

Laura Martín - Laura Torres

Wasteland

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and think about what were
the revolutionary moments in
our wandering.
I can visualise them.
And when I think about our
training, it appears to be the
other way round: all those
moments have been
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We deliberately looked for
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change and not remain fixed,
like a sun-baked,
dust-covered post in
the middle of the desert road.*

A milestone, a landmark is a permanent sign; a sign setting boundaries or hung in uncharted territory to serve as a guide. Almost as an exercise, we have asked ourselves which signs we, as El Baldío Teatro (Wasteland Theatre), have been following throughout the years.

Signs, smoke signals, watermarks, ungraspable material, concrete paper signals, so fragile as to be carried by the wind. Chocolate signs that one can choose to remove from existence with just one bite, but which have remained in our memory. They marked routes to follow, a scent, a turning point on the road, a before and after that moment. Landmarks raised on our path, yelling at us, showing us that "from now on, nothing will be the same". In the life of the group, many moments, situations, meetings and people deserve to be mentioned as milestones.

Living as *baldíos* has impelled us to give special significance to some of these signs: the first journey, the first premiere, our first street show, our training; each and every tour, each encounter with those we decided to call our masters, the peers, colleagues or theatre practitioners we have been lucky enough to get to know at home or abroad; teachers, actors and theatre groups who help us feel less alone.

*It was necessary to say something about the water,
or simply name it,
so that one could lure the word water
into putting out the flames of silence.*

Alejandra Pizarnik

THE FIRST TOUR

One of my friends, the one with the bulging eyes, always says the same thing to me whenever I share my thoughts after the tours with El Baldío: "When you travel, you exile yourself from your surroundings, and from how you relate to these surroundings. So the only thing you miss when you are away is yourself". The tours with El Baldío have always been



a bizarre cocktail of circus troupe, ballet-company, and a Sunday lunch at granny's house. We maintain the ability to make fun of ourselves. It is therefore inevitable that we think of the tours as landmarks or turning points.

Our first international tour was in 1996. Unconsciously, we were fulfilling the paradox of going far away in order to find ourselves. We arrived in Lima, Peru, with three different performances and a backpack full of expectations and very little experience. Without doubt, the greatest shock was to see a different reality, a country that then was economically poorer than our own, but which had a cultural and intellectual richness in the theatre and student community that surpassed our expectations.

Our hosts were the group La Tarumba. They received us in their big old house, playing Peruvian percussion instruments with infinite generosity. On that same day, when our nerves prevented us from extracting a single note from the instruments we tried sharing, we did not know that, once back home, we would start to study percussion and would end up creating our own repertoire of rhythms from the Río de la Plata.

We have established a bond with the people of La Tarumba that still reaches beyond theatre. The way in which they organised things, and the opportunity to see how they made theatre within a wholly different context, gave us our first big impulse forward. In Peru we were infected by passion and ideas. We started to be our own producers, we sought out publicity, made new contacts, attended meetings, and invited directors and actors to our performances. We needed to renew ourselves, to see who we were and whom, of the ten of us currently in the group, we could rely upon. We wanted to find our own way. And we did.

From that first experience, only five of us remained, like soldiers coming home after the war. That same year, began El Séptimo, a network and alliance of groups, perhaps the most important milestone in our history.

QU'EST-CE QUE C'EST?

In 1999, we were returning to Buenos Aires after an unproductive experience as producers in Rosario, in the province of Santa Fé, in Argentina. We had been ripped off in the purchase of a car. What could we do? We escaped to Europe. In thirty days we organised a tour that lasted for eighty days.

We carried five performances, three hundred kilos of cargo, a two-year old boy and a woman who was five months pregnant on our shoulders. The experience of translating our performances was unforgettable: it was a huge responsibility and we did it during the thirty days. All the performances were in Italian: "*Ma come non gridare loro che ho conosciuto il mondo attraverso i tuoi occhi?*" except some fragments in French. I remember endless rehearsals with the young man who helped us with the pronunciation; I remember terrible headaches, I remember my tongue twisting, searching for the correct sound: "*Oui, Dieu existe...C'est nous qui n'existons pas.*"

When we arrived in France, the director of the group that had organised our tour, came to see one of the rehearsals. We had to remove whole passages of text, as our French was incomprehensible. Later came other tours, more children and more languages. Another show was made in English: "Glamis you are... and Cawdor..." (I'm sorry Shakespeare!)

We did not give up on our French. In 2002, we returned with *Cartas de palabras sin eco* (Letters of Echoless

Words), almost fully translated.

There were, of course, individual journeys that the actors planned to fulfil the need to study and improve themselves. They were solitary buoys; journeys feeding each one of us like breadcrumbs, at the same time adding up to be gathered later into a collective experience.

We have known the world thanks to theatre, with our group. The journeys have been and still are revelations, they help us renew ideas and question our present. The journeys give us the oxygen to carry on. They restore us; they give us a more objective and real idea of who we are. They take us far away in space, but they bring us nearer to our essence, our politics; they bring us together, like a journey to the centre of the earth, to our inner centre. They strengthen us, make us proud, allow us to see ourselves, and, above all, see the others, our colleagues and their achievements, virtues and difficulties.

*Theirs is what lingers in the memory
of secular times. Our dregs.*

J.L. Borges

THE TRAINING

Our training has changed throughout the years. Actually, it is *we* who have changed, in this odd dialectic between our age and our changing realities where children are born, parents get older and become other kinds of children, needing just as much love and care as those babies we decided to bring into the world.

It is we, with creative desperation, and in the company of obsessions with which we drink coffee some mornings before taking them on stage, with tired bodies sometimes, but at the same time still eager to continue.

Today, I can stop and think about what were the revolutionary moments in our wandering. I can visualise them. And when I

think about our training, it appears to be the other way round: all those moments have been provoked, induced. We deliberately looked for those landmarks in order to change and not remain fixed, like a sun-baked, dust-covered post in the middle of the desert road.

We have created an exercise called *Planta-Punta*. It is a kind of improvisation composed while it is happening, as opposed to a dance which has fixed steps already. It is an improvisation based upon three or four principles; with the main objective of never starting from zero, but always reformulating the energy depending on the transition. In this sense, we are looking for an equivalent to what we are seeking on stage; for only what changes and lives. So, in this exercise we try to vary qualities, dimensions and speed all the time and also to change the relationship to gravity in a different way from everyday life.

This exercise has been the bridge each one of us has walked over for a long time, giving a personal imprint to the research work that previously had been collective.

TWO FEMALE FLAGS

At the beginning of 1998, we had another turning point in our work. It may have been caused by the many great changes in the preceding twenty months. We had had a flurry of activity, generating a lot of energy that in turn carried and pushed us onwards.

We were giving the last performances of *Los Viajeros del Arca del Argentum Opaco* (The Passengers of the Argentum Opaco Ark), the last show which involved the whole group. Among other reasons, the show had been conceived as a meeting point; an opportunity for those involved from the beginning of El Baldío to meet with those who joined later on and with the newcomers. It worked as a reunion

and farewell for some, and as a definitive encounter for those still working together after so many years.

Deeply immersed in a collective current, which included El Baldío and the whole Séptimo movement, we felt the urge to leave the refuge of collective performances and face the challenge of a more clearly individual development, through new performances, without the obligation to be on stage all together.

We actually had no idea what kind of performance we wanted to make. We had not decided on any story or text. So we decided to convert what we were and what

we had into our starting point: three solitary women; three women with unnamed images, visions and sensations.

At the beginning, we took some time for ourselves before coming together in the space. Each of us prepared her own material, sometimes working in couples. This game gave us the feeling that someone was always missing. We began having the intuition that this new performance had something to do with absence. When we showed our material to our director, the loneliness of the women and the weight of nostalgia framed the question: "Who are the missing



Laura Torres in *Cartas de palabras sin eco* (Letters of Echoless Words).

Photo: Stefano Trevisan

people?"

In our country, that question has an immediate answer: our missing people are the thousands who disappeared during the military dictatorship. What we were talking about then became evident, although we still did not know how to achieve this. It was evident, even logical. Because even without being a conscious proposition, the *desaparecidos* are an open wound for us. It was obvious for us that the women in our performance were waiting for those who would never return. It also seemed right to us that they were women, because those who struggled and struggle relentlessly to keep the memory of their children and grandchildren alive were and are women, mothers and grandmothers.

It happened during the process that two of us independently built two situations with incredibly similar dialogues referring to letters that had never arrived and a postman. One of the performance's scenes was born from these two texts:

ACTRESS: *Your letters never arrived...*

MARÍA: *I hate letters, the sound of the paper, the smell of the postman...*

A: *Yes, but I never got them.*

M: *Maybe it was God's wish.*

A: *There is no God.*

M: *I find it difficult to listen to such nonsense.*

A: *If God existed, letters wouldn't return.*

M: *What is it that you look for in music?*

A: *Beauty.*

M: *Have you written it?*

A: *No, but beauty is not a place.*

M: *Then... there is no beauty.*

A: *You know beauty exists.*

M: *In that case Mario, Daniel and Valeria exist, but they are out of reach like beauty, they are beauty itself, and God as well.*

A: *There is no God.*

M: *God exists... we are the ones who don't*

exist...

Cartas de palabras sin eco (Letters of Echoless Words) was premiered at the end of the same year. It has travelled within and outside ourselves (in Argentina: Buenos Aires, Humahuaca, Rosario; in Europe: Italy, France, Luxembourg, Austria). Even though we would not remake it in the same way - because we are the same, but also different - it has filled us with enormous pride and emotion.

Time passes. Yesterday's challenges become a safe place, and our art lives in constant search of new challenges, new questions.

Three years after the premiere of *Cartas...* it was time to face a new difficulty. We asked ourselves: "Why was it the actresses who wanted to face a new challenge?"

*...to be attractive, seductive, young,
enigmatic, sweet, maternal, feminine...
to be the dream woman... to buy this or that,
to have your nose, your chin, your eyelids
operated on...*

*The woman of today has to know
how to get drunk with style,
how to smoke pot... and how to seduce.
And attract and flirt.*

And always be ready. Sex girl-scout...

Susana Torres Molina

Right from the beginning the challenge would be strictly related to women but, this time around, with humour.

As actresses, they have reached an interesting point of development and this is all very well, but now they will have to speak directly to the audience, eye to eye, and they will have to make them laugh.

This is how we remember the challenge at

the beginning of the creation of *Fría... como azulejo de cocina* (Cold... as a Kitchen Tile). It was almost a provocation. At the time, we were six women; the three of us who had made *Cartas...* (Karina and us two), and three young actresses (Natalia, Natalia and Cecilia) working for the first time with the group. Each one of us had to make a monologue of her choice; it could be an already existing text, or we could write one. Some of us chose to adapt stories by Susana Torres Molina. Others wrote their own texts.

We began individually. Each of us rehearsed and proposed something, and Tony, our director, selected or accepted fragments, and proposed new ideas. After a few months, we saw all the pieces at El Séptimo's amphitheatre in Humahuaca. It was a huge surprise. Each of us had twenty minutes of material. Now we had to put the pieces together.

We created images juxtaposing Greek sculptural figures with elements of mass consumption from the 20th century. We immortalised them with the music of Aretha Franklin, Janis Joplin and Ella Fitzgerald.

Revising the rehearsal notes, we have tried to reconstruct the process in our memories. *Fría...* was a challenge for all of us; a completely different show from the others. The aim was to insist on doing the things that we knew were most difficult for us - and to enjoy ourselves doing it.

We were trying to examine aspects of the feminine world with a sense of humour and intelligence in order to reveal the other hidden side, the silenced, intimate, anguished place of oppression that all women are inevitably subjected to in our consumer society. We wanted to speak of the situation of women immersed in an outspoken machismo which we also encourage. In addition, we wanted to elaborate and improve the personality of each of

the actresses.

Today we still play *Fría...* in Buenos Aires, in the provinces of Argentina, in France, Italy and Latin America. We feel how privileged we are compared to other colleagues who accompany us off stage because making *Fría...* was an experience that has taught us the versatility offered by our profession to the artist.

TWINS

Some time ago we received an email asking us to write an article for *The Open Page*. We were asked to write something about our milestones, landmarks and signs. As few things in life come by chance, we knew that the fact of writing was marking for us the end of a phase and the beginning of another.

We teased each other with the image of a "twin" milestone, deciding to write something together. It was a new challenge and - why not admit it - a difficult and amusing task.

Translated from Spanish by Patricia Colombo

LAURA MARTÍN and LAURA TORRES (Argentina) are actresses with El Baldío Teatro, a group which has been working in Ciudad Jardín, El Palomar, in the Province of Buenos Aires for fourteen years. The group has created twelve performances and, since 1997, has organised the annual Festival de la Víspera in the town.