

Nathalie Mentha

From Circus to Stillness

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CHILDHOOD

I am the daughter of two Swiss theatre actors, Claire Dominique and Philippe Mentha. I was born in 1959 and spent my childhood and early teens with my brother and sister in Switzerland, at Carouge. A year earlier, my parents had founded the Carouge Theatre, in an old parish room, with the actor and director François Simon, the writer Louis Gaulis and other artists. This theatre opened with Chekov's *Three Sisters*, followed by *The Kings' Night* based on texts by Shakespeare, and many other productions. The theatre was destroyed after eight years of activity and then rebuilt in another part of the town. It still exists today.

Carouge is a small, rural, working-class town close to Geneva. It has a Protestant and a Catholic church, a market and church square. It quickly became even more working class with the arrival of Italian and Spanish immigrants who lived in shacks built by the river. Then some high rise buildings, new schools, and the first cultural centres were built. My family lived in a "tower" block, twenty-two floors high.

As with many families of actors, we had lots of baby-sitters: Paulette, the Danish Mig, Denise... In their company we would listen to our parents' voices when they performed on the radio.

I vividly remember the circus from this period of my childhood. Every year in September the Knie Circus put up its tent in Geneva in the grounds of the Plain Palais. This was the big square, which still had some grass - and was not just a car park - where the merry-go-round, travelling circuses, big antique markets, the flea market and the vegetable market would be set up. This square divided the riverside working class district from the wealthy area of the old city.

On Sunday afternoons our parents would take us to see the circus. At the beginning of the show, the sawdust filled arena was covered with a blue, red or white plastic carpet with a star in the middle that the assistants folded and removed with incredible speed. The orchestra sat above the artists' entrance. All the musicians were dressed in tails.

When Khatchaturian's *Sword Dance* began, a dozen marvellous horses entered and galloped swiftly around the arena, which was defined by a wooden border. In between the acts, a girl dressed in spangles and feathers would walk around the circus ring, holding a great gilded number that announced the next act.

Watching the trapeze artists, the clowns and above all the acrobats, my whole family were filled with joy: "Look how focussed he is... What precision! What skill!" I loved the feeling of freedom that I experienced at the circus, the gift of the acrobats, trapeze artists and clowns. They communicated a great sense of pleasure: the pleasure of knowing how to fly, of being able to throw oneself into empty space. Even my parents recaptured a child-like wonder and lit up. At the end of the show, leaving the tent when it was already dark, we would walk home with renewed energy in our bodies. The circus was a happy moment for everybody - children and adults.

FIRST IMAGES OF A DIFFERENT THEATRE

In 1967 my parents separated, continuing their theatre careers independently: my mother in Geneva and my father in Lausanne. We children went on going to school in Carouge where we began to do a lot of sport: football, classical dance, fencing and swimming.

Between 1967 and 1970, by chance, I watched the physical training that Ingemar Lindh, a Swedish director and teacher of Decroux's mime technique, led with a small group of actors that my father had brought together. Ingemar was working with my father on Edward Bond's *Lear*. I remember seeing them jump over tables and chairs, running, catching, doing strange acrobatic exercises and all without making any sound. I was glued to my chair, fascinated, not at all bored at having to watch the end of my father's work. I didn't understand much, but

I really liked it.

During the same period, my mother had to perform in Horowitz's *The Acrobats*. For this, she had to improve her acrobatic skills with a teacher. It was while accompanying her to her training that I learned my first acrobatic exercises.

AN OPPORTUNITY

In 1976 a circus school opened in Switzerland: it was the clown Dimitri's theatre school. With the blessing of my parents I decided to interrupt my studies to go there to see if circus was really what I wanted to do later on. What attracted me were the acrobatics.

Originally Dimitri's school was a training school for clowns and it was situated in Verscio, a small village with a population of about five hundred, in the middle of the mountains of the Valle Onsernone, thirty kilometres from Locarno. The school offered training in acrobatics, modern dance, theatre, singing, music, mime and improvisation. After a year of school there and an escapade in Italy during which I saw three performances that would influence me later in my artistic choices (Odin Teatret's *Anabasis*, *The Book of Dances* and *Come! and the Day Will Be Ours*), I decided to return to Geneva because I missed intellectual work on literary texts.

I enrolled in the Higher School of Dramatic Art in Geneva, which is a traditional theatre school. At that time this school's training lasted two years and included basic courses such as fencing, dance and speech, but with a completely different approach from that of the circus school. At the circus school the students were taught to work physically, to acquire techniques with the purpose of creating an act or specialising in a well-defined area of circus arts. The foundation courses at the traditional theatre school gave the pupils the skills required to move on stage, but they were not directly

connected to text work. The school directed the young actors more specifically towards the interpretation of texts.

The two years of training at this traditional school were entirely positive for me, giving me the opportunity to meet different ways of working through the various European directors who taught there. They gave me the fundamental knowledge of what I did and didn't want to do, or was not able to do. I graduated from the Higher School of Dramatic Art; I was an actress, but I hadn't found what sort of actress I was.

I was nineteen, school was finished: I had a great need to find my own path. I had an image in my head of the performances I had seen three years previously in Italy. I needed to know really what the young actors in the theatre school's bar said they knew about the art of the actor. I needed to fly away from my family, to mix my need for text with the physical circus work.

It was 1979 and there were no groups working in that way in Switzerland. I heard that there was a young theatre group called Teatro Potlach in Italy that was looking for actors to work on the physical training of the actor. As I spoke some Italian, I left for Italy.

Teatro Potlach has its home in Fara Sabina, a small village forty kilometres from Rome; it is a group for theatrical research, founded in 1976 by the Roman director Pino di Buduo and the Roman actress Daniela Regnoli.

In the bus that took me from Fara Sabina station to the village about fifteen kilometres away, seeing Fara Sabina in the distance perched on a hill dotted with olive trees, I well remember thinking: "Another small village, it reminds me of Verscio, the village where Dimitri's school is..." On the same bus I met a young man who worked with Teatro Potlach and he took me to the theatre.

The first thing I saw was six people ironing in silence and a man with black curly hair struggling with the spool of a film projector. It was Pino di Buduo, the director of Teatro Potlach, and he introduced me to the actors, Daniela Regnoli (Italian), André Sauter (Swiss), Antonio Mercadante (Italian), Ubaldo Visco Comandini (Italian) and Susanna Quaranta (Italian). He explained that they were doing a workshop with a Danish actress from Odin Teatret, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, in which I could not participate because it had already begun. I asked if I could watch and got permission. Pino explained that Odin's training film would be shown that evening for the workshop participants and the local villagers in the theatre's workroom. At that moment Iben came out of the room and greeted me. I recognised her and saw once again the three characters from the performances I had seen three years previously, and I thought in my soul, "I am in the right place".

After watching the workshop for three days, the director asked if I wanted to work on voice with Iben. Of course I did! I remember that the walls of the room were still painted in red and pink then, the floor tiles were cold and while I worked, Iben moved about continuously. So that was how my first working day with Teatro Potlach went! From then on I participated in the workshop. After it finished I returned to Switzerland to collect my suitcases and to try to get a scholarship from the city of Geneva to follow a year's apprenticeship at Teatro Potlach. I got it!

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MY CHOSEN ARTISTIC FAMILY

In 1979, many teachers participated in the formation of the young Teatro Potlach company: with Iben Nagel Rasmussen (Denmark) we worked on the basics of physical training, on dance and voice; with Ingemar Lindh (Sweden) on Decroux's mime principles; with Isso Miura (Japan) on sequences of actions; with Pino di Buduo, the director of the group, on the structuring of performances and on physical training. Numerous performances followed, and they took the group around and outside Europe.

After the first year of discovery, I began to feel the impact of a different culture within the group. On one side an exuberant, catholic culture, on the other the difficulty of making contact; a clash of cultures, one part Italian and the other Swiss and protestant. But I remained convinced that through this work I would find my voice, even if it would take my whole life. That first acceptance, "even if it takes my whole life", was my first milestone.

I learned to allow for divergence

when working together, to acknowledge the differences between one actor and the other, and to go beyond what we think we are able to achieve. After many years, thanks to the continuity of my work with Teatro Potlach, even my Swiss theatre family recognised the value of this theatre group.

I had to find out that in a group it is possible to learn and develop other talents, often out of necessity and a sense of responsibility: to telephone, organise tours, network. On one hand my work was that of an actress finding and developing my individual voice and on the other of an administrator knowing how to connect and create relationships with what happens outside the group.

The years passed and the age of maturity arrived. One day without me willing it, a character arrived as if from nothing, without any effort. This "doing nothing" was the next milestone, a sign for the years to come. The character was there, the dance was there; it was simply there. And it was through the eyes of that character that I could see that time had passed.

My Swiss theatre family acknowledged me and acknowledged the work of the

artistic family whom I had chosen and with whom I had worked for twenty-six years. My two families met: Teatro Potlach was invited to present *Felliniana* at the Théâtre Kléber-Méleau. It was a great success; another milestone. Now I belonged to a family by birth and to a professional family.

I had to remember my origins in order not to lose them: why did I come here to this group in Italy? What was I looking for? I searched for theatre with a group, I wanted to know what it meant to build a group from its foundations, how to find my place and my own way of being an actress.

Then came all kinds of difficulties that pushed me towards administration instead of dedicating myself fully to my research and my path as an actress; or rather that caused problems for me in managing the balance between my work as an actress and as an organiser. Until the day when a friend woke me up: "We are coming to see your performance, on..." Everything turned upside down and changed direction. I found the work again, with its precipices, but also

the answer to why I had come to this group and why I stay and play a part in making it live with my travelling companions.

To clearly maintain the dance of oppositions is always at the centre of the actor's work: this is the latest milestone I have discovered.

Translated from Italian and French
by Gilly Adams and Julia Varley

NATHALIE MENTHA (Switzerland/ Italy) was born in 1959. After studying at Dimitri's Theatre School and at the Higher School of Dramatic Art in Geneva, she joined Teatro Potlach in 1979 and moved to Italy. With Teatro Potlach, she works as actor and teacher, participating in all the productions and touring extensively. In 2004, Nathalie Mentha created the solo performance *Viva la vita* inspired by the biographies of Ingeborg Bachmann and Frida Kahlo.



Nathalie Mentha in *Città Invisibili*. Photo: Maurizio Cattaneo