

## Annet Henneman

# Is It Theatre?

*For me our process of journalistic or reportage theatre began there. It was what I wanted to do: to tell the true stories of people without a voice, of those who are never seen on television and who are not read about in newspapers. I decided to get to know more about the boats that arrived full of Kurdish people, coming from Turkey at that time, searching for political asylum.*

I don't know if my work can be called theatre. Can you suggest another word? Perhaps it is closer to what in America is called story-telling...

I was born in Velsen, in Holland. When I was fifteen years old, the boy I was madly in love with was involved in theatre. He had long hair. For me he represented a different way of life. My parents, naturally, forbade me both the boy with long hair and the theatre workshops. Being Dutch did not make my family open or understanding, and those were very different times.

I had not really thought seriously of a future in theatre: it was only a momentary dream, the ripple of a love affair. I was undecided about what to study, whether I should choose journalism or become a theatre teacher. I chose theatre. My parents were not happy because the Theatre Academy was not then officially recognised and they thought that I would not find a job without a qualification. However, immediately after I finished my studies the Academy received its recognition and I, my certificate. The Academy was new and operated on the basis of collective decisions taken in plenary meetings; the tasks were divided among us all, starting with the cleaning. It was a four-year, full-time course, in a school without funding and in small locations, but with competent professional teachers who were willing to work for nothing. We could, and had to, choose continually. We worked with many different methods and techniques, from mime to classical theatre, from comic theatre to improvisations that could last up to thirty-six hours. The Academy experience taught me to achieve an ideal by working concretely day after day, and this was of great help later when I founded Carte Blanche with Armando Punzo, when I worked in the prison of Volterra with the Compagnia della Fortezza, and later still with Teatro di Nascosto-Hidden Theatre and the development of what we call Reportage Theatre.

I started at the Theatre Academy in 1978. One of the teachers brought Ryszard Cieslak to lead a workshop for us. This work was physically very difficult for me, because I

was weak and untrained. But he had selected me to participate and his teaching turned out to be very important for me, not only because of the physical dynamic, but also because of the kind of focus I started to get acquainted with through working with him. It was a way of looking at yourself, of becoming at one with one's surroundings, of seeing, listening, perceiving and being, thanks to a detached state that could be achieved through physical work, which was the result of demanding and precise instructions. It was a hard meeting: you would see yourself for what you were with both your beauty and ugliness.

After four years at the Academy, I taught in schools for one year. Primarily, I worked with young people from difficult social conditions, who had suffered strong psychic traumas, were segregated or labelled as criminals. At twenty-three I found myself doing theatre-therapy with individuals who had attempted suicide, who couldn't manage to go outdoors anymore - people like me, in fact, or even older than me, but with much bigger problems. I came into contact with terrible traumas. I remember a woman who between the ages of twelve and eighteen had been violated regularly by her brother. I did this work, not as a psychologist, but always confining myself to concrete work with simple improvisations, during which the participants could discover new aspects of themselves, and search for fresh solutions and less destructive behaviour patterns. During that period, I confronted problems that were often bigger than me, and I tried to solve them practically rather than theoretically.

During that same period I went to Poland for the first time. I wanted to work with Cieslak again. I had written several times to Wrocław asking to participate in workshops, but I had not received an answer. Then, one day, a

letter arrived: "If you want to come, the workshop starts in a week." It has always been like this for me with them: silence and then suddenly an immediate summons. It was the period when Grotowski's group made the "The Tree of People" as a conclusion to the workshops.

I hoped to work with Cieslak, but I ended up working with Zbigniew Cynkutis. At first he put me off. He talked all the time while we improvised on themes he had given. On the first day I wanted to change to another group, Zygmunt Molik's for example. It was strange and difficult work. I saw the participants act in the exercises in a way that seemed false to me, miming actions that were empty. Also, for years I had been the person leading groups and now I was again in the position of an apprentice. I failed to become part of the group. But then it was as if Cynkutis and I discovered each other at the end of the project. I asked to work with him and he invited me to Berlin.

He asked me to choose a text and I told him that I was not, and didn't want to be, an actress. But he answered simply: "Then pretend to be one." And so I started working on *Medea*. We worked every morning, the two of us alone, because he said that as I was a therapist, I didn't know how to be a group member. I always had the tendency to direct, and it was better for me to remain outside and work alone with him. In the afternoon he worked with a group. I felt deeply privileged. We worked in particular on body memory, a lesson that I understood only years later.

Cynkutis would ask me to work on a theme from *Medea's* text, for example on the fact that *Medea's* love had turned into deep hatred. He asked me to envisage a situation in which I was with a man with whom I both wanted and didn't want to make love, whilst saying an extract from *Medea's* text. He pointed out a small table, half a square



Annet Henneman in her monologue *Shirin* about a political Iranian refugee. Photo: from a live television programme.

metre, on which I could lie down, and he gave me a blanket, saying that I should take off my clothes after he had gone out. I made a long improvisation: I can still feel the shape of the small table under my back. The next day he asked me to say the text, dressed, standing in front of him, remembering what I had experienced the day before. Each time he would give me a new theme on which to work alone, for example the way my favourite animal moved, the moment when Medea kills her children...

On the last day - after more than one month had gone by - we worked on the text of *Medea* together. He was Jason and spoke Polish, and I was Medea and spoke Dutch. At the end of this meeting he said: "The work is finished. And I am sorry, but you are a born actress because you have 'body memory'. You still don't know it, but you have it." Body memory means the ability to remember, but also to represent, select and perform the physical details of a real action, something that then came intuitively to me without thinking. I was twenty-five years old. The work on body memory was an enormous gift that is still useful in my work with actors and in the creation of my characters today.

While I was in Berlin, someone who

had been to Volterra told me that Fausto Pluchinotta, whom I had met as Cieslak's assistant in Holland, had founded a para-theatre group there. I promptly forgot about it. A few months later, however, I was with a friend in Frankfurt seeing Odin Teatret's performance *The Million*. Odin Teatret's performances were meeting points, and there I met an Israeli woman, Netta Plotzki, who was going to Volterra, so my friend and I went with her. I arrived in Italy, going first to Pontedera and then to Volterra, where I encountered Fausto Pluchinotta's group, L'Avventura, which was working on the "Viae" project. It must have been 1982. I participated in the project and agreed to return in the summer for a month.

For a year, I had been trying in vain to participate in Grotowski's "Theatre of Sources". As soon as I reached Volterra for the summer, I received a telegram: "The day after tomorrow you must be in Sant' Arcangelo to take part in the Theatre of Sources." I was undecided; I had just started the work in Volterra for "Viae". But I left once more without knowing for how long.

The experience of the "Theatre of Sources" taught me a lot, because it made me confront all my weaknesses, the physical ones as well as my habitual ways of thinking and doing. I was first in Sant' Arcangelo and then in Rovereto. But at a certain point, after three weeks, I went to Grotowski and told him I could not stay anymore. Nobody had asked me if I wanted to stay or go. I could have remained there, but I lived with a man in Holland and I wanted to go home. I also wanted to return to Volterra.

The experience of the "Theatre of Sources", although relatively brief, was important and hard. I don't want to recount everything about it, as that would not seem right. It is difficult to describe work of a kind that must be experienced directly and I would risk damaging the memory of

Grotowski's work. But I remember some situations and images that have become intimately and deeply mine. I remember that I walked on a mountain after a downpour. I walked and walked and the clay earth stuck to my shoes. Slowly they became heavier and heavier, they were almost impossible to lift on each step. One of the 'guides' followed me closely. I felt that he did this because he did not think I would manage. We also completed an action during the change of light from day to night, on top of a hill, turning slowly on the same spot for an hour and a half, keeping the backbone, back, shoulders, neck and head still; only the feet and legs moved; and then we descended again. We started the exercises at seven o'clock in the morning, there were other exercises at nine o'clock, others at eleven... All this happened in the middle of nature. We lived in an isolated house, without talking, we all slept in the same room. A small oil-lamp and a cushion were provided for the exercises that each person did for an hour every night. After your hour, you woke up the next person, and then you went to bed observing your breathing while you fell asleep. In the morning you tried to remember what you had dreamed. It was continuous work that never stopped. We were together but in silence. The guides gave us clear instructions for the exercises only once every few days.

Later, with the group L'Avventura, I continued to work on silence as part of the physical work for the "Viae" project, during which we didn't speak for five consecutive days. After two or three days in silence something changes inside you: you no longer do anything superfluous and personal relationships develop on a different level, with a different language.

Grotowski's work was really hard and very extreme. Coming out of situations like those and returning to normal life, you

don't feel relief; rather, it seems strange to have to speak so much and to make so much noise. That kind of work on yourself, with theatre as a vehicle, can turn you and your conventions upside-down.

After leaving Grotowski in 1982, I returned to Holland. But I longed for the work in Volterra and I asked to return to L'Avventura. After two months I became part of the group and a guide for physical actions, first in nature and then, when we made "Actions in the City", also in an urban setting. Substantially, the guide's work was to lead a person or a group of people, creating a situation that introduced an 'extra-daily' way of being, which stimulated a different perception of the self and of the world through precise physical actions and a predefined course. For the guide this meant, for example, finding not just a way of walking silently, but a way that provoked silence and an intensified manner of looking and listening; this might happen by suggesting not looking at the ground, concentrating on how to place the feet without making a noise and create repeated positions or movements. In normal life we fix our thoughts and senses on certain things to the exclusion of others. When I joined L'Avventura I had to work alone for a month and a half to find a valid action, and then one of the guides, François Kahn, followed it to see if it worked. In this way I slowly became a guide myself.

The work with L'Avventura was wonderful, but eventually it finished: there was no more money, we started having children, and we needed some funding, just a small amount... The group drained away, and that was the end. It hadn't lasted more than three years. I remained in Volterra with Armando Punzo, who had joined the group some months after me. We were a couple and we had a son, Yuri. We kept the space that had belonged to the group.

As L'Avventura our paths had crossed with Pontedera Teatro and its director, Roberto Bacci. He was a close collaborator with Odin Teatret and with Grotowski, and he encouraged, facilitated and financed many Third Theatre projects. When L'Avventura was born, he invited us to the Festival of Sant'Arcangelo. After the group dissolved, some of us (Stefano Vercelli, Laura Colombo and François Khan) worked with him on a project that was related to L'Avventura's city actions, but in the context of a performance.

Meanwhile Armando and I founded the company Carte Blanche. I worked in schools, and he wanted to direct. He had to start somewhere, so he started with me. We created the monologue *Etty* together, based on the diary of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch-Jewish woman who died in a concentration camp. In Holland this diary is like the Bible: seven hundred pages long, and published only after the significant people in her life had died. The next performance, again directed by Armando, was about Camille Claudel. The following work, no longer directed by Armando, was given the classic Dutch name *Aafke*. In part it told my story: what it means for a Dutch woman to live in Italy. I spoke about the rain in a kind of lullaby: "Rain, rain, I like the rain because it makes me feel at home". I missed Holland, but I was also in love with Italy. I spoke about the difficulty of getting used to a new culture and way of living, how learning a new language made me seem and feel like a child. I also spoke about how on the surface it can seem that Holland has more sexual freedom, but that in my experience people in Italy are more open sexually, because they are closer to their bodies, maybe because of the climate. Another monologue was *Un volo infinito* (An endless flight). This was a performance in which I told true stories from Volterra's

psychiatric hospital that had been gathered together in a book called *La scatola delle sorprese* (The surprise box) by the psychiatrist Remigio Raimondi, when he was director of the hospital. To prepare myself for this work I spent some time in a closed unit at the same hospital. Gianni Calastri, with whom I have been working now for almost ten years in the Hidden Theatre, met me during rehearsals for this performance. With it I overcame many of my personal problems, creating a world of my own, of madness, pain, injustice, illness, entering the world of a nymphomaniac who lived her 'illness' in great solitude among so many 'lost souls'.

Meanwhile, Armando and I had started the work at the prison in Volterra, and this became my main preoccupation for eight years. We began, like so many others, with a workshop in jail. We worked with the inmates and created a performance with them, *La gatta Cenerentola*, which we played only once and for a very restricted audience during the Volterra Festival because that is what the prison director would allow. The following year, 1990, we presented our next performance, *Masaniello*, as part of Volterra Teatro Festival, when Roberto Bacci had become Festival director for the first time. This time many more people were allowed to see us, and we became almost famous overnight.

In prison I worked on the following productions: *La gatta Cenerentola*, *Masaniello*, *'Or juorno e' e San Michele*, *Il corrente*, *Marat Sade*, *La favola* and *The Brigg*. After eight years of this intensive work - which for long periods was daily, with training, improvisations, performance preparation, sharing everyday life and stories with the inmates - the experience ended for me. Armando and I separated. I was left without work, husband, money or home. I will never forget

the few close friends who continued to believe in me: Rosanna Marcolungo, Gianni Calastri, Roberto Veracini, Alexander Togoli, Corrie Hiwat...

I had to start all over again. Many thought that I had lost everything: the beginnings of fame and the work in prisons; but I think it was for the best. There could not be two captains on the same ship, in Carte Blanche or in the prison work. It is very difficult in the Italian theatre environment for a woman to co-direct, or create a space for herself. I always felt as if I was without wings in Carte Blanche. For this reason I continued to make monologues, first with Armando as director and then without him. I needed to have something of my own.

I would not have managed to do anything without Gianni and his trust in me even when I pursued the strangest ideas. With him and other people living in Volterra, including those mentioned above and Luisa Nannipieri, we started the Hidden Theatre. At the beginning of the prisons project, I had told Armando that people would say that only those who don't know how to make theatre work in prisons, but that we would continue and grow until something developed. And that's what happened. When I started the Hidden Theatre, I said to myself again: "Nobody will understand who I am, but I was already professional before Carte Blanche, I have worked a lot, I know how to describe projects in writing, I will manage." We have worked and worked and slowly we are becoming something: a group that specialises in reportage theatre. Roberto Bacci supported us with an official start in the theatre world at a national level.

We called ourselves Hidden Theatre and we really were hidden. Our space was a basement used as a store in the Santa Chiara old people's home in Volterra. We worked

there for two years, adapting a small theatre space and creating a performance on the history of Ulysses, called *Tra vita e morte* (In between life and death). In the second year, while I rehearsed a new monologue, *Randagia* (Astray), things around us changed, or perhaps my perception of them changed. An old man was living upstairs from the theatre. He was a good friend, and was dying of bone cancer. There was an enormous earthquake in Guatemala. Kurdish people started arriving to Italy in boats asking for refuge. I remember that for three weeks every morning I began work crying, and I would say to Gianni: "What am I doing here?" Finally I decided that I no longer wanted to make *Randagia*, but rather to use theatre to talk about what was happening in the world.

During the Festival I read two poems and then related what I felt was going on around me in the form of a fairytale. For me our process of journalistic or reportage theatre began there. It was what I wanted to do: to tell the true stories of people without a voice, of those who are never seen on television and who are not read about in newspapers. I decided to get to know more about the boats that arrived full of Kurdish people, coming from Turkey at that time, searching for political asylum. I told all nine people who were with me in the group that I wanted to make journalistic theatre: "In a month's time we will go to Calabria, to wait for these boats. Who wants to come with me? I really want to find out who these people are who search for refuge in Italy. Afterwards I want to go to their country, to understand why they escaped." The others asked: "Where will we sleep?" "I don't know - I answered - perhaps on the beach." "How will we manage in Turkey and Kurdistan? Where we will go?" "We go! Then we will see..." Only a few of the group agreed.

Fondazione Pontedera Teatro supported the

production of the first reportage performance: *Ji Kurdistan dur* or *Lontano dal Kurdistan* (Far away from Kurdistan), giving us fifteen million Italian lira, not a small amount of money for a risky research project in a then unknown kind of theatre. Five of us departed: Gianni Calastri, Darius Simoncini, Rosanna Marcolungo, my boyfriend at that time Nachum Cohen, an Israeli actor with Kurdish roots living and working in the USA with Double Edge Theater, and myself. We went to Calabria, Istanbul and Diyarbakir. An adventure started that has not yet finished. It was hard: it is easy to say that one wants to have a true sense of contact with these people and share with them, but those who live in desperate situations don't trust anyone.

Dino Frisullo, a journalist and pacifist, helped us a lot. He died two years ago and I still miss him. He did a lot for the Kurdish people. Because he participated in a peaceful demonstration in Diyarbakir against the denial of rights for Kurdish people, he was jailed for more than two months in Turkey. Frisullo told us about a deserted Calabrian village, Badolato, full of Kurdish people in search of refuge. At that time I didn't know anything about the psychology of those who have escaped from war, I didn't know who the Kurds were. I only knew that I wanted to get to know their story so that I could tell it.

When we finally succeeded in gaining the trust of the Kurds of Badolato, we heard their stories, ate with them, and got to know their songs and dances. After returning to Volterra, we invited some of them for a Kurdish Night, the embryo of which would become our performance *Lontano dal Kurdistan*. The following day we left for Turkey.

The experience was shocking. For the first time I lived close up to war. I travelled hidden in a car, squeezed in between

four Kurdish men to meet people in hiding. I remember that I went to Goc-der, a refugee organisation in Turkey. I entered a room full of at least twenty men, and apologised for interrupting their reunion. They told me that they were there to meet me. There were only men present, something I continued to experience subsequently because that is the way of their culture. I, a blonde, Dutch woman, started speaking, asking questions, while someone translated. They had organised the meeting because of my visit. At that time the Kurdish situation in Turkey was really terrible: to speak in Kurdish was forbidden, as this was considered hostile to the unity of Turkey, and Kurdish music, newspapers, books and radio stations were banned. Activists risked years of jail, torture, or 'disappearance'. Now things are a little better, even if there is still much to do on the level of human rights.

On many occasions I found myself in absurd situations - also later, in Iran - and I told myself that I was crazy: a lone woman, asking about illegal activities, going around in a car with four strange men. I didn't know who they were, but I trusted them. It is the only way to make work like this: you have to be confident and throw yourself in.

We went to Diyarbakir, the capital of Turkish Kurdistan, next to the border with Iran and Iraq. At the time it was almost impossible to reach the city because of police checkpoints; it was difficult also for Kurds. Everyone was afraid, so we decided to go there by aeroplane. When we arrived, it seemed like a military airport, full of armed police. We came into contact with many situations like, for example, a union meeting of about thirty teachers. The day before some teachers had been arrested for participating in a demonstration against the resignation of Kurdish teachers. On the walls were the photographs of fifty-nine dead Kurdish teachers who had been killed or

who had disappeared. They were so happy that we were there. They needed to have a voice, to tell their stories. While we talked with the teachers, someone jammed a chair under the door handle for fear that the police would arrive suddenly. And the police really did come at the end to ask for our documents. We were an Israeli, a Dutch woman and an Italian. When the police asked us why we were there, I said we were a theatre group researching different cultures. We were lucky, because if they had found out that we were really there so that we could tell the stories of the Kurds in Europe, at a later date, there would have been a problem.

However that evening, we found that our hotel telephone no longer worked, and, when we went out, a police officer told us that we had to leave the next day. Nevertheless we managed to meet many people and also visited the Hadeb Party office. I had asked to talk to some people who had escaped from the villages burnt down by Turkish soldiers. About thirty people were in a line: they all wanted to tell their story. They embraced and kissed us and thanked us for being there. Sitting on chairs at two tables, we heard a continuous flow of stories translated into English or German from Kurdish or Turkish; we wrote them down.

It went on for hours. The stories were terrible. I remember the bodies of those suffering women, so full of hate but also of pride. A mother said: "They called my son, I witnessed how they set the dogs on him and they started to eat him from his legs up. Then they shot him in the head in front of me." She related everything with an empty gaze. An elderly woman and I looked at each other; we both began to cry without saying anything. It is impossible to say anything; you can't participate or help in any way...

This is how our performance devel-

oped, from improvisations based on true stories that we had heard or experienced. In Italy, a young Kurdish man who had been with the guerrilla, lived in my house and he took part in the work. In the rehearsal room he would faint regularly as we worked because he had been tortured until they thought he was dead, and then he had been thrown into the garbage, naked. But someone noticed that this naked, agonised body still stirred. He was taken to hospital and saved, and he then escaped to Italy.

Or there was the story of the boat. It stuck in my mind when I heard it: people were on a boat that took them away from home, there was not even room to sit down; they were terrified and desperate. And then, suddenly, they heard a bird singing. A bird had joined them on the boat, goodness knows how, bringing them memories of their country. We said in the performance: "It was the voice of our land and we remembered how we washed clothes in the river, how the children played and shouted, and the fields of almond trees."

Our performance *Lontano dal Kurdistan* was ready in 1998. Adil, the tortured young Kurdish man, finally did not feel up to going on stage. And for me it became agonising, because nevertheless I left everything as it was. I played the role of his mother, but he was no longer in the performance. So I would move towards him, I would ask him how he was, talk to him, but he was not there. And the others in the performance, Gianni and Darius, would look at each other, because I, the mother, had gone crazy. Adil was our first refugee actor.

In 1999 we organised an evening we called "Galattasaray Plaza", from the name of a square in Istanbul where mothers and family members go with the photographs of missing people. We recreated the same situation in Volterra for the closing night of the Festival. We invited eighty Kurds and the



group of Ciwan Haco, a famous Kurdish singer. That same year we were made Centro Interculturale di Porto Franco of the Tuscan Region. Lanfranco Binni, the project's director, had heard our story and asked us to join. And we produced *Sebri Eyub* (Job's Patience), following a journey to Iran and Kurdistan.

At first I was convinced that I could make theatre only for a very limited audience, as I had always done with my monologues. But then we happened to present *Lontano dal Kurdistan* for between two and five hundred people. I performed monologues based on the stories of Kurdish women (*Hediye* first and then *Payman*) for two or three thousand people in packed squares, as in Naples, or Washington - at the conclusion of a peace demonstration after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001. I have learned not to be afraid of a crowd that has come to participate in the demonstration, or to see the concert in which I have been included, rather than to see me perform. I have learned to introduce performances in schools, in order to prepare the students so that they can recognise themselves in the stories.

After the first experiences with refugees, *Sebri Eyub* and *Dinieghi* (Denials), we made a new kind of reportage theatre called *La scala della povertà* (The ladder of poverty). It was based on a week during which we lived as homeless people, in Rome's Indipendenza Square, in the winter. Those involved were: Gianni, Talip Haval (a Kurdish boy), Ketty Nacci (an Italian girl), and me. The first part of this performance was about poverty in the West, where you are not worth anything if you don't have money, about the poverty we found around the main railway station. The second part told of poverty in a different culture, such as India. We had been to Calcutta and the things we had seen there had shocked us deeply.

In Rome, we slept in sleeping bags. For the first couple of days we were still presentable, we would go to the bar and spend as much time as possible there in the warmth. Then everyone had to go off alone, while at night we slept together. On the third day, we were kept waiting for a long time at the station bar and then thrown out as soon as possible. On the last day we were filmed by regional television and nobody threw us out of the bar. For television, we told our stories from the sleeping bags.

We had experienced some beautiful moments. For example, a 'neighbour', an African homeless person, gave us advice on street life, on where to find pieces of cardboard and where to leave them, so as to recover them later still in a dry state. One day he asked us who we were and we told him the truth: that we were a theatre group. He said: "You must be a *really poor* theatre! It is obvious that you don't have anything. I was involved in theatre too in the past, but I did Shakespeare." And then he recited one of Romeo's monologues and we all stared at him open mouthed.

I experienced other crazy moments. It was cold, but beneath the station was a place with a warm air vent, only it was forbidden to sit on the floor there. I didn't know this, but a homeless person warned me that the police would come, and he invited me to sit beside him against a wall. He slept at San Egidio. He told me about being a sailor, and that German prostitutes were the best because they did anything you wanted. While we were talking, a strange young woman passed by, she looked as though she came from the East; and her knees folded under her at each step. The homeless person showed me his purse, which contained his San Egidio membership card and only five thousand lira. He asked me to take his money and get her something to eat, because he thought the woman was hungry. I did so,

feeling uneasy, remembering that I had a credit card in my pocket. I bought a hamburger, and gave his money back to him, explaining who I was, and what I was doing there. He said I was a very special woman, asked me if he could give me a kiss and, without waiting for the answer, he kissed me on the mouth.

The greatest fright of my life, even though I have been in much more dangerous situations, was on a night when we were in our sleeping bags, and someone was nosing around, even touching my sleeping bag, while Gianni was asleep. I hid my face. The man was very close and I was more and more terrified, hoping he wouldn't discover that I was a woman. My heart beat madly and I imagined he could see my sleeping bag moving. I could not defend myself, he would kill me, do what he wanted...

We founded the Academy of Reportage Theatre for Refugees and Asylum Seekers. The Academy is a laboratory, but also a communal living situation for a small group of refugees coming from all over the world, collaborators with our theatre, visitors and so on. The idea was to make two-year courses and theatre workshops, but we added courses in Italian and English for refugees, and also meetings with schools, lectures, suppers, and work for the town... The Academy has not only to 'help' the refugees but also to publicise their plight and help people to understand it.

After a first meeting with twenty-three people, ten continued with us, as they wanted to study seriously and live in Volterra. But seven out of our ten students were denied the asylum we had requested. We couldn't work anymore. The refugees were in a panic. They had risked their lives to get to Italy and now they were being told to leave; they did not have the right to stay. They had become illegal, without residency

permits. Our minds were elsewhere, we could not concentrate: they had to decide whether to escape or to trust lawyers they didn't know; it seemed as if they had no future.

A Commission decides a person's future after a meeting that can last as little as twenty minutes. In those few minutes awful, intimate questions are asked: "How many relatives have you seen die? Were they close relatives? Have you been tortured?" I asked the refugees to tell their stories, about the meeting with the Commission that would deny or grant them the right to political asylum. This is how our reportage theatre performance *Dinioghi* was born. As soon as this performance was announced, people wanted to hear the stories. We have presented it more than a hundred times. We became part of a campaign organised by *Médécins sans Frontières*, Amnesty International and the Consortium of Solidarity (ICS) for a decent asylum law in Italy because it is the only country in Europe that does not have one.

A kind of theatricality has emerged from my experiences of reportage theatre that does not depend on my need to make theatre, but on my desire to shake people up. Adil, our first refugee actor, had suffered terrible torture with electricity. During one rehearsal, calm and smiling, he pointed out to us some scars between his toes, saying: "You see, these are the marks of the electric torture". As if it was normal. This is absurd. I would like to make people feel in their hearts how unjust this is, how terrible and crazy life is for far too many people in the world...

If I say more, I will begin to cry. I have before me all the eyes, faces and painful stories I have seen and heard. But I have simultaneously observed an enormous *joie de vivre*, the capacity to savour every moment, because tomorrow life might end. These

experiences deeply nourish my work as an actor; they give me the motivation and energy to tell the stories.

I have seen and heard so many things during these years, and several people I have met have died. I have changed gradually too, since knowing Dana, who has been my partner now for almost five years, a Kurdish-Iraqi man whom I met in Tehran, and who is now a political refugee in England. But I am also the same Annet as before.

I cannot just listen to the stories, so remote from our western way of living; the moment comes when it is necessary to tell them, to shout to the public: "Look at us! Listen to us!" - *us* not *them*, because I feel that I have become one of them. At the beginning of the Reportage Theatre adventure, I asked myself how I could approach these people as an actress; now they are part of me. I no longer feel like an actress but more like a channel. I don't feel like a movement artist, a vocal artist or one who focuses on composition, but rather that the work that I do - and Grotowski comes back to my mind - is to prepare myself on all levels (psychological and physical) so that my body, mind, feelings are ready to be touched, to receive and to transmit.

We do physical training, we learn to sing, to dance, we work on that pre-creative state in order to become at one with the stories to be told, with the people in the performance, with everything that is present around us, with the audience, hoping to create a magical moment of energy, of special silence, of great intimacy from heart to heart; a moment that will leave its mark on all of us.

Grotowski often said: "You cannot ask to have an illumination, to change awareness, to have a dream that tells you something. You can only work and work on concrete actions and, who knows, perhaps

you will have a moment of grace for which you will be ready."

I was in Suleymania, in Iraqi Kurdistan, and after performing one of my monologues in English both at the university and in a theatre, some actors and students asked: "But is this the task of theatre? To tell these stories?" And I answered: "I don't care whether it is the task of theatre or whatever you call what I do. Whether it's theatre or not, I want to tell stories in this way, I *must* do so."

Translated from Italian by Julia Varley

This article is taken from an interview by Cecilia Cruciani and Sarah Gagliarducci for the Italian theatre journal *Teatro e Storia*.

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