

Gilla Cremer

Concentrated Mindlessness

Perhaps this state of concentrated mindlessness, which really makes me happy when it happens, can be compared with a child playing. Maybe the game is to chase snow flakes. The child is completely focused on this task. It runs, jumps, turns, grabs. Yet, while not thinking about how to make these movements, the child knows how to do everything two-hundred percent. Its whole concentration is focused on reacting to the snow flakes and not on acting in a particular way.

I have been working as a solo-performer for eighteen years. I have produced nine shows in this time of which I still perform eight. These plays are my capital, my bread and butter. In my case producing means: I choose the theme, prepare the text, find the money, look for the right theatre, hire the staff - that is to say director, musician, stage and costume designer and finally perform, sell and tour the plays.

The reason why I've worked like this for so many years is straight forward: I have two children and as a freelance worker I could, and - especially these days - I can only manage to feed three people if I earn all the money from the shows myself. In addition, since I am the boss of everything including the working schedules, I can organise the rehearsals so that they interfere as little as possible with my first profession: the business of being a mother and housewife.

Leaving aside the sometimes really lonely and exhausting, because always self-exploiting, aspects of my way of working, there are some extremely positive, I could even say, luxurious, benefits: I can allow myself exclusively to grab only those themes, adapt only those novels, tell only those stories, that I have an urgent need to tell. And the phrase story-telling is a good key to my work: I feel much more like a story-teller than an actress. I believe in stories. I love stories. We are stories.

When you're always alone on stage, you learn a great deal about dramaturgy: dramaturgy of the story, of text, even of words, of emotions and actions. A strong moment in the story or a strong piece of text can be played badly on a bad day and still function. But if you fail to seize a weak scene or text at its lousy peak, you drown, you lose the contact and dialogue with the spectators that you can never afford to lose when you are alone on stage, because no one is there to save you.

So my main concern is first to find a story or theme which I am convinced will fascinate not only me, but also potential spectators. The second step, before rehearsals with



a director, is to work out a good textual base that already contains a lot of nice highs and lows, breaks, changes in perspective, in pace, in character, in emotion. I need far more time for this preparatory period than for the practical rehearsals. The dramaturgical preparation of my performances usually takes many months; sometimes a year or, in one case, even two. The rehearsal period in recent years has lasted only for a minimum of three weeks and a maximum of nine.

In the two pieces that I have made since *m.e.d.e.a.* the story-telling aspect is far more obvious: while there are a lot of props on stage in *m.e.d.e.a.* and I race around doing this and that, the new works are more condensed. I have tried more and more to hide the actress behind the story, to disappear.

m.e.d.e.a. is the third part of a trilogy. In German it is called *Trilogie des Ver-Sprechens*. The word "*Versprechen*" has two meanings: promises and/or mistaken words. It is a trilogy about generations - one of the themes I really love! The first part, *The Bitch of Buchenwald*, is set in 1938 and talks about our parents' and grandparents' generation, about Nazi-Germany and the Holocaust. The second part, *Morrison Hotel*, deals with the 1968 student revolution, Vietnam, anti-capitalism, anti-fascism, sex, drugs and rock'n roll. And the third part, *m.e.d.e.a.*, set in 1998, asks what happened to my generation, that once fought for "free love", that was against marriage and tidy living-rooms, that hated pathos and Wagner, because all this was connected with our parents.

When we started work on *m.e.d.e.a.*, the director, Eva-Maria Martin, initially asked me to make a variety of improvisations on love and pain, loss, suffering and anger. I screamed and cried and rolled on the floor, I kicked and tore out my hair, but somehow I felt ridiculous. Then she brought two very different images taken by

Cindy Sherman, and they became our main reference point. Instead of producing noise and large emotions, which I don't really enjoy seeing and hearing on stage anyway, stillness and concentration became my field of work once I began to study these photographs. This reminded me a lot of the year I spent in Bali studying Mask-Dance. There too, my teacher made me study my mask carefully before I could dance it. I had to understand and feel the mask or, as my Balinese teacher expressed it, I had to understand the "breath" of the mask. And of course there is no one true understanding of a mask - it is always the performer's personal, psychological, physical, intellectual and emotional being that understands, expresses and dances the mask.

What happens to me when I study a mask? I will try to answer in the context of the Cindy Sherman photographs. We used the "Angry" image for the costume, the wig and the poster. Except for one eye, the face of the woman is covered by a wig; her hands are clenched into fists. She is wearing a dark, modern suit that crinkles around her breasts, as if she is pushing her breasts towards her spine. This woman is holding back all her anger. When I held this position for a while I experienced bad feelings and memories that came from some less than charming situations in my past. I tried, in a way, to chew these memories, to reach, understand and learn their essence so that I could recall it instead of the true life-stories that I would rather prefer to forget. I will call the essence "hidden anger". This became one of the practical paths for our *m.e.d.e.a.*

The other photograph shows a woman who has combed her hair neatly away from her face. She sits motionless as if she is posing for a stone-carver. Her face looks like stone: closed and empty on one side, but full of determination on the other. This woman is really foreign to me. When I try to feel her

forehead from inside my own, when I try to feel her jaw-bones, her mouth, her nose, her look, from inside my own jaw-bones, mouth, nose and eyes, I feel very foreign within myself. This was what we were looking for: the strange feeling that a woman from a barbarous, foreign culture might have in our so called civilised culture. Does this correspond to the foreign feeling a strong liberated woman from the 1960s might have, when she finds out that her once rebellious lover, the father of her two children, is now going to marry a bloody rich young girl?

My idea or thesis was this: since the women of the 1960s once demonstrated in favour of free love, they have no excuse to complain today if their partner leaves them; and since pathos and violence were eliminated from their range of expression, they don't know how to express their pain in an existential crisis such as one where you are being left. But the pain of separation today is as enormous and cruel as it was centuries ago, when Euripides wrote his *Medea*. So in my performance the modern, 'civilised', 'autonomous' woman Renate, borrows the mask of the old *Medea* to work out and express her unbearable pain.

The best performances 'happen' to me, when I manage to disappear behind the mask, when I find my personal key to the mask, or maybe when the mask is wearing me, or when I am the mask, or when I am in a state of complete and/but concentrated mindlessness. This requires me to know exactly what I have to do and say on stage, or how I have to grab the essence of certain states of mind. It is not sufficient to know this all one-hundred percent. I need to know it two-hundred percent in order not to have to concentrate on it at all. From this security I always find the licence and the best possibilities for improvisation or for digging deeper into what I already seemed to know. You can always dig deeper, especially in a

long monologue, where it might be difficult to be at the peak of concentration for the whole run.

Perhaps this state of concentrated mindlessness, which really makes me happy when it happens, can be compared with a child playing. Maybe the game is to chase snow flakes. The child is completely focused on this task. It runs, jumps, turns, grabs. Yet, while not thinking about how to make these movements, the child *knows* how to do everything two-hundred percent. Its whole concentration is focused on reacting to the snow flakes and not on acting in a particular way. The activity serves only one purpose: to be playful, to be fulfilled by playing and be complete.

I don't like acting. When I catch myself acting on stage, and it happens more often than I like, it always makes me angry and frustrated. In everyday life we have to act ourselves to bits all the time. As a spectator, I don't wish to see more acting in the theatre. As an actress, I have the opportunity to be liberated from having to act. I feel it is professionally mandatory to be playful. And this simply means: to be, to be exactly where you are.

This article was originally prepared for the Magdalena conference *The Articulate Practitioner* in Aberystwyth, Wales, July 2005.

GILLA CREMER (Germany) lives in Hamburg and has been produced at Kampnagel, Kammerspiele Hamburg and Thalia in der Kunst Halle. Since 1987 she has performed her solo-shows in Germany and abroad. Gilla collaborates with Theater Unikat, a free association of artists and advisors. Her productions include *Odyssee Embryonale - a Foetus-drama*, *Once I lived* - based on the novel by Natascha Wodin, *Rita - Alone Against the Mafia*, *The Bitch of Buchenwald*, *Morrison Hotel* and *Night Father* by Carl Friedman.



m.e.d.e.a. poster with Gilla
Cremer. Photo: Arno Declair