

## Julia Varley

# The Sea

### FIRST WAVE

I am on tour in Gallipoli, a town by the sea in the south of Italy. My hotel room is astounding. It has big windows on three sides and from all of them I have a view of the sea. In front of me I see a big port with sailing boats and ships; on the left there is a little fishing port, in the foreground of the old town; on the right, the open sea beyond the new town which extends along the long main street. A strong northern wind is blowing. It is October. The waves rush against the walls of the port and sea horses break the line of the horizon. Some people on a sailing boat bearing an English flag are worrying about their moorings. Seagulls fly close to the windows. They seem to enjoy the gusts of wind. After yesterday's rain, today the sun is shining again.

I woke up early this morning talking to myself, as I often do when I am worrying about something. Or rather, I woke up making up words that fit unidentified thoughts and images, as if I was talking to somebody else, formulating sentences as they come and putting them in an order. Time is up.

For the last six years I have been writing about my theatre practice for a book. It is difficult. The result tends to sound preposterous and boring, as if I expected truth to be contained in the black and white marks on a page. But I hope I have finished. The title will be *Stones of Water*. For this article I need to try something different. I don't have to write about real and realistic actions, performances, characters, training, improvisation, dramaturgy, text and voice: I have done that in two hundred pages that need to be corrected and corrected, and translated and proofed. Now I want to tell some short stories: simple episodes and examples of how practice leads me and my brain.

The first example is the article itself (1). I stopped talking to myself in bed with my eyes closed. I got up, took the first piece of paper I found and wrote down some sentences. The pen always goes much slower than the ideas and I am afraid I will forget most of what I have been

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thinking. I wrote the lines you have been reading up until now and some keywords: *Festuge* parade (2) /Munch painting/film snow scene/Natalia at the barracks; Articulate Practitioner lecture (3) /jug of water; Transit festival opening (4) /driving and changing clothes/Luisa Calcumil/the boat and the seed; *The Flying Carpet* demonstration (5) /Caulonia/professors and text/ alone with the lizards eating each other.

## SECOND WAVE

Time has passed. The deadline has come and gone: the article (1) is still not written. Zofia Kalinska used to say with a twinkle in her eyes: "You can do everything, but not today!" Don't get stressed and ill about it; just move the deadline! After all we decide when *The Open Page* comes out, and if it is not ready, it is not ready - full stop.

I am in a different continent looking at the sea again. I wonder how it can change so quickly: last night it was rough and at dawn today it looks like a mirror over which the fishermen glide on their boats. Eating dry biscuits and honey for breakfast I get the idea that the frame for my article is the sea. I still don't know why. My short stories on practice will appear between the waves, like happy sirens enjoying their freedom. Dramatic images of the little mermaid, who sacrifices her beautiful voice and hair in exchange for legs to walk on the land where her prince lives, don't attract me.

I suddenly remember a documentary about an animation film production. The film's main character was a fish. The team all learned to dive in order to study the thriving world of the sea at first hand: it would be easier for them to draw their characters after that. Many realities are hidden in the sea.

Every two or three years Odin Teatret organises a *Festuge* (a Festive Week) in Holstebro. For 2005 the theme was *The*

*Splendour of the Ages*. For this *Festuge* I was going to be responsible for a three week workshop, involving Augusto Omolú and Cleber da Paixão with their Afro-Brazilian Orixá dance, and Deborah Hunt, Hisako Miura and Sally Rodwell with their puppet and costume making. The participants would work two weeks to make a performance and then show it during the *Festuge*. Our title was "Ageless - The Dance of Gods and Masks - Conquering the Town". I wanted the participants to experience how theatre can transform the daily life of a town (in the same way as I have in the past), by performing in post-offices, bakeries, schools, hospices, parks, hospitals, fountains, churches, courtyards, prisons, night-clubs, cemeteries, at the police-station, with the firemen, at the barracks, at a race, in shops, among teen-agers, children, old people, alcoholics, drug addicts, shoppers, politicians, for an audience of hundreds of people or only one spectator, at all times of the day and night. After this they would be able to develop similarly 'impossible' activities in their own towns. Teatro Tascabile and Bilico Teatro from Italy and Atalaya Teatro from Spain would also be performing during the *Festuge*, while other Odin Teatret actors guided several projects involving Holstebro: spectacular events, intimate performances, an opera, village and neighbourhood fêtes. During a preparation meeting in May I was told that I was responsible for the parade (2) with all the participating groups on the last Saturday of the *Festuge*. The *Festuge* was to be in September and I was concentrating on the organisation of the workshop: the parade was placed somewhere in the back of my mind. I was asked for technical requirements. I said I didn't need anything, except a small stage in the square where we would end. From the beginning I was sure of one thing: the preparation ought to be as simple as possible; I wanted to create a structure

within which the different groups of performers could orientate themselves easily with no need for full and lengthy rehearsals or meetings.

Jill Greenhalgh asked me to give a keynote talk (3) at the "Articulate Practitioner/Articulating Practice" conference in July 2005 in Aberystwyth. She made it very clear to me that I should talk - not make a work demonstration as I usually do - and prepare what I had to say precisely - not improvise around the theme as I usually do. I was to take the task very seriously, please! Jill asked me for a title and I gave her one after playing around with words for a while: *Stones of Water - Embodied Knowledge and the Marks of History*. Then she asked me for ten lines describing the content of my talk. I gave her those too. I put together some of the obsessive thoughts which I know come out whenever I speak of the craft: the subjective point of view, principles instead of methods, knowledge based on impulses, actions and reactions, my little place in a big world, the opposition of flowing and solid elements.

The fourth Transit Festival, in January 2004, was called *Roots in Transit*. The theme I wanted to investigate concerned identity and tradition. The image on the leaflet showed roots growing through the air. I had written a short text for the leaflet, and I had invited all the artists, performances and workshop leaders with this theme in mind. I knew I had to give an opening talk (4) introducing the festival so that all the participants of the Festival could take off on a common journey of discovery together. I knew the importance of giving the right kick off.

In June 2005 I was in Caulonia, a village in Calabria. It was the 11<sup>th</sup> session of the University of Eurasian Theatre and the theme was "text". I was very irritated by all the talking about talking. I needed to *do*

something (5). I stood in the sun in an olive grove, as far as I could get from where the others were working without the risk of encountering a snake, and I did some vocal training. I started saying texts from my performances while looking at one lizard eating another, until only the tail was left hanging out of a small mouth that seemed to be enormous. I tried to restrain my horror by singing to the valley in front of me. In the distance, where the hills burnt dry by the sun came to an end, was a blue hazy sea that disappeared into the sky. I imagined that Sheherezade's songs, the ones I was singing in Arabic, would cross the Mediterranean to reach home.

### THIRD WAVE

Now that the sea is the frame for my article (1) I will have to remember other times I have been looking at the sea. "The sea is revolutionary" said a friend of mine when I was in my teens "because it always comes back to you." I never understood what he meant. "What does the sea make you think of?" I ask another friend. "Of the sun," he answers "I go to the sea when I am on holiday."

For a year or two, whenever I think about "it" - the article (1), the parade (2), the lecture (3), the opening (4), the demonstration (5) - I take notes: on the back of books I am reading, on loose pieces of paper, on folders, on magazines, in a diary. This happens especially while I am travelling, before falling asleep at night or as I am waking up in no rush: those moments when the mind wanders and I remember suddenly that there is something to prepare or be ready for. I hardly ever take notes on my computer. The computer comes in later, when ideas are to be made into sentences with a meaning for others - not just for me; when I need to follow an external music and the sentences have to be read through again



*The Flying Carpet with Julia Varley at the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. Photo: Francesco Galli*

and again for them to dance better with the rhythm. The computer helps me fix a form, if "it" has to be written. Giving a lecture forces me to find a form, if "it" has to be presented orally. Actors and rehearsals make the form concrete, if my notes and ideas are for some kind of performance. Before the form appears, the information is made of sensations, images, and loose words, memories and wishes.

The images appear mostly by chance. When I saw a Chinese film, I decided that during the last scene of the parade (2) I wanted to bury all the characters in snow. The film finished with two men fighting while the seasons passed, from spring to summer, from autumn to winter. The trees and fields in the background changed as the men continued their battle. It started to snow and, as they were slowly buried under a white mass, the fighting got harder, but never stopped. It must be also because of that film that I thought of a tree of different seasons, a tree that has some branches in flower, others with fruit, and others without any leaves, flowers or fruit. I asked Hisako Miura to make such a tree in paper, divided in three parts, so that it could be carried.

The image of stones of water in the title of my lecture (3) has been following me ever since I saw the blocks of stone from the bombed bridge of Mostar in the water of the Neretva river in Bosnia.

Travelling in Patagonia I heard about nomad tribes living on boats. The women kept a fire alight in the boats where they lived with their families as a symbol of home. This image was on my mind when I was preparing the Transit Festival opening (4) but I still did not how to include it.

Jill Greenhalgh often refers to weaving, and that kind of texture inspired me to think of text as a flying carpet. This was a concrete realisation of interlaced

words that gave me something to do during the demonstration (5).

Other images belong to a visual library of scenes I can fish from at need. In my working terminology I call them already existing "material". I decided to use some of these for the parade (2): the scene from *Orô de Otelô* when Augusto Omolú spreads green leaves all over the ground; Iben Nagel Rasmussen as Trickster who in *Itsi Bitsi* covers the floor with pieces of white paper that look like snow. Once I had the leaves and snow, I needed some fruit. I remembered the scene during which Beppe Chierichetti of Teatro Tascabile juggles with three apples taking bites from them before throwing them into the air again.

A video recording of the famous Italian actor Carmelo Bene was shown in Caulonia. Carmelo Bene placed his texts on a music stand, in the middle of the space, and used the stand to direct his eyes inwards and outwards. The impression he gave was that his great versatility and expressivity came directly from the written words in front of him, without him ever moving. Of course I wanted to try the same: I asked for a music stand for my demonstration (5). Having already presented scenes from performances without the help of costumes, set and props would allow me to accompany my texts with their usual actions reduced in order to fit in a much smaller space.

#### FOURTH WAVE

What did the fleeing chosen people think when the Red Sea opened up a passage for them? I wonder what it feels like to see the sea retreat now that we have been warned that a tsunami can follow. The images of all the destroyed homes, jobs and families from Christmas 2004 cannot be forgotten. Why did the devastation triggered by the sea seem more terrifying than the one provoked by earthquakes, hurricanes, mudslides or the

eruption of a volcano? Because the sea means sun and holidays for those of us who live surrounded by tranquil Danish nature?

I remember, as a child, looking down at the beach from the terrace of our summer house in Positano - on the Amalfi *costiera*, one of the most beautiful places on earth - during a storm. The fishermen would run from the shore calculating the right moment to dive into an enormous wave just before it broke. They would swim out to their boats anchored in the bay to save them from the anger of the sea. If the boat was big enough they would sail to the protected port further down the coast. If the boat was small they would bring it to land. Many men on the beach were ready to help, holding ropes and blocks of slippery wood. Again the timing was essential for the boat to come in over and not under the wave. The boats were kept in the bars and restaurants, waiting for the storm to subdue. I could recognise the fishermen risking their lives, I would follow their heads as they swam, and then breathe with relief when they were finally out of the water again.

To explain my concept for the parade (2) to the different groups of performers and to Natalia Marcet, an Argentine participant of "Ageless" who had elected herself my assistant and who kept on asking me what she should do to help, I used Edvard Munch's painting "The Dance of Life". Three women are in the picture: a young one in white, a middle-aged one in red and an older one in black. It was the first image that came to me when thinking about *The Splendour of the Ages*.

On the morning of the day I was to give my talk (3) in Aberystwyth I took out my notes to organise them once again. As I only had twenty minutes to speak, I had to concentrate on the essential. When I talk, it usually takes me about an hour to round up by returning to the starting point after

having stumbled upon something unknown on the way. I needed to find the opening sentence. I found one, and then a better one. As always, I ended up moving the opening sentences down along the structure of my lecture and my final choice was to be made just before starting. To organise my notes I needed to have an idea of the point of view that the listeners, the other speakers and the organiser have of the theme. I read again and again the letters Jill sent me and those I wrote to her. I read the speakers' presentations, and what they had written on the theme. I added turns of phrase, questions, events I wanted to narrate and axioms to my key words. I gathered my notes, writing them down several times, dividing them into families of subjects, searching for the way to pass from one topic to the next, so that they fitted on only one piece of paper. I drew lines from one argument to the next, subdividing each of them into further points, breaking them down until the map got too complicated and I had to start again. As I sat writing at the desk of the small student room where I slept, I began feeling the excitement, anxiousness and impatience of wanting to fulfil Jill's expectations. I knew that I had to *move* my audience to convince them and the only way I know of achieving this is as an actress. I could use some vocal actions, but I needed a theatrical image as well, what at Odin Teatret we call a "knot". My title, stones of water: of course! I went out into the garden to search for a nice stone. I borrowed one of the jugs of water from the tea table promising to return it; I chose it because it was transparent, so people could see inside. In my room again, standing, I held the stone and tried dropping it into the jug of water. I imagined various possibilities. I was guided by the thought of how I could turn the stone into water.

On the morning of the opening of the festival (4) Ana Woolf, seeing how tired

I was, looked at me disapprovingly and said: "You are going to change, aren't you?" I had one hour. I decided to go home. Driving is one the best ways for me to gather my thoughts: it gives me the distance of perspective and it forces me to sit still without doing anything. While I drove I thought of the situation of the opening and of the atmosphere I wanted to create.

The last text of the demonstration (5), according to the sequence decided by the dates of the performances, was to be from the scene in which the puppet called Sheherezade in *Andersen's Dream* flies, is shot and suddenly breaks. I had placed my music stand on a piece of Balinese woven cloth as if it was a carpet and I had thought that I could use it to show how I move Sheherezade. I picked up the cloth by two corners as if they were her hands. It was easy to make the cloth fly, but what could give the equivalent feeling of irreparable collapse?

#### FIFTH WAVE

I am reaching the end of the article (1). I need a bar of chocolate and some music for the last print, to write the last lines.

We were performing at the barracks with "Ageless". Natalia sat beside me as I drove the minibus, we were half dressed in costume. On the way there I gave the last instructions for the performance for the audience of soldiers and their generals, on the way back Natalia and I made the last arrangements for the parade (2). The structure was beginning to take shape, but I realised that for it to work simply and confidently for the hundred performers we had to resolve a mass of complications. Natalia would be free to run around giving last directives while I would guide the parade with Mr Peanut, my character with a skeleton head. I changed around the colours of Munch's ages to fit the costumes I knew the groups already

had: red would be childhood, black adulthood, white old age. Mr Peanut would start dressed in red and change to black and then white with the help of two Vultures (Deborah Hunt and Sally Rodwell). I had to try on the dresses, coats, shoes and gloves, adapt them so they could be taken on and off easily, and rehearse the order of the changes with my assistants. The parade would start in red at the police station square, change to black at the Old Town Hall square, and to white further down the pedestrian street, to end at the Red Square where a stage had been placed in front of a high staircase beside the hotel and fountain. All the performers needed to know where and when they had to meet, and wearing which costume. They also had to know where to leave the props, costumes and instruments that were needed for the different sections of the parade. Each "colour" would be accompanied by music: first the happy dancing rhythms played by Teatro Tascabile; second, the flamenco songs of Atalaya Teatro alternating with the marching drums of Bilico Teatro; and third, the wailing songs of Teatro Tascabile interrupted by the soft rhythms played by the "Ageless" group in white. The orchestras had to agree a signal for the alternation of the music. The music would determine the energy of the parade and the kind of composition each performer used to walk or dance. The Teatro Tascabile children would be clowns in the first part, and the "Ageless" masks were divided into three groups according to their colours. I chose two women to carry each of the three extremely beautiful paper trees Hisako had made, and one woman to walk in front of each tree, who would sing for the ritual of the change of colour, age and season. We needed to rehearse how the women carried the trees on a board in between them, how to make the change over, the timing of their songs,

how to join the trees together, leaving the boards behind and lifting the united tree as high as possible, and the way to walk behind Mr Peanut. The ten people involved would rehearse on the morning of the parade. When we reached the last square, a group of pensioners and children, who had made masks during the previous week, would dance together, then Bilico Teatro, on stilts, would clear the space, the three trees would join into a single one in the middle of the stage while Iben spread snow, Augusto spread leaves and Beppe juggled with apples. All the "Ageless" masks would stand on the staircase while a serenade was sung and one of the Tascabile children made an offering of flower petals to the united tree. The final circus music would break the ritualistic atmosphere. Natalia wrote all this down, I helped her make it look comprehensible, the structure was photocopied and distributed to all the groups. Each group had one person to whom everything was explained in detail several times. Fifteen minutes before everything started I was driving around Holstebro looking for the "Ageless" van that was depositing the masks, because I could not find the tree belonging to the first red section of the parade. While I drove I was on the telephone organising how the information that the second change over had been moved further down the pedestrian street, because of lack of space in the planned square that was now filled by a market, could be given to everyone. As I dressed I wondered how I could see my watch under my gloves in order to respect the agreed times. The moment to begin arrived, I gave the sign, the music started, and everybody followed Mr Peanut. I turned round to have a look: at least the red parade is beautiful, I thought. At the end, I was exhausted and Natalia was dancing: it had all gone very well. Many of the performers were surprised that the parade had been so successful on the basis of

instructions rehearsed only on paper.

It was my turn: I had to be ready to give the keynote talk (3). The participants at the conference were gathered in the theatre of Aberystwyth University waiting for me. My notes were on the table, written in big enough letters to allow me to peek at them without using glasses. I stood beside the table barefoot, the stone in one hand and the jug of water in the other. I started by saying that when I was young my world was divided in two: politics and sport. I had chosen to make theatre to put the realities of ideas and actions together. I trusted the intelligence of my feet well supported by the ground. Did I decide to throw the stone into the jug at that point? Or did the need to underline and make my words meaningful decide for me? As I went on, at times I sang and improvised with my voice. At the end I found myself quoting Eliot's poem about sirens and pouring the water over my bare feet, until the stone fell as well. More images of stones and water emerged from the conference in Aberystwyth. Just as in my case, other women used them to say what words could not.

I had asked Luisa Calcumil, the Mapuche Indian woman from Argentina to sing at the Transit Festival opening (4). As I drove home I remembered that I had chosen to be accompanied by a song because it would communicate, despite different language, nationality and culture. How could I make this idea even more concrete? Because I wanted to give space to the Balinese Arja singer Ni Nyoman Candri, suddenly I had the obvious answer to my question. I would ask the Berber singer Cherifa Kersit, Ni Nyoman Candri and Luisa Calcumil, all representatives of indigenous deep-rooted cultures, to enter Odin Teatret's white room from its three different doors, as if coming realistically from opposite sides of the globe, to meet in the offering of their



songs, as a demonstration of what theatre can make possible. I had to dress beautifully to compete with their costumes. I did not want to sing myself as I already had to talk. I needed something to hold on to, to make me feel at home. Home! The boat with fire! I had a small one, and I lit a candle inside it. I held it as Cherifa, Candri and Luisa entered singing. Luisa brought some seeds with her. I didn't know about this beforehand, and the image acquired a magic density as she placed the seeds from Patagonia into the boat with fire.

I was still in search of solutions for my demonstration (5) in Caulonia. On the video I had seen, Carmelo Bene had a glass of water beside him as he performed. I thought that if I put a glass of water on the stand, the flying Sheherezade could push the stand and make the glass smash on the floor. But I was afraid that the broken glass would hurt the spectators who were sitting close to the stage in summer clothes with bare arms and legs and sandals. I had not yet resolved the ending of the demonstration as I walked to the room where I would present it. I saw the debris from a building site at the entrance. Yes! That could be an image of text lying dead on the ground as the living text flew away like a carpet. I filled a plastic cup with stones and sand, placed the cup on the stand, as if it were water for me to drink, and quickly made up my mind how I would make everything fall at the end. When I actually did it, the silence and sense of shock I felt myself, made me react: I sang one of the Arab songs very slowly as I folded the carpet/cloth and walked away.

The sound of the breaking waves of the Pacific ocean are the background to which I learn Saxo's Latin texts for the *Ur-Hamlet* performance we are preparing for Kronborg castle next year. It was intuition that made me choose, but of course the sea is a very good image for theatre practice:

infinite, mysterious, strong, destructive, productive, made up of hidden worlds, eternally moving, coming and going, warm and cold, directed by currents and undercurrents, flat and tranquil and broken and varied, so different to look at from the surface or from underneath. The sea both separates and unites.

Immersed in the sea we concentrate on swimming, navigating, finding food or refuge, being carried by the currents or fighting against them. The power of the sirens' song reaches out to the horizon. The immensity of the sea cannot fit on paper as the complexity of practice will not fit on it either. The sea is just too vast. I understand this now, as I finish my article.

JULIA VARLEY (Britain/Denmark) was born in London in 1954. After living in Italy, Julia has lived in Denmark since 1976, where she works as an actress and pedagogue with Odin Teatret. Since 1990 she has taken part in the conception and organisation of ISTA and from 1986 in the conception and organisation of the Magdalena Project. She is artistic director of the Transit Festival. The last production directed by Julia premiered in 2006 in Naples, *Il figlio di Gertrude* with Lorenzo Gleijeses. Julia has written various articles and essays, is editor of *The Open Page* and author of the novel *Wind in the West*.