

Maria Porter

Ennobling Nonna - Enabling Maria

*I went on a trip... I learned how to crochet. I learned how to
make granny squares.*

Maria Porter, *Ennobling Nonna*

*In 2001 I took a sabbatical to find out how others made theatre
using physical techniques... I found many examples,
but the question they asked of me left the most impact:*

"Who is your group?"

Maria Porter, *Encounters with an Empty Room*

In October of 2001 I began devising a solo performance, which eventually was titled *Ennobling Nonna*. I had never made a piece for myself. Until that point, I had collaged work together for groups based on found texts, with choreographic elements, primarily taken from the Suzuki Method. I have never had any aspirations to be a playwright, and the idea of beginning with me as the blank page was terrifying. So when I started, I allowed myself to believe that I wouldn't have to be responsible for creating text; if I needed it, I would find it from other sources or someone would magically appear and write it for me. I wanted the work to be movement based, both because I come from a long background in the Suzuki Method, and because I had become enamoured of the work of Odin Teatret and Teatro delle Radici. In my eyes their work dared to flirt with the world of dance and bold, lyrical physicality that for years I had thought myself too old or too large to engage in.

BEGINNINGS - THE PLAN

The work took seed earlier, in January of 2001, when I first met the Magdalena group at the Transit Festival hosted by Julia Varley and Odin Teatret. For some reason, perhaps because of the theme of the Transit Festival, my grandmother, my *nonna*, was on my mind and in my dreams. After seeing the many strong examples of women artists who insisted upon working in the theatre despite many difficul-

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ties, I became emboldened and whispered my desire to make something for myself and asked where I should begin. I was told to see what was on my mind and to start from there: start from something known. Since my grandmother was foremost in my thoughts, I would use her as a kind of Virgil in this journey.

When I finally began to work I was armed with six months of inspiration from these theatre artists, my body, and my desire to attain some kind of creative independence. I was on sabbatical from my teaching job, so I had time during the day while my children were at school and day-care. I couldn't afford to rent a studio, so we moved the furniture out of the living room, and I worked there.

The goal would be to devise physical scores from as many sources as possible; beginning with anecdotes my *nonna* told me as a child. I didn't know how they would link together, but the plan was to allow myself this unknowing until I could find someone to help me figure out what I was doing. I had learned the phrase "generate material" in my travels which I adopted. It made me feel industrious and work-person-like, and it was also much less onerous than "creating a solo performance".

The question immediately arose: what constitutes material? What is materiality? I had the materiality of three anecdotes from *nonna*, the materiality of my body and what I could demand of it, and the materiality of the objects that surrounded me, beginning with a ball of yarn I had used to learn to crochet and had carried with me on my travels.

My first score in fact came from the object work I'd done at the International Theatre School given by Teatro delle Radici, based on a word I had chosen while blindfolded. The yarn seemed connected to my goal; I was learning how to make a beautiful,

complicated and useful object with a piece of string. Eventually, the yarn and the crochet work would provide the central image upon which the disparate scores would hang, and it remains as the first score in the performance.

Next I worked with the few anecdotes I remembered from my grandmother's childhood in Italy and as an immigrant in New York City. I retold the story of the first day my grandmother got her period in which she had to ask the nuns at the convent schools what to do, and subsequently lost her 'protection' in the middle of the town square. I had been given the suggestion to work from verbs, with the intention of avoiding mime and gesture. The image came of walking down long corridors, and I looked around the room and found several mismatched shoes from which to fashion an aisle. I improvised from there and soon my work with found objects began. These happy accidents, finding material which existed in my daily life, relieved me of the burden to be clever, which became one of the 'voices' that would later make work very difficult.

The first two months went by in a similar fashion. I experimented with all of the techniques I had discovered in my travels, and with techniques long dismissed as "dance based". Anything could be material, it seemed, and it was exhilarating. I made a score based on psychological actions from a script I prepared for an audition, next I layered music on that, then discarded the music, and finally worked it with a monologue from *The Merchant of Venice*. I worked improvisationally, in the style of Teatro delle Radici, with associative actions and with eyes blindfolded. I continued to find daily objects to work with which inspired entire scores. A distinctive example was the use of a *halumi* jar, a large jar used to make cheese in Cyprus, which eventually developed into a score that would provide the

justification for Giovanna's exodus from Italy. I was like the proverbial kid in a candy shop: I tasted as much as I could. These thousand changes in direction, try this, do that, were dictated by whim, until finally I succumbed to the inner voices that asked, "Just what the *&#@ do you think you're doing?"

MAKE THE VOICES STOP

Perhaps it was while I was astride the *halumi* jar sometime into the third month that I lost heart. The discouragement stemmed from voices that sounded something like this, "This is simplistic, derivative and boring - it's been done" "No one is going to be interested - like the world needs the story of someone's life!" "This is trivial compared to the suffering of so many around the world!" "Stick to your day job!" It was lonely in my suburban living room. I had tried to rent a space near my home, with a wooden floor, but gave up after the fifth suspicious church basement rental person asked what I was doing working by myself needing a floor upon which I could stomp. When I picked my children up from school and engaged in conversations with the other mothers, it was difficult to talk about what I had been doing all day. Their reactions ranged from polite to something a little less than horrified. I needed help. In order to face the daily task of entering the living room, I began calling a friend and making myself accountable to her for a period of two hours or so. I would call her at the end of the session and report that I had finished. Some days I couldn't bear working at all. She advised me to take the two hours in the room anyway, just to stretch or dream - but to commit to the time I'd allotted myself. I realised the importance of deadlines. I learned to make specific deadlines by which a certain amount of material was to be made: for instance, fifteen minutes by December 14th - regardless of what I thought about the quality of the material. When all else failed,

my Suzuki training came through. The basic proviso, always work beyond your perceived limitations, rang in my ears when the voices which derided my efforts seemed deafening. Lastly, I called in the cavalry: I asked a friend, a director and choreographer, to come over and see what I had been up to.

TO THE RESCUE

My friend came to see what was going on. I showed him the ten or fifteen minutes of material I had, and was shocked that he thought the work was interesting, and that he wanted to work with me to develop it into a performance. His presence and interest gave me permission to continue: a validation I needed to face my colleagues, my family and the voices. It was well into the sixth month of work, and I was back at my day job and would need to show the fruits of my sabbatical. When asked what the piece was about, I refused to say it was about my grandmother, I was certain that my director would lead me in a non-biographical, very interesting, and artistically important direction. I believe I said: "It's a work in progress... I'm still generating material." At that moment in time, with the hodgepodge of material devised in all sorts of ways, it was impossible to find logical connections or links between the scores. We would in the end take the narrative structure from the image of the crochet - a woman trying to put a past together without logical links between events, having to use the gaps in her knowledge as part of the design.

I spent the next year working intermittently with my director, Thomas De Frantz, generating more material. He would take on the task of finding the relationships between the material that eluded me and distracted me from making the work. I needed directions from an outside source from which to create; assignments pleased me a great deal. He gave them, often in the form of



Maria Porter in *Ennobling Nonna*. Photo: Todd Aiken

writing tasks. One very fruitful task was to write in her voice about Giovanna's views on beauty. He also encouraged me to find other voices, other characters, and so we brought her two husbands into the work. Their introduction into the piece was through writing assignments based on their first day in America, or about a typical day in their lives. I was being asked to make fiction, because my grandmother hadn't revealed these details, nor had I bothered to ask. I was hesitant, because it bordered on the territory of authorship, and I had entered this 'bargain' with myself not as writer but as a 'generator of material'. My director's assignments, I soon realised, were also to enable him to carve out a narrative structure that could sustain this oblique style of work. For me, however, they became the pathway to a dialogue between the physical and verbal I had never experi-

enced previously.

WHO'S WRITING THIS?

One day, thinking about this assignment, about Giovanna on beauty, I began a score I was making based on a song by Kate Bush called *Rubber Band Girl* - about a girl who doesn't or can't stop dancing. The score was based primarily on the different relationships of the foot to the floor which then became a woman who did not want her feet to touch the ground. The physical work was going very slowly, and then suddenly I was compelled to write. I wrote pages, in Giovanna's 'voice', about her views on beauty, footwear, keeping her skin a pale white, and how these efforts were unappreciated in her hometown Bari. The *halumi* jar was near me, and I put a pair of beautiful shoes in the jar and began to experiment with that scenario.

More text came, and from there, the imagined link between Giovanna in Italy and her entrance into America. I had from her only fragments of stories of her life in Italy and her entrance into New York, and no details. It was as if by working physically I tapped into her voice.

This new way of working also functioned in reverse. I began writing texts that seemed only tangentially related to themes and images, and which were later put to physical scores. For instance, I was working on a physical score about Giovanna's first husband, who happened to be a carpenter. I was improvising, without sound, on what his daily life was like after Giovanna left him. The next time I worked, I began to write, in his voice, about the secrets of wood. This text was not from any particular assignment given by the director, nor did it relate causally to the improvisation on everyday life. It felt like I was channelling these texts, and they were quite opinionated!

Another way of finding text came about by layering seemingly unrelated text and music onto a physical score. Early on, I had experimented with creating a physical score for a scene I had prepared for an audition. I put text on that from *The Merchant of Venice*, and then I replaced that with music with lyrics relating to a lost love. The lyrics bothered my director, and while searching for alternative music, I began to hear Giovanna speaking about her first husband. Eventually "Giovanna's Confession" replaced the music, born from many layerings of unrelated material.

NEW WAYS OF WORKING

In several instances, when asked to make physical scores from texts I had written, I wouldn't know how to begin. Always my tendency was to narrate physically what I'd written, or to dance the images. I was quite critical of myself in these situations, which of

course would stop the creative process. To solve this, Thomas and I came up with a very arbitrary system of making scores: in one case, I physicalised every third word. This way of working became important and very liberating towards the end of the process, when scores needed to be created quickly to bridge narrative gaps. When the work became less precious and deliberate, I was able to work fast. For example, I made a score in an hour based on a list of things Giovanna hated; and when given the task of making a score based on the theme of eruptions, I took my inspiration from the frog pond near where I was working. By the end of the process, which spanned two and a half years, I had amassed many tactics from which to generate material. I wonder now, if asked to make ten minutes of material, how long it would take? If I learned anything from this time it is not to worry so much about what it is one is making and its importance, relevance, or connection to a greater whole. Often the important thing is just to work, and to keep working, and to share the work with trusted friends and colleagues who understand the spirit from whence it comes. The results or reasons why the work was undertaken aren't necessarily even revealed by the first performance. After two years of performance, I am now just coming to understand why this was necessary to me and to my children.

PRODUCTION

Ennobling Nonna was produced by Slippage Theater, a group founded by my director, Thomas De Frantz, based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. We went into production in March 2004 with what seemed like a staff of thousands. I remember the first showing for the designers. Five people behind a long table and me on the other side with a ball of yarn, some shoes, a stick and a *halumi* jar. I thought, "What are

all these people doing in my living room?" This shift into a more traditional production structure was a shock to the piece and to me. I had entered the process wanting autonomy from those forces represented by the people behind the table, and yet, there they were. I was surprised at the amount of people who had gathered to produce my two and a half year endeavour, and subsequently relinquished much of my ownership of the piece, at least for a time. In my initial fear of "how is this going to fit together", I gave over many of the structural responsibilities to Thomas, and when we got into production, this carried over into design choices that I felt at times swallowed my work. I had, without realising, slipped into traditional actor mode during technical rehearsals, which was much like a somewhat obedient (or not) child waiting to be told if she could go out for a break. I imagine this was due to a shift to the traditional production structure, without taking into consideration how untraditional the work and the process were. I expect the autonomy I longed for is partially imaginary, because certainly my relationship with Thomas, the friends to whom I was accountable, and the ghosts, both living and dead, who were with me in the 'empty room' were as much a part of the making of the performance as I was.

The performance lasts for forty-five minutes and is physically gruelling. I made many of the scores when I was physically more fit than I am now. When I began the work I was on a quest to find other physical trainings and methods used to generate material. I wanted to leave Suzuki behind for a while. It wasn't until after I made the work demonstration about the piece, *Encounters with an Empty Room*, that I realised how much I had based the work in the tradition in which I was trained. Not only had I taken physical ideas from the training to make scores, such as working with different foot to floor relationships, but the aesthetic founda-

tion of the performance was from Suzuki. "The struggle of the actor and the struggle of the characters are visible to the spectator at the same time". So in fact, the physical difficulty I have performing the piece is part of the performance. This idea from Suzuki, that the struggle is beautiful, is comforting to my ageing body, which struggles now in very different ways than it did four years ago.

CLOSING REMARKS

I don't know if I would attempt this kind of endeavour again, simply because of the loneliness. Even now, when I am preparing for a performance of the piece, I call my assistant, Brian Lady, to make myself accountable or to give me encouragement. The fact that I did it, and that I finished something I said I would do, despite the length of time it took, is a source of great pride. I have found the freedom of non-linearity in my work, so I don't panic if my inspirations do not connect in a causal way. I remember the granny squares made from the single piece of yarn: eventually, if one makes enough of these squares they can be sewn together, and despite the many holes which exist in the pattern, they make a warm blanket.

MARIA PORTER (USA) teaches acting, voice, Suzuki and post-modern theatre practices at Long Island University. She is an actress in New York, where favourite roles have included Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*, Hecuba in *The Trojan Women*, and Piaf in *Piaf*. She has been working closely with Teatro delle Radici, and collaborated with them on their new work, *Nel ventre della balena*. She has performed *Ennobling Nonna* and *Encounters with an Empty Room* in New York, Providence, Boston and Lugano, and is most proud to have performed at the Magdalena USA Festival in 2005.