

Roxana Pineda

Hidden in the Blood

The voice that emerged from her was so beautiful and strong, that she scared herself; she stopped, shivering, paused and then sang again; as if wanting to find out if it was true. It was. She sang like an angel and many singers would have wanted to steal that voice from her. Her mother, who had little disposition for caresses and tender words, (a life fighting misery had hardened her too much), came out of the house to the yard where my grandmother continued singing, and with eyes full of tears, stood in front of her and in a fragile affected voice said: "My dear little one, how you sing!"

My desire to perceive and experience life as an intense event has often given me pain: disappointments arise from the unquestionable acknowledgement that life is also a practical reality. However, this desire also took me into theatre, making me an actress, and it helps me to avoid becoming completely tamed by pragmatism or scheming. I never stop asking myself from where this impulse, and my need for intensity as a means of communication and a way of understanding the world and other people comes.

My grandmother, Adelaida, is partly to blame. She died on the 28th of July 2001, four days after I turned thirty-nine. Life had two currents for her: the everyday and a different life that she bestowed on herself through her songs. I didn't always know this (it was something I had not understood rationally); I realised it quite recently, while I was wondering what to say in this article, beyond talking about my dedication to voice and my disciplined vocal work.

I knew that my grandmother was travelling to a hidden world through the songs she sang, one that allowed her to *live* in another dimension; it was visible in her physical posture, in the tempo she used, in the vocal engagement she risked to cut across the songs' texts with a touching capacity that made us shiver. In those moments she was not completely *there*. I knew that for her it was not just a question of singing - even though she was in fact singing, and in such an overwhelming way that it was impossible to remain indifferent to the radiant torrent of her voice. Things happened suddenly: my grandmother sang, she lost herself in those inaccessible worlds into which her voice took her, and I listened; without knowing it, I was learning to travel from lessons that were transmitted to me through the blood.

Because of our up-bringing and certain aspects of our professional training, we are accustomed to support our opinions with intellectual certainties that are explained with supposedly scientific precision. In art this attitude is even more absurd: art is in essence a human invention

created in order to understand the world poetically, and survive. We feel more important, serious and certain if we are armed with grandiloquent speech, even if, in the main, it doesn't reflect our actual relationship with reality or our place on the planet, and certainly doesn't take into account the personal biography which has allowed us to reach the present day. Thus we discard the uniqueness that makes us truly special.

In the last decades, this approach has been put into crisis by the advance of physics and the astounding discoveries that have destabilised many certainties. Of course it is not a question of giving up the capacity to think or to systematise knowledge, but in a profession like mine (acting), after so many years of technical research, of wanting to know how and why things are done, of inventing ways to learn how to use the body and voice, of acquiring wisdom and skill, of creating a body of rules to support my actor's artistic body, after almost twenty years of work, I am assaulted by the question of blood. In fact, this question has never left me; it has always been in a corner of my work, at all stages.

What is this question of blood? I believe it has to do with a silent and mysterious interior journey; one that, like the real journey of our blood in the body, is invisible to the eyes of those who watch (and to our own eyes), but keeps us alive. It is a hidden, continuous journey, replete with obstacles and turns, with chemical synthesis and complex evolutions; a subtle journey, as strong as a hurricane and as delicate as silk. A journey that encompasses the duality of utility and poetry; contradictory in the way that, in each instant, the journey happens at the same time as we, simple humans, are sustained by it.

The question of blood has to do with this almost incomprehensible, unlikely

journey; it has to do with those areas nourished by blood, and with a biography of the senses, interior, written, and kept in some area of our brain. This biography cannot be recorded in any conventional way. Therefore humans continue to generate so many "wings", to use the words of the Cuban songwriter and singer, Silvio Rodríguez.

It seems that through my blood-line, I have received a certain musical capacity. My great-grandfather, mysteriously called Susano, (my name is Roxana), was a 'henhouse rooster'; he was handsome, with deep blue eyes, well dressed but not well fed, always riding a giant black horse; and a drinker, a real *Jovellanos* character. He was a musician, poet and improviser. He played several instruments by ear, and composed songs, rhymes and fandangos for my great-grandmother, Izmenia. When she died, my grandmother took with her the memory of many of his compositions. Susano entered the taverns and got onto the tables with his horse. He was a party charmer, a philanderer to the bitter end. He died stabbed and betrayed, in a fight caused by jealousy, when my grandmother was only five months old. The girl, Adelaida, inherited from him the deep blue eyes and his musical talent.

My grandmother told me that once, when she was a little girl, while she washed clothes, (she also inherited his hunger), she began to sing. The voice that emerged from her was so beautiful and strong, that she scared herself; she stopped, shivering, paused and then sang again; as if wanting to find out if it was true. It was. She sang like an angel and many singers would have wanted to steal that voice from her. Her mother, who had little disposition for caresses and tender words, (a life fighting misery had hardened her too much), came out of the house to the yard where my grandmother continued singing, and with



Roxana Pineda and Alain Carballo in *A la deriba*. Photo: Joel Saez

eyes full of tears, stood in front of her and in a fragile, affected voice said: "My dear little one, how you sing!" My grandmother cried too when she told me this story. I think that the voice of blood was behind those words - the words of my great-grandmother Izmenia, who recognised in the girl the gifts of her dead, stabbed husband, and those of the girl who experienced her mother's recognition as a special event.

From my grandmother the gift was passed on to my father. As a small boy, he begged my grandmother to buy him a harmonica. She told me that it was Chinese torture to have him hanging on to her skirt all day with that relentless nagging: "Mummy, buy me the harmonica..." A whole year passed, perhaps more: to buy a harmonica amid that hunger was a kind of sacrilege. But then, on a good day, from fatigue and so as not to hear him anymore, she bought him the harmonica. The boy

took it, looked at it, went to a corner, sat down, put the harmonica in his mouth and began to play perfectly as if he had played the instrument all his life. My grandmother froze, looking at him from her kitchen, and began to cry. It was music in the blood. Many years later, when I visited my father, there would always be a moment when he would take out his harmonica to play a sea of melodies for me. He still does.

From my great-grandfather, my grandmother and father the gift was passed on to me. But it was especially my grandmother's blood that took root in my throat. From the moment I was born my grandmother would take care of me, carry me and say: "It is as if she were mine". She sang all the songs of this world to me; to make me fall asleep, to get me up, to feed me, to cook and teach me how to iron clothes, to get rid of her anger and sadness, to deceive me when she suffered. I remember perfectly the white

rocking chair where she would hold me on her lap. The years passed and my legs grew too long for the rocking chair, I no longer fitted on it, but I continued looking for a way for my grandmother to spoil me, so that I could fall asleep while she sang and sang. Now I know that this was a special moment for her as well, and that the emotion of her singing voice was transmitting a flow of experiences to me that I unconsciously picked up. The rocking chair broke and one day my grandmother could no longer carry me, but she never stopped singing to me. She ironed other people's clothes to earn some money; I sat with her and together, at five in the afternoon, we listened to the radio programme playing the songs of our favourite singer, the blind Tejedor. "*Plazos traicioneros por qué me condenan; corazón entristecido por qué lloras por esa ingrata*" (Traacherous words why do they condemn me; saddened heart why do you cry for that ungrateful woman): they all spoke of sadness and nostalgia for the love that disappears, of betrayal and the emptiness of life... But Tejedor sang with a moving eloquence that soaked the bones. And as the girl that I was, I learned the whole repertoire by heart to accompany my grandmother in those domestic concerts. And she acted for her audience with total abandon, while sweating from the heat of the iron.

I remember perfectly her pauses, with the iron in the air, sustaining a high note with her eyes closed and almost in tears. All this and more became the hidden current that was travelling to reach me. When I left home for the first time I was eighteen years old. I moved out, but stayed very close because my whole family was there; and my grandmother, with all her enigmatic and conflicting presence. She never stopped singing. She never stopped singing to me. She knew that I was the one who most enjoyed and recognised her talent. And

when she heard me sing seriously for the first time in front of her, she reacted like her mother, in a fragile voice, her eyes full of tears, she hugged me and said: "My dear little one, how you sing!" And from that moment whenever we could, we sang together. But in our musical relationship the most important thing, that we maintained until her death, was the meeting during which she sang and I listened and applauded; it was the moment of transmission.

Two weeks before she died, I was in Havana visiting her (I am from Havana, but I moved to Santa Clara to create my theatre group and work). She was already very sick; she hardly got out of bed and, as she had been like this some time, my aunt, who looked after her, could not always pay her all the attention she demanded. In her lifetime she had been a very active person, the centre of the family; and to find herself suddenly dependent on others, affected her a lot. I was sitting in a room near to hers. My aunt was busy with some domestic chores in the dining room. The house was very silent. I was feeling very sad at the time; I was going through a difficult period in my life and I knew my grandmother was about to die. And I was far away. Suddenly my grandmother, almost naked, opened the door of her room, walking with a lot of difficulty. She reached her armchair, looked at me with those deep blue eyes that I will never forget, and with a gaze that I will also never forget, let herself fall into it. Something made me freeze from the moment I saw her, because I didn't make the least attempt to help her. My grandmother fixed her eyes on an infinite horizon, began to rock herself in the armchair and, with a voice that would make the most saintly of boys shiver, she began to sing. It was a song that I had never heard. My aunt and I were stunned by the strength and the touching force with which she

sang... When she finished, my aunt and I applauded and I went to kiss her. She looked at me sweetly, with a simple head movement, and without a pause she began to sing the same song again. My aunt smiled, thinking that my grandmother wanted more applause, that she was demanding more attention. But I returned to my place and stayed there speechless. I knew that was not it; that was too simple for my grandmother. She repeated that soulful song many times. She was singing for me. She was teaching me her last song before dying. It was a gift and a farewell. I learned the song on the spot. I went through it and she corrected me once. And I took it with me to Santa Clara. The following week I received my aunt's call. My grandmother had fallen and was in hospital. I returned to Havana and stayed with her until she died. In her last days she no longer spoke. And I sang to her very softly, certain that the energy reached her and gave her peace. I know it was so. When she died I understood that she had wanted to teach me that song as a gift. When I went back to Santa Clara after her death and returned to work, I used my grandmother's song in one of the vocal training sessions. My voice broke and tears fell, but I didn't stop singing or doing the exercise. It was a settling of accounts and a very personal way of allowing those hidden currents to rise up to my skin. This is the way in which I conceive the art of theatre and of the actor.

Now I can explain better why I use songs in my daily vocal training.

Singing was not the first tool that I used in my group's vocal training. For some years our 'group' was only two actors. I recognised that I had a strong voice, but sometimes in a register that was too strident, with an annoying harshness. At the same time, I remembered the recordings of my voice

with dislike and I perceived a kind of hoarseness when listening to myself. When we began our apprenticeship in the group, voice was a difficult and delicate topic. For many years we insisted on creating or reproducing exercises that strengthened the vocal apparatus at the same time as allowing us to discover the curves of a sound register that remained hidden to us.

During this process we worked with resonators, with school-like exercises that improved the diction (a pencil in the mouth), vocal improvisations to affect partners who had their backs turned to us, dialogues at different distances, texts that were said to a sequence of very strong physical actions, texts layered onto physical improvisation or acrobatics, texts thrown in the air, texts applied to melodies, texts repeated while balancing a stick in your hand, sound improvisations to create vocal actions, reproducing typical ways of speaking, copying distortions in ways of talking, using a facial mask that imposes a form of speech, animal sounds pasted on to the text, the narration of events in invented languages... We used a long list of adopted or invented exercises to try to make our voices acquire strength, clarity, and discover a wide register of expressive possibilities.

Since I was a little girl I have always liked to sing. My brothers and I got up very early on Mother's day and I organised a choir of three to wake up our mother and grandmother. We sang for them: "*Madrecita del alma querida en mi pecho yo llevo una flor, no me importa el color que ella tenga porque en fin tú eres madre una flor...*" (Dear little mummy of my soul in my breast I carry a flower, I don't care what colour it is because you, mother, are a flower...), and of course, they would burst out crying and hug us. This song is in our performance *The Traitor and the Hero* at the moment when my character, Ryan,



Roxana Pineda in *Piel de Violetas*. Photo: Joel Saez

looks for the ways of truth at his grandfather's tomb.

With the inheritance of musicality I also received the therapeutic and performing functions singing involves. Since I was young I have chosen to pour

into the action of singing a parallel current that narrated my emotional state, commented on my vision of real or imagined events, and brought to the surface sensations that affected me or that I built consciously to liven up my singing.

Differently from my grandmother, while I was a girl my songs sometimes narrated real experiences; but other times, in the loft of the house, in front of a mirror, while I cleaned or walked to school, I invented an environment inside which the texts of the songs or the melodies could develop as if this was happening here and now. It was an impulse to compose fiction through songs, and to comment through them on certain events in my life. In this way, I received my grandmother's inheritance as a whole, because I received her melodious and fine-tuned voice, but also the possibility that song offered her to comment on her life and create other parallel emotional currents.

I don't remember when we used songs for the first time in the vocal training. What I do remember is that in the beginning we insisted much more on the research in resonators and on the use of small pieces of melody that could be joined together as if they were sentences repeated from mouth to mouth, fixing and memorising the corresponding actions to each syllable of the musical phrase. I can also recognise now how the appearance of my musical universe in the performance improvisations didn't have the same power at the beginning (I hardly sing in our first work *El lance de David*; but I did in the second, *La historia de un viaje*, and even more in the third, *Antígona*).

Even so, from the first day and in some moments of the work, the fact of singing meant a much more private space, a space where technical research could become a moving, introspective journey. Instead of betraying or taking value away from the precision of the vocal training, this journey led me to the amplification of my sound universe and to the discovery of its resonance. So the fact of singing transformed, little by little, into a space of technical opening in which I could use resonators,

amplify vowels, place very high or very low notes, underline the melody or the harmonics, speak to the sky or the earth, sustain a falsetto, play with the modulation of tones, improvise on the melody in an infinite range of tones, etc. But that work on precise rules was, and is, at the same time a private journey toward an emotional, active comment on my personal biography, allowing myself to go into unknown areas that light up other possibilities in my voice and place me within a family lineage. What happens is that the songs force me to build parallel channels and although the days are not (as happens in daily work that lasts for many years) always very stimulating, when I sing I can find the resources to go deeper into the knowledge of my voice and into the embroidery of a spirituality that never abandons me.

What has happened in the course of the years is that this process has sharpened. It is like a button that is activated and I can no longer separate the structural expression from its hidden currents. For this reason, I tend to use songs in my work more and more; the same thing happens while building materials, teaching my students and training my voice. I have sometimes wanted to impose on myself the restriction of not using melodies or songs in my proposals, but it has always been a prohibition that I have had to force on myself, because in some corner I then decide that it is song and nothing else that embodies with accuracy what I want to compose.

All this inheritance, and the work sustained by the group, has determined my growing interest in the musical world, in order to accumulate different references and experiences and make appropriate to myself strange sounds with my voice. The desire to adventure in singing, to build stage actions starting from my private musical archive, putting at stake my experience as a theatre

actress and my experience from my blood biography, has also become very strong for me. But all this is satisfied with being a hidden current that is activated in the creative processes of my group or in the exercises that I direct for my students at the School of Art of Santa Clara. It also determines my curiosity in approaching the work of people like Brigitte Cirila, who start from song to build a particular dramaturgy.

I know that in almost twenty years of work with my group, I have accumulated a certain professional wisdom. It is an organic archive that I need to take from myself and deposit in others in order to move on. Sometimes, while I train, I perceive in my tempo the burden of not knowing how to find the meaning that reveals a peephole from which to approach new paths for my work. I think it is an obsession that is born of my impatience, something characteristic of me, the impatience of doing, growing and perceiving each act with intensity. And then I have to make use of rationality, of the public person who has built a path that needs protecting and defending from the theatre monsters - nothing heroic, just the simple fact of living, which is perceived with violence in some atrophied corner of my biography because I am asking with my grandmother's eyes.

I want to remain in theatre using my grandmother's eyes. This is the condition that prevents me from giving in when doors seem to close and the burden tries to bring me to a standstill. I don't want to stop, nor feel that dullness darkens my skin. I know that it is senseless, but I don't care. It is because of this I make theatre: to maintain my senseless space, to maintain my space of guaranteed intensity where a human being who sings to live a different life is not a lunatic, but a simple human being who sings to live or to build other lives.

Sometimes, the fact of possessing an

inheritance of this kind makes me thank life. It is a concrete and, at the same time, a poetic fact; a gift that I can articulate in my work, a memory that activates the universe of my references, a private patrimony with which I can dialogue without mediators, and a sound and moving river that does not get drained. It is a well of petrol in the sea.

I feel that the act of singing is more and more the private space where hidden currents come up to my skin and transform experience into a public act that can be recorded and shared. I know that in those moments I am like my grandmother; I live two parallel lives and I can, playing with my abilities, go deep into dangerous areas of my humanity.

I believe that this is a path that is just sketched before me. I don't know where it will take me. But that is another open question that allows me to perceive that *aboulia* won't be able to conquer me, and that, in my work space, nor will the monsters.

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

ROXANA PINEDA (Cuba) graduated in Theatre Studies and Dramaturgy at the Instituto Superior de Arte de Cuba in 1985. She founded the Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara in 1989 with Joel Sáez, and has performed in all its productions. Roxana has toured festivals in Spain, Colombia, France and Venezuela. She is also a theatre scholar and professor, and as such she regularly gives workshops on improvisation and composition. In 2004, she founded the Centro de Investigaciones Teatrales Odiseo (CITO), a pedagogical theatre research project, which has organised five international meetings. She is the director of Magdalena sin Fronteras (Magdalena without Borders), a triennial international festival and meeting which held its first manifestation in January 2005.