

# Geddy Aniksdal

## Working Hands

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before giving up written  
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My Papa has written to me only once in his life. I was travelling for nine months in South America and at the end of one of my Mama's regular letters, which I picked up *poste restante* in various cities, he had added a line: "Your Papa is writing to you, don't be shocked!" That was in 1978. Thirty years later I am in Greece and on my mobile phone I receive a message. It is from my Papa. It says: "Hi, Papa".

My Papa's schooling was interrupted by the second world war, when the Germans confiscated the little house where the farmers' children met to attend school every second week. Born in 1932, he was eight when the war started and thirteen when it ended. At fifteen he went to sea. He has been doing practical, manual work all his life. There are five of us children and on each birth certificate he has a new occupation: bricklayer, carpenter's assistant, concrete worker, etc.

His big hands look clumsy holding a pencil or a pen. He seems uncomfortable, as if having to concentrate hard when holding such an instrument in his hand because it is too small. It is like seeing men invited to coffee served in cups with such tiny handles they cannot get their fingers into them. It is not wrong, but awkward.

I feel very close to my Papa, yet it is almost a mystery to me that it is possible to go through a whole life without writing. How can he not want to write? Then I realise that I have learned how to write. I have practised spelling letters in letters. Writing letters was the first step towards having a voice of my own in words, while my Papa would want to sit and talk, he would want to imprint his words directly on me, there and then. I have come to think that my Papa 'writes' to me according to an oral tradition - if I have the time to read it.

My father-in-law wrote letters every Sunday. My grandmother wrote me letters immediately after she received one from me; she always described where she was, her surroundings, as if she was setting the scene for an Ibsen play. My daughter wrote letters to heaven: her grand-



father had died and, even if she was not quite sure if he was up there, she decided to write to him. She told him what was going on here on earth and how much she would have liked that he was not dead. I believe I have often written letters to people to whom I could just as easily go and talk, when feeling that I wanted to speak with them without being interrupted.

I have written thousands of letters, notes, lists, hundreds of work logs and diaries, numerous articles, my own manuscripts for my actor's work, scenarios for when I am directing. I have collected boxes of letters received, notes, cards, lists. In the theatre we have archives of our activities that almost overflow from our rooms.

I would give up many things before giving up written words - read or written by me. If I come to a place where there is no literature, no printed matter, I feel deprived. Besides theatre, it represents the worlds, places and roads I need to explore. Although the form can change, I need to be in constant dialogue with written words in speeches, images, dreams, dances and performances.

"Why are letters a theme for *The Open Page*?" my young actor colleague asked me. He has been away working with a Polish theatre company, and is back in Porsgrunn to play the young Peer Gynt in a co-production we are making with the local institutional theatre. "Letters - I tell him over lunch - are some of the first documents we have of women's work in theatre and, as you know, one of the reasons for starting the journal was to document women's work and to inspire women to leave traces behind: traces for others to pick up; traces for others to go on from. Isadora Duncan's letters about her work made a strong impression on me when I started in theatre and I looked for other voices - women's voices. This was before The Magdalena Project came into existence."

Then I add, "There are also our own letters. Within the Project, before e-mail, even before fax machines, we were prolific writers. We wrote and wrote to each other as we were colleagues and sometimes friends, or about to become colleagues and friends. We often started by talking of work, then went on to how our everyday lives were going, with news of other women who had written to us or hadn't,

and the tone and shape of the letter would change. If the letters started out being type-written they always ended with some hand-written notes."

The multi-tasking potential of many women is often visible in the letters. And, as I said to the young actor, isn't this also something that has come into our performances more and more, in the way we see and direct material? In the weaving of material? The different angles we use to tell a story? The going in and out of a character? The fine line between acting and not acting? Is the strict division of what is to be considered professional, personal or private still an issue now that the crossing of genres has been introduced to theatre for such a long time? Is the old discussion about what information benefits the story to be told still relevant?

When I was a little girl at school and we had to learn about punctuation, our teacher told us about a telegram sent to the front, concerning a prisoner of war. The telegram read: "Kill him not, wait till I come." And the telegrapher wrote: "Kill him, not wait till I come". So my teacher said: "This tiny little mark, a comma, is a matter of life and death." And I went home, worrying about the comma and crying over the man who lost his life.

Letters are a way of remembering. Letters confirm an existence. Letters are communication. Trying to keep a dialogue going is the whole purpose. You owe me a letter.

When I was learning theatre craft at the beginning, my body was clumsy. I do not like being clumsy. It is hard to accept that it is a necessary phase to go through in order to have a practice, a place from where to act and reflect. Now I write throughout my work: letters from my worlds, letters to the world; to one of you, hoping to reach many of you. I find myself asking and answering questions about the silent women of the

past, the silencing of women and the struggle against this.

That I make theatre is very important for me and maybe a handful of others, but - let's face it - for most people it is totally uninteresting. This is fine, since I know I do it for other reasons: to have a place to belong, to struggle against the darkness, to enjoy myself profoundly, to fight back by insisting on continuing to do the very small, almost insignificant, everyday chores in a constructive way.

Last night I spoke to my colleague about small words, phrases that we who share a common history, we who remember, only need to begin to say like a code and the others know immediately what is coming, the context of the original saying, and the use, the history it has travelled. This is the heritage that we need to pass on, or it will be gone.

P.S. My father is very good at crossword puzzles!

P.P.S. My mother taught him!

GEDDY ANIKSDAL (Norway) is a long time member of Grenland Friteater, Norway, and has worked closely with The Magdalena Project since the beginning. Her performances *Blue Is the Smoke of War* and *No Doctor for the Dead* have toured internationally within the Magdalena network. Geddy is also the artistic director of *Sense of Place*, a multicultural project for the city of Porsgrunn. She is on the Editorial Board of *The Open Page*.