

Marisa Naspolini

Fiction and Confession

In writing letters - and in reading them - I certainly had some of my most special moments of sharing confidences, confessions and reflections. Sometimes, I open my large box and choose some of them, randomly, to refresh some episodes and remind myself how and why I chose as I did.

During a long period of travelling (I have lived in different cities in Brazil and abroad, in Italy, France and the USA), writing and receiving letters became an important connection with the world around and with people about whom I cared a lot. My box of letters and postcards was kept safe until I finally got re-established, twelve years ago, in the city I was born in, Florianópolis, an island next to the coast in the South of Brazil. As almost all my trips and long spells abroad were related to theatre practice, most of the letters I wrote and received made reference to my own practice as well.

I began to write my first 'secret' diary at eleven. I had just moved with my family to Brasília, the capital of Brazil. I was in crisis. I loved the life I had previously, on an island surrounded by nature, beaches and friends. I fully resisted my arrival in Brasília, but little by little I got accustomed to an experience that lasted six years. At the beginning I felt inadequate, partly due to the fast metamorphosis in my teenage body, and partly because of the dry, rough urban landscape, that showed me the harshness of life in my juvenile conception. I didn't want to be there and my bedroom window became my escape, an opening space for day dreams and fantasy. Things became worse when I got a diagnosis of myopia: definitely I didn't want to see *that* world.

One day, looking through the window, I could see my neighbour, a charming, good-looking young lady, long hair blowing in the wind, free body dancing in space. She seemed to incarnate my ideal of happiness. Freedom. Well being. Not feeling strange. I wanted to be like that: an Isadora from the *cerrado* (the typical vegetation of the Brazilian middle-west). I had just read an interview with an emergent Brazilian actress where she said that working on a character was a way of living other lives, of becoming someone else. I worked out with surprise that theatre could provide me with the mechanism to experience *another me*. That fitted perfectly. I could become my neighbour and as many women as I wished.

In that special moment I decided to make theatre. Funding and taking part in the school theatre group was a simple and natural step. The decision was made. I needed to experience other ways of being, of moving, of feeling myself. My diary was the first to share my recent discoveries - what impulses and needs were pushing me to theatre work? What did I find in theatre that I couldn't find anywhere else? I have since then accumulated many notebooks where I write down my impressions of life and work, thoughts and feelings, creative processes.

The same happened to my correspondence. I have always been fascinated by letters. Letters have been a live testimony of my choices and my path in theatre, whether my correspondents were relatives, colleagues, friends or lovers. In writing letters - and in reading them - I certainly had some of my most special moments of sharing confidences, confessions and reflections. Sometimes, I open my large box and choose some of them, randomly, to refresh some episodes and remind myself how and why I chose as I did.

In 1994 I accomplished an important theatre project in my career and life. After living for one year in Italy, studying Italian language and history, making an internship with Teatro Potlach and travelling around in Veneto searching for the roots of my family (my great-grandfather was Venetian), I created a play - *America* - about Italian migration to Brazil based on my own family's story. I was the co-author, co-director, co-producer and I also acted. Most of all, I was responsible for giving new life to that old story which was part of the whole group too. All Brazilians have their own little family story of migration. We were searching - the whole group (actors and staff) - for our roots. That whole project was pretty much related to my own background,

but the story of my great-grandfather became the guideline for each of us to search for his or her own personal story. For many months we learned Italian, sang popular songs from the 1880s, read documents, travelled around the country to meet relatives and friends, made interviews, submitted to an intense daily training, and shared our memories brought from far back in the past.

Letters had a specific and important role in this research. In the eighteenth century, almost all important information came by letter: the promises of the "new world", the reports of births and adversities, the notice of a death. Letters had the power of documents. Both in Italy and in Brazil, I read a huge amount of letters in order to find a particular way to tell that story. We finished by having two important scenes in the play which used letters (I mean concretely).

At the moment I am working on another project which is very much influenced by correspondence. It is a solo performance called *Simulacrum of Solitude*, directed by Jefferson Bittencourt and based on texts by the Brazilian poet Ana Cristina Cesar, who died in the early 1980s. Ana Cristina's work is known for its peculiar mix of letters and diaries and the way she deals with fiction and confession. The mixture between autobiography and artificial construction, life and art, reality and fiction, objective and subjective, throws up an original writing where intimacy and public life, internal and external, get (con)fused and implicate each other. Her poetic prose is installed in a moving field where the borderlines are not clear. There is a transitional, 'oscillation zone', that interests me a lot in terms of composition for performance.

I first heard about her and her work when she died prematurely, by committing



André Jounot, Luciana Cesconetto and Juliana Nezzi, in a scene from *America*, co-directed by Marisa Napolini, 1994. Photo: Cleide de Oliveira

suicide. It was October 1983. I bought her books, I identified myself with her work, and that was it. Then some years passed, I travelled, I wrote letters, I received letters, I learned new languages, I knew places, I moved, I performed and when I got to read her poems again, they had another - and special - meaning for me. In 1991, I began a project called *Lonely Women*, based on the life and work of seven important women in the West. Ana was to be one of them. The project was aborted after one month of rehearsals for several irrelevant reasons.

Break.

In 2006 my mother died. I was in the middle of a Master's project in theatre and I had just decided that my project would include a practical experience. I would work on some of Ana Cristina's poems. I would write about and explore composition processes that combine fiction and confession. I would work together with another actress to systematise procedures of creation. We dive into subjectivity. We talk about our lives. We investigate our intimacy. My mother becomes a source too. Her long illness provides me with enough time to revive aspects of our relationship, to read again the letters she had written me, to make her part of my personal research...

Break.

Last year I decided that all the hundreds of letters I have kept all my life long would become something theatrical. This means that I don't want them any more just as memory or documents. I need them to become seeds of something else. And they will. Since the beginning of the year I have been working on *Simulacrum of Solitude*. I read the published letters of Ana Cristina. I read my own letters. I read her poems so full of personal references. I read my diaries. I mix things. I'm in process. I experience this very particularly feminine way of working.

I called a friend, a theatre director,

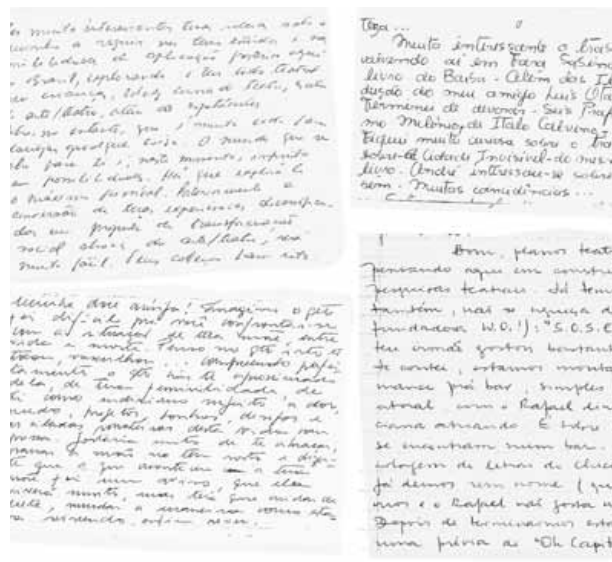
musician and video-maker, to work with me as a director. I told him I wanted to deal with letters and poetry, to mix fiction and confession; to be *me myself I* and *the other*. I brought dozens of letters and postcards to the rehearsals, and many fragments of poems. I proposed a kind of chaotic process to him. Things - and by "things" I mean texts, actions, music, objects - would jump into the performance in as much as they made sense, as we had the feeling of it. We decided to create a 'story' from that. The poems could take us anywhere. They could tell so many different stories. We had a starting point but not much more than that.

After three months, this process is beginning to take us somewhere. Images begin to pop up. There is a woman. She waits. She receives letters and postcards. She creates a parallel world. She mixes reality and fantasy. She moves. She waits for someone. She creates a presence. She creates an absence. I bring things from my own life: parts of letters, memories, states of being. Every rehearsal I experience the feeling of not knowing where this is going. I think this is so much a 'female practice': being guided by intuition; searching for answers in the stars. Letting things settle down until they make some kind of sense. Not rushing. Not giving up. Persisting. I'm so happy that Jefferson accepted this challenge with me.

Although I love letters I rarely write them nowadays. E-mails have occupied this space and my personal time. In the 1980s I used to wait for the postman to bring news. One had to wait for weeks for an answer. Once I got it, I would easily read and re-read the same letter many times, tasting it like good wine. Now I get anxious if someone takes two days to answer a message. Wow! How immediate we are becoming... A friend of mine, who is in his twenties, told me he had never written a

letter in his whole life. It seems this practice remains in the past. The act of writing a letter has become a remembrance. Maybe that's why they became my main source of creation. Maybe through theatre we can bring these memories back and live again - somehow - the life contained in sheets of paper. I finish with some words by Ana Cristina Cesar from her *Intimate Diary* (Boulevard Books, London, 1997):

I thought up a cheap trick that almost came off. I shall have correspondents in four capitals of the world. They'll think of me intensely and we'll exchange letters and news. When no letter arrives I plan to rip the calendar from the wall, in the session of pain. I'm drawing little snakes which are the offspring of rage - they're little rages which mount the table in a cluster and cover the calendar on the wall, ceaselessly writhing. Those plans and tricks - it was me who invented them on the train. "Trains passing through chaos?" - nonsense. A letter arrives from the capital of Brazil which says: "Everything. Everything but the truth". (...)



Extracts from letters received by Marisa Naspolini, clockwise from top right 1986, 1992, 1992, 1995.

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