

Lena Simic

Masha Writes to Vershinin

Vershinin never receives Masha's letters. However, audiences will get their fragments: my thoughts about the relationship with Masha and Chekhov, theatre and performance, love affairs, falling in love, desire, war, revolution and longing. Some of the thoughts in the letters are just notes for the performance, my notes to myself, to the future.

Letter writing has always been an important part of my life. As a teenager I wrote letters to pen-friends I never met in exotic foreign lands. In secondary school I wrote letters to my best friend, with whom I shared my school desk. Letters afforded us an easier and deeper way of communicating teenage angst. I wrote letters to potential boyfriends, to friends in the army, to girlfriends scattered around the world during the Yugoslav war. I wrote letters daily and religiously to my future husband during our long year of separation. Even in the fast age of internet, I am still a committed letter-writer and post-card sender. I cannot resist the pen and paper, the envelopes, the stamps, the post box, the whole ritual. I cannot resist the spontaneity of the moment, the stream of consciousness, the impulsiveness with which I write, close, seal and send.

Sending letters has meant that one can truly give to the other. Once the letter is posted, the act is final. Letters are seldom recalled. The act of letter sending is the act of giving, which is in a certain sense, very similar to performance. It is always much more fulfilling to give and put oneself on the line - to take the risk. Therefore, in my performance work I have decided to combine the two. Letter writing became one of my strategies in performance making processes.

In January 2006 I started working on my new solo performance *Masha Serghyeevna*. Masha Serghyeevna is the middle sister from Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. For the duration of the play she has an affair with Vershinin, a melancholic and philosophising officer, who is destined to leave her and go off to another war. Some words get exchanged between them with the promise of letter writing. My performance is set after Chekhov. I wonder if Masha ever wrote letters to Vershinin; I wonder what happened at the end of the play; I wonder where Vershinin has gone and whose war he is fighting.

As Masha I wrote letters to Vershinin in the winter of 2007.



Masha who is bigger and somewhat
and I think I am losing you.
e? Touch me? Smell me?
I am trying to keep still.
it really be Vershinin? I might
copy. Hold on, my love.

Those letters were always written on my travels, the time I was away from my everyday routine and with space to think. I sent my letters as Masha addressed to Officer Vershinin to the addresses of my seven friends: Clare Duffy, Emily Underwood, Louie Jenkins, Abi Lake, Caroline Wilson, Kerstin Bueschges and Jodie Allinson, all of whom are performers. All but one have been sent back to me.

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These returned letters become my gift to the audience of readers. It is in and through them that art meets life and autobiographical narrative gets re-written and formed into performance.

26/1/2007
FROM A LETTER SENT TO
CLARE'S ADDRESS IN
EDINBURGH

Dear Vershinin

...

I am still your Masha. Masha who is bigger and somewhat older and somewhat sad and I think I

am losing you. Can you remember me? Touch me? Smell me? I am forgetting you and I am trying to keep still. What is your name? Can it really be Vershinin? I might have forgotten my Chekhov copy. Hold on, my love.

9/2/2007
FROM A LETTER SENT TO
EMILY'S ADDRESS IN CARDIFF

Dear Vershinin

I am irrationally in love.

His name is... No, I can't tell you.

You wouldn't know him but they might.

He reminds me of a distant lover, someone I lost. Someone whose name I remember every day, but only the name, not him, not his face, not his voice. I don't even think about him anymore.

Now I'm in love. I watch him in the dark. I watch him as he watches some performance artists during their weird politics on stage. I watch his body, his pants, his top, his hair, the way he holds himself, his youthful clumsiness, the way he holds a plastic cup of beer, the way he talks to a girl, the way a girl flirts with him and he smiles.

10/2/2007
FROM A LETTER SENT TO
CAROLINE'S ADDRESS IN
MANCHESTER

Dear Vershinin

...

He talks to me about arts and politics, the usual. He says he gets drunk quickly. I am incapable of flirting with him. It's beyond me. I talk seriously. I look at the bar. I worry he's bored by me and wants to go away. I worry I'll look at him and see he's occupied by

something else. He isn't. He keeps talking to me and looking at me.

11/2/2007
FROM A LETTER SENT TO
LOUIE'S ADDRESS IN BRIGHTON

Dear Vershinin

...
Anyway I don't think I'm that much in love anymore. The fever is passing. I do still imagine us meeting in a B&B in Carlisle or Scarborough.

16/2/2007
FROM A LETTER SENT TO
KERSTIN'S ADDRESS IN
LANCASTER

Dear Vershinin

...
Be blindfolded and feminine. Be passive. Be in my red dress.
Walk across stage blindfolded in your red dress.
Dance on stage blindfolded in your red dress.
Do your 1-10 movement scores in your red dress. Not blindfolded.
Do your 10-1 movement scores slowly.
Do your 1-10 movements quickly.
Find someone to fall in love with in the audience.
There is no-one to fall in love with in this room.
Where are you now? Where are you?
Will our bodies meet again?
Where are you? I need you to keep breathing...
To be. To be. To be.
I need to introduce myself. Yes, as Masha. I am not sure they will know who I am. Have they heard of my sisters, Olga and Irene? Have they



heard of you, Vershinin? Have they heard of Chekhov? They must have heard of Moscow and longing, and falling in love and boring husbands and affairs. They must have heard of snow in the hair and dance and wind. They must have heard about women like me, suffocating in marriage made young and dressed in black, and enjoying poetry and affairs. And women like Olga whose life revolves round work and migraines. And girls like Irene whose life will slip away, who sees her dreams disappear.

22/2/2007
FROM A LETTER SENT TO ABI'S
ADDRESS IN BORTH

Dear Vershinin

...
I'm on a train, going to Winchester where I am performing tonight. Some naughty youth were playing some reggae music on their portable player. I also heard a song by Sublime, the band from Long Beach that I used to listen to in my early twenties or rather late teens. Sublime reminded me of an ex-lover and I almost texted him about these naughty youth, reggae, Sublime and their snogging on the train... but then the conductor came and told them

to switch off their happy music and now revolution is all gone. Revolution ended in Reading.

...

There are no revolutionaries really.

Just the users of gimmicks of our time... How fooled we all are.

Remember to use some Sublime music.

Remember to use some CCCP.

Remember to use some Waltz.

They started using their player again.

It's not as loud and the music is rubbish, one of those generic groups with generic sound with generic thoughts about revolution. They are not really disobedient, they are only trendy and I'm sick of them.

How's your war? I haven't heard from you in a while. Can you still be

bothered? Have you found someone sweeter, younger and happier?

Someone less melancholic and care-free? Someone who laughs.

The letter sent to Jodie's address in Cardiff in March got lost. That was the letter about the revolution. I am hoping to get hold of it again for the performance. In the meantime I commissioned my friend Zoë to write me a letter about revolution. She and I talked for hours in the café Space in London on the day I wrote my original letter to Vershinin. I reckoned Zoë must have had some thoughts about it, some kind of memory of our conversation.

Zoë wrote from Berlin on the 13th of January 2008. Her letter was written on white and red paper in order to encourage revolutionary thoughts as well as aestheti-

cise and historicise it. Zoë wrote about her work in the theatre, idea of home, wandering, impatience for adventures, Kleist, tenderness, pain, young couples, cafés and the confusion she once felt between love and revolution. She wrote that the revolution was just as unlikely to happen in English as it was unlikely to be televised. She claimed we were both too comfortable. She persuaded me that anyone who told you that revolution happens from within was probably trying to sell you a beauty product. She admired solidarity and collectivity. She mentioned her friends: a despairing email received from Lahore in Pakistan; Antonio who told her about a failed attempt at revolution in Mexico City in 2006 and a small theatre collective from Berlin that really tried to trigger revolution in Berlin in the late 1980s but got only global capitalism for their pains. She concluded that friendship was also a pre-requisite of revolution.

LENA SIMIC (Croatia/Britain) was born in Dubrovnik and now lives in Liverpool where she works as a performance artist. Recent solo performances include *Sid Jonah Anderson* by Lena Simic, *Joan Trial*, *Medea/Mothers' Clothes* and *Magdalena Makeup*. Her work has been presented at the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow, Leeds Met Studio Theatre, V&A Museum, Ohio State University, Odin Teatret in Denmark, Teatro Guiñol in Cuba.