

Julia Varley

To María Canepa

Holstebro, 23rd July 2008

Dear María,

"The rest is silence, whispered the prince": I say this sentence at a certain point in the performance *The Castle of Holstebro* quoting Shakespeare. I wonder if Shakespeare used this word "rest" on purpose thinking of its double meaning in English: the remainder and the respite. Letters are silent; although their stillness entails all the voices and sounds of the situations described and of the people writing and reading. The silence of letters speaks to the heart. Maybe it is this particularity that induces me to write letters when I am confronted with death. Letters allow me to fight quietly the inexorable emptiness I feel and that no spoken words manage to fill - the emptiness left when someone rests in peace and the rest of us cry.

Most of my important recent letters are to people who are dying or to family members of someone who has died. I have reached that age, I suppose. I resort to writing a letter when I need to react to what seems so unjust, to help retain a sense of life and future in the face of death taking our loved ones away from us. People die, loves die, performances die, theatre groups die... Something else needs to be born, but how to face the future?

Ever since you died, María, I have wanted to write a letter to you as a way into the creation of a performance about you. Again I am trying to defy death, in order for you to live on in my stories and for those who will never meet you in person to get to know you anyway. As I start to write I imagine letters as a particular space in which past and future coincide.

When still a child, my mother taught me to write letters which described something that had happened to me. People want to hear about what you are doing, she said. Also writing a letter in itself is a way of doing, of continuing to walk, of looking up and forwards, hoping others can do the same. So, dear María, instead of starting from you, I will tell you about me, about a journey and a girl

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you would have liked, and how I took a glimpse at fascinating worlds hidden behind apparently similar characters and letters.

In April 2008 I went to the south of Taiwan for three days to do some research for a performance with Nankuan Opera performers in Taipei. I had written to Ya-Ling, the close Taiwanese friend of mine you met at the third Transit Festival, asking if she had some suggestions of people to meet and places to stay. Ya-Ling wrote to Mr. Ming, a friend of hers, the founder of experimental theatre in Taiwan. He promised to organise a programme for Eugenio Barba and me.

When we arrived at the airport no-one was there so, following instructions from the tourist office, we took a taxi to the hotel. Soon after a worried Mr. Ming called: he had missed us. He quickly made an appointment for the next morning in the lobby of the hotel, giving us a few hours to get over our jet-lag.

We had just had breakfast when three Chinese men arrived. In a mixture of broken English, Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese and Hakka they tried to explain that we should see a performance next morning at 6 a.m. so it was best for us to leave Kaoshiung where we had planned to stay. We decided not to resist these strange plans and to let ourselves be guided by our new friends. We packed and climbed into the nursery school minibus that belonged to Teacher Liu, who only spoke Chinese. Teacher Liu did not seem to mind that we could not understand him as he gurgled on, pausing only to smile even more at us, and off we drove.

Our first stop was at Master Cheng's. He is an old painter and shadow puppet maker. His niece welcomed us. Her name is Chia Yen, and she is the girl you would like: gentle, deeply spiritual and humbly

committed to her work and masters, a shadow puppeteer as well. Chia also smiled happily at us. She had been summoned because she spoke a tiny bit of English. To begin to understand her I had to get used to a very different logic of thought and sentence construction.

I could not take my eyes off her straight black hair: it nearly reached the floor. At times Chia would sit on it, other times she would wrap it round her body and play with the tips as if they were giant paint brushes.

We were offered tea and a collection of strange fruit; we were shown shadow puppets moving against a lit screen, dolls and different altars. Our Chinese hosts wanted to dedicate the art books they gave us: holding their special soft pointed paint brushes they discussed how to spell Julia and Eugenio in Chinese characters. They had to choose out of a variety of signs which had the same sound. Their way of writing the letters of our names seemed like a sequence of paintings to me, but they were much more fascinated by how we wrote our names and addresses using the Latin alphabet. They watched as we held our biros and then wanted to practise.

At lunch only chopsticks were available to eat with. As I tried desperately not to let all kinds of small and unrecognizable bits of food fall on the table on the journey from my bowl to my mouth, I understood that eating was a way of training their clever fingers in writing letters and moving shadow puppets. Or was it the other way round?

"Do you feel isolated? Could one say that Taiwan is a besieged country?" Our new Chinese friends who live on the island that has no direct contact with 'mainland' China did not seem comfortable with the political implications of the question. Chia smiled and said: "No problem!" While I was wondering if she meant that there was no

problem in Taiwan or that it was not a problem that we asked, our hosts changed the subject. They preferred to solve the problem of how to combine taking us within just a few hours to see a shadow puppet show, a painting exhibition and to listen to two choirs directed by another energetic woman who asked us to call her Linda instead of using her Chinese name. She obviously thought it was hard for us to pronounce Chinese properly and of course she was right. The letters that spell a word are a combination of drawings of concepts and do not indicate the intonation that determines the meaning of what you say. I could easily be saying table meaning a dog, or vice versa. Writing in Chinese uses complex traditional characters or simplified modern ones: Pierangelo Pompa, the Italian assistant director working with us in Taipei who studies Chinese, tried to explain this to me a week later. In Taiwan they mostly wrote in a classical style in contrast to how they write in mainland China. The different logic that lies behind alphabets, letters and characters continues to fascinate me.

But there in South Taiwan all these difficulties of language and writing did not impede our communication. While his company prepared the puppet show and Chia had gone to look after her uncle, Teacher Liu showed us how he made small shrimps out of a straw and a fish out of a strip of paper. His hands moved very fast, as he talked and talked. Then the performance started. Three dancing monkeys who played saxophone and accordion were in front of us. Suddenly the screen moved away and we could observe the happy faces of the six puppeteers separately moving arms and legs with long sticks and hopping to the rhythm of recorded music. Following the same rhythm, my eyes jumped continuously from the monkeys to the people: they all smiled

proudly and generously at the foreigners in the audience.

After listening to one of the amateur choirs conducted by Linda in a community centre, we were offered a kind of hot jelly of sweet brown beans on ice. I have never tried such a foreign combination of flavours, colours and consistency. I really could not get myself to eat it, but our hosts were happy to make up for me. The fact that we had shared their work and spoken to the choir made us even more part of the family. So much so, that we were also taken to knock coconuts down from a palm-tree in the garden of a space Teacher Liu and Chia wanted to use for summer workshops. Three people stood under the tree holding a stretched piece of cloth, while another climbed up and used the sharp end of a pole to liberate the fruit. I decided not to risk getting a coconut on my head, and took photographs instead.

The next day - as promised - Teacher Liu and Chia came to fetch us at the motel they had booked for us at six in the morning. They enthusiastically took us on a mystery trip to an empty field out of town, in the middle of which a car was parked. Someone was flying model airplanes. Teacher Liu and Chia explained their dream: to make shadow puppets fly and dance in the air through remote control. They first needed to learn how to fly the airplanes though, Teacher Liu said, as he longingly showed us how his friend's airplane made summersaults, plunged to the ground and flew up again, advanced upside down and sideways, hopped and skipped rhythmically, and more. T h i s w a s t h e performance Teacher Liu and Chia so much wanted to share with us! Their enthusiasm was catching.

I could see the attraction of merging a traditional form, which no longer reached the same number of spectators as in the

past, with modern technology: it reminded me of I Made Suteja, the performer of the ancient Balinese Gambuh theatre, showing a scene with a comic Topeng mask driving a motorcycle. It also reminded me of how a young Australian performer had been fascinated, at the third Transit Festival, by your straight reading of Chilean poetry in your attractive Chilean accented Spanish, a language she could not understand. The quality hidden in the way you spoke, dear Maria, reached beyond time. Today when working on telling your story I listen to your recordings. You still make me cry.

Watching the airplanes, I started thinking of the Chinese problem of maintaining the quality of the traditional form of writing characters and the contemporary need for speedy communication, quick results and a faster rhythm than the one used in the past. Although it has been explained to me many times, I still don't understand how it is possible to write on a type-writer or computer in Chinese. Chia seemed not to worry about time, as she accompanied us, staying away for three full working days from the school where she taught. "No problem," she repeated, when we were worried for her.

After our morning performance and after assisting the rehearsals of a high school choir, we were taken to Master Cheng's painting exhibition at the National Museum. A class of children sat enchanted in front of other shadow puppets moved by Master Cheng, Teacher Liu and Chia. The children sang songs with the characters on the screen and then joined the puppeteers behind the screen to have a try at using the sticks and moving the shadow puppets. I was also allowed to try: it was not easy! Then we drove further south.

We crossed a very long suspension bridge on foot to visit a Hakka village. Chia gave percussion classes in a local school so

she knew the children there. One of her pupils took us to a house where five women pulled many decorated costumes, belts and head pieces out of some cardboard boxes. Photographs on the walls showed how the Hakka dressed up for wedding ceremonies and feasts. I bought two head pieces decorated in silver that I later used as a belt for Cloto, the character I played in Odin Teatret's itinerant multicultural performance *The Marriage of Medea*.

Chia insisted we should see the Hakka women washing clothes in the communal fountain of another village. They wore long rubber boots, standing in the water as they beat their clothes on the stone. In this way they could do their household chores while exchanging local news. The water gushing out of the fountain was a communal resource. There are many springs in Taiwan; and some of them are hot, one of the well known tourist attractions in the South along with the National Park.

We were taken to one of these springs and had to buy the obligatory swimming caps. The pools had various temperatures; some so hot I could only put my toes in, others too cold for my liking. I stood a long time under a fountain of rushing warm water that strongly massaged my shoulders. One hour of sunshine re-established my energy. I was again able to try to interpret the hand signs which accompanied the Chinese sounds. I even tried to learn some words. But it was very difficult to retain in my ear the held syllables or the sounds cut-off abruptly, how the tones went up or down changing the meaning of a combination of letters which seemed identical to me. How could text be interpreted in theatre - I wondered - if the musicality is fixed by the meaning?

This question became even stronger when I discovered in Taipei - working with the Nankuan Opera - that the audience



María Canepa. Photo: Revista Paula



Hakka woman washing in the communal village fountain. Photo: Julia Varley

could not understand the texts spoken and sung in its old dialect similar to Taiwanese. When we translated the text into Mandarin Chinese, but retaining the Nankuan melody, the spectators laughed and commented in an embarrassed way that the words sounded ridiculous and childish. I suppose the same happens with European languages when we artificially prolong the syllables or when we exaggerate the melody of speech. I had to change my way of working with voice and text with the Nankuan Opera performers. I could not use "r" for warm-ups and I tried to insist on the change of colour and rhythm of the voice to find variation in the speech rather than using the melodic phrases and changes of tone interval as I usually do.

Taiwan is the island of orchids and these beautiful flowers accompanied us throughout our trip. Many of these plants

had been attached to tree trunks adding colour to the green tropical leaves. We even visited an orchid nursery garden. Roberta, my Odin colleague with a passion for orchids, would have lost her mind seeing this incredible infinite display of colours and shapes.

Right beside the orchid garden was a very big temple. The monks invited us to eat there. After a bit, I realised that the monks with shaven heads were women. They fed us, asked us to wash our own plates and showed us round, giving us instructions on how to bend in front of the many deities and on how to sit in the position for meditation. Their way of speaking of religion was simple and straightforward. Philosophy was embedded in the everyday schedule of their lives.

Fish at lunch, duck for supper: our hosts did not drink beer and they never allowed us to pay for anything. When we visited a very famous old folk singer, Chia managed to convince him to sing for us by pretending she wanted to learn his particular string instrument. He let us know when he was too tired to entertain any more by sending us to the coral beach down the hill to see the sun setting into the sea. We reached the beach too late. In fact we spent our time there rescuing Teacher Liu's model airplane that, on a sudden impulse, he had decided to fly. In his enthusiasm he had not taken into account the dangers of the place: after saving his airplane from disappearing into the waves it landed in a tree behind some rocks. We endlessly poked, pulled and lifted with the long bamboo poles we had found in a fishing boat nearby until the airplane was free.

We stayed the night in the police hotel in the famous resort of Tenking. Policemen and their families spend their holidays there. A 'niece' - another one! - worked at the hotel, so we did not need to pay. We joined

the tourists walking among stalls selling jewellery, t-shirts, fruit and tattoos, accompanied by loud music. It was warm. I thought that only the Asian faces and the letters on the signboards kept me from thinking I was in Brazil. When the products are the same, the real identity is marked on our faces and in our writing. But also on our tongues... if only I could have a real Italian coffee, instead of the sweet soy milk and rice for breakfast - I thought!

The landscape changed from rocks and sandy beaches to green hills and high cliffs as we turned round the most southern tip of Taiwan. It started pouring with rain exactly when we wanted to admire the goose egg shaped stones on a beach just after a very poor looking fishing village. Finally we managed to pay for lunch. The price was so incredibly low we could hardly believe it and then Eugenio created a great commotion by trying to leave a tip.

Our nursery school minibus continued to travel. We had to get back to Kaoshiung to the station to catch the fast train that would take us to Taipei. On the way we stopped at Mr Cheng's house to leave presents from the 'niece' of the police hotel. We had also been treated like family members in the south, but maybe that is because everyone seems to belong to one family there. Maybe 'niece' means something else in Chinese...

On the last day of the workshop in Taipei we presented a performance to an invited audience. Teacher Liu and Chia Yen came from Kaoshiung at their own expense to give a demonstration of their shadow puppets to the Taipei spectators and performers. Teacher Liu had made a new puppet to personify Eugenio, copying his figure from a photograph. He really enjoyed making Eugenio do flip-flops and summer-saults on the screen. The Taiwanese were just as fascinated as we were by Liu and

Chia. Their generosity, which made me think of how you had welcomed me in your home in Santiago without even knowing me, conquered their own people as well.

Collecting material for the creation of my performance about you, María, I wrote a letter to your second husband, Juan. I asked him to send me stories about your life together. I had heard some from you and some from him, but I needed them in writing to remember them better. In reality the impulse, asking him to write the stories in letters to me, came as a way of giving him a concrete task to help him get over the feeling of infinite loss after your death; so the words which brought back the past could keep him company.

The first time I stayed with you in Santiago, I wondered if Juan was your husband or your son. He was so much younger than you, but you fitted so well together. Do you remember how envious of you all the girls at Transit Festival were, as they looked at Juan taking care of you and doing all your household chores?

Juan has regularly been sending me letters with anecdotes and descriptions of events which happened to you. He seems especially motivated to do this since we met in Montevideo where I was on tour last year. Juan came there from Santiago to bring me your very special black and grey silver suit, the one you wore to receive the National Prize for your acting career, to get married in and to read your poems at the Transit Festival on generations.

Now I have this important dress and I feel responsible for doing something special with it. I cannot wear it myself: you were so much smaller and thinner than I am. Bruna Gusberti wears it in the Magdalena work "Women with Big Eyes". I introduced it into that process together with some stories about you as another way of gathering

material for my performance about you.

You were so different from me: a traditional text actress, you always knew you wanted to be an actress, Catholic and your technique very emotion based. I needed to find a way to tell your story. The first time I had a chance to work alone I built an improvisation using the suit and the recording of your voice as if I was dialoguing with what you say in the tape. Only you could make the words full of generosity, gratitude and dedication sound real. I also gathered poetry books I know you cherished - Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral - choosing the love poems. I discovered your story is a love story. When I showed what I had done I was told I should search for a character to tell the story. I obviously cannot play you. I should search for a character that is very different from you and me.

I woke up one morning knowing who the character was and magically I immediately found the costume in a second hand shop in Holstebro. But it is too early to write about this character, even to you. The character must first exist, find its muscles and flesh. With the character I found another story I want to tell: of an emigrant to Mexico from Lebanon who sells cloth, marries his first love after many adventures and meets up with someone from the family after many, many years to spend days sitting under a tree remembering all that had happened. Curious about her past, a niece brought them together again. Who knows if the character will fly shadow puppets through the air...

All this will be added to Juan's letters talking about how you made the women of the Chiloé Island participate in the men's feast, of how you got everybody to get out of the boat into the sea although you had not reached the shore yet, how you took me to visit Salvador Allende's secret tomb, and Pablo Neruda's house in Las Piedras and in

Valparaiso, how you introduced me to Mariano Puga, the revolutionary priest, and how the sea grabbed your ashes with a big wave at your funeral.

When I first arrived in Denmark in 1976, I wrote many letters to my friends and family in Italy and Britain so as not to feel lonely. Then I began touring, meeting my friends and family here and there in the world, learning not to suffer for each goodbye knowing we would meet again if not next year then in the next decade. Now letters have mostly become a tool to keep in touch with those who are no more. Although some of my friends have tried to get me back into the habit of writing real letters, I never seem to have the time to do it; until it becomes the only way to send you my love. Dear María, thank you for everything you have given me and continue to give,

Julia

JULIA VARLEY (Britain/Denmark) has worked as an actress with Odin Teatret since 1976, is an active member of The Magdalena Project and artistic director of Transit International Festival. She has directed productions with Pumpenhaus Theater (Germany), Ana Woolf (Argentina), Hisako Miura (Japan), Lorenzo Gleijeses (Italy) and Gabriella Sacco (Italy). Julia Varley has written various articles and essays published in theatre journals, is co-editor of *The Open Page* and author of *Wind in the West* and of *Stones of Water* about her work as an actress with Odin Teatret.