



Antonia Cioază in *Hamlet's Clouds* (2024). Photo: Stefano Di Buduo

**Antonia Cioază**

## **Transforming Memory**

### **A quest from thought to action**

In an apocryphal writing of Thomas, there is a story called *The Hymn of the Pearl*. It tells of a prince from the East who comes to Egypt seeking the One Pearl, which is in the sea, guarded by a fire-breathing serpent. In Egypt, he was taken prisoner by the men of the country. He was given their food to eat and forgot his identity. He forgot he was the son of the King of Kings and served their king instead. He forgot the pearl, which his family had sent him to find, and lived as if he were in a deep sleep. But his parents heard what had happened and wrote him a letter to remind him who he was and why he was there. After they signed it, the letter flew directly to him and turned into spoken words which immediately broke the spell. He regained his memory, and his soul longed for its original freedom. So, he went to battle with the snake, defeated it, and this way won the pearl which he took back to his country.

I identify with this character, not only because, for the whole of my childhood I wanted to be a boy and fight dragons out of admiration for my older brother, but also because every time I found myself in a state of existential amnesia, the cure came to me in the same form as it came to him, as a written message. The books I gathered during my life were stored in my memory and the people of the past, who wrote them, whispered to me which direction to choose whenever I lost my way.

There were not many books in the house where I grew up and my parents did not read to us very often. Yet the strongest image of my father, one that has stayed with me throughout the years, is of him reading during supper. On the few occasions he would start a novel, he would consume it obsessively and disconnect from the outer world until he finished it. Perhaps the reason I managed to teach myself how to read before starting school was that I wanted to share something with him in the very little time we spent together, when he was not away for work.

I recall often closing one of my eyes while reading, in order to be able to understand what it felt like for him. Both he and my mother are blind in one eye. When she was four, my mother's brother threatened her with a toy gun asking what all Romanian kids ask when playing thief: "Your money or your life?" She answered, "My life", so he shot her in the eye with twelve pellets at once and took her sight away forever.

Shortly after my father married her, a fire extinguisher exploded in his face. It happened on a Sunday and, during communism in Romania, one was not even allowed to drive the car on a Sunday. My father needed surgery and there

was only one doctor in the hospital. He was an Arab and his name was Furat. In Romanian this means stolen. My father had to hold the thread himself while his face was being sewn up. When it was almost done, Dr Furat unintentionally stuck the needle into my father's eye. It was the same eye as my mother's.

Their condition somehow defined the way I learned to look at the world. From a very early age, I developed a predilection for the unseen dimension of things and a need for dialogue with what is hidden from sight slowly grew inside me. I learned to satisfy my thirst by reading. My books could weave the threads that connected me to an invisible world, parallel to my own, where I could be free. They became my second life.

For a long time the cultural mutation that is taking possession of my generation so violently with the progress of technology, gave me the feeling that choosing the book as a guide in life made me part of a minority that defends what was once a value and is now threatened by collapse and disappearance. This thought helped me to be even more determined when I chose to study theatre and not film. To embrace the theatre and the book against their obvious decline is only possible when one has a taste for 'the novelty of failure', which not so many still see as a virtue.

Since I was young I have believed that those who understood this have disappeared and that I could only converse with them through the writing which they left behind. It felt as if I were witnessing the end of history. I was longing for a living example, someone able to transform something in my soul through *practice*.

At the age of seventeen, I read a book by Eugenio Barba and was surprised and happy to discover that he and his actors were still alive and working. After the first year of theatre at university, I finally arrived at Odin Teatret both to meet people who were in complete harmony with what I had read, and to have the shocking impression that all their performances were about me. I knew very soon that it would be difficult for me to stay away for too long, and that if I came back it would not only be to seek out how to make theatre, but also to ask how to live. The answer I found is: by fighting. I am my own enemy and the battlefield is my own body, with all its habits.

Despite the fact that, during my visits, I heard the director say many times that he did not wish to train young actors or accept anybody new into the group, when I was twenty one I decided to move to Denmark in order to be close to Odin Teatret. I was welcomed with generosity and allowed to be one of the director's assistants for the performance they were working on at that time.

The person who played a big role in my destiny from then on was Julia Varley. She took care of me quietly and made apparently small proposals to me, which made me overcome my boundaries and constantly surprise myself. Knowing I was living in a very small apartment in the centre of Holstebro, with my partner Jakob, she suggested it might be a good idea to move to the vacant wing of Eugenio's house, since the tenants had just left. Eugenio wanted to help someone he already knew, and we came at the right moment. Since we moved there, I have woken up many mornings thinking how that yellow house

by the lake will be one of the images that will come to my mind in the seconds before I die. It is the house where I will remember how happy I was.

In my first year there, every time Eugenio and his wife were away for more than a day, I used to sneak into the room where he kept his oldest and rarest books. I spent many hours looking at them and writing down all the titles that were new to me. I knew that if I asked, I would have been allowed to go there any time I wanted, but there was something special for me in meeting my master's masters and friends in secret. Realising that most of them were practitioners helped me see that my only experience until that moment was reading and I didn't actually know how to do anything else besides that.

This thought became intimidating and provoked in me the urge to start a personal training. Jakob, who is educated as a writer, shared the same need for physical practice, so we decided to create a working routine together. On one side of the house, there is a small, empty room which, in agreement with Eugenio, we named the Teatrino. We went there every morning in an attempt to bring in all the exercises we had learned while being around the Odin Teatret actors. We cut the mattress of a big double bed into two in order to practice acrobatics and have something similar to what we saw being used in the old videos. We learned dance steps from different traditions, we made exercises with sticks, and we learned many songs while also studying violin, mandolin, cuatro, flute and percussion. But we had no idea how to use all of these elements in order to reach the expressive level of performance. We were in great need of a director and we dared to hope that Eugenio would agree one day to work with us. He gave advice every time we went to him, and he answered all my questions for months, while I was driving him to rehearsals every morning when I was his assistant. But we never dared to invite him to the room and show him our work. It felt as though our process was too intellectual and we were stuck inside our heads. However, when I look back, I appreciate the fact that we continued searching and didn't give up despite not having visible results immediately. These started to be seen much later, when the circumstances of Odin Teatret changed and we suddenly had the opportunity to be more present in the theatre's activities.

When the new director of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium dismissed the oldest members of the theatre from the place which they had built with their own hands and worked in for more than half a century, they decided to make an association that could keep the name and dreams of Odin Teatret alive. I like to think that it was *serendipity* that the first meeting of this association was in the house where we were living. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2022, Odin Teatret was reborn from its ashes and those who signed the document to attest it were Eugenio Barba, Judy Barba, Julia Varley, Tage Larsen, Else-Marie Laukvik, Jan Ferslev, Ulrik Skeel, Rina Skeel, Anne Savage, Jakob Nielsen, Claudio Coloberti, Dorthe Kærgaard, Leif Bech and me.

Shortly afterwards, Eugenio announced that he wanted to make a new performance. Jakob and I were present as assistants at the first rehearsals, which took place in another actor's living room. Once again it was Julia Varley who

influenced the course of events by asking the director whether he might consider including us in the performance as actors. Else-Marie Laukvik, another actress, asked the same thing more than once. Eugenio said no to both of them at first, but I understood the importance of the voice of the Odin Teatret women one day when Eugenio asked me and Jakob to meet downstairs in the Teatrino, to play a piece together on our violins. We played Bach's Double Violin Concerto in D Minor. Eugenio said our way of playing sounded like cats which are about to die and it made one's ears bleed. But then he invited us to join the performance, which was by that time called *A Story of Clouds*.

The director's initial intention was to tell a story starting from the image of clouds that continually change shape. Each one of us had the freedom to propose songs and texts about clouds or to make improvisations on this theme. All this served to make a basic structure which evolved and changed and which, after a couple of months, had a new name: *Hamlet's Clouds*. Tage Larsen, one of the actors, came with the dialogue between Polonius and Hamlet about the changing shape of clouds. So, although in the first month of rehearsals, I was hidden backstage playing music with Jakob, our faces covered as the director wished us to have only a minimal supporting role in the performance, now we became Ophelia and Hamlet.

The possibility of starting from the topic of clouds and arriving at Shakespeare's *Hamlet* only arises because the work is associative. Logic is of no use in trying to understand the process by which chaos is transformed



Antonia Cioază in *Hamlet's Clouds*. Photo: Stefano Di Buduo

into creation on stage at some point. The actor's body is free to think independently in order to find solutions to the problems raised by the director because of not being constrained by any demands to produce meaning immediately. New meanings emerged from the physical actions at each rehearsal. Such an approach would not be possible if it were not supported by the training, in which we develop both a common language and an individual one, led by an inner rhythm that is gradually revealed.

Once we began rehearsals, Eugenio dedicated a few hours each day to making a new training with Jakob and me. We called the training *Imagining with the body-mind* because it insists on differentiating between the actor's physical exercises and those that are pure gymnastics. The need to approach training from this perspective arose when we presented Eugenio with a series of exercises that the Odin Teatret actors used in the past, and which we learned from Else-Marie. The director found that our way of making the exercises was devoid of inner imagery, and that in the attempt to accurately incorporate forms that were unfamiliar to us, we were stuck at a level which was lacking in content. We decided to invent other exercises together, through which we could acquire physical discipline, guided by our own personal mythology.

At the beginning, being confronted by the need to find my own references felt intimidating, but I slowly realised that all that I had ever read and experienced was in a way present in my body's memory. The challenge was to put the memory into action, to bring the imagination, in which I had found mental refuge for so long, into space.

As I was working on this aspect of the training, I found the courage to use the new language I was developing in order to give life to my character, Ophelia. As I write this, she is still trying to find her voice, even though the premiere of the performance already took place months ago. With every representation, she is digging deeper inside me to find the resources to build her own stage life, reminding me of the *pearl* I came to look for when I decided to become an actress, an elusive, personal truth that is never fully realised, but always worth the pursuit.