



Silvia Moreno as her clown character Candelita. Photo: Tiana Andriamirija

Silvia Moreno

Walk Barefoot in the Snow

I have been writing-blocked for several days in front of this white page. I feel cold in the middle of a snowstorm. I see only white, a thick and impenetrable white that surrounds and freezes me. My fingers are paralysed, my brain is thickened and numb, but the heart is coming out of my mouth.

I am overcome by a deep fatigue that I have been dragging around for years. Work overload, family overload, if only an artist could afford to go to the doctor and take leave for burnout! I feel a deep-seated tiredness that fills me with disgust for what I love most, what gives meaning to my life. Disgusted even with myself, a silent, icy storm collapses upon me, and in the midst of that collapse, a blank page. To the collapse is added fear! The fear of the blank page! I call up my discipline and get to work. To warm up and unlock myself, I collect reflections on the subject of memory, pages full of fragments of texts I have written and others that inspire me. Nothing flows; the story does not get going. I block even more! Panic! Exhaustion and fear have overcome me until my female colleagues and friends reach out to me, reminding me that I am not alone and that we cannot give up, that we have a responsibility to tell our story. Today, more than ever, in front of this 'Open White Page' I am afraid to leave my mark. However, I walk on the snow!

Memory and theatre: can we separate memory and artistic creation? Isn't creating a way of leaving our mark on life? Isn't creating a way to fight silence, oblivion, emptiness? Can artistic creation transform individual memory into collective memory? Can theatre, an ephemeral art form that is born and dies simultaneously, be a carrier of memory?

Memory and oblivion, silence and words, ephemeral and eternal, the single person and the multiple collective, intimate and public, quietude and action, presence and absence, a rain of thoughts, concepts and opposite realities that constitute the essence of our art. My brain shakes, my fingers stop typing, I feel again the avalanche of snow that resonates on top of the mountain. I breathe, I anchor my body to the ground, focus on my breath. Remember. I see myself in the rehearsal room, training, feel the pleasure and strength of my inhabited body and, anchoring in the present thanks to the dance of opposites. I remember my director who guides me meticulously, who moves me into action with precise tools, to get in touch with the other and create an authentic, living bond, to make our words and our stories resonate.

I am not an intellectual or a theatre theorist. I am a woman of action. The only/best way I have to bring life to this blank page and make the words dance

is to speak from myself, talk about my work and how 'memories' inhabit and build it.

Performance - *The Daughters of the Wind*

Recordar: del latín re-cordis, volver a pasar por el corazón.
(Remember: from the Latin re-cordis, go back through the heart.)
Eduardo Galeano

Galicia, northern Spain, 1923: The Gómez López family or the photo of the tribe as my mother called it. My family lived in Autarky, in a valley several kilometres from the nearest village. The little one is Celia, my grandmother. Her father kicked her out of the house when she was six because she lost a pig in the bush.

This is the start of *The Daughters of the Wind*, an autobiographical performance directed by Jill Greenhalgh. The story is made up of fragments from the lives of four generations of women in my family: mothers who lost sons; daughters who lost their mothers; women who migrated, lived through wars, dictatorships, fought against poverty, lived with death.

In 2013 I attended a Magdalena network meeting for the first time and met Jill Greenhalgh. Two encounters, the network and Jill, which have left a deep mark on my personal and professional life and become fundamental pillars of my professional practice.

They say that nothing happens by chance in life! The occasion was the Transit Festival, organised by Julia Varley, with the theme 'Risk, Crisis, Invention'. I was 40 years old, and in a time of search and transition in my theatrical practice. I wanted to refocus my work and had begun to explore other forms and scenic idioms, starting from two questions that inspired and obsessed me: how to develop the idea of creating a link, of establishing an intimate and direct relationship with the audience? What are the communicating channels, the resonances that exist between the lived (biography) and the act of creation and how can individual memory be transformed into collective memory through the act of performing?

During Transit, I attended a presence and identity workshop led by Jill Greenhalgh and Violeta Luna. That was a bomb! Actually, the whole of Transit was a bomb! I ended up with a very strong and particular feeling. I felt physically and emotionally ploughed, tilled, kneaded and sown. The seeds planted in me by the teachers and the colleagues that I encountered at that Festival full of meetings, learning and inspiration still continue to flourish today.

A few months later, I went to another Magdalena Festival organised in Madrid by Amaranta Osorio. There I participated in Jill Greenhalgh's workshop *Daughter*; a performance workshop on mother-daughter relationships where participants create an *in situ* performance based on their personal stories. When I read the programme and saw the work and the theme that Jill proposed, I

thought: “It’s made for me! Impossible not to participate!” Madrid is my city, where I was born and raised, although I have lived more than half my life in France, where I migrated. Five years ago I became a mother, my own mother died a few months after the arrival of her granddaughter and my maternal grandmother was ninety and beginning to lose her mind.

When I finished the workshop, I had one certainty: I wanted to continue with the work started during the workshop and create a performance. I asked Jill to direct the work and she agreed. That’s how the story of *The Daughters of the Wind* began, in a beautiful collaboration with Jill, who has become my director and teacher.

There were three great difficulties I had to face as an actress during the process: technique, dramaturgy and legitimacy. I would even dare to say that I still confront two of these in each performance.

Technique: to strip myself of all artifice

As in *Daughter*, the staging of *The Daughters of the Wind* is based on refined acting work, without ‘artifice’, founded on stage presence, the narration (storytelling) and on creating a direct and intimate contact with the audience: to tell without character, leaving aside my emotions; to occupy space with authority, without fear, without shame, without anger. and keep the spectators’ attention. I rely on the intimate relationship I create with the audience, in the meticulous execution of a series of simple and extremely technical actions, and with a wooden box out of which come pictures that tell a family story. This is fine and risky technical work. Every time I go on stage, I have the impression that I am making a crossing on a tightrope between two buildings. Double or quits! There is much I would like to share about this experience, but this is not the place.

Dramaturgy: what do I mean?

First day of rehearsal: lots of emotion, joy, excitement, vertigo, nerves. Jill asked me to bring all the material I had to the rehearsal room. I arrived with the trunk of the car loaded with boxes and suitcases. They were full of photo albums, documents, letters, objects, clothes. My mother kept everything and always related the family stories and anecdotes: the old and the recent, the beautiful, the incredible, the funny, the heroic and also the ugly, the sad, the hard, the dark. My mother was a real chronicler of the family, and I was the sole heir.

The first thing Jill asked me to do was empty the bags, take out all the stuff and install it in the rehearsal room. I had literally filled the space, and it was also filled with presences and stories. Jill couldn’t believe her eyes and ears, every object, every photo had a story. It was like an endless game of Russian dolls, from each story two or three more emerged.

After several days of immersion, submerged in the life of the women in my family, we moved on to the next stage. Jill said: “This is wonderful material, you could write several shows, but what do *you* want to talk about?” It was like braking hard in a car that was travelling at two hundred kilometres per hour. After an overwhelming inner silence, I panicked, felt as though I was on the

edge of a cliff. In a way I was confronted by 'a blank page'. I wanted to include everything, I wanted to pay tribute to those women whom I love deeply, of whom I am proud and thanks to whom, in a large part, I am the woman that I am. It's impossible to tell a life in sixty minutes! What to choose, what to forget? Actually, this was not the fundamental thing. The first challenge was to free myself from my emotional burden so that I could approach my personal experience as performance material, establish the necessary distance to play with dramatic elements and be able to develop my own words.

Always guided by Jill, I put myself in the shoes of a documentary filmmaker: I tried to get as close to the truth as possible, I questioned my relatives, I dug into my memory and theirs. I experienced in my own flesh something that I have been told many times before: the testimonies, the memories *differ* from one person to another, they are not the same. At first, I felt anguish, anger: the testimonies, my own memories do not guarantee me access to 'the truth'. And they also did not answer Jill's question, what do *you* want to talk about? Jill asked me to play with different events, putting together various puzzles by theme, character, place, emotion. Thus, experimenting, breaking with the usual logic, letting myself be surprised, before my eyes appeared the red threads of my female genealogy and my discourse was revealed; the perspective from which I wanted to approach the family biography.

Legitimacy: is what I'm doing theatre... is it art?

As a woman, telling the story of my grandmother, my mother, my daughters makes sense: for me personally, being on stage and telling their story is a way to bring them back to life and be with them again, if only for a few moments.

But, as an artist, what is the point of 'telling their life' on stage? Is relating aspects of my life, theatre? Is it artistic work? These questions have haunted me for a long time, creating uncertainty and a lack of confidence. The hardest thing was not to put aside the shame and embarrassment of opening up an intimate part of myself and offering it to an audience. The hardest thing was to imagine the reaction of professionals, to imagine their questions, their assessments. Is this documentary theatre? Is it performance? What category does this show fall into? Which discipline or artistic family does it belong to? What most provoked these questions was the fact of making an autobiographical performance. Was it the question of having to face the gaze of others, the gaze of my professional peers, or the challenge of facing my own fears and insecurities? In the creative process we always expose ourselves personally and face all our weaknesses. In such a process of artistic creation, personal exposure and vulnerability are amplified.

In reality, it does not matter to which discipline, category or artistic family *The Daughters of the Wind* belongs. Like any show or performance, the essential thing is whether what happens on stage works or not. Is the actress present? Is her performance credible, organic? Does the rhythm hold or break? Does the story express an authentic point of view? Is the audience captivated, moved, reflected, reflective, or would everyone be looking at Instagram if I hadn't made them turn off their mobile phones?

The Daughters of the Wind works. The audience laughs, is surprised, cries, is moved and at the end of the performance comes to see us, sometimes talks to each other, even to strangers. Some people tell a part of their own story or share with us an intimate question that the performance has revealed or amplified: “Why couldn’t I cry the day I went to see my mother’s grave?”; “Why did I never see pictures of my family?”; “I don’t know if you’re talking about your mother or mine”; “In my village there are still houses like your grandmother’s”; “I also lost a child”; “When I get home I’ll write a letter to my mother”.

The Daughters of the Wind is an intense testimony where Jill Greenhalgh’s staging creates the necessary conditions for the indispensable distance between performer and audience to exist. The spectators find an echo in the scenic action and feel and recognise something of their own story. The work is a mirror that causes introspection in the person who listens to it: through my story, the audience connect with their own stories, and this is a way of strengthening the humanity we carry inside.

Through my family’s stories, *The Daughters of the Wind* talks about the living conditions of humble Spanish families before the Spanish civil war, speaks about the war, the dictatorship, the arrival of democracy. It speaks of marriages, violent divorces, extraordinary love stories, the relations between generations, how women are accompanied and supported, or not, by them. How, in short, we all come from a story that is told to us again and again, thus we build our lives on and with each other’s.

Revisiting my memories through performance is not a cult of the past or an act of narcissism, but a re-creation. Remembering belongs to my own memory and is also an acceptance that we share with others a *corpus* of common memories. Personal memory and collective memory are inextricably linked.

I have always been convinced that artists play an essential social role. Whether through *The Daughters of the Wind* or the participatory creations I make with neighbours from their own life stories, for ten years my work has been based on creatively exploring personal stories. For me, the artistic act, whatever its form, is having the courage to say ‘I’ and embody a living memory. For the artist that I am today, my fascination is with telling the stories of the people I love, of the people with whom I live, of my neighbours, the stories of the nobodies, of the unknown, of the seemingly insignificant. Telling our own stories, the ones that provoke memories, those that illuminate us by the light of projectors, the ones that unite us, the stories in which ‘the other’ has a face, stories in which ‘the other’ experiences emotions that I understand, share, feel help me understand that the other is me, and I am the other.

Telling our stories is essential because they are history; and, above all, our stories are those of women: writing, strengthening and making visible the female, personal, human and professional, artistic genealogies. Recall, recognise, value, perpetuate, transgress, reinvent! Tell our story, walk barefoot in the snow and be the living thread that connects the women of yesterday with the women of tomorrow.