

Maria Pia Battaglia

Theatre is the Rage Inside

My physical relationship with the theatre began with a heap of rubbish in my hands. During the staging of a school-play, when I was just a child and I observed the preparations and drank words I half understood. I was clumsy, shy and totally unable to communicate verbally even the simplest concepts. Too many events had annihilated the will to speak out my needs. I just lived in my mind, content with day-dreams which I could not transform into freeing creativity.

Sometimes I also lived with my heart ... but it was suffering which made my heart beat faster.

The day someone said: "The stage is to be cleaned", I stood up immediately and got hold of the first heap of rubbish I found on the floor-boards. I was happy! Also I could do something. I could take part, somehow, in the magic of theatre. Someone reproached me energetically. I stopped, thinking I was considered unable to achieve even such a simple task. I was told instead that I would do better to use a broom. I carried out my task so meticulously and with such devotion that it reminded me of the attention and the respect due to the House of God.

I loved those rickety boards. Even now, when they have been substituted by a reinforced concrete floor which, instead of the prompt-box, has a grey iron hole, I keep on loving them. And I feel them under my feet every time I act.

It does not matter whether I have a group of school children in front of me, or an absent-minded crowd at the Patron Saint's feast, or tidy rows of qualified intellectuals who scan attentively and competently ... It still tickles me, the dust of my first steps, cheerful and unconscious, on that stage, small as a too-well-known village, huge as a mystery which must not be disclosed.

The first time I came on to the stage, with the audience in the hall, I felt the impulse to run away. For a long while I fixed my eyes on the sea of faces and realised that if I had the courage to act the first cue I would never get off the stage. Not only did I act, but I completely exposed myself, revealing all which lived in the hidden corners of my own being.

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revealed.*

Little by little I decided to choose words and actions. I started writing the plays which I directed and performed. I have never stopped. No sacrifice has prevented me from going on. Not even leaving my children has induced me to give up. I have never felt exhaustion, never. Only when someone charged me with egocentrism and left slamming the door ... I have seen thousands of faces waiting for words. Everybody stretched a hand and tore pieces of skin from my soul, which lavished segments of fantasy and bits of life. I have never given out of generosity, it was only the need to share suffering and space.

In theatre as in life, I have been a mother. I have observed clumsy steps, I have encouraged the "children" to run, building invisible fences which protected but never humiliated them; I have cried embracing their scars and I have laughed for defenceless joy.

During the pains of labour I thought of the scenes I had left pending; still with a hurting belly I dragged myself along to the rehearsal, carrying a baby in my arms, giving him suck and lulling him to sleep inattentively, among the dust and tension.

Every time I grew, the accusations of abandonment tore me to pieces; when I kept silent the accusers shook me until I said what they wanted me to. But meantime I flew, I flew far away. And now that I have chosen to dig the trench by myself, I am an unnatural mother who cuts umbilical cords without notice ... But children are born not to understand ... And I look at my children-actors who breathe heavily upon floor-boards they have not the courage to tread. I have not been a good mother, indeed I have not. But I am trying at least to become a woman. I go on groping about among the feelings of guilt which nail my heart to the ruins of my errors, even if sometimes I succeed in wringing smiles and assent.

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over. My mask is on my soul and it protects truths which must not be revealed. Sometimes, a lie is courage. In which life have I chosen to hurt myself so much?

As a child I lived in a town which seemed so merry and lively to me, full of lights and colours. Among the unknown faces which invaded the streets I caught glimpses of promised chances. My life was tangled up with the plants and flowers which filled the little balcony where I could merge my dreams with the actions of my merry loneliness.

The village where my grand- parents lived also aroused my interest. I used to spend my holidays there, and it was nice to stay there for a while. But that microcosm soon became a fixed abode of tiles, stones and darkness. In this other dimension I could smell new sharp aromas and hear unknown sounds.

I used to speak Italian when I lived in town, but when I used it in the village where I had now moved, I was discriminated against. Village children have their own codes which you have to decode if you want to communicate. I tried to reproduce their language, their gestures, but at home my family was against it and their answer was clear and outspoken: "Living here does not mean you forget Italian. Leave dialect to the others!" ... But you live by halves ... I would not speak Italian with the other children, I would not dare speak dialect with my family. I decided to be silent. I observed. I was as useless as an extra in a film which has no plot, only actions: expected, expectable. There were no speeches, only gestures, winks, a little laughter and darkness.

I hardly survived in that small hostile world which choked dreams, curiosity and fantasy. I had a thousand lives beyond my gaze, but I unceasingly lived them inside myself. If I acted I was a wrapping of disowned skin. "The books were my only merry-go-round. My lies were my only real world. I used to tell myself magically true stories and each one had a smile for me.

For many long years, my voice had no sound. I just watched and hid my thoughts. But the ghosts which peopled my existence exacted a voice. So I learned to write the stories which I felt close to, stories I had learned, seen, disowned and loved ... And I wrote them in dialect, with the same sounds which had repudiated me as an intruder. I have written sixteen comedies in dialect, almost all of them have been performed. I have exorcised the fear of not being accepted; I tried to demolish bigotry and meanness by mocking the wicked characters who cynically transformed my will obliging me to go beyond appearance into a nightmare.

And now I feel a child of my country. The sounds which impelled me to escape have become a language. I feel on my skin the contradiction of these people who want to grow up without suffering and I smile at the ingenuousness and the pride which gave birth to my poetry. When my company was dissolved, I kept on writing plays. I did not know why.

Theatre is for me the rage I have inside, the frustration, it is the wish denied, the melancholy. It is the silence which smashes the brain. It is an urgent question which comes back unceasingly and never finds the answer. It is the memory of the first whispers. It is awareness of the fact that the world keeps turning round ignoring my clumsy attempts to take part in life. It is the canvas which I can spoil playing with the "if" and the colours, it is the insistent modesty never confessed, it is the fear of not being able to return.

Theatre is hidden in the banal days that I paint with absurd unlikely dreams, soaked in deceptions. It is a slap which shakes. It is magic that hurts. It is a gratifying lie. Theatre is the cry to which I cannot give a name. I would want to understand. Every step is a mistake. The star which twinkles today, will tomorrow be a wandering cold rock. And I escape life ... Dreams turn into traps; the fulfilled desire is a prison cried for. Yet I keep on sending dumb prayers to the sky.

I write to give sense to my madness. Even if I drown among faces and events, I remain an inhabitant of a planet which I have not yet reached. I am only a chrysalis. My real life evinces through ink. It does not belong to me but it is the only essence which makes me really vibrate.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

MARIA PIA BATTAGLIA (Italy) was born in Messina and lives in southern Italy. She has written twelve plays amongst which are '*U Femminismu* (Feminism, in local dialect), *Nd'a casa di don Raffaeli, Teresa. 'Untrallazzu*. She teaches physical education in schools and at the same time works as an actor, director and playwright with her company A Lumera. She has received several awards for plays in dialect and popular theatre productions.