

Flora Lauten

Looking in the Mirror

Edited by Julia Varley from a talk given at The Magdalena Festival 1994

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When my mother was six months pregnant with me, she discovered that my father was cheating on her. So she decided to go to a costume hire shop, so that she could dress up as a beggar and go where she was told my father would pass by every day with his new girlfriend: it was in front of a church. She dressed up as a beggar and waited for the couple to go past. They gave my mother alms. Afterwards my mother went back home, she got rid of the costume, and later threw my father out. In this moment my destiny was decided.

I was born in La Havana, in a very big house, very close to the sea. We all lived together, many members of the family: cousins, aunts and children. On Sundays we children played "statues", "blind people" and "small chickens", while we sang. We asked the rest of the family to pay to watch us. I often used to look at myself in the mirror, because from the moment I was born people said that I was truly beautiful. I looked at myself in a very innocent way, trying to go beyond the image and understand what was that other side of me that was not just the beautiful girl. I was very shy, and my shyness found shelter in games of make believe.

During my late teens it was traditional for Cuban families to send their children to study English at Convent Schools in the United States. Thus I too was sent to an American Convent school for four years. I did not like studying, I passed with the lowest grades. The nuns told my mother that I was always day-dreaming. I did not like the fact that the only time we could take a walk outside was on Sundays, all dressed up in the same way. I had decided to invent another reality for myself and I imagined I was elsewhere.

I went back to Cuba in 1959 when the Revolution started. It was a time of surprises when many concepts like homeland, freedom, autonomy, agrarian reform, women's liberation and so on, took on new meanings. When I went back to Cuba I decided I wanted to become an actress and by pure chance my mother decided I should study at the

Academy of Teatro Studio. I was lucky because the Academy was directed at that time by Vicente Revuelta, one of the most important artists in my country, because of his talent and his interest in theatre research.

I started at the Teatro Studio and despite my great timidity I had to try to become an actress. The Stanislavski method was being taught then. Also the director had just come back from Europe and he talked about Brecht and his ideas. My first appearance on stage was disastrous. The theatre critics wrote the worst things that could be said about an actress, but it was then that I understood that I really had a great strength and discipline within me, because I decided to change.

I remember a particular day when I was on a bus. I wanted to get off and I needed to stop the driver. My voice had never projected well, not even to the first row in the theatre. That day I said to myself: "I will stop this bus! I will be heard!" I concentrated and from the back of the bus I screamed. Everyone looked at me, because my voice was so strong. A whole life of research started from that moment: to fight against the external image of beauty and against my shyness, in order to discover something.

I was allowed to stay with the troupe out of pity while they performed the next play. But when an actress fell ill, I had the opportunity of standing in for her, playing the part of an old woman, a spinster. I was successful in this. I had found a way. When I looked at myself in the mirror as a child, I had been searching for a different image of myself than the daily one. Now I was able to find these other personalities within myself by playing figures like the spinster and later a prostitute. I had never even seen a prostitute, not in the Convent School nor in the Academy.

I stayed with Teatro Studio from 1960 to 1970. They were times of great emotion. Suddenly we were living within a war. The Academy became the place where

we could hide, defend ourselves with sticks and stones and listen to the news ...

One day my mother called me to tell me about a beauty contest: Miss Universe. She asked me to please do this for her. It was frightening: I was still very shy and the only way I was able to overcome my timidity was through theatre. But I had the feeling that it was one of the few concessions I should make to my mother. I put the bathing suit on, had a number in my hand, praying not to win, and I won. My mother was very proud and she went with me to the United States, where I had to compete in an enormous stadium. Again with the same number, but this time I was wearing a garland of flowers. I felt like I was at a cattle market. Many temptations resulted from this terrible experience: the possibility of filming in Hollywood, the possibility of getting married to a very rich Brazilian petrol magnate ... I chose to go back to the Academy in Cuba and to continue to work.

The same day I gave birth to Lily, my first daughter, I decided to start an experimental theatre group with eleven other colleagues. We took inspiration from Peter Brook and the Living Theatre, but at the same time we could not forget that Cuba was - and still is - a country suffering embargo. We did not have the possibility of travelling to England to work with Peter Brook or of going to India and Japan. We could only study from books. Thus we discovered *Towards a Poor Theatre* and my next teacher, Grotowski. For me this book connected with the mirror which I had looked in when I was a child. Both were about giving: not that which is apparent, but that which is hidden, which surprises me, which I am frightened of, that which I don't know and that which is close to the essence ... my devils and angels. Both had to do with the idea that a theatre character is a springboard to try and reach the essential through an act of love. I recognised something which I feel has always been important for me: the

sacrifice of the actor who lends her body, giving up the ego.

The group dissolved after two years. I asked myself if I should go back to traditional theatre. But the Revolution demanded that we conquer a new and virgin public. I decided to go to Escambray, a place where a struggle against counter-revolutionaries had just finished. It was a place full of tensions and contradictions. I took my two small children there. It was in the country and surrounded by mountains. My mother was sad and could not understand my choice when I was at the very peak of my career.

In Escambray I discovered the urgency of theatre, of the "here and now". It was something I already knew from Grotowski, but which became connected with the social reality. I went to a community of peasants and with them I started to work with the same method of research, reflection, confrontation, but with a difference: I was living there with my very small children all the time. Hector was one year old, Lily was five. I was aware of the necessity to find solutions for the women working in the group. This was the first community of peasants who had left their land and had moved to a new village, living in apartments and working in a milk factory. There I learned to work - milking. I learned to cook. I learned to research alone and to write because there was no dramaturg. There I started to direct. This peasant community became a very important school for me.

The peasants were wonderful actors. They did not have any problems with the voice because they were used to calling the animals in open spaces and they were used to singing their peasant songs. We worked with techniques from *Commedia dell'Arte*, respecting the characters which emerged from the community with their contradictions: the peasant who was used to working for himself and suddenly had to work for someone else; the peasant who was used to living alone in a hut in the country and suddenly had to live in an apartment, right

beside other people; the women who left their children to be looked after, so as to go to work. This experience lasted seven years.

Then I went to Angola. I was interested in going to a country where war was just ending. There I wrote a small piece, which I staged.

Back in La Havana, I felt lonely. I worked in a factory for a year where a theatre group was doing research so as to reflect the workers' reality in their performances. But I did not have anything to do with the factory's world nor its sound. But still, I travelled to Nicaragua with that same group and I wrote another small piece which was presented there.

I met my next master, Santiago García, the Colombian director of La Candelaria, when he directed a performance in which I worked as an actor. With him I learned about collective creation, a method developed by his group in Colombia.

At that time I was invited to work at the university and I started as a lecturer in what is now the Higher Institute of Arts in Cuba. It meant working with very young people, a generation which had not experienced trying to build the Utopia as my own generation had. They were born within the Revolution. They were sceptical and understood the double morality of our society. I had two possibilities: to form them - and reform them - according to my own image; or to let them find their own pathways - to grow strong, free and rebellious. Becoming a lecturer, I wondered if I should try to find answers to all the questions I was also asking myself, so as to show that I was a strong and important woman and an intelligent and good teacher. I found out that culture has to do with heritage and with what is new. I was not interested in being original, so I taught all that I had learnt until then - from Stanislavski to Grotowski, Santiago García, etc. - together with new things, like what I had happened to find in a wonderful book about theatre games by Clive Barker. I felt like a filter. All this

information which had passed through me was then passed on with my own details, marks and rhythm.

The group I direct now, called Buendía, is made up of all my pupils from different graduations. Buendía is the name of the church that we chose and reconstructed according to our needs. We have a young audience which not only sees the result of the performances, but also the process. In the group today there are young directors, professors and actors. This gives me great satisfaction.

Meeting with Eugenio Barba was also important, because of his books which enable me to work with concepts like the pre-expressive level and the actor-in-life, and because of him as a person. Eugenio decided to come to Cuba in a moment when nobody wanted to come to my country, when the Utopia and the socialist countries were falling apart. He spoke of resistance and the mission of the artist. His words came at the right time, in one of those moments when one feels tired, when the passion dissolves and at a time when the conditions in Cuba are particularly hard. In our theatre a link is created between the sweat of the actors

reaching their limits and the spectators who are under pressure from the economic and moral situation and who come in search of a history which does not respect the official version of reality.

Even today I keep on looking in the mirror to see what is underneath this fifty-two year old woman, with two grandchildren and lots of pupils. And today I am very happy to be able to appreciate the solidarity that one feels in the applause, in the intimate discussions and in someone bringing you a chair when you feel tired.

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

FLORA LAUTEN (Cuba) is an actress and founding director of Teatro Buendía established in 1986 with graduates of the Higher Institute of Arts in La Havana. Their most recent production *The Innocent Erendira* has recently toured Europe, Asia and Australia.