

Laura Mariani

Actresses Between Theatre and Writing

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When asked by Onorato Roux for some "autobiographical memories of youth" to include in a dictionary of *Prestigious Contemporary Italians*, Eleonora Duse answered: "I detest biographies, autobiographies, commemorations, honorary occasions, jubilees, centenaries and so on! Please forgive me. Everyone lives according to their own rules. I pray thee to wish me to be acting until the last hour of my life. About the rest, which is to say, to talk about this life of mine, I do not care" (Florence, April 23rd 1907). It was not a rejection of writing. Eleonora Duse left thousands of letters, often so beautiful that because of them she is recognised as "a writer most of all, and a great one": words written in verse, underlined, placed between dots, spaces ... They give us back the actress' other face, "not that of art, but that for which theatre, primarily, is a place of exile"; and they constitute a kind of underground text, which flows beneath the drama represented, from one drama to the next (Mirella Schino).

Perhaps the actresses' greater bond with daily life, perhaps the high psychological price paid in exposing themselves publicly on stage demanded a closer study to dominate and conceal the autobiographical material - giving it a form and rendering it "anonymous" in the collective relationship of creation - but with the possibility that something more could continue to vibrate. For female actors the need to turn to writing, and especially the particular form of letter writing, seems stronger: it becomes a mediator between theatre and life, between conscious and subconscious, a temporary renunciation of the duality of the stage in favour of an external reflection.

"Text in theatre is stage writing" and in it the "autobiographical threads" come together stored in the body and memory, and shaped by the actress (Renata Molinari). The woman-actress, subject and substance of the artistic action, tends to create another reality on stage, another self. Contrary to common belief, she loves to conceal rather than reveal. Therefore, those who study both male and female actors have to reconstruct - together with the social-historical context, the performances and techniques -

the "intimate, secret visions" of the artist (Claudio Meldolesi).

Autobiography can then seem to be a further translation and rearrangement of memories. These memories have already fed the work on stage appearing in a form that should render them unrecognisable by onlookers (intimate visions are stronger when concealed), being absolutely present when the actress formed her theatre language. How is it possible to write about this?

The stage actress can talk about herself as anyone can, but she starts from an inhibition: not only because she has to measure herself with the public image she has built with her name, but because the living part of her personal memory has already been translated and become "body-mind" on stage. Even when alone on stage, the actress is part of a chorus, together with the directing or the writing of the text or the creation of the scenic space, with its lights and sounds. Others always participate to achieve a performance: it tends towards being an anonymous product in conflict with a more specifically autobiographical demand. A second form of inhibition encourages the actress to only tell of the surface of her life: the difficulty of finding the words to render the body's experience on stage and the need to protect the mysterious source of her art.

The distance between existence and writing is thus emphasised and biography becomes even more artificial. An inherent contradiction of all life histories explodes and the actress answers radically, either choosing silence or constructing an artificial/artistic story. Mistinguett, the post-First World War Parisian music-hall diva, indicates a reverse possibility in *Toute ma vie* (All My Life, 1954): "What is called vocation is a way of revealing one's own life to oneself; a way of getting the legend told".

Many theatre artists of the past, from Gustavo Modena and Giacinta Pezzana to the great Eleonora Duse, have preferred other forms of writing to autobiography. Others chose differently, for example

Adelaide Ristori or Sarah Bernhardt. I want to pause upon the latter - who wrote *pièces*, stories and reflections on the art of the actor and who talked about herself in *Ma double vie* (My Double Life) - because we have an extraordinary review of her book. I am referring to the timely and, until now, practically ignored observations made by an exceptional reader who took the book very seriously, Virginia Woolf (*The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, Cornhill Magazine, February 1908). Written in 1907, the narrative of Sarah Bernhardt's book ends in the year 1880, when, at thirty-six years old, she was at the apex of success.

Virginia Woolf searched the book for a particular style of writing. She considered the stage experience an important element and she wanted to go beyond the oddities of Bernhardt's public figure and the conventions the actress employed to speak about herself. As a point of departure Virginia Woolf took a common sentiment - the excited curiosity that surrounds actresses' lives and their disclosures - in order to single out the concealed reason behind the contradiction of the actresses having lived through many shapes and circumstances, and having cultivated a contemplative and retired dimension. Woolf also noted that the actress' "invisible person" is always marked, even if slightly, by the character she meets up with.

Woolf searched the book for something similar to what Bernhardt herself pursued: to make visible that which is impossible to put on stage - the preceding time, the extraordinary construction of oneself as a theatrical character already from childhood. She was fascinated by Sarah as a little girl, by her capacity to impose herself upon her boarding school companions, by the way in which she caught their attention with extreme and concrete expedients (small animals shut up in boxes, cut off lizards' tails, healing a cut finger with a spider's web, angrily combing her tangled hair ...). Sarah wanted to become a nun, but during a

strange extended family meeting, the Duke of Morny, at that time Sarah's mother's lover, suggested that she should devote herself to theatre. According to Woolf, this scene demonstrates that, even at twelve years old, a potential actress sees things differently and this later helps her to recreate on stage, and translate in writing, in a special manner. Bernhardt did this with a "precision and vitality of certain lively coloured photographs".

The same happens in the description of an apparently paradoxical episode. This undertaking, similar to the balloon flight over Paris, was symptomatic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ideology which demanded from the artist extreme life experiences and adventures in perception. Over a rough sea, tied by a belt, she had let herself be lowered from the cliffs until she skimmed the waves. In such cases even the most scrupulous reporter has extreme difficulties in reconstructing the scene in all its details. There was also an element which struck the imagination: she saw octopuses that multiplied and transformed into "shipwrecked persons eyes" and she was able to describe them, without the metaphysical or metaphorical factors ever going beyond the concrete facts and their impressive web. According to Woolf, a special mind, "a very literal mind", lay behind that slender and penetrating gaze. How was the actress able to reach a similar precision and intensity on stage?

But the reader felt at times like an intruder, like someone spying instead of waiting in place for the arranged surprises; dazed - because of lack of preparation - by the bursting of lights and colours, that seemed like spotlights pointed at the actress; the reader's armchair seemed to sink into undulating perfumed vapours amongst a chorus of French voices with perfect accents. So the final image, worthy of Orlando's shrewd eye, gives us back an eternal Sarah, disquieting in her ability to attract and illuminate what surrounds her: an icon with

a corresponding opposite and disconcerting image which evokes the dissipation amongst the waves fated for "the rest of us".

As with the pages of D'Annunzio's *Fuoco* (Fire) inspired by Eleonora Duse, these observations by Virginia Woolf show the insight that an "other" view of writing can have when it actively creeps between the actress' art and life, piercing through the fascination of her difference. The actress must count on her admirers' memory to leave traces of her art, becoming the target of desires and recollections, up to the point of penetrating the autobiography of the narrator who is watching.

On the other hand, in our time, in performances more connected to women's movements, art and life motives have blended too strongly. This is due to an



Sarah Bernhardt playing Hamlet.

insufficiently decanted need to reconstruct and reinterpret one's own journey, at the same time as aspiring for a totality capable of going beyond the dichotomy between public and private, profession and affections, playing and personal history. So, even in experimental theatre, a growing attention has developed towards finding one's own language using the self as source. This does not happen without difficulties in the passage from literary to stage writing, as Lea Melandri pointed out in the first issue of this journal (*The Language of the Goddess - How to Get Free of a Myth*). With regard to this I would like to call attention to two aspects.

The first has to do with the question of female subjectivity - also touched on by Lea Melandri - which relates individualities, experiences and personal psychological lives with their own original visions and roots. Indeed some of the most pregnant definitions coined on this matter by theoreticians recall the actor's role. I am thinking of Teresa de Lauretis, who speaks of "eccentric subject" placed "out of view"; of Rosi Braidotti, who proposes the image of nomads to describe the female-feminist subjectivity (multiple, multicultural, stratified); of the *Cyborg Manifesto* by Donna Haraway, who criticises the idea of body-nature ("bodies are not born, they are built"); of cross-dressing analysed by Marjorie Garber as the basis of anti-essentialist "culture of the third". We could also say, in agreement with Marina Cvetaeva, that gender difference is nothing but a small irreducible kernel that can "only be understood from within ourselves, through being"; in everything else it changes and transforms, as in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. So the rigid, ontological contraposition between male and female is put into question, as suggested by Rosella Prezzo when she writes that the two sexes "almost resemble" each other and that the difference revolves around the "almost". This connects to Claudio Meldolesi's point where he defines the actor as a "man similar

to man" used to working on details to recreate identity and diversity. It is not by chance that the capacity of being empty inside and of being dedicated to a neutral dimension is essential to the art of the actor, in order to meet the unknown in a "space of maximum risk and total availability to transformation" (Luisa Passerini).

Testimonies which I have gathered from experimental theatre actresses about their interpretations *en travesti* touch on the second aspect. These testimonies are deep and precise, coloured by an uneasiness about scientifically defining their own work process, but worthy of the theoretic engagement of advanced research studies in this field.

Marinella Manicardi (Teatro delle Moline, Bologna) has played a chair, a monkey, a robot ... This consists of "borrowing some physical attributes from the object" - she says - as adjectives, without turning them into a subject, and of activating a childish imagination. The "vertigo" is eventually felt later, remarking that the audience seems willing to believe the actor in whatever guise she appears, because of her power and ability to change. As in the age of Commedia dell'Arte, disguise and cross-dressing has once again become, rather than an exception, a further possibility, a third factor between the actor and the character. It creates distance and artistic freedom, differentiating between stage and life, nurturing intimate visions and bringing to life again the undifferentiated status of childhood and the disguised maidens from fairy tales. But is it still worthwhile underlining the divergence of sexual identity between artist and character? Is the *travesti* interpretation so different that it needs special attention?

To interpret the main role in Federico Tiezzi's *Genet in Tangiers*, Marion d'Amburgo (I Magazzini, Florence) had to "maintain female characteristics whilst at the same time embodying a man", entering a timeless situation, in eternity. The first process was one of "undressing": Marion

resorted to the faint memory of a dead young boy, already dressed for burial, and made the extreme gesture of shaving her hair off, thus changing her physiognomy in daily life as well. Later, so as to "break through this impoverishing process", she introduced strong visible signs of femininity: a tiara and a jewelled bracelet. Amongst the ghosts that visited her at that time was Renée Falconetti, the actress who had created incredible constrictions for herself, in order to play Joan of Arc in Dreyer's film. In this way Marion-Genet was born, a "body twisted in the middle of the stage", all voice.

Ermanna Montanari (Ravenna Teatro, Ravenna) considers having played a donkey, as a fantastic animal with no "sexual connotations", as a decisive move in her artistic experience. Thanks to this she could "contain the actor, the author, the light, being confused without an outline". "The disguise gives you more credibility" - she says. It is necessary because the artifice creates distance, and a hat, a pair of trousers, any small thing are enough to activate it, because the essential part is elsewhere, in the mind and in the voice. The voice with its "body" is the first to be disguised, by adopting foreign dialects. However Ermanna is not able to achieve the disguise with a total "outline". So, in *Ventidue infortuni di Mor Arlecchino*, as she was not satisfied with her Scapino, she substituted him for the character of Spinetta, a female driver who would like to be a man.

Laura Curino (Teatro Settimo, Settimo Torinese) puts a human filter between herself and the character: she thinks of another person, preferably an actor, not to imitate him/her but so as to find his/her traces within herself. She starts with a particular gait in order to arrive, through the text, to a way of thinking. But it is not easy. The problem is to understand where the voice starts from, both in the case of another gender or of an unfamiliar language. So a game is established between moving away - recognising in alterity a liberation stimulus -

and coming closer. She imagines the character as a child, she searches for it in the ridge between one and the other sexual identity and after a while she starts wearing its clothes allowing it to enter her daily life.

Claudia Contin (Attori e Cantori, Pordenone) speaks of a "neutral actor". Particularly so as to become Harlequin, she operates a metamorphosis of her physical structure, she "undresses" her body to dress it again, different and purified, so that Harlequin himself can enter it in performance. Claudia thinks that to fit a costume well is like being "dressed in a character" and that the make-up also transforms the face covered by the mask and the legs covered by trousers. During this process the physical mask - the whole body of the actor - must be taken care of before putting on the external disguise; and the voice, which is not an appendix but the body at another level, must "speak according to the body's position". Also the psychological journey is important for her: how can one be Harlequin on stage without being acquainted with his perpetual hunger? Like a "journey outside so as to bring back inside", the human being reveals itself as the animal most capable of metamorphosis.

But this third space occupied by cross-dressing is not only that in which the "sublimation beyond the border" between the sexes evokes a third dimension; the third space is also the one defined in Lacanian terms by desire. In *Agatha*, a text inspired by Duras, directed by Thierry Salmon, the twin sisters Luisa and Silvia Pasello played an incestuous brother and sister. Luisa, who assumed the male role, says she surprised herself by performing like a man whose "gaze and desire she would have always wanted to have" directed towards her. She writes: "I received from this the physical sensation of a male expression contained within myself which caresses, rejects and escapes me as if I was not the person to determine it".

These examples show how *travesti* is a structural dimension of theatre and how

amongst its steady aspects it also inspires different approaches and sensibilities, allowing for surprises. The *en travesti* role of course differs from others as interpretation code dictates, but it can nevertheless constitute a particular channel in which the actress' awareness and subjectivity express themselves with particular force. Both in these interviews and in others, the tension brought on by talking about one's own work process precisely and concretely results in the surfacing of themes which were not originally solicited. Themes emerge such as maternity or allusions to that "kernel from which everything depends, and that anyway is secret" (Montanari). Marion d'Amburgo says that "her image came as a catastrophe" - it was the image of her mother who died when Marion was four, leaving her no memories and dying "because she made theatre". Marinella Manicardi spoke of her nightmare, the body breaking; Ermanna Montanari spoke of the "dual personality" that includes herself and her animal persona.

So, having touched on a deep place, where the division of sexes is born alongside life and where the ghosts of subconsciousness bustle about, naturally those intimate visions which nurture creation emerged. I got the idea of a dual constriction from them: one which led my own choice of limiting and energising the whole thematic of the interview by putting it within a context; and the other, much more important, connected

to the institutionalised characteristics of the *en travesti* character. In the constraint of an uneven journey towards embodying another sexual identity without losing her own, the actress is taken deeper into her professional awareness, so that the theatre action, conquered in darkness, engraves itself in detail in the creator's memory, whilst also producing a surplus of life on stage.

So, indeed, Orson Wells' statement that between actors/actresses and "normal" men/women there is a difference which belongs to the sexual sphere, is not simply meant as a paradox.

Translated from Italian by Julia Varley

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