

# Silvia Ricciardelli

## Survival

*I left Naples totally confused and I remained confused for a long time after. For two years, at six o'clock every morning, I went into the training room and by the evening, I was completely destroyed. I often cried while I was in the shower. But the next morning, at six, I was there again.*

*May 29th, 1969. At the Politeama Theatre in Naples, Silvia plays the role of a maid in a benefit performance of a comedy in dialect by Eduardo de Filippo. She replaces an actress who had left the company and in a particular scene, in her youthful zeal, she accidentally scratches the hand of the leading actress.*

*In her dressing room she finds eighteen red roses. They have been given to her by her friends, not as a gift to a leading lady on an opening night, but because it is her birthday. Silvia turns eighteen.*

In December of the same year, I enrolled at University. On the 13th of that month, a bomb exploded in Piazza Fontana in Milan, and thus began the period of terrorism now called "The Night of the Republic". I have never been involved in politics, but many of my friends at that time were, and we had many heated discussions about theatre and its futility.

It was the seventies, years in which we were attracted by group activity. We discussed the family, taking as a point of reference forms of communal life such as were being experimented with in the United States. We felt that the concepts of Home, Country, and Family and hence Traditional Theatre with its stereotyped roles, were restrictive and limited. We wished rather to consider ourselves citizens of the world. On the other hand, the search for a relevant acting technique led us to study theatrical forms near to us, such as popular Neapolitan theatre. I remember Liliana, a stout, seventy year old actress. With a song she announced her own entrance from the wings, swept onto centre stage, bowed to the audience and then, finally, began to act. And the voice of the marionette who told stories about the camorra, the Neapolitan mafia.

*The kind of theatre to which Silvia is drawn is an "underground" theatre, literally, since it takes place in cellars and basements. They call it research or "experimental" theatre. In fact, it is a place in which, in addition to being an actor, one had to do many other things ... cleaning, building the sets, sewing costumes. Between rehearsals, they avidly discuss political theatre, Brecht, Dario Fo and the Living Theatre.*

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I was not principally drawn to the theatre in order to become a good actress but because in the theatre I found a micro-society within which I could analyse and work on the dynamic relationship between individual and group, that is, between my potential personal growth and the cultural ideas which the group incarnated. I felt as though I was working for something.

As a result of the tensions created within me by the longing for a convincing political belief, the desire for a personal identity, and the search for a valid acting technique, one night, while I was performing the role of a sweet young lover, I lost my voice and ended up completely mute for a few interminable minutes ... and darkness descended.

*December 1st, 1974. Silvia arrives in Holstebro, Denmark. Odin Teatret had offered her the possibility of participating in the company's First Long-Term International Seminar.*

*In May of the same year another bomb in another Italian square had killed eight people. In the meantime the friends with whom Silvia used to argue about politics had begun to take drugs. Some years later they will begin to die of them. The futility of theatre was as evident as ever.*

In the tobacco drying room in a small southern Italian town where I first met Odin Teatret, I then seemed to be talking with the birds in the fields outside. For me it was a first and impressive example of non-verbal communication. I suddenly realised that I needed an "other" kind of knowledge, a knowledge which was not the result of mind and words producing ideas and speech but which, by means of the senses, elicited feelings.

I left Naples totally confused and I remained confused for a long time after. For two years, at six o'clock every morning, I went into the training room and by the evening, I was completely destroyed. I often cried while I was in the shower. But the

next morning, at six, I was there again. It was four years before I took part in a performance. A long period on the sidelines as a non-actress. Then I took over a role in a clown performance ... once again I became an actress by replacing somebody else.

*Silvia works with the Odin Teatret for exactly ten years, from 1974 to 1984, touring the world with the performances Anabasis, The Million, Brecht's Ashes. Much has been written and documented about that period and you can find her in photos, films and books in Odin Teatret's archives.*

The main thing which is important for me to relate is that, then as now, I found myself in great difficulty when people asked me about my work as an actress. Even though I cannot deny that I have developed an acting technique and that I have found unexpected expressive possibilities for myself, I know well that what made me grow as a theatre person, and especially as a human being, was not what people usually expect to find in a theatre school: the courage to try seemingly impossible exercises, the necessity to demand the best of oneself, the patience and the perseverance required in the search for solutions to theatrical problems ... I can surely say that I learned a method more than a technique.

Just in the middle of the period of *Brecht's Ashes*, Rune, my first child, was born. All of the personal and professional confidence, acquired with so much work, collapsed. I was like a clock gone crazy. Life, work, needs, duties ... nothing meshed together anymore.

After being on tour for eight months, I, alone with my two year old child, and in fear of losing my mind, decided to get out of the theatre forever. I didn't know where to go or what to do. The only thing that felt important was to be at home in the evening to put my child to bed ... We the actors, were all dressed in our finest clothes, each with a red rose in our hands and seated

in a circle. While we crushed the roses of our youth, he, the director, spoke about the need to untangle the threads of our destinies ... I suddenly realised that I had to change both my life and my work.

*1985, January. Silvia goes to live in Aradeo in southern Italy, where she becomes an active collaborator with Koreja, Campo d'Azione Teatrale. For four years, she works only as a teacher. But in 1989 she finds herself playing one of Chekhov's three sisters in Koreja's Production Amori. Once again she replaces an actress who had left.*

In August 1980, a bomb killed, among dozens of other people, a theatre student from Bologna I had met during one of my tours with the Odin. In December, 1984, another bomb exploded, on the same train that twenty-four hours previously had brought Rune and I back to Italy. Not really an encouraging welcome home!

I had left confused; I returned confused, but I felt very different. I had left to become citizen of the world and I returned a foreigner in my own country.

During the ten years I spent abroad, there were only three occasions on which I realised I was still a Neapolitan: when a French critic told me that I had a comic soul and should never do anything but comedy; when an Italian professor said to me: "Silvia, I don't recognise you anymore! Neapolitans always manage somehow, but you, you work at it!!"; and when I was talking to a friend about my son, of how important he was to me and of how difficult it had been to share this feeling with my theatre group, and he said to me: "But you are Neapolitan, you are not like them at all!!"

*November 11th, 1989. The Berlin wall falls. Rather than being an opening of horizons, this much hoped-for event in fact brought about the end of the socialist dream.*

In the eighties the group experience shows signs of crisis, no one seems to be interested anymore. The question of personal

identity becomes much more important. As far as theatre is concerned, much more professionalism and technical ability are demanded, at any cost, and much less enthusiasm, ideology and motivation. There are more and more schools, workshops, seminars. You can become a wonderful actress ... but where are the theatres?

Meanwhile, in Cardiff, Wales, the Magdalena Project is founded and searches for its own identity in women's theatre. In southern Italy Koreja searches for its identity in the cultures of the world's southern half.

My second child Georgia is born. I live Motherhood physically and mentally. I question the dichotomy between mother and woman, both as a biological-existential condition and as a social state of power-servitude.

*October-December, 1991. Silvia creates S'è stutato 'o sole (The Sun Faded), a performance about motherhood. It is the first performance she creates on her own (cf. Magdalena Newsletter n. 8 "Seen from the Moon").*

*May 29th, 1993. Silvia presents her performance in Erice, Sicily. She once again receives red roses, six this time ... 4 + 2. It is her 42nd birthday and twenty-four years have gone by ... The accounts are right.*

On the way home after the performance, I came across a gravestone along the walls of the town, bearing a typical Neapolitan family name:

In memory of  
GENNARO ESPOSITO  
23 year-old carabinieri  
who on the night of May 30th, 1992  
in a youthful outburst  
of his sense of duty  
fell to his death  
from the top of this tower.

I left him one of my roses and I thought to myself: Neapolitans manage to make you laugh, even at the worst of tragedies ...

I believe that this way of experiencing and living theatre and life belongs to a particular period of History. And my personal story is probably similar to that of someone else, whose name is not written anywhere.

We assume a tremendous pedagogical responsibility if we make new generations believe that in order to survive they need only do what we have taught or told them, instead of obliging them to open their eyes and see the world they are in. We risk teaching people in the desert to fish. We encourage errors like that committed by Gennaro Esposito. He fulfilled his sense of duty, but he forgot to look where he was putting his feet.

This article was first written for Raw Visions, a Magdalena Project held in Cardiff, Wales, in July, 1993. Since then, no more bombs have exploded. It seems to me that we are entering the New Age. As a woman, I have beside me a family - two children and a husband - and, at the same time, my name appears in public, in print, on theatre programmes. Some of my friends have been lost along the way. I feel confused again, I don't know which theatre to make ... nor where to put my feet.

SILVIA RICCIARDELLI (Italy) is an actress and teacher in association with Koreja, southern Italy. In 1988 she mounted a project entitled *Mothers, Children and Theatre* and has recently toured with Teatro Settimo, Turin. She is a member of the International Advisory Group of the Magdalena Project.



Silvia Ricciardelli in *Brecht's Ashes*.  
Photo: Tony D'Urso