

## Julia Varley

# Across the Bosphorus

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on tour.*

My life is on tour. It has not always been so, but these days it is when I am away that I mostly feel at home. Away I meet my closest friends, I visit universities, post-offices, churches and cemeteries, I shop for Italian newspapers and pasta, for English books and biscuits, for Chilean wine, Brazilian mangoes and Indian clothes. Away I find the sun and views that Denmark does not have. Away I am happiest. Away I am confronted with the "other" which defines my "self": spectators, other theatres, people who live all over the world.

My home travels with me: the performance space which is recreated wherever we go, the group to which I belong and the colleagues with whom I have shared my work now for twenty years, my suitcase and the portable computer.

On tour I learn the road from-the-hotel-to-the-theatre-to-the-restaurant-to-the-hotel, I speak different languages, I do performances, demonstrations, meetings, workshops, seminars, barter, parades, press conferences, lectures ... and have days off. My time is regulated and the priorities are clear.

On tour I am hardly ever as stressed as I can be in Denmark, where I live in part of an old rented farmhouse in the countryside just nine kilometres from Holstebro. It is in west Jutland. The wind blows the flowers in my garden flat, the snow often blocks the drive. The windows are small and the ceiling is low in order to keep the house warm. I live alone there. I have an electric stove, old wooden furniture, a bathtub the wrong way round and about two hundred birds - not alive - in different shapes and forms.

I was born in England, but lived in Italy as a child. I joined Odin Teatret at the age of twenty-two and moved to Denmark. If for some reason I had to leave the Odin I would probably move to Latin America and grow potatoes. When I was young I wanted to have a riding school. I have been married, but the timing was wrong, and I have no children. I love - and am loved, and I go through the same ups and downs as all normal people. Theatre is my world, within it I exist. It allows me to be, without thinking of myself and despite myself.

In the modern world travelling has become a tourists' activity. What used to be adventure, discovery,

restlessness is now an industry. Theatre allows me to travel without being a tourist. Having a job to fulfil and something concrete to do obliges me to come in contact in a different way with those who live where we tour. Organisers, actors, directors, spectators, drivers, hotel managers, waiters, shopkeepers, women, men ... become friends. I have learnt not to be sad when I say goodbye. We will meet again at the next party, dinner or outing. Next Friday, which means in three or four years, when we have a new show to present. The sense of time and space is different living on tour. I return to Lima, Montreal, Pontedera, Budapest ... ten years might have passed. I notice how the towns and countries have changed, from dictatorships to democracy, or the other way round, isolated or at a cross-road of cultures. I meet new children, I remember those who have died. We pick up from where we left off.

#### ISTANBUL

I am having supper in Europe. Sitting under one of the two bridges over the Bosphorus, which connect the two sides of Turkey, I look over the water towards Asia and I see a big white palace built for Eugenie, the wife of Napoleon III. It could be a palace in Vienna or Paris. Another evening I am eating at a restaurant in Asia, just in front of the small island of Istanbul's port. I look over to Europe at sunset. As the sky slowly turns red, purple and black, the horizon is mapped by mosques and minarets. The shapes of Suliman and the sultans inhabit Europe. In between, the long silent ships travel from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, from Italy or Greece to Russia or Georgia. I feel that I am in a real knot of cultures, a crossing point for history, behaviour, clothes, religions. The earth itself participates bringing together mountains, water, desert and trees.

Together with Eugenio (Barba) we are giving a three day workshop for theatre directors at Istanbul's municipal theatre. Eugenio works with me as actor to demonstrate how he proceeds with a text, finding a

theme, elaborating an improvisation, assembling words, actions and meanings. A director asks me: "Do you work on purpose without expression on your face?" I had never thought of it, but as I try to answer, I discover that it is true. In the beginning of a process, when I know I have a long way to go to reach a depth of meaning in my actions, I deliberately resist the tendency of giving an artificial importance to what I am doing through the expression of the face. I prefer the neutral mask, a blank "Japanese" coldness to an overplayed warmth. I trust that later - when I have been through all the phases of elaboration and the actions are ready to be performed - my face will come alive, as the actions do, through an expression of their own.

While explaining, I think of a woman I saw, and did-not-see, that same morning at the hotel. She was walking up the stairs with her children after breakfast. She was covered from top to toe in black. In front of her face she did not have a veil, but a thick black cloth. Also her eyes were covered. I could not understand how she could see to walk. How could she eat? How could she be identified with a passport at a border?

Are our eyes there to see? Or to be seen? Is our face really our identity?

Walking in town I saw other women completely covered. They were Saudi Arabians, I was told. In Turkey it is officially prohibited for women to wear a *chador*, but as the Islamic political parties get stronger, the Muslim head scarf which covers women's hair has become quite usual and many women cover their faces, if not their eyes.

One evening we were invited to an expensive-looking restaurant to meet some of the local intellectuals. As I chatted with one of the women I asked her about the *chador*. I was curious about what it meant for women to wear it, apart from the mark of tradition and religion. Could it mean protection, privacy, a woman's world? Was there a positive aspect to being able to spy

on the outside world without being seen? Did they put make-up on - I had seen some faces all made-up under the cover as some women leant over the counter of a shop - for themselves, because only they needed to know they were beautiful? The woman I was talking to reacted very strongly. I was surprised by her vehemence. She was adamant. "They are stupid! These women just accept their lives being destroyed out of stupidity!"

Obviously the political point was a sore one. The Islamic parties coming to power are closing down cafes and bars, places of entertainment and theatres. The resistance against what is happening today in Afghanistan leaves no place for understanding and acceptance. It is a question of life and death for those intellectuals and artists who believe in exchange and need to be open and not secluded. I could not go any further in my curiosity about what it means for a woman to have a masked face in daily life.

But my curiosity then led me to visit the Harem of the Sultan's Palace. Again I was fascinated by this secluded life of women. The secrecy of the rooms, the beauty of the decorations, the disposition of the cushions, windows, beds, all gave a taste of power. I could imagine the power struggles between the women themselves, wives and concubines of different degrees, and the decision power they exercised on the outside world through the sultan and their sons, through the poets and musicians they listened to. An indirect power.

In the evening I presented one of my work demonstrations. It had to be simultaneously translated into Turkish. I was nervous because in the demonstration I used two poems by poets opposing the regime: Nazim Hikmet and Ahmet Arif. How would the spectators understand my political point? But the demonstrations are in fact about actor's technique, a personal method which I share without knowing what information will be useful to others. The fixed score

which I perform allows for something beyond even my comprehension to be communicated. What the spectator sees and perceives depends as much on their eyes as on my actions.

Each culture represents a mystery and trying to understand the mystery we learn. I belong to a culture with roots in a theatre group and with theatre I am able to meet other cultures rooted in different geographical, historical and linguistic backgrounds. In a closed room, far away from the public eyes, in my own harem, I prepare. I can cover my face with a mask of neutrality to be able to offer in performance something vulnerable. My personal black veil protects me during the process and has a function I have chosen. I know these restrictions give me a better chance to act and live. I am part of a tradition which is formed from the bottom upwards, from today backwards, which looks into the past to recognise its ancestors and masters, its rituals and behaviours. I have chosen the tradition of the theatre to which I belong.

I doubt many of the women I saw in the streets of Istanbul feel the freedom of their constriction. The choice is imposed by a tradition they are born within with very few chances of evading. While wanting to protect their families and beliefs, they have to give up their own autonomous identity. Their lives are tied to a past decided long ago. My life is on tour, moving between past, present and future. Their home is not away, but there where they have always lived. My home sails on a ship across the Bosphorus and the continents so as to meet other women, theatres and lives along the way.

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*The Magdalena Project, Holstebro, 1987. Julia Varley (3rd top right) with participants.*