

Rosa Ileana Boudet

Memory: A Burning Flame

When the Cuban revolution triumphed in 1959, I was fourteen years old and didn't know for sure what politics were. Two years later, I interrupted my studies and signed up at the School for Art Instructors, created to take art to the newly founded co-operatives and people's farms. In April 1961, on the first day of classes in what used to be a luxury hotel and was now housing incredible young people (some thought they were going to study art and some artillery) together with the basic rudiments of what would become our craft, we did not rehearse a theatre piece, but an evacuation drill. A naval vessel, the U.S. Oxford, could be seen from the Comodoro coast. It was the preamble to the attack on Playa Girón. Since then, politics has been present in all my actions, not from the lectern or in theory, even though there was no lack of lectures and what was referred to as a "political conscience", but from the praxis we learned from Marxism. I am a member of the generation that lived through adolescence and young adulthood in the epic moments of a triumphant Revolution and we had the opportunity to experience that transformation in everyday acts.

In 1961, at the School, we did Cervantes' vignettes or Lorca's puppet plays, we got to know Joris Ivens and read Rainer Maria Rilke and François Villon and learnt *Poesía bajo consigna*. The October Crisis found us in the Sierra Maestra during the first coffee harvest: the discovery of the countryside and of poetry is described in *Alánimo, Alánimo*, a small book I wrote much later and, although the title refers to a children's song, it is also political, as it speaks of the mountains and of the studies and anguishes of a young girl who, as in the song, runs a lot, while she leaves behind the other person she used to be. Two years later, I was already at the Isla de Pinos directing a group of theatre amateurs among the peasants and villagers. I remember that we staged a farce, *La esquina de los concejales*, by Nicolás Dorr, that parodied political small talk to the melodies of the music typical to the place, the *sucu sucu*. The people enjoyed this play which ended cruelly when

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the "politicians" swallowed all the paper from the factory where they had exploited the workers, and a *conga* - as in our comic theatre - was a conciliatory ending, during which we threw election fliers to the audience.

I could not continue on the island. There I lived in a magician's room, in the closet of a house of culture and I was already pregnant with my first daughter, Broselianda. After many occupations, among which that of a puppeteer, I studied journalism at university in 1967. It was the period in which we thought we were revolutionising the world's journalism with the rise of testimonial, the booming popularity of the novel and when we converted a university publication of minimal distribution, *Alma Mater*, into a focal centre for the debate on new ideas. During those years the university was not only an academic frame, we did social work - again at the Island of Youth - we would go to agricultural campgrounds, to the ports and the factories. The university linked me to a group of writers, poets and narrators, but at the end of 1971 - we were already experiencing what was called "the grey quinquennial" - due to minor disagreements and the exercise of healthy, aggressive and revolutionary criticism, I ended up being placed at a technical magazine, at which I arrived perplexed and insecure, but which I ended up loving. It allowed me to go deep into the secrets of the Bodoni and the *sans serif* and meet wonderful people like a Mig 40 pilot who reappears as a shadow throughout my short stories. These are the scars and wounds that all those of us who have lived a Revolution have.

In 1973 - and searching for a sensational report for the magazine *Revolución y Cultura* (of which I was head editor) - I got to know the Teatro Escambray and the work Flora Lauten was starting at La Yaya, a community close to Cumanayagua. I remember the per-

formance of *Como unos hombres perdieron el paraíso* (How Some People Lost Paradise), interrupted by men on horses and by the peasants who didn't respect the spatial convention of theatre. Also those "actions" were like games filled with resourcefulness and eloquence. Or a piece as experimental as *El juicio* (The Judgement), by Gilda Hernandez, that took place on a sugar cane plantation, in a natural location and where the real judges, chosen by the spectators, mingled with the fictive characters. My training as a critic would have been different had I not known the experience of a group that, since 1968, declared they wanted "to make theatre an effective tool at the service of the Revolution". And effectiveness would turn into criticism, spectators' participation, daring procedures so that the public of peasants would respond with a contradictory image of themselves. I visited them many times, travelled through the area, observed their performances, and from those experiences wrote a book of essays and a testimonial about a war hero. It's a biography for children about one of the mythic men who accompanied Che Guevara during the invasion: El Vaquerito.

The certainty that writing theatre criticism was a useful path was made clear and real by the meeting with the Teatro Escambray. Although I haven't, of course, limited myself only to this area of creation, by reflecting on politics, I recognised that this debt is important because the conception of the group somehow transcended the supposedly political theatre of the moment - which was performing Brecht or Cusani or Weiss - and dared to try out, starting from its own means, a poetic, an action that transcended the stage. Soon the group will be thirty years old. The landscape where they live has transformed radically. Many young people who study at the High Arts Institute saw their performances as children in



Rosa Ileana Boudet with her daughter Broselianda Hernández.

remote places. It has become a tradition. And I'm glad to have got to know them, of my excesses and my mistakes, because without them, I wouldn't have the image of theatre as a public service and most probably words like commitment and urgency, that have marked these hard years, would be foreign to me.

With the same purpose to serve as a critical counterpart to the theatrical movement, we created the *Tablas* magazine in 1982, that fortunately still continues with a new creative team. For me, the practice of criticism not only consists of writing books or teaching, of the uncontaminated space or being the outsider, but it also is essentially a will to serve the theatre that doesn't undervalue confrontation, activism and dissemination. So, since 1970 - when I started professionally - I have been linked to dozens of projects, institutions, editorials, where my contributions range from the most elementary idea and the simplest comment, to the ability to bring together and give cohesion and sometimes only offering enthusiasm.

These are the traits of an era that unfortunately is coming to an end. My generation wasn't anguished by having to postpone individual creativity or in giving itself completely to collective work. We have many papers in our drawers. Getting published isn't the only aim nor is being known or becoming famous. We never thought about whether we were at the edge, at the periphery or at the borders. The most important thing was to act, as an intimate need. And that's what we are doing.

In the 1990s many ideas have been thrown into crisis. Perhaps one of them, the most difficult, is demonstrating that one is revolutionary not only through following an ideology but because one's actions are carriers of a reform that expresses itself under other conditions. And how is this idea kept alive? When it seems like utopias have fallen apart, when the country lives under severe material restrictions and a war economy exists alongside the influx of foreign capitals as the only way to survive, each day one asks oneself what is a reformed form of politics. And although I don't have a definite answer, I try to continue with my projects, individual and collective. To keep on doing is the best antidote to routine and paralysis. To receive each adverse commentary or congratulation is a daily exercise to keep yourself updated when the direct forms of the political language have suffered a severe beating and the youngest people refer ironically to, and even mock, an excess of politicisation that they feel has been transformed into stereotypes, into a false iconography. Nevertheless, in the present Latin-American theatre - I study particularly the Cuban scene - there is a discourse that combines testimony and the absurd, realism and fantasy, and offers a renewed existential and philosophical political theatre as a path of multiple communicating vessels. We find this in *El Arca* (The Ark) by Victor Varela,

which discusses the legitimacy of the Cuban utopian project, and in *Las abarcas del tiempo* (The Embraces of Time) by César Brie, a journey to the deepest memory of a country turned ragged, and also in the many versions of *Waiting for Godot* presented in America and especially in the Caribbean. From that of Rosa Luisa Marquez in Puerto Rico - seemingly exuberant and exaggerated, or that of Miguel Rubio in Peru, or that of the Argentinean groups that do "theatre on the margin" and wait for Godot at the feast of consumerism and marketing. We find it in *Kaosmos* by Odin Teatret, in which the characters all wander about and knock at the door of a Europe that is breaking apart and where I thought I saw Anna Akhmatova and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Each proposal makes me reconsider that politics are not so buried, but are rather enriched by new symbolic gestures. What is the *waiting* for Godot on the eve of the next century?

In 1997, I have now had enough experience to know how to unyoke the political rhetoric from the real experience of "changing life". *Alánimo* continues being a personal password, valid in order to fight against my own lack of inspiration. Contact with human groups within the collectives where I have worked makes me respectful of contrasting and divergent opinions and more open to opposing ideas that sometimes nourish more than those that agree. At this point, I would like to have more certainties to give to those who come, but I don't have them. Only many questions that still have no answers. Nevertheless, I have an intimate conviction. It has been worth living within a Revolution; it is stimulating to think that the work will be perfected even if it has not been a bed of roses. We have certainly lived difficult times, as old Brecht would say, and

even though most probably those who are my age, won't see the world we dreamed of, still to imagine and construct it has had meaning. I know many reject this way of thinking, that the repentant, the apocalyptic, the banal phraseology are in fashion, that fashions are in fashion, and that many of us, the last of the romantics, will remain with our mute deeds. I would like to be remembered for being faithful to the ideas I had when I was fourteen years old.

This is why, during a break at the Santa Cruz de la Sierra Festival, in Bolivia, some months ago, I went to the Vallegrande and, at the laundry department of the Señor de Malta Hospital where Che Guevara's corpse was exhibited after his assassination, I placed fresh flowers and lit a candle. Later dozens of Vallegrandinos made a pilgrimage, when they found his remains in a common pit. Many will make the trip, from Vallegrande to La Higuera this October 8th. I close my eyes and a child's cry still resounds. The small school at La Higuera is a medical post and the birth of a child was my welcome. I close my eyes and know that I left fresh flowers and a burning candle there. In his memory.

Translated from Spanish by Roxana Avila and David Korish

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