

## Julia Varley

# Red Carnations and a Rose

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### RED CARNATIONS

When I was about ten years old "politics" was a way of staying up a little later than "Carosello", the advertising programme which sent all children in Italy to bed. I would guess the names of all the ministers and party leaders who appeared on the news just after.

At thirteen I started going to high school. I usually went there by bicycle. Only at times would my mother take me in her small red second hand Fiat 500. It was 1968. One day, arriving at school with my mother, I found banners hanging from the windows and the doors obstructed as someone speaking through a megaphone explained that the school was occupied, squatted. I heard the words "Mao" and "filocinese" (pro-Chinese) for the first time. My mother tried to explain something, but I did not really understand what it was all about. I just knew I was getting an extra day off because it was not possible to go to school.

Some months later the school was occupied again. This time the banners and flags were both red, and red and black. There were many more students talking through megaphones. Most of them had long hair and beards. I heard words like freedom and anarchy, power to imagination, no to alienation, sexual liberation ... A girl from my class was inside. She told me that they needed some food brought to them. I thought she meant sweets and chewing-gum and that is what I eventually went to buy. While I was still standing around curious, wondering what was going on and trying to recognise the different students inside and outside, the father of another school-friend of mine started screaming and shaking his fists: "Whores ... that is what you are ... a pack of whores ... come out and I will show you ... whores!" My mind was made up for me. I knew which side I was on. I climbed over the gate, entered the school and joined the squatters.

The students were talking in big and small groups, sitting on the floor in the classrooms, they were writing and painting on enormous sheets of paper. My friend asked if I

was also going to stay the night. I rang home, as often happened when I wanted to let my parents know that I was staying the night with a friend. I was really surprised when I heard my father's voice say strictly: "No! You cannot spend the night at school! Come home right now, straight away!" I was beginning to understand that "politics" had to do with power and disobedience and that there was some danger involved. I also became aware that as a foreigner living in Italy I had to be particularly careful. But all the same in those years everything seemed possible. I liked the idea that people should be equal; not equally poor, sad, frustrated and alienated, but equally rich, creative and alive. At home I tried to get my father and brothers to do the dishes.

At sixteen, having left school for a year in search of new challenges, I started "doing theatre". I gave up volley-ball games and ski races for rehearsals. Three times a week I met up in a borrowed garage in the outskirts of Milan to work with a group of people who said they did underground theatre. With a mask on my face and a nurse's cross on my arm, dressed in jeans and a blue T-shirt, I carried the Dead Soldier of Bertolt Brecht's poem round the space. The group was inspired by the Bread and Puppet Theatre. We used puppets and masks to present a story of war.

Back at school I became politically active again, this time more seriously. Some young people were taking drugs, others spoke of armed guerrillas, others liked buying special pointed shoes and motorbikes. I was attracted by the idea of grass-root associations, by structures which seemed anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical. I was falling in love with Marco, who was blond, blue-eyed, came from a working-class family, was musical, had founded the theatre group I was working with and also belonged to the same radical left wing organisation I was

active in in my school.

The theatre group split after an internal discussion: we were no longer underground, but political. We felt theatre should contribute to the class struggle and function as counter-information. I had no intention of becoming an actress - someone I imagined to be a liar and an impostor - but I liked doing theatre. Our theatre did not belong to the official buildings with red velvet chairs, nor to the alternative buildings with wooden chairs, our theatre belonged to the streets, to the markets, to the occupied schools and factories, to the community centres.

The performance about war evolved to include a protest against compulsory military service. The next production denounced Pinochet's state coup in Chile. I played Death with a rubber mask covered in green wax and a fat US Marine chewing gum. I marched in the streets under an enormous paper tiger to criticise imperialism or in front of a big red elephant to support the rights of the workers. My bridesmaid's dress was used for the puppet of the Christian-democrat Fanfani, while a rubbish bag was the fascist Almirante's evening coat as they paraded as a married couple when we made propaganda in favour of the referendum for divorce.

My political responsibility grew at the same time as I was getting more and more involved in theatre. Slowly, the two activities merged to become one. At nineteen I was a militant of the "culture cell" within a radical left-wing political organisation, together with some of those politicians whose names other children are guessing today. I took part in endless meetings discussing the meaning of art and culture, amongst comrades who mostly considered music and theatre as a means of getting funds for the more important political activity with the workers.

We started a music and theatre school

in a squatted house in the centre of Milan. Hundreds of young people came to participate. I organised courses and lessons, I contacted professionals, I taught, I wrote documents, prepared festivals, built masks, performed wherever they called us, drove the old blue van, contacted the press, discussed, called and chaired meetings, took part in the training sessions, recycled the clay, painted the walls ... I worked in the morning, went to university in the afternoon and did everything else all evening and night. Enthusiasm, passion, political belief, deep convictions, no sleep, no money, meetings, meetings and meetings, assemblies, demonstrations, popular village fêtes ... were daily bread.

The Danish Odin Teatret was coming to Milan. We invited them to see our space and give a workshop. We organised a barter with them. At twenty-one, just before going to live with Marco and other friends, I left for Denmark for a period of three months. I thought I would come back from Odin Teatret to share all I had learnt with my companions.

Suddenly I was non-existent: I could not speak the language - and anyway they did not speak much there, I was not part of any performance or public activity, I did not know any of the rules of the profession, I was not at all useful, and as an actress or artist I was totally hopeless. It took only three months to totally destroy my identity and for the ground on which I stood to crumble beneath me. I only knew one thing: I could not return to Milan and continue to be responsible for hundreds of young people like me just on the basis of enthusiasm and words. I had chosen theatre as a way of saying no, of being a rebel through actions, intolerant of sitting around at a school desk or in an office. At Odin Teatret I had discovered I did not know what a real action was. All I could do was stay in Denmark. My

mother was pleased. Italy was entering the decade of hard terrorism, the "years of lead". Many activists would be imprisoned or killed. I could easily have been one of them. Politics could have been my only horizon.

### A ROSE

I have been working with Odin Teatret now for more than twenty years. It has taken time to bring the bits together and recognise the continuity in what seemed like a break between my life in Italy and in Denmark. For years I did not speak about content and responsibility while slowly the meaning of politics and theatre changed for me. To take position politically no longer had to do with party directions or with ideological backgrounds, but with a reality which was continuously appearing in different forms and with different names. We were not a "political" theatre, but in every choice there was a policy and an awareness of the community, of the *polis*.

The seventies ended and in Italy the student and workers' movements started disbanding, the young people no longer met at demonstrations and assemblies. Even my friends seemed to be confined to their jobs and homes, while I started touring the world as an actress.

In 1986 I was in Argentina. The army made an attempt at insurrection to stop the trials condemning the crimes committed during the previous military dictatorship. This provoked a massive popular demonstration of protest in the Plaza de Mayo of Buenos Aires. For the first time I saw the sea of people marching from above while participating in the demonstration at the same time. I was on stilts, in the costume of Mr. Peanut, "Death", carrying a black notice on which was written "*Olvido?*" (oblivion). I was back on the streets, and I could see better. Touring Argentina again just a few months ago, I was asked to see the work of a

theatre group in Rosario, a smaller town. Two young girls, about twelve years old, dressed in innocent white dresses, presented a scene with which they told about the hours when Allende died not wanting to surrender to the attacking military forces. The two girls had chosen the text themselves out of a need to know about all they had heard from their parents: assassinations, disappeared people, mass graves ... They needed information, or rather counter-information, and were doing theatre to get it.

In 1976 and 1983 I was in Italy. In 1978 and 1988 I was in Peru. In 1980 and 1986 I was in Wales ... Theatre groups were meeting to exchange professional experiences, to share visions, dreams and problems. They were creating networks, collaborations, festivals ... One evening they all walked together in a long long line in the desert to show their work to someone who was not there, to someone who had opened up a way. The sun disappeared and it became dark. The theatre continued. The shadows of the



Mr. Peanut (Julia Varley) welcomed by Pinochet's police at La Moneda, Santiago, 1988. Photo: Tony D'Urso

partisans of the Second World War and of the rice-field workers with bent backs reappeared to remind me of the solidarity, generosity, stubbornness and hope which endure the dark times. There is no need to represent resistance when theatre's way of living and working is already a form of resistance.

In 1988 I was in Chile. I visited Allende's tomb, which did not carry his name, and then, again as Mr. Peanut, I went to his palace, La Moneda, where instead Pinochet was living. I had a piece of bread in the shape of a heart which I broke to feed the birds. I had started making theatre in Milan to tell the world about Allende's death and now I was there in Santiago to remember him.

In 1993 we were organising a festive week in Holstebro. I listened to exponents of different religions sing under the same roof. I saw Arabs and Jews sing and dance together while I remembered what their two flags had meant for me. I had not seen people behind the flags. At the time, I could not have imagined speaking to somebody who did not think like I did.

In 1995 I was in Cuba. At breakfast I would steal eggs, bread and cheese from the hotel to take them to the technicians of the theatre where we performed. Because of the *apagones* (electric power cuts), spectators waited for hours to see the performances. One day a technician brought us some mangoes in exchange and told us how proud he was of his country. Even with the hardships they had to endure, he still believed in the Cuban Revolution. In his shining eyes I could see the belief that imperialism really was the paper tiger I had marched under many years before.

In 1996 I was again back in Milan. We organised a barter in the prison. I performed behind bars and in a closed courtyard while it was snowing. The male prisoners presented parts of their performances in return. The

female prisoners danced to the music of the men who were allowed to visit for the first time. Theatre can be an island of freedom.

After the Berlin Wall fell, and many illusions of being able to change the world fell with it, I felt the need to perform something outrightly political again. I chose to be dressed in men's clothes and hold a flower. The flower should be red, but I could not use a carnation because the meaning would be too direct. I decided on a rose. Then, at the end, following the logic determined by the texts and materials I was working on, I changed to a woman again, loosening my hair and singing to a dead brother kneeling before the crushed red rose. The coldness of the political discourse softened to show that real strength is concealed within vulnerability.

The red rose seems to be the right flower to represent what politics is for me today: no longer the ideal and ideological determination of my youth, but the questioning, preoccupied and contradicting position of something living and moving. The red rose is the flower that belongs to the theatre I make; it reminds me of the values that I struggled for when I was young and that I still believe in. What used to be counter-information, agit-prop, political theatre, what used to be theatre at the service of society has become theatre which is communication, relation, network and an island of freedom, theatre which makes the impossible possible. Following the true nature of theatre, I have exchanged revolution for rebellion, political for subversive, man for woman, and red carnations for a rose.

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