

OPEN LETTERS

Prague, October 2nd, 1998

Dear Julia,

Once again I am writing a letter to you. Writing is easier when I address you personally. A couple of experiences are, for me, associated with the topic Theatre - Women - Trespass.

In 1968 Teatr Laboratorium had a room where everything was done: performances, rehearsals, exercises and individual tasks. That room was never empty, but when I entered it for the first time at night it was empty. I was expected to prepare something on which the continuation of my stay would be decided. I could not afford to miss the opportunity. Out of sheer despair, I got a bucket of water and started washing the floor to somehow justify my moving through the hall. I got immersed in the work and caught a rhythm. I felt like singing. As I went on and the wet part was drying, the floor itself started showing me where I should progress. I felt more and more free: I was in my place. Next time I entered the hall with the bucket right away. I was allowed to take off from the floor into the imaginary world of improvisation.

For a long time I thought that this experience was my personal secret. About a year ago I read about a Shinto training which begins by washing a floor. I felt jubilant: it works! The lesson I drew is that theatre can achieve what religion does. It can deal with things we cannot change. Otherwise we start seeing things we could change as unchangeable and forcibly try to change things to which any change is detrimental. Theatre helps us see where we stand when we're trying for the impossible. Grotowski said: those who want to try to do the impossible, must be realistic. I thought: I can be that already!

Last year I started my first pedagogical project, an integrated programme for the development of communication skills. It is a one year project, optional for all regular students of the theatre academy as well as the part-time students, for the healthy ones as well as for those with special needs, for Czechs as well as for foreigners, for the young and old. After just a week it was clear that there were no barriers between us which should be overcome. Many borders fluctuate and change according to given tasks as quickly as we form and re-form groups. At one point the relevant distinction is health/impairment, but just a little later it is men/women or actors/non-actors, seeing/blind, childless/parents, etc. That freedom is fantastic, and we all share within it.

But later two people asked how to vent aggression. My students' questions made me think over the relation between integration and aggression - and I started seeing this in connection to your question. I took in what my children

taught me. Their lessons are effective, because I cannot side-step from them. When I found out that my son had a problem with drugs, I started desperately fighting. Only when I accepted it as a fact, could I see that places which were previously blacked out by fear were in fact exit points. As long as I was scared and defensive, it was all about aggression. The moment I got over the fear and close to the task, the struggle and fight was over.

When my daughter travelled to Bosnia with the humanitarian convoys, she arranged for me to give a workshop in Sarajevo. On day one I saw only ruins and losses, but once the work began, in the people and in the town I saw all that which had been saved from ruin. Hope gains strength near disaster. If I don't fight that which I did not actively choose - the inevitable; if I let myself be led by what is necessary, the task will centre my energy away from the extremes of anxiety and aggression. That is integration. In this way unsuspected possibilities arise.

As a woman I find my way through the world with the help of theatre. I've known it for a long time, but I always have to search for it afresh and be amazed: what we have to endure is not necessarily a barrier, it can be turned into an impulse for change. I am happy. Tomorrow we go on - still without insurance.

With kisses and hugs, I wish you all the best,

Jana

(Jana Pilatova)

Buenos Aires, 1997

Incomplete letter to the Magdalena Project,
In my history as an actress, the questions about identity and gender always went together. I started to study theatre conjuring the sacrilege of desire. The desire of being looked at and admired was born in me at Sunday mass. Or rather, I discovered it with horror. I was fourteen years old. In the moment in which the priest lifted the wafer to consecrate it, I - kneeling at the last bench - found myself thinking: "I hope someone is looking at me". All the alarms started going off: "Sacrilege! Sacrilege!" Because the "someone" should be a man who would be impressed by my devotion. Given a choice of taking myself to the psychologist or to the confessor, I chose the intermediate path: I would study theatre.

A kiss from Maria Clara in the day in which she started to grow gills

Maria Clara

(Maria Clara Reussi)

Birmingham, January 1999

Dear Julia,

Just lately I've been drowning in theory - positively wading through books and articles of the stuff. Going back to teaching after a break of a year and a half, I thought I should remind myself of this burgeoning area which I've never been keen on. I am a theatre historian albeit one who is still at the stage of an apprentice. Theorising history is one thing but theory and history have a difficult relationship, and I have a very difficult relationship with theory, me dearie ...

In the world of theory there is an uncomfortable lack of the concrete. There is a language, a linguistic conundrum which one has to absorb and then utilise in order to discourse with theory itself about, let's face it, *theory*. Theory can be created in a room, an ivory tower ... far removed from the everyday realities of making theatre. True, much theory can be translated into performance, but my own cultural bias often hinders the purchase of tickets for such performances. It may simply be a reflection of my own ignorance but for me theoreticians are not performance practitioners; they don't have to apply for funding, manage a company, get up on stage, learn their lines, train their bodies to the point of exhaustion. A practitioner will inevitably make use of theory, but often the theoretician's use of practice only comes from the position of observer not doer, or if a doer then only in the context of the Academy.

Camille Paglia, a contentious figure to invoke, talks about the way in which the generation of theory about cultural production has become a kind of liberal intellectual escape route ... I guess that I am inclined to agree. As a historian I am interested in re-construction through a process of taking to bits, scratching away at the surface of so-called objective versions of history. In relation to women's work in theatre through the ages, this process, a kind of *pentimento*, followed up with a form of cooking up of ingredients, is often far more constructive than the burden of theory. Performativity, intertextuality, pre-Oedipal, post-Oedipal, corporeal, Derridean, Lacanian, post-Lapsarian ... some of these words and phrases are more useful than others. I'm not refuting all use of theory, rather, the way in which issues of women, gender and performance have become bound by the limitations of theoretical perception. Theory is surely a means to an end not an end in itself.

As a woman theatre historian interested particularly in the researching and repositioning of women's work in an expanded and ever changing pluralistic history of theatre (perhaps a reflection of my own liberalism), I can tell you now that, much like our knowledge of the human brain (we understand about five percent of its capabilities) we know relatively little about women in theatre history. Archive research is expensive (the generation of theory is not). The woman centred theatre historian cannot rely on theatre archives ... somehow records of women's work just aren't often kept ... even in the context of women working in the mainstream. Much of the reconstructive work has to come from hearsay, from a little imagineering mixed in with a little factual information. The

process of historicising isn't necessarily scientific, it can be very interpretative and wildly subjective - for me this is a good thing. Much of the theory machine is frightened of the non scientific as well as being dismissive of the concrete. So many of the books on women's performance, and in particular feminist performance, of late, are drenched in an imperialist mode of perception ... working towards the ultimate not the pluralistic. Thus because a performance doesn't do this or that, doesn't adhere to this or that form of sexual expression, political correctness, visual privileging ... it can't belong, belong to the schmeary theory dearie club. But how do we fit the work of (my context is British) say, Lena Ashwell, Clemence Dane, Beatrice de Lion - the list is endless, the archive material limited - into such a narrow framework as (American centred) definitions of feminist (and therefore worthy) performance? Should we be obliged to talk about the work of Karen Finley and your own work, for example, within the same theoretical framework - and when the framework doesn't work whose work is dismissed?

For every culture, every era, there will be an ever expanding list of women whose work is forgotten. Whatever the context the basic pattern is the same, women trespass on official cultural history, just as they have often trespassed on the "male" stage. We, as women in the late Twentieth century, have more choices (perhaps) than our foremothers, in terms of how we construct ourselves in our work in theatre, whatever the context of that work. I would like the obsession, amongst academics and some practitioners, for theory to subside now ... it should be a tool not a rule. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence ... there are so many more things that I as a theatre historian would like to re-discover in order to feed into cultural perceptions of women in theatre - it would be a great pity to let theory ... schmeary ... get in the way, n'est pas, me dearie?

Maggie

(Maggie Gale)

OPEN NEWS

GENERIK VAPEUR (France)

Caty Avram has been co-director of Generik Vapeur since 1984. Writing about their work she says:

Street theatre invests in public space as its primary setting. The theme of the show will be silhouetted on the walls of the town if played at night, or else in daylight in the middle of the noise and bustle of everyday life. We arrive; the town has its own way of functioning, its own schedules, its own routines. We will transform the sign-posting, re-organise the one-way system, hang out the washing on the electric lines. Music will escape from the sewers, an underground car park will become a rural farm, we will bring the sea-side to a market square.

Regulations are tamed in the name of authorisations. Blocking the streets, erecting a merry-go-round of cars on a roundabout, building a pyramid of buses, invading the town with a thick mist with the collusion of the firemen, using the statues as partners in theatre and giving them their lines. The poetry of files will light up the elected representatives of the municipality. The town is our communal territory and our artistic "duty" is to reveal, enlarge, denounce and orchestrate it. Turning the town upside down, pushing the boundaries relating to gatherings of people, reliving together the history of a particular neighbourhood, or else projecting a Utopian future there in pictures. The musicality of the town is integrated with the soundscape of the performance.

Playing theatre in the street is to perpetually contrast the real with the surreal, to invent settings which confront the functional objects which the town has created: the urban furniture, the different modes of transport in their technical diversity. The population is invited to abandon itself totally to play, to question itself by taking adventurous routes. To live as a human being, leaving some traces like marks on the walls and tarmac; to play with the facades, to climb the banks and the museums. To challenge the flexibility of the public, the perpetual movement which comes from the desire to be present or not, the contrast between the mythological, the social and legality.

THE MAGDALENA PROJECT (Wales)

In October 1998 eight performers from different parts of the world came under the guidance of Jill Greenhalgh for a month long workshop entitled *The Presence of the Actor* in Llangranog, Wales. They worked on the cliffs above the sea and in a tiny village hall. The workshop will be repeated for

one month every year. The participants were: Sophie New (England), Helena Dias (Portugal), Ana Woolf (Argentina), Jo Shapland (Wales), Jo Randerson (New Zealand), Rabab Ghazoul (Wales/Iraq), Kirsten McIver (New Zealand) and Branislava Kuburovic (former Yugoslavia). Apart from the daily training, each performer was working on her own project, mostly consisting in first steps towards solo performances.

Amongst the messages we have received from them on the theme of trespass, Rabab Ghazoul wrote:

In my small mind a woman appears wearing the clothes of my childhood, of another country, of a hot place. She hides from me a word. In her hand she holds a palm tree in miniature. She picks up a little theatre the size of a child's shoe. She tells me nothing is forbidden. That memory shines like pictures in frames real and heavy. Opening her hand she reveals what she has hidden. A word: trespass. In the other, huddle three more in the round of a sturdy palm: Reclaim, Revisit, Return.

TALENTS DE FEMMES (Burkina Faso)

In 1995 a group of women, including Odile Sankara, created the Association Talents de Femmes in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. They began with a production of *Les Co-épouses* (The Co-Wives) by the exiled Algerian writer, Fatima Gallaire, because the play dealt with problems such as polygamy, mothers-in-law and men's infidelity which were of great relevance and concern. The play was performed many times, not just in towns, but also in villages in order to reach as many women as possible.

After hearing about the Women Voices Festival in Belgium, Association Talents de Femmes decided to mount their own voice

festival in Ouagadougou, and the success of this brought the Association to the attention of many women artists, not just singers and dancers, but also women working in the plastic arts and crafts.

The main aim of the Association is to promote women's creativity, because even though Burkina Faso is culturally advanced with two established international arts festivals, women artists have no place because they are not socially accepted. The Association allows the women to establish themselves within the cultural scene and also gives them the chance to express themselves and their concerns within their society.

NATSU NAKAJIMA (Japan)

Natsu Nakajima is a Butoh dancer and choreographer. In summer 1998 she taught at Dansens Hus in Copenhagen. She says that Butoh dance is in conflict with the European dualism that separates the body from the soul; that dance should give the experience of something full of contradictions and irrationality, just like the eternal chaos of the genesis of creation. When she tries to break down the visual language that has no borders into a co-ordinated academic language, everything moves further and further away from Butoh's search for the joy of a fulfilled life demonstrated through the body. The duration of a workshop is always too short to teach more than just superficial elements. People now have a need to understand, while her master Hijikata would say: "Don't ask. Think for yourself." Five years ago Natsu started dance education for people with special needs in Tokyo, with inspiration from Wolfgang Stampe's school of modern dance in London and today she is trying to find a balance between her teaching activity and performing her own dances.

M A G D A L E N A 2ⁿ d **GENERATION** **(Argentina)**

Magdalena 2a Generación published its first Newsletter in May 1998 and the second one, in Spanish and English, will be published in March 1999. After three different and successful meetings in Buenos Aires, Mar del Plata and Tucumán, Magdalena 2a Generación is planning the 4th meeting for October 1999 with the presence of Beatriz Seibel, Susana Freire, Julia Varley, Jill Greenhalgh, Gemma Moses, and Luisa Calcumil and Beatriz Pichi Malen (Mapuche singers). For information write to: Magda2a@cvtci.com.ar

TEATRO BUENDÍA **(Cuba)**

Otra Tempestad is the most recent production of Teatro Buendía, directed by Flora Lauten with the dramaturgy of Raquel Carrió. It narrates the imagined or dreamed meetings between Shakespearean characters and the Yoruba and Arará mythological figures of African origin in the Caribbean. The group was attracted by the exchange of fables and by the interaction between the references to Shakespeare and the songs, dances and rhythms transmitted by an oral tradition. The difficulty consisted in finding a structure for all this rich material to become a theatre performance. Teatro Buendía worked in an extremely artisan manner with a minimum of objects, in a non conventional theatre space - an old church - exploiting its height, depth and columns. An island of labyrinths became the space that introduced the spectator into a game of mirrors, appearances and disappearances coloured by the carnival and festive characters of Cuban culture.

RATNA SARUMPAET **(Indonesia)**

Ratna Sarumpaet, the Indonesian playwright, director, actress and activist was arrested in March 1998 along with nine other demonstrators during a pro-democracy rally in Jakarta. This is not the first time Ratna Sarumpaet has run into political trouble. Her play *Marsinah Menguggat* (Marsinah Accuses), which concerns the unsolved murder of an Indonesian labour organiser, has been closed down twice by the police. In response to her imprisonment, the International Center for Women Playwrights has organised a series of readings of *Marsinah* throughout the U.S., Canada, Australia and Britain.

FOMMA **(Chiapas, Mexico)**

Petrona de la Cruz, thirty-two, and Isabel Juarez Espinasa, thirty-nine, are the founders of FOMMA (Fuerza de la Mujer Maya), which has been working in the Chiapas region of Mexico for more than five years.

They are among the first indigenous female theatre makers to be known in Mexico. Their fate should have been the usual one of dealing with male alcoholism and violence, the absence of family planning and the solitude which is the lot of most of the women of the Maya community, but instead they have chosen to re-invent theatre. Traditionally the theatre and ritual of the Mayas has been the province of men, so the eruption of FOMMA onto the cultural scene in San Cristobal de las Casas has signalled the end of a taboo. "We decided to direct ourselves without any men to give us instructions", explained Isabel. *El sueño de un mundo al revés* (The dream of an upside down world), a fable which was written collectively, stages all Petrona's and Isabel's demons: weak and powerless men confronted by a destiny that overwhelms them, while women work without relief, in the perpetual fear of arousing the fear of their husbands, of

repeated assaults, and of the pains of child-bearing. They have been accused of being a feminist theatre, but this is a label which they reject. The Company has already made several tours in the U.S. at the invitation of some American universities.

GABRIELA BIANCO (Argentina)

Explaining about her work with sign language and theatre, Gabriela Bianco writes:

I am an actress and an Argentine Sign Language (LSA) interpreter. Twenty-nine years ago I made my appearance on life's stage. The scene: a small flat, and parents with a particular form of communication; deaf parents that belong to a cultural and linguistic minority community. I work at the University and in my studio transmitting and teaching sign language starting from movement techniques. The initial hypothesis, that still guides the work, is that it is an absolutely physical, three-dimensional and visual language of gestures, which uses the whole body and space as channels to produce meaning. Precision, meaning, configuration, orientation, placement, movement and direction: these are also theatrical terms. This conception is now directing my work towards the search for a scenic poetic of sign language, which could consist of a visual theatre or a dance or an aerial and musical text; a theatre of new words. Now I am searching for the poem hidden in hands, in the bodies of my parents and in those that look in order to hear and fly when they speak. It is something that is emerging from my own hiding places. Isadora Duncan has become my muse.

The sign language transcends two hands to codify information. In sign language it is the whole living body that speaks. The body challenges silence.

TEATRET OM

(Denmark)

Teatret Om has produced the performance *Colora il cuore* (Colour the heart) with the actress Sandra Pasini and the painter/stage designer Antonella Diana. *Colora il cuore* is a theatre happening in which painting and acting together weave the story of the performance.

The last wish of an executioner, who is condemned to death, is to have his portrait done by a painter. The painter becomes the witness of the executioner's confessions. The setting of the performance is the painter's atelier and at the same time it is the place of execution and the canvas on which the actions leave their coloured signs. The work was inspired by the American happenings of the '60s. However, this performance is not improvised, but has been fixed through rehearsal. A new way of painting developed from this opposition. The painting is staged and organised in a score so that it can be repeated and adapted to the actress's actions.

NAISDA (Australia)

In 1975 Carole Johnson, an African American who lives in Australia, founded the NAISDA (National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association), the main indigenous performing arts institute in Australia. Two companies sprung from the institute: Bangarra, which the aborigine dancer Bernadette Walong co-directed with Stephen Page, and AIDT (Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre). The school is primarily for indigenous dancers, and the teachers come from all over the world. The traditional dances open to people can be taught, but only the people from the tribes are allowed to teach them. The institute has been groundbreaking in allowing indigenous art to be recognised and accepted.

MAGDALENA AOTEAROA

(New Zealand)

In December, with the Magdalena Aotearoa Festival only four months away, the preparation work is becoming hectic. Everyone is scattered along a vast plank of projects, tapping at the computer, scratching out columns of figures, updating budgets, opening files, closing files, losing files, attaching documents, catching the last post, oozing and cajoling and persuading on the phone, crawling under the sink, and crying out to each other in the middle of the night. Plans for the Paekakariki Festival are intensifying with the welcome news of a NZ\$ 20.000 grant. Faxes flood the office daily asking for information and offering incredible performances, causing panic in the administration. The level of interest in the Aotearoa Festival is incredible, both from overseas visitors and from New Zealanders coming home. The office is buzzing, the wages are poor, but the spiritual rewards will be unimaginable.

THEATRE OF BEING (Scotland)

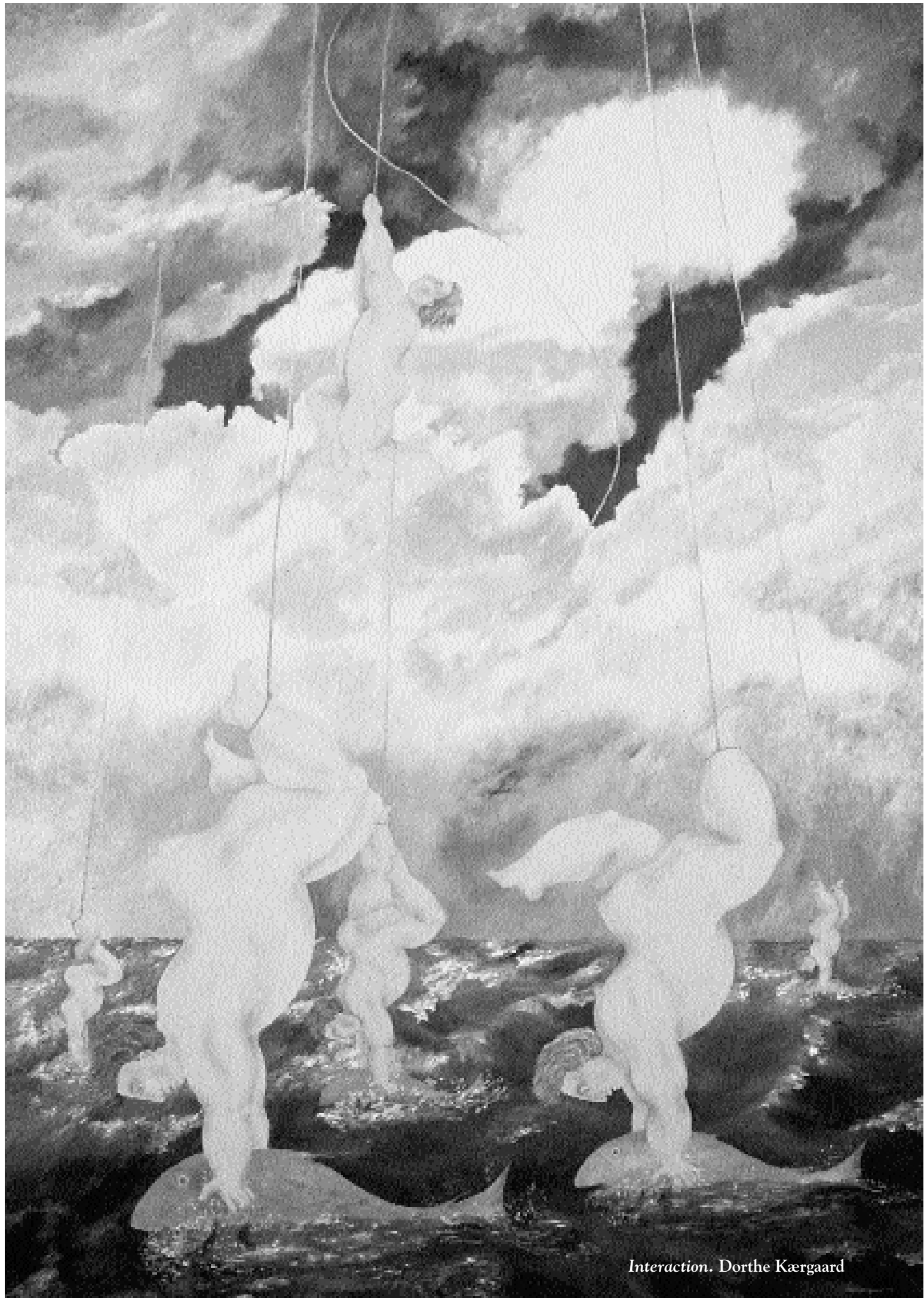
Lee Gershuny, as a poet/playwright, has been developing various forms of theatre as a way of processing individual and collective conflict for the creative development of the whole person which she calls a Shamanic Theatre of Being. She writes in her article published in *The Journal of Process Oriented Psychology*, 1995 Vol.7, N. 1:

Conflict is the basis of dramatic structure in which one character, group or natural element is set in opposition to another. (...) As a live presentation, theatre has the potential to incorporate both intentional and unintentional, spontaneous behaviour into each performance. (...) Theatre is a socially acceptable place for both actors and audience to enter and leave ordinary "reality" with a specific time limit. (...) The element of play releases the disavowed, disturbing voices of an individual or group and

presents them in a way acceptable to the culture. (...) Applying process-oriented principles and tools in the theatre not only enables the arts to take a leading role in cultural transformations but also extends the therapeutic role of process work.

TICVIN TEATRO (Italy)

Ticvin Teatro hosted the Third European Conference of Theatre and Prison in Milan from the 27th to the 31st of October 1998 with the support of the Cultural Programme of European Communities in collaboration with the Piccolo Teatro di Milano - Teatro d'Europa. After the conferences held in Milan and in Manchester, Ticvin has chosen European partners, inviting Escape Artists from Cambridge (a British theatre company of ex-prisoners), the Centre du Théâtre de l'Opprimé Augusto Boal from Paris (directed by Rui Frati) and Système Friche Théâtre from Marseille (directed by Philippe Foulquié). Collaborations and performances were viewed and the experience of the theatre group La Nave dei Folli, composed of inmates and ex-prisoners and directed by Donatella Massimilla and Olga Vinyals Martori, was shared both inside and outside Milan's prison.



Interaction. Dorthe Kærgaard