

Julia Varley

The Power of Vulnerability

Beside my grandfather's garden was an orchard that belonged to somebody I did not know. The best way down to the river at the bottom of the hill was along a path that crossed the orchard. It was a nice walk, under the trees, but I felt uncomfortable each time a grown-up decided we should go that way. As a child I was always respectful of "No trespassing" signs, I did not like entering private property, I hated being in the wrong place and breaking the sign-posted rules. I preferred to be normal and go unnoticed. I did not trust officials and policemen. I would try to convince my mother not to climb over gates, explore cemeteries, enter closed doorways and peek up driveways. Like my father I thought a bull was in every field, that spirits would appear in the cemeteries and that nasty fierce dogs would defend their masters' grounds. In Italy where the countryside is mostly fenced in, and in England where it is not, I preferred to go for walks along openly open roads.

At the same time I did not want to conform to the social rules: I was shy, I disliked conversation and parties, I hated discussions and arguments, I did not want to behave properly. I felt embarrassed if my mother spoke to people in shops and in the streets, while I myself enjoyed being cheeky and disrespectful with friends. As a foreigner I could get away with most of my anti-social attitudes; being a foreigner became a privilege.

Against all expectations, leaving university and skiing behind, I joined the world of theatre. I entered a territory where going against the rules is considered to be creative, travelling is a daily routine and being a foreign element in society is accepted. In theatre opposites met and actions counted more than words. There I could live on the borderline without going against the law. Theatre taught me to recognise paradox as the norm and to think differently, in a way considered perhaps conservative by the revolutionary and revolutionary by the conservative. Theatre demands me to continually jump over gates and trespass. What borders exist in this open land?

For the relationship with the spectators to exist you need to forget them and yourself, and concentrate on a concrete task. To communicate you must stop wanting to communicate. When you no longer need to be strong, you are so strong that you can offer your fragility.

SELF-ESTEEM

“I am too precious” - this sentence has been going around in my head ever since I heard it a year ago. A performer whom I had invited to an international theatre festival in Denmark was explaining her point of view. I listened with a smile, although I could hardly believe my ears. Is it really possible that anyone can be so egocentric? Sometime later a friend told me how important it was for her to discover self-esteem as a possibility. For a woman and a feminist it is essential, she insisted. I could understand, thinking of the general. But my experience as an actress told me something else.

My profession requires my actions and behaviour to be precise and decided on stage, so that I can project and give to the spectators. During a performance, what happens to the spectators is important. The point is not to show oneself, but that the spectator should see something. Humility and generosity seem to me to be not only the worthiest qualities of an actor, but also the greatest demonstration of power and wisdom. Self-esteem is not something that comes from the awareness of one's own value, but it is the result of a relationship. A profound effect on the spectators can be achieved by the human vulnerability actors reveal on stage when all technique is hidden and surpassed. An actor's self-esteem does not depend on showing strong muscles and beautiful faces, clever tricks and funny numbers, elaborate artistry and acrobatic wonders, but it is given by a quality of being which moves the spectator and which is often simple, warm, vulnerable and human. Actors touch me not because of their exuberant power, but because of the human frailty they are able to show through their power.

In the first years of apprenticeship I searched for results. What I wanted was to “function” in my scenic behaviour. I worked to achieve presence, to attract attention, to be seen. I worked to make my actions and

movements big, alive, effective and strong. Day by day exercises, training, rehearsals and performances were devoted to building and discovering my identity and power. Then one day I gave up; after trying so hard I worked for the pleasure of it without worrying about the results necessary for theatre. That same day I began to “function” on stage and the results came. My will to do no longer separated me from my actions. After tilling the earth, planting the seed and watering, the plant began to grow when I stopped looking at it or trying to pull it up by force. For the relationship with the spectators to exist you need to forget them and yourself, and concentrate on a concrete task. To communicate you must stop wanting to communicate. When you no longer need to be strong, you are so strong that you can offer your fragility.

Never would I say: I am too precious. I could say: my work needs a different context, the performance needs protection, I could give a better contribution ... I do not think I am accepted and appreciated because I am convinced I am good, but because I am able to offer something, amongst which I include my failures.

VOICE

As an actress the greatest difficulties I have encountered have been with my voice. It trembled and got caught. It was weak, shy, out of tune and often flat. I could not control it. I could whisper and shout, but I could not speak normally on stage. My voice was full of separations and borders: theatrical and private, nasal and growling, singing and speaking. The strong airflow I had developed playing the trombone was there only to struggle with my voice and force it. But still I wanted to sing; not on social occasions, but in training or performance.

My voice's roundness and desire to explore started appearing when - once again

- I forgot about the results necessary for theatre and I accepted my voice as it was, without wanting it to have volume and be strong and low pitched. I was travelling far away from theatre and all the people who knew me as an actress. I was in India, and a local young boy taught me a song. As I repeated it, my voice sounded different: it was my own. It still trembled, but it did not matter. It was soft, but it did not need to be loud. From there it began to grow.

Spectators have complimented me for my voice work. My difficulties and the solutions I have found to overcome the difficulties have resulted in a quality that is appreciated. It is not something I understand: my weakest point seems to be the most admired. Many people have asked me to work with them and I have started giving voice workshops.

When I teach I insist on thinking of the voice as something to let go of, give or send, as a present, not as your own. Like a letter, once it is written it belongs to the person it is addressed to, no longer to you. You have

to be generous for the vibrant quality of the voice to live in space. The mystery of voice is precisely that it does not have borders: it travels far and near, it laughs and cries, it sits and flies. It is totally individual and belongs to a space somewhere in between the person and the other people, trees and stars with which it communicates.

The living voice in an interview can give me shivers and move me to tears, while those identical words on a piece of paper do not have the same effect. The emotional landscape is created by the modulations of the sound. The alive presence that is the strength of theatre, is also a limit impossible to trespass, its weak point.

DOÑA MUSICA

Doña Musica is a character I played in *Kaosmos* who, after escaping from that performance, wrote a novel and created *Doña Musica's Butterflies*. Doña Musica lives like a shadow and a ghost, she follows and never leads, she flows and her movements are like waves. She taught me the strength



Julia Varley in *Doña Musica's Butterflies*. Photo: Jan Rűsz

of not doing, and of presence through absence. Her voice belongs nowhere and everywhere. In *Doña Musica's Butterflies* the character tells the story of her origins and narrates her adventures with arguments of theatre entomology, with theories of modern physics and with poems and tales from other times. She says:

How I was born? Did the actress give me life? Or did I, a character, reveal the actress? Did the actress mould her energy so as to transform it into Doña Musica? Or did I, Doña Musica, modulate the actress's energy? These questions won't lead us anywhere, because a character is a tendency, a tendency to exist. A character is something that lies in between the idea of an event and the event itself, a strange kind of physical being exactly halfway between possibility and reality. (...) In narrating I use the first person: I am Doña Musica - and I am not. I am the actress - and I am not. I am Julia - and I am not. I am and am not. I go forwards and backwards in time, just like those particles that leap and dance in an atom.

Identity fluctuates in a space where the boundaries between actor, character and person don't exist. My identity is eternally changing. What is separated in the world of concepts, is one in the world of action. In books which aim to understand actors' feelings and techniques of interpretation, identification and distance separate the character from the actor. When I am on stage commenting on the character or following in its steps are just different details in a scenic behaviour equivalent to the way in which we relate to ourselves in daily life.

SCHOLARS

Some scholars and historians react to my articles because they are too personal to be scientific and objective. They say: "What is the use of all these actors' writings? Although useful as documents, we must

work on them to extract a historical meaning."

I fight to pass on experience through a subjective point of view and questioning, because I think that women who work in theatre have a huge responsibility. Their knowledge of actions, of the creative paradox and of complementary opposites, their silent incorporated knowledge is the base for women to invent a new language and a new way of making history. Often a woman's way of writing is personal, passionate and is born from a need. It does not intend to be objective and scientific. Politically correct editors want to give women space, as long as they follow the established principles and respect the traditional way of thinking which puts objectivity, rationality and consciousness in a dominating position. Trespass is and was entering forbidden territories: theory for actors and directing for women.

FEMINISM

Women don't stand up for the same values all over the world; throwing away a lipstick can be liberating or the exact opposite; independence is not defined by working or being a housewife; the company of men can be exciting and stimulating or repressive. When searching for identity, separation is necessary in the beginning. Borders and boundaries are put up to recognise the differences and find one's own power. This has happened in all social movements: black and indigenous people, students, workers, gays and women. In the beginning there is something to defend. The first step must be to conquer equal rights. But as the autonomous position strengthens and a shared communication becomes clearer, separation is no longer necessary.

Also within the Magdalena Project in the first years it was essential that only women participated, but once their leading

position was secured it was easy to have men present without them creating conflicts. But misunderstandings arise also from different cultural backgrounds. Within the Magdalena Project, as in other situations, I have often remarked a difference between North Americans and Commonwealth countries on one side and Latin American and continental Europe on the other. The understanding of priorities, originality, requirements, exchange and innovation can be turned on its head if not taken into consideration in close connection with reality and within a context.

During Magdalena meetings in South America women often express their fear of feminism. They don't want to be as strong as men and fight for supremacy accepting male habits of competition. They don't want to struggle embracing the dominant values of their culture, they prefer to stay where they are. The question is then how to find a different way of being tenacious and vehement. Feeling the responsibility for what is going on in the world without wanting to discuss football and political parties demands a language based on solidarity and generosity instead of rivalry and egoism and for references particular to women and what they care for. A different image is needed of what a strong woman is.

CONCLUSIONS

If self-esteem in theatre is based on vulnerability and the ability to share and project it, could this also be true for a woman in general? Could the new image of a strong woman be a woman who is able to put forward her frailty, her intuitive intelligence and her complementary understanding as a value for humanity without it requiring male protection?

I have often found that an actor's experience is parallel to a woman's; the way of thinking is similar. It is important that the women who have incorporated the secrets of

action can indicate new ways forward. Putting the focus on the power of vulnerability does not mean giving up the responsibility of doing and building history nor does it mean submitting to those who feel strong because they are in power. It is a paradoxical vulnerability difficult to grasp in concepts and words, but easy to see in the work of actresses who are strong and vulnerable on stage and generous and independent in life.

I answered the "too precious" woman that taking into consideration similar ages and experience, what I appreciated in the other women present at the festival was their generosity. Generosity made them special as artists, women and feminists.

Trespass is a concept that requires separation and borders. Living in the world of theatre I try to overcome divisions knowing everything contains its opposite. My act of trespass consists then in not accepting the limits set by the establishment nor by those against the establishment, in not accepting the status quo nor the rules of those who go against the rules.

A yellow person is different from a black and a white; a woman is different from a man; an actor is different from a director and a scholar: depending on whom I am talking to I would agree or disagree. There are differences I want to maintain to give meaning to communication and discovery.

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