

Dulcinea Langfelder

The Little Sister

Born in 1955 in New York, I consider myself to be a younger sister to the baby boom generation. I also feel that I am a younger sister to the women's movement. I never had to burn my bra (actually, I never even needed to wear one, besides the flat, stretchy cupped one I used to fill with Kleenex when I was twelve). I have always felt as though my older sisters paved the way for me to realise my potential with no obstacles other than my own limits. I learned Martha Graham technique at the age of four. This certainly contributed to my feeling that, as a woman, I could be as great as whatever greatness was within me.

Unexpected and very unpleasant obstacles appeared when I became a student of Etienne Decroux, especially since what brought me to his school was the spirit of optimistic revolt with which I was brought up.

It was at the age of seventeen, during my first travels in Europe that I saw, at the Tivoli Garden in Copenhagen, a small dark stage with a colourful sign that said *Pantomime Theatre*.

My mother wanted me to be a painter, my father wanted me to be a musician, my brother wanted me to be a clown, and, from the age of four, I was "supposed" to be a dancer. I had no idea what pantomime was. The word suggested a play, funny stories, movement, visual creativity, musicality, but it was something no one knew very much about. I blindly decided to become a mime artist, motivated by curiosity and a mixture of fidelity and revolt towards my artistic family. I remember staring at the black, empty stage, wondering how I might bring it to life.

As I walked into Decroux's house, three years later, my heart was beating hard. I knew I was about to commit myself to a master. I was about to equip myself with the tools I needed in order to change the world. I felt strong, lucky, and scared stiff.

Decroux was, as many know, quite an eccentric man. He was passionate, he was revolutionary, he was hardheaded and he was profoundly unhappy. I have only realised recently

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Dulcinea Langfelder. Photo: Vidar Neuhof

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He was so busy developing his vision, surrounded by wide-eyed twenty year olds from all over the world, that he neglected his real family and his intimate relationships. His bitterness and frustration were both caused and echoed by the lack of caring recognition for the life he gave to his art. He died two weeks before Martha Graham died. Many comparisons can be drawn between the two, not the least of which is that she died having made a substantially stronger impact than he did... and yet...

Being a student with Decroux was as much an exercise in humility and subjugation as it was in the art of mime. He saw us

with the x-ray vision of a sage. He called us by the names he gave us (I was Dolcino, named after an Italian clown he had seen). He gave us permanent ages (I was - and will always be - fourteen). He would lecture us on our personality flaws, in a half joking way (I was - and certainly still am - stubborn). He didn't know, or care to know, our real names. He checked how we dressed when we left school, and women not wearing dresses would get his stern disapproval. We were obliged to collaborate in some very silly rituals (they were actually a lot of fun). We were constantly reminded that what we were doing was very difficult, and almost impossible to achieve.

When I left Decroux's (I was actually thrown out, for expressing dissent), I felt lost and confused and in no position to change the world. After three years of Decroux's misogyny and tyrannical behaviour, having learned a technique that I could never really master to his satisfaction, I felt like a poor, frail and victimised lady indeed. Not to mention that there were no female models in mime - of course, there weren't very many male models, either.

It is interesting that looking back on the experience, I feel once again strong, lucky and equipped with the tools I need to change the world. Memory is selective in its priorities and knows how to put experience into perspective. Even though I remember the imposing side of Decroux, I now realise that it was all part of his commitment to an art-form that reflects the play in life. He gave us roles (extraordinarily well cast), he played roles and made us play with him. Yet, in spite of his constant role playing, he was transparently candid. His underlying dissatisfaction coloured his often difficult relationships. I recently prepared a tribute for the centenary of Decroux's birth, and realised how much I learned from what he did - and not just from what he said.

My style of performance does not resemble Decroux's style. I move, but use his technique sparingly. I sing, I play with words... oh, but so did he. Word play was constant in class, and almost every exercise was accompanied by a song. And he was right, I am a clown - but so was he, and a talented one.

I don't know if all masters are as quirky as Decroux. I do feel lucky to have worked with a master - to have known that painful period of commitment, where you take the difficult times with the joyful ones, where you have to suspend your own values and your sense of self, where you have to swim patiently through something you don't understand in order to get to the other side.

Now I consider myself as "first generation" to Decroux. I am not a younger sister, I am actually one of the female pioneers in integrating Decroux's vision into a particular style of performance. I am quite proud of that. What I do regret is that I don't teach. I tried to teach his technique, and I couldn't bear to see the discouraged faces of the students, faced with the difficulty of the long road ahead before managing to move the head without moving the neck. To see someone trying to do that for the first time is to see a mangled, dismembered, confused and unhappy human being. I can more easily tolerate the sight of blood. When I teach, it is for short stints, giving people food for thought in the hope that it will help them in some way, which is valid too.

I feel a sense of responsibility in passing on what I learned, but I know it can never be the same as working with a master. Decroux was well into his seventies before he was considered a master, so I still have time, if that kind of greatness is within me. If not, I will be happy to have passed on the vision through my work on stage.

DULCINEA LANGFELDER (Canada) was born in New York in 1955. She studied dance from the age of four to eighteen, and then with Etienne Decroux, the great French master of Corporeal Mime from 1975 to 1978. In 1978 she moved to Montreal to work with Omnibus Mime Theatre and later with Carbone 14 Theatre. In 1985 she created her first solo, *Vicious Circle*, and founded her company, The Virtuous Circle Dance Theatre. Her major works are *The Lady Next Door*, 1988; *Hockey! OK?*, 1991; *Portrait of a Woman with Suitcase*, 1994, and *Victoria*, 1999.