

Leo Sykes

Trying to Be Born

*The era of passive learning
was over.
Finally I was in the present.
I was no longer working
towards a future. I was living
my life now.
This was the moment when
I moved up a generation.
What a relief.*

In my late teens and early twenties I was a workshop junkie, gathering interesting but quite random information. Luckily for me the Cardiff base of the Magdalena Project offered very high quality workshops and a network of women that lent consistency to what could have become a confusing and superficial quest for the tools of the trade. I then spent my mid to late twenties in apprenticeship, still trying to learn from others and at the same time trying to discover and establish my own values and identity. I worked as assistant director to Eugenio Barba at Odin Teatret. During those years I also directed a children's performance with Teatro Sfera di Om, an Italian/Danish company, started making videos and wrote my PhD on Eugenio Barba's way of directing. I lived between Denmark and England.

My work was sacred and when I wasn't working I felt as though I didn't exist, so I would work all the time. I was trying to become me. To get to that elusive point in the future when I would no longer say "I want to be a director", but would say, "I am a director". It was an exhausting struggle. So exhausting that at the age of thirty I collapsed with M.E., or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome as it is politely known, a name that makes it sound like some vague feeling of tiredness. I spent two years in bed. I thought my life had ended, to be so ill day after week after month after year. I also couldn't see how I could have a viable future, dependent on others for everything, with the doctors saying that it could last forever, or maybe just a few years, they really didn't know... And yet deep inside me there was also a grotesque feeling of relief. I was so ill that I really couldn't work. At last I was allowed to stop. Before every minute had counted but now I could spend months just staring at the ceiling without even thinking a thought. Time took on a completely different dimension. I was no longer in such a rush, after all.

However, before becoming ill I had written a script for a short film about my friend Sandra Pasini. Sandra is an actress and founder of Teatro Sfera di Om, who at the age of

twenty-one discovered she had a brain tumour. Fifteen years later she still has the tumour, as it is too deep to be operated on. In real life her favourite dish is *testarella*, baked lamb's brains. In the film Sandra eats these cooked brains in a metaphorical exploration of her own illness. Southern Arts (an English arts funding body) gave me a production grant to make the film. I had the script and I had the money. So I intended to make the film even if it killed me, but, ironically, I had to get better enough to be able to make it first. So after a year and a half in bed I got up and shot the film.

The golden rule of M.E. is to return to life gradually, as the risk of relapse is very high. We shot from eight in the morning to eleven at night for a week; sometimes I was shaking so much I couldn't stand. But we did it, and it didn't matter that I had to return to bed for another six months after the shoot. Although I am still not totally better, I am so much better and making the film was a huge part of the cure, the rest was down to the love of my family and friends. Making the film ended my existential crisis about my artistic and professional identity. I felt like I was being born, as me, at last. The time at Odin Teatret was my apprenticeship; the illness was a rite of passage. The era of passive learning was over. Finally I was in the present. I was no longer working towards a future. I was living my life now. This was the moment when I moved up a generation. What a relief.

APPRENTICESHIP

I had the great fortune to see a performance that changed my life, quite literally. At the age of eighteen I went to visit Odin Teatret, catching a ferry to a snow bound country where the little towns hide their inhabitants away from passing eyes. There I met the scariest and maddest bunch of people I had ever had the pleasure to encounter. I spent



Sandra Pasini in *A Tale of Two Heads* directed by Leo Sykes. Photo: Thyer-Jacobs Communications

ten days watching the last rehearsals of *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*, the most powerful performance, or even experience I have ever seen/had. I could tell you nothing of the story, but I can say that it was, if not a religious, then a spiritual experience. I was transported into the land of the dead.

Many years later I have come out of the other end of a long process of artistic evolution. Having worked as assistant director to Eugenio Barba, I know now that it was not black magic that I was witnessing in the performance but a web of information that was so intricately woven that any struggle to understand only left me further entangled.

During my time as assistant, and in writing my PhD, I tried to analyse the experiences I was living on a daily level. I tried to extract principles of practice, a methodology that I could employ in my own work and communicate to others, I tried to reveal the director's techniques. But today, three years after having stopped working with Odin Teatret, I find that the things that have stayed with me, at least on a conscious level, are not these objective ideas, but a subjective way of being, exactly that which I would logically consider incommunicable because personal. It is the passion, the total involvement, the belief, the need and the respect for the work that are still with me.

I would even go so far as to say that, like a teenager who leaves home, I felt a need to reject everything I had learnt. I needed to discover how to make my own work in my own way. The process of learning ultimately had to come from within. But I am just starting to perceive the reappearance of all that I learnt. The principles of practice that had sat on me like a book of rules to be disobeyed are now more like very good ideas with which I can finally dialogue.

MASTERS

The core of Odin Teatret are the old actors, all of whom have been with the group for more than twenty years. I joined the company at the same time as three other young people, all actresses, and another young assistant director. Eugenio named us the Lizards, younger creatures in the evolutionary scale of things than the Tortoises, as he called the older actors. Danish was the common working language. This caused linguistic problems for us Lizards, only one of whom was Danish. But even more problematic was the fact that after thirty years of working together the older actors and the director didn't need to explain much. So what was for us crucial information, was often left unsaid.

Sometimes we younger ones would urgently interrogate each other to see if anyone had understood anything.

I know that for us Lizards it was often a battle to be able to find our own identities and space within the enormous and very heavy structure of work. The hours we worked were so exhausting and long that just to find time and energy to do any work independent of that required by the group was virtually impossible. Of course the group work should have been ours, including the actors training, the work on a new performance, the music rehearsals. All these were spaces in which we young ones should have been able to create freely. But how free are you when working with monsters? The old actors and Eugenio are monsters, so huge and powerful, with such a body of experience and power of presence and faith in the void, which they have seen take form so many times, that it was difficult for us to collaborate as equals. So we struggled on as un-equals, as goldfish in the shark pool. And as in the Darwinian model, none of us goldfish survived.

We have all left the group although we all still maintain close contact and continue to make theatre. The point is that the Odin isn't a garment to be vested by a group member; it is the sum of its parts. When we Lizards joined the group, Eugenio spoke of his fears of bringing in young members, whom he had neither the time nor the interest to cultivate, as he had had in earlier years with the original Odin actors. He was not, as I thought at the time, alluding to the extra work and responsibility we would inevitably give him. He was alluding to the fact that the process of natural selection would mean that all the time and energy invested in us would be an act of pure generosity and not gain, as we would leave.

What my role as assistant director consisted of was never explained to me and I

was never asked to do anything in particular, except to give my comments after each rehearsal and to note down all the changes Eugenio made every day. Frustrated by my lack of input, I one day asked him what I could do to be more helpful. Eugenio replied: "Three things: be patient, be patient and be patient!" I felt that I had ceased to exist.

This process of watching others work for months on end was the single most frustrating experience of my life. It seemed to be the antithesis of everything I thought a director should do; I decided nothing, was responsible for nothing, could risk nothing, change nothing. But I had no choice; I was not ready to direct. At university I had formed a theatre group that had operated for two years. In order to keep the group together I thought we had to be constantly active, this meant we were constantly either in rehearsal or performing. The group became a production factory and at the end of two years I just started repeating myself. So I knew I had to spend some time learning from other people before trying to make my own work again.

In order to assuage my frustrations, I attempted to become actively involved in the work. Odin Teatret's performances often are not based on plays, but rather on a montage of texts from various sources. So I started suggesting texts. I soon discovered that this was a flawed strategy as Eugenio had already read all the books ever written (or so it seemed to me). I hardly ever got actually to direct the actors so text and actions were out. What was left were the set, costumes and props. These areas became my battle field. With the help of another colleague, and a lot of glue and cardboard, I was able to create some props that were actually accepted into the work. As a director I learnt something very important from Eugenio's way of rejecting ideas. He was never judgmental, so his rejections

became challenges, a stimulus to try harder, go further.

BEING BORN

My parents are filmmakers and every holiday I can remember as a child was spent either in the studio or on location where my dad was shooting or in the cutting rooms where my mum was editing. As a teenager it therefore became very clear that cinema was to be rejected as it represented all things parental, whereas theatre was great and radical, and all the better as my dad didn't like it.

The first performance I directed after my time of apprenticeship was a very strange experience. I tried consciously to employ the working principles I had learnt, sometimes without even understanding why, and the performance suffered all the consequences. Then I made the short film with Sandra, *A Tale of Two Heads* and this was a fantastic device for having to stand on my own two feet. I had no actual schooling as a filmmaker and a very strong vision of the result I wanted. This turned the whole dynamic of research on its head. Instead of starting work in order to arrive at an unknown result, I started with the result, a highly detailed storyboard, and we worked to recreate this on film.

This way of directing was the antithesis of everything I had ever learnt. The director as visionary, or indeed as megalomaniac, was not part of my culture or training. But in making the film I was for the first time speaking my own language. For the first time I was pleased with a piece of work I had made.

THE PRESENT

I now live in Brazil and am married to a Brazilian circus clown, Marcelo Beré. Seventeen years ago he founded a company, Circo Teatro Udigrudi, together with some fellow clowns. I have just directed a performance with them called *O Cano*, based on



Circo Teatro Udigrudi in *O Cano*.
Photo: José Carlos Libânio

the traditional circus act of "musical eccentrics". The theatre company I set up at university was an all woman company, later I worked with Teatro Sfera di Om, again an all woman company. Now I work with Circo Teatro Udigrudi, an all male company. What I most enjoy and admire in the Udigrudi men is that artistically they are very feminine, able to concentrate on details, listen to the other performers and the audience, take directions from a woman. On some weekends we perform in the smart theatres of São Paulo, on others we put up a circus big top and perform in the under-privileged areas of Brasilia, where we are based. The performance is out there in the heat and dust in front of audiences of five hundred.

But it is not all romantic and wonderful. I get frustrated that my work is presented in less than ideal conditions. In the big top our performance is shown with makeshift lighting and with the audience arriving the whole way through the show. As I live in Brazil this is not an exotic experience, it is my reality. So I feel a need to fight for better conditions, to insist on defending the work against detrimental circumstances. And yet, at the same time, I am completely humbled by the diffi-

culties on every level that cultural organisers overcome in order to create events. Here you have to know how to improvise, act fast and most importantly not get stressed by adversity. But it is all worth it. The press is calling *O Cano* one of the most important cultural events of the year. Everything I ever thought I was working towards is happening here and now.

LEO SYKES (Britain/Brazil) is a theatre director who also works with film and video. After graduating in Italian and Theatre Studies she went to work in Denmark as assistant director to Eugenio Barba and as director with Teatro Sfera di Om. Since moving to Brazil she has made her first short film *A Tale with Two Heads* and she is currently touring internationally with her clown and music performance *O Cano* and is in pre-production for two other performances, a short erotic film and a baby.