

## Magdalena Pietruska

# My Work on Myself as a Pedagogue

I enter the room and they are already there waiting for me, expecting something from me, wanting me to give, to share. But I have nothing, I have lost everything.

With time passing they become younger and younger than me, or I become older. They are as always more beautiful, more innocent, more inexperienced, more courageous, more everything: my students. They come to me to learn. They first look at me attentively, shy and evaluatively, and perhaps respectfully because of my work *curriculum*; but mostly they look at me with eyes wide-open and their whole beings ready to receive.

To the question: "Does a typical, not to say ideal, student exist?" Ingemar answered: "Definitely not! It is dangerous to want to have a typical or ideal student because all too often you realise you are mistaken. A student simply has to be someone who has nothing to lose."<sup>1</sup>

I think then that the pedagogue has to be the one who has lost everything - each time. It is a first condition. It is not a question of going down to the level of a student; we are not an elevator in some huge skyscraper of our awareness going up and down. We are all and always on the same level; each person's own level.

One should avoid transforming oneself into a tourist guide armed with a compass and a map marked in red: "I was there, it was an important experience". The experience was and will always remain just mine. It is impossible to share it. The students have to live their own experiences.

The research into the art of the actor in our theatre-laboratory, Institutet för Scenkonst,<sup>2</sup> was always put in confrontation with the context outside our laboratory through two other aspects of our work: pedagogy and the artistic creation in the performances. The pedagogical work also functioned for us as a forum for *auto-pedagogy*. Trying to

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1. From *Stepping Stones* by Ingemar Lindh (1945-1997) to be published by The Black Mountain Press, Aberystwyth.

2. Institutet för Scenkonst was founded by Ingemar Lindh in 1971, in Sweden.

translate into practical tasks for the students what we discovered in the laboratory work as well as what I already know from my actor's work, I push myself onto another level of understanding. Reflecting and speaking about the work is the next step towards awareness. In 1984 we started a more systematic research in theatre pedagogy, exploring new ways of transmission in the framework of an ongoing project, the University of Theatre, which we created as our laboratory.

We make a clear distinction between the experience of learning in a didactic situation and the experience of exploring in a pedagogical situation. The didactic form is based on the transmission of that which is already known, which is never the aim in our work, but can serve as a concrete starting point for the journey that I share with my students. There are a few techniques, exercises, ways of proceeding that I can propose as a first step or rather as a means and that are exchangeable. These exercises were invented or developed out of elements borrowed from various disciplines and created in specific conditions out of the needs and curiosity of people searching for answers to their questions. All of them contain some general principles for understanding the work of the actor; possible ignition-keys for one's own creative process. They are indications, never solutions, and certainly not absolute rules established once and forever. We call them "the means whereby" and not "those means whereby" because the elements are exchangeable and apt for modification through time and new insight. The art of the actor deals with a human being, a living organism, that is moving, changing. The whole of humanity is moving, changing - both on a physical and a spiritual level - and transforming the world we live in. It is never static. Therefore "the means whereby", in

order to remain as such, have to be part of the evolution. Whatever I propose to my students as a means, a tool, will be naturally chosen out of what I have been through myself, but it is not possible to propose it in the same way as it was put to me making a historical review or a nostalgic travel. With "the means whereby" we are meant to open doors, not to transport passengers through already wide-open ones. I make my proposition out of where I am today in my own process, because it is impossible to go back in time - and even if it were possible it would be boring for me - and because otherwise the students could confuse the means and the end, and be tempted to learn "how to do" instead of exploring. The tool has to serve the students to move from where they are towards an unknown destination.

In this sense the didactic part of our work is reduced to the absolutely necessary minimum and never used as a transmission of an accomplished knowledge. I have always put myself into a *auto-pedagogical* situation in order to create a pedagogical situation for students. By keeping up my own curiosity and putting new questions to that which is already known, I can stimulate my students' curiosity to explore the means, discover how to build their own way and start - or continue - their own creative process. This journey we make together during the pedagogical process, is the result of a dialogue between my students and me, an experience we share. I am not leading the students; I am not a guide. I am an older companion in a journey that everyone is doing individually, including myself and I am older, not necessarily by age, but by experience. My purpose is to help the students make their own experiences without following in my footsteps; I have to be careful not to impose anything.

My experience as a pedagogue helps me translate my own actor's experience into practical tasks for the students and find an

adequate way of communicating with each student. They are human, they are different.

My experience as an actress helps me recognise the difficulties and obstacles which hinder the student, but it can also make me impatient to suggest my solutions, as if I really had some or as if they were the only ones... My experience as a director helps me be patient, but also risks to influence the pedagogue with the director's artistic choices.

It happens quite often in our work that the pedagogical process includes an elaboration and presentation of a performance. However, this part of the work has nothing to do with my work as a pedagogue. It is an *auto-pedagogical* experience during which the students confront the questions of artistic creation and meet the audience. The principles for the actor's work encountered during the pedagogical process are obviously the basis for the work on a performance, but I cannot remain the pedagogue. The pedagogical performance does not exist. As a director I lead the work from my artistic choices that are not necessarily the same as my students'.

The pedagogical situation is similar, but not identical, to the actor's laboratory work of exploring the principles of the human creative act, without being concerned with the artistic aspect. I have chosen to direct my creativity towards artistic expression and that is why I am doing theatre. Whether this choice continues to be adequate for me is something I have to verify in my personal everyday dialogue with myself. To do theatre work in the way I am doing it is yet another choice. My choices are obviously constantly present in my work as a pedagogue, but they are not the main subjects. It is always up to the student to make his or her own choices. In this sense, my work as a pedagogue is dealing with questions related to human creativity, which is "without any speculation"

by definition.<sup>3</sup> That is why I have to have lost everything.

The pedagogical work establishes a very special relationship between human beings, similar to the relationship I am used to between director and actor. The total involvement and responsibility for keeping up the creative dialogue gives birth to our artistic creation and then starts again, or rather continues to start a next journey together. In a way it is a beautiful love-story. Almost the same happens with my students, but without a spectacular conclusion of our journey together and with the uncertainty of ever meeting again. It is not something I am in a position to decide and, also in this sense, any speculation is out of the question: this love-story knows perfectly which day it will come to its end. The separation is as inevitable as it is necessary; it is the very essence of this relationship.

Knowing this essence does not mean understanding it; being clear about something does not mean being automatically aware.

This very special emotional involvement and the contradictory feelings I have experienced as a pedagogue have inspired my work on *Sapho*, my last solo performance directed by Ingemar. My actor's work on this performance allowed me to understand more the nature of the implications of pedagogical work. In a presentation of the performance, I tried to express it with these words:

*... It is a story about the choice of inevitable and repeated abandonment.*

*It is a story about the choice of unlimited love...*

<sup>3</sup> ~~Institutet för Scenkonst~~ had been established. It is a definition used by Ingemar Lindh. You will find more detailed discussion regarding the distinction between creativity and art in the chapter *Transparent Man* in *Stepping Stones* and in the transcription of the conference *Creativity versus Life*, Porsgrunn 1997.

lished for two years in Storhøgen, in the north of Sweden, when I went to visit them for ten days. Ingemar found my University thesis about Jerzy Grotowski's work intelligent enough to invite me to meet his theatre-laboratory.

The very first day of my visit I asked him: "What do you want me to do?" And Ingemar kindly but firmly returned the question to me: "What do you want to do?" I felt slightly irritated but also too proud to insist. Being a Polish refugee in Sweden for four years, I felt quite experienced in finding a way of surviving in a foreign country. It should not be so difficult to manage that for ten days in this place where I had never been before and having no idea what its people were actually into, I did not realise until much later that I had received my first lesson. My ten-day project turned out to continue for another twenty-five years.

The notion of "surviving project" became a part of our terminology referring in particular to the actor's work in collective improvisation. It is about transforming what is generally considered as a handicap in theatre into a quality. If the unknown is no longer considered as something to eliminate but as something it is possible to relate to, the actor has no need to be protected against getting "lost" and thereby "losing" the performance. It becomes possible to act in an adequate way in any situation and to remain faithful to what is requested. This requires of course, a lot of preparation.

This experience from my actor's work became also my way of confronting pedagogical situations proposed to me by Ingemar. Sometimes these were situations of the most unbelievable kind, like when he left me on my own to lead work instead of him in Italy, a country I was visiting for the first time in my life, knowing more Latin than Italian.

With time, the principle of "the surviving project" in the improvised performance came

to be the basis also of my whole pedagogical work.

Before starting a seminar, Ingemar used to ask me how to start. In the beginning I had a slight suspicion that it was just a pedagogical "trick" to make his inexperienced assistant feel more at ease. But behind his question the anguish was real. I thought I recognised a feeling I had already experienced during that terrifying instant before a performance, and that I would later on also experience before a seminar. We always consulted each other in our group to keep up a continuous dialogue. For many years we had the important task of assisting each other during workshops. We called it "moral support" and it had the same importance as remaining awake beside the driver on tours. This was often my job, as I have no driving licence. I tried to answer Ingemar by suggesting some possible starting points. Even though he often accepted my propositions I had the growing sensation that it was not what he was really asking for.

With time I became an experienced pedagogue and I built up my own way of leading a seminar. My experience as an actress was of the utmost importance in my work with the students. I understood their problems and I could find the right way out. It was always an extremely exciting journey. I could see the parallels to our performance work more and more clearly: to do what has to be done, to pass on what has to be transmitted, yet navigating freely between a few reference points, from the take off to the landing point. It is like a performance, but much longer.

In 1989 I was invited as a director to the Magdalena Project session in Norway and also asked to present a work-demonstration as an actress. Opening the door of the actor's laboratory to an audience was, historically speaking, a strategy to clear up all kinds of misunderstandings and prejudices in relation

to the work of the actor. It was important to show the work and make known what it was about. Later on, the focus was more on a meeting between colleagues, often in public, to show each other one's own way of working. Finally work-demonstrations and their younger sisters "work-in-progress" have become an obvious part of the pro-gramme of festivals and seminars. The work-demonstration has become a new type of performance, worked on with the director or elaborated by the actors on their own. It has become an obvious part of an actor's luggage.

I had nothing of this kind, nothing elaborated or prepared. What I did on other occasions was to start to work on this or that, as requested by Ingemar, and then continue until I heard his "thank you". Before going to Norway, I asked Ingemar what I should do this time and he answered without any hesitation: "Do *The Logic of Passion*".

Well, that was completely another question. *The Logic of Passion* was a two-day seminar that we introduced in 1983 instead of a short workshop or a work-demonstration, which was much in demand at that time. The work was structured as a conversation with the participants concerning the actor's work. Ingemar led the dialogue with the audience-participants, formulating their questions into practical



Magdalena Pietruska in *Sapho*. Photo: Stefano Lanzardo

tasks that we worked upon to give an answer to the problem raised. The structure of *The Logic of Passion* always remained the same, even though we often had to reduce its duration to a few hours. It was teamwork. To do it by myself was another thing.

I was prepared for the hard work, but

not for the kind of feelings I experienced while I was working. I felt exposed, overly vulnerable, helpless, abandoned, unprotected. It was new and scaring to me. I was shocked by how released I felt when the question I got from the audience permitted me to take up one of the costumes and start to work as an actress. I felt at home.

The actor is always protected by the work itself. As an actress I am collecting an arsenal of perfect weapons to fight against my worst enemy - myself, my presumption, my vanity, my mediocrity. The pedagogue has no weapons, or rather, if they exist they are of another kind.

I had to take a more careful look at my work as a pedagogue.

Through my work as an actress, the most important experience for my work on myself as a pedagogue took place during the research work into a non-manifest act in relation to the essence, carried out while working on *Sapho*. *Sapho* was premiered in 1995.

I look at my students and hope in my heart that I have succeeded in what I have to do: to really lose everything. Otherwise how can I give them what is not mine but what was

given to me - time, the conquering of time. Our lifetime is short, yet it is unlimited. Time does not exist, it is said. So I have to try to give the big nothingness.

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