

Maria Pia Battaglia

Stories from Silence

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There will be a text!*

Since I no longer have a theatre group and things have happened in my life which have interrupted the exchange I had with other artists, school is the only place where I can realise my creative projects.

I teach gymnastics but, as the school building is collapsing and totally lacks suitable rooms for sport, it is not possible to carry out the scheduled programme. So, instead, I obtained permission to give theatre workshops and teach creative writing during my classes. The aim of these experiences is not necessarily to create a performance. Yet, sometimes, inevitably, wonderfully, a performance is born.

LOCRI, OCTOBER 1997

I enter the classroom and dozens of challenging and searching eyes scrutinise me. I pretend not to see these stares that undermine my self-confidence and, with my face buried in the class-register, I search for something to say that will not distance them too much from me. Usually, I stare straight back at them for a long time, in silence. Usually, I get their attention, at least at the beginning. Usually...

Yet, sometimes, I have no words to say, no words that are able to penetrate. Then I wait. I wait to understand how to cross the desert.

Usually I move my desk away, pushing it against the wall to eliminate the distance between us. I walk between the rows of desks, and I sit there among them. At first, my pupils exchange disconcerted, suspicious looks. Then, little by little, they understand my need to enter their universe and, after some months, they are the ones who move the table away, sit on it themselves and offer me their seats in exchange. The chairs are hard, uncomfortable and often rickety. I put my elbows on the green formica desk and contemplate the usual wretchedness: the door full of holes, ruined by some reckless individual, the tatty windows, the walls covered with light blue tiles.

This is my school, an ex-hospital. In the basement there

is a big space which could be turned into a rehearsal room, but nobody intends to clean it or even to walk into it: it is the old mortuary.

My pupils chat, while I look around for a solution. They chat about songs, films, unlikely travels. An ambulance goes by. Its siren cuts across their voices: silence. Some faces turn pale; some hands automatically search for the heart throbbing in the throat; some eyes turn to the window. I lean on the windowsill. I want to share the anxiety that will never be the same as the fear they experience. Somebody murmurs about people shot dead, about the nightly curfew. Some are afraid and some already know. Whose turn will it be this time? The neighbour, a distant cousin, a father, a brother...

I bring my gaze and my thoughts back to these hermetic faces, where fear and scorn have etched lines and expressions that recall ancestral pain and ancient resignation.

I had come into the classroom determined to propose the new theatre project, which should be performed for the convicts of Locri prison. I should have started the workshop that morning. It is a nice initiative; a pathetic attempt to reactivate minds and to detach them from the sticky necessity of habit and stagnation.

I speak about the project: some perplexity, some dissent, some enthusiasm. I propose a creative writing workshop that might lead to an outline script: protests. I ask for alternative propositions: silence. I suggest we abandon the idea: disillusion. I start losing my patience. The bell rings and they exit hurriedly, leaving me alone in a cold and squalid room, staring at the wall in front of me - the blue tiles of the former kitchen of the former hospital.

LOCRI, MARCH 1998

As I push the classroom door open, I regret my own impulsiveness. Why did I ever

decide to stage a performance for convicts? I imagined the inevitable difficulties. I acknowledged my pupils' reluctance and stubbornness... but I never learn. I said I would do it. And now, two months before the agreed date, I find myself fighting against a wall of ice with empty hands and an arid mind. All my attempts to build something believable, or even just acceptable, have failed.

From the prison, the convicts continue to send messages: "We look forward to seeing you..."; "Thank you for thinking about us"; "It will be a joy to see your performance..." The performance!

I come into the classroom simulating a determination I am far from feeling and declare that the project will be cancelled. At last I get their attention. I take advantage of the silence and bewilderment to invite everybody to take out paper and pen. "Today we will start a project that has been jointly thought up with your Italian teacher". No reaction, only disapproving whispers.

On every desk there is a blank sheet of paper; expectant faces while I grope about in the dark. What now? I feign concentration while I frantically wonder what I can offer, what I can give to them which will, in some way, touch their souls. Mysteriously and unexpectedly, I succeed in involving them. I will them to write something that comes from their interior world. I examine their faces. I stand demanding before every one of them. I wait. I receive only uncertain monosyllables, pale answers that I want to fix on the page, eager for things to look after. Somebody refuses to participate in this "buffoonery". I do not give up. I insist. They turn their backs on me and look over the lesson that follows.

The bell rings. I collect the papers handed in, not very many, to tell the truth. I say goodbye coldly and go out, hiding the sense of triumph that pervades me. I barri-

cade myself in an empty classroom and anxiously go through the texts. There are only a few sentences but they are sentences that reflect their painful thoughts, their imploded desires, their unheard voices. It is not much, but it is a start. There will be a text. It exists already. It is hidden among the unspoken words, among the blank spaces. I just have to explore the void. I have to give a form to that screaming emptiness.

LOCRI PRISON, MAY 1998

My boys and girls are all there: jeans, black T-shirts, excitement. In front of them are the convicts of the special section and the policemen; bare walls; a halogen lamp found in the captain's office; a domestic cassette-player; Pink Floyd's music *The Wall*; and the words! Clear, sharp words begotten by hearts that chose to explode and vomit pain, rage and frustration.

We achieved the workshop on creative writing eventually. We created the script. The stage design is made from what we have used in rehearsal, what we had from the beginning: chairs and desks. But the desks have been transformed, moulded by these torrents of words, like tears and hope.

The convicts visualise images of horses racing free, of boats rocked by insidious seas, of trains that take you far away and back again if you want; running away and returning.

The performance ends with Cosimo's monologue. He climbs up on the desk which is his stage and says:

I would like to be an actor. If I were an actor, I could cry out my truth. Acting a monologue I could say for example: "I want to go far away from this country, away from this disgusting land where you breathe injustice, where fear reigns, where you never really know whether your life belongs to you or not..."

If I were an actor, I could cry out my truth. But I am just a boy. A boy like many others. And I must content myself with smiling and bowing my head, even when rage explodes inside my heart. The rage...

And the convicts applauded.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

MARIA PIA BATTAGLIA (Italy) lives in Calabria, in the south of Italy. She is a gymnastics teacher and a playwright. Some of her plays are written in dialect and some of them are for children. For many years she directed a theatre company that produced and performed her plays in Calabrian dialect. Now she is giving theatre workshops for children and school teachers.



Students, convicts and staff at Locri Prison after the performance, May 1998.