

OPEN LETTERS

Bristol, September 29th 1999

Dear Geddy,

Autumn finds me in my mud-covered overalls (they call them dungarees in the UK) doing what is probably best described in farming terms. I am reaping a kind of harvest from my past few projects, reviewing, documenting and finding the seedlings that require tender care for future works. I am not surprised to find myself heading indoors for the winter. I feel I have learned much of what I set out to discover on the street (for now, always just for the moment!) and want to go indoors now to nurture ideas that are more layered or subtle than the street can accommodate. I have begun collaborations with a few colleagues here in Bristol. Small steps for now. I have many curiosities and questions for myself as a director and writer.

So I am one of the young ones! Clearly you haven't seen my grey hairs up close. My youthful exuberance fooled you! And yet, yes, you are right, despite at least twelve years making my way in the performing arts, I still often feel like a beginner. Is it a matter of age or gender that I don't often feel that my experience is valid, holds weight? Perhaps it is a kind of creative hunger and spiritual restlessness that doesn't let me sit still long enough to notice what I have done. It helps having to account for it, to document it.

I'll sign off now, with so much more to write, as I have a date with my husband; part of an ongoing attempt to nourish home life and work life in ways that keep them mutually sustaining. Any advice from the older and wiser women?

Lots of love,

Amy

(Amy Rose, USA/Britain)

Ecuador, November 8th 1999

Dear Julia,

A child is growing in my belly. The heartbeat of life with its deep and inexplicable awe touches me in some unknown way. A forgotten happiness movingly takes hold of my feet keeping me tied to the ground; the tired voices of the wind envelop me in the sound of my origins.

My body (bred from a woman bred from a woman, born from a woman born from a woman and another and another, all the way back to the dark night of remote times) curves like a fresh pot of clay while it continues to dance on stage, the only place where it recognises itself as whole. My body is accompanied for the first time.

The ancestral fragrances are restored and with them the forbidden tastes of salt and lemon are released. The textile doll that lay dazed in the trunk of a papaya tree stirs its millenary tangle of buckles and coloured ribbons and ignites its furiously black and Spanish Caribbean blood.

"And where is your granny?" - In my country the blacks playfully ask this to the light half-breed, so washed out they could be taken for whites. The question is meant as a warning for those who repudiate their race.

"And where is your granny?" we should ask ourselves, all of us who risk losing even the colour of our skin from so much wandering on time's paths.

*At the beginning of my theatre adventure I used a copy of Eugenio Barba's *The Floating Islands* was practically a lifesaving platform more than it was a subject of study. The anecdotes of will and perseverance of actors from the '60s in Europe were for us, the young generation of theatre practitioners of the '90s in Cuba, an example to follow. Will and perseverance were the only possibilities to endure the critical years of the so-called "special period", with the heightening of the North American obstruction of Cuba and the dissolution of the world's socialist system. Acute economic deficiency penalised the island. Creativity and inventiveness were the only means to face the ridiculous lack of absolutely everything during those years of hardship.*

The group was the only recognisable territory for my companions of Teatro a Cuestas and I. Faithful to the paradigm, we held on to the craft's daily discipline, training and practical research. Little by little we trod along a path and thanks to all our footsteps this path inevitably became our own.

In 1996 when unchangeable personal circumstances distanced me from Teatro a Cuestas I thought I was irreversibly falling into a black hole, immobilised by a feeling of being uprooted, of losing the base, of abandoning my only possible destiny. After nearly eight years of living, creating and dreaming in a group, the absence of my companions and of the space we literally built with our hands in Cienfuegos, Cuba, was similar to death. But death, it is known, is painful and

necessary.

I started to discover that my point of reference was not the terrible day when I trod on a stage for the first time, nor the first improvisation on the burning floor of the house of Justa Caravaca. It was more remote than the group, discipline and techniques. It was the memory of a nine year old girl, round and coloured like a tropical fruit, swooning before the last kiss of the old films with Libertad Lamarque and Carlos Gardel, María Félix and Jorge Negrete, a delirious little girl who mutters the ancient sentence "I-want-to-be-an-actress".

At thirty-five I am without doubt a woman of theatre and a legion of ghosts accompanies me - all the characters I have played. During the last two years of this century, travelling together with other actors, I have witnessed South America as a continent that, despite being dismembered in its poverty, full of corruption and violence, is populated by feasts and colours that must be remembered. With Ensamblaje Teatro and the research project America 2000, I have gone through our villages and the heritage of our grandparents has opened my eyes wide. Therefore I carry a secret and my duty is to share it.

We - women belonging to modern times, actresses who engage in a profession that discovers the dynamics of life to represent it - have a responsibility. Nothing is to be discovered, the path goes backwards to find again the struggles and sighs of those who preceded us. The most fascinating seduction will come the day we definitively decide to weave our new clothes with our grandmothers' needles.

My child must be born under the almond tree of the yard, surrounded by the sound of palms and the sinsonte birds. Therefore I am going back to Cuba and my next letter will come from there.

A big hug,

Merida

(Merida Urquía, Cuba)