

Gabriela Bianco

Coming Home

ISATUSTRA OR A SCENIC POETICS OF SIGN LANGUAGE

"What is the text of the play? I would like to read it before writing about the performance."

"I would prefer you to write about what you see. The spectator hardly listens to a word until the end."

"Yes, but I need to know what you say, in order to complete my idea of the play."

"The performance is what you see. The text has been a sort of loaded gun, an excuse to attack the stage."

"Yes, but you use a language that only deaf people know."

"I do not use sign language as a vehicle for words - although that is what it is - but as a visual form, a self-sufficient theatre language. It also seems strange to deaf people."

The dialogue continued for some minutes. Actress and critic were not able to reach an agreement. Finally the actress - me - agreed to send the texts that, if read only, seem tacked together in a capricious way.

Some time later, when reading the article published by the critic, two questions came up: do Isadora, Whitman, Nietzsche and Euripides exist beyond the language they made use of in order to be known? Is it possible to use a codified system and make it equally meaningful without relying on it being known by a part of the audience?

When I see certain kinds of traditional Asian theatre, I don't understand the story in rational terms, but I am drawn into another space. I feel involved, taken by images, memories and emotions that seem to come from an unconscious time.

Perhaps there is an Isadora in each spectator; an Isadora dancing behind the veils of understanding.

ISADORA DUNCAN

Like many other women, I have been strongly impressed by the biography of Isadora Duncan. During the winter of 1998, while I was taking part in a performance inspired by Aeschylus's *Orestes*, I started reading all the material written about her.

*Sign language is the home
of my childhood;
dumb words of syllables,
built in motion.*

*Language is action. To speak
in sign language
is a "physical action"
in space. To name is to give
visual existence. Words are
things and things are
words.*



Gabriela Bianco Photo: Filiberto Mugnani

In the middle of my personal romance with the Greeks, Isadora became a mirror of my own restlessness. I used to act every night with the image of being her, when dancing Cassandra's dance or mingling with the voices of the premonitory Greek chorus. Without being aware of it, Isadora was inhabiting my body. What could I do? Her favourite readings mostly coincided with mine: Nietzsche, Whitman, philosophical texts, the Greek tragedians... Driven by dreams and needs, I was launched out to recognise myself in this labyrinth of mirrors. What is this that I do not yet know but already lives in me? What events in her life awaken my images? Is it possible to create a new language at the end of the 20th century, when everything seems to have been created already? What do Isadora's dead children mean to me, since I am not a mother yet?

First image: two little coffins and a woman imploring her children to come out of there; dancing for dead people; the imme-

diated awareness of not being heard. To speak to those who cannot hear? Yes, but being looked at? How can one be looked at from inside two closed boxes? Do things that cannot be seen exist?

My parents are deaf and in order to listen they have to look at me. They speak with their hands, they listen with their eyes. I speak like them and also like others, because I can hear. I have two passports, both of which say: foreigner.

LANGUAGE IS HOME

On an island people do not have an image for that which is outside and the category of foreigner is not defined. They think of home according to language. People belong to the language that everybody spoke when they were born, but nobody knows when they will return. In this way, something arrives in the world that everyone knows from childhood and where nobody has been yet: the home country.

Ricardo Piglia, *The Absent Town*

Sign language is the home of my childhood; dumb words of syllables, built in motion. Language is action. To speak in sign language is a "physical action" in space. To name is to give visual existence. Words are things and things are words. The word "soul" occupies a lot of space because it has a double movement: the hands go up from the heart, they turn and continue to go upwards. I don't know how the soul is embodied, but my eyes see it.

*Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?
And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?
And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?*

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

In the home of my childhood words move in silence, but they are not silence. In a continuous dance of hands, arms, breasts, eyes, cheeks, sign language conveys emotions, ideas, stories, creations and disagreements as all languages do. It has no writing other than the one it imprints in space. In this sense, it belongs to the world of "oral traditions". Or gesture? It is not pantomime. It can make of an empty space a world full of multiple meanings, especially for those who don't understand the language, but who have the courage to perceive with their whole body. So I wanted to return to my home country, bringing the objects I had found during my absence. Go back... if only for a while.

I wanted to sing a song that the audience would have to look at, in order to hear it.

THE WAY OF ISATUSTRÁ

Sailing across two cultures - that of my parents and that of others - the scenery is the dry land that I indistinctly see from my island.

One day, with just two or three paragraphs taken from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I shut myself up in a room to work. I only had a few lines, the insistent image of the dead children and of Isadora trying to wake them up.

In my training, I often use songs that I translate into Argentine sign language. I take the lyrics and the melody as a unity and I try to turn the song into a visual story that frequently becomes a dance. I improvise and rarely fix the movements, until the story I want to tell appears. Frequently I do not know what will happen, so it is usually a task of discovery. I try to find the "hidden song".

For those who can hear, what is shown widens, hides, denies, confuses or reaffirms the song they are listening to.

That day I started in the same way. I took the paragraph and translated it,

changing speed, size, the position in space, the kind of movement. Using different melodies I built a little sequence.

To work with the "dancing" translation of the songs is amusing. I started doing this because I was not satisfied by the versions I saw on television. When looking at deaf people speaking, one can clearly see that it is not just their hands that are moving, but that they use a complex motion which involves the whole body; and it is precisely this that converts sign language into an appropriate material for the stage. I asked myself why sign language should only allow the hands to work? This is not sign language, but a country's language (grammar), accompanied by a manual code. Besides, a song is not attractive if we focus only on its syntax. What difference would there be between translating an interview, the news and a song? In principle, the presence of music; also I prefer not to forget the artistic vision that moves those who compose songs. While I was selecting more material, guided above all by my reading about Isadora, I thought about the story I wanted to tell: that of Isadora? My own? I am not attracted by chronological events narrated in a linear manner; definitively not.

During a trip on a bus (a *colectivo*, as we call it in Argentina), the idea of the performance occurred to me. I said to myself: it doesn't matter if it is about me or Isadora. Here things happen: there is a woman who wants to remember; there is a father who does not arrive; some Wise Men who never existed; the presence of Greek gods like dancing spirits; the desire for a joyful life and the shadow of death that sooner or later occupies our space. Who are we talking about? Isadora? Me? "From the first moment I did nothing but dance my life," writes Isadora. I wonder whether dancing someone else's life is not just a way of reaching deep within my own being.

I take some pictures of her. I imitate certain positions that inevitably lead me to certain ways of being and physical actions. Sometimes I consciously try to reproduce them, other times a logic, arising from images appearing in my sleep, takes possession of me. Dreams are a stimulating source.

At each rehearsal, I add some more text. Always in the same way: I translate it and I put it into contact with music, with preconceived images or with spontaneous associations. Nearly always I modify the text. A gesture put in another place, at a different speed or with a change in its original movement (a linear movement changed into a curved one), gives rise to a different relationship with the text and the space. A new dimension and dramaturgy is created first by linking the narrative literature to visual and three-dimensional gestures through translation, and then by putting this translation in relation to new meanings that arise from de-naturalising language, from differentiating it from daily sign language and creating a sign dance.

Then Isatustra appears; the woman who turns written words into physical ideograms; who appears after the journey home; who has the courage to present the foreign dance in her parents' country and who, while returning, sings her first song:

At last I can begin a song
The song of the whole body
No more, no more fear

I can tell you about a thousand forms
I am light, now I can fly
I can make you listen
to my cry with your eyes
The night is dark
Sing your song
The night is long
Dance, now, dance
Nobody knows when it will be dawn
I learned to walk
And then to fly
Now nobody pushes me
A god dances in me
I can make you listen
To my cry with your eyes
Sing, do not wait, dance
And nobody knows when
it will be dawn.

As an overcoat I wear my new country, but I
do not know all its routes.

Translated from Spanish by Maria Ficara

GABRIELA BIANCO (Argentina) was born in 1969. She is an actress and teacher, and she works for the Argentine Sign Language Association giving classes at the University of Buenos Aires and in different schools. She works with deaf children in a theatre workshop producing performances using sign language. Having started a project for the research and development of a scenic sign language, Gabriela has worked on her solo production *Isatustra - Así hablaba Isadora*, with original music by Leo Caruso, assistant Felicitas Luna and supervision by Geddy Aniksdal.