

Julia Varley

Ants in a Carpet of Clouds

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ANTS

An ant is rushing over my piece of white paper. At times it meets the tip of my pen, then it disappears. Every stem of grass under the blank page is different. The ant does not follow the shape of the words I write, but another course of its own, apparently just as chaotic and irregular.

Does theatre have to have text? Sound is so important to me, and often words are sound without meaning, but with a sense to explore. Then text becomes music.

The wind flips the paper, my eyes go along the lines and my mind is somewhere else. I must start again.

Calligraphy is an art. I envy a tradition that has freed itself of the duality of form and content, a trap so easy to fall into when dealing with text. I could say that women are more at ease with the implicit secret meaning, the information related as a consequence or internal logic to the form, while men are more at ease with all the concepts and stories to which they give shape. Both are obliged to work with the restrictions of making their intentions readable for a spectator. In theatre, text can be both action and concept, abstract and concrete, but communication depends mostly on how the text is said, presented, interpreted, and only partly on the actual meaning of the words. Perhaps this explains why singing has always been so important during the meetings of the Magdalena Project. The force of what is personal, vulnerable and inexplicable takes form in a song.

Now the ant is on my fingers going where I hold my pen. I am left-handed. When I was small I wrote back to front. "Like Leonardo!" said my mother proudly so it should never be a problem. The ant is climbing up and down the grass stems beside the paper, and the paper is full of words. Is it a text? Do I mean the ant on the grass or the words on the paper?

How quickly ants' legs move and how thin they are. The words on paper do not follow the scent of food, home or partners. What direction do they follow? Does a text smell? A yellow flower towers over the grass. A fly buzzes close to my ear, the sun is shining and the wind continues to create confu-

sion amongst my papers. "How I hate family bickering!" - my mind is wandering again: nothing to do with the theme, the task and the structure. I have a title and some lines: is it enough? No. What am I trying to learn, discover and say with these words? Why am I creating a text?

At three years old I moved from London to Milan and once there I was sent to a French nursery. To choose between pasta and rice at lunch-time I had to point at one of the plates. Body language was the only medium I could communicate with. Something similar happened to me when at twenty-two I moved from Milan to Holstebro, in Denmark. It took time to learn Danish, but even more to learn the professional language of a theatre group. Tired of school, in my teens I sold potato chips and studied German, while now I live on tour and the continent I like most is Latin America, in between Spanish and Portuguese. Always curious about what goes on behind and inside, theatre historians ask me today: "In what language do you think?" Although they don't believe me, I answer that I think in images, with no language involved.

I have always distrusted words. This is probably one of the main reasons why I ended up making theatre, where I could communicate with actions and where the text is mostly decided upon before it is spoken.

Since I started collaborating with the Magdalena Project and with women who share my professional interests, I have had the need to invent new words, or better, to give existing words new meanings, in order to talk about our experience and knowledge. It started with the "round", a form of discussion with no direct reply to opinions, no rights or wrongs, but statements with no logical link that all together resulted in a picture and synthesis. Then came the "marathon", a way of developing the training sessions so that the work eventually decided the meaning rather than the person leading it. To

find out if women directed differently, I tried using the word "conducting", like the electricity that passes energy from one element to the other. Today it is the word "master" with which I am dissatisfied. Masters are generally imagined as old men with long white beards and many women do not like to be recognised in that role. By refusing the name, we deny the authority at the same time as the power, and we withdraw from openly accepting the responsibility given to us by those who have chosen us, in order not to be judged as omniscient gods.

Words can be flat, determined and exclusive and so produce fixed ideologies and unproductive misunderstandings. Some feminists irritate me because they seem to love the power given to them by their opinions, more than they like women. I started writing, editing and giving lectures as a reaction, wanting to defend my own work and that of other women. I needed to create a space for the points of view of those who do not have cultural and historical power, of those practitioners who don't know the terms and have to invent them, of those who move freely and creatively in performance text and don't always endorse the concepts and abstractions with which it is described.

For example, since the great Orissi dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi died, I have felt it my obligation to stand up for her and defend her intelligence and her decision to bend down to kiss the feet of her Indian and European gurus. These choices are all too often excused as the naïvety of a great artist or attacked as submission to external obligations. I have trained my patience in my insistence on believing in another kind of intelligence while confronted with the self-certainty of those who are used to thinking in theories. But over the years I have also been gratified. The laughter I share with my colleagues of *The Open Page* repays me for all proof reading, and seeing articles in print giving voice to experiences that otherwise would remain silently buried, compensates for much of the sweat and anguish. But to feel that I have

really accomplished something in this direction, I need to invent more new words or learn to place the old ones in more contradictory contexts. The texts need to be woven into a more complex design.

CARPETS

I never thought of myself as a playwright, until one day somebody asked permission to stage *Doña Musica's Butterflies*. I did not believe that my written words from the performance could be separated from my actions and the presence of my *Doña Musica* on stage. Although I write easily, I never thought it possible for me to compose a play, imagine a dialogue and think of characters as abstract beings in the framework of a story I had made up. But I suppose I have done it: officially twice, for my two solo productions, and unofficially each time I have directed.

At six, I learned from my mother that thank-you letters were interesting if I wrote something about myself and at ten my school-teacher taught me that short sentences could be poetic. The rules and principles of creating a text have subsequently proposed themselves slowly as a result of confronting the problems in practice.

I don't know what I should be telling you about, what some of you want to hear. I am but a woman, you really want to know my secrets? Here they are, what no one knows? She always used to say to me: don't speak too much, act! It all started...

In 1987 I was preparing a work demonstration and I decided to start on stilts hidden within the character of Mr Peanut, a man with a very large head. It was difficult for me to speak directly into the mask, so I recorded the introduction and put a microphone to Mr Peanut's mouth, as if he were speaking. To make the recording I wrote down the words first and then read them out. That was the first step. The rest was a montage of existing scenic material that already existed, but each time Mr Peanut spoke

to create a connection between the scenes I had to invent his text. It was easy because the logic was clear: I was explaining my work process. Of course the words of an actor presenting her work put in the mouth of Death acquired a very different significance. I quickly found out that a text changes meaning depending on the context.

Doña Musica, the fleeting character with long white hair and high heels, having written the novel to tell the story of her life, then forced me to fix it in a performance and in a theatrical text from beginning to end, which others call a play. She sat in an armchair and told tales of physics and butterflies: the logic of storytelling was a good guide. The work consisted mostly of getting rid of all the unnecessary words.

Jeanne d'Arc of *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus* was the first character with whom I discovered the pleasure of making up a scenario transforming reading into scenes and creating a world around my role. *Daedalus of Mythos* has taken this process to the extreme, since I decided from the beginning that I would not represent a character with a text, but the whole context historically and mythically connected to him and the labyrinth.

My characters have taught me to put words and sentences together: they have been my masters, and this is one reason why it is so difficult for me to separate the text from their actions. Another reason is that the living relationship with the spectator gives a freedom of structure to the text that would be difficult to follow in writing. In theatre, digressions and jumps are possible that would seem absurd or incomprehensible on paper. A change of tonality, direction or volume of the voice, a change of focus, bearing and eye contact, a change of expression or of muscular tone in the face and body, a change of costume, lighting, props... - all this allows me to pass from one logic to another, to break the coherence of time and space, and to reveal contradictory and simultaneous meanings while presenting a text.

On paper other words would be necessary to explain. In theatre, words can follow the inexplicable path of ants, helped by the fascinating power of attention that actions have. On paper words remain still and dead until a reader gives them life.

I am not a good reader of poetry and plays, and text generally does not take on a central role for me. No words stay with me forever as they do for others and only rarely is a text the creative starting point that I have chosen myself. Images accompany me instead. As a spectator, I concentrate on the vocal inflections, scenes and actors, and I listen to what the words are saying only at the end. Even Shakespeare I managed to approach only after hearing the music of the verse presented by the actors of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and I started to appreciate his poetry only after having learnt some of his texts by heart and having repeated them endlessly together with a physical score. Taking pleasure from the words and their meaning is something that comes only when I start wondering how to make pauses, how to invent empty spaces between the sentences.

Although I also prepare for a new production with a lot of reading and study, my training has been to immediately transform text, words, letters and vocals into action, behaviour, music and harmonics, and to return to the meaning of the words at the end of a process. It is an actor's way of thinking that helps me read and interpret. Both in so called text based theatre and so called physical theatre my need is for actors who deliver the text with their whole body, for personal, vibrating voices and for a narrative level that brings out the story by creating connections and oppositions in a context.

I enjoy working with the apparent contra-

dictions an abstract text can contain in the complexity of the theatrical form, while I am rarely able to see its depth beforehand. I have found that the journeys I undertake to move away from the immediate meaning of the words while concentrating on other details eventually allow me to discover the text's density. Instead of just interpreting what I thought I knew from the beginning, I return to the text with a deeper understanding that can also be surprising. Just as surprising as the direction the ant follows while carrying an enormously heavy piece of leaf towards a black hole in the grass.

TEXT

The ant, now again on my pen, is following a trail I am not able to decipher, as if composing a secret alphabet, or preparing a labyrinth. It seduces and fascinates me.

Incomprehensible characters and writing contain a form of communication that is closer



to painting and music, to the images and sounds so important to me in theatre. I still feel closer to the poetical, musical and associative level of words which speaks to the heart and cells, although directing and writing are teaching me to approach their descriptive, hypothetical and ideal level. If text can be informative and poetic, conceptual and real, and have a narrative as well as an aesthetic function, it can give a challenging freedom of movement to us women as we learn to jump more easily from one perspective to the other. Like a song with its lyrics and melodies, I would like my words to be consistent in their form and in their representation. Like

poetry with rhythm and rhyme, I would like my texts to create concrete and mysterious images.

In Italian text is *testo* and head is *testa*, which reminds me of how closely related text is to the conscious thought. I would like to create a body-text, rather than a head-text, even on paper. I would like to invent this new still incomprehensible alphabet that expresses the different experience of being a woman in a language of our own, rather than learning to write as well as a man of the past can teach me.

If writing helps me fix my thoughts, theatre allows me to be, to open and question my thoughts. In a performance I can be information and experience, with no separation. If on paper text needs a structure, on stage it needs a reason to exist. I must know if the text is directed to a friend, an enemy, one spectator or many. I must know how to weave, learn, forget, invent, read, write, say, sing, play, interpret, quote, compose, place, cut, look at, listen to, shape, love, hate, remember, eat, digest, vomit, dream, tickle and analyse a text. I must discover the verb. Then perhaps my text will be a sound, a whisper, a story, a secret and it will be able to build a memory.

CLOUDS

Last night the moon was nearly full and when it freed itself from the clouds moving fast across the sky, it shone on the rough sea between the rocks. The sky was a Magritte painting. The light suddenly came on and nature was imitating art. The night before, the sky outlined by the Mediterranean umbrella pines had the shape and colours of a Japanese print. Only the ideograms were missing to join the moon with the waves.

Words are signs and symbols to be filled with a secret sense, forms that oblige me to give information and allow me to convey a practice and leave traces behind. I believe in history, in the experience that is passed along the generations, in life that remains in the actions and body memory of those who follow, in existence

that becomes future behaviour and implicit knowledge. My way of being is the result of many women who have lived before me and my life will continue in the life of those who come after me; I am sure of this. My actions are the most important legacy. But - although nowadays paper and grass no longer seem to be necessary - written documents still give more weight, visibility and importance to our existence for the future generations. Women have been silent and silenced. In theatre their knowledge has been transmitted in hushed tranquillity, in angry repressed stillness or with an awareness that true values could not be communicated in words. Our texts should now bring the invisible strength of women to the surface, while keeping our own particular force and way of being, also allowing silence to be active, powerful, present and recognised. Our body-texts should serve to build our own memory and history.

Our words could be like ants running to discover a path that only we understand and our texts like clouds left in a blue sky to tell something only unknown women of the future will be able to read. Meanwhile we need to write, read, speak and sing more to be remembered and considered in the everyday world.

JULIA VARLEY (Britain/Denmark) is an actor and pedagogue at Odin Teatret. She has published various articles and *Wind in the West*, the novel of a character. She has been an active member of the Magdalena Project from its beginning. The latest production she has directed is *Semillas de memoria*, with Ana Woolf, about the disappeared people in Argentina.