

Lena Ekhem

Wrestling with Words

My meeting with that which is often imprecisely called physical theatre was a discovery. I suddenly found myself in a space that contained the same silence and concentration I had earlier only known to exist in spiritual environments. But now the space was filled with bodies, sweat and movement, and I felt free. Words could fly and go where they wanted, like birds constantly finding new directions, but still always returning to me. Words were something I could tear to pieces, wrestle with and use to open new spaces up.

I grew up in Sweden, a Protestant country where words are given a great importance. Even though contemporary Sweden is secularised to a high degree, our Protestant heritage is strong; our belief in the word, and the ballast word has, is still deeply rooted in our culture, and in me. I heard someone talk about the Swedish as a people with "ritual insensibility". This sounds harsh, but at the same time it is an opinion which contains a great deal of truth. Ritual acts and the expression of the sublime are shoved into a corner. All the space is taken up by words that explain, words that carry a clear message, words that are psychologically motivated.

My grandfather belonged to a free religious group that was - and is - called Faithful Friends of the Bible. As I grew up I attended their meetings. During the summer they would gather in a tent. It smelled of grass and we sat closely together on long narrow benches while a man, a preacher, often with a hunched back and intense looking eyes, spoke at great length, perhaps up to forty-five minutes or an hour. In between we sang. The songs had at least twelve verses and were introduced monotonously and slowly. It was boring, nothing of that which was being said caught my attention, but at the same time there were many peculiar characters, strange relationships and other things to look at.

It is not the words, the texts, the songs that I remember, but the feeling of sitting close together. There was a form, an order to follow, and if one stuck to that, one was free to fly while the words kept grinding on. Even if the most

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important thing was to be faithful and true to the written word, it was as if words were a kind of "cover up", something similar to the radio playing in the kitchen whilst we are fully concentrating and engaged in doing something else. As a young, rebellious teenager, I just did not get it. The words kept grinding on relentlessly; they were so important and yet so dead. Theatre became my way of making revolution.

But sitting closely together on narrow benches, whilst looking at someone with intense eyes speaking, at the same time as there are many other things to observe and think about, is something I have continued to do, in tents and in other kinds of spaces. The context now is theatre, most often physical theatre, group theatre, third theatre, and the performances usually last one hour.

Scenic images, moods and fragments of texts that evoked a kind of recognition in me and gave me the desire to create a whole, guided me towards a director's role. In this work I found again the feeling of freedom in expressing something that cannot be explained, that which at first does not seem to have an obvious message, and cannot be psychologically motivated, although it rings and resonates in my whole being.

In the most recent performances I have directed, I wanted to challenge these problems, whilst at the same time continuing the flow of Teater Dagaz's work with mythological material and its contemporary meanings. I decided on two texts as a starting point: the Creation Story from the Bible - the loaded moment of biting the apple - and a newly written novel. I asked a writer friend to select from her own stories one she could in some way relate to the Creation Story. Subsequently our work consisted in searching for connections. It was an exciting, but also exhausting and challenging task, especially when we came to the "kneading", to use a term I have

adopted recently. The kneading of the dough could be a possible metaphor for how the performance's different ingredients arrive at a unity in which one element cannot be separated from the other.

At that point in the process, I notice how easily the words and the text take almost all of my attention. It is as if the words are shouting that they are the most important ingredients, and like a thin membrane they place themselves over my freedom, so I have to knead not only the performance, but myself as well, before I dare to let go.

Even if theatre is my "free" space, I see how I get stuck in the net of the text, in fear of not being true to the words. I see that this insecurity is mine, but it also derives from my culture. What holds me back? My Protestant heritage? A deep belief that word or text is the carrier of the most essential values? A culture that places more emphasis on the explanation of a revelation, than on the revelation itself? I have no answers, but I know my wrestling match with words will continue.

Translated from Swedish by Geddy Aniksdal

LENA EKHEM (Sweden) was born in 1958. After studying Drama and the History of Religion at Lund University and working as assistant director and actor in different theatre companies, since 1991 she has been director and artistic leader of Teater Dagaz. With other theatre practitioners she has started the International Theatre Network Natasha Project, that organises workshops and festivals in different European countries.