

Cristina Wistari

Foreign Landscapes

*This land of wisdom,
full of contradictions and
beauty, marks my way to
thinking deeply, influencing
any further decisions.
Here I discover the notion
of the Sacred.
I feel I am where I have to be.
Though I cannot find answers
to all my questions,
my body and soul are one,
undivided.*

Why travel?
Why dream?
Why dance?
Is it fascination?
A fantasy?

Is travel a necessity, a disease that affects our way of thinking, our perceptions?
Is dancing a fixation of the mind, an obsession which alters our actions? An addiction of the senses?

If I exist, but don't live, does it matter?
Is the need to live fully, deeply, desperately, a holy path?
Is taking refuge in Dance like taking refuge in the Buddha?
Journeying is stillness in movement.
Dance is stillness in movement.
The two are one.

As a child I used to fill up the walking distance between my house and the school with boundless daydreaming. At the stationery shop I would wait endlessly to buy a pencil or a piece of paper. The people shopping in front of me became the object of my fantasy. What I saw unravelling before my eyes was transformed into a fantastical movie. Was it all just a way of escaping the usual drama that was performed daily at home? Reading was also a way of taking off from the surrounding reality and plunging myself into an unassailable separate world. Flying afar with my imagination. Riding the clouds.

Does a child's inclination hold for a lifespan?
Is our inner nature one and the same until we die?
Is there hope for Transformation?
For Resurrection?
Do we want to transform?
To be resurrected?

At the age of twelve I started to be aware of the separation between myself and others. Under a glass bell I would see the others fading in the distance, getting smaller and smaller. I never truly grasped what makes the difference between dream-experience and daily-reality. Where is the borderline? When I visit a place again, either in reality or in a dream, I have the same inexplicable sensations while my eyes try to catch impressions and I try to remember when and how I have been there before. Is dreaming an escape from alienation, from madness?

Travelling and not moving.
 Travelling through space.
 Travelling through time.
 Experiencing with no defined boundaries.

When I travel I feel more at ease than when I stay in one place. Travelling gives me a sensation of total freedom. I become an anonymous visitor who is not confined in an unyielding image only partially related to myself. Is who I am the result of my experiences uncontaminated by my parents' desires, my friends' expectations and the general opinions that I have generated? Or is the identity that I have decided to wear built up by layers of labels, skilfully put

together by my ego's desires? Travelling shatters unwanted labels, and exposes us to the risk of unforeseen discovering. Deep diving in dangerous waters.

Is the need to travel far away from home an escape?
 Is the choice to live in a different country than the one where you were born, a need to cut away from the past?
 Can we separate from our memories?
 From our childhood?
 Our parents?
 Our lovers?
 From all the experiences which have enraptured or torn us to pieces?

My first trip abroad was at the age of seventeen. At that time going overland to Istanbul seemed exotic and far. Journeying was fulfilling an imperious inner desire. I would travel whenever possible in the following years. A new dimension which cut through unwanted landmarks was taking shape.

In Milan, my former hometown, I was restless in my night wanderings, exploring the forbidden, uneasy aspects of a city full of contradictions. Defeating my mother's reproaches every night, to satiate a rebel spirit in its search for discovery. Transgressing the



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Cristina Wistari dancing Topeng

conventional.

Do we ever have the freedom of choice?
The power to make decisions?
To point the compass?
Or do we unconsciously follow what is
already inscribed in the Universe?
The decree of an angry god?

Life unfolds following complex patterns. I
found myself leading an existence to which I
did not feel I belonged. An existence which
did not correspond with my ideals. Entangled
in a reality which was not mine. Pretending I
existed, while doing what I did not choose to
do. Caught in the spider's web.

The rebel is caged, cheated.
The dreamer is confined, dismayed.
Racked by the need to meet
the extraordinary.

The city is too narrow, colourless.
The political scene confused.
The end of the seventies.
All the fighting for a better world,
an honest society.
Equality.
Belong to the past.
All the ideals smashed.
Dispersion.
Disillusion.
The extreme left is agonising.
A journey to the East seems to be the way out.

My nomadic spirit is dazzled by erratic
wanderings, leaving everything behind. On
the road, sleeping outdoors under the stars,
fulfilled and happy. Content just to look at
the rising moon. Nothing counts anymore;
the infinite is above me. At last free,
appeased. Living day by day whatever comes.
In a small bag all my belongings, my colours,
my dreams.

Encountering unachievable reveries.

Going through foreign landscapes.
Crossing the borders of Time and Space.
Expanding the senses.
Riding my hidden fantasy.
Seeing myself in the act
of transforming who I am.
But who am I?
Who is the woman searching for Truth?
Is the journey just an abstraction?
A surreal illusion?
An hallucination?

From place to place, searching, trying to
unveil secret truths. The journey to the East
becomes the inner journey. Aiming at the
core of myself. In my roaming, I question the
reason for existence. Is existing a compulsory
act, an obligation to be fulfilled? A task to
be achieved?

It is India which triggers all the ques-
tions. This land of wisdom, full of contradic-
tions and beauty, marks my way to thinking
deeply, influencing any further decisions.
Here I discover the notion of the Sacred. I
feel I am where I have to be. Though I
cannot find answers to all my questions, my
body and soul are one, undivided.

Art is the solution to all my doubts. The
gateway to unfulfilled desires. To all the
riddles piercing my mind. The form yet
unclear, indistinct, dusky.

I follow faithfully the unfolding path and
then unexpectedly the revelation takes
place. The unveiled manifests itself, the
Dance is disclosed. It is a lightning strike, an
absurd and delayed meeting with a hidden
inner aspiration. The child's imagination is
at last rescued.

Moving from one experience to the next,
though not without having gone through
trials and tribulations. A deadly car acci-
dent, which leaves me in fear of total para-

lysis. I recover through the fever of romanticism. I finally understand that I have to make clear my obligation to Life. Dance is the reaction to immobility. The opposite pole of non-movement.

Intuition dictates the subsequent steps which relate to this new direction. The rebellious spirit that has always refused any sort of enforcement is cast into a disciplined routine, only accepted because self-inflicted. I have to mould my body to be able to express an art form, which does not belong to my Western origins. In India I first study Kathakali, the forceful dance-drama of Kerala. Then lured by Antonin Artaud's influence I go to Bali and meet with the metaphysical theatre of the island. Here theatre is back to its original function of union between the gods and humans. I find the place where I belong, the place where the Dance and the Sacred meet. A new journey begins.

Feverish, I take up this challenge which defies all common sense. In a country which is not mine, having to face all the cultural differences which distinguish the island.

I am fascinated by the exuberant nature, astonishing landscapes, and the complex rituals abundant with music and dance, which mark the life of the Balinese. Blinded to the point of not seeing any trace of ugliness, of distortion. I am in the lost paradise, or so I believe.

Drawn into a vortex spinning too fast to be stopped. Dancing in the temple ceremonies, I participate in sacred rituals. The ultimate achievement?

The dance becomes a kind of renunciation where everything else is relinquished. The woman has abdicated; subdued by a compelling desire. An absurd aspiration

wanting to break all the rules of a hierarchic society which will always consider me an outsider; which I am. The traveller has just taken a halt.

Is Dance a sublimation?

A sort of intoxication?

An insane passion that dictates the beat of my heart?

The child's reveries have transformed through time. The journey has taken only different shapes. From foreign landscapes to the empty space of the stage. The dance allowing continuous changes and transformations. Like a prism rebounding different colours according to the angle through which the light is reflected. It allows for exploring in many directions, discovering the complex geography of the soul. It allows dreaming, taking flight, flying high, though it nails one to a restrained practice. A polarity of experience where the visible and the invisible come together.

The journey moves on and I am ever the wanderer in the dust, pushed by the wind.

CRISTINA WISTARI (Italy/Bali) has lived in Bali studying classical Balinese dance for twenty years. In 1993 she started the Gambuh project with the aim of preserving the most ancient dance form in Bali. She regularly performs Gambuh and Topeng in the temple festivals in Bali as well as leading workshops and performing abroad. In 2000 she published the book *Gambuh*.