

Geddy Aniksdal

Cross Country

*We are so different.
Are we going to survive
together? Sometimes I think
that at least many of us like
beer and they seem nice.
They have done these tours
numerous times and are very
settled into their own routines.
We do not understand their
work ethic and all their union
rules. They probably think
we are a wild disorganised
bunch with no real order to us.*

Our theatre group is on tour with the Norwegian State Touring Theatre. It is the first time I take part in a performance with actors I have not met before. My group made the performance for an outdoor audience two years ago. Now some of our freelancers are not with us any more, and they are replaced by actors and musicians from this theatre institution of Norway.

We have co-produced before, but then we made the arrangements, chose the ensemble and planned and carried out the tour. Now we are travelling with them, on their route, with their organisation. They tour and perform regularly all over Norway.

We will rehearse the play with them and go on tour from September to December, performing fifty-two nights in almost as many places, travelling from the deep south to the far north of Norway. The distance is 2,500 kilometres. Mostly we will travel by bus, sometimes we have to fly. The play is *The Imaginary Invalid* by Jean Baptiste Molière. We have never been on a tour quite like this before. In total we are twenty-one people travelling. We all have to make it work.

28.9.2001 - ELVERUM

We arrived yesterday and had a general rehearsal for nine spectators. Luckily one of them could understand Norwegian and was blessed - or blessed us - with her generous laughter that carried us through our two hour performance. The other spectators were from Ethiopia and had not been in Norway long enough to understand our language, especially not my Norwegian dialect. They also laughed sometimes, but never at the point where people usually laugh.

The team from the other theatre that joins us on this tour are sad today; one of their colleagues has just died. We are trying to arrange all the practicalities so they can go to the funeral.

We are so different. Are we going to survive together?

Sometimes I think that at least many of us like beer and they seem nice. They have done these tours numerous times and are very settled into their own routines. We do not understand their work ethic and all their union rules. They probably think we are a wild disorganised bunch with no real order to us.

During a rehearsal Lars, our director, asked the musicians to exclaim three words in response to something funny happening on stage. They replied, with stern faces, that they were not allowed to speak words, as this would mean that they were under direction and thus had to be paid more. We all laughed and thought it was a good joke. It wasn't.

Today we bought aprons and a money-box for our two girls, Anna Andrea, my fifteen-year-old daughter, and Marie, my colleague Anne-Sophie's thirteen-year-old daughter. They act in the performance with us and they are going to sell programmes at the entrance and in the interval. They get 20% of what they sell and they are thrilled to help improve our economy. They would probably be more thrilled if they could keep all the income themselves, as they are at the age of fashion awareness. We try to instruct them in other values as well.

2.10.2001 - RENA

Whatever day it is, things are already settling into some kind of routine. I am mixing up places and dates and days, not to mention room numbers at the hotels.

Today we have played in a tiny little place where most of us failed to find the centre of town when we went for our obligatory walk after checking in at the hotel. It is a very fine hotel and our new royal couple stayed here two days ago, something the girls knew all about and I nothing.

The technical rig took so long that we did

not get to do our training, I swam in the swimming pool in our last hotel so it doesn't matter.

We never know what audiences to expect as country people never order tickets in advance. As it turned out we had a great house and, as some in the audience laughed a lot even before we had started, rumours went that they were drunk. They laughed so much that the performance took a longer time than usual.

We did the quickest get out so far which earned smiles from the technicians. We are still not accustomed to the fact that they would like the get-out to be as fast as possible. My colleague Anne-Sophie and I like to sit down after the show, talk a bit about how it went, take time to calm down, have a smoke, in a relaxed way. Not so here. We walk back to the hotel to hang up wet clothes, wash the ones that are too dirty to use, and count the days until we have a free day and get to have the costumes washed properly. My jacket smells so bad that I have asked people not to get too close. I am also one of the "runners" in the performance and I get soaked each night, which I use as a perfect excuse to have a beer after the show. Others are having beers as well, it has nothing to do with sweating.

The girls have gone to bed - told not to watch telly and have a good night's sleep, as we are leaving early tomorrow. Some of the boys have been great today, helping with their homework, sorting out the maths exercises. I am relieved not to have to do it all. Even though they are older they still need a lot of care and attention. Anna will not plait her braids before the performance.

And now what? After a beer or two like tonight, we have our small discussion about

the performance, about other performances, sit together and get to know each other. One by one we go off to our rooms to sleep or read, or write, or phone friends or husbands or wives.

I phone home just to find out that both my husband and son are in bed sick from food poisoning. I text mail my son and he tries to explain that they think they ate some old pesto sauce and so became sick. And at the end of the message "I miss you". Hm. I think "I miss you too", but it will be a long time before we see each other, so maybe it is better not to get too much into longing.

SHIT!

It had to happen and it had to be one of us. Usually we are all ready early at the bus, to load our luggage and take the last sip of coffee and fill our lungs with enough nicotine to get by for the next hour.

Today someone is missing. One of our lot. The tour leader had to go and look for him. He was in the bathtub peacefully relaxing. He thought there was another hour before departure. He was damp and sweaty all over on entering a very silent bus. We were catching a ferry. We did not get our smoking stop, or time to go to the loo. But we made it.

3.10.2001 - RØROS

We arrive in Røros, after a three hour ride in the bus. Our tour leader has more than enough to do, busy on the phone all the time. He has to take care of all the things concerning our travel, our stays in the different hotels, our performances in the different cultural houses. All complaints go to him, he is under a lot of pressure.

Some of his people think we are too crowded in the bus, and that it is wrong that technicians and actors have to depart at the same time. They say that this tour

should have had a bigger budget. We don't really know what to say since to us this is comfort.

Anne-Sophie and I walk down the streets of old Røros, one of the oldest cities of Norway. We mingle with the tourists and look like them, yet we have another reason for being here. We find a place to eat and Anne is thinking of ordering the local dish of *elghakk* (moose-stew), until she sees it served to the person in front of her. She opts for something less challenging to the stomach.

Our girls are pleased with the stay here, not that they care about the place, its history, architecture or anything they could learn or get to see, no - the hotel has a swimming pool and this is where they will stay until we do Kung Fu or get ready for the performance.

We speak about work amongst ourselves in the bus, we challenge each other to improve our work in the performance, to tighten and get it sharper every night. We wonder, yet again, about this mysterious thing called timing that one evening has the whole audience roar with laughter and the next evening is gone, is flat, dead, nothing. We agree to give our new lines some more goes, and if anything is not working we will try to be hard and just throw it out. After all, we made these additions to the script written by Lars. We all agree on the importance of keeping our work alive.

5. 10. 2001 - SUNNDALSØRA

How come we have arrived at a hotel where they don't serve food Friday, Saturday or Sunday? How come only fifty-six people came to see the performance? How come?

Hanto, who has debts and tries to save

money, cooks his meals on the hotel roof on a cooker he brought himself. It is just as well since they don't serve any food here...

Only forty-five performances left. I have arranged to have breakfast in bed with my daughter tomorrow. That is a treat. *Fawlty Towers* is just a kindergarten compared to this. I wonder what Molière and his troupe would have done?

7.10.2001 - MOLDE

We are in the most luxurious hotel, the girls have a room bigger than our first floor at home, and they think that Molde is fabulous, but we know their ranking system by now.

Anne-Sophie and I have been asked by the technicians to make coffee; it is to be taken as a privilege to be given a task by them. We have helped them sew as well.

I agreed to go swimming with the girls at 8.30 a.m. This hotel can be as luxurious as it wants, I have no time to contemplate or even use it. I have a bath and put my clothes to dry on the hot floor tiles.

8.10.2001 - ÅLESUND

Everybody is tired today after our day off in Ålesund. All the fabulous things people wanted to do; have a massage, go to the hairdresser, go shopping, sit in a library, climb the mountain...

We ended up looking for the shoe-maker and the laundry and then washing our own dirty clothes in the bathroom; trying in vain to find an internet café, and the rest of the time we did nothing, lying in bed, not tired nor rested. But we did all meet for a glass of wine before we went to a famous expensive seafood restaurant where Anna got to hold a live lobster and carried him through the room. We had to pay three days *per diem* for the meal, and we witnessed that some got very, very drunk. I went to bed at a very Christian time, just

to toss around restlessly for three hours.

Anna has started her on-tour schooling with the teacher, the Oslo actors are back from the funeral and we are on our way down south and westwards.

12.10.2001 - FØRDE

What day is it today? Friday? Then this must be Førde.

We have started to make charts and statistics in the bus. We have to give a percentage number for how happy we are, what we thought about last night's performance, and what we thought about our own contribution. The results are read out loud, and we have to try to comfort or give away some points to those feeling most low.

Jokes apart, we are tired. It is raining all the time, our costumes are dirty and smelly and some of us are not well. People are swopping medicines and good advice.

Last night my parents came to see us and Anna and I had a good time with them afterwards and most of the group ended up around our table.

On the way here we make a stop and look at a glacier. We all stand there open mouthed and stare - like real tourists.

We are not.

Shit again! The performance was not very good. It reminded me of what Dashiell Hammett supposedly said to Lillian Hellman after reading one of her early plays, "It is worse than bad, it is half good".

I wonder about the audience as well: they clap, laugh and seem content. But I did spot some sceptics like myself among them. We had the biggest house so far, and we did not play well.

All the other dissatisfactions add up: why do we, from the so-called free theatre group, stay behind and clean up when the others hurry off, because they cannot stay



Geddy Aniksdal in the middle, during a smoking break

longer than they are paid for, no matter how much there is left to do?

As we walk the rather long way back to the hotel, in the rain, I clutch the money box from the programme sale in one hand, and the flowers given to us in the other hand, and a bag with the wet and dirty clothes on my shoulder. I am angry and happy at the same time. Angry, because they do not show solidarity with our needs and with the work that has to be done. Happy, that I don't ever have to think that way.

I also nearly quarrelled with my love on the phone, since I found out that on the only two free days I have - when I am going home to see my family - he has to go away

for work. I must have sounded rather terrible on the phone because he called back to tell me he had been able to cancel one. I am usually the one to have other commitments on my free days, and he is always furious with me. Now he starts too? He is not supposed to be that way!

Today I was ready to quarrel with anyone I came across. Some days are not fun!

It is the end of October, and south Norway is cold and beautiful, low sun on yellow and red leaves, made for brisk walks in the countryside. My brisk walk is to buy the newspaper and more cigarettes and it is in town. I have excuses for not being out much, the cold, and the fact that I have lost my second scarf, a must in this country

after August.

I often think of the man I met in Buenos Aires who told me that his theatre had played *The Mousetrap* there for thirty years and that he had been in it since the beginning. I thought it was a joke. Little did I know.

Anna and Marie take part in the Kung Fu sessions, as well as practising their scenes before the performance. Anna has days when she says she is no good and will never be an actor.

Some days are just days, they need only to pass so I can start on another one. There is seemingly nothing wrong, nobody talks rudely to me, the weather is okay, all the practical arrangements are okay, it is just this sudden draught of melancholia passing through me, where if I am not careful, I am tempted to start doubting everything. These are the days when, instead of finding something playful to watch on television or making an appointment with some of my joyful friends, I engage deeply in William Styron's book on depression. And it works.

Reading about other people going through difficult phases of their lives, helps me sort myself out. I go from wanting to move to the country and grow vegetables to thinking about how fine I am, and how lucky I am to do what I do. A book is a good hiding place, a place to be alone, I remember my mother telling me about my disappearing act when I was a child; I used to take a book and hide under the kitchen table, to have some room of my own in a family of seven.

Days, nights, how come the smiles and jokes from the others that I enjoyed and laughed at last night don't interest me at all tonight?

How come the food is dull, the rush

before performance is almost gone, I can feel time, and feel myself go cold between scenes?

How come no-one else notices? How come when the spectators at the end stand up and clap, looking so happy, I am bewildered that they do?

I know all the sensible and rational answers to these questions, but still?

Night comes, and I can go to bed. I think of what city we are in, and where we are going tomorrow. I listen to the hailstorm outside, it calms me. I go to sleep.

BACK ON THE ROAD AGAIN

I join the tour again after a day off. I return from my uncle's funeral and reach the tiny village. I cannot see any posters for our play, the rain is pouring down almost sideways, the waves are coming up on the pavement, and I seem to be the only person out. I find the venue, and a woman there confirms that we are on - tonight.

The others start to arrive, we find our costumes, prepare props, the musicians start to exercise, I make coffee - someone is missing: the guitar player.

We have to rehearse and make plans for how to do the performance without him. Five minutes before we start he comes running in. He grabs his guitar to fine tune it, grabs his costumes and says: "I will explain later".

I am the one to do the pep talk before we start. Tonight I feel so tired and uninspired I ask my colleague Henning to do it. He starts out: "Today, when we might be tired and uninspired..." I could have said it myself. Luckily one of the others protests and says, "What do you mean, I am totally the opposite, so full of energy and ready to go", and we go to prepare, people are coming in - where do they come from? -

the orchestra plays and we sing our opening song. Henning starts his first monologue, and it is like thunder and lightning has filled the man, he is electric, and the audience is there with us right from the start.

I hide among the audience, I fall onto the lap of a spectator, as I usually do. I find a man - I think - and I am about to say so, in my lines. Just before I do, I bend down over this person, I feel a hint of perfume, I look down and cannot decide whether it is a man or a woman. Quickly I alter my text to say that this is a good place to stay, not a good man to find, and Henning looks hesitant up on the stage, but we are off and just carry on.

We do one of our champagne performances as we like to call them. It is like sparkling wine, and we are blessed with this woman who laughs like forty people and all the time. We are carried on her waves of laughter. After the show we go to the hotel in the rain. Nobody is out; we eat dinner and meet amongst ourselves, and then on my way to bed I have a little chat with the woman running the hotel. I have met someone in civilian life today too.

And we were in the right place.

29.10.2001 - KRISTIANSAND

The tour bus rolls into Kristiansand and parks in front of the biggest hotel, we go to the reception desk and get our room numbers, I find the elevator and finally my room. Outside the door it says "Business Class" and I am sure that it is wrong, but no, this room is meant for me. I am not used to all this luxury so my first reaction when I enter the room is pure embarrassment. At least four people could sleep here.

I have my own desk and leather chair, and an enormous bed, and bathrobe and slippers. In these surroundings I drink

coffee with an upset Henning who has been to check the stage where we are playing. We have two full houses of 450 spectators awaiting us, and the technicians have placed our stage as far from the audience as is possible.

We have the usual quarrel with the authorities, and there is nothing to be done whatsoever, because of fire regulations, house rules and a very uncooperative boss somewhere, so we find ourselves drowned in luxury, but with no real influence on how and where we play.

Our tour leader comes and tells us that tonight we have played performance number twenty-six and we have twenty-six more to go. Thinking of that I go to Telford Pub to meet up with the others and have a beer.

Tomorrow we have rehearsals during the day, because we are going to replace a role. My husband is coming in - he is also the director of this play.

UP NORTH, A DIFFERENT THING

We have been up north a week now starting out in Vadsø. You can't get further east. Then we moved on to Kirkenes, only a few miles from the Russian border. We had been warned of the cold, and we came prepared - that is, we have enough clothes, but we are not mentally prepared. When it is twenty degrees below zero, your nostril hair freezes every time you draw breath and melts again when you exhale. The snow sings under your feet.

The sun is only up a few hours a day, when it is around one p.m. it starts to get dark and you feel like going to bed. No wonder light therapy was invented up here, some people suffer severe depression because of the lack of light.

Cold outside, warm inside, especially if you

don't get too close to the outer wall. We played in Kirkenes, and in a little break I leaned against the outer wall and almost got stuck!

The distances are so great, that we can't reach our next venue by bus. We had to send the gear off in the night and then travel by chartered plane. We got up early (which is a big hassle for some people in the other company), and we got into this little seventeen seater plane, took off, saw that the wheels did not fold, heard from the captain that something was wrong. And down again we went, to wait for someone to find the right screw so we could take off again. We had a free lunch

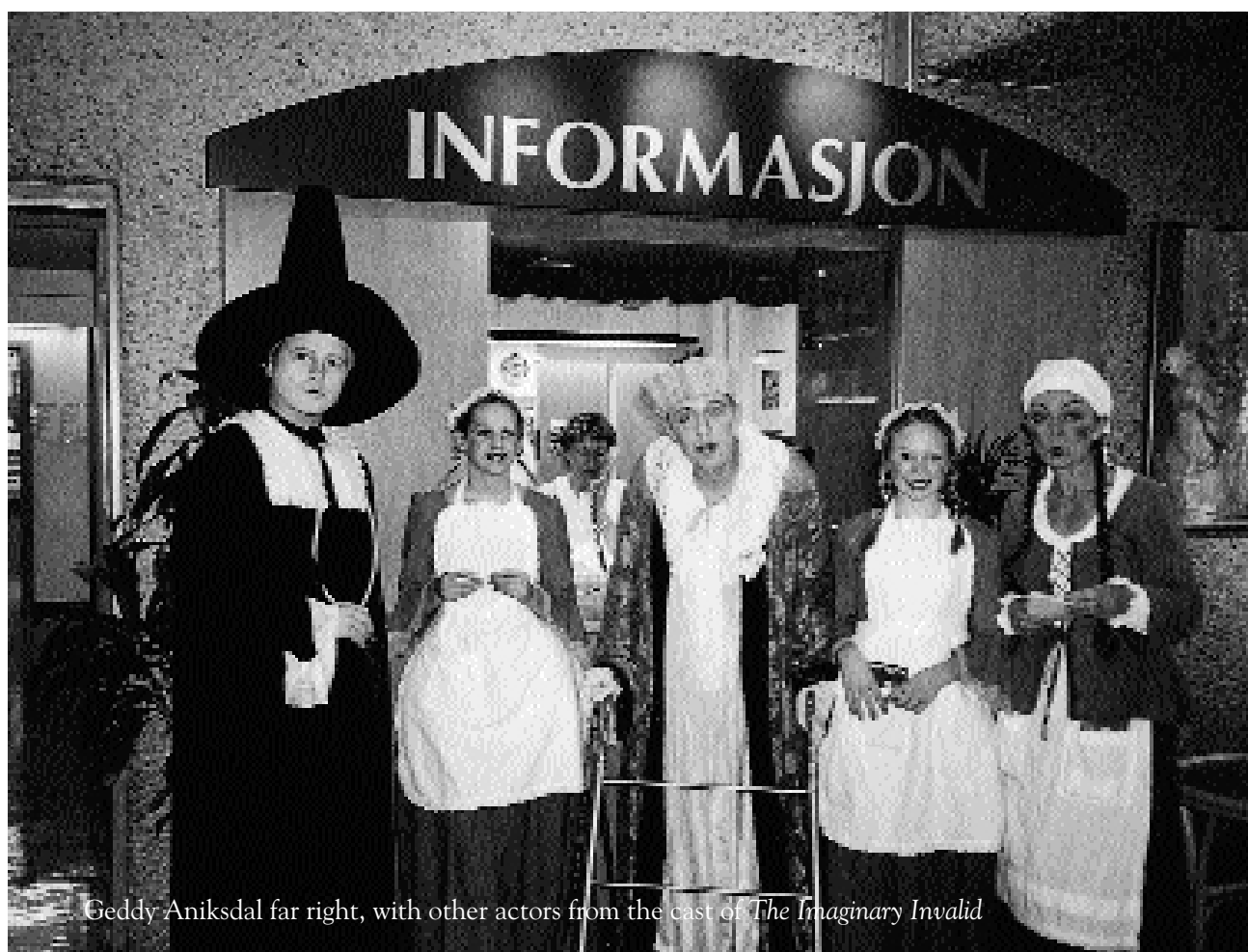
in recompense.

Sometimes we meet someone, for a talk, for a beer. Someone is helping us, someone is having a romance, someone has friends or family, most of the time it is us, and the audience. We get along quite well, I feared it would be more difficult.

23.11.2001 - TROMSØ

Some of us went to the movies to see the Agnes Varda film *The Collectors*.

The girls have their teacher back. She flew in to Alta, and she will do the Christmas exams with them at the end of the week. Anna will celebrate her 15th



Geddy Aniksdal far right, with other actors from the cast of *The Imaginary Invalid*

birthday on Sunday, and has invited the whole ensemble for coffee and cakes. I will have to find the cakes. We will be in a tiny little place I had not heard of before this tour.

We are in a real city today, and we read the papers and get longings to do things that other people do. There is an interesting lecture tomorrow, about Shakespeare.

It is mild here, only minus five, we can wear normal shoes. We will meet early tonight and go through some scenes that have strayed a bit lately. In my mind I think, is it worth it or not? We have only a few more performances to do. Then I force myself to do it, afraid of my natural tendency to get lazy.

28.11.2001 - BODØ

We are close to the end of the tour and it is noticeable on many levels. My fear is that the work is getting sloppy. It is still respectable. But people are tired and bored in a way.

Long travelling distances, short time for the technical crew, no daylight at all, when we are done with breakfast and some writing or washing or talking, we go out for a stroll and it is like late night. I lose the sense of time, and that sense is already in bad shape from odd working hours anyway.

Being in a city helps, people can log on to the internet, do some shopping, see other people, go to the movies.

One of our actors and one of the musicians gave Anna a trip to the movies for her birthday, and yesterday a taxi pulled up in front of the hotel to take all three of them to Harry Potter and his world. The taxi driver found it strange that they could not walk the 200 metres to the cinema, but they insisted that she should arrive in style "Nutters", the taxi driver said, but drove them anyway. We

are like foreigners. They call us southerners, it means we know nothing of this world up here. It is probably true.

For the first time on our tour we have had a critic who has written seriously and with insight about our tour, the troupe, the attempts to work in the spirit of Molière and his troupe. Our work has been seen in the context we tried to make it for.

Our last day off yesterday, we play six performances in a row and then we fly back down south. I look forward to seeing my son (hope he feels likewise), I look forward to being able to have some more space to walk in; to walk from room to room in pyjamas in the morning.

Even my daughter's fascination with hotel rooms and foyers has faded, she confessed last night. They have often been admitted to Business Class lately where they have Pay Television for free, and we have had to teach them how to close their eyes and switch quickly over the soft porn channels. In addition to this they get a newspaper dealing with the latest changes on the stock market for free! They laugh, and we take them swimming in the local swimming pool. I buy them cakes, shaped like hearts.

Everybody now talks about what they are going to do next. We, in Grenland Friteater, go home to prepare our 25th anniversary, where we also will play this performance for the last time as a gift to our town, as a final celebration. The State Theatre has given us the performance as a gift as well. We are grateful for it, but for their own actors involved, it means a lot of extra work since they will already be rehearsing for their next touring production.

Our girls only look forward to Christmas.

EVERYTHING MUST COME TO AN END

In this week, and quite contrary to what I would have expected, a kind of melancholia sets in. We have only two performances left, and people are mentally packing. Last night we also had an outburst of anger during the performance, which we have been spared so far. We wondered where one actor went; it turned out he was very angry because one of his cues was overlooked and he did not get his "share". If everyone walked off stage like that it would be empty before the interval, with all the alterations and improvisations we usually make.

I sat by myself the other night thinking about how this tour has influenced my children. Especially my son at home, he has grown into an almost independent young man, not necessarily too eager for us to come home.

Anna, fifteen years old now, lives by herself on tour, deciding when to go for meals, and when to arrive at the venue each night.

I had not planned their independence to come all in one go like this, but it has. Something outside ourselves creates a need and a necessity. Soon they will be off and gone.

And again, as with this tour now, when it is nearing the end. Already? So soon?

GEDDY ANIKSDAL (Norway) is an actor and director working with Grenland Friteater. She has considerable experience as a workshop leader, specialising in ways in which actors can create their own material. She has been an active member of the Magdalena Project since it began.