

# Guandaline Sagliocco

## My Orchestra

In the last ten years I have created three solo performances. In each performance I have played four or five characters, making a total of about fifteen - but I don't think they will ever meet together. However, they are, in a way, all related to each other by blood. The characters from one performance give birth to the next performance's characters. I imagine these one-woman shows as an orchestra with many different instruments and one chosen soloist. Characters are my tools, my working instruments.

Fifteen years ago I was confused about which aspect of my theatrical education I was going to proceed with. I had to juggle my respect for Stanislavski, my fascination with the grand tradition of the clown's work, the Commedia dell'Arte and, at that time, the mysterious physical theatre that I came across through my contact with Scandinavian companies.

It has always been evident to me that I would play characters. I like to use the imaginative capacity that children employ when they create fantasy worlds. I conceive my work as a serious game. I remember being nine years old and playing with my friend Malika in the courtyard. We were inventing adventures with dangers, husbands, and children. We gave each other some descriptions and invented rules to be sure we would be playing the same game. One day Malika got angry with me and, in order to punish me, she announced that my sweet, loving prince had been killed. Then she left me. There I was, not yet ten years old, already a widow. Even the unhappy ending of this story was a necessary part of our play. To wake my prince from the dead would have been cheating.

We make conventions or rules, we direct to a certain point, but it is the game that takes over. In theatre it is the same. I set the starting conventions. I am an actress. I begin to play - one, two, three, four characters. Little by little the spectator will forget the conventions. S/he will forget I am the only person on stage. Becoming more and more involved s/he will start to see all the different characters in more detail than I can give them, and will be able to imagine all

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the other characters as they *simultaneously* appear on stage. My playing of several characters became such a clever illusion that one day my director asked me for a session where I would work alone.

I have separated my characters into two different categories: the minor and the major, who always bring my work into question and challenge me. I know the minor characters well. They have been born out of my involvement with clown work. They have been my companions for the last twenty years. They are the ones with whom the audience can identify. They are witnesses to a drama in which they seldom intervene. They appear in all my performances but they are really the same person, each time revealing a different facet of themselves.

The minor characters have also become storytellers. This role is especially important at the beginning of a new piece. I let them re-invent the story, stretch it, play with it. This is the way for me to enjoy myself and make the new material my own. Writing down character improvisations is always fascinating. The power that this type of text carries is often contained in its simplicity and a certain poetical dimension that it holds. The text and the gestures come straight from the mouth of the character and it is the organic integration of these gestures and emotions that make the texts so alive and precise. I would never be able to write those same texts sitting at a table. In the development of the character my director eagerly demands to hear "her version" now as if the character could give a solution to a problem that I was not able to resolve. Writers often speak of how characters can become independent from their authors and this, I think, holds true in the theatre as well. My characters never have difficulty in expressing themselves, while I am struggling to write an article about them.

The techniques which are necessary for

the actor to give life to several characters at the same time, can also limit the richness and the depth of those characters. Stylisation and simple physical and vocal material are required in order for the characters to be recognisable quickly and to allow me to switch from one to another without confusion. It is at this point that I become the soloist in my own orchestra. I go from "I pretend that I am" to "I am". This is the journey.

The second category - the major characters of mythology - have become so because they have lasted throughout time in a dimension that transcends everyday man. They are their own story. Taking the example of Salome, I didn't choose to play her just for the part because Salome, for me, is not just Salome, she is her own tragedy. She is all of the characters and events that conspire to create the drama. Salome is also a biblical myth, so that most of the public come to the theatre knowing what they are going to see. I am not going to make the public believe that my version of the story will be different, that there may be a slight chance this time that the Prophet will fall in love with Salome and that she will not ask for his head. No! Salome is the innocence, the cruelty of youth. She is desirable and she knows it. She is a spoiled child and soon she will kill. All this we know already and that is what my Salome must reveal from the beginning.

To confront these major characters I must first find them with my body. It is fragile work that demands respect and intimacy with the director so that I will be able to open up and search for where this force is vibrating. It is a kind of violence that we are seeking blindly and this is a bit like opening up a wound and penetrating the flesh. The power of the material, and the small pearls created during the process will seldom appear in the performance. But the wound is

kept hidden.

If my three-year-old daughter cries and then sees her crying image in the mirror, her tears will increase. She will forget why she is crying as she becomes fascinated by the picture she presents. Her gaze will last a long time, glued to her reflection, and it is with great regret that she will detach herself from it. I do not look at myself more than necessary in the mirror before going on stage. I do not want to be disturbed by my own image. The work of creating a character is in opposition to that of the mirror. One must not be consumed by the image a character presents, as my daughter becomes fascinated by the physical presence of her tears, but by the inner emotions, dynamics and tensions that were uncovered during the process of improvisation. It is this image of the character that the public should receive. It is not unusual, after the performance, to hear comments from the audience like, "did you see how small she is?" and "I thought she was so much younger". If I had worked in conventional theatre I suppose I would have been trapped in roles like "funny little woman". I cannot pretend that it is possible for me to play any role, but through the work one may reach the right door and the right time to become a particular character. My Herod would have been more gross and ridiculous ten years ago. Maybe one has more testosterone around forty.

The tetrarch Herod in *Salome* was my first major male character. I remember that he was born from a gesture and the statement, "I have never been hard to you, I have always loved you". This work gave me strength, it was a kind of meeting point for different experiences from the past. The first time that Herod's desire for Salome appeared and his wet gaze fell upon her was an embarrassing situation. The director and I were giggling like two teenagers in front of *Playboy*

each time it happened. I lost my concentration like a novice because it was a beginning: a meeting with a new and still unknown part of myself.

After many years of work I am still fascinated by how to juggle the different methods of working towards a character. Each time I must choose whether to begin with the emotions and the words and then find the movement, or attack with the body and find the movement that makes the emotion vibrate inside. Somewhere in between these two approaches, exists a million other choices.

How many more characters am I going to create? I don't know - maybe I won't find it necessary to do this anymore. Maybe it will be good to eat and digest my fifteen or twenty characters and work... alone.

GUANDALINE SAGLIOCCO (France/Norway) is an actress who studied at the Serge Martin's Theatre School in Paris in 1985 and at the Università del Teatro and Istituto di Arte Scenica in Italy, 1986. She has for the last ten years been working as a freelance actor with independent theatre companies in Norway and produces her own performances. In 1997 her performance *The Story of the Fallen Hero* received the Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe where she was nominated as best actress. In 1999 she began working with Anne-Sophie Erichsen on her solo performance *Salome*.