

María Ibarreta

Personal Geography

To start speaking about "character", I must first talk of my theatre origins and apprenticeship. I was a child, a five-year-old girl, when I started to act. Almost without being aware of it, I was seduced by this space for play, that paradoxically I did not have in my everyday life. I woke early in a mysterious and lively universe, respectfully observing my first references - the actors from whom I learned. They were actors whose heritage came from circus, *sainete* (cabaret singing), the grotesque, and they were Spanish actors, a product of immigration into our country.

These actors demonstrated a style of acting. They were called "representational actors"; they belonged to the time when the actor dominated the Argentine stage, with a popular style, whose expressive quality was shared with the audience through improvisation, vocality, characterisation, and the intuitive unfolding of emotions. They did not reach the point of creating a theory about their work, rather they maintained an oral tradition that they intensified with practice. This was my starting point: practice and intuitive play. My referents transmitted their acting secrets in order to sustain the totality of the performance. A good representational actor had presence, could be heard in the back row and transmitted emotions. It is difficult to talk about the technical aspects of the work because they did not exist, but I do remember the vibrations that were crucial in this style of work, the living circumstances on stage. At a very young age, I acquired an insight which very primitively created my characters. Later this representational style diluted and degraded to transform itself into a commercial form of entertainment.

Simultaneously in my country the independent theatre movement was at its peak. This movement marked an important change in the aesthetics of our theatre. These groups aimed for an understanding of the actor's work, starting from theories that originated in European theatre: Stanislavski, Brecht, Copeau, and Rolland with his popular theatre. In the beginning the repertory was based on foreign

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plays, but finally this movement not only produced actors, directors, stage designers, but also playwrights who wrote for these groups and marked an important phase in Argentine theatre.

Unfortunately, the independent groups started by denying the native theatre which existed before them, and it took years to rediscover the values of the deeply Argentine grotesque and *sainete*. The Stanislavski system was the backbone of the independent theatres. It became familiar through books first and later through the practice and teaching imparted by Hedy Crilla, an Austrian actress who lived for a long time in Argentina and who had studied with a pupil of Stanislavski. She moulded a whole generation of actors and directors. These mentors of the first Stanislavski system of teaching, still very present in our country today, passed on the technique in workshops.

The need to expand my rudimentary universe, led me to incorporate this technique. For two years I worked with Luis Agustoni, pupil of Augustín Alezzo, who studied with Hedy Crilla, practising sensorial techniques and emotive memory in repertory scenes.

It was my first step towards reflection, towards a knowledge that I incorporated and enriched, but at the same time I felt fragmented. I learned physical and vocal techniques, I understood that they nourished a way forward, but I could not understand how to integrate the totality of acting in them.

This was the time when Raúl Serrano came back to Argentina. He was a scholar of Stanislavski's second phase, that of the Physical Actions. I studied with him for four years and in this way my universe was enriched by Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Craig, Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski, the Living Theatre and Baty. A mystical vitality made me vibrate, it identified with and amplified

the fragmentation I felt.

We still suffer from this fragmentation in Buenos Aires and it denies us other forms of knowledge. I think it also determines a fragmented way of building a character. For a long time, I suppressed the knowledge I already possessed thanks to my previous experiences with those actors who expressed a language of their own, for example with the *sainete*. This happened also in many professionally recognised theatres where one was supposed to build a character using a code, an imposed indication, as if starting from a colour while denying the shades that make the totality. It was a tyranny of knowledge made official.

This continued until the day when I played Mother Courage in the Teatro Cervantes with the director Robert Sturua. I was able to redeem those actors from the past who built their characters externally in an artificial way, through make-up and physical behaviour. Sturua accepted and proposed different and at times opposing stimuli, manners and understanding in order to build a character. It was a very important experience, which confirmed that a character is not only made up of a personal geography, but is also something that transmits poetry in space.

After this experience I started to generate projects with directors and actors who had the same expressive need, without defining dates, but giving a natural course to the creative urgency which they had accumulated for different reasons. This research allowed me to integrate the different mosaic pieces of knowledge freeing me from what had become an internalised fragmentation.

There are many ways of building a character - from primitive technical insights or an inherited knowledge that activates just as daring and mysterious a zone as life itself.

I think that in Buenos Aires there are many who are technically able to arrive at a

character, but I would say that there are few, very few, who have created a synthesis with a personal distinction, a particular point of view and poetic.

It would seem that after so much suffering from fragmentation, culturally and historically, we are not open enough to integrate the denied and silenced pieces that make up our cultural imagery.

The autonomous projects I set up are spaces of integration. One of these is the solo performance *Ceremonia Enamorada*, made up of monologues which refer to different Shakespearean plays where the woman's role is significant. In this excursion, heroic, ambiguous, mean and limitlessly passionate behaviours emerge, passing through Isabella from *Measure for Measure*, *Desdemona*, etc.

As always, I explored the texts for a long time with the director, with an initial fear that slowly became passion and obsession, to find a deep understanding of the chosen parts. I needed to be open in order to understand the poetic text - text which should flow. I needed to understand how to let it vibrate in my whole body through ways of exploring with vocal exercises. I sought to understand the behaviour of these different women, proposing variations and various characterisations for each monologue, invoking all possible stimuli and associations.

I tried to catch the shadows of these women, all that they don't express, imagining what they hide and translating it into my body. I created the narration finding oppositions in the shadows, sometimes with the voice, silences, rhythms, dynamics...

I researched their behaviour and ways of being, like songs, to apply to the words, creating in this way a score that would help me to distinguish the different beats, tonalities and sounds that created different conditions in me. I explored sensorial impetus,

imagining the smell of treason and what reaction it would provoke in my behaviour and how it would affect my way of saying the text.

When I prepare for these experiences, I open all the receptive channels and associations that the text prompts in me, and even if I don't have an apparent logic, I know chaos has its laws.

A text by Susana Rotker looking at the eradication of mixed blood indigenous and black minorities in our country and the African origin of *tango* are the starting points that are bringing us together for a new project. Two characters are being born and with them, we are exploring the rhythms of *candombe*, to understand the *habanera*, *tango* and *malambo*, and I am trying out the "momologue", a way of speaking singing that representational actors used.

Entering this territory which refutes the homogeneity of our culture and the habit of compromising typical of our history, I ask myself how many characters are still waiting to find expression in our theatre universe!

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

MARÍA IBARRETA (Argentina) has worked in and with theatre since early childhood. She currently lives and works in Buenos Aires. Her solo performance *Ceremonia Enamorada* is based on texts from Shakespeare and is directed by Miguel Guerberof. Other performances in repertoire include *El retrato del pibe* and *Israfel*, presented at the Teatro Cervantes.