

Maria Mänty

The Story of the Mummy Bride



The Mummy Bride
Photo: Masato Iizuka

THE ROOTS

In Helsinki in 1996, covered with white paint and bandages, I walked in slow motion through a gallery. It was the opening of an exhibition of mobile phone covers. I was given the job by the director of the amateur theatre group that I had joined. I just wanted to be white and slow. I didn't know anything about Butoh dance.

Half a year later I was studying at the Theatre Laboratory ECS in Kerava. When we worked on the outdoor play for the coming summer, I was asked to do "some mime" for the coffee drinking audience during the intervals. I tried some tricks with a colleague, but that didn't feel right. I decided to be white and slow again. I had been to my first Butoh workshop, which inspired me to do a *bisoku*, an extra slow movement. Dressed in white rags with a sickly, painted face I climbed into a bathtub as slowly as the water ran out of it. One day in the dressing room I happened to put a white curtain on the head of my hairless mummy figure. Something magic happened. I didn't know why, but when I looked in the mirror the contrast between the pale, sick face and the veil fascinated me.

THE REALITY

The next spring the teachers asked me and two other students to do some clowning in the town's annual

Circus Market. We would join a parade through the centre and then do some individual numbers in different places. I didn't have a clown character ready like the two others and the thought of creating one quickly made me very uncomfortable. The closer the day came the less I wanted to go out to *amuse* people.

The day before the happening we were supposed to show our characters to the rest of the school. I was desperately confused; but the day ended in a totally unexpected way.

I had decided to be white again and do a *bisoku* on some statues of horses in a little square at the end of the shopping street. But I couldn't do that now - and I was dressed in black, so I just decided to improvise a *bisoku* with my apple, sitting by the fountain in front of the school.

I did that for about twenty minutes, while the two clowns were jumping around and doing tricks. Finally my apple fell into the water and I decided to finish. Straight after that a strange thing happened: a girl in the audience suddenly had some kind of fit. She fell straight back onto the asphalt and became unconscious. A colleague saved her life with his first aid skills before the ambulance came. We were still standing there shocked long after her screams had disappeared with the ambulance.

One of the teachers had said that something of the question of life and death should always be present in a performance, but today it was really there.

I went home full of questions about the meaning of performing. What happens when reality takes over? Next to such a moment any kind of acting felt meaningless. I was still in doubt about my task next day, but my inner mood had changed, I wasn't desperate any more. In front of a mirror I put on all the white rags and torn petticoats I had, a woollen scarf made weird

hair and - remembering the magical moment in the dressing room a year ago - an old curtain became my veil. I was ready to meet reality.

THE CIRCUS MARKET

Next morning I left my home nervously asking: "Am I totally insane?" The make-up had become very strong. The circles around my eyes were dark purple, almost black. I had broken, frozen lips and stripes of "blood" on the chalk white skin.

Shyly I entered the school-yard where the colourful parade people were preparing. Following an impulse I hid myself behind a tree, but I had been seen. An older clown with a red plastic nose approached me. He was miming his adoration and even tried to make me speak. When the orchestra started playing and the parade moved, he handed me an empty plastic heart. I had learned an important thing about my character: she doesn't speak.

At my own slow tempo I followed the crowd. My colleagues were running and giggling around me. I was becoming a kind of ghost, but very alert all the same.

We all ended up in a park. The clown with the plastic nose was doing some tricks on the stage and joking with a microphone - also talking about a pale ghost princess and pointing at me. When it was time to disperse to our individual places, I didn't know what to do with the heart. I left it in a garbage bin, but returned to get it. It felt good to have something in my hand.

I held on to my old plan and began to move towards the horse statues. But I never reached them. It took me almost two hours to walk a distance of about 200 metres. Instead I travelled through many realities with the people I met.

It was as if I was surrounded by a different atmosphere. I witnessed with

wonder the noise of the market stalls. Encouraged or scared, provoked or touched, the people revealed themselves to me. Some started talking frantically, others just watched. I just gazed back, straight into the eyes of strangers.

The plastic heart became my main means of communication. And it turned out to be an extremely strong statement when I tried to give it to someone. People got confused or happy, saying things like: "I cannot take your heart, 'cause my own is broken too. Take it back and take really good care of it" or "Don't break down, fragile bride! You will find someone." I had become a bride looking for her lost loves, getting rejected over and over again, becoming sad, but always innocently open to meet the next person. Finally a man took the heart. He held it softly and said: "Thank you for this great gift. May Jesus bless you." Then he left me.

Later the clown came to get his heart back. He seemed irritated when he found out that I had passed it on. Ever since I have had smaller hearts inside a bigger one and I give them to anybody who really seems to need one.

When I returned home, I was simply crying, not really knowing why. What had happened? Somehow I had also revealed a part of myself. Was it theatre?

MEETINGS

Since then I have performed *The Mummy Bride* at festivals, in markets, on streets, in a shop window with wedding dresses and even at a dinner party and a cocktail party. She has experienced the differences and similarities of people in Finland, Denmark, Poland, France, Italy and Bulgaria. Each time when I am about to go out dressed as her I get uncertain, saying to myself: "But this is crazy. There is nothing to show. I don't do anything." But I have had experi-

ences which I would not have had otherwise.

I think about a Finnish teenager dressed in black who gave me his pocket-knife, refused to believe that it was a performance and followed me to the train. I had to push him down off the stairs of the train.

In Poland a gypsy boy was very afraid of me at first, following sceptically from a distance until his friends pushed him closer. I gave him a heart, but he returned it assertively. Later, when I was leaving the market place, he ran after me, smiling. He came very close and I gave him the heart again. He took it very happily and held it next to his own, waving after me.

In Bulgaria I had a contract to be on the street for two hours and I became very tired. I lay down to rest a little. All the people gathered around me, laughing warmly and covered me with flowers. In Sofia, when I rested on a bench with closed eyes, exhausted by my failure to find the bridegroom, suddenly a man whispered in my ear: "*Minä rakastan sinua*" ("I love you" in Finnish).

Working with some children I felt like E.T. In one meeting with an old lady I suddenly thought, "Wow, this must be how Jesus felt!" But there have been uncomfortable moments too. A group of young boys teased me until I cried, no matter what I or their parents tried to do. Some men have made me feel like a prostitute and once, my silence was so tempting that a man with obvious mental problems told me his horrible life story and about his involvement in a famous bank robbery. The most embarrassing moment was when I had to open my mouth to make a guy leave me alone.

THE PARADOX

That has been the big paradox of *The Mummy Bride*. Rejection makes her sad but rejection is necessary for the story to

continue (even after a wedding ceremony). I simply haven't found a solution to the "problem of not being rejected". This makes me laugh and ask, "What about in my own life?" But the Mummy Bride can't leave the men. Or can she? Should she change?

For some time I have been torn between the need to develop the character - to create small scenes and fixed actions - and the wish to stay faithful to her origin, her pure presence and openness to encounters, stories created in the moment. I have been inspired by other people's ideas to choreograph a dance, use some props or an instrument or a small coffin on the ground in which to collect money. But each time when I am about to get into the work something stops me - the Mummy Bride?

If she is a part of me can I put her into a structure without violating her origin, her openness to meet reality in her unique and silent way? Lately I have become the Mummy Bride less and less often. Looking at her picture makes me miss her.

MARIA MÄNTY (Finland/Denmark) was born in 1972. After studying visual arts, cultural anthropology and dancing for several years, she attended a one-year course at The Mime Centre in Helsinki. Then she studied for three years at the Theatre Laboratory ECS, an international research and training centre for the development of acting skills. After moving to Denmark in 1999 she became a member of New Winds, a group of young European actors led by Iben Nagel Rasmussen of Odin Teatret. Since 2001 she has worked with Teatret Om, an international group based in Denmark, and toured with the performance *Memento*. At the moment she is working as a freelancer and studying process oriented psychology.