

Sandra Pasini

The Line on which Life Dances

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is a bit like being
an archaeologist,
digging in the ground
to find traces that belong to us
or to the life history of another
human being.*

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*These questions sometimes
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I sense the risk of becoming too technical or abstract in trying to explain what working on a character means for me. There is a risk of giving too much value to words that are not always adequate to express the meaning of the work that I have done on a daily basis over many years, and through which I have discovered my need to learn and dream. This preamble does not free me from the responsibility of trying to write about my experience and understand my words at the same time. I accept the risk.

I was fifteen years old when I was asked to do my first improvisation; we were working on a performance with texts from Dostoievsky. "You have a piece of bread, which you have received after a long period of fasting. What is this bread for you?" This, I remember, was the theme, the question from which to start the improvisation. My colleagues improvised with objects and with their voices and bodies. I remember that while I was observing them I felt the question gaining strength and something in my stomach becoming warm.

My turn came to stand up and improvise (a word that had no meaning for me then, but that was full of appeal). I do not remember exactly what I did, but I remember very well that the bread had become precious. I wanted to eat it, but that was forbidden. I was excited to touch it. I think I ate it with the same calmness with which I had got up and with the same warmth in my stomach. That was my first improvisation, my first encounter with what would later on become a character.

What impressed me most at the end of the improvisation was how thinking intensely about something could change my state of being, creating a physical reaction and warmth in my stomach. This "power" that could create artificially a natural reaction had opened up a world steered by a different logic in which I could get lost and find myself again.

When I work on a character I must first find this necessity, something which is born from urgency. The obstacles I choose to face often confirm or develop this need. The diffi-

culties I decide to confront allow me to find the foundation of the work on a character. The choice to take up a challenge, the work on a character, theatre, are for me ways of getting to know myself and others, journeys into an internal world which belongs to me and into the surrounding external world.

In 1988, I travelled for five months in Colombia. I met theatre groups there and got to know their life in theatre. I met people threatened with death because they made a kind of theatre that irked those in power. When I returned to Italy I founded Teatret Om with Antonella Diana and we worked together on *Una spada per la mano* (1992), a performance that told the story of a young female drug addict. Why did I work on this after my trip to South America? Returning to Rome where I lived, the reality of the city seemed changed to me. I observed more carefully the youngsters I saw moving slowly in the streets, with lifeless eyes. How is it possible to reach this state in a rich country that offers many more possibilities than a poor country with problems like Colombia? I asked myself this candidly, like a child. Starting with this naïve question, I improvised in the rehearsal space, slowly finding stories to tell and songs to accompany with my *charango*, and little by little I gave birth to a character who was a storyteller. Later I developed the script and the plot.

The obstacles that I chose to confront in this performance were to direct myself (I had never directed before) and to ask a naïve question. This was the biggest responsibility and the most difficult task.

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In 1987, I worked on a performance

about survivors of a world catastrophe. To create my character I chose to read some books on the American Indians, and their culture before and after European colonisation. In one of these books, written by Black Elk, I found the text that gave birth to my character: "What is truth? When the heart is sad, we must see truth with a happy face. When the heart is happy, we must see truth with a sad face." This question and answer remain with me still.

Having directed my group's early performances, I realise how different it is to choose a character oneself rather than receive one from a director. When I can choose the character on which I work and am also the director of the piece, I am free to follow my needs, but I risk respecting my own wishes too much. I must be careful not to take myself too seriously. I must surprise myself, know at what I am aiming and accept the changes that occur, as when we choose to make a journey exploring new territories.

Working with a director, I have the freedom to wait for the performance theme to be given, but I risk waiting too long. I must be careful to keep my own needs alive, respecting the director's decisions and yet protecting what is important to me. Sometimes this implies going against the director's suggestions, for example if I don't agree on the way an improvisation is edited, or if essential parts of my work are cut, or if a detail or a costume that have importance for me are changed. To dissent means either proposing alternative solutions which maintain what is important for me, or keeping alive what has been cut by inserting it into other moments of the performance, probably changing its form but retaining its essence.

In the past, I have interpreted both female and male roles. For example, in *Qarrtsiluni* (1997, directed by Jadranka Andjelic), I worked on a fisherman and on a young girl dressed in red. For the male char-

acter I used the "samurai" energy (from a phase of my training that elaborates a samurai figure). For the female character, the director's decision to put me in a tight dress and high heeled-shoes, clothes that I do not wear normally, was very helpful. These concrete elements forced me to change my way of moving and walking.

Spugna (Sponge) is a character who helped me discover a new and comic world. To find his way of walking, I used a part of the training called "exercises out of balance". Spugna's steps were very unstable, as I worked with the image of walking on a sheet of ice. Later I understood that he was a character who loved wine. My colleague Antonella, the group's stage designer and painter, named him. She also suggested his costume, which he still wears today. Later I elaborated this character with the director Leo Sykes during work on a children's performance in 1995.

Working on a clown has allowed me to discover a different way of acting and reacting from that which I usually employ. I could say that when I work on the clown my way of thinking changes. As Spugna I can react to absurd things in a very serious manner, I can believe in what is evidently false, I can react long after the natural time for reacting. The particular way of thinking regulates the timing for action and reaction, apparently without any logic, but in reality following very precisely the logic determined by an ancient clown tradition.

During workshops I conduct, I am often asked what the use of training is and how training can be used in creative work. Training for me is similar to the way in which the peasant prepares the ground. It is a way of getting ready to receive, of emptying oneself of everyday thoughts and physical stereotypes. Training helps us to learn new physical conventions, to listen to the body through new rules, to use a different

alphabet and language. In the same way as the ground must be ready to accommodate a new plant, an actor must be ready to house a new being. In each phase of the training I work on energy, I try to discover its "essence", which I am able to find if I understand the reason for my actions and reactions, the principle behind them, what drives me to act. Then thought and action are connected, and the ground is ready.

I would like to conclude with what I wrote for the performance *Una spada per la mano* (A sword in my hand), because this text describes the journey and adventure that awaits me when I begin to work on a new character:

I will speak; I will speak of the line on which life dances, of the loneliness where secrets reside, of the path of dreams, of fate's wheel. In this labyrinth that hosts life I will shout if necessary in order to succeed, to continue my journey. I will sing and change appearance until I myself will know no longer if I am legend, dream, an old man's memory or a storyteller.

And when I reach the tip of this story, when the dizziness of words has scraped my skin and dried up my tongue, when my bones are tired, I will realise that I have tried to tell what cannot be told, have tried to understand what cannot be understood. Perhaps the only thing that I will have been able to find is a sword, a sword in my hand.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

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