

Maysa Zaky

Disappearing in Theatre

At the final meeting for participants in the Odin Week, I was very struck when Julia Varley mentioned that during her first years at Odin Teatret she had felt as if she were undergoing a period of disappearance. She said this in May 2003, in answer to a question concerning the critical moment of conversion decades earlier for most of the Odin members from an active political commitment to a theatrical one.

It was only then that I was able to recall a recent period of my life, which had never before been so clearly or well defined. Now I understand that it was a period or phase of disappearance. But what struck me most was the fact that someone should *choose* to disappear into theatre, especially when that person is an actress!

What was it that I wanted most when I chose to write about theatre more than fifteen years ago? "I'll tell you what I want. Magic! Yes, Yes, magic!" as Blanche Dubois said in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Blanche didn't lie. I looked for that which is beyond the ordinary, the everyday, the realistic, the redundant.

Though fond of writing, I couldn't bear to be alone so the best field of interaction for me became the stage and the performers. It is in this area between the auditorium and the proscenium that I search for the words, the artistic logic, the nature of energy and the sophisticated sequence of theatrical reactions.

I used to enjoy learning chemistry at high school; perhaps it was there that one of my problems with intellectual theatrical life in Egypt began. The use of scientific analysis, literary artistic passion and imagery cause bewilderment in a society fond of easy classification, when people are either highbrow professors of drama or famous journalists and critics backed by the full authority of a weekly column. A kind of monstrous tribal rivalry is encouraged which the so-called civilisation hides behind a pose of courtesy, while the reality is that much indifference exists on both sides towards the subject, in this case, theatre.

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It is the classifications and definitions that I hate most. Over the years, this has proved to be not only an integral part of the behaviour of revolutionary youth, but also a way of thinking.

In 1986 I started working on the editorial board of the only Egyptian theatre magazine that existed at the time. For me this work at the magazine meant both the enjoyment of a meticulous artistic process in which I could control the context of my articles - a very early, selfish, professional desire - and collaborating with a host of promising and established writers to ward off loneliness. I have always been so scared of being a loner, although I was at school in a way, and certainly at college. I entered this field and worked in this magazine with the precision of chemistry and the passion of art.

In the early 1990s just as the magazine was becoming effective in the field of theatre, causing enough trouble and turbulence in the relaxed, ordinary routine of criticism and pre-set ideas; just as I was starting to feel at home in theatres and theatrical spaces; just as my feet were finally beginning to feel Mother Earth so that I could look ahead to all the work that I would have to do to escape the terror of feeling ignorant that haunted me all the time - it was exactly then that the "experts" ganged up to spoil everything. You wouldn't have thought there could be so many of them everywhere!

This is what I wrote spontaneously on the aeroplane on my way back to Egypt from Denmark, immediately after attending the Odin Week. Later, however, whenever I tried to pick up this writing and develop it, I couldn't do so.

Perhaps this was because I noticed that I slipped back in time to the circumstances of leaving the magazine, without realising how many years had gone by since. Perhaps the inhibition was innate embarrassment at the

melodrama, since however authentic it was, the melodrama was also sometimes humiliating or unconvincing. Or was it fear of the deceptive eye of nostalgia that held me back?

But in order to speak of disappearance, I couldn't avoid writing this introduction.

It took me years to learn the dynamics of movement - or stagnation, in my eyes - of a particular society. It was unbelievably difficult and painful in physical terms to learn that searching for a space or a starting point had a political dimension; that the arrangement of words in a certain article, the style, and promoting the different in theatre, in a certain way were all threats to an insecure and vulnerable system. I discovered that to receive theatre with all one's senses, mentally, emotionally and physically, was such a change in perception for a stereotyped, rigid society that it endangered its stability (which I would call laziness) and the welfare of its influential individuals. And if the threat comes from young people, it is even bigger.

I thought I was an apolitical person, searching for beauty, space and camaraderie. But the more I tried to avoid politics, the deeper I was sucked into the more serious, sophisticated political layers and the "equations" of a society.

It was during this period of acute cultural shock and complete disorientation, while I was in the process of learning the strategies and tactics of power games, that an early tendency towards self-effacement grew in me, engulfing my appearance and presence. But it was not only this, for we could feel then the beams of negative energy aimed at us, as if to erase our work. In addition I had to experience the unbearable denial of my dearest and nearest. On top of it all, I lost a very dear person, the most essential to my future life. He was so young. I was caught within a greater drama than I

had ever experienced before, so that the effect of the stage on me became minimal.

Sometimes, however, I used to sneak into theatres trying to relate, but always hoping to be like the famous Invisible Man. It was not only the feeling that I was walking in slow motion into a vacuum, out of total detachment or the disgrace of defeat and helpless anger, but also that the void and inner emptiness which I most feared might be exposed. All this made the question of integrity a distant one. The integrity of self? Where was that self? Part of it was in my personal convictions that I couldn't defend; in the words that were fragmented and decayed; in the familiar places I went to which felt as if I had never visited them before; in the craft I had wanted to develop and excel in; in the supposed group that was dismantled. A great deal of that self had probably gone with the loss of my lover and life and work companion. At the time, there seemed to be nothing and no one whose integrity I needed to defend.

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

From then on, Humpty was like a vague shapeless something, or an amoebic cell that could only relate and attain presence, volume and a sense of existence when clinging to a stimulating work of art. This accounts for the number of articles I wrote unexpectedly off and on, during that period.

Sometimes the urge to disappear completely, to vanish, was so great, that I hardly knew if it was a state imposed upon me or an innate wish which I would always have to resist, something similar to the forces of life and death.

I have always been fond of acting. My first opportunity came with *Sahrawya*

(Desert girls) a six-day run of performances at the Hanager centre in 1994. It was a free adaptation of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, directed by Effat Yehya and presented by her free theatre group The Caravan.

I had started to work on the performance in the early stages of the period I have just mentioned, before all the factors combined into a more extended process. One of the positive aspects of such a traumatic experience was that the vagueness of the so-called self and the existential crisis connected to presence, allowed for an exploration of hidden places of the soul and body. Sometimes, it is limiting to stick to only one craft skill and attempt to attain all your sense of identity, integrity and even your dignity out of that!

Yes, I loved this stage! It was all sand, and I wallowed in sand, playing with it, and when the moment of death came, which the director asked each one of us to choose for herself - very kind of her! - I could overhear an iconic song of Om Kolthoom's, the most famous Egyptian Arabic singer. Following the popular lines pleading for freedom, I was miming her characteristic arm movement and tempo of the feet, so enjoyably dignified. While my hands rose upwards, I reached out on tiptoe. I discovered a longing to fly - the best position for an old nomadic girl, with mystical leanings and an irresistible wanderlust. This was the moment to choose for her death. About to fly - to die - while jumping backwards into the sand. I never expected to be that free with my body. I was at home.

It was not until 2003 that I had another opportunity to experience that sense of wholeness and belonging. It was in the performance of *The English Lover* by Marguerite Duras, translated into Arabic and directed by Nora Amin, and presented by her independent theatre group La Musica, one of the latest comers to the free theatre movement.

For a woman who for a long time had been living off hasty appearances and an elusive presence; for a woman who had been keeping a low profile in professional circles and even in social life; for a critic who had agonised over words - to give a glimpse of the complex feelings that mark theatrical presence was not easy. Not this time. To plunge into theatrical space, being watched by others; to cross the border between the auditorium and proscenium in the full light and focus of the eye - oh God!

In a way it was the gradual, cleverly planned opening up of the traditions and history of Odin Teatret during its workshop week that partly explained to me this daring step of mine. It is apparent that one of Odin's life-long sources of strength and resistance is holding to the mask and realising its authority. In his concluding lecture, Eugenio Barba clearly mentioned "hiding behind the mask" as a great source of power for theatre people, the "different tribe".

Now I know why I was extremely sensitive to any element or slight change in the performance that might cause a scratch in my professional actor's mask. I felt that I might crumble, as in a Walt Disney film as soon as the magic is gone, leaving an ugly irregularly patched Invisible Man, or me, naked and cruelly exposed to strangers. Within the character the mask shields me and I can safely disappear.

Last September, during another acting workshop, the lovely energetic Dutch director Frances Sanders was explaining how the energy generated by every part of our bodies should inject life into the half masks we were wearing, for "masks never lie", she said. Between these two simple and perceptive statements, "hide behind the mask" and "masks never lie", there was something intriguing, a promise of a magical "free at last" open space, yet a most disciplined and confined one!

Somewhere in between hiding behind a mask and the aesthetic truth of a mask, an elusive temporary integrity is attained and there is still a chance to disappear beautifully into theatre.

This is what we might call a happy ending to a humble note on disappearance and integrity. But who believes in happy endings? I still wonder what was really won in this so-called struggle to keep integrity. Isn't this idea yet another illusion? An illusion to cover up the real potential wasted along the way while keeping distant from the world, or in the slow, horribly slow, process of disintegration! It is not easy to face the fact that what we may have taken for the means of resistance might also be devices to sustain the rotten systems and weird minds, which cause us to suffer along this convoluted path.

I really hope that aesthetic distance and the theatrical illusions we enjoy most are not some kind of bi-functional device that gather the "strugglers" in a country of their own making - theatre.

MAYSA ZAKY (Egypt) has been a freelance critic since 1993. She was deputy-editor of the Egyptian *Theatre Magazine* from 1987 to 1993. She has published two collections of articles, *Theatre Lacework* and *The Suspected*. As an actor her work includes *Desert Girls* (1994) and *The English Lover* (2003).