

Roxana Pineda

The Path of Resistance

When in 1989 I decided to devote myself wholly to theatre, I firmly believed that creativity was something inherent to this artistic form. I thought that all the relationships coming from making theatre would be profound and intense, charged with emotions that would guarantee a different kind of future. This belief originated from belonging to a generation of young people who were born under the stirring influence of the Cuban revolution and who had developed an almost pathological trust in the future. We were convinced also that we had been assigned a place in the inestimable territory of social justice.

The decade of the 1980s reaffirmed this spirit of independence. Thanks to the passion of a country in constant ferment, many of us were determined to confront the world. We wanted to carve out a decent dwelling for ourselves within this world, using the weapons that five years of college studies had provided us with. As young graduates from the Faculty of Performing Arts of the Instituto Superior de Arte de Cuba of that decade, we felt on our shoulders the weight of the responsibility for bringing change to Cuban theatre. This responsibility was assumed not only as a personal adventure, but also as an attempt to respond through action to our recent history. Our country's transformation demanded social vocation in order to be integrated into the process of social change. The future opened up full of hope because the process of transformation was still young.

The political and social change that the world began to suffer at the end of the 1980s was perfectly visible on our island. Political vision swamped all the layers of our existence. It was then that the inheritance of a collective responsibility became combined with a need for introspection. Artists and creators started approaching the individual sphere in search of necessary answers in a world where many absolute paradigms and truths were beginning to crumble. As a consequence, Cuban theatre at the end of the 1980s began a process of introspection that today still tries to

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Roxana Pineda in *Piel de Violetas*, Estudio Teatral.
Photo: Joel Sáez

formulate answers while ensnared in a whirlwind of contradictions.

I came to theatre for many reasons. I discovered it was not just a simple form of production with goods to exchange in a market of shows. I perceived the possibility of creating real spaces for participation and a kind of commitment that was strictly tested by precision every day. I could choose how to form relationships. I could have the privilege of building a discourse starting from an emotional logic and from a deep dedication to what one is and wants to be. All this led me to found the Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara in 1989, together with two close friends and colleagues. We were, and are, a Cuban theatre group that works in a town geographically distant from the capital. Joel Sáez is the director, while I have always worked as an actor.

From the beginning, my passion for theatre was related to the need to build areas of intensity. I wanted to create a distance from claims that only those experiences approved for their utilitarian value in all aspects of life are real. These commercial experiences, already ratified by an often withering tradition, prevent other cultural

activities from having their own space to exchange and create a dialogue between artists and their environment.

Choosing theatre as a way of self-knowledge and rigour is in itself an unequivocally brave accomplishment in our context. Other artistic options offer the possibility to be self-indulgent and to dedicate oneself to activities recognised as correct and necessary by society. The group pattern and the work relationships within it also represent an unequivocal accomplishment. The achievement is that of not reproducing the usual relationships established by a social structure based on generalised decisions and strategies that are often logically planned according to a mega-vision that does not take into consideration intimate and personal needs and aspirations.

The need to build a space of different participation implies a path of persistence, which is often difficult to maintain with equanimity and shared meaning. As we are dealing with theatre, this path forces us to invite others to join in an adventure that does not guarantee success, applause, publicity, social recognition or dissemination of one's experience at all. On the contrary, judged on the surface of immediate efficacy, from the start it guarantees refusal of a tradition that does not acknowledge the needs of a theatre group devoted to artistic research and to focusing on essential questions concerning its role in society.

Therefore, in almost fifteen years of work, one of the sharpest conflicts that my group has had to confront was finding actors and companions interested in sharing the adventure of a theatre often wracked by silence and by the most discouraging loneliness. Trying to break through individual solitude has forced us fruitfully to be more radical in all the ethical and artistic premises of the Estudio Teatral. Our loneliness became the strongest example of how others

could overcome the same situation. From loneliness we have built a path made of absences that has allowed us to share and discover more intense and productive relationships, both from the practical and human point of view.

My position as an actor-founder of the Estudio Teatral has forced me to play a decisive role in all the group's activities. Being an actor does not limit my role to playing parts assigned by the director. The first steps consisted of a hard and complex process during which we were learning theatre craft together as actors and director. Our director was from a family of theatre makers and our degrees in Theatre Studies and Dramaturgy gave us theoretical references, but we were aiming for something different. Therefore we found ourselves in the hard situation of having to create our own references. Those were years of deep solitude, when we seemed to disappear from the world of the living. Sometimes discouragement showed itself. I could see how I was missing out on many brilliant alternatives because of the obstinacy of creating a theatre group in which relationships and creativity were marked by sacrifice and the intensity of systematic work.

Yet, my initial choice gave me no way back. I wanted to build my way of being out of a history and a new biography of my own choice. I wanted to choose the words, mistakes and sacrifices, together with the joy and immense rewards in my life. I could be born again by manufacturing with my own hands a destiny that was not decided beforehand. I chose a destiny that at least at one precise point contained my aspirations and my own way of conceiving the world: it would be my own world.

As a founder and actor, I embody the group. I am responsible for all its fundamental activities with my director. Years of experience force me to take responsibility for

the actors' apprenticeship and for all creative processes. I have to keep myself bright and luminous along the dark way. This is a hard obligation to maintain.

In these fifteen years it has been difficult to create and negotiate relationships and alliances with groups similar to ours that would enable us to resist the hardship of banality or simply help face the power of indifference. We have not succeeded in doing this in practice. The meeting with other artists has been possible only at times. We are not interested in a meaningless confrontation, but in a real meeting with people close to us in order to gain awareness of the point at which we are and to open a fruitful dialogue for all.

The isolation that living and working outside the capital implies, doubles when our theatre work is distant from the recognised canons of usefulness. Besides indifference and the absence of recognition, we feel the loneliness of a provincial town that suffers all kinds of discrimination in accessing goods available only in the capital. Yet, as years go by, we have acquired experience. The courage to keep on doing the theatre in which we believe has allowed us to gain respect and the right to exist.

My commitment to the work also demands personal sacrifices. I have had to give up certain things because of my desire to go always further and deeper along the path that I decided to undertake. Living far from my family and voluntarily giving up becoming a mother were difficult decisions, taken as a consequence of another stronger need: that of building a world with its own voice and body in which all words pass through my own brain and heart.

Theatre was the answer I found to defend myself from the uniformity imposed by the context I knew. Theatre was the space where light could be invented even though the soul remained in the darkness of a laby-

rinth with no exit. It is not possible to silence the voice of theatre, in spite of the threat of hurricanes or strong winds. This is the heritage that I decided to weave for myself. Going in the opposite direction to a discourse made of words that surrounded the world where I usually moved, the path that I was choosing was taking me away from words. For the first time I was being led to action, to the real transformation of my physical behaviour.

The obsession with the social efficacy of our work was reinforced by another obsession. Inside the group, we pursued work conditions of extreme discipline that would prevent dispersion. We concentrated determinedly on building our tools and on the desire to make ourselves from direct experience. Some books, technical theories and principles that were not contemplated by the existing theatre tradition supported our experience. We wanted to build a theatre group where no division would exist between personal behaviour and artistic premises. The actor's devotion as a human being implies a sacrifice to the craft, and a pressing and almost desperate search for a total commitment to the chosen direction. This was our way of responding to history and to the way we had been brought up as heirs of a social commitment that was inevitably changing because of the passing of time. We wanted this commitment to shape itself in action upon ourselves and to allow us to create our own voice.

Ever since I was very young, I have looked for areas of intensity. It happened to be theatre that opened its doors to me. The discovery of physical work and actor training as a path towards knowledge and real commitment set me on this journey for good. The practicalities of life hit me when the illusion of creativity gave way to the routine of daily work. Hours and hours of patient research went by during which we had to

invent guidelines and make mistakes, in order to build our own form of progression in time. Books were our best companions side by side with our stubbornness in remaining in a social environment that stated every day that theatre is not necessary and that our theatre offered very little to the community.

To persist is the most radical and courageous action in all our history. We stayed alive trying to articulate silently all the necessary actions that helped us continue. We gathered experience and developed the ability not to die even though everything was against us. Our existence was marked by the absence of confrontation, by the indifference of media and critics, by the lack of a recognition that in our environment is (or seems to be) the only measure to verify the quality of a piece of work. Persistence is the result of the pledge to keep doing the theatre we wanted to do in a world where uniformity and message seem to be dictated beforehand, where difference seems to blur more and more. We live in a world where all kinds of responses, in order to be deemed as valid, are forced to flirt with certain flavours decided beforehand by the market (something new in the universe of Cuban people), or tacitly accept a language which is considered to be socially useful.

Nevertheless, public recognition arrived while we were engaged in resisting, condemned by our own wills to go on "ploughing in the sea" (an expression used by Virgilio Piñera, a Cuban playwright). Recognition arrived in the least expected form: sip by sip, small and intense, as a slight drop that we just have the time to savour. Maybe this is exactly the stimulus that forces us to keep on searching for answers.

I live in a country where artists have the security of a basic wage to make the theatre they wish to. Official structures and institutions recognise the importance of culture in people's lives, and for the richness of an

identity that would avoid being suffocated. Without doubt, this is a condition to be respected. It permits the organisation of activities under the protection of a social system that recognises structurally the needs of creation, supporting and developing them as a part of a cultural policy.

But practical life takes us on a different course. The structures always go hand in hand with the people who make decisions. Cuba's economic recession and the strong political contradictions between our island and the United States put us in a situation of constant crisis and eternal precariousness at all levels of daily life. The vertical nature of our structures often blocks the creative independence of many groups. Although we receive a basic wage, we are not able to articulate deeper and more authentic reactions. We are forced to waste an experience which could potentially be a source of confrontation and cultural progress if poured into concrete work.

For many years I have felt the weight of a certain status quo which tends to paralyse experience in a constant inward flow to my group. It becomes extremely difficult to open up channels of confrontation and to put into practice a series of creative alternatives that can be integrated with the community in a personal perspective, without diluting the meaning into something generally recognised as acceptable. From the obstinacy of keeping silent I have passed to the obstinacy of breaking silence. We have to open up these channels, whatever the cost. We have to be even more intelligent so as to unfold them without losing the base on which we stand. We are lucky enough to have a theatre space in very good condition that we have been able to use for the past two years. But with it comes the need to multiply ourselves in order to train actors, give workshops, invite groups to perform, to follow other work, write in different journals,

organise events, etc. - something that seems so ordinary but that, in our context, becomes an heroic act.

The need to keep alive means for us a policy of constant premieres, with at least one new production a year (which many consider average). The economic tragedy we suffer prevents us from participating individually or as a group in international events. We have very limited possibilities for touring in our own country, at times because of indifference and incompetence, at times because of the lack of even minimal conditions from the practical and human point of view. This forces us to focus on our own space. Yet, the size of our audience is another problem. After the tenth show, further performances are often suspended for lack of audience, in a town of 500,000 inhabitants, with three universities, a school for actors and another for art teachers.

All of this confronts us with questions that we must answer as a group. How to bring in an audience? How to intrude on the course of lives which are so affected by their everyday problems, by lack of expectations, by a policy designed to promote populism that threatens the quality of artist-audience relationships and which often discriminates against projects like ours?

I feel totally responsible for the destiny of the answers to these questions. Today we are wiser, even if we have the same passion. The fact of living in a country where the artistic explosion is unquestionable allows us to count on operative tools in order to protect the quality of the theatre we want to make. It is difficult, but we will not give up doing it. We are better prepared. We have had the luck to be able to persist and resist. We have been able to make exchanges with the myths of contemporary theatre in an atmosphere of work and intimacy that encourages our own research. We suffer from the privilege of enthusiasm that this country

gives us, because, despite all, it seems that this island of sun and sea has a spirit of resistance that summons us and saves us from all evil.

I take a certain delight in having to struggle in order to make my work happen. I have arrived at a point where I know that I need to create other personal strategies so that my work and my experience can flow and not become entrenched. It is a question of not being content with what one has achieved and continuing to affirm and discover new horizons to nourish the path that is always covered with stones. I think that my sacrifice motivates and is a reference for others. At this very moment, the group feels that my strength and spirit push it forward, like the strength and stubbornness of the director who wants his actors to grow and build new ways of participating in a world where the available options are being stolen from human beings.

If it is true that I have given up the possibility of motherhood in its most common meaning, it is also true that I have another experience of motherhood. I collaborate with my body and blood in the tough labour of my group's birth. A labour that has lasted for almost fifteen years and implies, as

all actions of birth, a lifetime commitment. This is the best reward.

Translated from Spanish by Maria Ficara

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