

TRANSIT III

Theatre - Women - Generations

January 2001, ODIN TEATRET, Holstebro, Denmark

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Winter days in northern Denmark are grey and monotone, each one like a memory of yesterday. Nights hover between zero and three degrees. One night, Geddy Aniksdal says there are stars. We rush outside to look.

We are at Odin Teatret in Holstebro for TRANSIT III, two weeks of performances and workshops to investigate the transition between one generation of alternative performers and the new practitioners, to form mentor-pupil relationships to preserve forty years of avant-garde experiment. The festival was instigated and produced by the Odin's Julia Varley in association with The Magdalena Project founded in Wales by Jill Greenhalgh in 1986.

A declaration of independence by women in European theatre, the Project is now global, represented locally by Magdalena Aotearoa. Because of the network created by the latter, nine New Zealanders have travelled to Denmark for this meeting. The day's four workshops begin at 9.00 am. There are three performances every night; from Lithuania, Denmark, France, Wales, Chile, Germany, Argentina, Cuba, Singapore ...

Returning to the library after star-gazing, Aniksdal, from Norway's Grenland Friteater, muses: 'What we have in common with you is that because our countries are small, this may be wishful thinking, we are curious, and adventurous. We like to discover new lands. New Zealanders want to learn, to share—they gather material, information, knowledge in their backpacks to take home.'

Odin was founded in 1964 in Oslo by the Italian Eugenio Barba after three years in the hot-house of the Polish avant-garde. He wanted to find where theatrical illusion passes into real life. Looking for outlaws, he advertised among those refused admission to drama schools. 27 actors came on the first day.

Jo Randerson faxes from MV Mariela on the Baltic that the work-in-progress she will perform is called *The Legacy of the Soul*. She has been with this network since meeting Greenhalgh in New Zealand in 1997, and following her to Wales. Sally Rodwell, who managed that Greenhalgh tour, is an Invited Artist at TRANSIT. She shows her video works. Deborah Hunt, a New Zealander domiciled in Puerto Rico, is an Invited Artist too. She inveigles Rodwell into acting in her mask show, *Thief*. They rehearse at midnight. Hunt travelled here with 30 original masks for a mass-performance she is workshopping.

Odin's first tour, with the four actors who survived the initiation, was to Denmark. They were seen by a nurse from Holstebro. The town council had just instituted a cultural policy to put the town on the map, installing a huge statue by Giacommetti. Their next decision was to support a theatre group. The nurse suggested Odin. In June 1966, the council offered Barba an annual stipend and headquarters at an old pig farm in the countryside. By charm, obsessiveness and ruthless dedication, Barba has made Odin one of the most famous institutions of contemporary theatre.

Famous enough for Jenny Freed to hear the name while studying at Auckland's Unitech. After attending Varley's workshops in Wellington in 1998, she rushed to Holstebro. Why? 'I feel very insecure in New Zealand. You get the script, there's four weeks to put it on, to get back the money that's been spent. Then you never know if they're going to want you again.'

Randerson announces her show is, in fact, *The Rabid Horse*. One of the new generation Varley has chosen 'to fight against oblivion', she induces Miff Moore to be her technical director. Moore left Christchurch two years ago for the

Magdalena trail. First to Wales and then to Aniksdal in Norway, to a post-NATO festival in Yugoslavia, and a tour of Italy with the Sagliocco Ensemble. 'I've learned some real things from some real people,' she says. Yesterday, she presented her first ever solo show. How did it feel? 'G-o-o-d!'

On Saturday, the buzz is from Cristina Castrillo's *Umbral*, an intense performance that provokes a foot-stomping, ululating response. The magnetic Castrillo is alone on stage, showing 'a map of images, encounters, rest places and blind roads' from twenty years with Teatro delle Radici in Switzerland. The first to her afterwards is Rodwell, co-director of Magdalena Aotearoa with Madeline McNamara, to negotiate a tour of New Zealand. Castrillo offers to come in June.

Today, the Odin is surrounded by urban sprawl. The path through the woods to its entrance is flanked with carvings and Indian temple statues. Barba is famous throughout Europe and Latin America (especially Venezuela where the troupe performed on the Amazon for the Yamamani Indians). He is open, delighted by who's come. Like Birgitte Grimstad who, aged 56, went to India for a year to learn Sufi singing. And Maria Canepa, 80 years old, the grande dame of Chilean theatre, who recites Neruda with quivering passion. She is accompanied by Juan Cuevas (they married when she was 50, he was 23).

And Ni Nyoman Candri, with Topeng Shakti, Bali's first women's gamelan/dance troupe (formed by the Italian Christina Wistari). She is regularly on television, has her own weekly radio show and has performed from New York to Tokyo. But today the troupe has the flu. Smoking spicy Indonesian cigarettes, they visit the hospital for emergency antibiotics.

Magdalena is not exclusively female. Several men pass as 'technical advisers'; Alejandro with Cuban Marianela Boán, Andres with Grenland Friteater. And Barba himself circulates constantly. He asks me why we sing Maori songs. Is it Anglo-Saxon guilt? I explain we are constructing a society via negotiation between the dispossessed and the immigrant cultures. He looks nonplussed. I

tell him my suburb (Island Bay) was settled by southern Italians. He laughs. I say, 'I saw your *Brecht's Ashes* in New York in 1984.' He clasps me and bussess each cheek. We are both unshaven.

He hugs New Zealander Helen Jamieson too at the end of her cyber-performance display. She loves the response. 'I have support here, people who know what I'm doing—it worked; it was really good.'

Yeh-Yeh, adviser to Taiwan's Uhan Shii Theatre, puts his thoughts about the male question in writing. 'I was little bit worry before I went to Odin Theatre. But when I was there, I found relaxingly that the subject-women are only concentrated on themselves rather than against the other sex. There, I saw nurishing, decipline, compationate. I wish to be a good conpanion of our better half.'

I participate with Rodwell in a performance of poetry, slides and music for the Scandinavian Australia-New Zealand Friendship Society. It's the biggest tour operator in Scandinavia with 25,000 members. Afterwards, one upset Dane asks why he has to show \$1 million to immigrate. We plead lack of influence. Rodwell is indefatigable. Surrounded by Les Dissonantes, from Marseilles, who sing modern French poetry in 4-part harmony, she begins to organise a trip for them to New Zealand in 2002.

Randerson announces her show is *Broken Arrow, Clanging Gong*. A sardonic take on TRANSIT, its irreverent satire leaves the European audience slightly incredulous. Lucette Hinden, from Christchurch's experimental group The Clinic, is delighted. 'We're utterly different; so loud, so funny! I didn't know that before. I thought New Zealanders were shy and self-conscious.' Her colleague, Anastasia Dailianis, says her teachers tell her Magdalena is a fantasy world. 'If that's so,' she declares, 'then bring it on, we need that ...'

Randerson cruises on the respect she is given here. 'New Zealand has a poor culture of investment,' she says. 'There is no understanding, it's all business.'

There's never the feeling, like here, of putting money in and seeing what happens. That's why we only get mediocre results.'

It's the last midnight. We're in the Odin's third theatre space, brick walls glowing with ox-red paint. The actors learned masonry to build it. I ask Aniksdal if Europe is hospitable to young New Zealand actors. 'I don't think we have refused anybody who sits on our doorstep. I did it myself. That's the way I started. I just didn't go away. They need to find out what work is to be done and prove that they are able to it. They might be the person we need, the person who was not there.'

Greenhalgh stops for farewells. How were the New Zealanders? 'A breath of fresh air ...' Excuse me? 'Just that—fresh air.' Randerson stops too, for a last word. 'I'm never asked to perform in NZ, never asked to audition ...'