

Journey To Holstebro  
Kerensa Johnston

I feel like I have been coming here all my life.. ever since I studied alternative theatre. In reality, I have been trying to get here for two years. I left Australia two years ago, having paid to do workshops at the Odin Week festival. On my way to the festival, I stopped in at Bali for two weeks. Initially I extended my stay a month with the hope of getting new computer parts. The following month, I stayed a bit longer for performance opportunities. That was September 1999; I wrote to Sigrid and said I couldn't make it. She offered me a refund and I wrote asking her to hold my money because I would try and make it the following January.

Every month my plans changed and every Odin week, I would write again and say sorry I couldn't make it, I would be there soon. This year the next Odin week is in March, and, well, I couldn't make it either. But through my contact with Odin, I received news of the Transit III Festival, Women - Theatre- Generations, held at Odin in conjunction with the Magdalena Project. I had my doubts about attending a festival whose application forms defined gender as being female and non-female, but I figured that Odin wouldn't hold my money forever.

When I arrived Holstebro after a long journey, I smiled... exhaustion had made me feel like I had climbed a mountain and now I had attained bliss. The first sounds I had heard were Balinese Gamelan. I knew the group was coming, but to have it as my first impression and memory of Odin Teatret seemed quite bizarre.

Mari Holt greeted me. I said, " I am Kerensa." " Kerensa Johnston?" She took me to meet Sigrid Post. After two years I finally had a face for the woman who had been writing to me.

" So you have finally arrived Kerensa.... Welcome" I had assumed that anyone who worked for a large organization would be far too important and busy to remember someone small like me. I blushed. I hoped she did not remember my earlier naive emails written when I hadn't realized what a large and successful organization they were, asking to come and research at Odin.

There were women there from all over the world. Old women, middle aged and young women with different backgrounds and relationships to theatre. Odin Teatret is based in Holstebro, a small North- West town of Denmark, with a population of about 40 000. It was apparent from the literature in my purple folder that we as workshop participants, would also have to take responsibility for being a part of the Odin community - cleaning, cooking and other odd jobs and that we needed to respect the relationship that had been built up between Odin Teatret and the Community.

Having read Odin literature on and off for years, I had begun to suspect that their study of different world theatres had only taken on the esoteric - the art of the performer, how to maintain presence, techniques, ideas. Through my experience in SE Asian Theatre, I

had always felt that, these aside, were not the only things to be learnt but the relationship performers have in a community and the relationship the community has in the creation of a performance. This has always been a burning question for me, coming from a country, where far too often the relationships between artist and the community are only dependant on funding and far too often only exist for the term of the project which is one off - it felt good at the time but what are the on going effects of the work. I also come from a country where there is a strong differentiation between community artists, the "serious" artists who do art to express themselves, the TIE people and specialist. In my times in Australia, I have tried to satisfy these needs and have worked in all these capacities but have somehow never felt like what I was doing was real. That in order to be good (good as an artist, good in the way you make a change in the world, good as a person and not letting your sisters down) you must only work in one field. But my work and my philosophy is far too influenced by my times in Asia. These insecurities I have, have certainly been fortified by funding bodies.. How could I possibly justify applying for funding as a community artist or skill development if I hadn't specialized for ten years in the one field? How could I possibly know how to work with young people if I had specialized in Balinese dance?

What I saw here at Odin, was a group of performers and artists who seemed to have learnt from their studies of world theatre (although speaking to Eugenio Barba after this was written, I realize that it was not such a conscious choice), but the importance of a theatre group functioning in a the community. It takes years for a relationship such as this to develop. It seems now that the people of Holstebro seem to have as much a sense of ownership of Odin Teatret as the performers.

There were about 35 invited artists and groups and 50 or more participants from all over the world except for Africa. The women from the Congo couldn't make it due to the coup. There were a few men there too; one turning up not realizing it was a festival of women in theatre. Many of these men were there either supporting their group or spouses which was great because often one feels that there is an absolute and in relationships someone must lose but here were great couples supporting each other at different stages of their work and careers or working together.

At the opening, we sat in a huge circle and Julia Varley welcomed us, urging us not to sleep, to eat quicker and take every opportunity for dialogue and an exchange of ideas. For her, one of the main concerns is that as we move into an age of technology where many things can be learnt via email, video and television - what becomes of the personal relationship and the transmitted knowledge that occurs between a master and a pupil. She also drew attention to the idea of female masters and the challenges they have. I know that for myself prior to going to Odin that my point of reference had been Eugenio Barba, that I had not taken into consideration that Julia Varley, Roberta Carreri and Iben Nagel Rasmussen, through their years and experience were masters. Finally it was made clear, that this was not festival of boundaries but of dialogue and support between generations... and it was that. The power of personal contact is often as strong as bigger actions. Older artists helped younger artists setting up meetings with other people if they were too shy

or hadn't had a chance, gave guidance on text and scripts, feedback on performances. Younger artists helped older ones achieve what they needed to out of the festival.

Following this small discussion, each participant was asked to say their name and their country and in eleven words or less ask the question that they wanted to gain an answer to. There was a huge variety of questions. The girls from NZ asked a question regarding the ownership of techniques and principles that are picked up in a workshop situations..... in an age where teachers often make money from laying claim to a certain technique it is a sensitive area. The Women from PETA (Philippines Educational Theatre Association) asked about the role women in theatre play in creating social and political change. Older women asked what they had to learn from a younger generation... others wanted to know about if theatre had a future in this age? Theatre and technology? Cyberperformance? And me, with marriage on the cards, asked how does one can balance one's creative needs and desire to be in theatre and the desire to have a family and children?

After the meeting we were broken up into groups and taken around Odin. It was set up somewhat like commune. Three theatres, places for artists to sleep and rehearse, cooking area, a library, a kitchen, an office all extremely ordinary things. There was no sense of preciousness (although respect and responsibility were always encouraged); we were made welcome to use the different spaces when empty for rehearsal or rest. Else Marie, one of the founding actresses of Odin and now the Web page designer, describe the building of Odin over the years. In the early days, the workspace was just a barn and when they rehearsed they could still smell pigs and horses. Gradually ever so gradually, improvements were made, extensions built. The floors of the theatres are a lovely wood now but this has only been recent (in a video of a performance from 1994 in the black room theatre, the floor is unfinished and you can see into the rest of the barn where it is now the white room theatre).

I spoke to Hans, a technician, and Eugenio Barba about the relationship Odin Teatret had with the community. I had also wondered whether the theatre in small towns was a Danish tradition. Odin is unusual in Denmark (although Teater Om has recently been given a house to rehearse in, 25 kms away).

When they began it was not something that was manipulated but something that grew. In those early days, Holstebro did not want a Norwegian company in their town. There were hundreds of letters of protest. Eugenio said that when they came, the people of the town judged them not on artistic ability or performance but on other things like how many cars they had, what they dressed like and one of the most ground breaking moments and beginning of acceptance was when the town people realized that the Odin actors were getting up very early in the morning and beginning training at 7am and working through to the evening just as if it were in a normal job. It was important to them that they knew this.

We wandered into Eugenio Barba's tiny office. Else Marie said go in, have a look, he is working at his desk, say hello. The walls of Odin are filled with memories and artifacts and travels to other lands, photographs and posters from Odin productions and wood

block prints of Grotowski productions, gifts from people and paintings that were done by one of the actors, musical instruments from all over the world and images of Sanjucta Panagrahi.

There was an old silo where Sanjucta liked to read and rehearse. For me this was very special. In 1994, I had studied in India under a student of Sanjucta Panagrahi and Kelucaran Mohapatra, called Kasturi Pattanaik. I had even seen Sanjucta perform in Bhubaneswar, Orissa and had been past her house many times. For years I read everything about her and somehow had felt a connection to Sanjucta, that in an indirect way I had also been a student of hers. The choreographies and the recreation of Odissi dance had been given a new life due to her work and research into a form that could have disappeared due to British rule and the banning of temple dances. As I began to read more I realized that she had done a lot of work with Odin Teatret and was one of the first collaborators in ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology). In 1996 she came to Brisbane to raise money for the building of a Hindu temple and did workshops. In the workshop, she recognized that I had learnt a different style of Odissi, a style that she knew. The other students had learnt under another teacher who seemed to be creating the sculpturesque poses by a hip inflection rather than by the movement of the torso. We began a small dialogue and I eventually asked her to take me on as a pupil. I wanted to study gesture and expression and the way it could be used to heighten theatrical expression and storytelling. Hands can add so much.

She agreed to take me on. We talked about the time of year that would best suit her and I applied for funding which I did not get. So I did not go. This was the last time that I would allow not getting funding to determine what I wanted to do with my life. A few years later, she had died of breast cancer.

Odin considered her a great friend and her influence and use of the eyes, gesture and the way an actor can portray many characters and aspects of the one story can be seen. Sometimes I could see specific gestures that were Indian related, at other times, just the principle. In the garden, there was a small shrine to Sanjucta Panagrahi made up of stones with small messages written for her. For me, it was sense of how ones life keeps weaving through certain points and connections, a life that I would never have been able to conceive of fifteen years ago.

The first four days of the festival were to be 8 hours of workshops and performances in the evening. On the fourth day they had arranged an open session Crossroads where anyone could present something.

I took part in the Wind and Rocks workshop in the morning with Hisako Miura from Japan now living in Denmark and Anna Woolfe from Argentina. It was physical workshop looking at breath and presence through the use of contradictions based on Suzuki's "Grammar of the Feet". Anna is a Suzuki trained actress with a real love for teaching and theatre. We were asked to describe what theatre, women and generations meant for us. Many of the women in the group described women as being strong. Anna questioned this, for over the years through her work in Argentina, she had come across

women who had lost strength, so much strength that when they tried to speak, they couldn't talk. She regularly met pregnant women who would say things like, "I hope my baby is son so that he can be strong not like me". Women who were so oppressed physically. Much of the work I had seen here in Denmark concerns the freeing of the body as an actor and then connecting voice and text to the score. In a very simple but strong way, Anna began to do this in her work. She used Salsa as a way of opening the upper body which is often so closed before moving onto Suzuki techniques. In this workshop one could see great changes in some of the participants and what amazing teachers Anna and Hisako were.

They had asked us to bring a song from our country. I didn't have this information, which I was happy for because I would have panicked and changed workshop. I sang *Indiya No*, an Aboriginal walking song taught to me by one of my lecturers Sue Fell in 1990. Coming from Australia, the idea of identity and national songs is quite harrowing. The other participants all had songs that were closely related to their history and culture. If I had been given time to think about it I may have launched into the Angels "Am I ever Gonna see your face again". But *Indiya No* has a personal meaning for me tying me to a history of another culture, to my history through university and a song that has kept me company through every country I have traveled, every road I have hitched.

In the afternoons, I did the *Performing Words* workshop with Gilly Adams, from Wales, and Geddy Aniksdal from Greenland Friteater in Norway. Geddy is the artistic director, performer and writer with Greenland Friteater, a group that does everything - physical theatre, cabaret, street theatre and the first non-political/non educational shows for children. Gilly is a theatre director and writer at the BBC. Despite looking so different and having different theatrical backgrounds, these two women worked so well together and both had the same philosophy in leading the workshop to bring out the best in participants through support.

It was structured yet fluid changing to meet the group's needs. There was one rule made clear. This was a safe atmosphere and if something personal in the work was to come out, then it would not leave the room, although we were asked to use personal material in a professional way to inspire and feed our work. This was not a therapy-writing group. And, jokingly, Geddy said if you do cry, cry, you always have two hands to use as windscreen wipers. If anyone had a piece that they wanted to show, everyone would be given time although you didn't have to.

The workshop always began with some kind of physical warm up and game. The first day was about writing - getting it started no matter how or what... often-short one-minute segments where we watched Geddy move in the space. Over those four days, some people created pieces that were presented as works in progress.

At the beginning of the workshop, I had described my fear of the voice. Every time I had spoken publicly recently, I would begin to stutter and hyperventilate. I believe in what I can write, but too many bad experiences in the past (horrible voice workshops, a director who said very damaging stuff regarding my voice and memory, a fear of saying things

wrong or offensive and having spent so much time as a listener) have meant that I have a fear of speaking in front of people (unless of course I am in the role of teacher). It happens on such a physical level that it scares me and angers me, because I do not have the excuses that many women have for not having a voice.

Much of the work that Geddy and Gilly did was about creating split focus or a limited time frame. I.e. no preparation to begin writing, no time for fear to limit ones mind. When it came to sharing work or stories, it was not done in a circle moving from one person to the next giving people time to prepare, but spontaneously around the room. Little things and little advice happening on so many different levels kept the workshop going. They allowed us to be kind enough of ourselves - the freedom to write good things, bad things and sometimes even somewhat insulting things to the teachers without personal judgment, because again we were looking at the material professionally. Everyday the sessions were begun with how we rated ourselves - physically and mentally - for that day, and any queries, questions, or comments regarding the work. This is important in personal teacher/ pupil relationship and something that few teachers schedule into their teaching plan.

There were other workshops happening simultaneously: "Singing and Speaking Voices" with Julia Varley (Denmark) and Brigitte Cirila (France), and "Life Behind the Mask" with Deborah Hunt ( NZ/PuertoRico) and Marie-JosÈ Ordener (France). Or one could work on a production project called Water[war]s, directed by Jill Greenhalgh (Wales).

Cross Roads turned into a very antipodean night. There were texts present by a New Zealand girl and another Aussie. Stassa and Lucette from the Clinic in New Zealand presented a work that demonstrated how they had modified and used principles/games that they had learnt at the Magdalena Aoeteroa from people like Julia Varley and Anna Woolfe. They showed the changes and the way they used theses processes in creating work. It was a very brave but important piece - it was probably one of the first times that the older generation could see how their work was being used and changed, a moment of inspiration amongst the peers of those girls and gave us new ways of thinking about the things that we were learning. The girls from Mexico showed a video of their work with Theatre Labrynth. Again it is easy to hear about and see what the masters are doing all over the world but equally important and interesting to know what your peers are doing.

I did an excerpt from a piece that I had worked on with a director in London (who ended the project early, leaving me and another girl with a sense of hard work no achievement, no sense of future for what we created in the six weeks, 40 hours a week process. He was the only person that had seen what we did). I borrowed props and costumes from Odin and did it. I needed to know what this felt like under the gaze of an audience whether it was a work that was worth pursuing. I got the feedback I needed. I don't feel like I have lost six weeks but have gained and now was able to put into perspective what it is that I learnt as a performer during that time.

There were performances in the evenings. The first four days saw performances of Julia Varley and work demonstrations. These included Castle of Holstebro, The Dead Brother,

Dona Musica's Butterflies and The Echos of Silence. It is a great training as a director/performer to sit and observe a performer in different contexts and stories. One rarely gets a chance for such immediate reflection on the skills and techniques of an actor. I could see where different influences had come and how they had been applied. I also could see that the work Julia did on her voice could be done by anyone and it really opened new ways of looking at text as some kind of score to be performed almost musically. You may see an actor play a different character with several months difference in between but rarely night after night and even with in performance as in the work demonstrations. It was rather amazing to see Julia in action - she was involved on an organizational level, the driving force behind Transit, as a performer, workshop leader and very often a translator into either French, Italian and English at nearly every single talk.

Each day of the festival began with a physical warm up and vocal warm up from different practitioners. Then followed by Cornerstones where different women talked about changing moments in their careers in theatre; Bridges, which were either talks or demonstrations in practice between different masters and pupils; a discussion panel to discuss different topics such as "Generations in Different Cultures and Genres", "Pedagogy", "New Beginnings"; and an Encounter which took various forms. It was moment to hear about the way different women work.

One of the most interesting and inspiring women was Josefina Baez, a Dominican immigrant living in New York. Too black to be Latino, too Latino sounding to be black, there were no roles for her in theatre, and she comes from a community that doesn't exist, that falls through all the loop holes of assistance, funding and has no identity on the American political and moral landscape. Unfunded, she has created projects with street kids and also has an apartment project where she makes performances in peoples apartments using poetry, rap and Kuchipudi (Indian) dance and gesture in the telling of the story. These performances then develop into a feast and a discussion regarding the issues that have been raised. One of the young women from Columbia who works with street kids asked the question, "How do you cope with that feeling of uselessness as an artists.? These kids problems are so great and you are there for two hours a week and you wonder what your contribution is." Josefina answered that sometimes the bigger issues are too difficult to tackle in that time frame, but what she does do is try to give strength to the foundations, what is inside the person, and she teaches mediation and movement to these kids. She has created a performance using the F word, and run competitions where the prize has been to take the kids into the shopping plazas of New York to have a cup of tea. Most of the kids had never been out of Washington Heights and in the shopping centers the police were often called because of inherent racist attitudes.

Another interesting project that is happening was the work of Ya Ling Peng who does an oral history theatre project with old people in Taiwan. The nature of the project - having to spend years with old people earning their trust, giving them confidence to tell their stories, and the risk that some may even die during the process - means that it is virtually impossible for her to get funding. Her early background had been physical theatre training in London and working as a director in Taiwan. She told the stories of five

women that were on the project. They could not come but on stage there were five chairs, the way in which Ya Ling Peng would present the show with the women. The inspiration for these stories came from the mystery of how these women had survived into their 70's and 80's despite a history of abuse and adoption. In the villages of Taiwan, nearly every female has been adopted out, given away. It was about these stories of their lives, their wonder at how their own mothers who had been adopted and suffered abuse could actually continue perpetrating the same situation. And yet throughout these sad stories, Ya Ling Peng had kept a sense of hope and joy, for these were the stories that had made her strong enough to make a change, drawing people to old people's stories, creating a sense of history for young people.

There was so much I saw and learnt and I can only say that if you feeling unsure of why you are doing what you are doing, lost for inspiration, or in need of connecting with role models, then go to a Magdalena Project event or the next Transit. There were performances of all different standards, cultures and genres. I remember at the last performance looking at the row of people I was sitting with, we were all on the nod, heads bobbing up and down. So much had been shared, seen and experienced in that ten days... oh and so much food.... stories that have made me reflect ... Often in the course of life one does not realize what life is offering. On reflection, I realize that, two years ago, I wouldn't have been ready to attend an Odin week, and that at this stage in my training, it was more important for me to come and participate in Transit III.