

Roxana Pineda: Some Things Should Remain Unsaid

Five days after the Magdalena Sin Fronteras II in Santa Clara had ended, when I was awfully tired and mentally exhausted, somebody stopped me in the street to tell me that Yoel, the event's driver, had died of a heart attack. He was thirty-two years old and seemed to be a healthy young man. The news saddened me a lot and I began to review each meeting I had had with Yoel: each of his complaints, of our objections; each of his absences or late arrivals; each scene centred around the *guagua* (bus), which had become the evil character of those days making many participants require a better future organisation. I myself - who spoke very often with Yoel asking him to be punctual - now felt empty of reasons. All our considerations seemed quite repugnant since his death would prevent him from ever driving a *guagua* again. With this bitterness I said goodbye to ten intense, hard and beautiful days. Once again, amid difficulties, imprecision, sacrifices, gruelling work and passion, we had been able to achieve an encounter of undecipherable dimensions.

The first Festival in 2005 had the charm of the unknown; advancing on precarious ground while trying to make each step be the beginning of a coherent and nice promenade. The first love can be remembered with generosity; the first gesture has the value of opening a space: there is no level to be measured against; it is up to us to validate the experience without knowing if it will be successful. And it was. Being the first time, all complaints related to organisation and logistics (a challenge to the gods that we were able to overcome), despite the ever present difficulties, passed in second line. The most important thing was to defend a possible meeting in the middle of our island, outside the capital, and to put the basis for an exchange carried on the shoulders of a small theatre group whose members, not believing in hierarchies or status, passed from being director to light technician or porter, from actor to guide, translator, message bringer, toilet cleaner, snack deliverer or the person running after a horse cart so that everything should turn out well and on time.

I will never forget how I completely lost my voice in that first event; nor Jill (Greenhalgh)'s arrival at La Havana airport and her direct sudden question: why do you want to make a Magdalena? Of the first time I remember the happiness of walking in the streets with Deborah Hunt's giant masks; and seeing Rosa Cuchillo in the Parque Vidal, forcing people to follow her Indigenous woman painted in white. Of the first time I remember Dr. Graziella Pogolotti at the Guíñol Theatre thanking Julia Varley for her excellent translation; and Julia preparing Doña Musica's flowers in the small room of our theatre. And I remember with nostalgia the lunches in the Education Visitor House, all the invited practitioners together, and how at times the guests would take advantage of Cuba's strong sunshine. Of the first time I retain many images, mostly generous and cheerful, although some - like when Brigitte Cirila was forced to abandon Santa Clara without presenting her performance and sang a farewell to me - were loaded with tears. Sally Rodwell was there and, to the amazement of many, she laughed and danced during the closing party.

After the first Festival I was left with many small pieces of paper on which the participants had written down their wishes. Most participants forgot about them afterwards. I was left with the friendship of many women of the craft who I had not met before except through the e-mails while preparing the Festival. Most of all I was left with a sensation of fullness for having been able, with my group, to plan, organise and defend a meeting full of life that prepared us for future unforeseen trials.

I know that an encounter depends a lot on its organisational structure. I believe that an arrangement is necessary to develop a particular way of thinking and to guarantee that the most important points - always hidden in details and never anticipated - are not lost. This is why one has to be very protective when organising an event. There is no justification for changes of schedule or cancellations, for lights or props not being there on time, for the transport complicating the intended logic or for the food causing delays or for the stove breaking down. I have always believed that an impeccable organisation is a priority that has to be guaranteed in an event so that the unforeseen accidents that always happen can be dealt with without betraying the intelligence of the meeting or destabilising the balance between order and chaos. But at times reality overtakes us and we have to fearlessly assume responsibilities that guarantee that the essential is not lost. This enormous risk is run by anyone organising such a festival (for those of us who do not have influence over control mechanisms nor have the resources to avoid disasters).

When Magdalena Sin Fronteras II ended I realised that this second encounter had been much bigger than the first one. In 2005 twenty-four international artists had participated; in 2008 forty-six attended, without counting the twenty-three young workshop participants who paid their full stay in Cuba adding up to an overall number of sixty-nine people. I had anticipated the size of the participation and assumed it as a challenge that would allow a more open and fortuitous exchange for all: teachers and students, actresses and directors. At the same time, more than thirty women from theatres of different Cuban towns attended, besides dozens of actresses, actors, directors, teachers, journalists and theatre students from Santa Clara who made up the regular audience of the event.

Once again I was astonished by the generosity of the women who decided to return to Cuba assuming the cost of their flights to offer their constantly bewildering work without charging a cent and make it possible during ten days for our small town to become the capital of theatre made by women. I know how difficult it is for many of the women to find economic support to come to Cuba from so far away and for them to adjust their work programmes and plan a ten day stay in Santa Clara. I know how hard it is to make such a long trip and only present one performance and work for three scarce days with about ten or twelve people who they will not meet again for a long time. I know how complex it is to accept a way of behaving which often is very distant from the everyday life of their countries. And I also know that, in spite of everything, something essential can be experienced at the moment of the encounter.

Two preoccupations always accompany me during Magdalena Sin Fronteras: to guarantee worthy living conditions and an accurate organisation, and to present an artistic reality that reflects who we are in Cuba to our guests. For ourselves, I wish to introduce a theatre reference made by women that I believe can stimulate, provoke and, why not, amaze us while facing the distance or proximity of these unknown worlds. Beyond these professional and indispensable principles, appears the particular human being that I am, with my preferences and vision of the world. Without this selfish perspective I would not be able to commit all my energy to what I do and it would be impossible for me to conceive and support a meeting of this kind. Starting from this selfish perspective I try to create spaces where people I like, because of their work and particular way of defending what they defend, can come all the way to my town.

The Magdalena Project attracts me because I feel it has a rebellious energy and a solidarity that goes beyond good manners. I have experienced, in many of its meetings, how frank dialogues take place and new projects are protected without expressions of altruism or paternalism. I have felt part of the fighting, critical, rigorous, loving, dreaming and plotting spirit of this circle of women who try to build a language from within theatre to preserve their need to be present.

On the surface we see the meetings, performances, work demonstrations, forums and discussions. On the surface are the topics that we establish so that the women can speak of their experiences and find a particular way of doing so. Underneath lie the silences, the unspoken questions, the dreams, the fragility we shelter, impulses born out of the force of solitude, of being on the periphery, of being aware of our separate position. On the surface we see the programme I have designed so that the performances can be experienced in equal conditions and so that the criteria jumps from one side to the other following an almost visceral logic.

There are performances that rouse a lot of energy and others that leave us indifferent. There are performances that mobilise our minds reaching towards something inaccessible that words cannot capture completely and others that leave us speechless. There are performances we would like to

comment, others that mark a beginning and others still that are of the kind we would like to run away from.

Right now I am faced with a dilemma: we are women theatre practitioners and the performances condense a human and professional experience; how should we protect the quality of the festival without betraying the space of promotion and protection that Magdalena is? Dealing with theatre, we are forced to define what kind of theatre or theatres we wish to promote or confront. Our proposals should have a strong artistic profile, a rebel vocation and a deep structural beauty maintaining the performances' intention of research, their opposition to complacency, banality and all kinds of domineering discourses. My own selfish self could put it simply: I would like to invite beautiful and transgressive performances that should never leave me indifferent. But I don't want the logic of 'critical intelligence' that we have inherited in Cuba to decide what to discard or applaud in my festival. While recognising that as theatre practitioners we must find a way to dialogue and confront the processes, even to discuss about the performances, I refuse to create spaces where some are the judges and others the accused. This is not the Magdalena Project's logic and this I want to defend. Cristina Castrillo always insists that we have to speak of theatre. Patricia Ariza refuses a process of selection of work because then no-one will protect the young people who work in particularly difficult conditions.

I had not planned to write about Magdalena Sin Fronteras. I wanted others to do so in order to observe how the meeting was perceived and what questions arose more interest. On the last day, during the final round, I asked all the participants to write a page about their experience in Santa Clara. I wanted to force them to write. Very few did so. I also asked them to give a short opinion about the event. Everyone wanted more time for the workshops, more time to meet and talk outside the work, to discuss about the performances. Everyone requested rigor in the schedules; some were very hard in evaluating the organisation.

Sitting beside Jill, I wondered if I would be able to make another Magdalena Sin Fronteras in 2011. And I thought of my group, of my combat partners of the Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara who, without being able to participate in the workshops or enjoy the company of the teachers, had remained day in and day out at the theatre or running around so that everything functioned without mishaps. My colleagues - actors and director - a small troop of seven people willing to do everything for Magdalena Sin Fronteras: Joël Sáez, Gretzy Fuentes, Leyza Clavelo, Eylon de León, Alexis González, Raúl Acosta, Katia Alonso and Alejandro Marrero. They carried the enormous weight of an organisation that, despite the difficulties, managed that the Festival flowed and reached the last day with a feeling of happiness and dignity. Once we were alone in our town again, they also spoke in a round. They all acknowledged that they had worked much harder than the previous time but that they had felt that the festival belonged to them because, besides the intense work, they had been able to show their own artistic work. Listening to them, I felt as if I was looking at them for the first time and I felt proud of all of them.

For the selfish human being that I am, the fact that my small group is able to sustain and organise such a festival is significant. Taking into account a tradition that teaches us to be guided - to be consumers of ideas rather than creators - and that we are a small ensemble decidedly interested in defending the theatre group as a space of research and as an oasis of artistic confrontation, the fact of leading an event like Magdalena Sin Fronteras, without concessions and in complete freedom to decide how and with whom, is reason for satisfaction.

I could say that my impulse to organise the Magdalena meeting in Cuba also comes from the imperious necessity of circulating my experience and that of my group, to give our theatre other environments to move in. It comes from my obsession to pursue spaces of intensity where the secrets of the craft can be put on trial and from my eagerness to have the people I love and respect close. It comes from the pleasure of organising spaces where others can meet and exchange with a different quality than usual because of how the relationships are prioritised, regardless the performances being good or bad (even if I always take care of the quality of the performances). It comes from many postponed dreams, from many conversations with mute masters, from an almost twenty year-old history of working in the province against the tendencies of the fashions of the moment, against the opinions of those who ignore us, against the magnanimous and sordid charitable gestures of those who understand us and against the silence that has always accompanied us. It comes from a dark force that transforms into wisdom and no longer feels the pain of so much apathy. It comes from the light of an acceptance of what we are and from the energy that we retain from our birth in 1989, when three of us decided to create a research group in Santa Clara wanting to change the world.

Now we know that the world is really only our own world and this knowledge is not bitter. Looking back I am surprised that, almost twenty years later and in spite of a biography full of black holes, we can feel happy of organising work encounters with the seriousness and rigour of Magdalena Sin Fronteras.

I am moved by the fact that my group, in exchange for working as beasts expects to have a live contact with people that embody for us both the innocence and passion of our first days, to see and hear an artist in first person, to experience the confrontation or enjoyment of their performances in our home, to be able to welcome a group of women who make theatre, to be able to *serve* trusting that this *service* has a value in itself. I am moved because, after all, all my colleagues, including my director, have no reason to share this selfish part of mine.

I always wonder about what language is needed for me to continue observing with curiosity and dialoguing without prejudices. I am concerned about the meaning, so that the days don't just pass by and so that the performances are not flattened by a daily habit of consumption that our culture prevents us from discarding, or so that a paternalistic or self-centred reaction does not distance us from a dialogue that could reveal openings or at least questions. I don't want to organise a meeting to alight hierarchies, but one in which those who have more experience can demonstrate this through performances, work demonstrations and workshops. I want to be able to create a space in which the whisper can become a living voice that doesn't harm; to create a meeting that, after just ten days, is able to inundate the habitat and get entangled in the future of those who have returned home. I want the actors of my group to learn to see, to have opinions, to defend their craft professionally. While looking at others, I want them to understand that only the work is important and helps, that without work nothing is possible.

But my wishes cannot be achieved in ten days: it is a chimera, an illusion. Ten days are not enough to learn and let go, in that time one can only *shake the world*: perhaps a participant will face an important question or be able to recover her self-esteem so as to confront indifference and rejection. If something like this happens I feel calmer.

Dear Ju, I don't know if everyone knows that you were the first person to propose to me to organise a Magdalena in Cuba taking advantage of the EITALC meeting which should happen in the Escambray. Somehow you imagined this possibility. You know as I do that many doubted that we were able to organise such an event, but the doubts were dispelled. Now the question is if we are capable or want to face continuing the Festival. We will certainly try to. For my selfish being the most difficult is to find the people. I find it more and more difficult to work with people I don't believe in. It is not a question of artistic talent, at least not only, but of humanity. It is frustrating to work with people I don't believe in because I am aware their perspective is to plunder; they do not believe in me either, but they think they can use me. They would never move a finger to support this kind of meetings, but they expect to receive the benefits. But sadly I also know that it is important for the Festival that these people are present. But I cannot be magnanimous with my dignity. Therefore I am an actress: when I feel that my dignity or that of the people that I love is being attacked, I revolt. Nobody can be entitled to annul us or give us lessons. I cannot work beside people who, even if talented, behave like slave traffickers. I will never accept a relationship or experience that places me or my group in a situation of humiliation, and this has happened to me abroad in a way that would never be possible in Cuba.

I make Magdalena Sin Fronteras to continue my struggle against humiliation and so that you all can continue coming to Santa Clara: I know that you

are artists who would never accept humiliation as exchange currency. It is in my country where I can be entirely free: despite the setbacks in the capacity of thinking and participating, despite all kinds of hardships, the indifference or the injustices that fall upon us. In spite of everything I feel that it is here where I can fight and revolt strongest. It is something I must do.

I was beside you when you asked the woman of the INPUD factory if it was possible to give a coffee-pot to Eneyda (Villalón). You are right: perhaps it would have been nice for her and an expression of generosity for what the factory workers had seen. But I know that Eneyda didn't really care: her coffee-pot was concealed in her shining eyes. Now I will tell you a story. While preparing for Magdalena Sin Fronteras I began to think who to invite from Cuba. The most obvious names were clear to me, but I wanted others as well. I wanted to find somebody who needed to be at the Festival, somebody whose life could be saved by this meeting. And I thought of Eneyda. She had a performance that Gretzy and Joel had seen at a Monologue Festival, a competitive kind of festival that people here like in which the wise ones teach the unhappy. Eneyda was an unhappy one and all the rest were the wise ones. They tore her work to shreds. When I invited her she said "No! My performance has many problems, I received lots of critics from important people and I have decided not to make the performance anymore". It took me a week to convince her, giving her time to think. Finally I succeeded over all her executioners.

Now I want you to read the letter that Eneyda sent me when she arrived to Batabanó, a place on the coast, burning of sun and salt on the southern tip of western Cuba, where she has made theatre with her husband for many years.

My dear friend Roxana, how are you? I thank you infinitely for having invited me to the Event that you organise. As you told me, I was certainly able to confirm how different it is from other theatre events in Cuba.

You, a woman, artist and leader of the Magdalenas in Cuba, in the space you have conquered, challenging necessities, lacks, misunderstandings, but with a great spirit that I know we all value in you.

For me Magdalena Sin Fronteras has meant a lot. It is the first time that I have had the opportunity of sharing a meeting with women who make theatre in different parts of the world, and appreciate the great strength and will power, the need of something to say that we all have starting from text, space, gestures, voice, although we live at the end of the world. The encounter allowed us to meditate, meet with different cultures, know ourselves, value our context and the circumstances in which we develop our artistic processes, our own codes, the freedom of speech, and this liberates us from being critical: this is what I do and need to say, that's all.

The event has given me strength in many ways; it has reaffirmed my reason for dedicating myself to this profession and how many paths exist to make good art.

Thanks to you Roxana for your impulse and encouragement. Thanks to your husband who accompanies you, to Gretzy, Alejandro, and to the whole team that helps you so that Magdalenas in Cuba are possible. Finally lets remember Violeta Parra when she says:

*"Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto
Me dio dos luceros, que cuando los abro..."*

*(Thanks to life that has given me so much
it gave me two starry eyes, and when I open them...)*

A kiss from Eneyda and Chuchi.

Dear Ju, when Magdalena Sin Fronteras finished I lost my voice. But not like the first time. Now it was a reaction to my psychic state. I didn't want nor could I speak. You wrote to me to know how I was, Cristina Castrillo reclaimed my messages and Jill wondered from Wales why she didn't hear from me. One month after you had all left I opened the letter that Jill had given me on the condition that I would not read it until two weeks had passed. She was afraid that I would be hurt by her always strong questions. No, I was not hurt by her questions about the destiny of Magdalena, about the sense of the meetings, about the need to have a deep necessity to do what we do. She is right. I think I will continue to imagine how to improve the visible structures so that the invisible part is protected.

I always expect your questions Ju. I know that with them comes the lucidity of a critical view that is never empty of love and real commitment. Because of this I want you and your work to always be in our house and that people who need protection can collide with your spirit. Eneyda has her coffee-pot; of the kind that no factory will be ever be able to give her. I gave it to her forcing her to come and you gave it to her working with her and seeing her work. This coffee-pot that Eneyda took with her from Santa Clara will never be able to be built by any factory in the world nor by any Italian designer. And besides, it is magic: it has taught her to speak!

I will tell you another story. When I was a little girl I went through a traumatic period because I began to wonder how it was that men stopped walking barefoot to put shoes on, and then how it happened that shoes went from being a precise useful object to becoming an object of vanity. It is not poetry; I suffered a lot as a little girl analysing the phenomenon. When I lost words after this Magdalena everything got tangled in the same bag: the death of our driver Yoel, the departure of all of you, my dissatisfactions with the organisation, the fatigue, all the accumulated questions and the sensation of wanting to retire a little to know how to continue. Perhaps it has nothing to do with this; perhaps still many dark areas are left. But for all of this and for some things that should remain unsaid, I want to continue making Magdalena in Cuba.

A thousand kisses, Ro

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

Roxana Pineda (Cuba) graduated in Theatre Studies and Dramaturgy at the Instituto Superior de Arte de Cuba in 1985. She founded the Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara in 1989 with Joel Sáez, and has performed in all its productions. Roxana has toured festivals in Spain, Colombia, France and Venezuela. She is also a theatre scholar and professor, and as such she regularly gives workshops on improvisation and composition. In 2004, she founded the Centro de Investigaciones Teatrales Odiseo (CITO), a pedagogical theatre research project, which has organised five international meetings. She is the director of Magdalena Sin Fronteras (Magdalena without Borders), a triennial international festival and meeting which held its first manifestation in January 2005 and second in January 2008.