

## Julia Varley: The Coffee Pot

I had just watched Eneyda Villalón's performance *Carolina de Alto Songo* in Santa Clara in Cuba, at a factory where domestic goods are made. The workers had sat on one side of the room where I also sat with Gema Castro, the young actress who works with Antonia Fernández, while some other women who participated in the Magdalena Sin Fronteras Festival sat on the other side.

Listening to Eneyda's beautiful voice and seeing her generosity and emotion shine through her eyes at the end of the performance had made me happy. She had participated in my workshop and so I had had the opportunity to get to know her well. Together with many other people, I went to hug the actress in the office she used as a dressing room.

Before the performance, as often happens in Cuba when there is an official visit from foreigners, they had showed us something of the place. In a kind of giant cage at the side of an enormous empty hall, we had seen how Italian style coffee pots were manufactured. An Italian had been there many years earlier to teach how to make Moka machines to brew coffee, and Che had inaugurated the factory: the many different leaders who accompanied us on the visit told us all of this. The workers smiled and tried not to get distracted while the visitors took photographs.

Leaving the dressing room/office I had an idea: it would be nice if the factory offered a coffee pot to Eneyda as a small appreciation and exchange for the performance. I knew that it was not usual to think this way, but I was confident that the enthusiasm created by the show could facilitate a variation in the rules and I tried to speak to the leaders present there. No way. No-one could assume the responsibility for this decision. We don't have the authority, they told me. But who does? This question remained unanswered.

In the absence of people who decide and commit themselves personally only regulations and laws are left as a defence and way of life. In theatre, however, we are forced to transgress and find personal approaches in order to create our performances. There, in the Santa Clara factory, two ways of thinking were in collision, two ways of conceiving one's own professional survival.

I left the factory sad. This sadness coloured my last visit to Cuba quite a bit. I have travelled to Cuba many times before, always full of admiration for the capacity for resistance demonstrated by the inhabitants of this island and for this society's achievements in education, medical services and the struggle against poverty. Every visit has given me something important and I have made many close friends there. In some ways I feel half Cuban. This time I was there to participate in the international theatre festival and meeting of women organised by Roxana Pineda and her colleagues of the Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara.

The sadness I felt as I left the factory was also caused by other examples I had experienced of how individuals, in order to avoid problems, have 'unlearned' how to take the initiative. We are then confronted with rules without a human face, forwarded from one office to the next, until we finally give up organising something that should be simple but becomes more and more impossible. Not even the leaders are able to change the established way of doing things.

In the final Round in Santa Clara - the last meeting in a circle during which all the women who had participated in the Magdalena Sin Fronteras event spoke one at a time - the tears, dreams, laughter and wishes to participate again next time, the need to meet and the thanks were a demonstration of how much oxygen the Festival had provided; a space necessary for the Latin American and Cuban women as much as for the foreigners.

In an interview for television I had been asked: will there be another Magdalena in Santa Clara? I answered that I didn't know if Roxana and Gretzy, Alejandro and Joël, would have the persistence, strength and patience to face the organisation of another event despite knowing how important it is for their group and for the Cuban theatre women who attend.

The theme of the festival and meeting was "Actresses/Directors". The theme probably arose from Roxana Pineda's concerns: she wants to continue as an actress in her group but has begun to direct in the school where she teaches as well. The theme was also the consequence of the Magdalena environment where many women have passed through the same process. They have grown initially in the profession as actresses and little by little, to satisfy personal needs and the demands of their pupils, they have begun to direct: Cristina Castrillo, Geddy Aniksdal, Jill Greenhalgh, Maria Porter, myself... The same has happened for many Cuban women theatre practitioners: Flora Lauten, Antonia Fernández, Nelda Castillo...

The questions Roxana put to us were: how did we become directors, how do we work and how does our craft as actresses influence us when we direct. The answers arrived in different ways: through the performances; the workshop showings; the work demonstrations; in the forums; through the comparison between the abstraction of the words and the reality of the work; in the need to find principles and know how to move in the opposite direction when the situation demands it.

The last two performances I have directed are with actresses and actors with whom I have already worked (the Argentinean Ana Woolf and the Italians Lorenzo Gleijeses and Manolo Muoio). My first need on meeting them again was not to repeat anything that we had done before. Every time I direct, in the same way as every time I face a new production as an actress, I feel that to start I must first leave all the previous weapons, costumes, techniques and knowledge behind. I need to do this to be able to hear what the new situation is trying to tell me, to savour its particular perfume.

I am not a director who chooses themes at the beginning, who knows beforehand what to say. I use the process precisely in order to detect this. In the same way as I do as an actress, I concentrate on finding the truth of the action, with its rhythms, associations, colours, synchrony of behaviour, music, oppositions, light, complementarity, atmospheres, clothes, depth, mystery and objects. I am not an intellectual director who has read many books and remembers them; I trust more in my intuition, which recognises in the stage actions the questions I ask myself when faced with the drama of history and the simplicity of my everyday reality.

The performances, when confronted by the spectators, don't forgive. The relentlessness of what works or doesn't is imposed on me by my director when I work as actress, and I impose it on myself when I direct. I began to give creative autonomy to a German actor, Harald Redmer, providing him with different starting points to build actor's material and collaborate with the different directors that his group, Pumpenhaus Theater, took on from time to time. I saw a performance that decided for itself grow before my eyes: *Aus den Spuren des Yeti*. The same thing had happened to me with my solo performance *The Castle of Holstebro*, which began as a work demonstration and decided to turn into something different, to tell its own story. My training as actress and director has been to detect in the work the elements that indicate a path that takes me to a place that I don't know but will recognise sooner or later.

In the Magdalena Sin Fronteras, as a director, I showed *The Taste of Oranges*. The actress of this performance, the Italian Gabriella Sacco, at the beginning of rehearsals presented me with some mystic poems. I had difficulty in understanding how I would connect with this theme. But the work didn't give me time for this kind of uncertainty. When the actress showed me how she had concretely materialised my ideas, how she had transformed words into actions with dedication and commitment, I could do nothing else but work. At the end of the process I understood that my not-at-all mystic experience as a political activist revealed itself in the necessity of creating a memory, of telling the stories of people in whom I believe. The performance is my way of continuing to keep alive my dead friends, of thanking those who have given something to me. It was

important for me to show it in Cuba.

The Estudio Teatral had a lot of support (Thank you Julián! Thank you Nelly!) to carry out Magdalena Sin Fronteras , but all the same they had to solve thousands of problems; for example tasks that, in spite of having been organised in advance, turned into unassailable labyrinths: the transport, food and lodging.

In the context of the Magdalena Project's network, we have always insisted on the importance of basic organisational details for an event to turn out well and allow the participants to concentrate on the artistic and pedagogical exchanges. To eat all together, to sleep under the same conditions, to assure the agreed technical necessities, to have a common space to meet informally after the performances, to be able to arrive easily at the work places and lodgings are examples of conditions that facilitate the exchange, the reciprocal knowledge and the analytical understanding of the environment that makes one kind of theatre performance emerge instead of another.

This time in Santa Clara, especially in the first days, the division due to the payment systems between Cubans who live in Cuba, Cubans who live in exile, Latin Americans and foreigners, between teachers and 'youngsters', between artists with performances, workshop participants and simple spectators who wanted to join in didn't help create the Island Without Borders that this event intended to be. This did not depend on Roxana's or the Estudio Teatral's organisation, it was caused by the habits of having to follow rules without a face.

In 2005 the surprise was to discover the strength of a Festival that invaded the city, among children, old women and students. This time there were many more participants and there was an even stronger necessity to find places and times to share and get to know each other without the divisions caused by the differences of experience and places of origin.

For example, one night I spent several hours speaking with Dijana, Sanja and Maya of the Serbian DAH Teatar about how to transform the words of the teachers and to begin to speak with more simple and personal terms, about how we imitate in the beginning in order to learn but after some years of experience, we attain a different kind of language and should have the courage to express ourselves through it even though this doesn't give us the same degree of security. We met not so much to find answers, but to share the questions that it takes us so much time and work to formulate.

That night we drank beer, paid in convertible pesos. This is the flavour that I have left from those days together with the bitter flavour of coffee from a coffee pot that the factory had unlearned to give as a present. But I still look forwards to drinking a good Cuban coffee. The meetings need to continue! Next time?

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