

Raquel Carrió: The Coffee Pot and the Next Time

Dear Julia,

I have read your article with true nostalgia. How not to feel nostalgia for those days of the Magdalena Sin Fronteras during which difficulties and successes outlined, once again, the invisible bridges that bring us together?

All that you say is true and has your particular way of looking and selecting concrete facts or actions that turn into signs to interrogate the reader. It is an actress' way of looking that makes us become spectators, starting from the written letter and small scenes in which the irony, the humour, the disturbance or the sadness interact to provoke a third effect. It is this third effect that communicates an experience. And it explains how your book *Stones of water* has helped me exercise my own way of looking to discover in the small things a live and changing universe.

In this context, I select another sequence: that of the old cart, mounted on a motorcycle, (brought to Cuba from Europe around the time of the 1950s 'after the war' - the old man said) and mysteriously connected to an iron boxcar all welded together for public transportation. I think that we were four Magdalena participants running after that 'thing', to cross Santa Clara's streets and arrive on time for a lecture.

How did that old motorbike survive? How did it get all the way here and in what way did it transform, with the years, into this strange device, survivor of so many ages?

It is certain that the bike is a consequence of the absence of buses or any other means of transport, and surely in the photograph that Luciana took our faces will show astonishment, curiosity or sadness.

In fact the vision offered by a city where such different times converge and where the destruction and poverty threaten to make everything disappear is not cheerful. The river that crosses Santa Clara, with stagnant water full of garbage, makes one think of the beautiful and prosperous city that it doubtless was at some time. I remember having crossed it several times as a child with my grandparents, travelling from Havana to Camaguey. It was a very alive city of people working and changing their surroundings.

I would have other tales to tell: the *apagón* (blackout) in the small hotel, La Rivierita, almost in ruins in spite of the attempt to rebuild it, in which Gema, Tomás and I tried very hard, with matches, to go to rescue Iben and her actresses from the most absolute darkness. When I found her she was seated, silent, as if the darkness and the ramshackle scenario of the place took her to another time. Strange as it might seem, I connected this image of Iben with her own performance, *Ester's Book* : the dark and difficult times in which, however, life is engendered.

Why do I think like this? Why doesn't the cart, the darkness or the river of stagnant water provoke in me a bad memory of the Magdalena days?

Maybe I have got used to the ruins, to the aging and progressive deterioration of the buildings. Maybe my eyes have learned how to search in the darkness. But also, in this hard job of living among old and used things, and among rules and regulations that hamper changes and personal initiatives, I have had to learn how to defend the small, sometimes almost invisible, buds of life and beauty that teaching and theatre have given me. I see them like this: they are gifts; small and fleeting moments in which a performance - sometimes poor or imperfect - bestows on me a gesture, a word, a tiny light that illuminates something. Or a student who suddenly surprises me, comes out of who knows where, with a language that doesn't exist, a way of looking that she or he didn't learn in books, not even at school, but in some place in themselves that I managed to awake.

You are right: there is a hidden and silent memory. It is hidden in the objects, the streets, the deep rivers and the dust of the forgotten cities. They are like imaginary eras that survive, strangely survive, the voracity of change, the laws and destruction. They are not clearly visible, but in some moments they become embodied; for example, in *The Taste of Oranges* , your performance, when Gabriella squeezes what could be the juice of love or nostalgia. I think, as you do, that the difficult thing is to fix, and keep, those small buds of life and food. How to learn to transform images and objects that surprise, assail or sadden us every day, into something that can be life and beauty.

Beauty is a word that I like and that makes me uncomfortable. It has a terrifying aspect because I associate it with something that I can't find and that I look for, desperately at times, amongst a heap of stones and waste. I know it exists: I have seen it many times. There are moments: fleeting instants of a performance, a painting, a book, a sound, or pieces of life that one holds on to and protects.

Each meeting with the Magdalena Project (in Wales, in Denmark or in Cuba) has left me different things: of the first one, in Wales, I evoke the strength and the surprise; of the second last one, in Denmark, a curious sensation of the passing of time in oneself and the emotion of the night, between one performance and the other, gradually encroaching on the sky; of Magdalena Sin Fronteras II, in Santa Clara, the delicate light illuminating the faces of the spectators like an act of faith.

It is not something mystic, but vital. It doesn't appeal to transcendence, but to what is left of life: to the rooted necessity to find a space, a place, inhabited by beauty for moments beyond the ruin, darkness or incompleteness.

I could speak of other reasons: historical, socio-cultural, etc. But what moves me finally is not only Roxana's or Joël's effort, and that of the actors of the Estudio Teatral, or the support of the cultural institutions in spite of the conceptual limitations (for example, the absurd separation of foreigners, Cubans of the island and residents abroad, which is deeply offensive, I believe not only to those of us who live *here*), as well as the difficulties of organisation and resources. I know all of this: I live it and it hurts me daily. What moves me mainly is the *real necessity* of this meeting.

Personally, I believe that where the landscape is more forlorn, or colder, company is more necessary; and where it is dryer, poorer or sadder, is where the delicate light of the stage can enrich and illuminate life.

In general, I hate the fragile optimism of the calculated politics that promise, as we very well know, that next time will be better. I don't know if it will be better. I don't know if there will be busses that drive around the town, or more old carts, and not even if there will still be carts drawn by horses, the Chinese bicycles, or the motorbikes of the 1950s. Nor do I know if the water of the river will become a transparent again or finally be only a repository for trash. I don't know if the city will be buried by dust or - as now - one in front of other in a bitter dialogue, the new Internet Café and the ruined colonial house will coexist. I don't know how much light and darkness the streets and the houses will have. But I do know that, in any case, the necessity of theatre and the meeting of different stage practices, will not disappear. As the affection and the gratitude one feels for so many teachers and friends from all kinds of places do not disappear.

For me, the Magdalena days in Santa Clara were prosperous, not for the difficulties and not even for the efforts, but for their achievements: the small flame that still burns in the eyes and heart of its actors and spectators.

Dear friend, to the rivers that connect your *stones of water* this one will always have to be added, with its black waters, because the geography of your heart would not be complete if it was not so. For you, for Jill, Geddy, Gilly, María, and all the Magdalenas, teachers and pupils, a big hug and

the gratefulness of sharing our secret island once again. There will be next time in Santa Clara... but bring the coffee pot, just in case! With all my love,

Raquel

RAQUEL CARRIÓ (Cuba), born in La Havana in 1951, is a professor, playwright and essayist. She is the founder of the Institute of Scenic Arts of the University of Arts of Havana and of EITALC (International School of Theatre of Latin American and the Caribbean), and full time professor of Drama and Methodology of Theatrical Research with a Ph.D in Dramatic Arts. She has received numerous awards and honours for her essays and critical studies. Raquel is dramaturgy consultant to Teatro Buendía Theatre since its inception, working for productions like *Circular Ruins* , *Another Tempest* , *La Vie en Rose*, *Bacchae* and *Charenton* , with which she has toured the world.