

Ginevra Sanguigno

A Moving Body, a Growing Mind

Interview by Maria Ficara

Can you tell us about your apprenticeship in theatre?

I began to make theatre late, when I was twenty years old. I used to work in an advertising agency in Milan and I did not like it, I only did it for a living. Then, for three years I attended the school of one of Jacques Le Coq's assistants. After joining his theatre company, I planned a journey that would take me to India, where I wanted to study Kathakali, and Japan, where I wanted to train in Noh theatre. My teacher gave me the possibility of meeting his great master, Hideo Kanze. It was in 1982. Once I arrived in Japan, I was invited to attend one of Kanze's classes - the school was very expensive - and I came upon a pedagogical rigidity that I had never seen before.

At the Italian Cultural Institute in Tokyo, I heard about a dancer, Min Tanaka, who performed naked, with his body painted, and who was considered to be the most important artist of the moment.

I saw him in 1983 and his performance made a very strong impression on me: he danced in a wooden cage, interpreting a man reduced to the condition of a hunted animal. It was Butoh dance. I enrolled in his school and found myself facing a very hard process of training. I attended his classes relentlessly and it was a difficult time of real physical suffering. After a couple of years, the company moved to the country, where things became even harder and more intense.

In Butoh it is necessary to reach a harmony between the body and the movements of nature. In order to do so, the body has to be re-awoken through strenuous exercises. When we moved to this place three hundred kilometres from Tokyo, we practised "body weather", a meteorological laboratory of the body, going through extreme experiments such as spending days and days in a wood with no food or tools. These were very hard experiences and, when we returned,

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our perception was so expanded that we thought our bodies could fly. The rhythms of our activities were extremely rigorous: from five o'clock in the morning we worked as farmers, because we cultivated rice and soya fields, then we trained for three hours and after that we rehearsed our performances.

I began to spend six months in Japan and six in Italy, because my tourist visa did not allow me to live permanently in Japan. This influenced my choice to not give myself up completely and exclusively to the group. Nevertheless, the whole experience gave me a physical and spiritual dimension that allowed me to make precise choices later: I discovered the very strong energy we all possess through the very light dance of Butoh that I had decided to learn. Through practice, and living in a very extreme way, I was able to explore my physical or psychological limits. Life in a Japanese commune, following a strict master who was highly attentive to discipline, the daily training with strenuous exercises, and the heavy work of the farm, made me reach such a level of tiredness that I discovered that, in fact, there are no boundaries. Butoh training explores the actor's limits, but in reality, through the exercises, one takes a leap and a flight of exploration towards other dimensions. We all have the opportunity of experiencing this flight, because we all have an extraordinary body, even if we are unaware of its possibilities. Working in this way, I attained a different level of both physical and mental perception.

How long did you stay with Min Tanaka?

Six years, until I decided to leave Japan. Back in Milan, a friend was organising a performance in the Beccaria prison, and she invited me to work on some dance. It was a revelation for me: there were gypsy girls in my group who danced in an incredible way.

At the same time I met Luigi, who came from France where he had nursed Étienne Decroux during the last years of his life. Luigi worked as a street performer and he asked me to collaborate with him, sharing the income. My career as a street performer began in this way, more or less fifteen years ago.

Was that the time when you first discovered your clown character?

Yes. I started to act as a street clown for a job, but I soon felt that it was a very natural role for me. The clown character suits my temperament, because it says things through singing, dancing and a lot of laughter. It is very close to my way of being. I had to choose: during my Japanese period, I had tackled dramatic roles, and I had only succeeded in producing an imitation, because those roles did not belong to me. I literally chose to become a clown. I am not referring to the circus clown, but to the transgressive character who makes revolution by laughing and making others laugh, because it is when one laughs that one realises how small our insurmountable problems really are.

How did you meet Patch Adams?

In 1994, Patch Adams - a doctor who introduced clown performances in hospitals - came to Italy, to a meeting organised at the Palatrussardi, to which both conventional doctors and exponents of natural medicine were invited. My partner had attended the meeting because he had to write an article

Ginevra Sanguigno at the Centre for Recovery of Physical and Mental Disabilities in Caulonia, Italy.
Photo: Teatro Proskenion

for an Italian magazine. Patch had given him his book as a present. It was by reading this book that I entered the dimension I was looking for: to put the clown at the service of our massacred world. Patch had decided to confront suffering as a clown and this is what surprised me. After reading his book, I wrote to him saying that I wanted to go to the USA to work with him. He answered that I could take part in his travels, but that I had to pay my own expenses. I had to wait for two years before being able to leave, mainly for economic reasons, and, in 1997, I made my first trip with him and his group. We went to Russia, where the clowns have travelled every November for the last twenty years. This year is the 20th anniversary and we are preparing something

special for the occasion.

Why the clown?

This character can be a stimulus for people to gain awareness of their situation. The cheeky aspect of the clown, free from conventions, is not frightening and it helps to establish a form of communication. I am not so interested in the clown's theatricality, but in its being a passport that allows one to be introduced into many situations, and in its recognisable physical form with characteristics such as the red nose that stops you being considered completely crazy. The clown is my excuse for approaching people. It is extraordinary, because also in extreme situations like war,



the clown is able to turn on the "switches" of life. I say this without presumption: we do not feel like healers, rather modern shamans who use the tools of their craft to let people rediscover moments of joy. When you are at the bedside of people who are really suffering, and you realise that you are successful in turning on the "switch" of life, it is an extraordinary feeling.

When you started this activity, did you think of children or of people in general?

I thought of people in general and, above all, of a kind of personal revolution. I thought, boldly, that I do not like the way the world is going and therefore I invented a character that allows me to speak, to say things, to assert what I need to assert. The clown's power is comparable to that of jesters, who, thanks to their not having a role in society, could say what they wanted without being killed. They are the only historical characters who could speak the truth.

You are not healers, but with Patch Adams you organise aid trips, you prepare surgery facilities where doctors can work for months. What does it mean for you to know that you are a means of providing help and solidarity?

It is fantastic because you become a link in a chain, you turn into a sort of activator of energy. We do not feel like healers, because healers do not exist. We went to meet some shamans in Nepal, who are very different people from the stereotypes we have in mind: they possess qualities passed down to them by their parents, but they are simple people; they are usually blacksmiths, artisans, people who work with nature and who mostly cure mental ailments. So, also the shamans are activators who have the skill - or the talent, if we want to call it that - to activate the capacity for self-healing that

every human being has, but that our society stifles: just think of the increasing depression and loneliness in our society.

The activators - us, but also those who have the awareness that they can help others - set people free from always having to use specialists such as psychologists. In Third World countries these jobs do not exist because people need to solve more urgent problems and it is through working as clowns in these regions that we have obtained the most enthusiastic responses: in the Ivory Coast, in the homes of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, where people are literally dying, and where when we arrived singing and dancing, people got up and danced with us. These things make me think about our society. We like being activators and we receive a lot in exchange, because when one sees that what one does is effective, one receives life nourishment. It is extraordinary to believe in oneself and in what one is doing; to see that we are of some use on the planet where we live. And I will continue to do so all my life.

How many countries have you visited with the clown activities?

I already travelled a lot before joining Patch Adams's group, and with him I have seen a good part of the world.

How many children do you think you have met?

Thousands! In Afghanistan they came to our performances from all the surrounding villages. We would find a sea of people in front of us, many more than we had expected in such a difficult country, where war had only ended a couple of days before. There were crowds of children, but also of adults.

Are there not some people who discourage or

even accuse you, especially when you go to countries at war, saying that you only do it for yourself, as people there have terrible problems and no reason to laugh?

Yes, there are. And it is true that I do it for myself, it is logical. If I did not receive something in exchange, I would not be able to witness so much suffering; I would get ill and die of sadness. I am proud of what I do - I mean it - and I have no problems saying it, because I have nothing to hide.

Do you all still pay for your own travel expenses?

After three years, Patch proposed that I join his staff and I have found a sponsor to pay for my travel expenses. The whole activity of Clown One is supported by people or societies who finance the projects and it is on the basis of this financial support that we can plan our journeys.

Is there a milestone in your experience?

Yes, it is surely Japan. It has been the strongest travel experience of my life, hard both at a physical and a psychological level. It allowed me to mature, discovering my inner self, because when one starts moving the body, the mind moves as well. It is the path that has led me to my travelling clown activity, which I have done only for seven years. This activity is the result of my years in Japan. That time of voluntary segregation, of very hard unpaid work in the fields, of tough training with my master, made me understand things that have led me to choose what I do now. I am very happy about this because, in some way, I made this choice unconsciously. Everything has been useful and I realise that all that happened before

was essential for what happens today.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

GINEVRA SANGUIGNO (Italy) is an actress, mime artist and clown. After her studies at the Civica Scuola d'Arte Drammatica of Milan, she trained in Butoh with Min Tanaka in Japan, and in traditional and mask theatre in India and Bali and in Qi-gong in China. She has been a clown in Patch Adams's group since 1997, travelling with him to Russia, Romania, Cuba, Afghanistan, South Africa, Palestine, Israel and Cambodia, and with Teatro Proskenion and Linea Trasversale to Brazil, Scotland, The Ivory Coast and Denmark. Ginevra works as a clown in hospitals for the Garavaglia Foundation Doctor Smile in Italy, where she has founded Clown One Italia, an association for international humanitarian aid. She is author of the book *The Laughing Body*.