

Cristina Galbiati & Ledwina Costantini

Intuitive Methods and Provocative Questions

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Cristina Galbiati

How can I transpose onto paper a process that does not follow the rules of logical narrative construction, but rather is fed by intuition and superimposition, chance and reciprocity? How many, and which, are the aspects that cross and combine, overlapping each other to mix again in a final form that contains them all, even if they are not apparent to the spectator's unaware eye? What is the border between method and intuition in the work of Trickster Teatro?

It seems to me that I am like a hard-working beekeeper running after millions of bees in the attempt to catch them all in a bonnet, whereas perhaps what is really precious is invisible to the eye and impossible to lay my hands on.

To achieve some order, I put into practice a process I often follow as a director when I need to clear my mind: I give my actors a task that allows me to narrow my field of research and be guided by something I am given rather than by something I determine in a conscious way; a process that is more intuitive than rational. I asked one of my actors, Ilija Luginbühl, to write down some specific questions concerning the creation of a performance. He had the freedom to choose the performance and the questions, while I retained for myself the freedom to answer in the way I thought best.

This procedure fully respects an implicit rule we use in our practical work, independent of the role we have in the group: faced with a given task, each of us has the freedom (and obligation) to develop it according to his or her own nature. Consequently, the final result is the synthesis of the work of different independent individuals.

Among the various questions, those that interest me most are undoubtedly the ones referring to the beginning of the creative process, probably because every time we begin working on a new performance, I feel the absolute need to have some safe references. It is as if a part of me refuses the challenge of the unknown, as if the need for certainties becomes so imperative that I am compelled to

search, more than for a working method, for formulas that will guarantee that I will, without mistake, chose the "right way". Methods and intuition... Methods and formulas... Yet I continue to repeat to my actors that there are no recipes...

In this hectic search for secure references, the first and only concrete things I can cling to are the mistakes we have made in the previous performance. In the case of *Rapsodia per giganti* (Rhapsody for giants), our last but one performance, what mostly blocked the work was losing ourselves in absolute abstraction. In the attempt to deny the naturalism that had characterised our previous performances, for months we got lost in proposals that had no concrete form, bordering on the kind of self-indulgent experimentation that I hate so much. I remember a thousand proposals presented by my actors, always accompanied by my unhappy comment: "We are being too abstract, we must try to be more concrete" or "Yes, now it is a little more concrete, the direction is right, but it is not enough". Actually, I think now that my directorial suggestions were not concrete enough, rather than that my actors' proposals were too abstract.

At times I have the feeling that the director's work consists mainly in the creation of barriers that allow actors to channel their strength so that it is not dispersed like homeless molecules, in a thousand directions.

I like to see that there are people who fall in love with an idea and cannot avoid concretising it in a performance and others who, instead, when creating a performance, start from a distant restlessness and need to create a kind of grid to move within. Without doubt I belong to the second group and, as a director, not having anybody who creates margins for me, I am forced to find a strategy that helps me not to get lost or, at

least, to get lost in a rigorous way.

In these recent years of work I have learned to start from my own way of operating: I observe, for example, that I react well when there are problems to be solved, so, firstly, I have to detect problems in order to look for the right solutions.

In the case of *Ghirigori per il lupo nero* (Squiggles for the black wolf) I began to single out all the starting points that might represent a difficulty or obstacle (described thus, this way of proceeding seems a method, but in reality it is something automatic of which I only became aware later). The main problem was certainly that we wanted to make a performance that could be staged outside theatre venues and that, therefore, needed a structure that would create a theatrical atmosphere, a set that somehow would also generate a narrative space.

With this in mind, the first steps of the work were directed towards defining a narrative space following the so-called *via negativa*: since the initial theme of the performance was fear, we first of all ruled out all that had to do with dark colours, too easily associated with the 'idea' of fear. The resulting set was a huge cube of white cloth, which could contain the actors and spectators: the walls and floor were white, the noise and feelings were muffled. This was our first discovery: the colour of the space affected the feelings of the actors and spectators during the presentation. After a few performances we eventually found that this kind of space forces the spectators to modify their way of being and their sensorial attitudes as well as their expectations of the performance.

The second problem concerned the theme of the performance and the audience we were addressing: "Is it possible to deal with fear without being frightening?" "Is it possible to create a performance that can speak to the child within every spectator

regardless of their age?" Some months have passed and now my assessment is that the whole performance is our attempt to answer these questions actively.

During the creative process of *Ghirigori per il lupo nero* there was a moment when it seemed as if the tying in of the different aspects worked perfectly: I remember our delight when we covered the floor of our space with white paper for the first time and we amused ourselves (method? intuition? chance?) drawing the path of a labyrinth with long twigs. The impact of the simplicity of the wood within the white compound had a disarming effect: it seemed to be the exact concrete translation of how I imagined the atmosphere that the performance ought to have and that I would never have been able to express in words (method? intuition? chance?).

Something similar happened with the costumes. Often, in our work, costumes are included in the early stages of the creative process, because they help - me above all - to have a point of view which influences what the proposals can develop into and how they can develop; the costumes give me a link towards the possible final result, all of which is quite reassuring.

Already in the first month of work for *Ghirigori per il lupo nero*, we had designed two sophisticated twin Little Red Riding Hood costumes. They were a little surreal, with short starched red skirts and trapeze shaped pants and military boots. While we discussed the details of the costumes with the designer and waited for the costumes to be ready, I asked my actors to come to rehearsals in very elegant dark clothes. I cannot explain exactly why I gave this instruction, but I think that in some way I wanted to avoid the performance taking too artificial a direction and that the elements previously selected ran the risk of encouraging the actors to follow what they

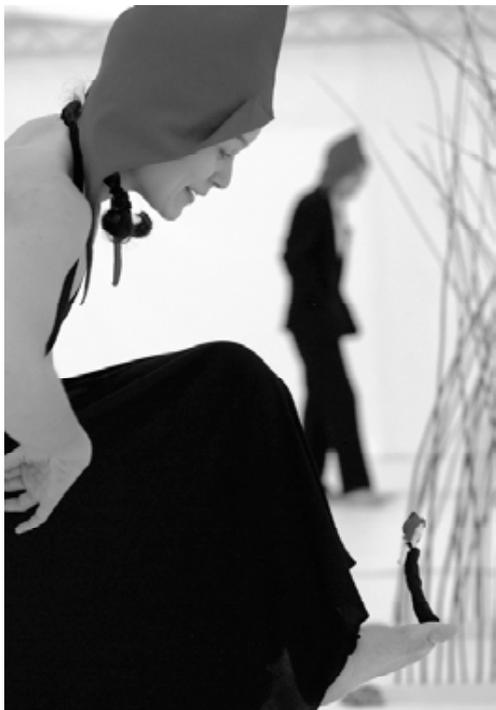
thought "should be" rather than what might surprise us; that they would remain unconsciously too attached to their first idea of Little Red Riding Hood.

The proposal of elegant costumes - which I had thought originally would represent only a passage in the work, a kind of exercise - in fact opened up possibilities I would never have expected: the smoking and evening dress immediately gave the actors' material an elegance and dignity that contrasted with the fairy-tale like atmosphere of the set, creating a strangely dream-like environment, which was surely more surreal than it probably would have been with the explicitly surreal costumes. Paradoxically, in their elegant costumes the actors' bodies found a freedom of movement that until then had seemed deadened by the idea of the starched costumes.

Problems arose when the rules that I had built so wisely in order to guide us in the work, started to turn into obstacles: the wonderful labyrinth of branches and the circular arrangement of the audience caused great difficulties for the actors' movement in relation to the space. The two characters, in their evening clothes with hoods, seemed to proceed on parallel tracks, without my being able to create a relationship between them: they were born in my mind as twins and they continued to live on as mirror-twins.

The technical difficulties - to understand where and how the actors could move in the labyrinth, the precision required by the precariousness of the branches, the need to change the actors' orientation continually - imposed themselves in a tyrannical way on what should have been the creative work: many scenes were born from formal rather than expressive needs.

And as if that were not enough, for the first time we were making a performance where the actors were both on stage for the whole time, and the actions happening



Ledwina Costantini in *Ghirigori per il lupo nero*.
Photo: Consorzio Visivo

simultaneously in a non-narrative context inevitably called for a more articulated dramaturgy.

I think I spent most of my time in rehearsal trying to understand how the actors could move in the labyrinth without becoming too artificial and without remaining still on the same spot for too long; how they could act in tandem without overlapping or dominating one another. For hours and hours, we rehearsed sterile formal hypotheses, without finding the key to understanding what would help us. The passages that functioned one day, seemed on the following to have no logic or meaning at all; the actors became more and more tired of such technical work and I was losing my

patience seeing that, in spite of my efforts, I couldn't understand how to get out of this vicious circle.

Looking back now, I think that this performance, which has reached a final complexity that I would never have thought we were able to achieve, is the result of the solutions we found to the technical problems, rather than our choices about its content.

The deadlines that were so important in the past, forcing us to be concrete in our work without wasting time on useless frills, in the case of *Ghirigori per il lupo nero* showed themselves to be ferocious enemies against which we had to fight and that inevitably trampled us down.

It is as if the choices were made more by the performance itself than by me; as a director I just recognised and corroborated them. While I am able to explain perfectly the steps of the early phases of our work and the choices and thoughts that directed me, from a certain point onwards it is as if the performance went "pouf!" and built itself. I remember well the feeling of tiredness and exhaustion, but I would not be able to describe what we created and according to what logic or principles. The image I have now is that of a fast video of the assembling of a model of a city, in which it seems as if everything is ready from one moment to the next, but in which it is impossible to distinguish the phases: the result is there; you cannot explain it, only take account of it. Finally, it was as if the performance had reached too high a level for us despite ourselves, forcing us to run to keep up with it.

When we perform *Ghirigori per il lupo nero* in schools, one of the most frequent questions is: "How did you get the idea?" (method, intuition, chance?) "If it were only a question of ideas..." I say to myself, answering: "We started by playing a simple

game. We asked ourselves: if fear were an animal, what animal would it be? It could be many animals, but the first association we had was a wolf and you cannot have a wolf without a Little Red Riding Hood... or two... or perhaps a hundred... This was how the performance was born." Pause: everyone seems satisfied with the answer.

"If only it were so simple..." I say to myself, and I smile at the arbitrary nature of methodical theatre making.

Ledwina Costantini

I am an actress with Trickster Teatro. Our group's director, Cristina Galbiati, and I agreed not to write about our training, but to describe the process that leads to the creation of a performance, even though this would be difficult, given the non-linear nature of such a process.

In order to set ourselves boundaries, we asked Ilija Luginbühl if he would ask us some questions about one of the performances we had made together. He prepared twenty-three questions about our last performance *Ghirigori per il lupo nero*.

Even though I have only answered some, for me it is important to record all his questions so that the direct voice of all three members of the group can be heard. In fact, I think that respecting everyone's presence can allow us to witness the intimate and tortuous development of a creative process.

BEGINNING

What marked the beginning of the creative process?

Cristina's proposal to make a performance on the theme of fear.

What was clear and concrete at the beginning and what wasn't?

It was clear that we would participate in the project, that Cristina would be the director and that we had the theme. We were going to make a performance for schools and take it to the schools rather than bringing them to the theatre. This meant building a set/installation that would neutralise the anonymity and bleakness of places such as gyms and assembly halls, and which would have to be loaded and unloaded, assembled and dismantled. It was clear that the performance would not be on stilts, and that we probably had enough financial support to allow us to begin our work in peace.

Everything else was unclear: how to treat the theme we had chosen? How to talk about it? What colour, shape, rhythm, would the performance have? What title? How much importance would the set installation have? Would the performance have the power to say something or would it remain merely an aesthetic exercise? Would the three of us once more manage to survive the creative period and come out of it as winners? How would we deal with the array of roles, conflicts, joys, envies, egotism, compassion, and passions? And, eventually, how would the audience receive our work?

How did you imagine the final result?

My ideas evolved and changed as the work progressed, as a result of the tasks we were given, the scenes I proposed and those I watched. I did not want to think about the final result. At some point, I remember thinking that I did not want to become attached to anything of mine - props, scenes, or images - so as not to suffer if I had to give something up. Then I realised that it is healthy to love and defend your work, because the intimacy of being and acting on

stage depends on this. I showed, put forward and manifested everything of mine by working as concretely as possible in response to my tasks. At times I presented only a sketch, but never an approximation; I took care of all the details and did my best to achieve the exact shape, colour and texture of a prop, costume or even of an action I had discovered, chosen or thought of in advance, and that I wanted to defend. Only in this way was I able to influence the work, revealing and, at times, discovering myself differently.

How did you begin the process? What was the first thing you created?

We were given two tasks: to make a list of the things that frightened us when we were children and to recreate the circumstances of those fears, and to bring a prop with which to prepare a scene. I prepared six short stories based on fears or frightening moments I had experienced as a child: "Being", "I accompany you", "The corridor", "The funfair", "100% polyester fear", "Nice fears". I only talked about the stories, not daring to read them, something that I regretted later. For props, I brought many teddy bears, which I used later for a scene entitled "The devil" based on a dream, or rather a nightmare, I often had when I was a child.

Tell me a feeling or thought you had concerning the performance when you first entered the rehearsal room.

Curiosity and anxiety: curiosity because we had just done two performances on stilts and I wondered what it would be like to work on the ground again, what richness I would bring with me from all that work on stilts, and whether I would have to regain something I had lost. Perhaps I had lost the

capacity to master small, introverted, intimate actions. I was anxious and afraid... of not being good enough.

MIDDLE

What blocked you?

Having to prepare choreography blocked me. Choreography is not a good word for me; I should sidestep the term and find another definition - just to trick myself. Choreography, for me, has to do with mathematics, something I really hate: it is like a grid that suffocates me, closing me into a technical shell from which I cannot escape. I am not able to translate the shape of an aesthetically pleasing movement into the truthfulness of a theatre action and image; I have to start from something else. If I begin with the choreography, my acting will always be empty, sterile.

What did you do about this block?

I buried it in the garden, until the next time, hoping that my dog would eat it in the meantime.

What was particularly stimulating for you?

Did anything block the creation of the performance?

Nothing ever interrupted our work. Of course crises occurred that 'stole' some afternoons from the work, when we shouted at each other in discontent or about unsolved problems. These were important moments, I think, but we never really stopped working.

What helped the creative process to proceed?

All our reactions and actions.

Was there a moment that was particularly fertile?

Yes! This was during the early part of the process when we all had very different tasks and the proposals didn't seem to belong together, rather like parts of performances still to be created. We proposed and created a lot; there was a wealth of material, maybe too much... but I remember it all.

Tell me one thing said or done by another person (director or actor) that blocked you and one thing that stimulated you.

I would get stuck when Cristina said to me: "do the same thing as Ilija". I could not imitate Ilija, because I am not Ilija... I believe that it is fundamental to the learning process to reproduce something alien as faithfully as possible, but then you have to re-create and transform, to make something your own that initially does not belong to your own behaviour. Learning and development can only occur when the passage from reproduction to recreation takes place. Perhaps "do the same thing as Ilija" was first of all a question of terminology or working language, (not a small problem: misunderstandings, incomprehension and conflicts often happen because of it. A shared language is not something you can take for granted, it has to be created,

especially when you come from different backgrounds as we do!), or maybe it was simply "do the same thing as Ilija", and I just did not want to do so, and had to find an alternative: "do the same thing as Ledwina". On the other hand it was extremely stimulating when Cristina, aware that I was convinced that I had a "choreographic block", looked for other terms when giving me tasks, sharing my attempt to sidestep that damned word so as to overcome the problem and then in fact actually getting choreographed work out of me! In other words, she allowed me to start from a place with which I identified more, in order to conquer the unconquerable.

Was there a point when the performance itself, rather than a person, demanded certain steps?

No, the performance didn't demand, we decided consciously or unconsciously where we wanted to go, how much to give and how much to ask.

How did you work for this performance: text, actions, props, set, music, sequence?

To answer this I must say first that, in my opinion, Trickster Teatro does not have a single method or a single, dogmatic and incontrovertible creative process. On the contrary, out of necessity, we have built a physical and temporal space where we can be led by the simplicity of confrontation, provoked by the inescapable progress of experience. This neutral place becomes the field of fertile chaos from which something can be born, although chaos is intrinsically difficult to tame. Misled and unmanaged chaos sometimes generates dispersion, uncertainty and distrust. We move, advance and sometimes get lost in this intricate field, which is as productive and uncertain as the

blank page before any mark appears on it; each of us within the complexity of his or her role. Each Trickster Teatro performance has had a very different research and construction period. This comes from the fact that individuals with very strong and different backgrounds in theatre schools and other experiences, confront each other during the creative process. This results in the performances having a discrete and almost tentative imprint rather than a well-defined common style.

Personally, I have developed a distinct way of acting during each research and construction period. For this performance, my way of acting was not to have one. I started at the beginning with each task I received. This often gave me the feeling that I betrayed my work; because what I created frequently had no connection with anything I had done previously.

To talk about the systems I adopted during the creative process as a whole, would involve describing the development of every single task I carried out, given the different approach I used for each. Instead, I prefer to choose one, in order to describe its practice thoroughly, even dealing with those moments when the subjective and the objective, or the personal and the professional levels mix, and when the need for borders becomes vital, yet too elusive.

The task we were given was: "Create a wood". That was all Cristina said, adding nothing. For a while, I got lost in the comfortable limbo of confusion produced by such a well-targeted yet enormous task. I was aware that asking for explanations would have been a waste of time and would only delay my decision on how to proceed.

I realised I already had a very clear starting point: the image of a bundle of long, thin branches, like those I had often seen older women in my village carry on their

backs; young willow branches that I later discovered are used to tie up vine plants.

It was already late at night and this task was required for the following afternoon, so I telephoned a friend who had a farm, thinking she might be able to get hold of some branches for me. She did have some, of different length and thickness, arranged in bundles and piled up in an old barn. But she wasn't going to be there that night, so I would have to manage alone. It was winter, it was already dark and very cold, her farm was one and a half hours away from the theatre, and I was not completely sure whether they would be the ideal branches. Rather cross and frustrated, I took the car convinced that I would have to give up the purity of my image and replace it with one of those approximations that I hate so much and always try to avoid.

On top of this, once again I had the dilemma of choosing priorities: that evening I was supposed at last to have supper with the guy I have been living with for eight years and from whom I had been latterly rather distant, lost in some absurd thought, or concentrating on making a prop or learning a text. As I always want everything, I found myself in the typically divided state of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde.

Luckily, halfway along the road, I remembered that I had seen a similar bundle of branches used for decoration at Cristina's house. So after a telephone call, I managed to have both the branches and the supper.

What I had to work out was how to keep the branches upright. I needed a polystyrene base, but after searching my cellar, I realised I didn't have one. Very early the next morning, I bought three big sheets and rushed to the theatre where I started to cut them into strips four centimetres wide, two centimetres high and three metres long. Time was tight, so I rushed to place my 'wood' installation in the acting space,

which, at that time, was already divided into a labyrinth by lines of tape on the floor. I made a rectangle with my polystyrene strips leaving one side free. For the time being, I stuck them to the floor with tape so that they would not fall down when I placed the upright branches in them. Intertwining the branch tops, I created a little room-wood-cage with a rectangular base. I was so excited! The wood was much nicer than I expected, because the dark branches stood out against the white walls of our rehearsal room. They created an optical illusion like an Indian-ink drawing acquiring three-dimensional life.

My excitement lasted only until I realised that my time was up and I had no dramatic actions: after all I was working in theatre and not in my old art school! Wondering whether the way I had carried out my task would be satisfactory or not, I started going over what I had thought about while working on my wood installation, and I structured a proposal in my mind.

I took as a starting point the image of the old woman who carries the branches on her back. I placed myself inside the tape labyrinth, at a little distance from the wood so as that I had room to walk, holding a bundle of loose branches on my back. For movement, I chose a very mechanical step we had worked on together a long time before and that we had fixed as one of the ways of moving in the labyrinth. At this point, not much was left of the image of the old woman, because I had to adapt the action of carrying the branches to my mechanical gait. The branches were much taller than me, and I held them with both hands behind my back and let them sweep the floor as I walked. As I went I repeated, first as a whisper and then gradually louder, a nursery rhyme I often sang when I was a child:

Biribicabi cabi cubi
Son tornata con le nubi
(I've come back with the clouds)
biribicabi cabi cubi
nella foresta dei carrubi
(in the forest of carob trees)

After doing this, I found myself with my back to the entrance to the wood. Dropping the bundle of branches, I turned suddenly and caught it before it tipped or fell apart like a Mikado game. Then I began to enter the wood, slowly pushing the base of the branches forward until I found myself inside. From that position, I let myself fall to the ground so that the branches would cover me. This is how my proposal ended.

Out of all of this, only the wood, with a more solid base that could be assembled and dismantled, (made by Ilija), and the loose branches with which Cristina replaced the tape of the labyrinth path, were left in the performance. We went on working for a long time with the wood and labyrinth, adding new tasks and proposals.

I used this method of acting, which was atypical for me, out of many I could have chosen during the work. While confronting tasks for this performance, I often found myself breaking safe rules and laws that I had brought with me from my training and previous theatre work. Usually I am not able to transgress these rules and I do not want to give them up - but that is another story.

What came first and what consequence did it have? Which way and which order made you feel at ease?

END

Is there something you did not expect, that surprised you in a positive or negative way?

I was surprised when in the final result I saw how much I had wanted and managed to

influence the work.

What marked the end of the creative process?

The deadline provided by the premiere.

How did you finish your creative process? What was the last thing you created?

When I finished I was too exhausted to concentrate on the fact that I could continue to influence the performance until it was completed; at the end I no longer had the strength to propose anything or to feel affection for the performance. What did I create last? I think I sewed a piece of red velvet.

Tell me a feeling or thought you had with respect to the performance, when you left the room after the last rehearsal.

Sadness and hatred as well, with a distant echo of love.

IN GENERAL

When did you feel completely alone? And when completely together with the others?

I always feel my solitude, in the positive and negative sense; I feel our unity when I look at our work and recognise in it traces of each of us.

When did you need to be alone? And when did you need to feel part of the group?

If I were always able to organise my being alone, I would never have enough of it. I needed to feel part of the group when I was no longer able to reconcile my professional and private realities, when being alone became inevitable and impossible to deal with, when I no longer believed in anything, neither in one or the other of my realities,

when being alone was a destructive force.

Tell me three things you will definitely change in a future production.

I would like to take more care of my body and mind, let them rest. Say "no" more often, first of all to myself, and not love myself less because of this, and finally I would like to be more 'male' in taking decisions, that is, not to question them and myself endlessly.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

CRISTINA GALBIATI (Italy/Switzerland) was born in Italy in 1973. She moved to Switzerland to attend the Dimitri Theatre School, graduating in 1996. From 1997 Cristina studied Indian classical theatre at the Kerala Kalamandalam School. In 1999, she created Trickster Teatro with Ilija Luginbühl and since then has directed all the group's productions among which *La fiera di San Bartolomeo*, *Rapsodia per giganti*, *Ghirigori per il lupo nero*, *La vita: avvertenze e modalità d'uso*.

LEDWINA COSTANTINI (Switzerland) was born in 1976. She studied visual art in Lugano, and started her theatre apprenticeship with Teatro delle Radici directed by Cristina Castrillo, taking part in their productions and touring Europe, Asia and South America. Since 2002 Ledwina has been an actress of Trickster Teatro and has taken part in *La fiera di San Bartolomeo*, *Rapsodia per giganti*, *Ghirigori per il lupo nero*, *La vita: avvertenze e modalità d'uso*.