

Iben Nagel Rasmussen

Ester's Book

"We did it on purpose," my mother wrote in what she called *Book of the Seed*. What they had done on purpose nine months before the end of the war was me. *Book of the Seed* is a long letter written to the child she was carrying, in the form of a diary in which thoughts circle around the forthcoming motherhood, her expectations, and how her hopes and joy stood in sharp contrast to the war that was literally taking place just outside her main door.

Photographs and newspaper cuttings of hers bring the wartime close in all its horror with the daily executions of members of the resistance. There are pictures from the big general strike in Copenhagen and accounts from the 5th of May 1945 when the Germans finally capitulated in Denmark.

My mother - Ester - was an author and novelist. As an adult I asked her if she wanted to publish the *Book of the Seed*. She did not. Was she afraid that it was not interesting enough as literature, or that she would be marked down as a typical woman writer who deals with 'small things'? But *Book of the Seed* is a unique document of a pregnant woman who sits in her two-room apartment on the 5th floor, and in even handwriting tells the seed in her belly about her everyday life, her dreams for the future and her fear of dying a much too early death.

The material - the theme - has been lying there for a long time. Would I be able to create a performance about my own mother? Draw her voice and pieces of her story out of the darkness they seemed to be buried in? The question was not so much about whether or why, but rather how I should proceed.

Tacit Knowledge was the theme of an international symposium held at Odin Teatret in Holstebro in 1999. I had been asked to make an intervention: what does it mean to teach, to pass on one's experience as an actor, or to carry within

That performance was also built on autobiography, personal texts, memories and fragments with characters that already existed. I was becoming tired of myself as an actor who infinitely repeated the same scenes. What would be new?



oneself - perhaps in an unconscious way - an influence from the past?

With Sandra Pasini, a pupil of mine, I demonstrated how the training is passed on from teacher to pupil without words, through imitation, in the same way as I had been taught at Odin Teatret. We showed the development of the training, during which Sandra, from given principles, autonomously cultivates and invents exercises with different kinds of energy. We presented the body-to-body contact between teacher and pupil that I had experienced during the first years in the theatre and that was used for the vocal training with resonators. I showed sequences from my own training and mentioned how experiences from our childhoods also remain as tacit knowledge within us all. For example, I remembered how during my school days it had become fashionable to play with the hoola-hoop in the playground. I had not touched a hoola-hoop since then, but I did not need more than half an hour of practice before my body could remember all the variations: how we used to let the hoola-hoop circle round the waist, pass it on to the neck, then to an arm and back again the whole way in faster circles down to the knees. Perhaps there were other hidden, tacit traces in my memory that had influenced my way of training and all together marked me as an actor?

There was a special rhythm that appeared time after time in my training, but also in my non rhythmical use of the drum, which I had practised in Odin Teatret's parades and street performances: stops, pauses, suspense. I imagined that I could recognise the sound and rhythm of my mother's typewriter. That sound accompanied my brother's and my slumbering and dreams as children. I experienced those pauses not as empty holes, but on the contrary as charged with activity - with

thoughts - and just as intense as the sound of the keys beating against paper and platen.

I had asked my mother to take part in the work demonstration. She lived then in what we call the Pavilion behind Odin Teatret. As an ending to my contribution she read the first page of the *Book of the Seed*. At that point what had remained hidden behind the sounds and the concentrated pauses of thought I had experienced as a child came forward. The world and space of the words became visible. A small microphone was attached to my mother's shirt while she read faultlessly from the book. When she wanted to take off her glasses after the reading, they got caught in the cable and fell to the floor. "I am not an actor," she said to the audience's amusement, "I am only an old clown."

In 2001 when Teatro Potlach prepared their big project *The Invisible Cities* in Holstebro, I was asked to participate. *The Invisible Cities* consists of hundreds of scenes or living tableaux which happen in different places in a town: a 'polar bear' fishes from a raft, ballet children train in a garage, modern dance is presented in an open square. I had been given the task of sitting in the container of a military truck.

Why I was sitting there, and what I did, was up to me. I imagined that I was a war refugee, an old woman who has been picked up by the soldiers. Or was she sitting in an abandoned vehicle? On the covered container I prepared a 'sitting room': a lamp, a chair, a box full of bits and pieces and some photographs. One was the framed picture of my mother as a young woman. The refugee read - from the *Book of the Seed*. I was struck by the idea that what the refugee loses apart from home and family is identity, roots.

When people passed the military truck or stopped to look at my sitting room, I stopped reading. Look here! I am not what

you see. "Refugee" is just a word. I carry a past; I used to have a home. To help visualise my unspoken words I gave each spectator an A4 page. On one side was my mother's picture and on the other the first page of the *Book of the Seed*.

Was I on the way?

In 1949 my parents went for a very late honeymoon trip to Paris. They had saved up a bit. Ester had started learning French, and Paris was the city of cities. They were supposed to have their trip of a lifetime together.

But it was not the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre or the Seine that conquered my father's heart, but an 8mm film camera in a shop window. From the first day he stood with enamoured eyes and stared at the window, and when on the second and third day he was still stuck there, my mother said: "Alright, so buy it then". And he did, with the result that the return journey was brought forward, and my mother never got to practise her French.

My father turned out to be a first-rate photographer with a good feeling for composition, rhythm, light and dramatic points of view. He was enthusiastic about Eisenstein.

The films still exist today. If I used fragments of them to bring alive the image of those times, Ester could be experienced as a young woman, the streets practically empty of traffic, and with horses instead of tractors.

But what could tie together the film cuttings? How could the *Book of the Seed* be part of the story about my mother? And what should I do?

Lina della Rocca of Teatro Ridotto from Italy had heard me talk about the performance that still existed only in the form of an idea and vague sketches. I had made myself guilty of a deadly sin: to talk about a performance without anything concrete to offer.

During a stay at Odin Teatret, Lina saw that I had asked the photographer Jan Rüz to film my mother in the garden behind the theatre where she lived, and witnessed how Torgeir Wethal had started editing sequences of my father's 8mm films. "Why don't you present it as a work-in-progress at Teatro Ridotto in Bologna?" she suggested. I have no idea what made me say yes.

Time was short. What should I do? I could present the film cuttings: the old black and white films shot by my father and the new one in colour of my mother as an old woman. I could read from the *Book of the Seed*. Could I talk about those times, about the family, about small things?

But me as an actor? Oh yes! Old scenes from Odin's performances, already existing characters: Trickster from the performance *Talabot* with its red thread, Trickster with the sand child, fragments that had already been used in innumerable contexts. I added the scene where Medea kills her children from the performance *Mythos*. This is how the first loose sketch was presented in Bologna in 2003.

The way of proceeding was too reminiscent of *Itsi Bitsi*, I thought later. That performance was also built on autobiography, personal texts, memories and fragments with characters that already existed. I was becoming tired of myself as an actor who infinitely repeated the same scenes.

What would be new?

Julia Varley asked me to show the material from Bologna in a session of the 4th Transit Festival. Again I said yes without knowing what I would present. A dialogue was missing, more text. Meanwhile my mother had moved to an old people's home, with severe dementia.

There was something both touching, comical and tragic in our conversations from that period, when she insisted on

moving back from the old people's home to my house, even if she could only stay in a shed in the garden. I wrote the dialogue from that situation, I fixed which texts I would use from the *Book of the Seed* and wrote down childhood memories. The first text montage was home.

I didn't envisage making a solo performance. I - and the material I had gathered - needed a partner on stage who could add something new to my story. I asked Anna Stigsgaard, an assistant on Odin Teatret's performance *Andersen's Dream*, to play violin to the films. The accompaniment would follow the films' rhythm like a piano used to complement the silent movies of that period.

The collaboration with Anna was decisive for the work in progress that was presented to the participants at Transit. Her musical background, age (she could have been my daughter) and general life experience, was so very different from mine. She brought to the performance a necessary freshness. Gone was the thought of using old scenes and characters; gone the thought of vehement physical expression.

We had invited Eugenio Barba to see and perhaps help with the montage before it was shown. He came for a few days. He suggested some changes and brought ideas that, as so often before, in a straightforward way made the scenes more rigorous and thorough.

That is how it was shown - in all its simplicity.

Is *Ester's Book* a performance? Or is it a narration? Is the narration's nakedness and negation of acting its real strength, or is it the result of an old actor's infinite tiredness with herself and her profession? Does it matter, as long as the story wants and can be told and someone wishes to listen to it?

Translated from Danish by Julia Varley

IBEN NAGEL RASMUSSEN (Denmark) was born in 1945 in Copenhagen. She was the first actor to join Odin Teatret after the group moved from Oslo to Holstebro in 1966. Her experiences as an actress are published in *The Actors Way*, edited by Erik Exe Christoffersen. Iben's main pedagogical project is a yearly gathering of actors from different countries who share their artistic experiences as well as create a performance which takes the name of the group "Vindenes Bro" (The Bridge of Winds) and "De Nye Vinde" (The New Winds).