

# Geddy Aniksdal

## Everything Has a Sound

*Even the wires holding  
the ship's masts started to  
sing in the wind the other  
day. From the Spanish shore  
their sound made me  
remember the rhythmic song  
of the telephone wires when  
walking home alone on dark  
winter nights in Norway  
when I was only a child.  
Is it as simple as this? If  
the song is not here, we are  
not here either. If you do not  
have the rhythm of breath,  
you are not here. All things  
lose their momentum if they  
have not got a beat, a pulse -  
however faint. But we have  
to be able to recognise it.*

### SOUND AND WORK

I am in Los Abrigos, a tiny fishing village in the south of the island of Tenerife, a village which has managed to survive in some miraculous way with some of the old ways and traditions still intact.

The fishermen leave in the evening and come back the next morning to unload their varied selection of seafood, nowadays, into mobile deep freeze units in which the seafood is transported to its next destination. We, who are lucky enough to live here for some weeks, only have to go to the restaurant at the port to choose from a greater variety of seafood than I have ever seen, and let alone eaten, before.

In the travel guide I read about the next island, La Gomera, about the *silbo*, the whistling language that has survived for generations there, and that boys, (and only boys I think), are now taught the song, the language, in school.

I am here with two actors to put down the groundwork for a new performance. It is a story about two children, left on their own, who meet late one evening in an old rundown garden, where the boy has sought refuge in an old kennel. The girl, who is on her own, finds him there, and a strange friendship develops. In this story, the children play all sorts of different games. They pretend to be animals, a dog and a cat, and the girl has learned how to make a lot of animal sounds. The actor playing the girl has also studied the sounds of real animals.

Whilst here, we are working outside in a public park at the end of the village. Some people come for their daily stroll. We get to know the locals: a middle-aged man in a wheelchair, out to have a cigarette and enjoy the sun; older ladies who sit for a while, roll down their socks, lean on their canes, before they ever so slowly start on their way home; elderly men, out with their dogs. At a worksite nearby, a dozen construction workers are setting up yet another apartment complex.

We start our daily work and the actors work on the scene where the boy and girl exchange dog and cat sounds before they meet face to face. A veritable crescendo of noise echoes back to us. First we think it is a real echo, but it turns out that many of the dogs around respond to the actors' calls as if they were real animals. As if that wasn't enough, the workers inside the building also start to bark. And inside the half built complex their voices are thrown around and multiplied, so it sounds as if all the dogs in southern Tenerife have moved in there. We are bewildered. I have not even begun to work with the actors on the quality of their vocal work, I have only said that we will work more, later on, when we are indoors and can be more subtle. But they have obviously found something.

What is this *something*, and how does it work? In this instance I believe that some work had already taken place and that the sounds the actors made were close to recognisable animal sounds. And my thoughts drift. They evoked a response, they called and had an answer. Is this the deeper sense of all our sounds? Of theatre? Of song?

When ideas will not go away, they are there for a reason.

As I could not sleep, I thought about songs. Music. About Pythagoras who did not write down one sentence of theory apparently for fear of being misread. I thought about wavelengths and how all things start to sing when set in motion. What is not song?

Even the wires holding the ship's masts started to sing in the wind the other day. From the Spanish shore their sound made me remember the rhythmic song of the telephone wires when walking home alone on dark winter nights in Norway when I was only a child.

Is it as simple as this? If the song is not here, we are not here either. If you do not have the rhythm of breath, you are not here. All things lose their momentum if they have not got a beat, a pulse - however faint. But we have to be able to recognise it.

Physical work has that - rhythm. Or functions best when the beat between the actions being carried out and the person carrying out the actions agree and unite in an organic rhythm. The song of the demolition men secures the safety of their work and unites them in a common beat before carrying out their often dangerous operations.

Keeping the hum alive also reminds me of the women who used to be responsible for keeping the fire going, from camp to camp. A tiny little ember was enough to get the new fire started, with dry wood and fresh air.

## SOUND AND MEMORY

Reading about the old Greeks I found it interesting to learn about the science of music, about the systems one believed in, and how the relationship between music and maths, for instance, has influenced us: science in the waves; music is a wave; wavelengths. In my language we talk about being on the same wavelength, communicating on the same frequencies. A song has to strike you. It can be as perfect, as professional as can be, but it has to strike you, or better, touch something that stirs in you.

Why do we react so differently? If I am song-less, I suppose I cannot hear songs either.

*My beautiful, hardworking mother of five got a look on her face and a way about her that was simultaneously shy and eager. She took off her apron, tussled her hair, sat down to roll*

*a cigarette, take a sip of coffee, then complaining to the guitar player that the guitar was tuned too high, that she with her deep voice not could sing the female part, she lowered the pitch one octave, and sang... and sang, and flew away and took me with her...*

*(Time did not matter then. How come? Usually there was so little time and so much to do - the daily chores.)*

*Now one song became another. My father brought out the harmonica and played. And they quarrelled about pitch and tone, and sang and laughed and got that rhythm, that flow where nothing could be wrong really. And I wanted them to go on forever; I wanted us always to sit like this.*

What do we do, what is ripe, what is bound to happen if there is a common wave or direction at a gathering? At a certain stage the guitar is bound to come out, the piano lid is bound to be opened, or the drums moved into the circle. The personal library of songs and memory opens. We enter and lose ourselves at the best of times into something bigger than each one of us.

*The child will not go to sleep. I sing and rock it. I want to be with the others. After having sung my whole repertoire and getting too tired to enunciate properly, I start to make up words, keeping the emphasis on rrrs in the same rhythm as the songs were made in originally. This becomes a drone, a kind of hypnosis that at the same time keeps me awake and the child tired - me awake, because I have to concentrate on something new, the child tired, because all the nuance and edge have been taken away.*

The morning songs of the children assembling for school woke us each morning outside where we lived in Havana. They sang, and then their teacher made a political speech. You could hear them enjoying singing.

## SOUND AND WAR

The silent sound of the mines left on the battlefields in Cambodia; just a premonition, but the hiss of a potential mine is faintly audible. It reminds me of a poem by the Chinese writer Tu Fu: *Blue is the smoke of war, white the bones of men*. There is a whiteness in the fields of Cambodia. There is a strong, loud silence, like the silence we have been told comes after a strong blast, after an atomic bomb, a grenade, an air raid attack. The sound or song has been so loud that it leaves you momentarily deaf; a contained silence. This silence seems not to leave the fields, the landscape, the generous people you meet in the streets.

Chan, our driver, was going to take us from Phnom Pen down south to Sihanoukville, a four hour drive along the only existing road. His brother and wife, with their children, as well as his seventy year old mother lived along the route. He asked if we could stop on the way so he could see them. We said yes.

Chan's brother lived along a dirt road by the river, in one of the traditional Cambodian stilt houses where you climb up a ladder to get to the first level. Outside was a sitting platform used for cooking and eating. There were chickens everywhere and pigs behind the house. Dust, dirt and garbage. No electricity. Chan's brother had lost one leg and used crutches. The wife had a scooter. They ran a little mill, and she drove the flour out to the customers. There were grains and sawdust all over the place. The mill was run by a generator of sorts, which made a deafening sound. Previously Chan had brought a gift for his mother, a flash-light so she could see her way up to bed at night, and now he brought her new batteries.

There was no toilet, no bathroom, no kitchen, no running water. There was no postman or garbage collector. There was no

address. No telephone, no television, no radio. They worked until it got dark, fed the animals, ate and went to bed. No clocks either. The children went to school when the right light was there. In my head I tried to work out if I could have managed to live there.

The wife had become the traditional 'man'. Her back and arms were strong and muscular and she heaved thirty kilo sacks of milled grain on to her scooter as if they weighed nothing. She was a very strong, proud woman, and she managed to keep the family alive and well with her strength. Her song was very powerful.

In Colombia I also heard the song of the disappeared, the lowered tone in the family's voice, the rain in their eyes, the songs of hope against hope; and I heard the lamentation songs of the old peasant women, the coarse and magical quality of their harmonies in the harvest songs; the natural need to sing together.

Sadness has a deep song in it, a slow murmur deep inside the body; a pain that finds its release in song. To move and to sing is close. A song moves us, or a movement sings: songs about the impossibility of making songs that can console... and yet in the making there is a little consolation.

## EVERYTHING HAS A SOUND

The song of others, our own sound as we go about our little tasks here in the world. What does not have a sound? A song?

In a work session, many years ago, taking part in a Lorca play and given our parts, I was to be the old, strict mother, cruel to her daughters, to herself, to life. The director, a composer, had made songs for the different characters, which we had to rehearse and use as an important part of the work in progress.

One day she said to me. "Your character

is so terrible, I cannot hear any song from her. She cannot have a song". At the time I thought that was hurtful. Later I have wondered whether that is possible or not. Doesn't everything have a song or a sound? Nothing human shouldl frighten me? Isn't it too easy not to engage with evil, with darkness, with trouble? To pretend it is not there? Did the tsunami not have a sound? Did the tsunami have a sound? A song?

The stillness afterwards...

The beat, the song, the pulse, the rhythm of us, you, me, them. When the birds do not sing in the woods, it is a real sign of danger.

GEDDY ANIKSDAL (Norway) is a long time member of Grenland Friteater, Norway. She has also been working closely with the Magdalena Project since its beginning. Her performances *Blue Is the Smoke of War* and *No Doctor for the Dead* have toured internationally within the Magdalena network. Geddy Aniksdal has also been on the editorial board of *The Open Page* since the beginning and has published articles in the journal and in other theatre publications. Geddy is also the artistic director of *Sense of Place*, a three year multicultural project for the city of Porsgrunn.