

Julia Varley

Journeys of Songs and Silences

It was Christmas day of 1987. I was eating lobster, in a small restaurant on Kovalam beach, in Kerala, while Jill Greenhalgh looked in disgust at the pile of shells I was leaving on my plate after having sucked all the meat from them. Jill and I had been travelling three weeks in India and we were spending our last days under the palm trees and blue skies of a post-card like landscape. In the evenings we would often play cards or backgammon with the restaurant owner.

One of the young waiters had a nice and gentle face. After the restaurant closed I went for a walk with him. I asked if he would teach me a song. I spent some time writing down the sounds of the text. He told me it was a folk song, something to do with drinking beer. I repeated the tune as he sang. There on the beach in India I was very far from the world of theatre that demanded volume and self-assuredness from me. As I sang, my voice sounded soft and simple; it did not need to be anything else. It was strangely different: not my own private shy voice, nor my strong theatre voice. My surprise was increased by the fact that I was singing without having to. I don't know what made me ask for a song while enjoying the company of the young Indian boy who, as many Italians I had met before, wanted to behave as a great seducer and was totally confused by having to deal with a woman who was just friendly and curious without any other kind of implication.

Soon after returning to Denmark from India, I left for another beach: Chicxulub in Yucatan, in Mexico. I was going there with Odin Teatret to work on the performance *Talabot*. I was to play Kirsten Hastrup, a living Danish anthropologist who had intrigued our director Eugenio Barba by her decision - in the time of 'exotic' anthropological studies - to go to Iceland for her field work. Kirsten had written a scientific paper in which she confessed to having been seduced by a *huldrufolk* (a mythical 'hidden' person) enveloped in the fog of the hills.

For the rehearsals, every actor of the group had to

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prepare what we call a 'knot': a scene containing dense and opposing information. For me the 'knot' in question was just a scene that in some way put together my different points of view concerning the themes of the performance: my travel to India and Thailand for the first time, being far away from Europe and theatre, meetings without much language in common.

I made an improvisation based on the rhythm of the song I had learned from the Indian boy and on how the meeting with him had occurred. I forgot to say that the owner of the restaurant was jealous I had chosen to go for a walk with the waiter and had dismissed him from his job the day after. So my curiosity had a sequel of consequences as I tried to convince the owner to engage him again and the boy tried to convince me that I should send him money from Denmark or that he could come with me to Europe to find a new job.

When I presented the improvisation to the director for the first time, I sang with the same soft voice I had discovered in Kovalam. I did not try to be 'good' or 'interesting' or 'strong'. I just accompanied the images, which almost had an everyday dimension, and sang. Later I grafted the text Kirsten had written about her meeting with the *huldrufolk* onto the melody. The gentleness of the song was emphasised by the meaning I was conveying of charm surrounded by fog.

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Some time later, having been invited to the Magdalena Festival "A Room of One's Own" in Norway and having to prepare something to present, I decided to use the scene again. It became an essential part of my performance *The Castle of Holstebro*. I also sing the original text in the unfamiliar Indian language in the work demonstration *The Echo of Silence*. I remember the song in all its successive phases of work. I doubt the Indian boy remembers having given it to me.

In the bathroom of the flat in Milan where I lived as a child, there was a large stool beside the tub. After we had played for hours in the water and had made the bathroom floor all wet, my mother would wrap me and my two brothers in big soft towels. Rubbing us dry, she would make us jump up and down on her knees as she sang nursery rhymes. I enjoyed Humpty Dumpty most, because as she sang, she made us fall between her legs, and we all giggled. I love the sound of my brothers giggling that still resounds in my ears. I am five and six years older than my brothers, so perhaps it was only them who were thrown about, although I remember the feeling of bouncing to the rhymes' rhythm. But it was certainly me who, standing on tiptoe on the stool, sang "I am the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascals" as I looked down at my brothers.

As children we went to church only a few times. I never learned psalms or carols. At school, I was taught music by having a recorder put in my mouth and being made to repeat some patriotic Italian songs that I would make fun of with my classmates. When I arrived at Odin Teatret and began my vocal training one of the older actors asked me to sing. The only song I could think of was a nursery rhyme. So I endlessly repeated Ba Ba Black Sheep feeling utterly

stupid. That evening I closed myself in a room alone to try to remember some melodies on the recorder that I could repeat vocally. The first one I tried was "*C'era una volta una gatta che aveva una macchia scura sul collo e una vecchia...*" (Once upon a time there was a cat who had a dark spot on its neck and an old...). It seemed like an impossible job and I hoped nobody could hear me. Some time later I discovered a whole record of English folk songs, and I learned every one of them, trying to make up for all the singing time I had missed.

There is a small door along one of the roads of the market in Damascus that leads into the Danish Institute. Outside there is a lot of noise and the strong smell of herbs and spices. People are calling, talking, crying. Cars are trying to get past, bicycles carry enormous loads, donkeys appear here and there. The stalls and shops invade the pavement as all their goods spill out on to the streets. Textiles mix with jewellery, dried apricots with plastic bags, strings with books and paper. Tea, coffee and water are offered everywhere. Some women are covered from top to toe, others - probably from the Christian neighbourhood - proudly show off their hairdos, tight blouses and miniskirts. No one remarks on the difference, they are naturally part of the same landscape. Most people look as if they have time to talk to you. On the other side of the door is a small courtyard, which leads to another slightly bigger courtyard and to another one which is even bigger, built in soft white stone with a fountain in the middle. Coloured wooden engravings and tiles are visible through the windows of the buildings around the courtyard. When the small street door closes, silence pervades. In a split second, the rush of the market turns into the calm meditative space of Arabic architecture. Only the muezzin calling for prayer at the Great

Mosque can be heard from the distance, adding a sense of infinity to the sound of the falling water of the fountain.

I was on tour in Damascus, invited by the Danish Institute, and I thought I could use the occasion to discover the way of speaking of Scheherazade, the puppet I was going to move in Odin Teatret's next performance *Andersen's Dream*. I asked the organisers if I could meet and work with a local singer, and I was introduced to a willing student.

We met in a class of the theatre school where I had performed and given workshops. I had my tape recorder with me. She spoke a text and sang three songs, spelling out the words and giving me the translations. She told me she associated these songs with Scheherazade. Perhaps they were only the songs she knew best. She told me about Fairouz, the Lebanese singer whom she greatly admired, from whom she had taken the songs. Later on, at a music shop, I bought many CDs by Fairouz, some of which turned out to be blank when I returned to Denmark and tried to listen to them in my sitting room at home. I chose fifteen of her songs and learned them all one after the other, mostly as I was doing housework. It was very difficult to learn the texts, trying to reproduce all the Arabic sounds which were new to me. I had to listen to them again and again to distinguish the syllables and the words. I would bring the tape recorder closer to my ear hoping that the sound would become clearer. Little by little, endless repetition made me more secure and the songs started to flow by themselves, taking me back to Egypt and Turkey. There I had first seen veiled women; their mysterious eyes fascinated me, I wondered if they were sad or happy: trying to understand them was my starting point in working on *Andersen's Dream*.

Theatre Women Song - Julia Varley



Julia Varley in *The Flying Carpet*. Photo: Francesco Galli



The Arab songs gave me Scheherazade's voice as a gift. The voice is placed slightly higher than my own; the volume and the power are adjusted to the size of the small body of the puppet. I sing, or she sings, while Scheherazade plays in the snow, while she unveils herself to dance in her beautiful embroidered red and gold dress, while she explains to Hans Christian Andersen why she was forced to tell stories to save her life. Scheherazade sings as she personifies the little match girl from Andersen's tale (or a young Palestine militant); she approaches the bed where all the other characters are lying down in the shape of huge paper photographs; she then throws a red rose and sets fire to the characters of the performance - to theatre's fiction: "*Ana la habibi...*"

I sing that same song at the end of the work demonstration *The Flying Carpet*: the music stand has fallen, a glass has broken, stones and paper are spread all over the floor, an image of destruction is before my eyes. The song comes out slower, as I fold the cloth that was my flying carpet; the melody separates into spoken words. I become calm after the sudden shock. Lack of hope accompanies me towards the exit and the sounds of war echo in my head.

Fatima stood amongst the audience in the big concert hall in Brussels; she looked at the stage and sang her Berber song. On stage, the mothers and sisters and wives of 'disappeared' people from many countries of the world had just finished their act and speeches. Fatima's song was happy; it had a fast rhythm of celebration meant to encourage people to dance. The women on stage had told their dramatic stories - who had lost a husband, who a brother, who one, two, three, even up to eleven sons and daughters; the air was full of the tragedies that history surrounds us with from all sides.

Fatima cried as she sang. The women on stage, while listening to her, started smiling: her song brought courage, life's joy and the wish to fight back into their eyes. Songs convey the complexity which can't be expressed purely with words. The Magdalena Project's dream of joining one thousand women to sing together for a political cause is probably the consequence of this emotional and poignant power.

Fatima's song happened on the closing night of Brigitte Kaquet's Festival of Women's Voices in Belgium. At that same Festival I fell in love with Ferghana's voice. She sat on a cushion, closed her eyes and sang as if it was natural to make miracles, accompanied by incredible musicians. Her father, Alim Qasimov, a well known singer from Azerbaijan, enthusiastically followed her concert from the first row of spectators. The songs seemed to take her to a place out of this world; I listened to her completely captivated. She was young, delicate and shy. The next time I saw her was when I invited her to sing for Odin Teatret's 40th anniversary two years later: she had married, had two children, and wore a head scarf also during the concert. Again Ferghana sang superbly while her father watched from the audience.

A good friend managed to find a recording of hers and gave it to me as a present. I spent many hours in the training room accompanying her high pitched laments, her joyful and rhythmical songs. The melodies were simple, but the vocal ornamentations extremely complex. Her voice helped mine to be loud without forcing it to be so. With her, I looked out onto the horizon, passed through the walls and crossed over the sea to the Cape Verde islands.

The main airport of this archipelago off the coast of Africa is on Sal, a desert island blown flat by the wind, where hotels are

growing like mushrooms to accommodate the tourists in search of sun, cheap fish and beer. The route of slaves passed by here, leaving traces in their sad and longing music, and in their poems. Ferghana's songs gave me the melody on which I placed the words of these poems speaking of women drumming on washing bags, of men leaving on boats, of chains, creeks and groans, and of the sound of the waves, the only ones always coming back to the shore.

A group of people were gathered in front of the sea, in the north of Chile. They were carrying ashes and flowers. Suddenly a large wave washed over the group and took the ashes away. Laughing, the people commented: "María has given her last farewell like a great actress; she has left us with a final show". María is dispersed in the sea now. María Cánepa: at 80 years old she married Juan, 30 years younger than her, for the second time; she taught diction to the wives of the *pobladores* who had been arrested during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship so they could speak out loud at meetings.

Her voice has always moved me. Something of it touches me deeply in the same way as when I listen to the Welsh actress Liz Hughes Jones sing. Their voices make my skin tingle. For *The Open Page*, María once sent me a cassette with a recorded interview. She talked about Pablo Neruda's death, about his wife Matilde organising the funeral in their raided home, about Salvador Allende and the military coup that overthrew him, about the secret tomb where Allende's body lay. Listening to the recording, I cried. It is a strange experience to cry listening to a person who is not present, but is there all the same through the body of the voice and its vibrations. María also made a recording of her poetry reading as a farewell to her friends. At the

end she thanks life and God, her two husbands and theatre, with a genuine gentleness that only her voice makes acceptable. Her simplicity while speaking of nature, of the beauty of the wind, of water, of trees, is perplexingly believable.

María brought back to me the view of the pine trees bending in the wind outside the window of the composer and singer Michael Vetter's studio in the Black Forest in Germany where I worked for five days. I would walk up the hill from the small country hotel where I was staying to the house where the studio was, repeating everyday sentences and turning their intonation into musical phrases. Michael had asked me to do this to help my fine-tuning when accompanying the tambura for my warm-ups. It was interesting to discover the inverse process of saying a text based on a melody. I had often before sung a text then slowly to let go of the tones in order to find a way of speaking, but now I had to start by talking normally then slowly make the tones clearer by sustaining them. But what fascinated me most whilst working with Michael were the images that my mind would latch on to while improvising vocally after the exercises. I improvised, standing on his beautiful Persian carpets, looking out at the movement of the tree tops, at the birds flying, following the irregular lines of smoke, the very slow growing of a plant, making sounds of air and learning to keep pauses alive.

While I was there, one day I heard that one of my grandmothers had died. I remembered her face. With a round lively face, she had told me about her time as an English spy during the war; about how she had been clinically dead and come back to the world again, how she could see her body and floated in the air over the bed looking down at it; about the famous German actress Therese Ghiese and her fear of going on

stage again because she no longer remembered her texts. When I had visited her for the last time, she was no longer conscious. Her face was unrecognisable, empty, skinny and very small. Her eyes were closed and the only sound I could hear was her difficult breathing. In the Black Forest that morning I had cried from frustration for not managing to keep my voice from shaking while keeping a long soft tone. In the afternoon I realised I had cried for my grandmother. I knew then that I wanted to tell stories of women like them: to hear María's and my grandmother's voice again in a performance I must work on and that still does not have a name.

At the end of my vocal work demonstration *The Echo of Silence* I reduce the volume of the song I am singing until reaching silence. Helen Chadwick taught me the song - a melody with the words in Hebrew from the *Song of Songs*; she gave it to me years ago together with a shawl that has accompanied me ever since. I absorb the sound from a full voice, to the softness of the Indian song and continue absorbing until the song remains only inside me while my whole body pushes out and holds back its flow of energy. Then I say: "Now I understand why I have chosen silence as a theme of a vocal work demonstration. It is as if I would like silence to sing." I put Helen's shawl on my shoulders and prepare to answer questions from the spectators. The silence is dense and people usually do not clap, although it is clear that I have finished. It is as if they don't want to break the quality of stillness that the absorbed song has established.

I create the same quiet feeling for myself after improvising and adventuring in all kinds of directions with my voice, when at the end I say a text in the most simple and straightforward way possible. The

memory of all I have done, of all the tones, colours, timbres, syllables, noises, cries, calls, laughs, melodies I have visited remains as a veiled testimonial. I just say Eliot's words "I have heard the mermaids speaking each to each...", but the landscape of preceding sounds fills the text with meanings shrouded in mystery. Silence is not the end, but the beginning of a journey in which everything is possible. My songs and their silences contain all the sounds of the landscapes I have visited, of the people I have met and of the stories I still want to tell.

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