

Post from Cuba

Maria Porter, Julia Varley, Raquel Carrió and Roxana Pineda



Sequence of reports, articles and letters in response to Magdalena Sin Fronteras which took place in Santa Clara, Cuba, January 2008.

From: Maria Porter

La Habana, Cuba
Santa Clara, Cuba
Toronto, Canada
New York, USA
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My Darling,

Well here I am - at last in Cuba! I had to travel two days to get to a country that is about fifty miles from our southern-most border, but you were so right to encourage me to take the trip. Even though no one would sell me a ticket, I eventually came across a Canadian internet travel group that could not care less if it was illegal for me to travel here and sold me a ticket on Air Canada that Air Canada refused to sell me. Ah well. I have only been here a few hours, but I've learned many things, which is the point of taking a sabbatical, yes? Crossing the borders proved most interesting. I was treated better coming into Cuba than into Canada. The Canadian customs officer was suspicious about my supposed four-day stay in Toronto for which I'd packed two suitcases. If he had opened them and seen my summer clothes, I had prepared a clever story about meeting my lover in Canada and flying off for a romantic tryst in the US Virgin Islands. Why the Cuba travel guide? My lover is Cuban and I need to learn more about his culture. Alas, I didn't need the story, so I'll save it for the return trip.

THE
OPEN
PAGE

68

My greeting in Havana was impressive. There was a lovely woman holding a large sign with my name on it, so I decided it would be good to follow her. I made conversation with her all the way through customs. She smiled at me, saying what I thought was "*Veep Vinculo*" - but since I didn't yet know how to say, "what are you saying?" in Spanish, I thought it wise to smile and nod. Well lo and behold I was escorted to the VIP lounge to meet an escort from the Ministry of Culture. Wow! I don't think the dean of my college knows who I am!

I stayed overnight in Havana in what I believe was the Ministry of Culture's safe house, where I was guarded by the kind Armando. I spent the evening watching volleyball with him while we chatted about Cuban culture and his recent visit to New York. No, darling, I don't speak Spanish, and he didn't speak English, but we seemed to understand each other perfectly. Besides, I brought "Spanish Grammar in 100 EZ Lessons" and I spent all of my free time learning masculine/feminine versions of adjectives, which I'm sure will come in handy.

The next day I learned what might be a very useful phrase, "*quédate tranquila*". Apparently when Cubans say that to you it means something is going to happen which will most likely really irritate you. This particular lesson came about when I was introduced to the Cuban concept of time. Our group got on the bus for Santa Clara first, and the journey was to take three and a half hours. We spent the first hour circling Havana picking up passengers and then mysteriously ending up precisely where we started - at the safe house! People got on and off the bus, then on again - and this process was repeated several times throughout the journey. Six hours later we arrived and I understood why everyone was

carrying around packets of crackers and tissues - you never know when you'll get to where there will be food and a toilet.

The money here is complicated. There are two kinds of currencies, and we are mostly allowed to use *convertibles*, but there are also things for sale in *pesos* - the other kind of money. However, there is no sign telling which money to use, so I bought what was a 50 cent piece of pizza for about 4 dollars. Belatedly I understood why it was called *peso* pizza. There is almost no signage at all - advertisements, road signs, store indications - you need to know someone here to understand where to find things. That is, however, unless you crave political inspirational quotes - there's no shortage of that!

The opening ceremony of the Festival was beautiful with dancers and young performers from Santa Clara. Roxana Pineda, who has organised the Festival, led us from place to place, and then a half hour later did her solo performance. I have a suspicion that Roxana might have cloned herself, or that she is one of a set of quintuplets, because I never saw her actually leave the ceremony. I'll report later when I have more info.

Well darling, it's true - not only are there two concurrent systems of currency, there are at least two systems of time and space. That is the only explanation behind how Roxana and her assistant Alejandro are able to be everywhere at once. I have never seen Roxana travelling - she magically appears at each venue, looking refreshed, enthusiastic, and often not wearing the same outfit. The same can be said for the actresses from the Dah Theater. While the rest of us are looking rather bedraggled from lack of hot water and vegetables, these women look as if they are at a resort! They're tanned, they know all the best beaches - and yet they attend all the performances. Remind me to consult



Maria Porter in *Meetings with an Empty Room*, Santa Clara, 2008. Photo: Carolina Vilches

them before I go to the next Magdalena!

A curious thing happened today - we were told that we could no longer stay at the hotel we were lodged in. It wasn't clear why - we heard many different reasons: the military needed it, school children were coming for a camp - in any case we had to pack up and wait to be taken elsewhere. The bus came, and we loaded our luggage and proceeded to drive around Santa Clara picking up other festival participants from other hotels. We didn't know where we were going, or how the group was to be split, but Alejandro seemed cheerful and confident, so I was *tranquila*. We got to the first new lodging, and we all got out, but only a few stayed. It was a bit like choosing teams for a sport: you, you, you - OK - the rest of you on the other team. Those of us not chosen for this hotel got back on the bus, picked up yet more festival partici-

pants, and went to another hotel. Again the same process - you, you, you - here. Then quite mysteriously, the bus returns to the first hotel and more people get off here. We've made a three-hour tour of Santa Clara and have returned to the same location. Darling, this is exactly when the "*soy tranquila*" mantra needs to be repeated. How lucky I learned it the first day!

The vegetarians in the group are looking quite peaky at this point. We have had rice and beans at least twice a day, and pork or chicken. Even when you order beef, you get pork. Apparently, here pork is considered part of the plant family, because at every meal our vegetarians are offered some. Thankfully someone discovered how to buy cheese, so hopefully these meals of lettuce on white bread that our veggie friends subsist on will end.

The other day we took a trip to the Arts School to have a look at a folkloric dance class. Oh Darling. I would be fired on the spot if I conducted such a class! My, my. This style of dance is such a far cry from our Ballet and Modern offerings - it makes us look like Puritans straight off the Mayflower. I was told they would be guaranteed jobs as dancers upon graduation - although at a salary well below what we could exist on. However, when I think of all of us, young and old, working in New York; working during the day as secretaries, waiters, paralegals, nannies - and then when we can do theatre, which costs us money to do - I wonder who is more fortunate. And so many of us at home are on anti-depressants and other pharmaceuticals. If we all danced like this, we'd put Prozac out of business.

The festival came to a conclusion yesterday, and it felt as if we'd been there forever and hardly a day. We came to the last Round - a tradition of Magdalena festivals, in which the women participants sit in a circle and each says something briefly

about her experience and wishes. In the several days leading up to this Round, I've spoken at length with the Cuban artists about their work here and what they are up against. Again, while I speak no Spanish, and several of them little English, our exchanges feel genuine and comprehensive. I can see clearly by their physical and vocal prowess that training and performance are serious business. I wish the young actors I work with could witness this for themselves. During the Round, it felt as if the Cuban women were standing on the shores of their island bidding us farewell and urging us not to forget them, to remember their efforts and struggles. It was as if the rest of us would go off to our respective countries but meet again soon, while they would remain fighting an uphill battle in order to make theatre. There was a sense of their collective, massive strength ebbing away.

They had been such an inspiration to me, and their force was a hundred times mine, that I found it impossible to imagine it diminished to a level where their creative life would die out. However, I could see in some of the older ones who had been working for many, many years the fatigue and the releasing of hopes and possibilities. Sanya from Dah Teatar exhorted the Cubans to try to resist what had happened to Serbia after the war: to beware the influences of consumerism, commercialism and the dilution of their culture and traditions. Many Cubans asked me about our elections - hoping that we'd choose a more 'enlightened' candidate, but I fear regardless of whom we elect, Cuba is a place ripe for exploitation, and that it is a matter of months, perhaps, before they get their first Mc Donald's.

When I crossed the border from Canada into New York, I had fully prepared myself once again for interrogation. I had the CDs I bought in my underwear, the pendants of

Che in my shampoo bottle, and rehearsed the story of my lover and our tryst in the Virgin Islands. But when the dogs came sniffing down the aisles of the train, I felt a defiance - I almost wanted one of the officers to ask where I'd been - and I wouldn't tell the ridiculous fabrication I'd created, but of the impossible, extraordinary country I'd visited and of a theatre festival that happened almost in spite of itself. No one asked where I'd been, and after two hours at the border, they pulled off two Asian college students. I should have worn the pendant of Che.

And now, my dear, I am writing to you from my hotel room where I can watch one hundred and twenty two TV channels, take a half hour hot shower, flush paper down the toilet, and choose from a menu of a hundred items to eat. My children are excited to tell me about the latest Play Station that has come on the market. I feel lost; as if between two worlds and two realities. The reality I share with the people I've met is sourced in my daily efforts to maintain a theatre practice, often on my own. The reality I'll re-immers myself in doesn't pay much attention to these efforts, but I'll manage. However, I still have the image of all those Cuban artists standing on the shore - waving goodbye to me. I imagine after a few weeks home the image will fade. This evening, however, I find more solace and companionship in this image than I get from the TV, hot water, and rich food. Roxana and her hundred selves are living in me, and in this moment I will try very hard to return the gift they've given.

Yours ever,
Maria



From: Julia Varley

The Coffee Pot

I had just watched Eneyda Villalón's performance *Carolina de Alto Songo* in Santa Clara in Cuba, at a factory where domestic goods are made. The workers had sat on one side of the room where I also sat with Gema Castro, the young actress who works with Antonia Fernández, while some other women who participated in the Magdalena Sin Fronteras Festival sat on the other side.

Listening to Eneyda's beautiful voice and seeing her generosity and emotion shine through her eyes at the end of the performance had made me happy. She had participated in my workshop and so I had had the opportunity to get to know her well. Together with many other people, I went to hug the actress in the office she used as a dressing room.

Before the performance, as often happens in Cuba when there is an official visit from foreigners, they had showed us something of the place. In a kind of giant cage at the side of an enormous empty hall, we had seen how Italian style coffee pots were manufactured. An Italian had been there many years earlier to teach how to make Moka machines to brew coffee, and Che had inaugurated the factory: the many different leaders who accompanied us on the visit told us all of this. The workers smiled and tried not to get distracted while the visitors took photographs.

Leaving the dressing room/office I had an idea: it would be nice if the factory offered a coffee pot to Eneyda as a small appreciation and exchange for the performance. I knew that it was not usual to think this way, but I was confident that the enthusiasm created by the show could facilitate a variation in the rules and I tried to speak to the leaders present there. No way. No-one could assume the responsibility for this decision. We don't have the authority, they told me. But who does? This question remained unanswered.

In the absence of people who decide and commit themselves personally only regulations and laws are left as a defence and way of life. In theatre, however, we are forced to transgress and find personal

approaches in order to create our performances. There, in the Santa Clara factory, two ways of thinking were in collision, two ways of conceiving one's own professional survival.

I left the factory sad. This sadness coloured my last visit to Cuba quite a bit. I have travelled to Cuba many times before, always full of admiration for the capacity for resistance demonstrated by the inhabitants of this island and for this society's achievements in education, medical services and the struggle against poverty. Every visit has given me something important and I have made many close friends there. In some ways I feel half Cuban. This time I was there to participate in the international theatre festival and meeting of women organised by Roxana Pineda and her colleagues of the Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara.

The sadness I felt as I left the factory was also caused by other examples I had experienced of how individuals, in order to avoid problems, have 'unlearned' how to take the initiative. We are then confronted with rules without a human face, forwarded from one office to the next, until we finally give up organising something that should be simple but becomes more and more impossible. Not even the leaders are able to change the established way of doing things.

In the final Round in Santa Clara - the last meeting in a circle during which all the women who had participated in the Magdalena Sin Fronteras event spoke one at a time - the tears, dreams, laughter and wishes to participate again next time, the need to meet and the thanks were a demonstration of how much oxygen the Festival had provided; a space necessary for the Latin American and Cuban women as much as for the foreigners.

In an interview for television I had been asked: will there be another Magdalena in Santa Clara? I answered that I

didn't know if Roxana and Gretzy, Alejandro and Joël, would have the persistence, strength and patience to face the organisation of another event despite knowing how important it is for their group and for the Cuban theatre women who attend.

The theme of the Festival and meeting was "Actresses/Directors". The theme probably arose from Roxana Pineda's concerns: she wants to continue as an actress in her group but has begun to direct in the school where she teaches as well. The theme was also the consequence of the Magdalena environment where many women have passed through the same process. They have grown initially in the profession as actresses and little by little, to satisfy personal needs and the demands of their pupils, they have begun to direct: Cristina Castrillo, Geddy Aniksdal, Jill Greenhalgh, Maria Porter, myself... The same has happened for many Cuban women theatre practitioners: Flora Lauten, Antonia Fernández, Nelda Castillo...

The questions Roxana put to us were: how did we become directors, how do we work and how does our craft as actresses influence us when we direct. The answers arrived in different ways: through the performances; the workshop showings; the work demonstrations; in the forums; through the comparison between the abstraction of the words and the reality of the work; in the need to find principles and know how to move in the opposite direction when the situation demands it.

The last two performances I have directed are with actresses and actors with whom I have already worked (the Argentinean Ana Woolf and the Italians Lorenzo Gleijeses and Manolo Muoio). My first need on meeting them again was not to repeat anything that we had done before. Every time I direct, in the same way as every time I face a new production as an



actress, I feel that to start I must first leave all the previous weapons, costumes, techniques and knowledge behind. I need to do this to be able to hear what the new situation is trying to tell me, to savour its particular perfume.

I am not a director who chooses themes at the beginning, who knows beforehand what to say. I use the process precisely in order to detect this. In the same way as I do as an actress, I concentrate on finding the truth of the action, with its rhythms, associations, colours, synchrony of behaviour, music, oppositions, light, complementarity, atmospheres, clothes, depth, mystery and objects. I am not an intellectual director who has read many books and remembers them; I trust more in my intuition, which recognises in the stage actions the questions I ask myself when faced with the drama of history and the simplicity of my everyday reality.

The performances, when confronted by the spectators, are not forgiven. The relentlessness of what works or doesn't is imposed on me by my director when I work as actress, and I impose it on myself when I direct. I began to give creative autonomy to a German actor, Harald Redmer, providing him with different starting points to build actor's material and collaborate with the different directors that his group, Pumpenhause Theater, took on from time to time. I saw a performance that decided for itself grow before my eyes: *Aus den Spuren des Yeti*. The same thing had happened to me with my solo performance *The Castle of*

Holstebro, which began as a work demonstration and decided to turn into something different, to tell its own story. My training as actress and director has been to detect in the work the elements that indicate a path that takes me to a place that I don't know but will recognise sooner or later.

In the Magdalena Sin Fronteras, as a director, I showed *The Taste of Oranges*. The actress in this performance, the Italian Gabriella Sacco, presented me with some mystic poems at the beginning of rehearsals. I had difficulty in understanding how I would connect with this theme. But the work didn't give me time for this kind of uncertainty. When the actress showed me how she had concretely materialised my ideas, how she had transformed words into actions with dedication and commitment, I could do nothing else but work. At the end of the process I understood that my not-at-all mystical experience as a political activist revealed itself in the necessity of creating a memory, of telling the stories of people in whom I believe. The performance is my way of continuing to keep alive my dead friends, of thanking those who have given something to me. It was important for me to show it in Cuba.

The Estudio Teatral had a lot of support (Thank you Julián! Thank you Nelly!) to carry out Magdalena Sin Fronteras, but all the same they had to solve thousands of problems; for example tasks that, in spite of having been organised in advance, turned into unassailable labyrinths: the transport, food and lodging.



In the context of the Magdalena Project's network, we have always insisted on the importance of basic organisational details for an event to turn out well and allow the participants to concentrate on the artistic and pedagogical exchanges. To eat all together, to sleep under the same conditions, to assure the agreed technical necessities, to have a common space to meet informally after the performances, to be able to arrive easily at the work places and lodgings are examples of conditions that facilitate the exchange, the reciprocal knowledge and the analytical understanding of the environment that makes one kind of theatre performance emerge instead of another.

This time in Santa Clara, especially in the first days, the division due to the payment systems between Cubans who live in Cuba, Cubans who live in exile, Latin Americans and foreigners, between teachers and 'youngsters', between artists with performances, workshop participants and simple spectators who wanted to join in didn't help create the Island Without Borders that this event had intended to be. This was not the result of Roxana's or the Estudio Teatral's organisation, it was caused by the habit of having to follow rules without a face.

In 2005 the surprise was to discover the strength of a Festival that invaded the city, among children, old women and students. This time there were many more participants and there was an even stronger necessity to find places and times to share and get to know each other without the divisions

caused by the differences of experience and places of origin.

For example, one night I spent several hours speaking with Dijana, Sanja and Maya of the Serbian DAH Teatar about how to transform the words of the teachers and to begin to speak with more simple and personal terms, about how we imitate in the beginning in order to learn but after some years of experience, we attain a different kind of language and should have the courage to express ourselves through it even though this doesn't give us the same degree of security. We met not so much to find answers, but to share the questions that it takes us so much time and work to formulate.

That night we drank beer, paid in convertible pesos. This is the flavour that I have left from those days, together with the bitter flavour of coffee from a coffee pot that the factory had unlearned to give as a present. But I still look forwards to drinking a good Cuban coffee. The meetings need to continue! Next time?



From: Raquel Carrió

The Coffee Pot and the Next Time

La Havana, 22nd March 2008

Dear Julia,

I have read your article with true nostalgia. How not to feel nostalgia for those days of the Magdalena Sin Fronteras during which difficulties and successes outlined, once again, the invisible bridges that bring us together?

All that you say is true and has your particular way of looking and selecting concrete facts or actions that turn into signs to interrogate the reader. It is an actress's way of looking that makes us become spectators, starting from the written letter and small scenes in which irony, humour, disturbance or sadness interact to provoke a third effect. It is this third effect that communicates an experience. And it explains how your book *Stones of Water* has helped me exercise my own way of looking to discover in small things a live and changing universe.

In this context, I select another sequence: that of the old cart, mounted on a motorcycle, (brought to Cuba from Europe around the time of the 1950s "after the war" - the old man said) and mysteriously connected to an iron boxcar all welded together for public transportation. I think that we were four Magdalena participants running after that 'thing', to cross Santa Clara's streets and arrive on time for a lecture.

How did that old motorbike survive? How did it get all the way here and in what way did it transform, with the years, into this strange device, survivor of so many ages?

It is certain that the bike is a consequence of the absence of buses or any other means of transport, and surely in the photograph that Luciana took our faces will show astonishment, curiosity or sadness.

In fact the vision offered by a city where such different times converge and where the destruction and poverty threaten to make everything disappear is not cheerful. The river that crosses Santa Clara, with stagnant water full of garbage, makes one think of the beautiful and pros-

perous city that it doubtless was at some time. I remember having crossed it several times as a child with my grandparents, travelling from Havana to Camaguey. It was a very alive city of people working and changing their surroundings.

I would have other tales to tell: the *apagón* (blackout) in the small hotel, La Rivierita, almost in ruins in spite of the attempt to rebuild it, in which Gema, Tomás and I tried very hard, with the aid of matches, to go to rescue Iben and her actresses from the most absolute darkness. When I found her she was seated, silent, as if the darkness and the ramshackle scenario of the place took her to another time. Strange as it might seem, I connected this image of Iben with her own performance, *Ester's Book*: the dark and difficult times in which, however, life is engendered.

Why do I think like this? Why doesn't the cart, the darkness or the river of stagnant water provoke in me a bad memory of the Magdalena days?

Maybe I have got used to the ruins, to the aging and progressive deterioration of the buildings. Maybe my eyes have learned how to search in the darkness. But also, in this hard job of living among old and used things, and among rules and regulations that hamper changes and personal initiatives, I have had to learn how to defend the small, sometimes almost invisible, buds of life and beauty that teaching and theatre have given me. I see them like this: they are gifts; small and fleeting moments in which a performance - sometimes poor or imperfect - bestows on me a gesture, a word, a tiny light that illuminates something. Or a student who suddenly surprises me, comes out of who knows where, with a language that doesn't exist, a way of looking that she or he didn't learn in books, not even at school, but in some place in themselves that I managed to awake.

You are right: there is a hidden and silent memory. It is hidden in the objects, the streets, the deep rivers and the dust of the forgotten cities. They are like imaginary eras that survive, strangely survive, the voracity of change, the laws and destruction. They are not clearly visible, but in some moments they become embodied; for example, in *The Taste of Oranges*, your performance, when Gabriella squeezes what could be the juice of love or nostalgia. I think, as you do, that the difficult thing is to fix, and keep, those small buds of life and food. How to learn to transform images and objects that surprise, assail or sadden us every day, into something that can have life and beauty.

Beauty is a word that I like and that makes me uncomfortable. It has a terrifying aspect because I associate it with something that I can't find and that I look for, desperately at times, amongst a heap of stones and waste. I know it exists: I have seen it many times. There are moments: fleeting instants of a performance, a painting, a book, a sound, or pieces of life that one holds on to and protects.

Each meeting with the Magdalena Project (in Wales, in Denmark or in Cuba) has left me different things: of the first one, in Wales, I evoke the strength and the surprise; of the second last one, in Denmark, a curious sensation of the passing of time in oneself and the emotion of the night, between one performance and the other, gradually encroaching on the sky; of Magdalena Sin Fronteras II, in Santa Clara, the delicate light illuminating the faces of the spectators like an act of faith.

It is not something mystic, but vital. It doesn't appeal to transcendence, but to what is left of life: to the rooted necessity to find a space, a place, inhabited by beauty for moments beyond the ruin, darkness or incompleteness.



Poster for the Festival Magdalena Sin Fronteras II, Santa Clara, 2008.

I could speak of other reasons: historical, socio-cultural, etc. But what moves me finally is not only Roxana's or Joël's effort, and that of the actors of the Estudio Teatral, or the support of the cultural institutions in spite of the conceptual limitations (for example, the absurd separation of foreigners, Cubans of the island and residents abroad, which is deeply offensive, I believe not only to those of us who live *here*), as well as the difficulties of organisation and resources. I know all of this: I live it and it hurts me daily. What moves me mainly is the *real necessity* of this meeting.

Personally, I believe that where the landscape is more forlorn, or colder, company is more necessary; and where it is dryer, poorer or sadder, is where the delicate light of the stage can enrich and illuminate life.

In general, I hate the fragile optimism of the calculated politics that promise, as we very well know, that next time will be better.

I don't know if it will be better. I don't know if there will be buses that drive around the town, or more old carts, and not even if there will still be carts drawn by horses, the Chinese bicycles, or the motorbikes of the 1950s. Nor do I know if the water of the river will become transparent again or finally be only a repository for trash. I don't know if the city will be buried by dust or - as now - one in front of the other in a bitter dialogue, the new Internet Café and the ruined colonial house will coexist. I don't know how much light and darkness the streets and the houses will have. But I do know that, in any case, the necessity of theatre and the meeting of different stage practices, will not disappear. As the affection and the gratitude one feels for so many teachers and friends from all kinds of places do not disappear.

For me, the Magdalena days in Santa Clara were prosperous, not for the difficulties and not even for the efforts, but for their achievements: the small flame that still burns in the eyes and heart of its actors and spectators.

Dear friend, to the rivers that connect your *stones of water* this one will always have to be added, with its black waters, because the geography of your heart would not be complete if it was not so. For you, for Jill, Geddy, Gilly, Maria, and all the Magdalenas, teachers and pupils, a big hug and the gratitude of sharing our secret island once again. There will be a next time in Santa Clara... but bring the coffee pot, just in case! With all my love,

Raquel

From: Roxana Pineda

Eneyda Has Her Coffee Pot



Santa Clara, May 12th 2008

Dear Raquel and Julia,

Five days after the Magdalena Sin Fronteras II in Santa Clara had ended, when I was awfully tired and mentally exhausted, somebody stopped me in the street to tell me that Yoel, the event's driver, had died of a heart attack. He was thirty-two years old and seemed to be a healthy young man. The news saddened me a lot and I began to review each meeting I had had with Yoel: each of his complaints, of our objections; each of his absences or late arrivals; each scene centred around the *guagua* (bus), which had become the evil character of those days making many participants request a better future organisation. I myself - who spoke very often with Yoel asking him to be punctual - now felt empty of reasons. All our considerations seemed quite repugnant since his death would prevent him from ever driving a *guagua* again. With this bitterness I said goodbye to ten intense, hard and beautiful days. Once again, amid difficulties, imprecision, sacrifices, grueling work and passion, we had been able to achieve an encounter of indecipherable dimensions.

The first Festival in 2005 had the charm of the unknown; advancing on precarious ground while trying to make each step be the beginning of a coherent and enjoyable promenade. The first love can be remembered with generosity; the first gesture has the value of opening a space: there is no standard to be measured against; it is up to us to validate the experience without knowing if it will be successful. And it was. Being the first time, all complaints related to organisation and logistics (a challenge to the gods that we were able to overcome), despite the ever present difficulties, passed in second line. The most important thing was to defend a possible meeting in the middle of our island, outside the capital, and to put the basis for an exchange on the shoulders of a small theatre group whose members, not believing in hierarchies or status, passed from being director to lighting technician or porter, from actor to guide, translator, message bringer, toilet cleaner, snack deliv-

erer or the person running after a horse cart so that everything should turn out well and on time.

I will never forget how I completely lost my voice in that first event; nor Jill (Greenhalgh)'s arrival at La Havana airport and her sudden direct question: why do you want to make a Magdalena? Of the first time I remember the happiness of walking in the streets with Deborah Hunt's giant masks; and seeing Rosa Cuchillo in the Parque Vidal, forcing people to follow her Indigenous woman painted in white. Of the first time I remember Dr. Graziella Pogolotti at the Guiñol Theatre thanking Julia Varley for her excellent translation; and Julia preparing Doña Musica's flowers in the small room of our theatre. And I remember with nostalgia the lunches in the Education Visitors' House, all the invited practitioners together, and how at times the guests would take advantage of Cuba's strong sunshine. Of the first time I retain many images, mostly generous and cheerful, although some - like when Brigitte Cirila was forced to abandon Santa Clara without presenting her performance and sang a farewell to me - were loaded with tears. Sally Rodwell was there and, to the amazement of many, she laughed and danced during the closing party.

After the first Festival I was left with many small pieces of paper on which the participants had written down their wishes. Most participants forgot about them afterwards. I was left with the friendship of many women of the craft whom I had not met before except through e-mails while preparing the Festival. Most of all I was left with a sensation of fullness for having been able, with my group, to plan, organise and defend a meeting full of life that prepared us for future unforeseen trials.

I know that an encounter depends a lot on its organisational structure. I believe

that an arrangement is necessary to develop a particular way of thinking and to guarantee that the most important points - always hidden in details and never anticipated - are not lost. This is why one has to be very protective when organising an event. There is no justification for changes of schedule or cancellations, for lights or props not being there on time, for the transport complicating the intended logic or for the food causing delays or for the stove breaking down. I have always believed that an impeccable organisation is a priority that has to be guaranteed in an event so that the unforeseen accidents that always happen can be dealt with without betraying the intelligence of the meeting or destabilising the balance between order and chaos. But at times reality overtakes us and we have to assume fearlessly responsibilities that guarantee that the essential is not lost. This enormous risk is run by anyone organising such a festival (for those of us who do not have influence over control mechanisms nor have the resources to avoid disasters).

When Magdalena Sin Fronteras II ended I realised that this second encounter had been much bigger than the first one. In 2005 twenty-four international artists had participated; in 2008 forty-six attended, without counting the twenty-three young workshop participants who paid for their full stay in Cuba adding up to an overall number of sixty-nine people. I had anticipated the size of the participation and assumed it as a challenge that would allow a more open and fortuitous exchange for all: teachers and students, actresses and directors. At the same time, more than thirty women from the theatres of different Cuban towns attended, besides dozens of actresses, actors, directors, teachers, journalists and theatre students from Santa Clara who made up the regular audience for the event.

Once again I was astonished by the

generosity of the women who decided to return to Cuba assuming the cost of their flights to offer their constantly challenging work without charging a cent and make it possible during ten days for our small town to become the capital of theatre made by women. I know how difficult it is for many of the women to find economic support to come to Cuba from so far away and for them to adjust their work programmes and plan a ten day stay in Santa Clara. I know how hard it is to make such a long trip and only present one performance and work for three short days with about ten or twelve people whom they will not meet again for a long time. I know how complex it is to accept a way of behaving which often is very distant from the everyday life of their countries. And I also know that, in spite of everything, something essential can be experienced at the moment of the encounter.

Two preoccupations always accompany me during Magdalena Sin Fronteras: to guarantee worthy living conditions and an accurate organisation, and to present an artistic reality that reflects who we are in Cuba to our guests. For ourselves, I wish to introduce a theatre reference made by women that I believe can stimulate, provoke and, why not, amaze us while facing the distance or proximity of these unknown worlds. Beyond these professional and indispensable principles, appears the particular human being that I am, with my preferences and vision of the world. Without this selfish perspective I would not be able to commit all my energy to what I do and it would be impossible for me to conceive and support a meeting of this kind. Starting from this selfish perspective I try to create spaces where people I like, because of their work and particular way of defending what they defend, can come all the way to my town.

The Magdalena Project attracts me

because I feel it has a rebellious energy and a solidarity that goes beyond good manners. I have experienced, in many of its meetings, how frank dialogues take place and new projects are protected without expressions of altruism or paternalism. I have felt part of the fighting, critical, rigorous, loving, dreaming and plotting spirit of this circle of women who try to build a language from within theatre to preserve their need to be present.

On the surface we see the meetings, performances, work demonstrations, forums and discussions. On the surface are the topics that we establish so that the women can speak of their experiences and find a particular way of doing so. Underneath lie the silences, the unspoken questions, the dreams, the fragility we shelter, impulses born out of the force of solitude, of being on the periphery, of being aware of our separate position. On the surface we see the programme I have designed so that the performances can be experienced in equal conditions and so that the criteria jump from one side to the other following an almost visceral logic.

There are performances that provoke a lot of energy and others that leave us indifferent. There are performances that mobilise our minds reaching towards something inaccessible that words cannot capture completely and others that leave us speechless. There are performances we would like to discuss, others that mark a beginning, and others still that are of the kind we would like to run away from.

Right now I am faced with a dilemma: we are women theatre practitioners and the performances condense a human and professional experience; how should we protect the quality of the Festival without betraying the space of promotion and protection that Magdalena is? Dealing with theatre, we are forced to define what kind of



Opening of Magdalena Sin Fronteras II.
Photo: Carolina Vilches

theatre or theatres we wish to promote or confront. Our proposals should have a strong artistic profile, a rebellious vocation and a deep structural beauty maintaining the performances' intention to research, their opposition to complacency, banality and all kinds of domineering discourses. My own selfish self could put it simply: I would like to invite beautiful and transgressive performances that should never leave me indifferent. But I don't want the logic of 'critical intelligence' that we have inherited in Cuba to decide what to discard or applaud in my festival. While recognising that as theatre practitioners we must find a way to dialogue and confront the processes, even to discuss the performances, I refuse to create spaces where some are the judges and others the accused. This is not the Magdalena Project's logic and this I want to defend. Cristina Castrillo always insists that we have to speak of theatre. Patricia Ariza refuses a process of selection of work because then no-one will protect the young people who work in particularly difficult conditions.

I had not planned to write about Magdalena Sin Fronteras. I wanted others to do so in order to observe how the



Roxana Pineda (at the back) in the coffee pot factory in Santa Clara. Photo: Carolina Vilches

meeting was perceived and what questions caused more interest. On the last day, during the final Round, I asked all the participants to write a page about their experience in Santa Clara. I wanted to force them to write. Very few did so. I also asked them to give a short opinion about the event. Everyone wanted more time for the workshops, more time to meet and talk outside the work, to discuss about the performances. Everyone requested rigour in the schedules; some were very hard in evaluating the organisation.

Sitting beside Jill, I wondered if I would be able to make another Magdalena Sin Fronteras in 2011. And I thought of my group, of my combat partners of the Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara who, without being able to participate in the workshops or enjoy the company of the teachers, had remained day in and day out at the theatre or running around so that everything functioned without mishaps. My colleagues - actors and director - a small troupe of seven people willing to do everything for Magdalena Sin Fronteras: Joël Sáez, Gretzy Fuentes, Leyza Clavelo, Eylen de León, Alexis González, Raúl Acosta, Katia Alonso and Alejandro Marrero. They carried the

enormous weight of an organisation that, despite the difficulties, managed that the Festival flowed and reached the last day with a feeling of happiness and dignity. Once we were alone in our town again, they also spoke in a Round. They all acknowledged that they had worked much harder than the previous time but that they had felt that the Festival belonged to them because, besides the intense work, they had been able to show their own artistic work. Listening to them, I felt as if I was looking at them for the first time and I felt proud of all of them.

For the selfish human being that I am, the fact that my small group is able to sustain and organise such a festival is significant. Taking into account a tradition that teaches us to be guided - to be consumers of ideas rather than creators - and that we are a small ensemble decidedly interested in defending the theatre group as a space of research and as an oasis of artistic confrontation, the fact of leading an event like Magdalena Sin Fronteras, without concessions and in complete freedom to decide how and with whom, is a reason for satisfaction.

I could say that my impulse to organise the Magdalena meeting in Cuba also comes from the imperious necessity to circulate my experience and that of my group, to give our theatre other environments to move in. It comes from my obsession with pursuing spaces of intensity where the secrets of the craft can be put on trial and from my eagerness to have the people I love and respect close. It comes from the pleasure of organising spaces where others can meet and exchange with a different quality than usual because of how the relationships are prioritised, regardless of whether the performances are good or bad (even if I always take care of the quality of the performances). It comes from many postponed dreams, from many conversations with mute

masters, from an almost twenty year history of working in the province against the tendencies of the fashions of the moment, against the opinions of those who ignore us, against the magnanimous and odious charitable gestures of those who understand us and against the silence that has always accompanied us. It comes from a dark force that transforms into wisdom and no longer feels the pain of so much apathy. It comes from the light of an acceptance of what we are and from the energy that we retain from our birth in 1989, when three of us decided to create a research group in Santa Clara wanting to change the world.

Now we know that the world is really only our own world and this knowledge is not bitter. Looking back I am surprised that, almost twenty years later and in spite of a biography full of black holes, we can feel happy about organising work encounters with the seriousness and rigour of Magdalena Sin Fronteras.

I am moved by the fact that my group, in exchange for working like beasts, expects to have a live contact with people that embody for us both the innocence and passion of our first days, to see and hear an artist in person, to experience the confrontation or enjoyment of their performances in our home, to be able to welcome a group of women who make theatre, to be able to serve trusting that this service has a value in itself. I am moved because, after all, all my colleagues, including my director, have no reason to share the needs of this selfish part of me.

I always wonder about what language is necessary for me to continue observing with curiosity and dialoguing without prejudices. I am concerned about the meaning, so that the days don't just pass by and so that the performances are not flattened by a daily habit of consumption that our culture prevents us from discarding, or so that a

paternalistic or self-centred reaction does not distance us from a dialogue that could reveal openings or at least questions. I don't want to organise a meeting to feed hierarchies, but one in which those who have more experience can demonstrate this through performances, work demonstrations and workshops. I want to be able to create a space in which the whisper can become a living voice that doesn't harm; to create a meeting that, after just ten days, is able to infiltrate the habitat and get entangled in the future of those who have returned home. I want my group's actors to learn to see, to have opinions, to defend their craft professionally. While looking at others, I want them to understand that only the work is important and helps, that without work nothing is possible.

But my wishes cannot be achieved in ten days: it is a chimera, an illusion. Ten days are not enough to learn and let go, in that time one can only *shake the world*: perhaps a participant will face an important question or be able to recover her self-esteem so as to confront indifference and rejection. If something like this happens I feel calmer.

Dear Ju, I don't know if everyone knows that you were the first person to propose that I should organise a Magdalena in Cuba taking advantage of the EITALC meeting which would happen in the Escambray. Somehow you imagined this possibility. You know as I do that many doubted that we were able to organise such an event, but the doubts were dispelled. Now the question is if we are capable or want to face another Festival. We will certainly try to. For my selfish being what's most difficult is to find the people. I find it more and more difficult to work with people I don't believe in. It is not a question of artistic talent, at least not only, but of humanity. It is frustrating to work with people I don't believe in

because I am aware their perspective is to plunder; they do not believe in me either, but they think they can use me. They would never move a finger to support this kind of meeting, but they expect to receive the benefits. But sadly I also know that it is important for the Festival that these people are present. But I cannot be magnanimous with my dignity. Therefore I am an actress: when I feel that my dignity or that of the people that I love is being attacked, I revolt. Nobody can be entitled to annihilate or give us lessons. I cannot work beside people who, even if talented, behave like slave traffickers. I will never accept a relationship or experience that places me or my group in a situation of humiliation, and this has happened to me abroad in a way that would never be possible in Cuba.

I make Magdalena Sin Fronteras to continue my struggle against humiliation and so that you all can continue coming to Santa Clara: I know that you are artists who would never accept humiliation as exchange currency. It is in my country where I can be entirely free: despite the setbacks in the capacity of thinking and participating, despite all kinds of hardships, the indifference or the injustices that fall upon us. In spite of everything I feel that it is here where I can fight and revolt strongest. It is something I must do.

I was beside you when you asked the woman of the INPUD factory if it was possible to give a coffee pot to Eneyda (Villalón). You are right: perhaps it would have been nice for her and an expression of generosity for what the factory workers had seen. But I know that Eneyda didn't really care: her coffee pot was concealed in her shining eyes. Now I will tell you a story. While preparing for Magdalena Sin Fronteras I began to think who to invite from Cuba. The most obvious names were clear to me, but I wanted others as well. I



Roxana Pineda in *Historias con Mascaras*, Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara. Photo: Carolina Vilches

wanted to find somebody who needed to be at the Festival, somebody whose life could be saved by this meeting. And I thought of Eneyda. She had a performance that Gretzy and Joël had seen at a Monologue Festival, a competitive kind of festival that people here like in which the wise ones teach the unhappy. Eneyda was an unhappy one and all the rest were the wise ones. They tore her work to shreds. When I invited her she said "No! My performance has many problems, I received lots of criticism from important people and I have decided not to make the performance anymore". It took me a week to convince her, giving her time to think. Finally I succeeded over all her executioners.

Dear Ju, when Magdalena Sin Fronteras finished I lost my voice. But not like the first

time. Now it was a reaction to my psychic state. I didn't want nor could I speak. You wrote to me to know how I was, Cristina Castrillo reclaimed my messages and Jill wondered from Wales why she didn't hear from me. One month after you had all left I opened the letter that Jill had given me on the condition that I would not read it until two weeks had passed. She was afraid that I would be hurt by her usual strong questions. No, I was not hurt by her questions about the destiny of Magdalena, about the sense of the meetings, about the need to have a deep necessity to do what we do. She is right. I think I will continue to imagine how to improve the visible structures so that the invisible part is protected.

I always expect your questions Ju. I know that with them comes the lucidity of a critical view that is never empty of love and real commitment. Because of this I want you and your work to always be in our house and that people who need protection can collide with your spirit. Eneyda has her coffee pot; of the kind that no factory will ever be able to give her. I gave it to her by forcing her to come and you gave it to her by working with her and seeing her work. This coffee pot that Eneyda took with her from Santa Clara will never be built by any factory in the world nor by any Italian designer. And besides, it is magic: it has taught her to speak!

I will tell you another story. When I was a little girl I went through a traumatic period because I began to wonder how it was that men stopped walking barefoot to put shoes on, and then how it happened that shoes went from being a precise useful object to becoming an object of vanity. It is not poetry; I suffered a lot as a little girl analysing the phenomenon. When I lost words after this Magdalena everything got tangled in the same bag: the death of our driver Yoel, the departure of all of you, my

dissatisfactions with the organisation, the fatigue, all the accumulated questions and the sensation of wanting to retire a little to know how to continue. Perhaps it has nothing to do with this; perhaps still many dark areas are left. But for all of this and for some things that should remain unsaid, I want to continue making Magdalena in Cuba.

A thousand kisses,

Ro

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley



MARIA PORTER (USA) is a teacher, director and actor from New York. She is a master teacher of the Suzuki method, and is the head of the acting programme at CW Post/Long Island University. She has recently created and directed her second original performance, *Third Child*. Maria has worked extensively with Cristina Castrillo and Teatro delle Radici, where she collaborated on their recent performance, *Il Ventre della Balena*.

JULIA VARLEY (Britain/Denmark) has worked as an actress with Odin Teatret since 1976, is an active member of The Magdalena Project and artistic director of Transit International Festival and Meeting, dedicated to themes of interest for women working in theatre. Julia Varley first met Raquel Carrió and Roxana Pineda on tour with Odin Teatret in Cuba in 1994, and she has since been in regular contact with them.

RAQUEL CARRIÓ (Cuba), is a professor, playwright and essayist. She is the founder of the Institute of Scenic Arts of the University of Arts of Havana and full time professor of Drama and Methodology of Theatrical Research with a Ph.D in Dramatic Arts. She has received numerous awards and honours for her essays and critical studies. Raquel has been dramaturgy consultant to Teatro Buendía since its inception.

ROXANA PINEDA (Cuba) graduated in Theatre Studies and Dramaturgy at the Instituto Superior de Arte de Cuba in 1985. She founded the Estudio Teatral de Santa Clara in 1989 with Joel Sáez, and has performed in all its productions. She is also a theatre scholar and professor. In 2004, she founded the Centro de Investigaciones Teatrales Odiseo (CITO), a pedagogical theatre research project, which has organised five international meetings.