

Anna Furse

Written on My Body

It has been a terrifying privilege to write this "autobiography". Two thousand words works out at about one word per week lived. How to select and order the past, and why the choices? Memories are ragbags.

I blame it on the rat costume. It was a dingy grey cotton leotard with a long stiff pink satin tail and bonnet with ears. But wearing it magically connected me to all the other toddlers strutting our stuff at the Scala Theatre, London, circa 1956, the pride and joy of my beloved dancing teacher and surrogate mother Betty Vacani. The adrenaline rush of commingling with this sweaty chaos of dimpled limbs swarming in pursuit of the Pied Piper left an indelible mark on my psyche. A passion for ensemble physical theatre was born here in my rodent stage debut.

Unlike the doting parents of the other girls and boys, my mother wasn't in the audience. She used Betty V. as cheap childcare. She was a single parent, eccentric, volatile, tyrannical and neglectful. My devotion to dance at such an early age was to prove a useful distraction from a turbulent home life. I was an unhappy kid and ballet gave an outlet for expressing big feelings. By the time I was twelve I had played many parts including: a star (as in twinkle), a thistle, a pierrette, a spring flower, a nose-less maid, a tap-dancing secretary and a swallow with a broken wing, performed with hobbling angst and a great deal of tragic facials. By this time I was enamoured with the idea of suffering 100% for my art and won a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School in 1965. The Royal Ballet School was heaven to me. Its harsh and punishing training of body and mind appealed to my in-built work ethic. I danced myself senseless. I battled with puberty. I won choreography prizes from Gods like Frederick Ashton for avant-garde antics like making my company do headstands to synthesised Bach whilst my ballet teachers winced in the corners. I was besotted with Fonteyn and Nureyev. I stood for night upon night at Covent Garden to catch every performance I could on student freebies.¹ Somewhere along the line I saw David Warner's *Hamlet* at the Aldwych and found it deeply exciting. The ballet world was beginning to seem stifling and narrow. Meanwhile I was growing too "shapely" despite bouts of self-starvation.

¹ Free tickets.

One day, aged seventeen, I woke up and decided to quit. I stunned my friends by announcing that I would be retiring from the race before graduating and try to become a normal educated citizen.

Emerging from a professional ballet training is like giving up the convent. It was a kind of rebirth, painful and liberating. In the real world people didn't giggle and whisper in corners about each other's arabesques or body hair. They talked to you looking at your face rather than your legs (mostly). And there was so much to talk about: politics, war, sex. I enrolled to sit A levels in a London college of Further Education. There, huge macho boys wore boxing gloves in the common room to thrash each other for fun at lunch-break and young hippie women in floral gowns drifted into class barefoot, smoking roll-ups and talking of existentialism. I had an action-packed year joining them. I corrected my dancer's duck walk, wore long black dresses and dutifully lost my virginity. I secured a place at University but decided to take a year off and go to Paris.

It was 1971. Paris was still smoking from the heat of '68. The streets were clogged with armed police. A Portuguese friend shared my *vie bohème* and taught me about Marx and Lenin and of the fascist regime in her own country. Suddenly I thought I understood everything and wanted to change the world. I went on demos. I sat up in cafes smoking and talking about dialectic materialism. Our tiny flat became headquarters for a branch of the Portuguese underground and a constant stream of young men with assumed names like D'Artagnan would turn up at our door to collect messages, food and a few nights kip.² I waited tables and cleaned houses, fuelling my class analysis by the minute. Searching for an opportunity to learn about theatre I landed myself an unpaid job as a bi-lingual assistant

with Peter Brook's International Centre for Theatrical Research.

The CIRT was my first hands-on theatre experience. I was kept busy pecking at dictionaries translating Ted Hughes' prolific output of rehearsal stories for *The Conference of the Birds*. It wasn't all paperwork. Peter let me watch improvisations and study Tai 'Chi and Feldenkreis with his company in return for my happy slavery. I was infatuated with every one of his actors. One day a visitor from England whispered sniffily: "It's all a bit like a temple in here". "Oh, yes" - I replied - "but that is what is so wonderful about it". To me the gruelling discipline of daily Japanese song, physical work, long hours and cruel feedback were just a spit away from the training I had come from. I mistakenly thought that all theatre would be like this: tough, sweaty and spiritual. How wrong I was.

By the time the year was up I felt ready for university. I had been sworn to secrecy about the CIRT work. Peter fixed me with a glassy eye and made me promise never to show my notes to anyone. To this day I haven't. I arrived at Bristol to study for a Drama and French degree already a dissident from the theatrical mainstream, sitting on a secret I didn't fully understand. All I knew was that frocks and fans and diction didn't really do anything for me. I was interested in the outer edges, the rule breakers, the iconoclasts. And there was this great heart-and-mind-cracking thing called Feminism which was completely reorganising my brain. I questioned everything and deplored the lack of women's work in the theatre. Along with two girlfriends, we staged the second United Kingdom festival of women's work on a grand budget of £600 wrenched from the department's production fund. We told our teachers not to teach but simply support our aims. We staged whatever women's voices we could find (this was 1973 so you could count them on one hand) and supplemented this with our own material. We made films, played music, taught

² A few nights of sleep.

ourselves theatre technology, swapped artistic and stage management jobs and presented this rough and ready potpourri to a paying public. It was exhausting, exhilarating and ultimately tragic: one of us three prime movers died suddenly of pneumonia the night before we opened. Getting the traumatised group of thirty-six organised and supported to perform our week's work was my first and daunting taste of responsibility for a large company.

I graduated in 1976 still unsure of my theatrical future. My feminism didn't sit comfortably with the idea of becoming a professional actress (although my acting career at university suggested I certainly would). I felt an urge to write but a voice inside said to wait till I was older. Then, in Paris again, I found a fresh passion to divert me from the theatrical straight and narrow: I became swept up into Grotowski's paratheatrical experiments. In the blistering July heat at a chateau near Bordeaux I spent ecstatic days and nights discovering the extraordinary kamikaze rituals of *Holiday*. I was in a trance. I felt no pain (despite severely spraining my wrist) and found unimaginable resources of energy and freedom. I must have slept a total of five hours in five days. I danced in dawns, rolled in mud, ran for eight hours through forests non-stop and played a lunatic game at midnight on the highroad, lying down flat till the very last minute before a truck could see us in its headlights and then bolting into the verge. This, I felt, was Life. The rest of it seemed so flat now. But how to find this physical intensity, this risk-taking, this collective *extremis* as a *modus vivendi*?

There were no simple answers. I spent the next few years searching in the U.S.A. and in Britain for a way of training and making theatre that expresses both my feminist politics and my Brook-Grotowski mentoring. I went to Poland for another paratheatrical experience. I rediscovered dance, finding an emerging movement of radical experimentation and artistic idealism

at the X6 Collective in Butlers Wharf, London. These people were ex-ballet dancers trying to reconcile their past with contemporary sexual politics and they collaborated with eccentric artists from the London Filmmakers Co-op and the Musicians Collective. Meeting them was like finding my long lost tribe. I threw myself into the movement as a performer and activist - making bizarre shows as one of the four women company Helen Jives (with Jacky Lansley, Suzy Gilmour and Maureen O'Brien) and writing and editing for *New Dance Magazine*. My heart was now set on performing and making theatre.

My first properly paid job as an actress involved a year at Chapter in Cardiff, Wales, as the only woman in a professional experimental physical improvisation company called Reflex Action. One all-night training session, the director (who shall remain nameless), having set me a mystifying physical task, sauntered off at 4 am to the newsagents and returned with a *Penthouse* magazine. "Let's see who can keep me awake longer, them or you" - he yawned. The Brook/Grotowski male-guru thing had clearly gone too far. Besides which the testosterone-highs on stage were producing appalling sexual and violent impulses. I was angry being made to feel I was blocking creativity if I "censored" material. But I had to admit that being perpetually non-sexist/non-racist could be like watching paint dry. Being nice just isn't exciting. Theatre has to be about darkness, disobedience, the forbidden. "No conflict, no drama" as Shaw said. But to me the point was: how to work on conflicts and tensions that didn't abuse human values. And also to look frankly at conflicts that existed between women and why. The idea took shape in my mind to form my own company, ask my own questions, research theatre in my own terms. My quest was: how could I steer a course between physical risk and a feminine perspective? Looking around me I noticed that the most successful women's companies

tended towards Brechtian didacticism or clowning. Laughter sugared the pill. But I wanted to find a lyrical, imagistic, dark and demanding form of women's theatre - a poetic feminist physical theatre that would touch big themes.

I founded Bloodgroup with Suzy Gilmour in 1980, and our first project was the deconstruction of Genet's *The Maids*. *A Barricade of Flowers* took almost a year to make. Embodying Kate Millet's analysis of Genet's portrayals of "slave mentality" (in her book *Sexual Politics*), our odd duet found us literally tied together by an umbilical cord throughout, a pair of self-hating and destructive twins. I wrote us a grandiose manifesto which pledged, amongst other things, that we would not work from vanity or a need to be beautiful and loved on stage. I suggested we try and look like skinned rabbits in the performance - hair and skins bleached out and our bodies concealed by grey cotton coats. One male reviewer still eulogised our peculiar brand of "eroticism".

Barricade explored the Virgin and Whore archetypes, and the love-hate relationship between women. We bickered and fought our way through the show, culminating in a great feast. This began as a sedate meal of pink and white foods and ended as an orgiastic binge. On one occasion I couldn't find a red rose which I usually ate as hors d'oeuvre and had to substitute it with a huge crimson rhododendron stolen from a nearby park. I ate the lot. I was told later that they can mortally poison horses. Perhaps the paratheatre was paying off?

Barricade was an unexpected success and we toured the piece all over the United Kingdom and to Holland, Switzerland and Germany. By searching for the expression of our unconscious associations with the show's themes we had somehow touched raw nerves. I suggested that we continue our research using difficult and provocative themes of "sex and power". Our second project was an exploration of pornography - *Dirt* - in which we were joined by designer

Kate Owen and performer Stephanie Pugsley and helped by a modest grant from the Arts Council.

Bloodgroup's work was to search for the non-verbal syntax of theatre, to test whether there was such a thing as a feminine narrative structure and to let personal and subconscious material inform our imagery. We wanted to know if the microcosm of the personal would connect macrocosmically. This might then prove some kind of conditioned collective feminine unconscious. The impulse to make *Dirt* was a response to two personal facts: I had just completed the translation from French of a book about prostitutes and my partner's peccadilloes had included an affair with a very sexy stripper (who was in fact a post-modern dancer). I was simultaneously politicised by women working in the sex industry and threatened by the sexuality of my rival. *Dirt* was a way of coming to terms with my own anxieties and disrupting the eroticism of women performing to a male gaze. We stripped naked and re-clothed ourselves throughout, exploring the fetish of costume and the erotic in classical painting, high art and showbiz. It was sassy, bold, up front and risky for its time.

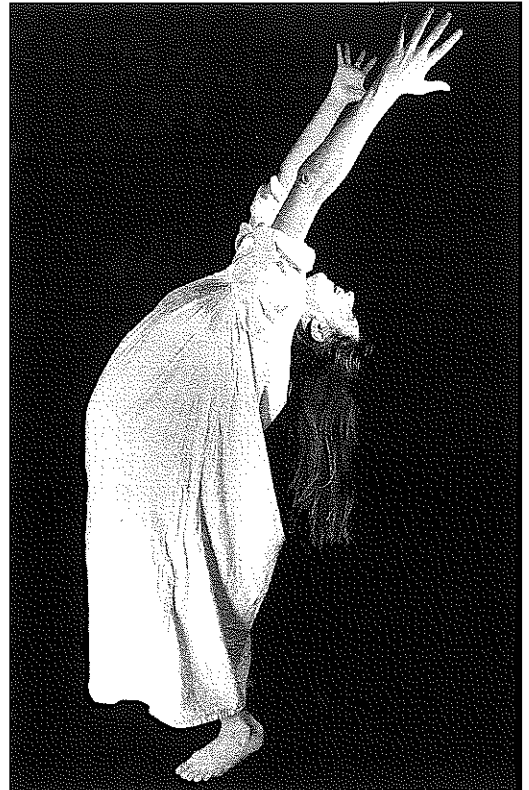
Feminism was still extremely puritanical and the orthodox view we were challenging was that women in the sex industry were dumbly oppressed. The subtitle of our show was *The Theatre of Sex and the Sex of Theatre*. It was a smash hit. We sold out wherever we played and ended up sharing a two week season with Jan Fabre at the I.C.A. in London. *Dirt* was followed by *Cold Wars* (a response to the nuclear threat), then *Clam* by Deborah Levy and *Strokes of Genius*, in which Suzy Gilmour and I tested the old magic again in another twin duet as Virgin and Magdalene, this time working from the Gnostic Gospels and starting with the idea of the two women living side by side as ancient hermitesses. I enjoyed performing our usual acts of transgression, but by now I was getting offered directing work and felt

that my real interests lay in creating and writing rather than performing. Bloodgroup ceased operation.

This was 1986. In the last ten years I have directed many productions, moving gradually into textual work. I have also written my own plays,³ starting with *Augustine (Big Hysteria)*³ about a case of Grande Hysteria in late 19th century Paris and the dawning of Freudian psychoanalysis. Augustine was a star hysteric at the great neurologist Charcot's clinic. A rape survivor, she had turned her unutterable protest into great performances preserved in photographic and written records. Hélène Cixous says hysteria is a text of pain "written on the body" and a "theatre for forgotten scenes". In retrospect I can see a connection between all the physical extremes to which I had taken my own body, the creative methodology of Bloodgroup and my interest in telling this particular story. Today my research into the relationship between hysteria and acting continues, extending into classical and contemporary play texts. If Ophelia's "madness" for instance is in fact a form of (hysterical) protest, an externalisation of trauma, then her songs are a strategy - messages in bottles, deliberately exaggerated performances designed to find expression for repressed and oppressed feelings. The history of theatre is certainly not short of mad and possessed women (and men) to study in this new light.

By the late 1980's my work was almost exclusively text-based: in 1988 I formed a company with Juliet Stevenson and Paola Dionisotti directing them in an American play about 19th century women explorers, *On the Verge*. I had also met my partner Jack Klaff, a brilliant actor and storyteller with whom I worked on a one-man show on quantum physics, *Stand Up!*, which interconnected themes of military dictatorship with Man's oppression of

³ *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* is published by Harwood Academic Publishers, England.



Shona Morris in *Augustine (Big Hysteria)*.
Photo: Sheila Burnett

Nature. In 1990 I was appointed Artistic Director of Paines Plough which had survived sixteen years to become Britain's premier touring company specialising in new plays. I wasn't allowed to change the meaningless title, so I subtitled it instead: *New Theatre New Writing*. The visual, physical and musical was to be taken seriously in the dramaturgical process with writers. My mission was to take our work abroad despite language barriers. I sought writers who wanted to create vivid, exciting, non-naturalistic and non-Brechtian theatre. My main collaborators were the designer Sally Jacobs (Peter Brook's colleague of the sixties and seventies) and the composer Stephen Warbeck. By the end of my five years with the company I had directed nine

shows, created the ongoing training programme the School Without Walls and annual professional research laboratories. We had toured to the former Soviet Union, Holland and France and created a pioneering Anglo-French production of an adaptation of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* with a company of nine plus seventy-five extras. The Arts Council had increased our funding, we were co-producing with repertory theatres and shows were finding an enthusiastic and growing audience. But I was constantly having to justify myself to opposing artistic camps - the playwriting community and the theatre-making one - formed from what I believe are deep-rooted cultural mind-body splits. My artistic agenda clearly upset many traditionalists who thought a new writing company's job was to (modestly) stage small-scale new plays to audiences of three men and a dog. I was hell-bent on totality, on making new writing accessible and exciting to young and uneducated audiences and on encouraging playwrights to think of theatre as a poetic medium. I couldn't sit in a box and repress my artistic impulses for the sake of playwriting piety. It seemed an absurd and very British way of dividing and ruling artists. My proposals to continue expanding the company's mission into site-specific work and planned collaborations with an opera and European dance-theatre companies were rejected by my normally enthusiastic Board in an astonishing coup. I left the company at the end of 1994, stunned by this *volteface* - and pregnant.

I write this from Princeton University, U.S.A., where I have spent the semester

as Visiting Professor. My eighteen month old baby girl has transformed my life. Since she was born I have written a film-script, written and directed a play for Theatre Centre (*A Story from the Second World*), run a laboratory for The Women's Playhouse Trust and directed students in Britain as well as here in the States. I have also written a book about infertility⁴ and am on commission to Doo Cott - a feminist puppet company based in Manchester. I am reeling with the pressure of what feels like such a fragmented life as a professional artist and mother. It has been a terrifying privilege to write this "autobiography". Two thousand words works out at about one word per week lived. How to select and order the past, and why the choices? Memories are ragbags. Methods can feel like madness. Life is ultimately lived chaotically. But it is in the exercise of telling of it, trying to shape the story, that we may find logic and coherence. And that, in the end, is what making theatre is all about.

ANNA FURSE (Britain) is a writer, director and former artistic director of Paines Plough, London. She was actively involved in the New Dance movement of the nineteen-seventies. In 1980 she founded Blood Group and has directed The Women's Theatre Group, Scarlet Harlets, Graeae and The Young Vic as well as working for the Royal Shakespeare Company as a movement director. She currently works in a freelance capacity.

⁴ *The Infertility Companion* will be published by Thorsons Publishers, England, in May 1997.