

Lieve Delanoy

Returning to Andahuaylas

One day I decided to stop "liberating" women. I had been through all my classical discourses and they had been through their sorry looks, when one of them, called Purificacion, shouted: "Why don't we prepare a Verbena!" Surprised I asked: "Please, what is a Verbena?" She answered: "Well, we play roles and so we get some money." "And what will we do with the money?" I could not refrain from a lecturing tone in my answer. She promptly replied: "We could buy a full crate of beer and have fun."



When I was invited to write about *Theatre, Women, Politics*, my first reaction was to refuse because the word politics fills me with horror. This word has been manipulated so often that I feel ashamed for those who call themselves "politicians": the context is so dirty. On second thoughts I asked myself: "What do I really know about politics?" And suddenly I remembered a joke in a newspaper about *Mafalda* (Quino's cartoon). *Mafalda* is looking in a dictionary for the interpretation of the word politics and finds "the one who takes care of his city", which makes her laugh for the next twenty-four hours. So I decided to do the work.

Several years ago in Belgium I decided not to continue to perform theatre. Forever. It was a time when theatre in Belgium was astonishingly subsidised by the Government, so that anybody could produce any kind of nonsense without any problem. The year was 1974. It was awful; quality had no importance: produce whatever you wish and it will be paid for. The idea originated from the Minister of Culture in Belgium, herself a woman with good intentions. At that time I worked as an actress in a theatre group and was terrified about the quality of our performances, so I decided to stop acting.

Meanwhile my husband and I decided to leave the country with our two children in the direction of South America. At home we had the classic Che Guevara poster: he was our example. It was my upmost conviction that by going to South America I could free the people from poverty and injustice, exactly like a feminine "Zorro".

So we arrived in the highlands of Peru, and my first disillusion was seeing that hardly one woman was interested in me saving her either from poverty or from injustice. I still remember the speech I had prepared so well and how dreary the looks of my audience were, notwithstanding my enthusiastic fervour. The more emotional I became, the more sorry for me they became. I

tried all kinds of attractions: crafts - it did not work, no one would buy the products; gardening - no one liked vegetables; weaving workshops - they did not like staying inside their houses, they preferred to walk around and sell things. What these women really hated was being closed together in a room weaving sweaters and other things, and they always looked at me with such sadness in their eyes.

One day I decided to stop "liberating" women. I had been through all my classical discourses and they had been through their sorry looks, when one of them, called Purificacion, shouted: "Why don't we prepare a *Verbena!*" Surprised I asked: "Please, what is a *Verbena?*" She answered: "Well, we play roles and so we get some money." "And what will we do with the money?" I could not refrain from a lecturing tone in my answer. She promptly replied: "We could buy a full crate of beer and have fun." With nothing to say for myself, I could only ask: "What can you do?"

The women started acting and the audience got all the fun they wanted. I saw the sad look in their eyes disappear, they relaxed and livened up. They went to their houses and brought back clothes and other things to disguise themselves as they wanted and then they started performing all kinds of roles, especially male-roles.

Looking at them I decided I had a new job. I could direct their play. For the first time these women and I had a common language with which to communicate. At last I was doing something I liked and so were they.

Later came the awful years. From 1982 on, when *The Shining Path* appeared in the villages followed by the Army, almost all peasants died as a consequence. I was living with my family in Andahuaylas, a small provincial town. The young people there

started to make theatre, because it was a way to escape from reality. They needed it, in order not to lose their dignity, not to succumb to fear.

It was a recourse for me too. I directed theatre groups. The actors were all amateurs and the majority of them were women. The Yuyachkani company played a major role in the whole theatre movement. They led the "Muestras" (showcase festivals), they went to the villages to give workshops.

I saw how young people were terrified by the "political" guerilla and counter-guerilla monster, by the killing and the reprisal executions. None of them were prepared for this situation and they were certainly unable to stop it. I saw how they looked for a hiding place, performing. I discovered some very strong actresses: these young women had a power I never thought they possessed when I watched theatre during my first year in Peru. Performing changed their personality, it made them think of and react to the hard and cruel reality of their lives. We cannot forget that in these terrible years the violence was even harder for women than for men. And when imprisoned they paid a much heavier toll.

It is 1991, I am sitting on the stage experiencing a lot of emotions. We lost a very good friend, Luciano, killed by *The Shining Path*. I am wondering what the hell I am doing in this country and while I am thinking about my life in Belgium, a song comes into my mind, *Ilusionen*. It is a German song sung by Hildegard Knef. Suddenly I am in Belgium again, I am an eight year old small girl. My mother is cleaning the bar, the doors open and a gypsy woman comes in. I see fear on my mother's face. The gypsy woman is very big and has a strong voice. She is quarrelling with my mother. My mother screams: "Don't mix my father up in this story, he has nothing to do with it." "But why didn't he help us escape;

why didn't you help us, the only girl who spoke German properly?" answers the gypsy woman. The story is that during the war my grandfather had a bar where one day two gypsies started a fight with Italian soldiers. Instead of calming everybody down, my grandfather ran to the Nazis who took everybody to prison. The Italian soldiers were degraded and all the gypsies were sent to concentration camps in Germany. Most of them died. The woman was one of the survivors. "Get out", my mother roars. Just before leaving the bar the gypsy looks at me and says: "You are one of us, don't forget it."

I took two decisions: to write a play and to perform again. I started to write. It was very difficult. Pieces of memories: Belgium and Peru; my childhood; I am the daughter of a traitor (my mother was a Nazi sympathiser); the death of Luciano, killed by The Shining Path because he was a "traitor".

I went to Lima with my four children and tried to forget about the show. I was so afraid of being ridiculous. I had last played theatre twenty years before. In January 1992 I showed the play to Beto Benites (ex Yuyachkani, who had just arrived from Venezuela). He proposed that he direct me and that we work during the night, because there was no other time. I accepted immediately. We worked hard for three weeks and it was magic. Beto had also lost good friends during the years of violence. He is a young director of great sensitivity. Marc, my husband, saw the play and said I had to go on, even if there was a great danger because I accused and attacked The Shining Path directly.

During the night, when we were working, we heard the bombs. Sometimes the fear was so great that we wanted to stop and forget everything. Beto returned to Venezuela and we were to resume the work in June. He gave me several tasks, one of

which was to find the end of the play. One day I went to the airport with my husband, who was returning to Andahuaylas. While waiting for the aeroplane we were talking about why we wanted to stay in Peru, a country with so many problems. We remembered the first years and our first friends in Peru. One of them was a scissors dancer in a small village. Suddenly I had found the end of the play. I wanted to dance the traditional scissors dance. I contacted a scissors dancer living in Lima and I asked him if he would teach me this difficult, traditional dance. He was shocked at first, because I am a woman, but then he accepted. He brought me a pair of scissors and we danced for hours. My whole body hurt for days.

In June Beto returned and I showed him the end of the play. He was very happy. For six weeks we worked twenty hours a day and then reality hit us, The Shining Path killed Maria Elena Moyano, the leader of the poor people of Villa El Salvador. I cried the whole day, I could not believe it. One night at eight p.m. there was a great explosion which shook the house. It was a car bomb in Miraflores. Sixty people died. We looked at each other and without a word we started to work again. We felt so angry.

At the end of July we went to Andahuaylas to present the première. It was July 1992. The theatre was a very big building. It was cold. We were all very nervous, because we didn't know how people would react. At the time The Shining Path was very powerful and there was an atmosphere of fear. I hadn't performed for twenty years. At the end there was a big silence, the lights went on and nobody clapped. A man stood up, with flowers in his hands. I had to look twice because he looked like Luciano (our dead friend): it was his brother. He came to me and said: "Thank you for remembering



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my brother.” Tears were shed and we cried together. I felt at peace, this moment was enough for me. All my efforts were rewarded, feeling the warm tears of Luciano’s brother. Now I know that performing has meaning. ... *de tanto volver* was born and I still present this play in different places around the world.

In the 1990s, the impact of the guerilla forces almost disappeared and it seemed that peace would come. Theatre groups dissolved, everybody needed work, because an economic crisis was looming. Many names and themes were taboo. Politics

became a dangerous business, talking about certain subjects in public could mean your death sentence. Women remembered that they had to return to their domestic responsibilities. Politics returned to its original masters: politicians by profession.

Many people, who had been compelled to run away from the land of their ancestors with the clothes they wore as their only possessions, were now returning to their homelands. Their new neighbours could happen to be people who had previously accused them of belonging to the guerilla forces and who could have personally killed

one or more of their relatives; but they are condemned to live next door to one another.

I also returned to several of those villages in the region of Andahuaylas. In one of them I worked with a group for "displaced persons". The experience was very strong for me. The accompanying psychologists had separated men from women. When the men had left, we tried to get the women to talk without inhibition and played some soft music in the room. One of the "homecoming" women said to her companions: "Beware! I don't want to say one word in front of these people." They remembered the days when The Shining Path had invaded their villages, and had done exactly the same thing; they had gathered the women in a room with music, leaving the men outside. When the women left the room, it was only to find that all their men had been savagely killed. The Shining Path had cut their throats. These experiences were so confused in their minds, that they were no longer able to differentiate between the past and the present, between their executioners and us. They were only sure of one thing, *fear*. We had to go back to their personal memories, to restore the balance of good and evil, of war and peace, of life and death.

The two psychologists went back to Lima and I started to work with the women outside in the fields. What should I do, where should I begin? Social drama style theatre did not convince me, the classical techniques seemed to be met with complete indifference, looked upon as infantile recreation. I started with massage, rubbing the face of each of these women, in order to free their emotions, so that they could begin to show what they felt. Then we continued with Tai Chi exercises, with the sun on our faces and the great silence of the mountains around us. We did breathing exercises. I said that these were special laughing

exercises and if somebody started to laugh this was the sign that the exercises were well done. Every woman was concentrating on the exercises and then it began, one by one they started to laugh, harder and harder. Finally we all roared with laughter. Afterwards we continued, with the aim that each exercise should cure them from one horrible experience or another, or at least that they could hope to forget for a while and go on living. At the end of the workshop, when I had to return to Lima, we said goodbye. One by one the women embraced me: "Please come back soon, you helped us a lot, for that we thank you."

Now I am back home, in Lima. I hear the voices of my children, who have grown up in this country. They are young, they have lovers and maybe one day I will have Peruvian grandchildren. In my thoughts I hear the voices of these women and realise that my "home" is in different places in the world. One part of me is in Belgium, another in the Andes and a third in Lima. Different cultures are inside me and theatre helps me to live together with these ever divergent cultures.

LIEVE DELANOY (Belgium/Peru) is an actress and director. In 1978 she moved with her family to Peru. In 1984 she started working with a theatre group. They created three plays *Esperanza*, *Kuyaykuyki* and *Gracias a la vida* (in Spanish and Quechua). In 1988 she organised the XIII Muestra de Teatro Nacional. Since 1992 she has performed her one woman show ... *de tanto volver*. In 1995 she participated in the Keystone Project with Teresa Ralli, Lucho Ramirez and Beto Benites, directed by Carlos Cueva. She gives workshops in different parts of Peru.