

# Brigitte Cirla

## Survival and Recognition

*I invented my way of working because I had to pay the rent and to bring up a family. And this work now brings me recognition.*

When I was twenty years old, I left music for theatre because I wanted to say something and be heard. My first impulse was to revolt. I was angry - of course I joined a very political theatre group. Theatre and art were means to an end - tools and not an expression in themselves.

I believe theatre saved me from exploding or destroying myself. It civilised me. I discovered that rules and constraints could be a source of freedom; I learned to listen to a partner, to be aware of the physical presence of others. I realised that communication could happen in different ways. This was an interesting time during which I slowly shifted from wanting to change the world to changing myself. Theatre became a space in which to challenge my own physical and mental limits through vigorous exhausting physical training, a space where gender and sex no longer defined people. This was a relief. During these years theatre was an exciting ground for adventures allowing me to explore unknown territories.

When I got pregnant, I returned to music: two or three singing lessons a week for two or three years. It was tiny but deep work which involved me physically and mentally which I never interrupted. Becoming a mother brought me violently back to the reactionary reality of the artistic world and of society: I was “atypical” in my own work. When I asked my colleagues or directors to begin rehearsals in the morning and to finish not too late at night, I had to face responses from both male and female artists: “You should choose between art and having children”.

I was also “atypical” in society since I did not fit into the image of the “normal” mother: away from home eight to ten days a month, my weekly planning never conformed (working at night, at week-ends ...). Everyone in society who works with children or is in contact with them has a powerful, strong and approved idea of what a “good” mother is. Of course for a father it is different. I have three kids: sixteen, fifteen and seven years old.

Survival and recognition: for me these two words are strongly connected. I invented my way of working because I

had to pay the rent and to bring up a family, and this work now brings me recognition.

I met the Magdalena Project when I was fighting with the impossible concept of being a mother, a wife, and an artist. Meeting other artists with their own questions, challenges and doubts helped me think, reflect, compare and work.

I began to run workshops to pay for my singing lessons because I did not have enough work on the stage. I realised later that through teaching I improved my personal professional standard and had the opportunity to explore in a way which I never have time for during the creation of a performance.

Running workshops brought me to crossroads where I felt the social climate more than if I'd been shut up in a theatre.

Revolt and anger were never far away and quite naturally I began to work in segregated places: hospitals, prisons, the suburbs, etc.

Again, the magical-theatrical space created an opening where identity is no longer defined by a label: insane, psychotic, inmate, criminal, abnormal, artist ... but is defined by the present, the here and now. Quality belongs to "now". Is it theatre, is it music, is it art? I don't know and I do not think these are the right questions to ask.

When I work in the suburbs of Lyon with the young rap, groove and hardrock music groups, I feel a quality of energy, of involvement in which I recognise the same desperate need which first brought me to theatre and music.

I work as I live and I live as I work. I left behind the eternal stupid question: family first or work first or love first or ... I remember a sentence from '68: "We want it all and we want it now". I don't understand why I should choose and why one thing should exclude the other. I feel my work

orientates my whole life as a woman, as a mother and as a human being. Even if it is difficult to believe, learning to breathe with singing changed my whole comprehension of the world. The joy and profound pleasure I experience in singing allowed me to look for the same thing in life: balance and physical care. The requirements of voice obliged me to change my way of living and to take care of my health. This always happened for the same double reason - survival and recognition. If I'm too tired or too out of balance, I will not have voice for the concert, I will receive neither money nor applause.

Last year I conducted concerts and choirs, I ran workshops in prisons and in the suburbs. I also directed a musical performance and toured it, created music for another performance, ran a vocal group and was directed as a singer, on top of which came a *huge* administrative load. Who am I? A singer, a director, a performer, a teacher, a conductor, a charlatan ...

I know I never stop doing the same thing, working upon the same obsessions which, in fact, are very few. They take different forms according to the nature of the meetings and the proposals. I do not decide tactically for work or family life, I explore what is offered. When I choose or accept a new project, its form and content determine the planning and the rhythm of family life, at the same time as the fixed school hours influence my work. It is a never ending negotiation and compromise which can never be ideal and which creates hundreds of problems as life is made up 99% of human beings.

I always feel the real problem is to find the right question. The problem is not how to live in a family and work, since I can't split my inner feelings and thoughts from my private and public activities. The real question for me is: how long will the passion last? Since it is the real motor of my existence, do

I find it in work or in the family or in everything else? If solutions or answers exist, they come from deep desire, obsessions and the inability to do something else. For the moment I know only that I am doing what I can.

BRIGITTE CIRLA (France) is a singer and actress. Her special field is polyphonic song from all parts of the world, which she teaches in the oral tradition. For several years she has worked as a singer with other artists and doctors and nursing staff in institutions where mentally disturbed and autistic young people are cared for, out of which came the theatre group Turbulences. In Marseilles, where she now lives, she leads several singing groups including Les Dissonantes and a large community choir.



Brigitte Cirla. Photo: Mary Giles