

## Ana Woolf

# Belonging to the Country of Solitude

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Argentina's history is quite similar to the history of other Latin American countries: it repeats itself. Because of our heterogeneous origins it is difficult to build a group culture. We Argentines are a mixture of Indians and Spaniards (the conquerors). The politics of the conquerors was to destroy rather than discover.

At the turn of the last century we received many new immigrants: more Spaniards, and Italians, Turkish, French, English, Russians, Lebanese, Polish ... Everyone lived together in the same place: Argentina. From this heterogeneity comes one of the reasons for our political instability. We cannot really speak of "Argentines".

Our national identity is fragmented because we spend our time fighting between ourselves and searching for a culture outside our own country. We say: Federals against Unitarians (in the last century); Indians against Spaniards; *mulatos* against *criollos*; city against village; people against oligarchy; Radicals against Peronists ... and finally, with the excuse of instability, the military forces appear to "restore national order".

In 1983 democratic elections were re-established, but the country was destroyed; we had tortured and missing people, internal and external exiles, censorship and self-censorship. We were left with a devastated economy, a high percentage of unemployment, financial debts and a cramped culture.

Within this context some women appear as a focus of resistance, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. They marched, and continue to march every Thursday, around Plaza de Mayo asking about their missing children. These strong women, wearing a white handkerchief bearing their children's names, have been claiming justice for the past twenty years.

In 1981, Teatro Abierto '81 took place in Buenos Aires. It was the biggest political theatre movement in Argentina and also a focus of resistance. Theatre practitioners, actors, lighting technicians, costume and set designers, twenty-one directors and twenty-one playwrights decided to get together

to find an alternative way to denounce the oppression. They wanted to create a social and mass cultural phenomenon and they reached their goal. Of the twenty-one playwrights three were women: Griselda Gambaro, Diana Raznovich and Aída Bortnik. Of the twenty-one directors, twenty-one were men. When the military were defeated, the motivation for Teatro Abierto's existence also disappeared.

Some women playwrights - Susana Torres Molina, Susana Gutiérrez Posse, Cristina Scofet, Susana Freire, Diana Raznovich and Beatriz Mosquera - wrote about the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, dictatorship, missing people, economic and moral crisis, and concentration camps. A woman like Griselda Gambaro is a model in terms of the unity of women, theatre and politics. Susana Freire, one of her disciples, has denounced the political situation and its social and moral consequences since 1985.

#### **MONTHS THAT SEEM YEARS**

I wrote these lines before going to Transit, an international festival on the theme of

Theatre-Women-Politics, which was held in Holstebro, Denmark in 1997. Today, after having travelled very far in a very short period of time, I can say that, for me, the relationship between theatre, women and politics is alive in the Magdalena Project. After meeting such strong women and hearing about their social work, to belong and work in the Magdalena Project is, for me, a political and militant choice. I believe we can change something with our work in theatre. If I want to change the reality that surrounds me, I have to start changing my own reality first.

When I returned to my country from Norway and Denmark, one of my personal obsessions was - and still is - how I could build a sense of belonging. But belonging to what?

I felt a pain in my soul and in my body. I have my mother and some friends whom I love and love me, but I felt I had to build a strange, special space called "belonging" which confers an identity. I don't really know where it is, but I know it is not a country or



Ana Woolf (centre) training during the Magdalena 2a Generación meeting in Tucumán, 1998

a physical place. It is not our parents and lovers who give us this "sense of belonging".

As children we could feel this sense of belonging through the heritage of a surname. I was the daughter of Isaac and Beatriz and this was my sense of belonging. Growing up, a personal sense of belonging is needed. I am desperately looking for it. I am thirty years old, not a child anymore, even if my mother still brings me an orange juice in bed some sunny mornings.

I have to start building my happiness and this means to discover what/which/where is my sense of belonging. A theatre, my personal training - when I am alone with the silence of my body - my work in the Magdalena Project, some special theatre people, give me this sense of belonging. I realise that this kind of work and these meetings make me feel confident.

### **AN ARGENTINE CALLED MAGDALENA**

How could I socially justify the existence of a Women's Network in a country culturally, politically and economically dominated by a male language?

The Argentine mentality is male. Our way of thinking and looking at reality is male. Our subtext is male: tango is one of our national dances; Gardel our national singer; the *asado* our national meal and, of course, to prepare it is a male work, while the women usually make the salad; Maradona is one of our national heroes.

Magdalena 2a Generación is a strong statement in my country, where the word "feminism" means lesbianism, truck drivers, madness and: "What on earth do women have to do together?"

Argentina is a country where both men and women are afraid of women's power. It is much better to believe that by earning our own salaries, having good jobs in factories and enterprises, convincing our husbands to take care of the children at

times, we have won our freedom, we have control of our lives and we are successful.

We decide to be Argentine, so as not to be Indian or *mestizas*; we decide to do gymnastics and jogging and have a car because all normal people do. We decide to fit into a pair of jeans size 38 so as to be like T.V. models. We are anorexic and bulimic because we decide not to eat. We buy hundreds of creams because we decide not to have wrinkles; we decide not to breast feed our babies because we do not want our bosom to drop. We decide to introduce silicon into our bodies to fill up our flaccid bottoms. And we implore not to die, because this is the only thing we human beings cannot decide upon.

### **THE FACTS**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1998, Florencia Coppola and I gave our first talk for Magdalena 2a Generación. For a long time we had wanted to work together, as a group and as a network. These two things were linked from the beginning.

One of the main reasons for meeting came out of solitude and an understanding that theatre is a group work. Florencia had split from her colleague two years before and I had just stopped working with the company I had belonged to for three years. Working in solitude is a painful and undesirable reality for many of the women that joined us. Perhaps this was the reason for choosing "Women, Theatre and Solitude" as the topic for one of our first meetings.

We wanted to work with women that belong to a second generation, about thirty years old. Most of us are not married and we have not solved the conflict between work and motherhood. We usually work alone, but we would like to be part of a group. We are determined to live from our theatre work, but we have economic problems. We all have many projects to share with other

people, but we end up doing them alone. We recognise and admire our teachers (some of them belonging to the first generation of Magdalena) and we are searching for action.

We concretised two actions: the edition of a Newsletter and a meeting of the Network in Mar del Plata, a city 450 km from Buenos Aires.

## NETWORK

I have a friend, Natalia Marcet, in Mar del Plata. She is an actress and she enthusiastically took to the idea and invited all the women artists she knew to a Magdalena 2a Generación meeting. I was really surprised by the interest and curiosity such a meeting provoked.

Everybody asked the same kind of question: why only women? At first it was fun to look for intelligent answers; but I discovered myself trying to find amends according to other people's thoughts rather than talking about my own choices. I didn't know why, but each time I finished an interview I felt sad. I was also tired of listening to my own words. I discovered myself trying to persuade people (male and female) about something that they didn't want to hear. I felt like a merchant trying to sell something to people who say they don't need it. I decided not to speak anymore. I started building my own discourse from something I am familiar with - myself. Similar to many things in life, the Project is not for everybody.

Florencia came to Mar del Plata for only a few hours to help with the preparation and then returned to Buenos Aires to continue her "real" work at the well-known Muzzarella Arrivata (a fresh cheese factory). She came with training sticks. I laughed and thought: "We are crazy. Why are we doing all this?" We didn't know why, but we were doing it.

Seven women participated, one of them

my mother. I asked her to come with the excuse of filling a place. I was afraid. I needed her: seeing her gives me a feeling of security. We talked about Magdalena. To build a network is an unreal activity, as a network has no materiality. Where can you see the network? It is a non-existent product. We work with air.

The women asked concrete questions: how to work in the Magdalena? How to belong to Magdalena? How to receive information? How to give bodies to the names on paper? What does it mean to belong to a women's network? And again - why only women? Everybody talked about solitude and the difficulties of working in an extremely bad economic situation. Florencia and I had to find concrete answers: they could meet once a week and exchange training experiences. We proposed making a list of what we could offer and our needs. Then we decided to stop talking and we worked with the sticks. All the questioning ended by giving place to a real action. Now we were only there. Now Cardiff, Holstebro, Germany, Italy no longer mattered. We had to be there, where we had decided to come out of curiosity or in search of a way to end solitude, or because we had nothing better to do that Sunday ... We were there and we were putting the first brick into a new building. The fire was lit.

Again it was the will to build a "sense of belonging" that was the primary impulse for our next meeting. We followed in old steps, continuing past experiences of the Magdalena Project. Ten years later those actions were still productive. I understood we could talk about our motivations, but the deeper sense and passion of our choices could not be transmitted.

One of the women who worked very hard with us was María Clara Reussi. So now, happily, we were three; three very different women.

## PROBLEMS

I could name the first: action versus words. Whatever the generation, the majority of women who participated were anxious to express their thoughts. Women I had seen mute in different situations co-ordinated by men, within this pre-space of the Magdalena, needed to talk about their personal history.

On the 8th of March 1998 - International Women's Day - we introduced Magdalena 2a Generación during an assembly organised by women of the Argentine Actors' Association. We met Luisa Calcumil, an Argentine actress who belongs to the Mapuche community and lives in the south of our country. We invited her to take part in our next meeting. She could co-ordinate a singing voice workshop. Luisa decided she would also teach us how to make a special kind of bread, called *pan en el rescoldo*, a bread baked in burning ashes, as a shared communal activity.

Another woman confirmed her participation: Teresita Guardia from Tucumán, a zone of our country particularly hit by economic and political military oppression.

How could we build a refuge for solitude? How could we communicate a passion? How could we talk about Patricia Ariza and her work in emergency zones in Colombia? How could we explain about Donatella Massimilla and her work in prisons in Milan? How could we transmit the experience of a Women's Festival in Cardiff and what happened in Transit, to the women in our country? What we have at hand is only the commotion of an experience and hundreds of sensations.

## BUILDING

My father was a clock maker. I know it is not through opening a clock that I can understand the sense of time, but at least I know how this machine moves inside and I could build another clock that contains the illu-

sion of catching time.

Obsessively analysing and studying past actions, finding the mechanisms that made them function, reproducing the working conditions we believe helped, we moved to create a structure, our own structure. Confirming and denying, but always recognising the inheritance, to begin our own adventure from there.

In the next meeting women lived together for three days on a farm fifty kilometres away from the centre of Buenos Aires. Florencia and I gave two workshops structured around the topic of "Solitude". María Clara was in charge of the internal organisation, the kitchen, timing and the women's immediate needs. We hung up a daily timetable: time was not something planned for us, but it belonged to all the women there and we respected it. We had entered another world.

Most of the women confessed that hearing the theme "Theatre, Women and Solitude", they had come with two prejudices: they did not want to spend the whole time talking, as had happened in other women's meetings, and they did not want to consider "solitude" as pain. We decided to prioritise the practical work as an approach to reflection.

At the end of the meeting, during the conclusions, all the participants were anxious to know what would happen next. Devoured by organisation, we had not thought of this question. We were thinking of our first Newsletter and of a possible meeting in November. After having lived in a mythical time, what more could we offer? I made great efforts not to cry. I felt impotent. I had to understand the anxiety caused by the void which the women felt would come after the meeting. I answered: "Right now I have nothing to offer, I am exhausted". This had a good effect: we started speaking about the void and the

fear of facing it. It was impossible to fill the personal void felt by each woman. Each woman had to recognise her own void as part of herself to discover how she could start building her own “sense of belonging” to the Network.

I myself feel lost now because I have had no time to stop. I run from one place to the other searching for roots that are not to be found anywhere. In two months I will be leaving for Europe again and I am unable to make fixed plans. It is a strange feeling, but the only space I recognise as my own is the working space. To shut myself in the training and rehearsal room is the only way I can find myself.

I don't know if I have discovered my sense of belonging. I am trying. I imagine it is not a metaphysical sense but a space. We can see the walls. And perhaps inside this space we will find the sense or perhaps we will find the sense in the action of discovering the space. In a silent sweet accompanied solitude.

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