

Graciela Ferrari

The Arch of Time

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Memory is strange, it holds on to what it wants. To be absolutely faithful to memory, we would have to negotiate with it and then venture along different roads, bifurcations, secondary paths and tiny tracks like the ones left by birds on the beach; the kind that are erased by the sea.

My history in theatre is therefore my memory of that history; sometimes I want it to comprehend my whole life; other times I recognise a partial and capricious will in that recollection. But if I could get rid of this history the way someone takes off a dress, I would not remain naked, but simply transformed into another person.

A fantasy: I did not start by working with theatre. I left - as I was about to - to become a university professor in Patagonia. If I had never met María - my master, nor my colleagues from Libre Teatro Libre, the group I belonged to during the '60s and '70s, who would I be today? A penguin - the typical inhabitant of those regions? One of the 30,000 *desaparecidos* (missing people)? A professional academic teacher who at times likes to let herself imagine who she would be now if she had chosen theatre instead, such a long time ago, in her youth?

But I didn't go south. After the final examination of my student career that only resulted in a diploma that my father hung on the wall beside his own, I - literally - crossed the street and entered another building. The theatre school was situated there. I enrolled for the first year course. Only many years later did I become aware of the infinite meanings and significance that the choice of entering the theatre building - literally and metaphorically - was to have for my life.

I had never fancied myself as a traveller. Theatre made roaming one of my identities: "Not living one life, but many". Theatre made me, in general terms, what my country's slang calls *teatristas independientes* (independent theatre practitioners). But, specifically, theatre turned me into an actress, an exile, a teacher, a tailor, an author, an artisan, an event organiser, a member of unions, associations and groups, a

blue collar worker, driver, carpenter, director, dramaturg, "necessary reference for...", foreigner, national, provincial, local... (Nothing really any different from what usually characterises any independent theatre director of my generation in my country.)

Still today, when I have been "local" for a long time (I travel abroad very little), I think about my years in theatre as a journey, as a continuous wandering. What is the spirit of a traveller? Always wanting to reach some different unknown place; enjoying every pause as a moment along the way, along a road that is made by keeping on the move, without any possible "Travel Guide" to go with it.

María Escudero, the *alma mater* of the Libre Teatro Libre, was my master. I learned many things from her. I originally trained with this group making collective creations. In the group, we also taught each other everything we knew and we learned together about everything we ignored. (1999 was the 30th anniversary of the birth of the Libre Teatro Libre, and we celebrated it with a beautiful and touching festival here in Cordoba. All the ex group members were reunited again, together with friends from all over and an audience of mostly young people. For ten days every one of us presented their current work, groups and realities: a feast for the town.)

As the years went by, I myself began to teach. I have had very many pupils. God will know if it was worth it. Transmitting a technique, committing oneself to insisting so that some young people can learn to use their voices, bodies and souls to be able, later, to re-present themselves in a space, under spotlights and wearing clothes they never dreamed of putting on - I wonder if this is teaching theatre. The indescribable, stimulating and unique sensation of letting

go of all securities and of all the paths previously lain out by family education and cultural and academic art tradition to just jump out into the unknown - what María taught us through her own behaviour: this for me is the model for teaching theatre. I don't think I have achieved this with my own pupils, maybe at times only exceptionally. Maybe the '80s and '90s haven't been as propitious as the '60s and '70s for jumps into the void. When I was young they taught me to jump into the void.

"And where did you fall?" asks the conjectural, nearly retired, Patagonian professor. "It isn't worth answering a wrong question": I still haven't finished my fall after the jump. Or at least I hope so, here at home in my town, surrounded by my family, a million years later.

I have never thought of myself as a *woman* in theatre. My theatre training and culture belongs to a group. When I began directing, I did it with actors who had been participating in my workshops for at least three years. The idea of a group remained also in Teatro Avevals, my own theatre. Even if the principle of collective creation did not last, the idea of a work ensemble - where the results, the performances, are sustained in proportional parts by what the actors and I endow - did. My responsibility as a director is not different from that of my male colleagues. (However, they do have muscular strength in their favour: when I had my own space - the Avevals House that lasted three years - some walls had to be pulled down; the day I filled a container with debris, I had to get hold of a physiotherapist at night to recover.)

When History first expelled us from our country and then allowed us back years later, it didn't distinguish between them, men, and us, women. In meetings with cultural officials when asking for financial aid or support

for the realisation of theatre projects, sometimes the younger men would offer me a seat, but this happens now because I am an older woman.

At times the critics refer to the "feminine sensibility" in some of my plays. I ask them why. They speak of "tenderness", "lyricism", "delicate irony" and "dreamlike world"... I find that these words correspond to stereotypes, not to a question of gender: there are so many works of art created by men where the same characteristics can apply.

And this is all.



There are things in my work I cannot yet resolve; contemporary questions that have nothing to do with artistic concern, work ability, collective imagination or difficult and uncertain group dynamics. I am thinking about production. If I am missing something in my life these days it would be to become a marketing expert. Everything can be sold, nothing is transformed. Those of us who are committed to independent theatre are some kind of anachronistic Quixotes who should recognise that the windmills are now computerised and that Sancho Panza is surfing the Internet.

I was always interested in theatre languages and in the dramaturgical construction of forms. I get the biggest pleasure in my work when I have to organise the performance and draw the sequence of the actions. This work is as personal as writing; personal, lonely and amusing.

In terms of the actors, it is moving to follow their transformations, detect the precise instant when they stand on their own two feet and take charge, through their decisions and actions, of their own freedom as artists and creators. This is what theatre is made of, that which is particular to our craft, the material we are committed to as creators of "spaces that seemed not to have place in space".

So, today, the actual possibility of continuing this way - with theatre being at the same time my job, my profession and the place where my private games find the way to have a social and public identity - is endangered by difficulties that didn't exist till yesterday or the day before. Money is lacking. Producers are lacking. Sponsors are lacking.

I am a professional; my actors are profes-

Teatro Avevals in *Ágava, la playa* directed by Graciela Ferrari. Photo: Eduardo Vareto

sional for their artistic training and capacity, but not for their status as workers. They all have other jobs; theatre doesn't make you a living. Some groups in my town try to live from theatre. There they are, admirable, working hard, as true crusaders who will find their Holy Grail the day cultural policies appear which recognise the existence of a "third bank of the river": a contradiction.

Impulse, risk, utopia, "romanticism", all those values we knew how to cultivate in the era of our youth, do not belong to these times. They are not practical and they seem not to be useful. Suddenly everything seems to close in as a funnel through which not the best pass, but those who are best at selling their products. Theatre performances are a product like cars, hamburgers and paperback best-sellers. With one great difference: in our case you can't see the buyers well, they don't stand in line, like at McDonald's in shopping malls. Nobody is eager to buy us.

Those of us who have a history in theatre built with passion and will, desire and good purpose; those of us who like explorers were favouring all the risks and discoveries - will we be a kind of endangered species, left behind from the 20th century?

Learn new game rules? Join the youngest ones who somehow manage to produce and who were only babies during "our happy years"? Invent alternative practices for this era, in the same way we knew how to in the

past?

To be absolutely faithful to something can be suicidal. Sustaining essential loyalties should not place us out of History, but rather in the very heart of times. Perhaps ... This is what I hope.

As nearly always I have more questions than answers. If someone, any person receiving these thoughts, is in the opposite situation, I beg them to let me know. My address is below,¹ as I am. I have the feeling that I am at the foot of the page as well.

1. Postal address: Graciela Ferrari, Bv. San Juan 248, Piso 14 Dpto C, 5000 Córdoba, Argentina

Translated from Spanish by Alejandro Drallny

GRACIELA FERRARI (Argentina) has been director and dramaturg of Teatro Avevals since 1985. She was a member of the legendary Libre Teatro Libre in the '60s and '70s. Since 1969 Graciela has travelled, given workshops and performed in Latin America and Europe. She lived in Venezuela for five years and in Italy for four and is now back in Cordoba where she actively participates in the development of independent theatre activities.