

Roxana Avila

To Know and Know Nothing at All

I search for that which none of my "schools" gave me, including that which for each is a mistake and has been rejected. I try to accept that what is valid are the avenues that open new ways and I try to rely on the tools I have incorporated, as well as inventing others, so as to resolve each question of the performance.

EXILE

I live in triple exile.

As a professor at the university and member of the academy, I share neither the way the programme is structured nor the approach to teaching nor even the working relations established there.

As co-director of an independent theatre group, I try to retain actor training as the aesthetic and ethical centre, but by not belonging to any specific theatrical tradition, what I share and teach is more by trial and error rather than any clear way of communicating the craft.

Finally, I have been trained in two distinct ways of making theatre and have been unable, for different reasons, to overcome either.

CHANGE

In the first place, at the university I must teach what I supposedly know in depth, what can be taught in the allotted academic time (one semester). Unfortunately, the more I read, see traditional Eastern as well as non-traditional Western theatre - that is, the broader my horizons - the less I know. Yet I continue evaluating, judging and teaching concepts I hardly agree with, in ways I cannot support but cannot change. The present structure is closed to proposals and techniques alternative to those that already exist; it accepts no substantial variations on the way to transmit knowledge.

Change is seen as a threat.

DOUBT

In the second place, by not belonging to any tradition, by not having absolute truths, a specific vocabulary or a concrete method to train others, I am not only constantly inventing, but always doubting and testing everything in practice. Not a mistake in itself, but exhausting for a group of young actors who, against the grain of theatre in Costa Rica, have decided to mould themselves by working as a

group and accepting actor training as a fundamental necessity. Sure, but what training? If one doubts everything, one really knows nothing. Yet, if one doesn't doubt at all, one also knows nothing. The concrete question of actor training is exhausting if one has no tradition, whatever it may be, that permits one to defend oneself from absolute eclecticism.

Making our work even more difficult is the fact that in Costa Rica very young actors are absorbed into the professional system, with all of the secondary benefits that this brings (generating expectations, performing before an audience, appearing in the press, winning awards, earning money). Confronted with this seemingly substantial alternative, where doubt does not reign and where, above all, theatre actually gets created, the idea of shutting yourself in a room for six or seven hours a day and sweating through all types of exercises, based on a philosophy of doubt, is fairly complicated for a person in his or her twenties. As co-director of the group, I find myself in constant crisis since I have the responsibility of nurturing the dreams of people who are risking the hardest, least visible road which, above all, requires a great deal of time before any clear results can be achieved.

Another important factor in this situation is the fact that the work of our group is virtually invisible in our own country, despite the fact that we have created the most relevant, non-traditional performances of the last decade. Again, for a young person of limited resources, the decision to belong to invisibility and poverty produces a concrete tension.

In this environment, difference is also threatening.

OVERCOMING

In the third place, I am an educated woman who has had opportunities to study and

obtain degrees from academic institutions that are highly recognised on an international level. Nonetheless, I have rejected the "method" and the principles I learned during my apprenticeship as an actress and director in Costa Rica. Even so, there are moments when I must rely on them since I have not yet constructed other ways, other forms of creating. On the other hand, I have also had the opportunity to study with diverse masters, to be influenced by internationally prestigious people in the non-traditional theatre in the West and traditional Eastern theatre, but I cannot copy an experience that is not mine. I am not interested in repeating what others have done decades ago and converting it into a new canon; it would be foolish, not to say impossible, because one does not have thirty years to learn something in order to teach it subsequently; one only has the present. How do I overcome these masters as well without making their teachings banal?

In the end, I have been influenced by two ways of creating that appear to be mutually antagonist: the creation of performances with the director as the central axis, with characters, a psychological logic, with a coherent, linear narrative line, with the written text as a point of departure, where the actions, interrelations and images are created by the context of the piece in relation to what is said; and on the other hand, a creation departing from the actors' dramaturgy, the text that is written during the course of the rehearsals, the multiplicity of stories, often difficult for the spectator to read, where the actions, interrelations and images are moulded by the director and given a logic from the outside, sometimes without relation, even in direct opposition, to what is actually said.

Separately neither satisfy me and yet both resonate in me as a creator. Can the actor improvise on stage, with technical

precision, taking into account the context of the situation and his/her relationship to the other characters? Is it possible that two or more actors can create scores together? Many of the indications I give the actors are clearly psychological in nature, while others are of a physical, rhythmic nature, relating to the physical composition. I find myself relying on both sources at each point of rehearsals, yet still without fluidity or the sensation of being in charge of this new way of creating.

The threat is internal.

OASIS

Exiles keep in their houses small oases of objects to remind them where they came from; like small norths that help find the way, even if return is impossible.

I keep in my oasis tiny grains of salt to ease the exile.

At the university, each semester, I offer alternative courses such as Theatre

Anthropology, Bunraku and traditional Japanese theatre, intensive studies of authors like Grotowski, Artaud, Barba; I invite masters to give courses on subjects that would never be taught otherwise; in the directing course, I offer diverse ways of creating that explore process rather than result. Over the last few years, I have systematically refused to teach practical courses so as not to commit errors for which I would not forgive myself. I offer a place for discussion and perception of theories and stage practices that are alternative to the rest of the programme, despite earning the ostracism of my colleagues.

In our group I try to create and offer discipline and mystique, love for the act of creation itself, independent of its application in performance. We try to create a consciousness of our weaknesses and enjoy the small triumphs over our limitations. We emphasise the importance of activities that are not necessarily "artistic". We propose ways of



Roxana Avila (right) with friends after the opening night of *Romeo y Julieta en Concierto*.

encountering the spectator that challenge the actors to be more whole hearted: for example, a Central American tour of small towns far from the urban centres where we will create a performance with the community. As a group we try to eliminate the sensation of invisibility and offer, in exchange, a place of belonging and responsibility, of individual value. In order to assassinate eclecticism, we try to work systematically and methodically on some essential principles that allow us to evaluate and grow and establish bases for further development.

In terms of the aesthetic and philosophical dichotomy, I try to create a synthesis of both tendencies with the elements I have been able to make mine. I search for that which none of my "schools" gave me, including that which for each is a mistake and has been rejected. I try to accept that what is valid are the avenues that open new ways and I try to rely on the tools I have incorporated, as well as inventing others, so as to resolve each question of the performance. Being unfaithful to both, perhaps I manage to be faithful to myself.

REBELLION

When you have lost everything, you have no

fear of losing anything more.

Why don't I leave the University? Why don't I stick with a specific technique? Why don't I abandon dichotomy and commit myself to a road?

When there is no fear of losing everything, you lose the fear of being lost, and assume contradiction as a way of life.

Exile allows me a systematic rebellion against everything that doesn't provide me with clarity. Rebellion and clarity are, perhaps, what I propose as a personal path.

Translated from Spanish by David Korish

ROXANA AVILA (Costa Rica) was born in 1963. She is a director, actress, producer, designer and professor at the University of Costa Rica. Since 1991 she co-directs the independent theatre group Teatro Abya Yala together with David Korish.