

Neusa Thomasi

Walking to Avignon

I belong to the world of theatre research and creation. After completing my studies at the University of Santa Maria in southern Brazil, I went directly to the Centre for Theatre Research in São Paulo, then to the Grotowski Centre in Pontedera, and then to Gitis in Moscow where I immersed myself in Meyerhold's Biomechanics. After that I went to Japan to discover Butô with Tetsuro Fukuraua, I visited Eugenio Barba in Denmark and had dozens of other privileged encounters with extraordinary people like Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Mario Gonzales, Elisa Breton, Ursula Mikos...

In 1987 I remained in France, after having left the Macunaima theatre company directed by Antunes Filho, at the airport in Paris. The European tour of the Brazilian Centre for Theatre Research ended there. I had taken my decision during the Theatre Festival in Stuttgart to remain in Europe and continue my journey alone.

Brazil was in a bleak situation in 1987: 100% inflation, poverty, unemployment and violence. If I returned there, I wouldn't be able to come back. There was nothing to lose over there. Here, there were things to get to know, and to learn how to get to know. In Brazil, I used to start working at the Centre in the morning and I left around ten thirty at night - no salary, no meals, nothing! Only my passion for theatre was responsible for my survival.

The company took off. I was left alone with my return ticket clutched in my hand. I didn't speak French and I didn't understand much of what was going on. My decision mingled with fear threw me into a black hole: no visa, two hundred and fifty dollars in my pocket, and a heavy suitcase filled with books. A young woman of twenty-seven, full of hope, dressed in a purple dress hiding tearful eyes behind her sunglasses! Tears and tears! My black hole filled with tears - my salty sea.

In my phone-book I had the number of Edson Audi, the Brazilian translator of the Théâtre des Amandiers of Nanterre. Help! South American hospitality immediately

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responded.

Two months later I had at last found my bearings. The house I shared with a friend had become a living dictionary. I had papered the walls with posters that I recited constantly: "*Soleil, crayon, fourchette, je voudrais de l'eau...*" (sun, pencil, fork, I would like some water). This was my school. The whole house was my blackboard. During the day I stayed locked in this giant book because I had no papers. Anguish and fear determined the pulse of my life. I was like a little mouse running along the walls.

My Brazilian clothes remained at the bottom of my suitcase, jeans and dark colours gradually took over. To become invisible, lose your identity, be like everybody else, become nobody - that is the clandestine person's motto! But when night fell, Little Mouse always found a way out of the labyrinth. Begging, I managed to attend masterpieces at the theatre, opera, concerts, museums and exhibitions.

My passion engulfs my depression until the day when an alarm goes off in my head. I need to go home. I need the sun, my roots. Little Mouse uses her inheritance from the Macunaima: the return ticket.

Back in Santa Maria, in front of her parent's home, Little Mouse burns her passport and Identity Card: with a jolly bonfire, troubles and past go up in smoke. Later on Neusa lets Little Mouse die; the dust of the ashes outlines the pattern of the future. I understand my gypsy fate; I am made for exile. I run to the police in my town and have my documents redone. Once again, I cross the ocean and land in Charles-de-Gaulle, papers in hand, to found my company, the *Compagnie des Contraires*. I am reborn.

Six months later I am teaching in two Parisian theatre schools. I gather round me young novice actors from the four corners of the world: Cameroon, Tunisia, France,

Uruguay, USA and Brazil. Pretentiously, we invent our own language. We start a quest into the indefinable question of fate, to interrogate everyday banality, human archetypes, but in which we also rub shoulders with love and humour by returning meaning to objects that are usually scorned.

Yves Berlioz, one of the members of the group, professor at the *College Sainte-Barbe* in Paris, obtains permission for us to invade the school's chapel. There we begin our research on the gods in Greek mythology, concentrating mostly on Dionysus.

And so, without fame or grant aid, we dive into the cruel and sharp mirror of identity crisis and the conformist attitude of human beings when faced with the systematic lobotomy of society. Without thinking, we react and take the decision to exist and start our journey.

PARIS - AVIGNON ON FOOT! THAT'S IT!

Our group consists of nine young actors and contemporary troubadours, five boys and four girls. We make a wild bet: to walk all the way to the Avignon Festival. The reason for this marathon is easy to explain: walking was the most appropriate means of transportation for our group's budget. Added to that was the urgency, the challenge of survival and the desire to present our work throughout a large part of France. We crossed twenty-six towns - twenty-six stops to show our latest production: *That's it!*

An adventure: we leave Paris, 91 Quai de la Gare, on the 3rd of June; we plan to cover the distance of 800 kilometres and arrive in the city of Popes on the 28th of June, in order to take part in the Fringe of the Avignon Festival that will start on the 9th of July, 1993. Our challenge is to perform in each town we visit, reviving the tradition of popular theatre.

During the first days of walking, there is no deficiency of cramps and blisters. We

keep on going in spite of all kinds of difficulties: sharp pains, sunstroke, infections, and lack of sleep and water on badly calculated distances. Sometimes we cry and clench our fists. In our dreams, fairies come to attach little wings to our Achilles heels. We continue in our search for new theatre forms of popular art. Who are we? What is this pilgrimage for? We no longer have an answer.

In each town, our relationship with the local inhabitants deepens and gets closer. We take risks. We try to free the spectators from their passivity and fatalism in the face of a capitalist society. We want to rouse communities that are reduced to boredom. *That's it!* presents an extrapolation of daily rules. *That's it!* offers the audience tools for a desired and forgotten release. The economy of words, the use of gesture and body movement reveal the disparities between human beings in an ironic and sometimes tragic way. *That's it!* questions the traumatic truth that surrounds us and seeks ways to undo the knots of our lives.

The phantasmagoric breath of our steps crystallises certain human truths, and transforms us humans into a pure product of the environment. Our desire to tear theatre away from everyday banality by exacerbating this same reality is sharpened. Legs stride forward as the spirit is released. Our days are filled with inventions, discoveries and conquests; we see the folly of destruction,

and simultaneously also human spiritual and artistic construction.

We go through little villages not accustomed to great intellectual debates, but full of images, anecdotes and conventions. Each day I say to myself: "There is no formula. The ground is always unstable."

Often the tension provoked by fatigue impedes creative development. Our imagination is exhausted and our day is spent calming spirits rather than allowing them to dream. The parades that we usually schedule before the show are cancelled on those days. But we believe that the most important creative moments reside in the breaking points, to open, explode and then rebuild. We have always to keep on going, to pursue our quest for the beings that we are becoming.

WE KEEP ON WALKING

The first week, the roads seem longer each day. Our legs are heavy and sore. When we are sitting, in order to get up we have to get on all fours and clutch something to stand slowly, like a baby taking its first steps. These daily scenes make us laugh hilariously. Laughter is the magic potion to forget the body.

From castles to churches, from churches to camps, from camps to community halls, we have become mediaeval tumblers. We aren't performing a Mystery Play; we *are* the mystery. Why are we walking? Why do we



Compagnie des Contraires walking to Avignon



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keep on going? In the squares and market places, people give us enough money for food and petrol for the caravan and small truck that transport the set.

We lay our costumes, wigs, false bosoms, hats, Zeus' and his wife Hera's accessories out on the grass. Dionysus' big penis in *papier maché* makes people laugh. Everything dries in the sun.

Nobody dreams of stopping, there is not a moment of doubt. We have made our bet. We are no longer walking to get to Avignon, but simply to arrive together there, where we decided to arrive - proudly.

The peasants who see us cross the fields can say we are crazy, but not that we are liars or good-for-nothings. Pitiless fatigue doesn't stop us. Our sometimes feverish bodies have lost their bearings, but on we go. Each town is a space, each space is a stage to discover, each stage a new production; each show determines a new group. This improvisatory apprenticeship that comes from the changing stage and audience transforms us. We are receiving an important schooling, that of the street, in contact with a popular audience.

On the road, peasants offer us fresh water, apples, some home-made bread. In exchange we tell our story, and another form of theatre arises. Have we become storytellers? Families surround us to hear about our trip. This exchange feeds us more than a meal. We leave again. We continue to believe that our nomadic words, carrying myths, stories and legends with them, are useful - useful and necessary.

When exhaustion takes hold of our bodies, we sing nursery rhymes. Dried fruit and water jiggling in our backpacks set the beat of our march.

THE SECOND WEEK

One afternoon, on the day of a forty-five-kilometre hike, we get lost looking for a path. We are in the middle of a huge sunflower field. It seems like a dream, but the giant leaves of these magnificent plants cut our arms and legs - this is reality.

We stop to look at the sky, we burn; large drops of sweat dehydrate our bodies. We are simply lost. We walk, like ramblers, refugees, migrants, dead. No, the dead don't walk anymore.

During the second week we become savage. Knives and forks remain in the caravan and hands resume their function. Hair? Tangled. Deodorant? The smell of human flesh in the sun.

Walking thirty kilometres a day implies harmony between the actors and their inner life. To contemplate the same mountain for eight hours before reaching it replenishes spiritual growth. The body moves forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen, all passengers carrying a ticket are asked to present themselves, to discard what burdens them, to slide to the other side of the mirror and begin a long trip that will be primitive, primal, innocent and rough. We ask you to please refrain from thinking, for thought can block the rhythm of the legs and spiritual enlightenment."

Some locals invite the characters to dinner or to have a drink in their homes. In these meetings behind closed doors the actors in costume dive in turn into disturbing worlds and roam among the darkest aspects of the soul and in the most luminous forms of innocence. These are countries that are not to be found in any atlas, ghost universes that still draw a lot of ink to the paper.

These people make a mosaic of worlds and we emerge on new territory. Children live there as their parents before them, and their grandparents before them. Dreams are banished. Here we are in the Middle Ages. One thousand years later we still find traces of this life in our daily existence. Let's stock up our memory of these characters that will inspire us in future creations.

These exchanges actively contribute to weaving links between popular theatre and a popular audience. They also put into perspective the spectators' legitimate wish to bond this form of theatre with their daily life; the theatre they think they understand. No mystification: the actors walk, drink, eat and earn their living just like them. From town to town we become a symbol of freedom, peddlers of leisure and well-being, symbol of a living form of theatre.

WALKING HAS BECOME A PLEASURE

We set our tents and install the caravan on a ground behind a school. We are delighted: twenty kilometres today! Our well-oiled legs, that Meyerhold would have envied, slide over the ground with incredible speed. Dreams, fairies, wings attached to our Achilles heels: the joy of having two strong legs.

The group performs triumphantly and authentically. Various villages invite us to do a second show returning at night. The memory of our television interview on the *Nul part ailleurs* programme suddenly flashes back. "Professional or not professional?" was

Gildas' question. I answered: "In order to survive, we have a job on the side." Is that the definition of professionals? The question and my answer eat a hole in my soul. We perform, we have the know-how, and during this walk we earn our living by performing. The public receives our presentation with utmost respect. Therefore professional - I think.

Neusa, apprehensive mother hen, lets her chicks fly away, by car, for the evening show. Professional or non-professional?

Alone, I lay out the harvest of our day's labour on the table in the caravan. Not bad! Deep in a childhood memory, I sort out the coins as I used to wash black-beans in Brazil. Total: 125 Francs 25 Centimes per person - professional!

Dinner is ready. Inside each paper cup, the first salary: 125 Francs 25 Centimes. At eleven at night, the nomads return to the shelter. As we sit around the big tablecloth spread on the grass, I mischievously say: "Let's have a drink!" Surprise! Each of them discovers the coins in their cups. I say: "Here is your first salary, mates. I hereby declare you professional actors. You shall follow your road to distant realms in search of the riches of a new world." Laughter, embraces, come together: to my surprise everyone empties their cup in the middle of the table. At that moment we are one - one group. We start a long tribal dance under the watchful eyes of a starry sky.

Silence: bodies fall asleep, well-aligned shoes keep watch at the entrance of the caravan for the sand man. "*Duerme, duerme negrito, que tu mama está en el campo, negrito. Trabajando sí, trabajando sin parar, trabajando sí...*"

The alarm goes off at five in the morning. I am the first one out of bed. I make coffee. Wake-up time is always quiet. Little by little the group is ready. Breakfast is cleared in the caravan. Our feet pay their

daily visit to shoes and they know it is time to go. No doubt, never doubting, we must go on. Now we have got the rhythm and we can easily cover thirty kilometres a day.

IN THE SOUTH

The roads of southern France are getting closer, we hear bees in lavender fields. The further south we go, the earlier we must get up. The sun burns hard and early. Do the same Greek gods that we introduce to the peasants decide to free us from our physical pain? During our breaks we find ourselves walking, in order to rest a little. Dialectic invades us.

We stop walking only to sleep. Thirty kilometres, sometimes only twenty-six kilometres and then it is a feast. Birds sing all along the way, the sweaters for the early morning end up tied to the backpacks. A rooster stares at us, curious and unbelieving. We keep on walking, adding new observations to our inner repertory. How to push our limits? What happens when one is at the brink of exhaustion? What new energy is born? What colour does this new energy have? Where will it take us? Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*.

Before the shows, we make parades. We yell to the sound of trumpets that everyone must gather at seven in the evening in such or such a place. The news spreads. The audi-

ence follows us from one town to the next. Often I am told: "I saw you yesterday in my village."

One night Yves gets an ear infection, Marco has tendinitis, Lassada the Tunisian gets extremely homesick and stops talking. Bia has gastro-enteritis, Bumba (Eric from Canada) sleepwalks. Patu popped the blisters on her foot with a needle and they became infected, so we go to the hospital. In the waiting room we have become fragile and we cry - we are human.

But we start walking again. I hold Patu by the arm. We tell stories to exorcise the pain, but sometimes she yells and cringes. The pain goes away and we continue; I offer her the chance to quit walking and get in the truck for a few days, but we are too proud of our strength to do so. My Christian Umbandista roots resurface. I pray to Saint George, my protector, I pray most of all not to get sick. A mother who has to lead her children across the frontier never gets sick.

Three weeks go by. Our route has taken an aerial form, we are slowly turning into birds. We glide over the roads.

WE ARRIVE IN AVIGNON, THE SHOCK

Thousands of actors in the streets beg for a little attention from the press, grabbing the public from each other, while at the same time villages nearby are left in the deepest boredom. Yes, it is a shop-window, as they say. We have arrived at the theatre market that is slowly subjected to the deterioration of creative freedom. Constraints and constraints, a "society of men", so meaningless, eaten by the ordinary violence of success made of suspicion and inference where each person feels authorised to judge the other. An invisible trap? A hideous social crisis? Here ethics are worthless.

I feel drunk, my head spins with the difficulty of distinguishing the essential from the trivial. The majority of state-subsidised



companies with the Fringe groups who have given their last pennies to pay enormous rents are together in this Papal city to finish Jean Vilar's dream.

And we, who walked twenty-nine days? We were the human remnants of Avignon's theatre. I felt that from then on we were living this march from beyond the horizon that had helped us to pass through to the other side of the mirror. We were freed from this disenchanted existence in this absurd society that simply prevents one from belonging to oneself. And who am I in all of this? I follow the breeze to the left, disappointed in my hope of sharing our experience and our sufferings with such superficial people, and I hear a frail voice whisper in my ear: "Never abdicate who you are!"

I had forgotten all the facets and traps of the human heart, of reality turned inside out. I went to bed, or rather I hid under a bench on the Crillon square and fell asleep. I was awoken by one of the actors an hour before the show. It is time for technical preparation. We performed for a curious crowd that looked at our legs to make sure we had really walked. At the end of the show I ran to get the first train.

Theatre should be lived; it should vibrate with more than is seen. Theatre is my wealth and the reason for the generosity of my imagination. It exaggerates my Brazilian roots and offers my life a palette of highly coloured sensations. It makes me shimmer, multiple, mobile like the huge silk fabrics actors used to wave in visions of mediaeval tournaments. I am searching for the antidote, the crazy or obvious answer that will pulverise the continuation of a



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banal universe. I detonate in this disconcerting, hilarious and most often distressing game.

Translated from French by Phyllis Yorzdán and Maureen Tessier. Translated from Brazilian by Anouck Auboiron

NEUSA THOMASI (Brazil/France) studied with Antunes Filho in São Paulo before moving to Paris where she founded the Compagnie des Contraires with which she still works today as actor and director, developing theatre projects with a social dimension in small urban districts.