

Anna Zubrzycki

Chronicles - a Lamentation

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The lights are dim; they show the silhouettes of two women sitting on high-backed chairs, behind them another woman sounds a chord on her harmonium, and behind her, a half-circle of men sing a drone. The two women weave their voices together, answering one another in turn, and so they tell their story, using only their voices. We call them the *voices of the desert* as this is how the women wailed and sobbed in ancient Babylon, and how they continue to do now at the funerals of loved ones in small villages in eastern, southern and central Europe. In this Prologue to the performance, through our lamentations she and I, the two women, tell of everything that will happen in the next hour just as it will be shown and re-told in different ways.

My character is Ninsun, the Female Buffalo, the Mother of Gilgamesh, the Teller of Dreams, the Seer. I prophesie on stage. I both interpret the dreams and re-live them during the performance. None of the actors in our performance plays a role as this is usually understood in classical theatre. Together we present a canopy of allegories which are layered one on top of another, tightly woven to tell the story of Gilgamesh. I carry the thread of those allegories that is constant, so you might say I play a character; I would say it is more complex than that. Look at the tasks we have as actors at any moment in the performance.

First, we are like the strings of a harp which must sound together in harmony. The whole performance is sung. From the first note of my incantation, I never stop singing during the entire performance. The singing expresses who Ninsun is, as it defines the allegory in which she exists. Because the songs are polyphonic and each of us sings a different melody line the audience sees seven individuals yet one singing body of actors.

Then, there are many different things happening simultaneously on the stage. Each of us must carry the life-line of his or her own character and at the same time reflect the story the others are telling through their gestures, the dramatic events on stage, the relationships shown and the

texts that are spoken. We are never still.

We began working on the performance by researching the ancient polyphonic singing of Epiros (Ancient Greece, now partly northern Greece and partly Albania). While on our research trip to Albania in 2001, we spent an evening singing with a group of male polyphonic singers and were struck by the spatial relationship of their voices. In turn this suggested to us a spatial arrangement for the actors during the performance because the Albanian singers described their voices as the "voice that weaves", the "voice that takes or gives", the "voice that cuts" and the "voice that holds" (the drone).

We felt that if the voices were understood in this way they could inscribe the entire stage both horizontally in terms of where they were situated, and vertically in terms of the "mission" the voices carried at any given moment. They also expressed the vibrant line of life that I and each of the characters in the performance carried. Because music works on more levels than a text that is merely spoken, the life-line I carry as Ninsun is not simply the expression of a certain personality or psychological model. It has become deeper and symbolic, almost allegorical at times.

Thus, in the scene where Gilgamesh tells of his dream, and I, the Mother, the Seer, prophesie, telling him of its meaning and of the whole journey on which he will embark, of Enkido whom he will meet, and Death who will defeat him, the actors make several layers of meaning. Maria (Death), the voice that weaves, "sings" me as I say to Rafal (Gilgamesh) "hark the meaning of your dreams in my words". She echoes them by beginning the singing of an ancient polyphonic song. I pause, then echo the song in my spoken prophecy. Now I am the voice that cuts, I "see through, cut through" the meaning of Gilgamesh's previous text.

Meanwhile the voice that takes is Colin (Ushnaptin, the boatman across the river) and the drone is echoed by Ania (Shamhat the priestess-prostitute) and Marcin (Enkidu, Gilgamesh's great companion). Christopher (the Shaman who is the other Gilgamesh) is the voice that also cuts. Ania reflects Christopher's voice in her movement, Christopher reflects my words in his voice and so the canopy of meanings is woven.

SINGING

The polyphonic songs are lamentations which possess a set musical structure. I can say that we actors of *The Song of the Goat* are like musical instruments and the musical structure is our score, our script - the script of each character fitting together to make a perfect unity.

I began working on my role, with my younger colleagues, by working on the co-ordination training that we have devised as a company. It consists of exercises that serve to link and integrate voice and movement within the individual as well as between a partner and the whole group, between dance and word, rhythm and sound. It is about taking space and giving space and, above all, partnership on the stage. It may be described as an attempt to attain what the Greeks called "formal unity"; i.e. the actor is an instrument whose tools are song, dance, rhythm, movement, gesture and the spoken word. For us, all of these tools are equal and equivalent, and an actor can use and exchange any of these tools in order to be expressive. So, for some of the company, gestures may be based on complex acrobatics; others work with impulses from the spine, but completely co-ordinated with the breath and the impulses to the feet so that the impulse from the spine travels right inside to produce the word or song. These impulses are all individual and together form

a complex training for each actor's own character's line of life. I no longer need acrobatics to tap into new inner resources; that happened when I was much younger and my body needed to free its excess energy. The creative process took much longer then. Today I work more simply and with moments of stillness and inner reflection. For example, the "scene of birth" was a true riddle for me: how to be not merely realistic - a temptation I suppose because I still remember how my daughter was born - for realism is banal in theatre. Where to plant the seed of something that will carry me as an actor through this scene performance after performance, and allow me to be still and yet alive?

Co-ordination is also a perfect tool for allowing the voice to sink into the body. During work on *Chronicles* I touched on something which I could call a physiology of singing. But the music was also the tool to opening the actors' emotions. Because the voice work draws from the storehouse of lamentations it gave us easy access to our emotions, both personally and in relation to our characters.

THE SCENE OF BIRTH

As I give birth to Shamhat, she comes towards me from the darkness of Bardo, she travels the length of my birth canal metaphorically, spatially from one end of the stage to the other, from the beginning of one verse of the ancient polyphonic song to its end. A song where the voice that cuts is the voice of the wolf, the voice that weaves - my voice and Maria's - the voice of sobbing. She travels the song and retells the story of her love-making with Enkidu, and as she is born at its end she tells of her anger, defilement and humiliation by Gilgamesh. As she is born, so her anger is born and I, who have given birth, am now the child, the perfect seed of anger and rebellion.

The performance is like a spiral in both its form and its meaning, so many musical motifs are repeated in different arrangements like a symphony. The characters repeat their texts or gestures, although the audience may only sense this, as the repetition is often clothed in different musical phrases. And so I end the performance as I began - veiled, lamenting, yet only the outer substance of my character is the same. I have often heard our director, Grzegorz Bral, saying that at the end of each performance he wants to join in the final song which we sing as we exit, but he cannot, because our voices have progressed within the course of an hour to a completely different plane and have a quality and carry a story which he, even with his excellent ear, is unable to accompany.

Our voices possess a physical substance. I think this remains the goal of my work on character - that the audience should be literally struck by a physical sensation when hearing my words, so that when they see me move and speak and sing simultaneously they cease to wonder at what is being expressed, and only experience me - my character.

ANNA ZUBRZYCKI (Poland) was born in 1952 and graduated at Canberra National University. She moved to Poland to participate in workshops with the Teatr Laboratorium, following which she joined The Centre for Theatre Practices Gardzienice. Anna worked with Gardzienice for seventeen years, taking the lead role in *Sorcery*, *Avvakum* and *Carmina Burana*, for which she received the Annual Critic's Choice Award. After leaving Gardzienice in 1993, she founded The Song of the Goat with Grzegorz Bral, touring the world with their productions and workshops.