

Julia Varley

More or Less Real People

Let's imagine an impossible situation: we meet all together, despite our different ages.

But we cannot, characters from different shows cannot do this!

Who's to stop us? Our actress, Julia? Our company, Odin Teatret? The director? The spectators? Theatre historians? Come on, let's try!

All right then, but where shall we meet? At a party?

No, Julia is not so fond of parties. At the theatre?

No, we do that all the time. For a meal?

But this is not our style, we don't usually eat *real* food, even if it is good, do we?

Well, **Daedalus**, you drink wine standing at the big white table in the scene before you change into your golden trousers and jacket, and put the net over your face. And **Jeanne D'Arc**, I have seen you spitting blood in the Last Supper scene with other characters. **Kirsten** knows about food from when they threw beer and fish at her and **Mr Peanut** always steals ice cream from the children.

But we have never *really* eaten! It would be strange to sit at a restaurant table. Why should we do that?

Shall we go for a ride together then?

Mr Peanut! You are the only one who has ever been on a horse, dressed up as a bride, we others don't know how to ride!

We could ride on a bus together, go to the sea and sing to the sun disappearing in the waves.

It has already been done. Let's think of something else. Buses, lorries, aeroplanes... we are usually put in boxes and suitcases to travel, we would rather forget those experiences. Shall we meet at a university lecture?

Oh **Mr Peanut**, we know you have done it all... but at lectures we cannot say all that goes through our heads, we would have to behave! Be intelligent and pedagogical! That would be boring for most of us. In a park?

And if it rains? Most of our costumes cannot stand getting wet. At the hairdressers?

Ilse Peachum, we know you like to spend your time making yourself beautiful, but what would bald **Mr Peanut** do

I have heard that in those places where they study real people in books, and transform reality into history and theory, they say actors either identify with a theatre character by being emotionally involved or analyse the character with a critical distance. I wonder why they cannot write down that we characters are just as complex as real people.

there? He would have to borrow **Doña Musica's** white hair, and that makes her jealous. Let's avoid the hairdressers! In what other situations do *real* people meet? At a museum?

And look at the same statues by Giacometti and Rodin again and again? Or dream of being part of a painting by Chagall? It would just silence us. On the underground?

New York, Paris, Tokyo, Milan, Mexico City... squashed by the crowds as when we are stuffed in our boxes... no! At the dentist?

Mr Peanut went to the dentist at the military hospital in Cordoba, Argentina, to have a new front tooth put in. He has the tendency to get into trouble with soldiers, but why involve the rest of us in that kind of adventure? In church?

Too much hard work to whisper all the time. We only believe in the goddess who checks all unseen details of our work, it would be nice to have a rest from her, just for a moment.

Well, let's go for a walk!

No! No! No! If we do that, that director Eugenio will ask us for variations and improvisations and to fix and remember and repeat... No! No! No!

Let's meet in an article for The Open Page! Then Julia will be really happy. At last she will stop worrying about one job at least that she has no time to finish!

We had better introduce ourselves first, as at a proper meeting. Let's do it in order of age.

Lady-in-black: I was born in 1978 and lived in *The Million*. For the books, I officially died in 1984. I did an acrobatic dance with **The-man-with-the pink-shirt**. I spoke some poems and played the trombone. My black lace dress was handmade in Mexico (I have lent it to **Mr Peanut** for *Ode to progress*. How Julia can still fit in it is quite a mystery, I am sure she can hardly breathe!) I was young; I

believed in romance, in good will and people. I enjoyed the *batucada* (a percussion samba rhythm) and held back my tears in the funeral procession. My personality came from listening and dancing to march music. I tried never to let go of the hands of **The-man-with-the pink-shirt**; he was my hero, my teacher and master. But I often quarrelled with him.

Ilse Peachum: My name was inspired by Ilse Koch, the German nazi commander's wife and Mrs Peachum, from Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. I knew them, but was not really interested in them. I was born in 1980 and officially died when my home, *Ashes of Brecht*, was put down in 1984. I spent my time combing my hair, putting make up on and smiling. It is such hard work to be gentle and beautiful! I also played the trombone, but not the same circus music as **The-lady-in-black**; I played Vivaldi's *Winter* from *The Four Seasons*! I wore Japanese trousers that widened at the side, long laced boots and a white shirt. Julia had to set her hair every day so that my own could be soft and straight and ordered. Behind my smile, I hid anger and frustration. I carried - and hang on to - a handbag. I generally wished I could run away and hide, but I had to encourage my actress who had difficulties, so I stayed and continued to attempt to look like a Madonna.

Jeanne d'Arc: I was born in 1985 as a filly. I lived in *The Gospel according to Oxhyrinus* and when all the red curtains of that performance were finally stored in the attic, I succumbed to my destiny of being burnt forever in a fire of coloured ribbons. That was in 1987. I enjoyed being young and rebellious. I was dressed in yellow, and the leather and silver of an old bridle. Julia was happy to use saddle soap, which reminded her of her childhood, to clean my dress. Like my other family members, I wore a *cangaçeiro's* (an outlaw from the dry regions of Brazil) hat.

I had bandages and spurs at my feet. My voice and movements originated from a suspended jar of water and from Dostojevski's Aliosha Karamazov. My origins included the historical Jeanne d'Arc and Morgana, the fairy of the Round Table. When I could, I ran and jumped in excitement.

Kirsten: I was born somewhere in between the beaches of Kerala in India and Yucatan in Mexico, very appropriately, as I represented the contemporary Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup. I was active from 1988 to 1991, quite a short span really. I am the kind of character who cannot be away from her environment. I would not be able to leave my performance as **Mr Peanut** and **Doña Musica** have done. I existed because I walked, danced, talked, sang, trod on shells, broke nests, gave birth to feathers, carried flowers, covered my face in thyme and played music in *Talabot*. I wore a white cotton jacket and skirt, blue jewels and high-heeled shoes, and a colourful scarf around my neck. Voice was my true adventurous guide.

Doña Musica: I have written a novel about myself, and I present myself every time my butterflies are taken out of the box, I don't really feel like introducing myself once again. I still tell the story of how I escaped from the performance *Kaosmos* (1993-1996) to anyone who wants to listen, but for that I need my armchair, table and garden of white flowers. I just want to remind those who have never met me before that I wear a long black dress, a silver embroidered Arab cape, very high heeled boots and my hair is long and white. Some think I am old, but I don't have an age. I really enjoy making baby faces.

Daedalus: I still dig the labyrinth in the sea of pebbles of *Mythos*, Odin Teatret's latest ensemble production. I fly with the arm movements of a Mongolian dance and the cock feathers bought in Utrecht, while I call out for Icarus. My secret is contained in a



Doña Musica Photo: Jan Rüz

resonating cup in the form of a golden string that unravels endlessly. I was officially born in 1998, but my bird voice appeared earlier, when Julia made a trip to Australia and Bali.

I am an artisan and I like to be concrete, so let us finish this introduction and get some work done. We won't present all our minor colleagues; we cannot include everyone just to be correct! Democracy takes too much time!

Mr Peanut: How dare you forget me! I came long before any of you! And I will survive all of you, no matter what you do. My skeleton face does not need looking after, I can walk with long and short legs, change from man to woman, become a baby and carry daisies with my eyes. I have been to so many places that none of you ever dreamt of. I have sold a *barong* (the Balinese dragon) at a horse market and been 200 metres underground. I have been part of at least six productions. Which of you can do that? Show some respect! I play, tease, dance and laugh a lot, but I certainly know how to be frightening and serious when it is needed. I



Mr Peanut Photo: Tony D'Urso

stand for the one thing *real* people fear - death.

So what shall we do now that we have introduced ourselves to each other? We are not good at discussions and theory; we are made of action and behaviour.

We could try out the tradition of the Magdalena Project; we could pass a stone from one to the other to make a round where everyone says what s-he¹ wants and maybe expresses wishes for the future.

That sounds nice!

Doña Musica: Who is it that gives life to a theatre performance? An actor? A dancer? Someone who moves well? Someone who interprets texts? Someone who identifies with the character? Someone who uses the *verfremdung* "distancing" effect? Someone who is carried away by emotions? Someone who leans coldly on technique? I ask these

1. S/he means either she or he. S-he means a being that is both she and he, and not a neutral it. S-he is both female and male, although mostly female because women should be given more importance nowadays!

questions in a work demonstration, because *real* people who make theatre seem to be interested in my answers. I never answer! I prefer to concentrate on the moment that comes just after I put the questions to the audience, when the actress relaxes her face and body from the tension which belongs to my way of moving and becomes as normal as she can, just standing and walking casually. But is she really *normal*? I enjoy listening to the quality and rhythm of the guitar music that starts at that point allowing me to slowly dissolve and disappear into the soft sound.

Lady-in-black: Julia just concentrated on keeping on her feet while I danced and was thrown about by **The-man-in-the-pink-shirt**. My frightened eyes came from her *real* terror in the beginning. Then I kept that expression because the director needed it. It was a long time ago, I never thought of what the spectators saw or understood of what I did. I certainly did not worry about theatre technique or the difference between *real* people and us characters. I only had to be.

Doña Musica: I am sorry for already disobeying the round rules, but I *must* add something to what I said before! I have done a whole performance in which the dialogue between Julia, the actress and myself is the theme. In that performance I say that a character is a tendency to exist, something which lies in between the idea of an event and the event itself, a strange kind of physical being exactly half way between possibility and reality. This seems to contain some kind of truth for me. Do you know where these texts come from? From subatomic physics! But don't ask me to explain physics!

Daedalus: A spectator once asked Julia why my voice was high like a woman's if I portray a man. Isn't that ridiculous? To think in terms of exclusion? As if we characters could be only male or female! I wear trousers, because I represent a *real* man who lived in ancient Greece, but I tell the story of all

mothers and fathers who have lost a child and who in some way are responsible for that child's death. I learned the languages of the birds so that they could teach me the secrets of the sky. My voice belongs to them, because I like to fly with the wings that I have built myself. I also like to build labyrinths that *real* people cannot escape from. It is mostly their way of thinking that gets caught in the different directions they chose to follow, while we characters can follow opposite directions and still make sense.

Kirsten: I have heard that in those places where they study *real* people in books, and transform reality into history and theory, they say actors either identify with a theatre character by being emotionally involved or analyse the character with a critical distance. I wonder why they cannot write down that we characters are just as complex as *real* people. I remember in *Talabot*, when I was talking about the *real* Kirsten Hastrup's divorce, and I was breaking the nest in two. So many feelings and thoughts would pass through me simultaneously, because of everything which comes from the actress, from Julia, from the space, from the spectators... - all of this belongs to me. The actress concentrated on her craft; she made an extra effort to break through the glue, choked on the thyme that covered her face; she focused on the broken rhythm of the text and held her balance on the platform. The spectators saw her telling them a story and looking at me, as if I were standing on the opposite platform. Julia personally remembered how she tried sitting on a chair thinking that maybe an independent and lone wife is better. I listened to the sounds made by the other characters and often so many things that I cannot remember, many of which changed for each performance.

We characters are able to feel different things at the same time, analyse and behave differently from how we feel, build our

external behaviour out of what is expected from us and think of shopping lists or of our next appointment, just like *real* people can. We can be totally involved in what we are doing and at the same time have a critical view about the consequence of our actions. Just like *real* people, we can be madly in love, and at the same time ask ourselves if it is really a good idea to get involved.

Jeanne d'Arc: I love to run freely and talk to stars.

Ilse Peachum: It is generally thought that I am vain and beautifully cruel. I would set my hair with the curling tongs heated on the cook's kitchen fire and interrupt Katrin's cries with a gentle firm smile. But my story presented the unimaginable facts of the Second World War and of the Holocaust while following Bertolt Brecht's life story. Here is the real point of fiction. It mixes the true experience of what is actually happening on stage with what is being said, thanks to the actions. It is an occasion for reflection. If our conduct works as it should, our spectators see beyond us into their own minds and feelings. Fiction can seem more real than reality. Have you ever seen a special sunset and thought that it looked like a painting? Have you ever totally believed in a fairy tale? The spectators see us as a person who walks, sits, speaks and at the same time as a representation of a person who walks, sits, speaks. There lies our magic.

Mr Peachum: Are we characters not *real*? Are we just fiction as some people say? Of course we are *real*! Our reality is to be both *real* and fictional. We live in the actor's bodies and in the spectator's minds. In the spectators' minds we can live forever, just like *real* people, but we can also live in other actor's bodies, developing and transforming endlessly. I don't believe *real* people can do that! *Real* people die! The entity that I represent takes them away. I would not do that...

Now that we have been serious and finished the round with discipline, let's express a wish for the future in a maximum of ten words and sing a song together.

What is the point of singing? Nobody can hear us from the pages of an article!

But that is the point. We sing just for ourselves, because we like it. We have conquered the right to do as we please at times after all our work. It is very important to enjoy ourselves.

Lady-in-black: here's my wish - to be forgotten.

Kirsten: to live new adventures with Julia's voice.

Jeanne d'Arc: to maintain the same illusions as when I was young.

Daedalus: to build my labyrinth in Crete again.

Ilse Peachum: to do all I can to avoid becoming indifferent to the consequences of war.

Mr Peanut: to dance and dance and dance!

Doña Musica: to help Julia organise the next Transit Festival.

Oh! Look! I can see a new character appearing on the horizon, who will take Julia's attention for some time. S-he is appearing in the smoke of extinguished matches. S-he seems to have suffered, and now has gone slightly mad. But we cannot get to know her in this article. A character comes to life only when s-he flies away from the written pages.

JULIA VARLEY (Britain/Denmark) is an actor and pedagogue at Odin Teatret since 1976. She has published various articles and *Wind in the West*, the novel of a character. She has been an active member of the Magdalena Project from its beginning. The latest production she has directed is *Fox Wedding*, a children's performance with Hisako Miura of Teatret Om.





Photo montage with Mr Peanut,
Kirsten Hastrup, Julia, Deadalus
and Doña Musica