

Iami Rebouças Freire

The World of Appearances

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My greatest desire as a woman was always to be beautiful, strong, healthy, attractive, elegant, intelligent, special. But, alas, life made me normal. So my battle became one of seeking recognition for these qualities within my own normality. In some ways the confrontation with my reality became my wound. My self-esteem as a woman cannot stand rejection. A disappointment in love, for example, can undermine me completely and I often end up punishing myself with some kind of physical externalisation. I am constantly fighting to overcome existential crises and though theatre constantly keeps me in check, it is in theatre that I find the reason to keep on trying, to transform reality into something between what is possible and what I am capable of.

An irony of fate: I was recognised in theatre for my strong, almost grotesque characterisations. My most impressive characters are not feminine and delicate, but shamelessly ugly and deformed. When I hear people praising my work, saying that I am a "monster", I think of that "princess" whom I would like to be and hope for a courageous redemptive hero, who will make me feel beautiful. Yes! I am always hoping for a miracle. Or I make miracles happen when I can. If I stop believing in this, I will lose hope. I consider theatre to be a means of making the miracle happen.

When, as a teenager, some thirty years ago, I thought of the future, I wanted to meet my companion, the dreamed-of man who would give me children and be by my side in my everyday struggle. I had no clear idea of what I would do professionally, but preferably wanted nothing that would distance me from family life. I really did not think of running risks. I always liked to sing, dance, imitate people and to talk to the mirror. At school I was not a bad pupil, but I was also not an outstanding one. When I finished school I had to choose a profession. Led by common sense I chose dentistry, for I considered it one of the most useful professions that existed. After all, I was a victim of the damage caused by sugar and by the lack of information about dental care, and

I did not want to be yet another Brazilian with a toothless smile. I chose to work in social dentistry, but I abandoned this when I decided to use my dentistry diploma as a "passport" to get onto the acting course at the university. Although I did not need a diploma to work as an actress, an activity I had already been involved in for four years, I decided to pursue an academic training. This training, and the diploma, became very important when years later, for financial reasons, I decided to seek work as a teacher of vocal training at the same university.

The theatrical experience was overwhelming for me. I soon came across an irreverent and transgressive text by Alfred Jarry,¹ in a provocative montage by Paulo Dorado, the well-known director from Bahia. I thought of giving up, I was afraid, I lost my voice, but I was already infected by the desire to reveal what lay beneath my submissive, comfortable and cowardly sheep's skin. The image I had of theatre was a far cry from what I was experiencing. I did not imagine I would have to expose myself in this way.

Total involvement with theatre requires a lot of energy and this can take time, invade relationships and require solitude in order to meet with one's self. But everything has its own time, its own measure. When this solitude lasts too long, the lack of a partner to share my woman's skin with, once I am abandoned by the skins of my "creature-characters" that I invent, makes me very sad.

I am talking about what life did to me and what I did with my life. I was born in September 1959, so I will soon be 44 years old. My life could take a turn and something surprising could happen, but looking at the probabilities it seems that I will not be a mother. This dream does not seem as though it will have the chance to come true. It is

also very probable that I will continue to be a teacher, though I beg the universe to conspire in order that I may be only an actress and therefore be able to dedicate myself to this task with more tranquillity. As to having a partner, one never knows how many will appear, and how long they will stay.

As an actress I never managed to earn enough to live on, living and eating according to my basic needs. I always had to have a parallel paid activity in order to be able to continue acting. After fifteen years in this situation I decided to join the staff of the Federal University of Bahia as a theatre lecturer. As I knew I was reaching the age limit for having children, I needed a certain financial stability, just in case destiny should look kindly on me. I gained the right to a monthly cheque, health insurance, paid vacations, a yearly bonus and all else that permanent employment brings. On the other hand my life as an actress now had limitations: less time, more tiredness, less freedom to travel and so on. Most actors who make this choice end up not acting any more. I think it is easier for directors to dedicate themselves to theatre when linked to a university, but actors need to be available the whole time with their voices and bodies ready to meet the technical demands of the profession. It does not matter if a director is hoarse or if s/he has a broken foot, s/he continues directing just the same. When an actor is hoarse she feels incomplete, mutilated.

I had the privilege, on various occasions, of seeing the work demonstrations of actors from Odin Teatret and Teatro Potlach. Inspired by these, I developed the performance *Umbigiüidades* as part of the practical work on my M.A. in Theatre Studies. The performance is a collage of different scenes

1. The play was *Ubu Rex, Pataphysical Ephemeralities*, an adaptation of the UBU trilogy.

from performances in which I have acted, focusing on those in which the voice work was particularly important. I adapted the scenes and wove them together with accounts of episodes of my life as an actress. Of the characters I present perhaps the most emblematic is Bahêa,² who certainly was the most popular. In *Umbigüidades*, amongst other texts that criticise, in a humorous way, dominant political and cultural values, Bahêa tells the story of how I survived vocally (and financially) in theatre, speaking in the rhythm of a football match commentator:

She enters the theatre in Bahia in 1981. Gets onto the Free Course at the TCA.³ She gives the kick off as an inexperienced player and immediately is confronted with a vocal dysfunction in the first play. She dribbles the lack of technique, but loses the ball to stress. She rushes on to the next throw and is caught out by lack of breath, flaw. Flaw of deep breathing. The game is tense. Calm down! Under a lot of pressure. Moves on to researching sound, articulates better, manages good resonance, increases her projection. Fans breathe as she gains a better control of the game. Living as an actress is very good for her, but as an actress she earns very little. She gets close to winning her first prize, but is caught off-side. The fans cheer her on! The game goes on. She advances dangerously, knocks into a vocal nodule, gets a penalty. Penalty. Too much work is to blame, but she gets a warning from the throat-specialist referee. Yellow card! Surgery is recommended. But she gets better using audio-phonology, working on technique. She continues her research, this time she tries to

say a lot without uttering a word. She risks another dangerous throw and, with the mute daughter of Mother Courage, she finally makes a definitive change. R\$2,040.00. She wiiiiiiins! She gets nominated as the best actress of 1998. At thirty-five, thirty five performances. She owns herself now. The fans are excited. It's Bahêa! And look, look another amazing kick. Hold tight, here she comes again! About to kick another one with Umbigüidades. It's a glorious show! At thirty-nine she wiiiiiiins! R\$2,000. They pull out 40,⁴ but it's still R\$2,000 for best actress of the year 2000!

And look out! Look out! Hold tight! Because here she comes again with another goal for Umbigüidades at thirty-nine, she wiiiiiiins. She wins the Bahian semi-finals. It's really a glorious show. And on the wings of Asa Branca (White Wing, a song) she kicks forty! Forty performances! She is already around forty. The fans are cheering! Bahêa! Another one, Bahêa! Another one, Bahêa!

Although the show refers to a personal situation, using a specific social type from our culture, this character was popular with various kinds of audiences. Perhaps this was because he allowed the actress to create a funny characterisation of a Brazilian male type who can be found on the city streets trying to get hold of some cash doing any old job. The pride of having his team win makes up for being a loser in society. It is also a way of being impersonated on stage. This character was inspired by a tramp I had known as a teenager. He travelled from one town in Bahia to another as if he were a car. As he couldn't afford a car, he decided to become

2. A character from the performance *Dendê and Dengo* by Aninha Franco, directed by Carmen Partenostro premiered in 1990, and performed in Brazil and abroad. Bahêa is a rubbish collector, a fan of the Bahia Sports Club, the most popular football team in Salvador.

3. The Teatro Castro Alves - one of the largest in Latin America - belongs to the state of Bahia. It has a symphony orchestra, a ballet company, but as yet no permanent theatre company. The free courses resulted in performances.

4. The first time that I won the prize was calculated in dollars. The second year it was in Brazilian *Reais*, so that is why there was a reduction.



Bahêa in *Umbigüidades* Photo: Sandra Delgado

one. For me Jeep - the name he used, as it was his favourite car - was an actor. The road was his stage. From his own misfortune he created the chance to live the life he chose, up to the last consequence. A car could kill him, as long as he could live his dream.

The actor too, in a way, puts herself into this reality of being what she is not, what she could be, or would like to be. Jeep ate what people gave him, he was accepted in society as a madman, an absurd picturesque figure, who resisted poverty by living on donations. And the actor? Here in Brazil, with the huge domination of television as a medium of entertainment and now with the lavish

musical shows in public squares, there is little chance of survival for theatre. Subsidised theatre is subject to the interests of the funders, generally it needs to be funny, enlivened with music and not long enough to tire the audience. So the actor has to choose between tightening the belt of survival or making theatre a secondary activity and finding another source of income.

At the moment I am working in one of these subsidised performances. My character is Maria Quitéria, a Bahian heroine who dressed as a man, cut her hair and joined up as a voluntary soldier in order to fight the Portuguese who resisted in Bahia, even though Independence had already been declared in Brazil in 1822. Bahia only freed itself from Portuguese domination on the 2nd of July 1823 and Maria Quitéria was one of the soldiers decorated for bravery.

Here we fight for life, for our Cachoeira, for our country. But a secret voice also whispers to me that I fight for myself. I am fighting to free Maria Quitéria de Jesus from paternal tyranny, from painful domestic duties, from a boring life. Ah, I fight in water up to my breasts for the freedom of women, for the new woman who will have to emerge. My bayonet tears open the stomach of a Portuguese soldier who does not want to recognise the independence of Brazil, announced there in the South, by the Emperor D. Pedro.⁵

This woman of the people, whose prospects were marriage, looking after children and domestic matters, was moved, perhaps by patriotism, or more likely by the desire to flee the limitations that life imposed on her, and managed to pass herself off as a man until her father came to look for her in the army. As the prerequisite to fighting was to

5. A quotation of text by Hélio Pólvora inserted into the play *Maria Quitéria*, by Ida Vicenzio, musical adaptation and direction by Deolindo Checcucci.



Iami Rebouças Freire as Maria Quitéria in the performance of the same name.
Photo: Samuel Freitas

be a man, she made herself into a man and went off to defend her dream. She was the Brazilian Joan of Arc. For me, she was also made of the same stuff actors are made of. Maria Quitéria was an actor; she made the miracle happen and entered history. She made the battlefield her stage. Today, 150 years after her death, she is remembered, represented and paid homage to in the theatre. I was given this privilege and chal-

lenge. Being in the skin of Maria Quitéria is another chance that theatre has given me to reflect on the power that the world of appearances can have, being at the same time fragile and ephemeral. Our heroine had her day of glory, she was decorated by the Emperor and acclaimed by the population, but she died poor, forgotten, blind. Maria Quitéria has taught me to see the stage as a battlefield, where one fights tooth and nail for the constant renewal of life. Like Jeep, she shows me that the stage is a path to go along, a road that takes us to invented places, places where the world of possibilities is an inexhaustible source of self-knowledge. Theatre can make us queens or beggars, but behind it all there will always be a woman who resists, who persists, who keeps on dreaming, keeps on struggling.

Translated from Brazilian by Leo Sykes

IAMI REBOUÇAS FREIRE (Brazil) is an actor and graduate of the Federal University of Bahia. She is a teacher of Vocal Expression in the Theatre Department. She began her career in 1981 and has acted in more than forty theatre performances. She finished her M.A. in 2001 with *Umbigüidades, Staging of Vocal Research in Theatre*. *Umbigüidades*, has already been performed more than eighty times in different Brazilian cities. For this performance Iami was awarded the prize of best Bahian actress of the year 2000.