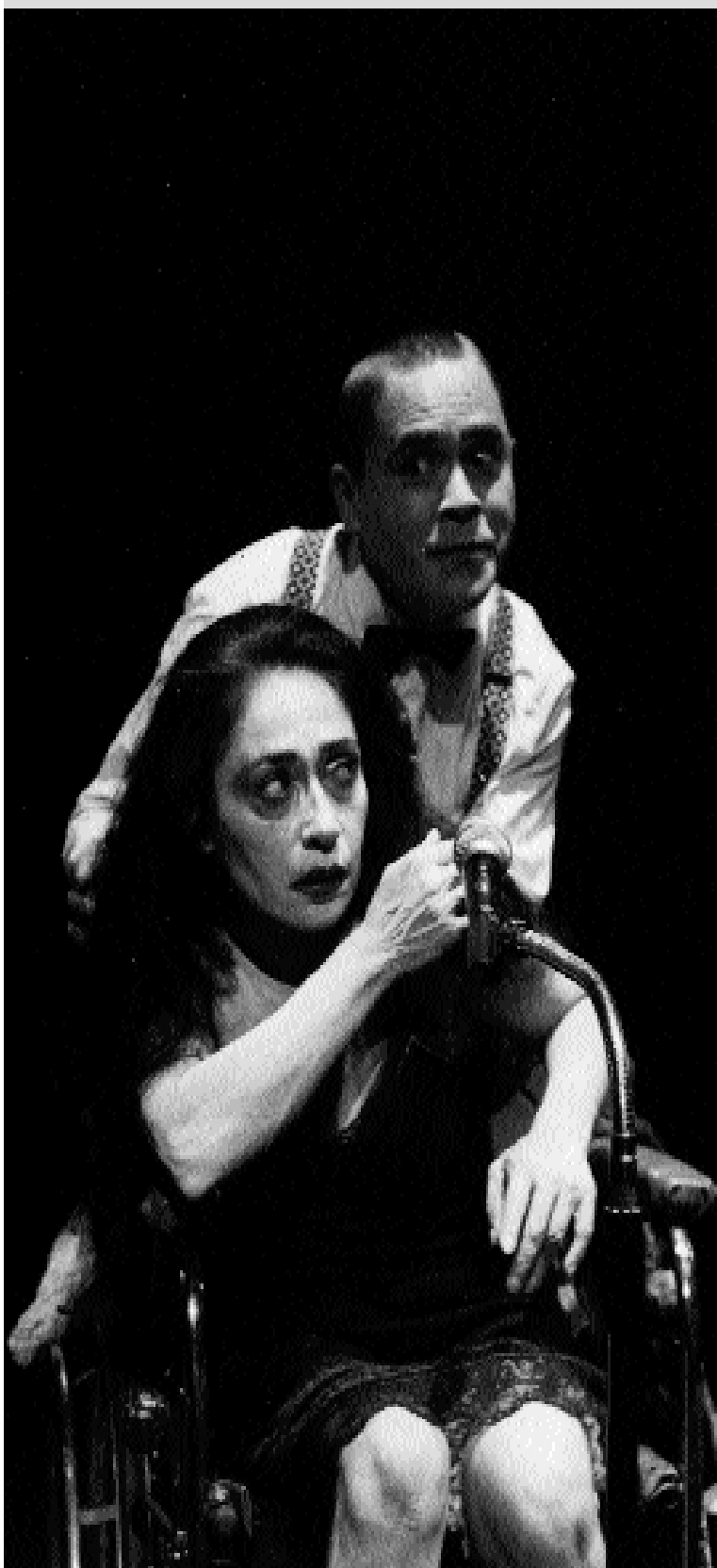


Rebeca Ralli

Constructive Constrictions



I never imagined that a suggestion which made me hate my director Miguel Rubio could be the beginning of a process that still today - thirteen years later - confronts me with questions.

In order to show the director an exercise, I go to great pains. I try climbing up and down on a table and a chair placed on top of the table. From the top of everything I look at the high ceiling of our theatre. I sing, climb down again, run - always careful of my newly operated-on knee. I lift tables and chairs while I improvise melodies for the poems of León Felipe to the sound of Julián's guitar and drum-set. I hide myself behind a barricade made of the remains of a bar. I am sure it is the right way to proceed. At the end of the long improvisation, Miguel comments: "This is terrible. Change everything you have done into immobility, do the same standing still." And he marks a corner of two metres by two in the space: "Do it like an inner dance, completely motionless."

My blood boils listening to this. I breathe deeply. Silent outside; inside I am saying all the rude remarks that I can think of. I thought: "I'll show you how I do this!" Julián and I looked at each other. How? I had no idea how practically to transform speed into stillness, the drama of a bombardment into neutrality and humour, the need to communicate with the other into the physical action of distance, without even looking at each other.

I thought Miguel was joking, pulling our

Rebeca Ralli and Julián Vargas in *No me toquen esos vals*. Photo: Joaquín Rubio

legs, but in fact that was the beginning of the story of Amanda, my character, and Abelardo, Julián's character. I felt that the only thing I had was my name, Amanda (which means "the one deserving love"). It was the name of an old aunt of mine, who had always been segregated and excluded because she was the daughter of brother and sister cousins. My aunt used to walk around with her hair in a bun on top of her head, singing in the corridor. She was friendly and she loved cats. I turned the cat into a lioness. "A lioness has whelped in the streets," says Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*. Amanda and Abelardo sing this line to a rock rhythm. But this happened later. At that time, when I had just received the instruction to work with stillness in a two by two corner, I felt as segregated and excluded as my aunt. I only owned my name.

All this happened in 1989. What was Lima, my hometown, like then? And my country, Peru? The population was caught between two fires; on one side the army, on the other the Shining Path and the MRTA (Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru). Lima was a besieged city, with tanks in the streets. We lived in a state of emergency with a curfew from 10 p.m. until 5 a.m. At night I had to run home, and then listen to the bombs and bullets from my terrace. I had to show my papers all the time. Barricades made of sacks of sand blocked the streets. Lima was a fragmented city. Never go past a petrol station or a bank; it could explode in a terrorist attack. When you go to rehearsals, or to perform, don't look straight at the police nor ask them anything; it could result in suspicion. I have to queue to buy milk, sugar, rice. Today it costs three, tomorrow six. The high-rise towers are bombed; Lima is in the dark, without electricity or water. I carry water to the fourth floor. Every day people are killed: peasants,

people from the town, policemen, militants from the Shining Path or the MRTA. The number of widows and orphans grows. There are masses of drug traffickers; it is easy money - a necessity? Corruption is everywhere. The newspaper headlines repeat: ten, fifteen, twenty dead; and morbid photographs accompany the news. In essence, using the brevity of a telegram, this was the social context of Peru. These images, even though they may seem gruesome, are part of my sources of inspiration.

Women in mourning: this is what my hometown showed. Amanda was born then. She is also in mourning, but she mourns herself. She wears a black petticoat. She also wears a grin, she laughs at herself. Her song is caught in her throat. She fights against being dead; she returns to the bar where she sang with her accompanist Abelardo, to share her songs, poems and stories of women artists who cannot pay the rent and struggle to find shelter, with the customers. She wants to love and cannot express it. She wants to continue to be an artist. Perhaps she returns to denounce her own death.

To survive in a world of destructive violence is a hard challenge in any case. But when the struggle to survive is undertaken by the dead, even to try to understand what happens is a disturbing trial for our mental health.

The Dead Attempt to Survive and Fail, D.J.R.
Bruckner, *The New York Times*, 17.7.1993

The performance starts with a dance of immobility that suggests the resurrection of the characters, and with a sentence of Amanda's: "Tonight I feel words are deadly wounded." At that time we could not say what we thought, democratic freedom did not exist. And today when freedom exists, words are often prostituted.

The social context is the main source. It influences and in some way suggests the keys

that guide the different courses of the performance. The keys are not automatic; they transform as they pass through a kind of aesthetic. I refer to a fragmented country, to a population limited in its freedom, as in a similar way the actors are restricted by a drum-set and a wheelchair. Events occur, creating atmospheres, silences, vocal and musical explosions; dialogues at a distance for which a cactus and the spectators function as a nexus.

What do I do each time I start working on a performance? I read what I feel like, novels, poetry, about physics. I search in dictionaries. I listen to classical or contemporary music. I go to the cinema. I dream, draw and sing what I like. I go by bike. I look at paintings and sculptures. I walk where the streets take me. How did I work in 1989? What did I do with my body? I exercised Tai-chi-po, segmentation, the connection of movement and breath, I looked at the centre of my hand, searching for the precision of the movement. It was a disciplined, cerebral research. But I also allowed myself to be driven by intuition. I felt like dancing a gypsy dance. Why? It does not matter. It is what my body was demanding. I also wrote down all that came to me in my notebooks, in those same notebooks that I am going through now in order to write these lines. In one of them I find this annotation:

Today is the 16th of March 1989. I worked again with Lieve Delanoy, my Belgian gypsy friend. I practised a gypsy dance with flamenco music. While we were dancing she tells me: "The feet, the hands, with coins, the violin, jump! [Ouch! My knee!] There are no fixed steps, but improvisation. Move your shoulders, attract the men, the movement seems like a sexual incitement, in reality it is a movement of freedom. It is a woman's dance. The eyes are like knives or doves [I remember that I had stopped working on the eyes in my training

because of the question of neutrality of the face. I will start working on ways of looking again. The eyes, how nice!] Lieve continues to talk while we dance: "The gypsy dance is like a cock game, against convention and establishment."

Thank you Lieve.

When I create a performance I read a lot of poetry. For this performance, I devoured all the poetry and theatre works of León Felipe, an exile of the Spanish civil war. Why him? I felt he expressed my current pain, my solitude, my lack of future. Now that time has passed I see the similitude: my country was living a civil war that still had not revealed its real and dramatic magnitude, the size of which we are able to discern today when the war has ended in its military form.

Amanda comes from a male character, the madman with the cart, whom I had played in a previous performance, *Encuentro de Zorros*. The madman said only one line from a poem by León Felipe: "What a pity, what a pity that everything always repeats itself in the same way". Miguel suggested that I read this poet. I gathered his works in Spanish bookshops, as I could not find his books in Peru. I wanted to sing his poems; I felt they spoke of me as well. In the beginning, Amanda was the madman with the cart who, holding an old rustic lamp, searches for a house for the exiled poet to live. He cooked corn biscuits in the shape of doves on a small rum stove and he sang a cappella.

I also read Luisito Hernández, the Peruvian suicide poet: "I hate peace of mind, as I own it". I read Javier Sologuren: "The fact is that I have a terrible desire to go on". I read Margarite Yourcenar in her *Memories of Adriano*: "Nearly all men equally ignore their just freedom and their true servitude".

I did not copy out all these texts for the performance, but they are there in spirit. They are part of a process of sensitive accumulation in which research and the approach



Julián Vargas and Rebeca Ralli in *No me toquen ese vals*. Photo: Joaquín Rubio

to creation is intuitive, chaotic and based on instinct. I believe that it was also a way of getting out, of distancing myself from an always unstable and surprising social reality, in order to look at it with other eyes.

I continued reading the poet Blanca Varela, thirty-three suicide poets, Akira Kurosawa, Fellini, Cooper in his *Yin and Yang*, etc. etc. I also read dictionaries; I searched for "cactus". This inquiry came from a suggestion of Miguel's: "A lot of solitude, what is a very solitary place? A desert. What do you find there? A cactus. Investigate cactus." So I searched in dictionaries and botany books, and I bought various kinds of cactus. I can recognise their perfume, I look at them, so quiet and strong, but in reality so fragile because:

The cactus is a plant that lives in arid or dry

areas. It belongs to the family of cactáceous. Their stalks broaden and get deformed because of retaining water. Their leaves convert to needles and their flowers have fleshy petals and pretty colours. The flowers are solitary.

This dictionary definition is part of Amanda's text in the performance. A cactus is also physically present on stage creating a nexus between the characters.

Chaos, discontinuity and interruption have been the characteristics of a working process which started in 1987 and was premiered in 1990.

For a long time the actors explored, working physically with chairs and tables. Then we settled upon a more precise situation: two singers had been locked in a bar in the centre of Lima bombed by war. The scene presented two



Rebeca Ralli in *No me toquen ese vals*.
Photo: Joaquín Rubio

dead singers - we don't know how they died - who return to a bar where they used to perform. Under the effects of alcohol the customers evoke the singers in order to make them reappear. People see them or believe they see them. The exposition of the plot is not so important. Instead we try to achieve a special atmosphere, emphasising the rhythm, the change of situations, the simultaneity of actions, precision, silence, looks, the condensation of movement, stillness, immobility. We try to create something similar to a "ocurrencial" plot. It is not logical, but nevertheless something happens.

Miguel Rubio, *Notes on the Productions*, 1991

There are various sources for this work: personal material, the poems by León Felipe, traditional *criollo* songs from Lima, texts by Quevedo and Alberti, letters that I sent to Miguel from Cuba, conversations overheard in bars by Julián, but most of all what was happening in our country. We wanted to talk about this situation; even if nothing was said directly, a lot was said.

I started the work in 1987, at night, after working in the daytime on another production with the whole group. We did not have money (for a change!) but we had the desire to work. The process was interrupted because I hurt myself during a performance and had to go to Cuba to have an operation on my knee.

I arrived and the next day I was interned in hospital. It was the Day of the Public Health Worker. There was a feast. Patients, doctors and nurses were gathered. For me the feast's spectacle was nightmarish. Everyone was dancing, some with crutches, others moving shoulders without arms. Some approached me to shake hands without fingers, others had half their body in plaster. Some had nails in their legs and open wounds, and so on. My insides shuddered as I looked at all the crippled patients who tried to appear normal. I had to keep to the rules of the game however: yes indeed, they were normal.

That day I wanted to go back home. I thought, "it is only for three months". And it became eight. After the operation and nearly two months in plaster without walking, my leg was reduced to a string, what could I do? Exercise and get better quickly. I wanted to return and perform again. But I could not go against nature. I read. I wrote letters, some of which I sent, while others I kept secret. I drew. I looked at the red sunsets of La Havana. I waited for the only visit that I received on the island: Magali Muguercia, a keen scholar of Latin American theatre and a kind-hearted friend.

I had to remember how it was to walk. I thought about body memory. I thought about the value of movement each time I wanted to do something and I could not. I thought about minimal actions and stillness. In some way I was going through a process of real accumulation. I wrote letters to Miguel talking to him about my fantasies for the

performance, without imagining that afterwards these same letters would become work material. In one letter I wrote: "We will meet in La Havana. We will drink glasses of rum to toast scarcity. You will see my not-so-beautiful leg - it was never beautiful - with its nearly disappeared scar. The real scar is in the soul, or in that thing that we feel, because of so much absence and all we have been through."

This is one of the texts that gives a key to the spectators in the performance allowing them to assemble their own version of it. The nightmarish memories come back to me each time that we sing Shakespeare's text: "A lioness hath whelped in the streets;/ And graves have yawn'd and yielded up their dead;/ Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds,/ In ranks and squadrons and light form of war/ Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol. (*Julius Caesar*: Act II, Scene II) Each fragment of the performance brings images from the past back to my mind.

At that time a policeman lived with his wife and daughter in front of my apartment. His wife was surprised that I would walk home alone. The policeman looked at me as if I were a prostitute. It was unbearable, but even worse was the smell of meat fried in fat at seven in the morning. He would eat a steak for breakfast every day. It nauseated me. One day the policeman disappeared and when I met him by accident, he told me that he now owned a house with a bathroom the size of my living room. Hearing him made me feel as if I lived in a toilet. I reacted in an even stronger way when I thought of where the money to buy the immense house that he was describing had come from: drugs and corruption.

In the performance there is a scene where the bar door opens and - in our secret story - the police enter. The memory of my neighbouring policeman comes to my mind

and with him the smell of meat mixed with fried fat. I wonder about my olfactory memory, about how to transmit an atmosphere to the spectator through a recollection that is not mentioned.

I cannot disconnect my daily life from the creative process. It is not something premeditated. The connection between actress and character is created, for example, by my aunt Amanda or by the waltzes of my childhood. My aunts Saba and Aspoasia used to dance on the balcony, at parties with guitar music that my father enjoyed. My mother looked pretty, laughed happily and sang all day. The morning smell of the fried fat, the orthopaedic hospital, the fear of explosions, loneliness, the need of hope and future - all this is not only part of my olfactory, emotional and vocal memory. I believe it is implanted in my body in such a way that it can be transformed into actions different from those that originated the memories.

With this performance I learnt that theatre can be made from all kinds of material. I learned to be free on stage, without a pre-established convention, letting myself be carried by olfactory sense and intuition. I understood that chaos and intuition are guides for research. The organisation and restriction come later in the process.

In our group we are used to doing closed rehearsals for invited spectators. We did one of these for friends and theatre critics like Hugo Salazar del Alcázar, who unfortunately has now left us orphans of his intelligent, sharp and constructive criticism. At the end of our public rehearsal we had a sparse dialogue. Hugo said, "What is this? This is not Yuyachkani. It is not the Yuyachkani aesthetic." (A reference to Yuyachkani's usual iconography and themes that relate to the indigenous culture of the Andes.) Rebeca-Amanda answered, "Yuyachkani's aesthetic is not absolute, it builds itself for each production."

This was the initial tone of the reactions to our proposal. After the first performances some people could not stand the show. They left. "Maybe one day they will even throw a tomato in my face," I thought. I had already planned what I would do, but it did not happen. Even within my group the so-called "Andes faction" (in our internal jargon) protested because what we did could not be understood. This was not Yuyachkani. This situation made me feel marginalised within the group, as if I were not accepted, without company. But all of this reaffirmed the three of us (Miguel, Julián and I) on our course. Shortly after the premiere, Hugo wrote that the performance was like a scenic fresco with an expressionist mark that illuminated the proposal and attracted the attention of the spectator.

What do I think now of Amanda's body? Dressed in underwear, painted white, with her face made-up like a dull mediocre cabaret artist. Her body is like a stage where feelings, ideas and memories run after each other. This apparently motionless body - the motionless country - the fragile, painful, singing body with its bare breasts revealing a violated intimacy, covered up again with dignity. The body is put upside down in the wheelchair, in spite of the legs. The country is upside down, fragile, showing its wounds and lacerations.

Magali Muguercia wrote in 1997: "The main physical content of *Valse* is oscillation. The dilemma between paralysis and vitality reproduced at a physical level gives the central meaning of this performance." What does this body say now, thirteen years after the premiere of the performance? The civil war has ended. How can it connect to the spectator today? My task as an actress is greater in order to keep the performance alive. And it is alive! I am performing currently. I venture to say that it is alive because it does not tell a story, because it is

open to different interpretations, because it is directed at the private world of each spectator, who can arrange her or his own puzzle.

Though the social context is a source, we do not speak of it as in a chronicle. The actors' and director's subjectivity intervene in the elaboration. We speak of an era - yes and no. We speak of two singers, of artists. The performance encompasses us.

I also think that Amanda is alive because I created and brought her up with an urgent need, within me, within my private story and the story of others, with a lot of pain, through loads of tears and lots of laughter, and with masses of work. Now, after so much time, I try reading the libretto of the performance as if for the first time, looking at what is beneath each sentence.

The lines of this article attempt to discuss my work. They are fragmented, chaotic and allusive. They hide many things. They are just like *No me toquen ese vals*, and like the situation in my country. Thank you Miguel for the suggestion of stillness on a two by two stage. Thank you Julián for running the risk with me.

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

REBECA RALLI (Peru), actress and pedagogue, is a founder member of Yuyachkani and since 1971 has worked in all its productions and projects in Peru and abroad.