



MONTAGES

By Iben Nagel Rasmussen

RIDING THE TIGER

We call it "the flow". The energy created by the exercises in the training or the actions in a performance. Like water in a river, it should always be present. It can be slow or fast. It can be dammed or turn into a waterfall, hum gently between narrow, or broad, riverbanks. But if the water dries out, it is no longer a river.

In my very first improvisation at Odin Teatret, I imagined walking in a forest. Unexpectedly, a storm arose. The resistance seemed immense and it made me lean forward. After a short while, I fell to the floor and cried out unarticulated. After some screaming I got back on my feet, walked to the door of the working space, and knocked on it. Once, twice, three times. Of

course nobody answered and I lay down on the floor, curled up, and “slept”.

Eugenio Barba commented my improvisation: “It was not bad,” he said, “but you have to learn to ride the tiger. Don’t let it ride you.” I felt embarrassed about my losing control but at the same time I understood that “the storm” was what made my improvisation alive (“not bad”). Furthermore he had said *ride* it, not tame it.

Tiger or storm – I had to learn to ride.

BODY POEMS

Years later, I found that different kinds of exercises would develop different kinds of energy that, in return, without me wanting to, coloured my way of acting on stage. I discovered this by watching an improvisation, which had been recorded on video for the Odin performance *Come and the Day Will Be Ours* (the video was a tool that enabled us to remember the details in what we had just done). My character was a shaman and I was surprised to see that my character’s way of using the scenic space and the power the actions were containing and radiating, was exactly the same I had developed in my training. The vigorous and strong elements were changing into softer sequences without ever breaking the flow by stopping up to think, calculate, or control.

At Odin Teatret we call that kind of improvisation “warm”, as opposed to “cold”. The latter refers to a composed score: physical actions assembled one after another, which the actor must be able to repeat precisely. The actor can work by imitating paintings or sculptures, or just being inspired by them. She can invent completely new actions and, by putting them together as words in phrases, they appear like a “body-poem”. If an actor works alone to prepare propositions for a role without having a director or another actor present, the way of composition would be preferable. It would be futile to throw oneself into the

“storm” of a warm improvisation that needs an outside eye to let go of your own judgement. During a warm improvisation your intellect is of no use at all. Just the opposite: it can block the flow and make the river dry out. Only later, while elaborating, refining, and putting the physical score in relation to the text, the music, or the other actors in the context of a performance, can your own - and the director’s - head be useful, very useful indeed.



Come and the Day Will Be Ours, Photo: Tony D’Urso

TIGHT WOVEN CANVAS

During the first meeting with The Bridge of Winds in 1989, we dedicated the hours in the morning to physical and vocal training, and the afternoon to the creation of scenes that were put together to form a small performance. Not to be too pretentious or fool ourselves, we called it a montage.

I asked each actor to write down stories from their respective countries. One was telling about the massacre at the central station of Bologna, carried out by the neo-fascists in 1980, a Brazilian actor wrote about the carnival in Rio de Janeiro, and a Peruvian - about Villa el Salvador, a huge territory near Lima occupied in 1971 by four thousand poor people, coming down from the mountains, without any place to live.

To engage all the actors, we worked with part of the group as a chorus. Each scene had a principal story, performed by one or several actors, surrounded by the others, who commented or repeated the text rhythmically, or by singing. Some elements of the training were introduced to bind the scenes together. We had been working for hours and hours on the Wind Dance, to the rhythm played on stones gathered at the North Sea, and sticks picked up in a small wood not far from Odin Teatret. We introduced a few more props, like red pieces of fabric, which were transformed from being bundles that contained the stones, to scarfs covering the faces of the “terrorists”, or to happy waving flags in the Brazilian carnival. The actors sewed their own costumes in all white, adding colourful ribbons and bright pieces of cloth.



Montage. Photo: The Bridge of Winds

I experienced how the flow would grow naturally while weaving the different elements together. And I always kept in mind what Jerzy Grotowski had once told me, after seeing a dance performance of my previous group, Farfa: “You have to weave the threads together, like tight woven canvas”. All the many details were important, but not significant in themselves, if they remained loosely floating actions, like single exercises in the training. They became relevant and fascinating only once connected to one another, following both, the logic of the texts, and the dynamic logic, with its changing rhythm, intensity, alternation, and contradictions.

The “sound-track” of the montage became the emotional thread in the canvas. The rhythmic beating of stones and sticks, the actors’ hoarse, high-pitched, soft, or funny voices when saying a text. And the songs! Some of them had, and still have, the ability to touch me right in my stomach, beyond anything I can explain in words.

Every time The Bridge of Winds meet, a new montage is made, or an old one is elaborated, according to the time of the year, for example. In the summer of 2000, in Ryde, where I live and have a working space, we made a montage called *Sankt Hans Spil* (Midsummer Games) with texts about the feast of Midsummer. We invited the neighbours and members of Odin Teatret to see the result, performed on the lawn in front of the house. Just before Christmas, in Brazil, the same structure was changed by inserting new songs and texts, which transformed it into a Nativity scene, with (real) nuns as spectators.

RAW AND REFINED

It was an immense inspiration and help, when the professional Baroque flute player, Nikolaj de Fine Licht, joined the group in 1997. Not only did we now have real live music, both during training and montages, but under his guidance the songs developed a new lightness and we were enabled to work with polyphony, for example in *Tors Hammer* (Thor’s Hammer), based on an old Danish chain dance, introduced by Tippe

Molsted. Tippe was leading the chain of actors, who wore black dresses and suits adorned with colourful details. The ballad was interrupted several times, to give place to scenes and new songs for three voices, composed by Nikolaj. Soon after, he also became the master of the concert *Voices in the Wind* involving both, the original Winds and - when they arrived in 1999 - also The New Winds. With the latter, the musical aspect increased significantly with flute player Annemarie Waagepetersen and, in 2004, violin player Elena Floris who, when Nikolaj left the group, became our indispensable and severe musical maestra.

The Wind-children: Emilie, Frida, and Giada have been accompanied by songs and dances from the time they were still in their mother's belly. They grew up first watching and then participating in *Midsummer Games*, and later, in the entire concert. I remember a precarious moment in the historic centre Pelourinho, in Salvador Brazil: we were about to play the concert on a huge outdoor stage, surrounded by flashing lights, under a five meter high Nativity with Baby Jesus, Virgin Mary, Joseph, the three Magi, sheep, a cave, and an oversized star, when we realised that we had no one to give the notes for the polyphonic songs. Nikolaj was not present and I had to ask the actors: "is *anyone* able to give these notes without creating a mess?" There was a deep silence, after which nine year old Emilie stepped forward: "I think I can!", she said and then, with her voice clear as a bell, she gave each group of singers the right note.

I loved the raw musicality and wildness we had developed during the first years. I didn't want to lose that quality. However, it turned out that there was nothing to worry about. Today, the concert and the montages are more refined and elaborated, but they still contain the glow, the power, the community spirit, and the embodied joy that have been the core of our meetings from the very beginning.

SEEING THE LIGHT – OR NOT SEEING IT

Twelve performances (some of them repeated in several versions, including the concert) have been created and performed in - mostly – Denmark, but also in Italy, Poland, Brazil, Colombia, and Belgium. New montages have seen the light of day. One of them, *Ancestors*, with the young actors of The New Winds in 2008, told the unbelievable stories about the roots of their European families. I almost fell off my chair while hearing them:

Jori Snell's great-grandfather owned a coffee plantation on Java, while Signe Gravlund Thomsen's family descended from the Huguenots in France. Iza Vuorio's family "is very proud of their noble roots, which however, reach all the way back to one of the greatest traitors in Polish history. „I am the great-great-grandchild of Beethoven,” says Annemarie Waagepetersen, ”and my mother's family goes back to a wine merchant of the Danish court, who was so fond of music, that he named three of his sons Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven – as their first names.” And Mika Juusela: “My father comes from a region in Finland whose folks are extremely slow and silent. My grandfather advised him to find a wife among the most talkative people: those who live in Savo, because he was afraid that otherwise his grandchildren would be mute”.

There were more and longer amazing texts. No one could ever have *invented* anything like that. All the actors made a rough staging of their own story. The scenes were elaborated, props were added, new songs were learned, and costumes were sewn.

A Polish director and light designer, Leszek Mądzik, saw a presentation of *Ancestors* at Odin Teatret. He was struck by its simple structure, the images, and the actors' presence, and proposed a collaboration. Leszek specializes in hidden light sources, which he has developed using very simple light bulbs, insignificant flashlights or torches, things you can buy in a supermarket or a toy store. I had seen one of his performances years before and experienced how, with these extremely poor

tools, he was able to create perspective and illusions, which many spectators thought was the result of high-tech equipment. To be introduced to his world of lighting was magic.

We had been working on a simple light setting for *Ancestors*, and his ideas were new to us. We didn't start from scratch, of course. The performance was already there, but Leszek changed the lighting by covering the few lamps we used in black fabric or boxes of wood. The source became invisible and illuminated only certain spots on the stage, so the actors had to jump from spot to spot, to catch the light, something that made them quite annoyed. Unlike the actors, I was enthusiastic and caught by the many possibilities the work had revealed.



Ancestors. Photo Francesco Galli.

Harvest Cantata, Easter Play, Midsummer Games, Christmas Nativity. We invented a montage for each time of the year, using leaves, feathers, eggs, straw, and big flower-stands. The actors lighted dangerous bonfires and walked on sawdust. The present everywhere assistant, Kasia Kazimierczuk, cut fresh herbs from the garden and put them fragrantly under the spectators' benches. We have made plays about the actors' ancestors and staged episodes from their respective countries. The montages

have been countless. Next year, we will repeat UR-NAT (The Primeval Night), a big outdoor event moving through landscapes and towns, produced in collaboration with Teatret OM, and with the help of Rita Superbi and her fifteen Japanese drums.

HOME WITH A WORKING SPACE

It's late November and I'm sitting, writing at a table in Ryde: my home with a working space. Sometimes I look up at the grey, wet sky, the grass that should have been cut months ago, and the birds eating of the feed board outside the window. The muted shades of almost winter weigh me down. But in December, I remind myself, together with set-designer Antonella Diana, we will enter a darkened theatre space, to work on the lights and fervent colours for our next play with a name that seems to fit the group perfectly: FREAKS

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Freaks 2018. Photo: Francesco Galli