

Lene Therese Teigen

DRIVING FORCE

responsibility, thoughtfulness, necessity

THOUGHTFULNESS

When, earlier this year, I was interviewed on camera in connection with the documentary film about *Time Without Books* and the people behind it, I was to try to explain what I thought about the performance I had watched come to life and which was to receive its premiere that day at Teatro Solis in Montevideo, Uruguay's capital city. I was to say something about the Uruguayan performance, directed by Cecilia Caballero, the person who has had the greatest importance for the genesis of the text. What I said needed to be short and precise; otherwise it would get cut. It was then I came upon the very word. It is a performance that *cares* for those watching and for those performing, I said. A theatrical situation which takes responsibility for everyone in the space, and which wishes them well. It was a strange expression to land upon but at the same time I knew it was absolutely right. Back in Norway, I wanted to put the stage text and the kind of performance I wanted to create into words. So I tried out the term 'care dramaturgy'. This was a little suffocating. As if the theatre space had been reduced to a nursing home. As if the art had been suddenly transformed into therapy. My dictionary suggests that care means exercising thoughtfulness towards others. In many ways, thoughtfulness is a word that is created for the theatre arts, where we are all living individuals in a here-and-now situation that we relate to together. Our art must take care of this situation, and what we communicate should be carefully thought through, should be informed by thoughtfulness.

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

How was it I fetched up in Uruguay? What were the coincidences that led me there? Was it really the place that it was all about? Or was it more to do with Cecilia?

One thing is that we both belong to the so-called theatre family, which is as much as to say that we who work with theatre are in a kind of community that spans both time and place. It is to do with insight into craftsmanship and having competence in relation to the actual

theatre situation. Some people call it liking the smell of sawdust, with its associations to nomadic circus life: It is seeking out an audience and performing as artists in return for payment. To put it simply: Theatre isn't theatre without somebody watching. There are quite obviously a few guild secrets in the theatre family concerning where how and why we work as theatre artists.

Meeting Cecilia confirmed this anew but there was also a further, different feeling of kinship. Cecilia's exile background was from Norway and I met her with my own cultural baggage, shaped, among other things, by a freelance existence with many experiences of international cultural exchange. This was the space in between in which we met: The space between Uruguay and Norway, between national and global, between public and private, between art and politics, between emotion and intellect, between belonging and not belonging. The vulnerable position of being freelance artists is also certain to have an effect on our understanding ourselves. We find ourselves in an in-between space in society, without the security that attaches to an ordinary working life. It is also a privileged position because it affords us the opportunity to view things from the outside, from where we are – in the space in between.

It is as if we meet on a kind of drifting ice floe, or is it an oil mirror, an island of plastic or a cloud? Or something else that is both solid and fluid, shaped and changing. It is here we meet, here we can communicate. We both have the necessary social competence. She has her two identities – Norwegian and Uruguayan – which perhaps form one primary aspect in their very doubleness. And me? I'm arch-Norwegian and un-Norwegian at the same time, like so many others who have had the opportunity to travel widely, work within several cultures and meet people in different life situations. From this starting point, where we move shakily in our shifting, changeable in-between position, we wish to create theatre art that is both existential and political.

For me, this has been a very special journey. While on the one hand I have made a mental journey into this 'space in between', I have at the same time made a concrete journey to Uruguay. Cecilia produced my theatre text *Square*, originally written in English in 2015. She wanted to produce a Norwegian female dramatist and found me. 'Can I read the pieces you've written?' She reads and chooses *Square*, a theatre text which is difficult of access and really needs reading many times over, perhaps even playing twice in succession. She is going to translate the text into Spanish so we talk on Skype, to find out what's what, and it's so

easy to talk together, such an unproblematic communication. This is how we get to know each other. We're concentrated and don't start by getting into long, personal stories; neither of us have time for that. It's all to do with what we working on. And now it's *Square*. So I travel to Uruguay to watch the premiere.

PUNTA CARRETAS SHOPPING

I'm collected at the airport to be driven to my hotel in the Punta Carretas district. On the way in from the airport, we chat away like old friends. I have never been in South America before, it's lovely weather, we're driving through a table landscape towards the centre of town and there we are chatting in Norwegian, both of us in an identical Oslo dialect, about children and divorces and Korsvoll school. She used to live where I live now. It's a small world. Just before we pull up in front of the hotel, she points out a large building and says: 'That's the shopping centre, where they've got everything. Just go there if there's anything you need. Incidentally, that's where my dad sat inside for three years, when it used to be a prison.'

Punta Carretas Shopping. Punta Carretas jail. A large red McDonald's sign shines towards us. I visit the place later – the familiar shopping-centre atmosphere with sleek chain stores over several floors full of clothes, toys, underwear, shoes, sports gear, cafés, food, interiors, watches, cell phones, jewellery and books – but there's no information about the fact it was actually a prison not so long ago. The cells have become shops, and in the open areas where there are now palms and benches, even a little carousel, there were prison guards on duty. I can hear the echoes of steps, the rattling of keys, calls and whispers, laughter and tears. Almost three years later, when we meet forty teenagers who have just seen a performance of *Time without Books* at Teatro Solis, I realise what I was almost unable to understand when I wrote the piece: Only two raise their hands when we ask how many of them knew the shopping centre had previously been a prison. Two of forty.

Anyway, the first time I came to Uruguay, it was to see *Square* under Cecilia's direction. It was so good, her production based on the horrific piece about incest that I barely know how I managed to write. During the last few days before the premiere, I attend rehearsals. We talk about the various qualities of the actors, about the film they have made about the

sisters it concerns, and about the last few choices that need to be made. I love the fact that she's brought out the grotesque aspect in the piece so that it almost becomes tragicomic. The concept is clear. She has done her analyses and taken her choices: The characters are schizophrenic and the staging claustrophobic. The audiences are speechless. Of course we decide to work more together. Cecilia wants to direct something else that I have written and I want to write something new for her, inspired by what she has done with *Square*. It is to be a theatre text which others would also be able to direct, including myself. In the same style as *Square*. Throughout my stay, I've got little droplets of stories about what the country and the people experience of the consequences following the dictatorship, which began in 1973 and lasted until 1985. No national judicial process has been instigated after the fall of the dictatorship and many people still don't quite know how they are supposed to talk about what happened. I am led to understand that children have not learnt anything about it at school. And then there are the experiences of Cecilia and others who have lived in exile and now returned. We now agree that this is what I shall write about. Perhaps, it occurs to me now, I also want to write something from this position in the space in between. And I realise that *Square*, which I actually wrote in English, a language in which I was fluent when I was seventeen to eighteen, has arisen from my own space in between. The place I end up in when I'm with Cecilia. A strange place to feel at home in.

BETWEEN TEAPOTS AND MINERAL WATER

A year later I arrive at the Vinterhaven restaurant in Hotell Bristol, where I am going to talk with Cecilia's father for the first time about his story: Why he is here in Norway and what happened during the dictatorship in Uruguay. His children live in Uruguay but he and his wife live in Oslo. He tells me his whole life story. We start with his parents, where he lives when he's little, the schools he goes to, that he plays in a band and works at a factory. That he falls in love. I hear about the left-wing urban guerrilla group, Tupamaros, of which he was a member, and about how he gets caught. When he is about to explain how he was bound and hung during torture, he can't help but get to his feet, amid all the Bristol café tables, between the sandwiches and the Napoleon cakes, the teapots and the glasses of mineral water. Then he plumps back down in his chair: 'No, now we must talk about something fun!

So he tells me about how one-year old Cecilia almost gave them away when the military police came and ransacked the house looking for evidence. It's a funny story. We both laugh. I get to hear about a cell full of books, about books being taken from the prisoners and about the intricate methods of communicating their contents to fellow inmates. People wrote down what they could remember in miniature writing on thin little sheets of paper. Papelitos. He tells me how they rolled them together and wrapped them in plastic so they could be hidden in the body's orifices when the guards came and there was a full-on raid and they were stripped naked. They managed to fool the guards, fool the entire prison system! Messages were smuggled out and information passed on. There was a lot to be proud over, not least the strong sense of community. We talk about how difficult it is to speak of and about how difficult it must be to ask about too. 'Now you know more than my children,' Cecilia's father says.

The dictatorship came to an end and, after seven years, the family was able to move home. But for Cecilia at fourteen, Norway had become home and going back was not easy. She soon acclimatised however, and her Norwegian side became part of the double identity she still lives with today. And then, fifteen or sixteen years later, when there was a deep financial crisis in South America, her mother and father brought the two youngest siblings back to Norway. Unable to feel settled in Norway, the brother and sister travelled back to big sister Cecilia in Uruguay. The parents, who had both been educated in Norway and got good jobs and friends, some from the old exile community, remained in Norway. Cecilia's story is not over. There are two countries in her heart and the dictatorship is the reason it has become that way.

A BLANK WHITE SHEET

After having completed a further three in-depth interviews, ploughed through doctoral theses, novels and articles, watched documentaries and feature films and looked at masses of photographs depicting the time before, during and after the dictatorship years in Uruguay, it was high time to start the writing process. Cecilia was waiting in Uruguay and a two-week text development workshop had long been agreed upon. The actors had been booked and the first version of my text was to be the starting point of the work.

Cecilia's mother had not been willing to speak to me. It wasn't difficult to understand. Why rake through difficult memories? Why not think of the future instead? Her reaction gave me a great deal in my work with the text. How could I write about keeping silent? About resistance? I wanted to write a text that encompassed more than one perspective. I also wanted to include several generations. Right from the beginning, moreover, my preconception had been that the text I wrote would not take place specifically in Uruguay. It needed to deal with universal experiences that people in Norway, for example, could also relate to. We had already got a travel grant for Cecilia to come over and join a new workshop with Norwegian actors in Oslo six months later.

And so I write, force the difficult story into the light, try to make it possible to live with: To make it possible for the actors to perform; for the audience to watch and listen to.

Everything I had read and seen, the interview material and my own notes, was remodelled into fictional characters,actable situations, visual sequences, monologues and dialogues, distance and intimacy, sound and colour. I wanted the piece to be yellow for piss, brown for shit and red for blood. And for the base colour to be white, like an unused white sheet to be filled with writing, with evidence of what is happening, with the story of the story.

Dramaturge Elin and I read through and discussed matters, I made a number of changes and sent it to Cecilia, who began the work of translation while I was sitting on the aircraft, already engrossed in a second version.

QUE Lindo!

The evening before the workshop begins, we write and translate far into the night. I am staying in a small flat on the corner of two streets – Acevedo Diaz and Ana Monterroso de Lavalleja – on the outskirts of the Cordón district. We sit on either side of the table, talking and working, discussing the actors' approach to the work, Cecilia's new theatre venue and how her family reacts to her wanting to do this project. We talk about creating what one wants the theatre to be through the writing, that there must be a necessity, not just in terms of the subject matter but also in the textual quality. I know that Cecilia understands where I want to go, I know that she wants a challenging text, a text that does not give her all the answers immediately. She wants a text that asks her to work with it, to find the keys that

allow repetition and independent directorial choices. She must find her own reason for staging the text. And so we work on, together and separately. I write, she translates. We drink tea and eat crispbread with brown cheese. Work, work, work. Breathe, laugh. After a short night, we are on the way to La Escena, Cecilia's acting school and theatre venue. Generally speaking, it's full of activity both day and night but right now we're the only ones here. It's January – summer holiday – hence there are no pupils around and no other theatre projects going on. We set up a long table, print out manuscripts for everyone and make maté, a drink reminiscent of herbal tea that everyone in Uruguay is pretty much addicted to. We put out bowls of fruit and biscuits and chocolate, the way I always do for the first day's reading of a new manuscript. The patient actors have to be buttered up a little bit at least.

And then they arrive. First three women bubbling with expectancy and then Ivan, the male actor. He too is excited. There's a good buzz in the air, they talk about each other's performances, about their mutual friends and about work, and then it happens. Cecilia only knows the three women from before, not Ivan. He crosses his arms and starts talking about 'pieces like this' about the dictatorship, and although my Spanish really isn't very good, it's not difficult to understand that he's sceptical. And I'm not even Uruguayan – what could I have to add to the story? I can feel my nerves come creeping up on me: What are they going to say? What is he going to say? He's sure to think something about it and I understand he's not going to keep it back. ? He's speaking with a low, insistent voice and the three female faces turn towards him, patient and interested. They listen and nod, not interrupting his flow of speech. I understand that he is afraid. He is going to be working with a director that he knows is demanding, who will bring to play both physical and psychological motion. It is his resistance that we are experiencing now, the fear of what he has chosen to commit himself to. Cecilia has told me that he was imprisoned in a young offenders' jail for a whole year when he was fifteen-sixteen during the dictatorship. For he's the eldest of us too and the only one with direct experience from the dictatorship, apart from Cecilia, who was imprisoned with her family when she was one year old. She and her mother were released after twenty-four hours but her father remained in prison for five long years while Cecilia and her mother waited and waited and waited.

They start reading. I listen: My words in Spanish. Further into the text, still uncertain as to what they think and whether or not it strikes a chord with them, I begin wondering if they

will want to enter into this work. We approach half way through the piece and Pedro's monologue. Ivan reads: *Yes, they raped me... they wrapped a rope around my testicles... Yes, I got a picana electrica in my butt too... Yes, it was my body...* He reads well, investigating what's there, not too emotional ... *And afterwards I washed it with soap, bathed it in the sea, let it dry in the wind, climbed the highest mountains, looked out over the land and let the world embrace me again.* He lowers his manuscript and looks up, looks at me: Que lindo. So beautiful.

THE TEXT LIVES

The youngest actor appears with books and films. She does research, just as I have done. For she knows almost nothing about the dictatorship; she hasn't learnt anything about it at school or heard about it from her family. Nor has it been a subject for discussion among friends. She is clever and curious and throws herself into the work. Maria José, who was born during the dictatorship, does not have a lot of stories to contribute either. In her family, an uncomfortable silence is chosen rather than opening up wounds that have not healed. Like in many other families, some have supported Tupamaros while others have been involved on the opposite side. The oldest of the female actors lived beside a prison. Her parents were terrified lest they be involved and forbade her to play with children in the neighbourhood. She also remembers that a neighbour lad who was active was killed, but it was only after the fall of the dictatorship that she really understood what had happened, when, as a fresh young actress, she joined Ivan's political theatre group. That's thirty years ago now. This project is perfect for picking up the threads between them.

Cecilia works physically with the actors and asks them to write down their own stories which they shall then tell each other afterwards. They improvise family situations and interrogate each other in such a way that my spine shivers. And they write sheet after sheet of notes from the scenes they are not involved in and hang them up on the walls around them – to remember what happens, for these are stories too. I sit on the side-line making my own notes: Tidying and tightening. "Notice how often I write that the lines shall be addressed straight to the audience," I say to Cecilia, 'Whatever kind of scene we create, the actors can actually address the audience.' We are creating fictions but at the same time there is never

any doubt that we are in the same space as the people watching. This is where theatre arts distinguish themselves from all other arts. This is why we must make use of it, to create a shared space. The actors are asked to talk to our fictive audience, which does not yet exist. Cecilia and I sit on opposite sides of a conceived circular playing space with the audience sitting all the way around. 'Look at me,' says Cecilia, 'Talk to me!' They look at her, turn and look at me, delivering the lines to each other and to us at the same time. And the text lives.

UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCES

I complete the text and receive positive feedback in the months that pass before it's time at last for the next phase of our project development. In early September, Cecilia turns up in Oslo. The plan is a new workshop with Norwegian theatre people. But first we meet up with a great many Norwegian Uruguayans at an open event at the Eldorado bookstore and tell them about our project. Cecilia's parents are also there, clearly proud of their daughter, but they are unsure about what shall actually come of it, unsure as to whether it's right that we have taken responsibility for the story. But what can they do? They have hardly seen any of the pieces that Cecilia has directed and know little about theatre besides, just like my own parents. We speak and explain, for the others of exile background too, and we know what we are talking about. We are thorough and emphasise what is important to us: What do we do with our memories today? Is it not important to talk about what happened so that it does not happen again? Should one keep quiet or speak out? Should we not talk about it? Our audience is deeply engaged; this is important. 'If only we in Norway could get to see this piece too. It's so relevant now for all those who are displaced around the world, for all those who cannot remain where they were born.

For the workshop in Oslo, we've brought in people responsible for scenography, lighting and music as well as four actors. Now we want to investigate the scenic potential and, of course, if the text can be realised wholly independently of Uruguay. I lead the work; Cecilia undertakes the warm-up with the actors and shares in the work of direction. And our collaboration works equally well in Norwegian. We drift around on our ice floes or clouds or whatever they are – in between everyone – with no problems. Again, there's this special feeling of belonging to the same clan and there's no resistance or scepticism in meeting with

Cecilia: She is just as much at home in the theatre as all our Norwegian participants. There's the theatre family all over: generous and relaxed. And so we meet the Norwegian context, not least through the youngest actor, Sulekha, who is originally from Somalia but grew up in Ethiopia until she fled with her mother and siblings to North Norway. The material really generates associations with all kinds of stories about flight and exile and, not least, about talking about the difficult things that have happened. What is best for a child? To know what is actually going on or for the adults to pretend that nothing is happening, hoping that their children are living in a parallel world and do not understand all the difficulties? That their children do not understand the challenges of coming to somewhere new and putting down roots or hoping one day to return home? And how do you talk about these difficulties and at the same time allow the children to understand that the adults are looking after them? We have only five days, however, so we have to be strict directors and interrupt the many interesting discussions that grow out of the situations and memories that arise.

The workshop confirms the hope that the piece can also be played for a Norwegian audience. It's clear it can be played in many other countries too. One year later, I open *Shakespearetidsskriftet* (Norwegian Shakespeare periodical) and read the following in a review of the text: 'The characters struggle with their language in meeting their memories and struggle with their memories in meeting their language. The balance between a language that stutters and one that flows brings tension, flow and variation to the text. (...) Teigen makes an open document of her manuscript, asking questions about how we, the reader or audience member, handle our own memories. She does this by eliciting situations that are universal and recognisable.'*

RESPONSIBILITY

The plan for the workshop in Oslo was to invite Cecilia's father and the others who had provided in-depth interviews to a kind of showing of the whole piece, performed with manuscripts in hand and very sketchy direction. In the week we were working together, we also arranged a dinner where the Norwegian team got to meet Cecilia's father and a couple of the others I had interviewed during the preparatory work. It was a magical meeting, with laughter and good food, including some heavenly empanadas, which immediately got people

talking. In the end we sat around the table asking detailed and difficult questions to which we received open and honest answers: a privileged situation which re-emphasised the importance of the project both for the theatre gang working with the material and for Cecilia and the other Uruguayans.

In the theatre space, we had used the few days at our disposal to work through the entire piece. We had talked our way from scene to scene, brutally jumping to the next instead of continuing to work with our investigations. Obviously, what the actors were able to provide during the showing was largely informed by chaos, uncertainty and gut feeling. We had been working for four and a half days! Usually it takes six to seven weeks before the audience is given entrance to our workspace. But the showing was very relaxed, with a lot of faith in the room. It was thus exactly what I wanted: Our most important audience met the text as theatre. It was through the actors' speaking to the audience via their relations with the others on stage and a few meaningful actions that they got to understand my way of communicating this material.

Cecilia's mother did not come. Her father was very nervous. The piece starts with one of the actors trying to say something about a small plastic-wrapped roll of paper but the words do not come and she gives up. Instead she goes and sits with the other people watching, where she feels at home. 'From the moment I saw the plastic roll, I cried,' Cecilia's father told me afterwards. He cried throughout the entire showing. Over what he had relived, over life which is so short and over Cecilia who stood there talking in Norwegian to the Norwegian theatre people who were also there: She whom he perhaps identified on the stage as the little girl with a teddy bear on her way to the prison to visit him. Afterwards, he was happy. The point in giving them the showing was to take responsibility for their process. They had told me their life histories; they had shared everything with me, a person they had barely met before. How is it possible to take care of this vulnerability in a proper way? To allow them to come into the theatre space before all others was important. I didn't want them to sit alone with a text, a white sheet with black print. That would be too black-and-white. Bodies and rhythms and glances make it something quite different, an organism that lives and breathes and changes the way to look at things. Even a showing after so few days' work was better than sitting alone with the text. It would be easier to understand what we wanted to achieve, we thought, Cecilia and I. After the showing, it was possible for us to continue our preparations towards performance. We now knew that the manuscript was in

place and that it was easy to find ways into different types of concepts. We had also invited a number of other theatre people and the atmosphere after the showing was really positive. Everything was now ready to make the piece available for an audience.

THOUGHTFULNESS

So I'm back in Montevideo, it's May 2018, and the world premiere of *Time Without Books* is about to take place at the honourable Teatro Solis in the centre of the city. Cecilia has landed a co-production contract so the project is receiving a good deal of attention. In the meantime, there's a Norwegian Uruguayan film crew following the birth of the production and Cecilia's family. It's about their story and what kind of significance the project has to them. They are interviewed, I am interviewed, Cecilia is interviewed. Then her father travels home without seeing anything more but an early rehearsal. He has read the manuscript in Spanish, however. Her mother has neither seen nor read the piece.

The performance I see takes to heart the contact with the audience that I have written into the text. Cecilia allows the actors to meet the audience members when they arrive; they show them to their seats and tell them pleasant little memories from their childhood. Things that get us to smile, things that make us recognise ourselves in them. Some of the seats are empty; these are places where the actors will sit at times during the performance, becoming one of them, a spectator, an equal. For sometimes we need to be observers and not everyone can or wants to stand in the centre. Cecilia's actors care for the audience, Cecilia cares for the actors and I think the text cares for Cecilia. Some cry, some look down, not bearing to see things they recognise or situations that they suddenly realise that their sister, neighbour or best friend went through. There is no great drama or enormous facts, just intimacy and a kind of sad acknowledgment that we stand in this dilemma together: What shall we talk about and what shall we keep to ourselves? Through a process which has taken its time, first communicating her experience of time to me, then working with actors, coming to Norway and working with Norwegian actors before returning to the rehearsal period in Uruguay, Cecilia has acquired a distance to the material. At the same time, it has done something fundamental to her. 'This project has made me realise who I am today, who we are every day. It is both brave and innocent and challenges us in the strongest way as a

nation. When we are unable to reflect upon this as a society, it is in the theatre that the door to dialogue opens.

‘And I, who have gone through this as an outsider, suddenly find myself close to the dilemmas, to the issues which open up an unfathomable depth of reflection and insight. I have met many people who have trusted me and believed in me. In some way or another, it happens on the human plane, even if I feel that the feelings should be allowed to lie safely in the structure of the text, and I have to move backwards and look at everything from a distance. I learned this, I communicated it, and it changed me.’

DRIVING FORCE

A great many coincidences led to my becoming the author of this text for the stage. The material came to me; I didn't actually seek it out. It wasn't based on my investigating South America's recent history. That said, it is certain that my international experiences have played a role in my being able to enter into the subject and, at the same time, my personal history and, not least, political involvement have been important. As a feminist, it was important to me, as it was to Cecilia, to shed light on women's experiences. Too little has been heard of the mother figure that just waits and waits, those who get the wheels to go round and who nevertheless give birth to children and take care of all the basic needs we have. It was important to me that the daughter arrives at the realisation that for her, her mother is the greatest hero.

My driving force is to tell stories that can perhaps change someone's relationship to life and death, fellow human beings and their own identity. I have written *Time Without Books* because the story was evident to me there and then; it was the personal story of a director who liked my way of writing and wanted a new stage text to work with. I discovered a country and its history, a whole continent actually, and I met people who trusted me and opened themselves to me. Because all these elements were interwoven, it was compellingly necessary to write precisely this piece. I would never have arrived at this story if someone had given me the task of writing a theatre piece about immigrants or refugees or the experiences of exiles.

When many people suddenly take to flight on account of unrest in the world and regimes that ignore human rights, freedom of expression and equality, we must realise the importance of finding out the kinds of exchanges we are to create about these experiences. And the exchanges must occur across generations. It is possible I could have written a doctoral thesis or made a documentary on the basis of everything I have discovered, but by creating a text for the stage I also facilitate there being made a concrete space for both reflection and care, a space where something happens to the observer in connection with other people. It is a space that can perhaps contribute to creating more people who care for each other.

Thank you Cecilia, for allowing me to push you through both open and closed doors.