

NOTES FROM AN ODIN ACTRESS STONES OF WATER

*The stones that mark
my path are stones of
water; in them a process
brought to conclusion
merges with the next one
that has already started.'*

JULIA VARLEY



Notes from an Odin Actress

As an actress I sit, speak, run, sweat and, simultaneously, I represent someone who sits, speaks, runs and sweats. As an actress, I am both myself and the character I am playing. I exist in the concreteness of the performance and, at the same time, I need to be alive in the minds and senses of the spectators. How can I speak of this double reality?

Julia Varley

This is a book about the experience of being an actress from a professional and female perspective. Julia Varley has been a member of Odin Teatret for over thirty years, and *Notes from an Odin Actress* is a personal account of her work with Eugenio Barba and this world-renowned theatre company.

This is a unique window into the in-depth exercises and day-to-day processes of an Odin member. It is a journal to enlighten anyone interested in the performances, the discoveries and the hard physical work that accompany a life in theatre.

Julia Varley joined Odin Teatret in 1976. She is an active actor, director, teacher and writer. She is closely involved with ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) and the Magdalena Project, a network of women in contemporary theatre. She is also artistic director of the Transit Festival in Holstebro and editor of *The Open Page*, a journal devoted to women's work in theatre. Her articles and essays have been published in journals such as *Mime Journal*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Teatro e Storia*, *Conjunto*, *Lapis* and *Máscara*.

Notes from an Odin Actress Stones of Water

Julia Varley

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**To the editors of *The Open Page*:
Geddy, Gilly, Jill, Luciana, Maggie, Maria and Rina**

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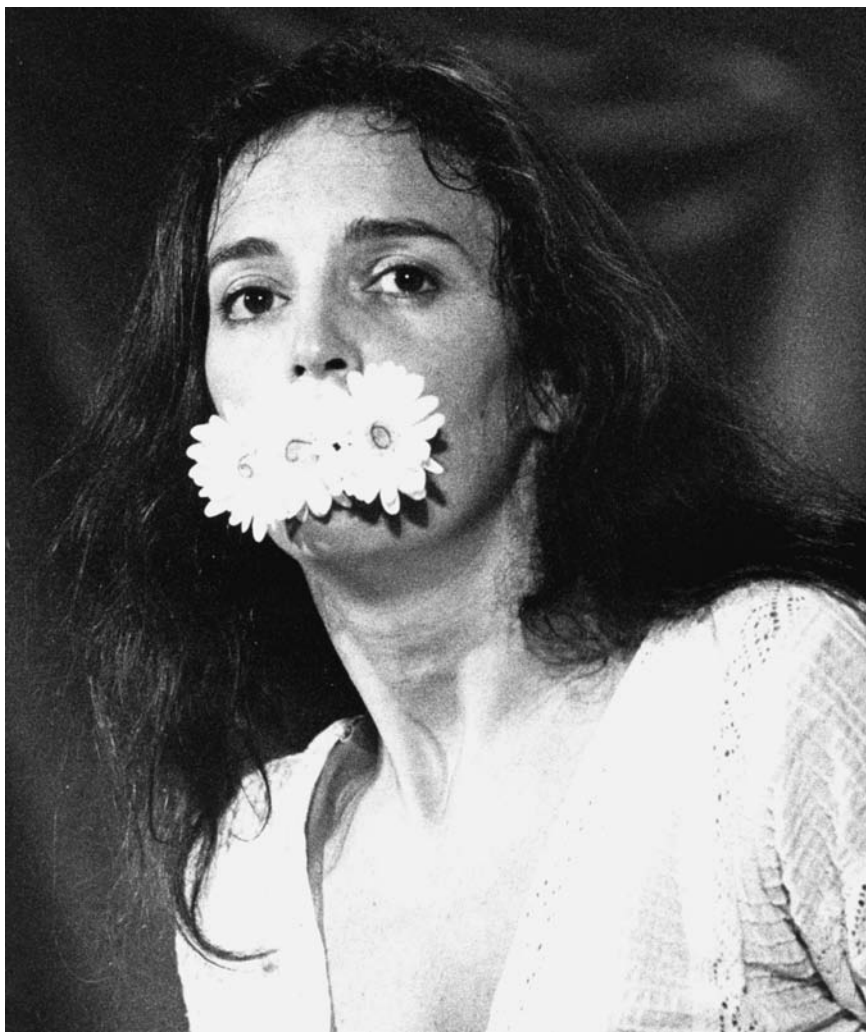
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Foreword

Actress or actor? She, he or s/he? I have had to choose from the start. Wanting to subvert the current habit of including the feminine in a universal masculine word, and in order to explicitly define myself as a woman, I decided to use actress, she and her, even when speaking of the craft in general. I would like to contribute to creating new rules and customs of vocabulary, following a logic of my own. I asked a friend of mine, Clara Bianchi, for advice. She is an Italian primary school teacher, a profession that is 98 per cent female, but which is still generally referred to in the masculine gender in her country. Clara suggested I use the term actress, giving to the word a manifest value by using it to denote both the women and the men who work in this profession. Perhaps male readers will feel excluded, as I have so often felt when men of theatre and letters, actors and directors are being spoken of. In making this choice I wish only to contribute to a more open recognition of the importance of women in theatre history.

Memories, sensations, aspirations, visions, necessities and technical knowledge mix in me, in my body: they allow me to create actions for the stage. There is no need to know whether what inspires me is true, a wish or a flight of fancy. My actions – the performances – are what permit me to meet others. The most important experiences of my thirty years at Odin Teatret remain veiled, while history is composed of accounts of exercises, productions, journeys, books and meetings. The process is continuous and fluid: even the deepest mutations do not appear as clear and solid turning points, but as the rapids and cataracts of a twisting river. The stones that mark my path are stones of water; in them a process brought to conclusion merges with the next one that has already started.



The Castle of Holstebro
Julia Varley

Photo: Jan Rüz

Preface

I am so pleased that this book – written by an English woman who has spent most of her life, when not travelling, in Italy and Denmark – already published in French, Italian and Spanish, is now available to English-speaking audiences. Julia Varley is an actress, director, teacher and writer. She is all of these things and yet none of them in any traditional sense. A long-term member of a theatre company whose original actors, mythically, were all rejected by theatre schools and conservatoires, Julia has also made a significant intervention into the professional lives of women working in the experimental and marginalised theatres of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. She is a pioneering founder member of the Magdalena Project, an international network of women in contemporary theatre that began its practical life as a series of questions and working propositions in Wales in the mid-1980s. Julia has performed and taught all over the world for over thirty years, through workshops, work demonstrations and symposia. *Notes from an Odin Actress* is a book about all and none of these things: it is an autobiography, a lively patchwork documentation, a pedagogical text and a testimony. Moreover, it is a book that suggests a new model for writing about the intersections of everyday life and professional practice. I would like to propose that every student of theatre interested in going beyond the surface realities of a commercial industry, interested in the poetics of performance making, should read it.

I have seen many of Julia's performances over the years but I first knew of her through her work with the Magdalena Project. A group of us who had just finished university drove to Cardiff in Wales, to attend the closing performance of the first Magdalena Project festival – we witnessed the product, not the process, of this event. But it was the impulse and the process that underpinned the event that became foundational to my meetings with Julia over the years. Although from different generations and from very different professional perspectives, we share a project around the desire to find a way of articulating, investigating and documenting women's creative work in theatre. I am a cultural historian and Julia has often criticised me for only writing about dead women, while I always remind her to look to history for examples, to find resonances with the questions she poses about women's

professional theatre practice in the present. She, on the other hand, has always tried to get me to engage with the present and the extraordinary range of women's theatre and performance work that the Magdalena network has hosted and nurtured over the years. This book is a way of bringing together these two timeframes and perspectives – as Julia says, an actress's work is very much in the present, but in order for it to leave traces and make connections from the present back to the past and into the future, she has had to choose the written form. She has had to use a historical framing for her professional engagement with theatre to, as she says, 'convert practical experience into concepts that transcend both the current moment and personal motivations'. Here, her work with the journal *The Open Page* is also important. Having created the journal from the Magdalena Project's newsletter, the editorial team stuck with the remit of trying to encourage and accommodate many different theatre women's voices in their attempts to articulate their own experiences and practices as actresses, directors, singers and so on.

For the dozen or so years we worked on the journal together with Geddy Aniksdal and Gilly Adams, we all argued about translation, about ownership of language, about how much intervention we could make as editors into other people's attempts to find expression through language. Julia always stuck to her principles and, as you can intimate from *Notes from an Odin Actress*, worked all the time – writing letters, translating articles, sending emails, bartering work demonstrations and performances in lieu of payment for our accommodation, placating administrators, flattering writers while changing what they had written, editing, proofing – and then, as soon as one issue went to press, starting work on the next. I have an arsenal of jokes about our collective images of Julia typing at five in the morning; translating from one language to another while speaking to someone in yet another language on the phone; cooking for ten people and running a meeting on scheduling a Transit Festival for one hundred women from twenty different countries; writing in between rehearsals, performances and meetings at Odin Teatret. Her life is both a hybrid form and a hive of activity. This energy and vitality breathes life into the writing of *Notes from an Odin Actress*. Julia has produced a vibrant book that crosses forms and purposes – an autobiography, a testimonial history and a book that provides a delicately woven, and yet deeply rigorous, exploration of the process of working as an actress and theatre maker. I know that, for Julia, the intent in writing was largely related to the need to find a way of articulating fine-tuned details about the processes of theatre making with which her professional life has been engaged. I know that these articulations speak, in some ways, to practitioners more than they do to academics. But the beauty of this book is that Julia has a remarkably scholarly way of finding a language to explore practice and this will be appreciated by all readers whether practitioners, scholars or students.

From the perspective of cultural history it is important to understand the significance of her starting place as an actress. Julia was a ski-racer and student, but she found a means of political activism through theatre. Part of the

generation of European political agitators who prevailed in the countercultural milieu of the 1970s, Julia came to Odin and to the profession of actress bypassing the traditional routes that most actresses of her generation would have taken. Far more in tune with the apprenticeships actresses from previous generations have followed, Julia trained and performed simultaneously, working in the company as student, assistant and then performer. She documents the work of her teachers and mentors, and the dynamics of working in a company of performers who have trained and performed together for many, many years. Their techniques have developed through the performances they have made and have interfaced with those of many other performers and theatre makers globally. As such, this book is a welcome demystification of practice – training, improvisation, vocal technique, composition – and at the same time places the work of one of the most innovative and challenging European theatre companies of the last hundred years, in terms of those whose presence and creative energy the company represents. The book interweaves the personal – Julia’s travels and her research, her frustrations with her vocal training – and the professional – her meetings with other companies and practitioners, such as Flora Lauten in Cuba or Patricia Ariza in Colombia whose work she has promoted and championed. It is a departure from many ‘autobiographical’ accounts by actresses who, often under commercial pressure or because perhaps they think no one is actually interested in the ‘work’ aspect of their careers, only talk of their star roles or the celebrities with whom their paths as actresses have crossed. Having said this, anyone interested in the work of Odin Teatret or of any of the ‘Third Theatres’ of the mid to late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, will find a wealth of detail and insight in this book. Similarly, Julia’s willingness to expose her own frailties and uncertainties as a performer and teacher, her research and practical processes in creating characters she has performed – and continues to perform – such as Mr Peanut or Doña Musica, her attitudes towards the complexities of articulating practice, all contribute to making this an extraordinarily inspiring book. She has worked in the gaps and fissures of theatre making, in places where practitioners from the mainstream may look for ideas, inspiration and an ethical stance, but rarely venture professionally. Julia has been central to the ‘social theatre’ work Odin Teatret have carried out, alongside making performances that challenge and push at the boundaries of aesthetic and cultural practices. Here we see echoes and manifestations of the political imperative in her early theatre work in the 1970s, feeding her theatre projects in and with communities. Julia works a lot with those who have no funding or no theatre building of their own, but who, for example, take theatre to villages and towns in countries ravaged by decades of war. It is this same political drive that has been so important in her work with the Magdalena Project and her unique Transit Festivals hosted by Odin Teatret in Denmark. Here she is tough but patient, tightly organised but fully embracing of spontaneity and the potential chaos that can ensue when an international group of women practitioners meet to exchange working practices. This is not the

political drive of an actress like Judith Malina or Franca Rame from the generation that precedes Julia's; it is more subtle perhaps, less defined by political affiliations and more open to the dynamics of a world in which the certainties of black and white are less assured than the grey that lies somewhere between and in the margins. Many great artists work on such borderlines, and many who will be inspired by this book will find their assumptions about Odin Teatret and more particularly about the process of performing and performance making challenged in some way.

I like very much what Julia says about theatre in the closing pages of *Notes from an Odin Actress*: 'Theatre taught me to recognise paradox as the norm and to think differently, in a way often considered conservative by the revolutionary and revolutionary by the conservative.' For me, the ambiguity of paradox is part and parcel also of the ways in which we construct histories, and part of Julia Varley's intention in writing this book was to find a way of giving her work and the work of other women in theatre a visible presence – what I would call its own history. Like all good histories, it weaves together experience, theory, conjecture, analysis and observation. This book works on you as a reader; it takes you on a journey, not necessarily from not-knowing to knowing, but on a journey with a working actress and, more importantly, with an actress at work.

Maggie B. Gale
Manchester 2010

Acknowledgements

I should thank many people for having shown me the way, even if they were not always aware of doing so: political leaders and colleagues, actresses and critics, sports teachers and intellectuals, musicians and relatives. My apprenticeship took place within an environment of theatre groups, organisers and friends, and also historians and artists linked to ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology). A particular thank you goes to every member of Odin Teatret and to the women of the Magdalena Project.

To Eugenio Barba, Lorenzo Gleijeses and Ana Woolf a special acknowledgement for their comments after a first reading of this book; to Gilly Adams, Jill Greenhalgh and Leo Sykes for help in translating the original Italian version into English; and to my parents for their patience at seeing me always at my computer during my summer holidays.

Introduction

Dancing history

In 1992, in Mexico City, after my work demonstration *The Dead Brother*, a spectator asked me a recurrent question:

As an actress, what do you think about when you are improvising? What happens to your original images when the fixed material of the improvisation undergoes transformation and is elaborated to become part of a performance? How do you work on your 'subscore', on your internal references?

I tried to reply:

When I improvise, I do not think in images or frames as in a film. My senses, my body memory, my mind and my nervous system think, act and react as a whole. Without consciously identifying my points of departure, my actions remember the original information and this continues to be part of them even when the actions are transformed and acquire new meanings for the spectator. I do not use a linear logic. Contradictory motivations co-exist within my actions, they appear and disappear. Everything happens at the same time.

I realised that I was unable to explain my actress's way of thinking, a technique that I have incorporated through years of practice. I was simply giving a confused account of a kind of knowledge that is hard to put into words. So I concluded:

I cannot explain; that is why I am an actress! My actions *are*; they interact with the spectators, and, if they are alive, I do not feel the need, nor am I asked, to comment on them further. To act on stage allows me to present different situations and events simultaneously, to further the conditions for an experience.

I wanted to underline that the choice of being an actress presupposes a preference for actions rather than words. Once again I insisted on the difficulty of analysing my actress's way of 'thinking with the body'.

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My profession allows me to be perceived in the present. However, if I wish to link to the past and leave traces that will endure in the future, and pass on what I consider useful, I also need to find a way to explain through words. The practice of the craft finds its own transmission channels, but theatre history is also a collection of testimonies that convert practical experience into concepts that transcend both the current moment and personal motivations.

Few women have a significant role in the theatre history generally taught in schools and universities. There have been important actresses and female artists, but they have not elaborated theories, and their experiences mostly reach us through biographies, letters and news chronicles. In the century of the great theatre reformers and directors, women remain in the shadows. They are part of the multitude of people whose achievements are veiled and unrecognised.

The theme of the fourth Transit Festival, held at Odin Teatret in 2004, was Theatre – Women – Roots. I dedicated the Festival to Maria Alekseevna Valentej, Vsevolod Meyerhold's granddaughter. Maria devoted her life to redeeming the memory and legacy of her grandfather, even withstanding the Soviet government. I suppose that it is legitimate to question why I decided to dedicate a women's theatre festival to someone who had spent her life rescuing the work of a man. I had the impulse to do this when I heard of her death, after meeting her in Moscow. Everyone will remember Vsevolod Meyerhold, but who will remember Maria, or Masha as she was called?

Being an actress has taught me to believe in the power of vulnerability and to value my difference as a woman, sidestepping issues of equality or superiority. Thus, in terms of theatre history, I prefer to aim at a particular kind of visible presence, which perhaps has yet to be invented. I would like to achieve a paradoxical dream: a history in which anonymous people have a face and a voice. Instead of being concerned only with insisting on an egalitarian recognition of women in theatre history and theory, I would like to turn the usual criteria upside down and emphasise the importance of assisting, bringing up, organising, translating, inspiring, feeling, listening, looking after a family or a company, being on stage and allowing oneself to be guided by intuition. The word 'relationship', so important in theatre, comes to my mind when I remark that women theatre practitioners often find more satisfaction in participating in a common project than on insisting in seeing their names in print. I would like to discover a scholarly authority in their letters, biographies and autobiographies and to give them recognition by name without them having to abandon their generosity.

I would like something to change in the way theatre history is registered, researched, documented and written. I wish to give more presence to women, and to their way of experiencing and thinking, and to include their contributions in the theories and practices of the future. I would like actresses – myself included – to change their awareness of their craft. This would encourage us to go beyond what we know, to overcome the diffidence and insecurity that keeps us at a distance from theoretical abstractions and from disclosing our life

experience. To ensure a visible presence, theatre women must accept the responsibility for writing their own history in words, forms and perspectives that, I imagine, are partly still to be discovered or reformulated.

Can I contribute to a different way of writing theatre history, and if so, how? Can I help outline a *rainbow theory* and trace words that recognise intuitively the implicit, non-evident processes of theatre practice? How can I include the diversity of my personal criterion of perceiving past and present events as a woman? If actions must be translated into a conceptual language, how can I transmit my experience and that of other actresses so they can be useful as practical and theoretical references and tools? How can I put into words the reality of actions, the texture of the motivations that generate them, and the effect they have on each spectator? How can I contribute to giving a correct place in history not only to the ideas and the men who have forged, written and achieved them, but also to actions and the women and men who have executed, perceived and interpreted them?

These questions are the result of a concern. Since working at Odin Teatret and listening to talks given by its director Eugenio Barba, I have often heard the names of Meyerhold, Stanislavski, Brecht, Artaud, Appia, Craig, Copeau, Grotowski . . . and each time I have asked myself why there are no women among those masters. The names of Duncan, Duse, Littlewood, Mnouchkine . . . are rarely mentioned. In 1989 I gave the same questions to some women theatre historians with the intention of publishing their answers in the *Newsletter* of the Magdalena Project, a network of women in contemporary theatre. One of the historians commented that it was difficult for her to generalise about something she only recognised as concrete at a personal level. To describe an actress at work was, for her, still a creative process and she did not know what the result of doing this would be. To find other answers I turned to modern physics and quantum mechanics, disciplines that fascinated me at the time.

The world of matter, as it really is, cannot be communicated verbally. Mathematics and English are both languages, useful tools for conveying information, but they do not work if we try to communicate experiences with them. All a language can do is talk *about* an experience. Words only re-present, with a description which is a symbol. Symbols and experience do not follow the same rules. Our symbolic thought process imposes upon us the categories of either/or. The difference between experience and symbol is the difference between *mythos* and *logos*. *Logos* imitates, but can never replace, experience. *Mythos* alludes to experience and does not try to replace it.

(Freely quoted from *The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra and
The Dancing Wu Li Masters by Gary Zukav)

But what happens when I speak of theatre that is both experience and representation? As an actress I sit, speak, run, sweat and, simultaneously, I

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represent someone who sits, speaks, runs and sweats. As an actress, I am both myself and the character I am playing. I exist in the concreteness of the performance and, at the same time, I need to be alive in the minds and senses of the spectators. How can I speak of this double reality?

Physics told me: you cannot communicate experience, but by telling how quanta (the packets of energy in organic material) are produced and measured, you enable others to have the experience. So, should I speak about *how* I create, elaborate and repeat actions?

When speaking of theatre, I consider the subjectivity of my point of view important. I do not seek objective justifications. Perhaps, precisely because it follows simultaneously two different systems of rules, that of experience and that of representation, theatre allows me to sense the possibility for deep changes. I recognise theatre as a privileged gathering field for women who review their relationship to history. It seems to me that our responsibility as actresses is greater: we are in touch with embodied thinking and with the secrets of actions every day. It is our duty to share our experience, also through words.

As women, we generally choose to prioritise the emotional intensity of our lives, our affections and present occupations. We are less concerned with leaving a historical legacy, as we focus on bringing up our children or engaging with people close to us. As an actress, my intuitive perception of reality, my sense of wholeness and of subjective truth allow me to act without being halted by the logical and linear passages necessary to an analytical thought process. The need for integrity becomes an impediment to speech because the description appears to be simultaneously true and untrue.

What alternatives do I have, if I do not adapt to the usual means of transforming an event into a symbol with a version of reality that is inevitably mutilated, tracing a map that draws and remembers, but that is not the territory? Am I able to use the words to *tell* in a different way? Quantum mechanics uses the 'probability of knowledge' because it is convenient. Can I do the same, accepting the distortions and limitations of narration to say what can become useful subjectively?

While I was directing the performance *Seeds of Memory*, with the Argentinian actress Ana Woolf, I constantly remembered the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. They taught me to challenge the absence of the *desaparecidos* by recreating their presence through detailed everyday memories of how they were when alive, smiling and full of hope for the future. The Mothers warned me that political dissertations did not give these young people their lives back, but that the description of their everyday doings kept them alive in our memories. I remember this when I am preparing the opening speech for a festival or a lecture. Formal headings do not help me speak, but daily practice and learning from mistakes does. My compass is to listen to others and concentrate on what is stimulating in the situation and avoids sterile antagonisms.

Sometimes, when I describe a creative process, I am accused of being dull, of becoming technical, as if I were renouncing passion, interior life and