MY OWN TRAINING

I hated running. At seven o’clock in the morning, rain or snow, in the dark of winter mornings or the light of Nordic summers, during the early years at Odin Teatret the day always began with a thirty to forty minute run. I did it because it was obligatory, distracting myself by looking at the landscape or learning texts. When the training passed on to the personal phase and I could devise my own programme, I substituted some physical stamina exercises that I had learnt on a martial arts course for the run. The hours dedicated to acrobatics also belong to my first training phase. I was not terrified of the chair that I had to summersault over, but of the hard mattress on the other side on which my flat back would bounce.

From the very beginning I worked with props: two flags and small stilts. Others were added a few years later: a bass drum, a black stick, a bowler hat, a monocycle and higher stilts. Throwing, catching and manoeuvring the flags or the long stick, I learnt to react with my whole body, combining these sequences with acrobatic exercises that required impulse explosion and control. Later still I found other kinds of props, less spectacular in appearance and size; they kept me company when I worked alone, without a colleague with whom to have a dialogue or a teacher to observe me. Music was another support in overcoming solitude and giving me a partner with which to interact.

I started by learning exercises from others, but I was immediately encouraged to invent my own. I could organise my training freely, applying principles or seeking to resolve difficulties, building stage material and putting sequences together. An exercise that first gave me a sense of feeling rooted was the samurai walk as developed in the training by Iben Nagel Rasmussen. Keeping the weight downwards, the solidity and width of the steps, the sensation of vigour and the need to re-establish immobility after each move, required a good foundation and a concentration of energy in the pelvis, with
the back well aligned on top. On the other hand, the walks developed by Tage Larsen, inspired by Marilyn Monroe’s undulating hips, and those invented by Etienne Decroux that I learnt from Ingemar Lindh, taught me to float through the air without lowering or raising my head, keeping an even distance between my shoulders and the floor. Practising these walks I discovered how to compensate with one part of my body for the activity of another.

At the beginning, to find the precision of an action, I let myself be guided by detailed images: walking through clover, being pinched by a crab, gathering daisies and making a chain of them, packing a suitcase, chasing the waves of the sea... The images steered me towards the making of ‘real’ actions. Over the years my body has learnt to think by itself and to chisel out the precision of an action without thinking about it beforehand.

The composition exercises were followed by ballroom dancing and a variety of walks accompanied by an assortment of march music. Then I worked on the different phases of a step, sitting on a chair or on the floor, improvising with the character of Shakespeare’s and Verdi’s Lady Macbeth, dancing to Irish rhythms. As the years passed, the presence of Tage, Iben or other occasional teachers dwindled. The training became more and more personal and solitary. The exercises I had learnt or invented were replaced by different principles I applied; composition was overlaid with montage technique to amalgamate texts and physical actions, songs, costumes and props. More recently I have concentrated mostly on vocal training, accompanying songs with postures, dances and actions.

In fact, I have always experienced training at Odin Teatret as predominantly individual. There might be many of us in the same room – and obviously each person’s process in some way influences that of the others – but the choice of approach, exercises and rhythm is taken alone. Even if we were all immersed in the same music (as happened in 1976 with a repetitive samba record, or when the Odin actor-musicians played), each of us followed specific personal motivations, objectives and principles.

In certain periods we trained in pairs or groups in order to establish the source of a scene, rehearse music or songs, or discern common starting points that we could develop for a new production. We called one of these periods of
communal training *Fiskedam* (fish breeding pool). It was in 1978. We took turns to play in the orchestra that accompanied the work; we improvised characters, some of which were later introduced in *Brecht’s Ashes*; we went wild doing all kinds of things, until the director intervened and got rid of roller-skates, exotic costumes and monocycles.

For a month, in 1979, Torgeir Wethal guided the younger members of the group, teaching us exercises that we had only seen on film. I had a taste of what it meant to stand on my head in every possible position, to fight with white plastic sticks aiming at a colleague’s head or feet, to follow the impulses of every part of my body in the ‘plastic’ exercises and to work for hours on acrobatics and sequences called bridges, half bridges, handstands, jumps, worms, cats and dolphins.

Over the years other elements have enriched my training. An awareness of the general principles verified in Odin Teatret’s training and in other codified performance forms is the consequence of meetings with masters from Asian, European and Afro-Brazilian theatre, especially during the first sessions of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) founded in 1979. From then on the terminology used for explanation in workshops and work demonstrations became more explicit. The training was no longer carried out and transmitted only in silence, but was also theorised through words and concepts like “real actions”, the “pre-expressive level”, the “organicity effect”, “form and information”, “segmentation”, “energy shaping”. Despite all of this, when I am in the room training, I don’t need these words: training continues to be a privileged universe of action.