THE CHRONIC LIFE

Dedicated to Anna Politkovskaya and Natalia Estemirova
Russian writers and human right activists, murdered by anonymous thugs in 2006 and 2009 for their opposition to the Chechen conflict.


Odin Teatret thanks: Sergio Bini Bustric, Lena Bjerregaard, Hanne Bredholt, Philip Doolan, Luca Ruzza and the collective mind from Wroclaw.


Production: Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium (Holstebro), Teatro de La Abadía (Madrid), The Grotowski Institute (Wroclaw).

First performance: 12 September 2011 in Holstebro.
The action of the performance takes place simultaneously in different countries of Europe in 2031, after the third civil war. Individuals and groups with different backgrounds come together and challenge each other driven by uprooting, war, unemployment and financial crises. What happens when newcomers want to implant themselves on foreign soil and be part of a society that thinks it has solid cultural roots? What misunderstandings and discoveries arise from this confrontation? How do people live in a country at war in which soldiers become visible only when they return from afar in coffins?

A boy arrives from Latin America to the feverish carnival of the civilised regions of Europe. He is searching for his father who has inexplicably disappeared. Little more than a child, he ignores what everybody knows: that life is a chronic disease from which our planet with its history is unable to free itself. Everybody knows that a thousand doors lead to freedom, and everybody nourishes this knowledge by eating without hunger and drinking without thirst. Everybody knows that they have a great past, and from this greatness each cuts out his own shred of honour and identity. They answer the foreign boy’s questions, teaching him to avoid that worst of all vices - Hope. "Stop searching for your father" they whisper, while escorting him from one door to another among the wreckage of fables that they call their history.

It is neither knowledge nor innocence that saves the boy. A new ignorance helps him to discover his door. Amid the bewilderment of all of us who no longer believe in the unbelievable: that just one victim is worth more than any value. More than God. ☐

About the performance

Characters:
- a Black Madonna
- the widow of a Basque officer
- a Chechnyan refugee
- a Rumanian housewife
- a Danish lawyer
- a rock musician from the Faroe Islands
- a Colombian boy searching for his father disappeared in Europe
- an Italian street violinist
- two mercenaries
Eugenio Barba

Incomprehensibility and Hope

I am often told that my performances are not easy to understand. This makes me think of a remark by Niels Bohr: the opposite of truth is not a lie, but clarity. The truth is, I usually like clarity. I appreciate complexity in books, but if they are impossibly obscure, boredom creeps in.

It is different with theatre. Sometimes, when watching a comprehensible performance, I think of an expanse of ice. I get the sensation of a petrified landscape, one without hope.

Hopelessness is when we are convinced that nothing can be done. Before being a state of mind, despair is the more or less painful acceptance of the status quo, the admission of the forces at stake, of everything which is evident, sensible, and which in the end we submit to. Despair is inaction which comes from understanding only too well what encircles us, what lies behind all events as well as what is forthcoming.

A mysterious bond links hope to incomprehensibility, I tell myself. Maybe it is not a mystery, maybe hope is just a way of preserving self-delusion. To me hope is something more than this: a dark undecipherable force which helps me to see closely and in detail that which I feel the need to refuse, without sheltering behind preconceived judgements and resignation. And without deluding myself that I have found the key which throws light on what I still experience as a confusing complexity.

I would like my performances to be like currents in the sea, not like immobile landscapes.

I have just finished working on another performance. I watch it; it seems different from the others. One question torments me: is it immobile?

The image of Fridtjof Nansen appears. He was a scientist leading the International Bureau for Refugees of the League of Nations and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He died in 1930 at the age of seventy. In the years of his maturity, he was a polar explorer, the most creative among the Norwegian explorers. The ships that opened the road to the North Pole were imprisoned by the ice during the long winter freeze. Nothing could be done. The only hope was to succeed in not succumbing and to wait for the weather to change. Because times do change and
even the longest night, as Brecht writes, is not eternal. Nansen did something more. He dreamt with open eyes against despair. He dreamt a contradiction: the navigation of a ship imprisoned by invincible ice. He called his ship Fram (Forward), a name that could easily be turned into derision. Nansen studied the ice; the conditions of the psychic and physical resistance of the men in the murderous vice of the frozen season; he calculated the tides and currents. Because also the frozen sea moves and changes. He let himself be trapped by the ice and exploited its long, desperately slow drift. He turned it into a paradoxical apparently static navigation, ready to take the initiative again at the first change in the season. Nansen is the great master of the deep hope.

A ship in the grip of the ice: I do theatre to turn this ship into a tiny precarious islet of resistance for me and for my fellow travellers, actors and spectators. On this islet, which a thousand sea-paths link to the surrounding geography, I weave performances that seem and are obscure. I try to bring into the light the dark forces which inhabit me, my biography, the history in which I am caught up, the difference which I have conquered and the differences which others have known how to conquer. I want to repay the spectators for their effort in coming to the theatre by making them explore a ship imprisoned by the ice, apparently immobile yet driven by dark underwater currents so deep that their existence seems impossible.

Beyond the ephemeral swarm of thousands of small daily hopes, there is the deep hope which dwells beyond the border of the Great Freeze and its fear. Maybe, if we want to keep the deep hope alive, there is no other means than to look at it from its opposite, staring at the dark face of its negation. To keep hope alive - and thus deny despair - is an arduous enterprise, and in certain historical moments we know this only too well. The act of hoping is as strenuous as the act of withstanding. It means to react in first person, often with actions which are incomprehensible to the criteria of the craft and the expectations of others.

We should not be deceived by titles. *The Chronic Life* is not a performance without hope. Hope nestles within it as does the "yes" within the "no".

Without hope we cannot live. Hope can be a strength or a burden. It can fuel mediocre illusions or harmful and fierce beliefs. It can inspire those "truths" that leaders of doctrines proclaim eternal and philosophers call "idols of the tribe" or "vital lies".

One of the most refined totalitarianisms of our time, is the obligation to clarity, the disdain for the state of I-do-not-understand, the shared devaluation of the feeling of incomprehension whose secret effects prompt decisive choices in our life. The cult of clarity, which served to enlighten minds, serves today also to darken them.
Come migliorare fronte e spazio?
La natura morta degli strumenti sul palco è molto pittoresco (pace italiana)... come si può trasformarlo spazio?

Se un foso diretto anche il palco mettendo in diagonale rispetto alla retta vista--spettat tra il palco--

dare mettere sedia sgabello fianco a fianco in rispetto.

Sarebbe un posto molto in alto.
Every time we turn on the television, open a newspaper or listen to a politician or an expert, the world is presented to us as something that has been understood and can be explained. Every piece of information depicts facts coherently described and interpreted; or else exposes the impatient waiting for the solution of the enigmas of politics and news stories. There must be an explanation. If this is late in coming, the event will in time end among the refuse of unexplained news, and thereby be destined to oblivion. Anyone who speaks or writes fears above all not to be clear. The need to be understood impels us to censor our reactions and feelings which we are unable to understand in depth. Even in linguistic behaviour, the expressions that cannot be clearly translated from one language into another are discarded. The gift of clarity loses vigour and sense when it buries the gift of ambiguity and the experience of not grasping everything.

If I ask myself: “What is theatre?” I can find several bright answers. But none of them appears to be of any practical use in intervening in the surrounding world, in the attempt to change at least a tiny corner of it. If I ask myself in which paradoxical enclosure in space and time I may allow the dark forces which rule in history and in the individual’s interiority to surface, and how I can make them perceptible in their physicality without producing violence, destruction and self-destruction, the answer is evident to me: it is the enclosure called theatre.

Until now I have made performances which refer to events and experiences of the past or the present. For the first time, *The Chronic Life* is imagined in a near future, simulated and simultaneous. The action takes place in Denmark and Europe: different countries at the same time. The story unfolds during the first months after a civil war. To make this scenario less believable (which is no consolation) I have chosen a relatively close date, 2031. The resulting performance cannot be grasped rationally.

A multitude of voices, day and night and through many channels, comment upon the various directions of history which besieges our lives, threatening to drag them into chaos. The intelligible answers stifle the questions that concern us most, dilute their urgency and become a sedative. We know this, but we cannot do without them. The fiction of understanding reassures.

I don’t think that my undertaking in theatre consists in furnishing a reliable interpretation of events which others have narrated, or in showing ways out of the vice in which we feel trapped. I believe in the commitment to another task: to give form and credibility to the incomprehensible and to those impulses that are a mystery even to me, turning them into a skein of actions-in-life to offer to the spectator’s contemplation, annoyance, repugnance and compassion. This commitment binds me still to the craft of the theatre. I would like this skein of
actions-in-life to infect that zone in each of us where unbelief blends with
naivety.

We assume that a theatre performance has above all the aim of communi-
cating. This is true up to a point. For me its primary aim consists in creating
relationships and conditions of intensified life. For whom? For the spectator, for
the actor?

Among the many repercussions which attract me to the theatre, is the
moment when a bizarre question suddenly pops up: what other reality is hidden
behind that which seems totally clear to us? Is clarity a form of blindness, manipu-
lation or censorship?

I would like The Chronic Life to open a tiny crack into the dark incandescent
magma of the individual and his painstaking vital zigzagging to free himself from
an icy embrace: that of the implacable and indifferent Great Mother of Abortions
and Shipwrecks, Our Lady History.

Translated from Italian by Judy Barba

A Danish lawyer (Tage Larsen): “With completely new feelings, with feelings never felt
before, shall our land be built.” Photo: Rina Skeel
(From my diary) 16 September 2007: I have taken two decisions. The first one I called *the interference of theatre*. Four months without travelling devoted to an activity to be invented in Holstebro and the surrounding villages. How can Odin Teatret interfere (subvert, create Disorder, turn itself into a geyser of underground energy) in milieus driven by pre-established programmes and obligations (schools, hospitals, churches, factories, jails)?

The second decision is more temerarious: a new performance with all the actors. Will we still be able to create a performance together after so many years? I already have the title: *The Chronic Life*, a line from a poem by Paulo Leminski whom Aderbal [Freire Filho] acquainted me with while sipping a glass of Uruguayan Tanat. For the moment the title will be *XL (Extra Large)*.

I immediately phoned Nando and told him of my first image: a crystal coffin full of water in which an eel and a drowned girl swim. Then other ideas: Antigone surrounded by venerable *doctores*, St Augustine, St Jerome, Origen, the child in Alisto’s last scene in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the first sentence in Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*: “I have come to Comala because I was told that my father lives here, a certain Pedro Páramo.”

When is the time for spring, for virgin energies, ignored yet at your side, within you? The answer is evident: at the end of a war, amid mourning and devastation. Incomprehensibility which is tinged with hope. The actors move away from pain and desperation shaken by an invisible yet audible thread: music.

Incomprehensibility as compassion, intuition of the other’s suffering and joy. And hope? The childish pleasure in telling secrets, asking questions, loving, inoculating doubts, crossing countries, books, theatres.

I already feel tired at the idea that I must do the best I can. I hope to be lucky and, with my actors, to do better than the best I can.

Intelligence, in theatre, doesn’t make one cry. Will I be able to let at least one spectator shed a tear? John Keats: the poetic is thoughtless experience. Don’t forget Laurence Sterne: I progress as I digress.

The pitiless ordeal with my actors: all those tensions and incomprehensions in order to keep alive the tradition of infringement, struggling day after day against the clichés which estrange us from our vital sources.

The subterranean life of theatre. □
The Rumanian housewife (Roberta Carreri): "I wanna die easy, when I die." Photo: Tommy Bay
Odin Teatret will soon be on its last legs. Next time the theatre has a birthday with a round number, it will be 50 years old - and if the age of man is three score years and ten, then the leader of the theatre is already way beyond that. Energy knows no bounds, but not so biology. For every day that passes, the fateful moment inexorably approaches.

As a rule, one postpones knowledge of the imminent annihilation to another day. We like to talk about death, but not about our own. Odin Teatret has chosen a different strategy - to look its approaching demise squarely in the eye. What happens to a collective venture that begins to consider its own demise? That was the point of departure for work on *The Chronic Life*.

There are various possibilities. One can commit mass suicide, as the small commune around its strong leader in Jonestown in Guyana did. One can also latch onto the signs of death evident in the culture in which one lives, and console oneself with the fact that one is not alone in growing long in the tooth. That, to cite the philosopher Spengler, one is taking part in the Decline of the West.

Or one can hope that something unexpected will turn up. This is what happened in the process that ended up as *The Chronic Life*, as I see it.

At a certain point during the long period when the performance was taking shape, we were working on it in Wroclaw, Poland. Barba had been invited to hold open rehearsals there, as a Master Class, at the Grotowski Institute in the old Silesian city on the banks of the Oder. He chose to demonstrate his capability by allowing professionals from the theatre and university to watch a whole week of full-time rehearsals on the future performance at a time when it was not even half complete.

The 37 participants - from Iran, Italy, Spain, Brazil, England, Mexico, Poland, all possible kinds of country in short - sat silently on the benches from the early morning to mid-afternoon. At the end of the day, they got the opportunity to ask about the work process and react to what they had seen and heard.

Each day began with what used to be referred to when I was at school as "standing floor exercises", i.e. with the actors spread out at regular intervals over the floor space of an empty room, each one involved in his or her own isolated project - to tame an instrument or a prop, to put the finishing touches to a dance,
a song, a movement. But, unlike the gymnastics lessons of my schooldays, a man sat here intensely watching each individual - with thirty-odd others also watching - in order to catch sight of the one decisive thing: where an actor carried out an action that had growth potential in it. Such elements with immanent energy and future in them were then transplanted from this "greenhouse" to the stage floor later that day, when the actors’ contributions were woven together before the eyes of the 37 participants.

I say "the stage floor", but that proved to be too imprecise a term as the week progressed. As readers of this programme booklet will see shortly when they enter the auditorium, the floor is covered with a rectangle of simple pine planks, a kind of raft, that fills part of but not the entire space. When we came to Poland, the entire performance took place on these planks. They were the stage, the stage was the planks.

Halfway through the week, Eugenio Barba decided to extend this stage, with the acting no longer taking place on the planks only, but also outside them. This added a new meaning. From then on, being "outside" and "inside" no longer applied exclusively to the words and movements of the individual actor but also to the internal space. The raft became something onto which one could be rescued or be pushed off.

In the question-and-answer session that concluded each day, the reactions to this opening-up of the stage were intelligent - the participants after all were professional theatre people - but not unambiguous. The reactions to the opened-up stage were like those prompted by other effects employed by Odin Teatret, which are reminiscent of the responses of a patient to the Rorschach test of the psychologists: they show the patient an image devoid of meaning, and the patient reacts to seeing it by saying personal things about himself or herself.

There is also a difference, however. The stage images admittedly begin in a way reminiscent of the random ink-blots of the psychologists. But, in the theatre choices are subsequently made. The dramaturg and the director pick and choose, they embrace and reject, so that everything finally ends up being based on conscious choices.

The trick is to keep the delicate balance between growth and pruning. If one sticks exclusively to the pruning shears, the result will be too obvious; if everything is left to the energy of growth, the result will be hazy. The Chronic Life gained in both energy and clarity during the week in Wroclaw. But the performance was still far from ready. One of the things that were still uncertain was the finale. The Master Class students had plenty of ideas as to how it should end, none of them really satisfying.

Then the performance was packed away and stored for several months, as
is often the case with Odin performances while they are in the process of gestation. When it was brought out again, its direction was clearer. The answer to the fundamental problem - how does one react to the merciless frontier barrier of biology? - came from neither Pastor Jones nor Oswald Spengler, even though the solutions of both can just be made out in the final performance.

Actual language - not stage language, with its many facets shaped by light, sound and movement, but language that comes from the mouth in the form of words - has always been a problem for Odin Teatret, which features actors with various mother tongues and has a worldwide audience that often only understands a language spoken by none of the actors. The fact that it has for many years successfully communicated with its audiences around the world says something about the particular capability of this theatre.
Despite its limitations, the actors nevertheless use language the whole time. I learnt something about the role of language during work on the rehearsing of the performance in Poland. Part of the text the actors use is made up of isolated lines by Ursula Andkjær Olsen, whose poetic Danish obviously escapes each and every one of the 37 students at the Master Class in Wroclaw. Despite this, we realised from the questions and answers afterwards that the ironical tone of the lines had been picked up by a great many of the students.

The explanation may be that the texts appeal to the actors in such a way that they become able to translate the speech of the lines into a body and sound language that observant onlookers apprehend. It is like being at an opera without supertitles. There, one does not understand what the songs are about either; even so, the singers use the words in order to sense the meaning they are to bring out via their singing and acting.

Odin Teatret is a theatre without language - although one that is profoundly linked to the language that is part of the performance, and that the actors, with the aid of the director, act with and against.

A few actual words are, however, shared by all audiences - the words placed in their hand as they are on the way in to the performance. In their own language, they can read sentences like: “The action takes place in various European countries in 2031, after the Third Civil War.” In other words, day and life are ebbing out. If one has failed to discover this by considering the age of Odin Teatret and its actors, one is now spoon-fed with the message. But what sort of a decline and fall is in store?

Each onlooker must personally look for the answer with his or her own eyes and ears in the performance that is shortly about to begin. I am prepared to reveal only this much - it is not an answer that is a foregone conclusion.

The answer that has germinated in the greenhouse comprising four years’ work on *The Chronic Life*, and that took shape at the same time as the play found its conclusion, has its roots in the same place as the initial question: in biology. Life goes on, as one says. But that is not the end of the story. It goes on in a quite special way, as only becomes apparent en route. The theatre perishes, but theatre survives. Theatre is chronic in the same unpredictable but also insuperable way as life.

Were the students at Eugenio Barba’s Master Class in Wroclaw, from the time when the performance was only half-finished, able to see the finished version, I think they would be just as taken aback as I was at how it had grown. As mentioned, Odin Teatret is virtually on its last legs, but they are still distinctly sprightly. ☐

*Translated from Danish by John Irons*
The Black Indies of Odin Teatret

The Actors' Writings presented by Nando Taviani
The "black Indies" belong to a vertical exoticism, i.e., not in the East but underground. The title comes from a novel by Jules Verne (*Les Indes noires*, 1877) set in Scotland in an exhausted yet secretly inhabited coal mine.

More than mystery, disorientation characterises the underground world. There is neither landscape nor scenery. Each sees only that which he or she illuminates with his or her own light.

The "black Indies" are also the mines of our Holstebro theatre: professional ethics, experiences, fantasies, motivations and personal needs, hardly ever visible, yet able to set in motion and nourish the visible work. In the following writings, notes and fragments of diaries as well as echoes of lost footsteps emerge from this underground.

Work on *The Chronic Life* started in February 2008 and was concluded in the autumn of 2011. Over a span of almost four years, Eugenio Barba and his actors cut out small oases of time freed from any engagement in order to devote themselves to the new performance. The result was a process consisting of accelerations and suspensions. The end of each working period was not the conclusion of a phase, but rather the pre-arranged date interrupting the rehearsals to fulfil other pre-arranged commitments. After each interruption, the work’s growth entered a state of hibernation and waited for the process to resume.

Barba and the actors found that this drawback was advantageous. It contradicted their habits.

The time dedicated by the Odin’s artistic ensemble to the creation of *The Chronic Life* corresponds to about eight months: February 2008, May 2009, February 2010, October-November 2010, February-March 2011, September 2011. The fact of spreading these eight months over a period of four years produced new kinds of complications.

The old suggestion “to make the obstacle your friend” served this time to materialise one of Odin Teatret’s tacit values: *stubbornness*. The given conditions
were not quite favourable to a new performance. All the members of the ensemble were already occupied with previously established commitments, both personal initiatives and group projects. They were forced to use their craft's astuteness to face a style of life which was governed more and more by the demands of the calendar.

While the new performance was in hibernation, each of the participants in the enterprise kept on thinking about it, each one for himself. They were like parallel dreams, never converging and in contradiction the one with the other.

At the start, two rather obscure titles guided the course of the new performance. First *XL (Extra Large)*, whose banality made one wonder or laugh. Later *The Chronic Life* which was simply enigmatic. In addition, a few themes emerged in the first phases of the rehearsals. Above all, alive and yet increasingly distant, the surprise of the first day of work still lingered, a fanciful infringement of the rules when Eugenio Barba, with a grieved and mockingly autobiographic dribbling, pushed the ensemble into a sort of archaic carnival: the celebration of his funeral. Capable of hurting, while at the same time cheerfully tumultuous, the commemoration exploited the vital energy of a homemade blasphemy.

In between phases, while the new work was in hibernation, Barba imagined scenes and compositions and - still in his imagination - destroyed them. Imagining and destroying are complementary actions for a director like him, to whom experience has taught that one way to succeed is voluntarily to take the wrong road, and that the correct solution is the unexpected one, welling up with the convincing power of serendipity.

Serendipity is the Moon of the mines, as in the verses by the Argentinian Homer who died in 1986. Borges writes that he had looked for the Moon in certain mythological mines, until "*ahí estaba, a la vuelta de una esquina*, and it was "*la luna celestial de cada día.*"

But also the Moon of serendipity and of the mines is in difficulty when one expects it to rise in a fragmented time.

For the Odin director-playwright his planning of the *mise-en-scène* is similar to the action of deforestation rather than of building. It corresponds to the actors’ work and apparent waste while sowing and planting in solitude, trying and trying again.

In the periods when the process was hibernating, each actor worked out materials to propose to the director (costumes, masks, props, songs and music, texts to recite or to sing, silhouettes of characters, etc.). They took advantage, each in his or her own way, of the pauses between the tours, and exploited the gaps in their habitual activities (the seminars and the various teaching programmes
The widow of a Basque officer (Kai Bredholt): "Children must witness their father’s death."

Nikita, the Chechnyan refugee (Julia Varley): "Water is gold in wartime."

Photos: Rina Skeel
The Black Madonna (Iben Nagel Rasmussen): From non truth to truth, from death to inmortality."

The Italian street violinist (Elena Floris) and the Colombian boy searching for his father (Sofía Monsalve): "A door does not tell you where you are going."
abroad and in Holstebro, the rehearsals to keep alive their repertoire’s many performances, the creation of individual performances and working demonstrations, the preparation of festivals and their artistic execution, the phone calls and mails to organise meetings, exchanges, hospitality and tours, the turns for the cleaning of the theatre. They knew that the work on the new performance, accomplished in solitude during these gaps, was a wasted effort. Perhaps a tenth of it or maybe nothing at all would be usable. But they also knew that unusable doesn’t necessarily mean useless. However they were not able to orient themselves. Beyond the circle of their individual work they could see only darkness.

Neither the actors nor their director-playwright had in their hands a "production plan" delineating the plot, the texts and the scenes of the performance to come. Working in this way has become normal in the Odin enclave in the last twenty years. It is a way of proceeding in which every actor is responsible for his or her own personal path, refining it with extreme care like a detail whose only importance is that it be alive, before knowing the landscape of which it will be a part. The extreme precision of the details is connected with a similar extremist suspension of judgment regarding the context in which these details will acquire a sense of their own.

Although this is hard to understand, and often also to accept, this way of working is not absurd. Every detail is a physical action precisely designed. It is not an empty, rootless sign that on its own is deprived of sense. It is the fruit of an imagination-in-action, rooted in the actor’s physical-mental organism. More than a sign, it is a cell with a life of its own, although still not part of an organ and a destiny indicating its identity and belonging. An action-cell can be transplanted in different unprogrammed contexts. The director-playwright is responsible for this operation and acts, above all, as a transformer of meaning.

This way of working is based on a paradox: in order to be free, Barba must give free hands to his actors. And vice versa, the actors conquer a new freedom of choice by giving free hands to Barba and facilitating the independence of his interventions.

Although this paradox works in the Odin and this way of proceeding has become almost normal, the fact remains that it is deeply abnormal when compared with most of the stage procedures in other theatres and with the mentality which derives from them.

At Odin Teatret, for example, there is no preliminary work on the text or on "the character", understood as a part of a dramatic organism with pre-defined and well delineated contours. It is the performance itself, when the rehearsals are over, which defines the characters and their relationships. There is no play, text or subject however brief. The starting point is not a scenario explaining to the
actors the existing relationships and situations, scene by scene, between the
different *dramatis personae*. There is nothing to help the actors to foresee how
the plot will develop and end. Nobody knows in advance the story or its purpose.
Thus the performance to be composed is not a goal on which it is possible to orient
oneself. The goal exists only as a postulate, as a point of interrogation, a wish, a
subject to be discovered. *A priori*, this goal doesn’t help, and it is not an
inspiration or a reference point during the rehearsals. It will always be, in the last
analysis, a discovery, and as such, it can be defined only *a posteriori*: something
which can be written as a synopsis to be offered to the spectators.

Things, in short, proceed “upside-down”: not from the project to its real-
isation, but from the discovery to its understanding; not from a subject to the way of
interpreting it, but from the unexpected emergency to the way of justifying it.

With some anecdotal drawbacks. As, for example, when the demands for
information from the organisers impose the writing of a short presentation of the
new performance. When this takes place before the performance is finished, the
promotional summary always results as imprudent or vague. It risks being grandilo-
quent and intentionally obscure. For this reason, when one treats the anticipated
promotional information as a document or as the author’s testimony, Odin Teatret’s
performances always result more hermetic or enigmatic than they really are.

Proceeding upside-down is a conscious strategy, already experienced,
resulting from a particular biography which is difficult to imitate. It characterises
Odin Teatret’s behaviour beyond its artistic practice.

Progressing upside-down with respect to the surrounding milieu - not
backwards but upside-down - defines the identity of our small theatre. Thus Odin
Teatret safeguards its tacit secession which keeps it free from the anxiety to
conform to the climatic changes of the surrounding territory, the general theatre
system with its novelties and successes which mark the changes in the spirit of the
time.

The following actors’ texts were written in the summer of 2011, when the
performance had not yet found its definitive form. "Definitive form", in our case,
means the opposite of "anticipated form". We are all aware that although *The
Chronic Life* already consists of well-outlined and fixed scenes, relationships and
actions, it may change radically after a few rehearsals or "open performances",
thus sealing its own journey in a different way from the innumerable hypotheses
formulated from time to time by its director-playwright, or suggested by one or
other of the people participating in the long rehearsals.

The route leading to the awareness that the performance is already alive and
has a form, although it is not yet known which destiny will animate it, generates
in those who participate different qualities of exhaustion, excitement, expectation, desire, curiosity, disorientation and anguish. But also a feeling similar to professional discouragement. This explains why the following writings don’t adjust to only one format, and why not all the protagonists of the enterprise have chosen to write about it. Writing is fine. But not writing is never a sin of omission.

Each actor is potentially the protagonist. To become aware of this, it is enough that the spectator sees the performance several times following with his eyes and his attention a different figure each time. Here the dramaturgy is intentionally composed in order to let each actor be considered as the centre of the general action, and to free the individual spectator from the comfortable but somehow customary situation of being “tele-guided” (literally: led from a distance).

This sort of dramaturgy, pursued in order to free both actors and spectators from the traditional dramaturgical hierarchies (first actor, secondary characters etc.) returns in all Odin performances in a more and more conscious and refined way since My Father’s House.

Time has passed.

My Father’s House was from 1972 and its last representation took place in January 1974. Two of its protagonists are present in The Chronic Life. A third one was present until a while ago, when illness and death forced him for the first time to desert a performance of the theatre he had contributed in founding. The actors, Eugenio Barba and some of the spectators who have long been close to our theatre keep on seeing him as a glimmer here and there in the performance. In The Chronic Life another person participates who was also linked to My Father’s House, although she was not part of it: after seeing it, she asked to join the Odin. Surprisingly she was accepted.

We have gone back in time to the years of My Father’s House. Since then the home of the Odin has expanded, the amount of its activities increased, its fame spread. But the group which pursues its own performances along tortuous paths, although partly changed, has nevertheless always consisted of only a handful of actors, headed by a director-playwright who makes theatre by trying to turn his back on the competence accumulated with the years.

The performance, which as I write, is almost finished (the “almost” is full of uncertainties) has a title uniting the noun “life” to a qualifying adjective usually used for illness. It may therefore awaken associations with figures such as the Wandering Jew, a Highlander from film sagas, or Amfortas from Wagner’s Parsifal. Above all, it risks steering one’s thoughts to the idea of old age.

Odin Teatret has existed since 1964, and its record of longevity in contem-
porary theatre has frequently been emphasised. Eugenio Barba likes to remark that such a record is "a monstrosity, an insult to the nature of the theatre". I suppose that by exaggerating a bit, he manages to restrain the effects of that strange cocktail which usually goes to the head with its mixture of pride in the past, self-confident presence, in addition to a due apprehension for the future.

Between The Chronic Life and old age there is a bond which is more metaphysical than physical: the relationship between fidelity to one’s own past and fidelity to the future, between stubbornness and freedom, twilight and hope.

Something amusing often happens to Barba and Odin Teatret reminiscent of what happened to Don Quixote. While the latter continued to travel and battle, one day, during convalescence, he was confronted with the book recounting his own adventures, arranging them in order and rendering them strange and exemplary. It was a book similar to those devoted to famous wandering knights, already buried with glory. So Don Quixote had also to take care of editing the book, of the amount of truth contained in it and of its appropriate distribution. All sensible things. However he - who was made of flesh that could be loved and wounded - was turned into literary flesh. He discovered that his beloved books could also be tombs or living jails.

The obligations toward memory are binding. So what about freedom?

I also remember the first day of rehearsals for the performance which was to be called XL and later earned the title of The Chronic Life. I remember it as an imprinting or perhaps an unrepeatable dawn. It was an early morning of 5 February 2008. In traditional calendars it was marked as Shrove Tuesday, Mardi Gras: one of the last days of carnival of which only ancient books preserve the essential memory. Days of irreverence until ferocity, of laughter until tears, in which respect for sacred things and esteemed people vanished.

The small Blue room, that Tuesday of February 2008, was filled with props and theatrical ghosts. In that space crammed with disguises, masks and curtains constantly fell. From behind one of those curtains two twin sisters appeared - reality or imagination? They unsheathed their swords and duelled: one was Truth, the other Hope. They were not allegories but sisters. It was not possible to guess whether that duel was a murder or a “flower struggle”, as love is referred to in certain exotic regions.

I forgot: in Jules Verne’s novel, the inhabitants of the abandoned mine dwell underground, not in order to hide. They believe that the mine is not exhausted, and they stubbornly insist on searching for new layers of coal which will heat, supply and pollute the future. □

*Translated from Italian by Judy Barba*
Everything began on 5 February 2008. Eugenio Barba had gathered his colleagues to start work on a new Odin performance. We met in Odin Teatret's small Blue room, at seven in the morning, in the total darkness of the Danish winter. Eugenio looked like the leader of a secret gang that had taken refuge in a faraway Danish town, to prepare a conspiracy, a pact of blood, a new adventure.

That morning Eugenio first talked of superstitions: the spells, words, sentences or actions that incite you to confront your destiny; the "Jeronimo!" that the north-American parachutists yelled before leaping into the void. This blessing of superstitions was the beginning of a performance that, according to Eugenio's words, should be a blasphemy against our beliefs.

A little later, Eugenio explained some central details of the future work. He said my name and pronounced the sentence that from then on would always accompany as an omen, a mantra, a battle cry or a prayer, my "Jeronimo!": "I came because I was told my father lived here." This sentence is from a novel by the Mexican author Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, that narrates the story of a young man who travels to the place where his mother was born in search of his father, a certain Pedro Páramo. The village was deserted and he only found the ghosts of a past life there.

My story would be about this: a young man who arrives to a foreign country in search of his father. Therefore the first question I asked myself was: who is my father? Who are my ghosts?

I come from a family of theatre practitioners; my father is a director, my mother an actress and anthropologist; I have been on stage since I was still in my mother’s belly. I think I was eleven when it dawned on me that I was an actress: a classmate asked me why I was wearing knee protectors and I casually answered that I was an actress and as such I had to take care of my knees. At that time I took part in most of the activities of my father’s group: performances, training, workshops and tours. But during the work I realised how much I lacked to become a real actress.

I knew of Odin Teatret through a book my father had at home: *The Secret Art of the Performer*. As a child I spent hours looking at the photographs, fascinated by the images of actors and dancers in strange positions, by their feet,
hands and eyes. I heard members of my group talking of Odin Teatret and of its
director referring to them as “masters”, their theatre fathers. So, when I turned
17, the time had come for me to go in search of my father’s father. But looking
for my theatrical origins meant, in some way, to leave home, emigrate, abandon
my group and repudiate my own father.

There I was on that first morning, 5 February 2008: on the other side of the
ocean, sitting with the actors of Odin Teatret, while the director spoke of a
conspiracy. Trembling, I sealed my pact of blood. I was ready to abandon all
certainties, my language, my family and any knowledge I thought I possessed.

Væksthus is the Danish term for nursery or greenhouse. During the
rehearsals of The Chronic Life, the Væksthus was a nursery for scenes to grow in;
it was a time in the morning during which we all worked in the same room, even
if each actor developed his or her own individual part. During this time of training,
before the actual rehearsals, we practised music, created new proposals for
scenes or individual scores that later would be introduced into the performance.
From my work diary: “Væksthus: Today the day began with work in the Black
room. I only played the short melody that Jan [Ferslev] taught me on the ukelele.
Time and time again. I was sad, for my obvious inability to do something for
myself. I don’t have anything, only my empty hands. The deeper we move into the
craft the more we realise how little we have, how empty our hands are.” This is
how my journey in The Chronic Life started: feeling completely naked, with no
weapons or tools to face the journey.

The theme that Eugenio gave me for my first improvisation was "In an empty
village”. I wrote in my work diary: “A child is walking in forbidden alleys, curious
and fearful of the unknown. The frozen windows hide abandoned houses’ ghosts.
Only a solitary cat is walking in the streets. The child knows nothing of this village
and follows the invisible traces of his father’s shoes.”

This improvisation was my first treasure: a sequence of actions and images
that I worked on alone, allowing it to grow and change, until the moment when
Eugenio inserted it in one of the scenes of the performance, adding a dialogue and
putting it into relation with the other actors. In its constant metamorphosis the
scene has changed so much, and acquired so many different qualities, that it is
difficult for me to recognise what is left of the original improvisation. After some
months, Eugenio decided that the scene would be a dialogue between the Black
Madonna, Iben Nagel Rasmussen’s character, and me. So, after a few weeks of
work during which we added text to the actions, the scene was transformed into
a blind battle in the dark: the battle from the biblical episode between Jacob and
the Angel. Following my score’s logic, Iben’s character became the solitary cat
that followed me in the deserted village, whispering false and true clues
concerning my father’s whereabouts. Trying to understand the cat’s words and catch it in the darkness, I reiterated my torment: "I came because I was told my father lived here."

During the first months of rehearsals, the other actors guided my work: I was like a puppet in their hands. They led me, lifted me, made me sit down, carried me, placed me in unbearable positions, and took me from place to place, from one position to the next. I exchanged roles with Lolito (a puppet that has always been present in the performance): sometimes he would take my place and other times I would take his. "Let us lead you," the other actors would say, and slowly I learned to act with one part of my body at a time, to follow the impulses and not be mechanic. I learned, little by little, to play the ukulele, to sing unfamiliar songs, to use my voice as a part of my body, to fall and get up again.

Meanwhile, in the performance’s story, the young man reaches the foreign country; the inhabitants of this Wonderland receive him with compassion and introduce him to this new place, teaching him its language and values, and the musical notes of its national hymn. The young man would ask everyone if they knew where his father was, but was only shown a closed door: behind it he would find the traces that would take him to his father. Various women, like guardian angels, wiped the sweat from his brow softly singing old lullabies, and watched his incessant struggle to open a door with the wrong key.

From my work diary: "Today Eugenio, just before I went on stage, came to
me with a golden cloth to cover my eyes. He blindfolded me so I couldn’t see anything, not even a shadow. He said: now enter the space and do everything as you have been doing until now."

A new performance opened before my eyes. For months I did not know what was happening on stage; I navigated through hearing and touching, counting my steps so as not to fall. Stumbling around, I tried to follow the other actors’ timing, to find my way in scenes that were elaborated and changed every day, trying to remember the position of each actor and object in the space. In the foreign country, unusual and, at times, atrocious things happened: the inhabitants of Wonderland attempted suicide to convince themselves that they were still alive, whilst others explored life’s borderlines with drugs and rock music. The foreigners who aspired access to this place of wonders, where people eat without being hungry and drink without being thirsty, were rejected time and time again until they paid the price: to know what everyone knew, and walk like everyone walked. As an actress, I was beginning to recognise every millimetre of the floor, to the point that sight was no longer necessary.

When Eugenio had finished his first talk on that February morning it was daytime. With light scenes appeared, and with the scenes chaos blossomed. And this chaos has accompanied us for the last three years; a fluctuating chaos that forms and dissolves; that kneads, amalgamates and then separates. I am surprised, reading my notes from the first months, to verify that there are parts and details that have not changed at all, while others have been lost along the way. Sometimes I feel that, beside other things, the performance also speaks of the process of creating it. In the same way that the genetic history of the species can be traced in each foetus.

During the work to create the performance, the young man continues his search, as he fumbles and stumbles, learns foreign songs and passes the trials that the inhabitants put him through, to be reborn as a new member of this community of ghosts. When the blindfold is finally taken off, a gunshot is heard and the door opens. But behind the door there is no hidden secret, no clues and no father, only a new path to follow.

While I write this article, we have still not finished the rehearsals. Many things can change, but there is one thing I have understood in these years of work: perhaps you only meet destiny when you distance yourself from your father. In the same way, as an actress, it has been important to be able to accept starting empty-handed and to continue searching beyond an open door.

Translated from Spanish by Stephano Regueros Savvides Garcia

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“Children must witness their father’s death. I wiped away your father’s sweat all night long. He died at four o’clock in the morning. I put you and your brother to bed. I whispered to you: ‘What a day of disorder today’.

In *The Chronic Life* I play a woman, a widow of a Basque officer. She was originally inspired by Donna Vera, Eugenio’s mother. The idea to create this character came from a chain of thoughts which Eugenio himself started. After one of the first rehearsals in the Blue room, he proposed that I could choose somebody I knew as an inspiration for my work. Walking out of the room he suggested, almost by chance, that it could also be a woman. After a few months, during a tour in Mexico, the word “a woman” kept coming back to my mind. I thought the performance would be about Eugenio, so this woman had to be his mother, Donna Vera. I asked Eugenio to tell me about her and his childhood. I also borrowed some photos from the time when Vera was a young girl, when she was a widow with two small children, and another as a mature woman flanked by two grown up sons dressed in military uniforms.

This was the starting point for creating Vera’s character.

In these pictures I saw a woman dressed in elegant clothes, discrete, without attracting too much attention. In the beginning I tried with a dress, but I realised I could easily fall into the cliché of a woman. I was looking for a costume in which the feminine aspect was only suggested. My character should be both a man and a woman. As in a cubist painting where the lines are only sketched, it’s the person who looks at the painting who completes the picture. My character could be easily identified as a man, but in reality was a woman. I tried with long black trousers that hid high heeled boots, a black blouse tied at the back, a pearl necklace and a black shawl fastened with a cameo belonging to my grandmother and which I had as a present from my mother. Simple, symbolic jewelry worn by a woman with class.
Eugenio liked this costume, and even when we later tried adding more details, such as a bra, a hairnet or a widow’s veil, we always returned to the original simplicity.

The high heeled boots have marked Donna Vera’s gait and posture. The boots helped me to find her way of moving, wavering yet resolute. I could work with the sound of the heels on the wooden floor, emphasising or absorbing it when it was not to be heard.

After a while, when balancing on high heels had become a habit, the character was not as sharp as it was at the beginning, and I fell back into my bad habit of looking down while walking. For this reason, during the training, I would put a small bronze bell on my head and try not to let it fall off while walking around. The trick worked, and Vera recovered her posture. Now it is enough for me only to recall the bell in order to find her posture.

My singing voice became important to Donna Vera’s character. Once again I looked for ambivalence, a voice that was neither a man’s nor a woman’s, a high falsetto voice, a fragile one. It could be very faint, but passing to a normal register, it became strong and changed character like in an explosion. I thought it fitted a woman who carried her grief with dignity, but kept within herself a storm of emotions. A love which had died too soon.

An Icelandic rock band, Sigur Ros, which plays a type of music they call slow motion rock, was my inspiration. They build their music on simple chords and insistent rhythms. At the beginning it’s a music which almost caresses you, then, all of a sudden the idyll is destroyed by a chaos of hammering rhythms, disharmonies, screeching guitars and very long notes sung in a falsetto voice. I was inspired by this music for the scenes I had prepared when presenting Vera to Eugenio for the first time.

I gathered some fragments from the interview with Eugenio, and with the director’s assistant Pierangelo Pompa’s help, I structured them into a text in which Vera told about her life. Like in my talk with Eugenio, the text was in Italian. This helped me to find Vera’s voice. It was easy for me to speak and narrate in Italian. When later the text was translated into Danish, I faced an almost insurmountable mountain. It sounded false and incorrect, and I could not find the melody which made me just say the text without interpreting it. Progressing in the work, I had to deal with another hindrance when Eugenio proposed alternating my text between Basque and Danish. I’m still climbing the mountain, but sometimes I come upon something which works both for me and Eugenio. It’s as if the text had to be pulled away from its logic, decomposed in meaningless fragments until nothing comprehensible remains, and then put back word for word to build a new logic.
The widow of a Basque officer (Kai Bredholt): "I dance alone tonight, my beloved is dead."
Photo: Tommy Bay
Maybe in the end, the text will sound as it did the first time, when it worked well because of the insecurity and the illogical pauses. Maybe we are going back to the starting point, but the journey was necessary and there are no short cuts.

The texts that I chose accompanied three scenes, in which Vera tells her life story. One scene takes place in the dining room of Eugenio’s and Vera’s house. She recounts her meeting with her husband and the evening in which he dies. I asked Iben Nagel Rasmussen to help me by playing some simple chords on her new accordion, upon which I could improvise with the voice while I laid out a tablecloth, set the table and prepared the bed. Small domestic duties that suited Vera. The big puppet from Odin Teatret’s performance *Andersen’s Dream* sat on the ground, dressed as in a photograph of Eugenio as a child. My mother had knitted a small sleeveless pull-over and sewn a pair of breeches. Vera was telling the story to the puppet as if it was her child, but when she began recalling the night in which her husband died, the actress Sofía [Monsalve] arrived dressed exactly as the puppet and took its place sitting on the floor. Vera placed the puppet on the table which then became the father’s death bed.

Eugenio had meticulously told me about that night when Vera had sent him to look for ice for his dying father: the shop would be closed, but he should knock on the door until the owner came down to open it. It seemed to me a fantastic image, and I wanted to use it. For a long time I had not understood what the ice was for. Later on I realised it was to bring down the father’s fever. Now in the scene, since it was Sofia and no longer the puppet who represented Eugenio as a child, I could send her to get the block of ice. I made her run around the stage again and again, as Eugenio had done that night in the narrow streets of his village, while Vera unleashed her inner emotional chaos, going from her falsetto singing to her other deeper and stronger voice.

In this scene I was concentrating on many small concrete actions: laying the table, folding a napkin, washing the corpse, covering it with a sheet. I liked these simple actions. But they too became routine which had to be broken down with the director’s help. I was unable even to put a plate on the table in a natural way. Here the small bronze bell didn’t help since the problem was different: to synchronise the actions with the text in Basque and Danish. I invented small “mistakes” that could help me: an action a little bit delayed or anticipated, a small counter impulse, or just a thought like I want to go to the right, but I go to the left. These small “mistakes” became conscious musical accents, until each action had its own identity. It was a slow process that took time; there was no short cut.

Thus Vera was able to find her character and begin her journey in *The Chronic Life*. 
Run and buy a block of ice

Donna Vera: "I come from an aristocratic family. I was very young when Emanuele, my husband, died and I became a widow. We lived in Gallipoli, a small fishing town. We had two children: Ernesto and Eugenio. Death had never scared me, but nevertheless for many years I slept with a gun under my pillow because I was afraid that they would come and execute my husband. He had fought on the wrong side during the war. I keep it as a memory. I never felt at home in Puglia, it was not my world. Now I’m old and my close family is a poor family from Peru who lives in my home and takes care of me."

Choosing Donna Vera, I had hoped that the performance would be about Eugenio and would tell the story of a boy from Gallipoli. Not to find the answers about this boy’s biography, but to challenge our habit of telling always open and ambivalent stories, and thus to put names to the people who are abused, die, speak and sing in our performances.

But it turned out that the performance didn’t deal with Eugenio and his life. Maybe the theme is too close. "It’s not interesting", Eugenio would say.

Maybe because he is still running through the streets of Gallipoli with a block of ice, afraid of not arriving in time to face death.

Yet the performance is also about Eugenio.
One evening, in Mexico City, I asked him if he could tell me about his mother. Next morning, and the day after, we sat down facing each other and he spoke about his mother and himself for five hours.

About the block of ice and the night when his father died.

About the well in his house and the eel in it which should not be caught since it prevented the water being contaminated and the whole Barba family dying.

He told about his uncles, obsessed by the idea of suicide, and of how three of them succeeded after a few attempts.

He told about himself, the only one in the family going to church every day and repenting his sins even when there was nothing to repent.

He talked about Vera, who, as a woman, could not follow her husband's coffin to the cemetery and who, as a widow, could not be seen on the street after sunset without being accompanied by one of the men of the family.

Vera, a strong woman with a bizarre sense of humour, who gave in to her destiny without ever losing her dignity, who never married again and who, all alone, taught her two children to move about in this world.

All these stories are also in The Chronic Life. Hidden under many layers, but they are there: anguish, happiness, pain, guilt, death, hate, humour, smiles, suicide, songs, music and loneliness.

Donna Vera: "Do you remember the night when your father died? Your father and I had been invited to a friend's house. 'We will come back at nine', we said. It was ten o'clock and we were still not back. You and your brother heard the sound of a horse's hooves, of the wheels of a carriage, upset voices. Unknown men carried your father to his bed. I turned to you and Ernesto and said: 'Don't be afraid'. To you I said: 'Run and buy a block of ice, then go to the doctor and tell him that your father is very sick. Then run to the priest and ask him to come with the last sacrament. Hurry up.'

Eugenio was ten years old the night his father died. Today he is 74 and the piece of ice has not yet melted.

Translated from Danish by Erika Sanchez and Judy Barba
A rock musician from the Faroe Islands (Jan Ferslev) and Nikita, the Chechynan refugee (Julia Varley): “I have reached the border of Wonderland. Here people eat without being hungry and drink without being thirsty.” Photo: Jan Rüsz
For me the making of The Chronic Life has been marked by death. Now that the performance is almost finished, I have begun to see it as a protest against the inevitability of death and an affirmation of the need to go on, despite everything.

We were not required to prepare anything before we started rehearsals. In contrast to the creation of Andersen’s Dream - for which each actor was asked to generate a structured performance of one hour and to direct the others in one of Hans Christian Andersen’s stories - for what was initially called XL (Extra Large), we were only invited to come to the first rehearsal prepared to confirm whether we were still able to make a performance together. Each one of us is a director, a teacher, a leader of projects and groups. Over the years, our defects have flourished, our patience has diminished, and it has become more and more arduous and challenging to surprise and stimulate each other. Collaboration does not come without a price.

On the first day we were given the task of staging a funeral. It was difficult to escape the habit of the previous years where the director had worked only with minimally structured material proposed and prepared by the actors. From the youngest to the oldest, with the exception of the apprentice Sofía Monsalve who had just joined the group, each of us had to imagine and organise a funeral ceremony with the intention of defiling what we most revered, going against authority and instigating a personal protest. The only object that was present from the beginning was a long box completely covered with cloth. Eventually this turned out to be a transparent coffin - looking as if it was made of crystal - that contained water and eels. One day Sofia had to submerge herself in that water.

The small Blue room at Odin Teatret where we rehearsed was soon filled with all kinds of props and musical instruments that we placed in a sort of storeroom at the back. I remember that the first run-throughs started with a long sequence of entrances and exits that enabled us to bring in the objects and cover the coffin with coloured cloths, in a relaxed way, as if we had all the time in the world. Eugenio Barba explained that the spectators would arrive gradually during
this preparatory phase. The act of arranging the cloths precisely on top of each other was reassuring; for a long time it gave me a succession of concrete procedures to rely on, that allowed me to conceal death from myself and the others. I didn’t want to think about death and I reacted strongly to the fact that I was being asked to do so.

In saying that the making of *The Chronic Life* is marked by death, I am referring to the loved ones that we, and I, have lost during the years in which we have rehearsed this new performance intermittently: first the Chilean actress María Cánepa, a dear friend; then Claudio Coloberti’s wife, Silvia Mascarone (I made theatre with Claudio in Milan in my youth and he now works on Odin Teatret’s Archives); then Marco Potena, my mother’s partner for three decades, almost the amount of time I have lived in Denmark; then Tony D’Urso, the photographer who accompanied us on many of our most adventurous tours and whose photographs have become icons of theatre; and then Torgeir Wethal - one of the founders of Odin Teatret and the first person in the group with whom I made contact - left us. Torgeir participated in rehearsals until three weeks before he died.

In addition, there have been other less painful, but significant, disappearances: Frans Winther, who has worked at Odin since 1987 as a musician, left the production, and at a certain point the director “killed” the character I had created, so that another could be born. All these rites of passage, which belong to the dynamics of life steadfastly continuing its course, were tough hurdles to overcome. Sometimes what is cut or discarded in rehearsals, seems a waste, at other times I understand that everything colours the final result, even if this is not perceptible on the surface.

María Cánepa’s funeral was special. I was not able to be there, but I was told about it. Her ashes were thrown into the Pacific Ocean, and the sea which that day was honouring its name with a poised aspect, suddenly produced a huge wave and threw the ashes back. “Her last theatrical act,” commented her second husband Juan Cuevas. María had already bid farewell to the people close to her with a recording of poems in gratitude for the human warmth that surrounded her. She talked of her life in theatre with the disarming naivety that characterised her: affection can only be reciprocated with affection. She devoted herself to her work, obeying the director and interpreting the role. After an acting career spanning 60 years, she would say, if she were asked, that she would live her life in exactly the same way again.

Silvia Mascarone’s was the first dead body I have ever seen. I left for Turin to be with Claudio while, to reinforce its tight bond with Holstebro, Odin Teatret was making a labyrinth-like performance throughout our theatre to inaugurate a
local project called *Interference*. There was a strangely sweet smell in the room. Silvia’s husband, Claudio, said to me: "Look how beautiful she is". It was true: beautiful, white and motionless. She was there, but absent. Was it she? During the funeral, on a sudden impulse, her son Camillo took a photograph of his smiling mother and showed it provocatively to all those present as if to say, "Look at her, how full of life she is!" Lucio Battisti sang piercingly from the loudspeakers "*Innamorato, sempre di più*". I took Claudio in my arms and danced with him. I try to hug him as often and as much as I can.

I cried for Marco Potena the first time one day as I was driving to the theatre. I had to stop. It is so unjust, I screamed silently to myself, it is so unjust that he is alone in intensive care in the hospital and that my mother cannot be beside him, to hold his hand and make the most of every last available second. It was so unjust, for him and for her. But our world is sustained by rules and regulations; individuals and relationships don’t count, there is no time, money or space for tenderness and shared silence. Making theatre helps me to protest against all of this. It’s not much, I know, but the action is still necessary.

One evening, after a rehearsal in the White room, we gathered to drink some hearty, crimson wine, the kind Tony D’Urso liked. As we drank we thought of him, recalling anecdotes from the Moneda Palace in Chile, from minibus journeys with nuns hitchhiking in Sardinia, from film shoots in Carpignano Salentino and Holstebro, from his wish to chat first thing in the morning in the house of Sir Alto, and, most of all, from the first time in Belgrade when he photographed *My Father’s House* clandestinely from the cracks in the ceiling. I had seen him recently in Bologna, at Teatro Ridotto, where he told me how, unexpectedly, his illness had opened new work possibilities for him: he was eternally poor and optimistic. Tage Larsen went to Milan to represent us all at his funeral.

I was in a bar in Scilla in Southern Italy, having coffee and a bun for breakfast, when Eugenio received Roberta Carreri’s phone call announcing Torgeir’s death. He passed away a few minutes ago, he said. I will never forget that bar, the open newspaper on the table beside the coffee cup, Eugenio standing by the counter to pay, the sudden silence that enveloped me, holding my face in my hands, our gaze lost in space. Roberta and Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Alice Carreri Pardeilhan and her husband Erik, were with him: "Thankfully" I thought in a corner of my mind. Then another undeclared reflection surfaced: although for months I had been denying the possibility that he would die, it was good that the end came so quickly. Torgeir was able to maintain his dignity, sense of timing and smile until the last moment. The participants of the Eurasian Theatre University session awaited me. Still confused and shocked, I climbed the stairs to Scilla’s
castle where we were working. The Indian storyteller, Parvathy Baul, who was teaching, saw me and understood. She asked me to join in the song and dance with the participants. I had to concentrate on the steps and notes. Then it was my turn to lead the work. Afterwards, all my thoughts were focused on Roberta and the group. How would we be able to continue rehearsing the performance and watch the video in which Torgeir also appeared in order to remember the scenes that had already been fixed? Everything changes in a second: have and have not, Eugenio always tells us. It is important to commemorate those who have left us, but it is necessary to celebrate life. We have to continue.

Commitment to work has always helped us at the most difficult times: returning to the training room when Eugenio abandoned the rehearsals of *Ashes of Brecht*; producing *Theatrum Mundi* for the ISTA scheduled in Portugal when Sanjukta Panigrahi died; rehearsing when couples in the group were divorcing and their children were demanding that choices be made. In this particular situation, we all felt the obligation to finish the performance, and this helped us not to be defeated by the unacceptable. Torgeir is present in *The Chronic Life*, even if this will not be apparent to most spectators.

It has always been difficult for me to endure someone morbidly directing attention towards him or herself. The first theme proposed by the director made me feel like this. I reacted very badly. I wanted to escape from the workroom. I tried to be inconspicuous and feel as little as possible. At the same time I could not give up being part of the performance and therefore of the group. After all, Odin is my life. How could I continue to exist outside and alone? I felt trapped.

For my "funeral ceremony" I arranged a cleaning situation, as Eugenio always does for our theatre’s important events, with interludes where anecdotes about past tours and performances were shared. The actors had to polish the silver I brought from home, narrate two stories and eat a water soup with a fork, following a tale Marco Potena had once told Eugenio. Only Sofía could eat with a spoon. Having joined our group, the youngest was confronted with a simpler life than the one we had experienced so many years before, yet more difficult in another way because she was alone amongst dinosaurs. I planned a game of "pretty statues" and asked everyone to hide the silver all over the room. I was inspired by an exhibition I had seen in New York of paintings Pablo Picasso made in his eighties, full of irreverence and recklessness.

At the end of the second week of rehearsals my torment reached its peak. On Friday night I couldn’t sleep. I absolutely had to find a way out. I could not keep on taking refuge in a corner of the room, enveloped in the heavy sadness caused by the theme Eugenio had given us in an attempt to break taboos and habitual responses. His provocation, intended to shake up the group, had
paralysed me. I refused the implicit blackmail in “if we don’t succeed in working together the huge effort of maintaining the group makes no sense”. I was embarrassed by the improvisations and caricatures of people and situations that seemed to amuse the others. I was tired of being told that we must not speak in the rehearsal room while the director’s every decision was explained and justified by long speeches asserting a choice that was changed again the following day.

That Friday I succeeded in falling asleep only at dawn, when I decided, I don’t know why, that I would appear at the next rehearsal as a man with a moustache. It was the greatest protest I could conceive and, simultaneously, a concrete proposal. I suddenly felt light.

Saturday was a day off. I left my home in the countryside and went to town, to Holstebro. I was excited, like a mouse dancing while the cat is away. I entered a second-hand shop that I had never been in before. I went to the corner that displayed men’s suits and tried one on. It seemed made for me. This must be a sign, I thought, as male trousers never fit me. In addition the white shirt that went with the suit was the right size. In another second-hand shop I bought a wide brimmed black hat. I had everything I needed for a perfect transformation. Above all, I didn’t want to be sad and gloomy anymore. I needed to stop being a burden on the director and the other actors.

At home I armed myself with glue and tape to manufacture a pair of moustaches and a wig that would look as if I had short hair under the hat. I had kept a lock of my hair for many years and I used it. The texture and colour had changed, but my enthusiasm wasn’t restrained by such details. These are the moments of the creative process which I love most: I invent props and costumes that I know are too primitive to be used in the future, but which give me ideas.

When I entered the workroom, my moustache trembled slightly: I was trying to remain serious and not laugh. Composure was important so that the moustache, barely held on with tape, wouldn’t fall off. Above all I had to avoid sweating. I remember the feigned smiles of my colleagues, the observers and the director’s assistants, all gathered in the Blue room waiting for Eugenio. When he entered, he exclaimed: “You look exactly like your father!” And he continued the rehearsals as if nothing had happened. For me, though, everything had changed.

I had decided that my man would always walk with his arms held parallel and a slightly bouncing step, like his brother, the Norwegian worker character created by Geddy Aniksdal, an actress at Grenland Friteater. Whether calm or in a rush, my man always proceeded with his arms swinging together. I was no longer Julia, sad, dark and heavy, but a character who was allowed to make all kinds of comments. I was free to behave badly and protest through an exaggerated, emphatic, non-naturalist behaviour, which I composed carefully and theatrically.
There was the risk that someone would not like my proposal, but it could not be immediately rejected, because it was an expression of commitment; it revealed a way forward, it was a signal to be interpreted. Certainly it was in opposition to the original instruction: create a funeral ceremony with restrained and non-theatrical actions. I had a new vocal task too: how to lower my tone and be masculine.

The next day Iben came to rehearsal wearing an elegant dress. We had a photograph taken arm in arm, as a couple. During the run-throughs we improvised using the characters that had started to materialise. At times I was bewildered in choosing the text. Should the words and the gender be determined by Julia or by the man with the moustache? I started to like the man. One day, during a tour to Istanbul, I bought him a pair of elegant handmade black and white shoes. The two old men, owners of the dusty shop, looked at me with curiosity as I happily tried on those men’s shoes. I placed a scarf that a friend had given me many years previously round his neck. Jan Ferslev lent me a real theatrical moustache with proper glue. This elegant man was acquiring many details. I decided he was wealthy and called him the Uncle from America to distinguish him from the poor Norwegian worker who had been one of his original inspirations.

Nando Taviani, Odin’s friend and literary advisor for 40 years, spoke of the various ways of limping. His talk reflected his long conversations with Eugenio, in search of a way forward. And then, after having introduced Jacob’s story from the Old Testament, Eugenio asked us to prepare a scene entitled “The struggle with the angel”. Unlike Eugenio, who spent his childhood in a Southern Italy permeated by Catholic rituals, as a little girl I had little contact with the religious world. Biblical references don’t arouse curiosity or resonances in me. I wanted instead to speak of María Cáñepa, the Chilean actress who had recently died. I wanted to give her voice and keep her alive through theatre. In my "struggle with the angel" scene, María became a guardian angel who protected and encouraged me.
Some time went by before I had the chance to present the scene I had prepared. I even thought that the director had forgotten about it, as happens sometimes when both he and the actors hurry off in other directions and we decide not to remember on purpose. I had opened a big cardboard box that lived on a high shelf in my changing room. Props belonging to *Strings of Voice*, a performance project of mine aborted some years earlier, had emerged from it: balls of golden thread and rope, knitting needles, cloths in various colours and an Arabic window of inlaid wood. I decided to use them with some sea-shells and a small silver jug full of salt water, and added newspaper pages with photographs of María Cánepa’s wedding and seaside funeral, while I related episodes from her life and quoted love poems from two books by Pablo Neruda which had been given to me as a personal gift. I also used her pearl-grey suit.

After María’s death, Juan, her second husband, 20 years her junior, had come to see me in Uruguay and given me the jacket and skirt. María had worn them three times: to receive a prestigious prize from the Chilean government; to read poetry in a recital at the third Transit Festival in Holstebro, and to marry him. He wanted me to keep them. Thanking him, I asked Juan to write down some episodes from their life together, acknowledging my desire to one day make a performance about María.

The skirt and the jacket were much too small for me. I would never have managed to get into them. When I was preparing the scene of the struggle with the angel, I decided to underline the fact that there were two pieces of a garment dangling from a hanger, taken out of a cupboard to evoke the past. I placed a long red ribbon inside the jacket so that it would unfurl, and then I fixed some positions inspired by the autobiographical story recorded by María. At the end of the scene I cut the ribbon, poured some drops of water from the small silver jug onto my feet and improvised to the music from María’s tape. I finished lying down on the ground or - in my imagination - on the bottom of the sea. I was reminded as well of the suicide of the Argentinian poet Alfonsina Storni, and of the text of a famous song that recalls that event. I worked in my changing room, in a very restricted space.

I presented the scene one evening, after working hours. Only Eugenio and his assistants were there. After years and years of experience, I wonder why I still feel excitement and fear when I have to show something new. I was red in the face, breathless and my voice trembled. I was wearing my ordinary clothes because it had been decided at short notice that I would present my actor’s material and I didn’t want to lose the chance. For those watching, it was probably my nervous trepidation that suggested a strong motivation behind a proposal that was still theatrically weak. I unfurled a ball of wool and paused along the path...
marked by the thread to read poems by Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, to recount some episodes from María’s life that her husband Juan had described and sing a couple of songs in Spanish. Following María’s recorded voice, I performed the fixed score holding the pearl-grey suit. In addition to my fear, I believe that it was the quality of María’s voice that made an impression.

At the end of the first period of rehearsals and before the next phase of work, Eugenio asked everybody to prepare their own character’s story and choose a name. We had all interpreted the scene of the struggle with the angel in our own way, using the fertile path of misunderstanding. Each of us also had to learn an hour of music and songs. To me in particular Eugenio said: “If you want to tell María’s story, you have to create a narrator who is very different from her. It cannot be you, and you cannot be her.” I decide that María’s story will be told by the Uncle from America and I gather an enormous number of songs in Spanish and Brazilian. I start transcribing the texts and repeating the melodies: a big effort for me, because my musical memory is poor. While gardening, ironing, driving or sunbathing, using earphones, I sing, endlessly repeating the long sequence of songs, for months on end. Not even a note of these songs will be used in the performance.

Stories by the Mexican author Angeles Mastretta have often been of inspiration to me. Above all the collection *Women with Big Eyes* has helped me give shape and voice to female figures. I had recently read her new book entitled *Husbands*. I was touched by the story of a Lebanese man who, after various vicissitudes, is reunited with the first love of his life, who had emigrated to Mexico. This young woman had married a rich man, who died during their honeymoon trip across the ocean. The first time the Lebanese man had seen the girl, who resembled an angel, was as she sat under a fig tree talking to her younger sister as they did every afternoon. After their wedding, he kept his family by selling cloth, knocking on every door, first with a suitcase and then pushing a cart. He earned enough to buy some land and build a two-storey house with a shop on the ground floor. Another husband in Angeles Mastretta’s book was a gambler: when he meets the love of his life, he throws a card among the folds of her skirt. At the moment of leaving, he says to her: you are the only country to which I want to belong.

I dedicate myself to telling María Cánepa’s story as a moustached man. Only at the end, when I cut the red ribbon that comes out of the pearl-grey dress, do I turn into a woman. I free myself from the man’s suit, loosen my hair and allude to the scene in which I wet my feet with salt water, while slowly lying down on the ground. I enjoy mixing the texts that I have taken from Angeles Mastretta’s stories of husbands with the episodes from María’s life written by
Juan Cuevas. The Uncle from America relates how he arrived in Chile (instead of Mexico) after having sailed for 53 days and having stopped in 18 harbours, and he tells of María, a theatre mad emigrant who was born in Italy. The Uncle from America sells cloth and speaks from behind his counter. During his breaks from work, he plays with a pack of cards and walks up and down moving his arms in unison. I adapt two poems by Pablo Neruda to some music that helps me speak in a low masculine voice. María appears from behind the inlaid window as a blonde puppet head and then turns into a small skull. The cloths and cards, the texts and the suit on the hanger: my moustached man, born out of protest, has introduced many elements that dictate the course of the performance. María - my initial inspiration - will exit from The Chronic Life to appear in another performance called Ave Maria.

We always complain that we don’t have enough time: the director to read, the actors to create material, the musicians to rehearse their music. Taking to heart our past criticisms of his irritable and impatient behaviour, Eugenio promised that during the process of this performance he would restrain himself and show only the amiable side of his temperament. So we establish a period of about two hours every morning called væksthus (the green-house nursery) in which we work freely in the Black room. Eugenio observes, takes notes, reads, and whispers individual comments to the actors. In this time, after a brief warm-up, I put on my Turkish men’s shoes and start the day by crossing the whole space diagonally with the slightly bouncing walk and the parallel swinging arms. My character knows how to walk, therefore he exists! Then I let the music played by the others guide me into an improvisation of dance steps, hopping, ways of sitting on the ground and getting up again, gestures, arm positions, facial expressions and small sequences of actions to sell and show cloth, play with a bicycle wheel, count money, pat my treasure filled pockets, rub my hands, bow to invite someone who no longer exists to waltz with me.

The Uncle from America is usually happy, even if occasionally he spies on things happening behind his back or looks through the cracks of his fingers and despairs. But he soon regains courage: there is always so much to do. I improvise with the cards: I make them fly, I rub them, I use them to clean my hands, wash the floor, cover my eyes, I shuffle them, pick them up in different ways, I sow them as seeds, I build a labyrinth, I offer them, stick them on my tongue, hold them like a cigarette or a fan, I fold them, use them to play different rhythms, I let them caress and kiss, I climb on the pack as if it were the base of a monument, I cry and the cards fall from my eyes like tears... I hang a card with a black ribbon like the photographs I have seen hanging round the necks of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. I fix a sequence
with the photograph-card. I work with the cloth-merchant’s scissors, with what and how they cut; I use them as glasses, a mouth with teeth, a hairpin, a child that walks, a flower that falls. At first, the director does not accept the scissors, then, when an observer explains that in his country they indicate the arrival of war, they are inserted into the montage. But after some months they are eliminated again.

Every day I repeat the sea sequence, barefoot and with closed eyes, with soft, circular movements very different from those of the moustached man. I also repeat the dialogue with María’s suit holding it in my arms. In the meantime I have encased the skirt and jacket in a transparent plastic bag to enhance the image of clothing being mothballed in a cupboard and no longer used. After Silvia’s death, Claudio Coloberti told me that he felt a strong desire to get into his wife’s wardrobe to smell her perfume. During the væksthus I bowed to the suit, I embraced and danced with it, I lay down on top of it, grasping it by the shoulders to roll on the floor. After standing on it, the suit would slap and run after me. I held it on my knees like a “Pietà” then folded it in half again so that it became a garment being put away. I remembered the anger felt by those who have lost a loved person. The image of someone mourning the loss of the beloved was very clear to me, but I noticed that it didn’t provoke associations in the director. I repeated the sequence waiting for the moment in which what was clear to me would also become clear to those who watched.

The burka again! It is not possible! It is persecution! In every performance Eugenio wants to hide my face and cover me from head to toe in black. I understand the desperation of the director who searches for ways to change his actors, but why is the solution for me always the burka? I can’t stand it anymore! Nevertheless I understand that, despite all of my protests, there is one issue on which Eugenio will not be moved: I will have to return to being a woman. The theme of war and soldiers is emerging, and I imagine that the emotional strength of a female voice will be needed. The director’s assistants and the observers who follow rehearsals say that I am not credible as a man, especially when I go down on the floor and get up again. Despite all my efforts, my femininity continues to assert itself. But a burka... no! I cry, I show my fierce desperation and once again I find a solution in protest: the day after a discussion with Eugenio, I bring to the theatre the most aggressively colourful women’s clothes I possess. I don’t participate in the væksthus, instead I hide in the Red room with a big mirror. I put on all the dresses and shawls, one on top of the other. The orange rubber shoes that I wear for gardening are the final touch. They still have earth on them. I keep them that way.

I call Eugenio and present this multi-coloured character to him. I move quickly through the whole room using the same walk, the same arm and head
carta con sotto luce

appese a fili trasparenti - sfilate de punti
Molto mobili - effetti di luce
interagiscono con movimenti di suolo

corta appesa al collo
colletto e cintola che si apre
e mostra costa da gioco

...
movements as my Uncle from America. Eugenio is happy. "It works - he tells me - I like Nikita". He immediately christened this character. The only Nikita I know is Khrushchev, the Soviet Secretary who died in 1971. The confusion of genders continues. Perhaps Eugenio, seeing this woman running about wearing so many clothes, was relieved by the prospect of no longer having to quarrel with me, knowing how hard it was for me to abandon the male identity and with how much determination I resisted the burka.

We agree that for this last week of rehearsals we will not inform the others that I have become a woman again. As a result a lot of confusion arises with the texts: Eugenio works with the idea that I am the wife of a man who dies in war and comments accordingly, but I am still dressed as the Uncle from America who tells of his love for the girl he saw for the first time talking to her sister under a fig tree.

When we start rehearsals again after some months on tour and other activities, Eugenio tells us that the performance is no longer called XL (Extra Large) but The Chronic Life. The story of the war widow that Kai Bredholt has developed begins to determine the development of the action. My story as an emigrant progresses differently too: now I am the widow of a man who went to war, perhaps as a soldier, perhaps as a guerrilla fighter, and who has not returned; perhaps he was killed, perhaps he disappeared. And my Uncle from America has also died. I take off his suit and put it on the hanger inside the transparent plastic bag instead of Maria’s pearl-grey dress. I attach the black and white shoes to the suit, as I can’t abandon them even though they make everything much heavier. At the neck I place a butcher’s hook like those on which the musical instruments hang in the storeroom at the back of the space. Dressed as a woman, a refugee from the Caucasus or the Near East, I hold the man’s suit in my hand. I execute my sequence exactly as when I held Maria’s pearl-grey dress. But I notice that the director now watches me with an expression that reveals that he sees something beyond my actions: this is a good sign. The Uncle from America’s grey suit continues to live in the performance and accompanies me when I tell the story of my marriage and my wedding night. At the end, after a shot has been fired, it collapses to the ground and a soldier drags it offstage.

Every morning I cross the whole stage space with the walk with parallel arms and I cover the coffin-box at the centre with cloth. This way I feel that, even

Nikita, the Chechnyan refugee (Julia Varley): "The last time I saw you, you were wearing a uniform. You said to me: ‘You are the only country I want to belong to and defend’.”

Photo: Rina Skeel
though my character has become a woman, it still exists. But now I am a refugee, someone who looks with wonder and envy at a country where people eat when they are not hungry and drink without being thirsty. I am the person who, halfway through the performance, is accepted into this country of milk and honey with a ceremony that makes me limp and allows me to board the "raft" of prosperity. My story does not allow me to be centre stage from the beginning of the performance. So suddenly, one day, Roberta has to cover the box with cloth that I pass her from outside. And then, during open rehearsals at the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw in Poland, Eugenio explains that I don’t belong to the same space as the others and asks me where I might present myself. Once more I am desperate, this time at the idea that I will not even be allowed to walk across the space once and that I will be relegated to the narrow corridor in front of the spectators, permitted to go on the stage only when it is already full of people. I succeed in saving my identity and my need for space by suggesting that Tage should throw me out. This clarifies both Tage’s role and mine.

Next, in order not to be simply a pathetic refugee, I must display some malice. I am given the task of mistreating Sofía, the only person to have less power than me. I am supposed to be irritating as I run along the narrow corridor between the spectators and the stage which results in me hitting people’s legs. One day I burst out crying. The observers/spectators were looking away from me as I approached at full speed. In a fraction of a second I realised that I risked hurting them if I stumbled. I screamed and immediately afterwards the tension made tears come to my eyes. At the end of rehearsals one of the director’s assistants, Ana Woolf, said: “I don’t like to see you cry”. What had happened? When the performance is still not fixed and embodied, every step, action, reaction, requires total attention. The run-through is a situation of continuous risk, during which I am extremely tense in order to interact, absorb and remember. Unexpected problems that have to be resolved instantly explode like a ball that has been blown up to the point of bursting; they hit like a sudden punch, because sensitivity is at maximum intensity. But to cry is also a way of protesting, of making the director understand that the problem of needing to avoid the spectators’ legs is real.

From one day to the next the space changes totally. Instead of the spectators sitting in a U on three sides of the "raft", they are now on two sides facing each other. A big void opens in front of the "raft", previously the actor’s only stage space, and this void must be filled. During the rehearsal Eugenio runs from one actor to the other to change the spatial relationships that we have learned in the past months. We try to follow his instructions understanding very little of what is going on, adapting our timing to the others as well as we can. When we
resume rehearsals after a week’s break, I am amused to see the director’s bewilderment as he watches his actors’ total confusion. We seem like zombies who have ceased to recognise the reality around them. The new space has cancelled all references and we don’t remember the simplest sequences. Months of work seem to have dissolved. Texts, music, songs, actions descend into chaos; nobody manages to be precise, definite, incisive. We continually turn to Ana Woolf, the assistant who notes even the smallest changes every day during rehearsals: “What happens now? Where should I go? What is the next scene? What do I have to do? What do I say?” I wonder if we will manage to go on. The next day we pick up detail after detail to reconstruct the territory in which we can feel at home.

The empty space in front of the “raft” occupied by the other actors becomes mine. I start drawing on the ground with the cards. The drawings are moved from the floor to the black wall behind me. I think of the Ka’ba and my cards give shape to a collection of photographs, but also to the frame of a door that Sofía and the violinist Elena Floris will use to exit. In this way the key that Roberta uses acquires another function. But I don’t enter through the door. Pierangelo Pompa, another one of the director’s assistants, has suggested that I crawl in with a saucepan that will later indicate that I have trespassed into the storeroom at the back of the “raft” and made it my home. While I am working on “my” home, one day, a television appears.

With every new performance we confront the problem of language. After the experience of *Andersen’s Dream* and the difficulty of translating the Danish texts into the language of the country where we perform, Eugenio wants to avoid this problem. He imagines a text that need not be understood, that might also be in an invented language. He envisages a performance in which the dramaturgy is not necessarily supported by the text. At the same time, Tage, preparing a work demonstration, states that what interests him now is to work with words and their meaning, with the story and the relationship between voice and actions. Tage has extremely hostile memories of the process of learning texts in Copt and ancient Greek for *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*: there is a danger that he will leave the performance.

I remember *Talabot* and the importance of having a character that narrated and wove the red thread of the plot so that the spectator could follow the turbulent current of the emotional montage. Even though Eugenio insists that we all have to learn our texts in an invented language, something tells me that at the end of the creative process some comprehensible words will remain. After the holidays, Tage is asked to speak in Danish and to use poems by Ursula Andkjær Olsen, who has followed our rehearsals and given us permission to use her lines
freely. I decide that my language cannot be invented. To tell the story of the cloth-merchant who emigrated from the country where his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents only knew war, exile and deportation, my words have to have a logic that cannot only be sound. It is not necessary for everyone to understand, but someone will. It cannot be the Arabic that I spoke in Andersen’s Dream. I choose to speak Chechnyan.

It is not easy to find a Chechnyan in Jutland. Through a friend I succeed in identifying someone who lives in Copenhagen. At first he refuses to translate. He tells me that a Chechnyan woman would never accept a man who declares that he would treat her better than a camel, not only because camels don’t exist in Chechnya, but also because the women of his country are emancipated and respected. Also the fig tree must be changed into a walnut tree. In various letters I describe our theatre and the rehearsal process, and I invite him to visit us. When he does come eventually, we discover with surprise that the elegant and polite gentleman is the ambassador of a government in exile. After having seen a rehearsal in which I speak partly an invented Chechnyan and partly English, we spend some hours together to scrutinise the translation word for word, to change the phrases that don’t convince him, to correct my accent and record the correct diction. I devote the next three months to learning five pages of text: it is very difficult. I often think I won’t succeed in the venture. But one line at a time, week after week, repeating the texts frequently every day, I learn all my sentences in Chechnyan.

At the resumption of rehearsals, I have to deal with the problem of dialogue that changes with the creation of new scenes, the difficulty of synchronising the Chechnyan with the dynamics of my actions and finally the real hurdle: sentence for sentence, word for word, what I have learned is cut to be replaced by the language of the country in which we will present the performance. Why waste so much time? Does all this effort make sense or is it sterile exercise? Without this, apparently useless, work I would not have discovered the oscillating head and warm smile that illuminates my face when I recognise the sound of the Chechnyan language as my mother tongue, nor the melody of the foreign accent and the apprehensive way of looking at the spectators when I speak in their language. I would not even have experienced the satisfaction of shouting sa kornie (my dear child) with the roar of a curse. I would lack a myriad details that, at the end of the process, reveal the character’s life and mystery.

But Nikita’s density is given above all by rhythm. Early on Eugenio had encouraged my jester’s air, but then he started to reject my character’s funny Chaplin-like style. It needed pathos. The walk, the arm movements, the body’s lateral positions suggested a happy fool and didn’t evoke empathy. Every day
during rehearsals Eugenio would ask me to reduce the external manifestations of my behaviour, until I understood that what I had to do instead was change the rhythm. So I concentrated on slightly slowing down my tempo, avoiding underlining the end of an action so that the transitions were light, and I continuously added tiny variations and brief pauses to diversify each phase of a gesture. This is the way to achieve a grotesque pathos, without lamenting misfortunes, rather armed with a smile that indicates the will to fight as well as vulnerability. It is important that I don’t lose the essence of the character I have created, even if many of its external forms are disappearing.

I still have a task to fulfil as I write this article: to make a card fly before me and chase after it. All the photographs of our dead, of the relatives of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo or the endless graves in war cemeteries, have to escape from their frames, their black ribbons and headstones, using the tenacity of the chronic life to free themselves from the weight of mourning with the lightness of a butterfly that vibrates in our memory. □
1. The Danish lawyer (Tage Larsen). Photo: Jan Rüsz
2. The rock musician from the Faroe Islands (Jan Ferslev). Photo: Tommy Bay
3. The Danish lawyer (Tage Larsen): “Everyone has a right to live, a right to die, a right to wash up, a right to shop.” The rock musician from the Faroe Islands (Jan Ferslev): “Those who have knowledge, don’t need to sacrifice themselves.” Photo: Tommy Bay
4. The Italian street violinist (Elena Floris). Photo: Jan Rüsz
5. Two mercenaries (Donald Kitt, Fausto Pro). Photo: Tommy Bay
6. The Danish lawyer (Tage Larsen). Photo: Jan Rüsz
We have just eaten supper and are still at table when I mention to Torgeir my dream of having a family grave for Odin Teatret here in Holstebro, where we’ve worked and lived for a lifetime. It’s 2003 and we are working on the performance *Andersen’s Dream*. For the creation of my physical scores I have bought an urn, my own urn, and I have created a scene with ashes. Seated on the other side of the table, Torgeir listens to me and smiles, in silence. Death is simply a lack of life, for him only life exists.

The beginning of a new performance has often been compared to the beginning of a new life. Our performances have only ever been conceived with just the actors and the director present, no-one else, in an atmosphere full of trepidation and intimacy. For *Andersen’s Dream*, Eugenio had seeded our fantasy in diverse places: in his office in Holstebro, in a hotel room in Moscow, on a restaurant terrace in Cagliari.

Eugenio’s "verbal improvisations" have the gift of being so precise and yet so vast as to be able to stimulate the imagination and awaken the interest in every actor. We are all so very different from each other, with a long experience behind us and a sense of weariness weighing heavily on our shoulders. We carry on because we cannot help it. Is it vocation? Sometimes the waters are disturbed as if by the violent thrashing of a fish trying to liberate itself from the hook. Fits of anger. Against our own destiny?

9 April 2011: *Andersen’s Dream* ends with a surprise in Bogotá with Eugenio’s declaration at the end of the performance, directly addressing the spectators: “You have witnessed the very last performance of *Andersen’s Dream*”. For the first time in the history of Odin Teatret, Eugenio closes a production on the stage, in front of the spectators. The axe has fallen. A big tree has been cut down in order to give more light to a younger one which two weeks earlier appeared to have taken root.

2008

Eugenio sets aside the whole of February to begin work on a new performance whose provisional title is *XL (Extra Large)*. He decides to start rehearsals in the
theatre’s smallest working room. We, on the other hand, are many in number. Entering the Blue room, from the left and seated along all four walls, are Roberta, Jan, Iben, Tage, Julia, Frans, Kai, Eugenio, Torgeir, Sofía, the literary advisor Nando Taviani, the actor-technician Donald Kitt, the technician Fausto Pro, and the three assistants to the director, Raúl Iaiza, Pierangelo Pompa and Ana Woolf. Also present are Tina Nielsen (one of Odin Teatret’s former actors who has become a Protestant minister), Anna Stigsgaard, assistant director for Andersen’s Dream, and the young English director, Max Webster.

For the first time Eugenio describes to us the theme of a new performance in the presence of other people. Every moment of the creation of this performance will be witnessed by others. Is it to help Eugenio? Or is it to help us, the actors?

5 February 2008. The Blue room is the only working room with windows. Outside, sprinkled with snow, the thin, black branches of the birch trees stand out. I am expecting a new beginning but when Eugenio opens his mouth, he

The Rumanian housewife (Roberta Carreri): “They gave me the axe, but they hid the tree.” Photo: Jan Rüsz
confronts us once again with a funeral. This time, however, it is not that of a song or an idea - it is his own.

Eugenio says: “One day you come to the theatre and someone tells you that I’ve died. In a letter I ask you to organise my funeral with what you know I love. You will be able to converse with me, tell me things you have never told me. For so many years you’ve all struggled against being crushed by the Angel. You must create a scene in which you show the struggle between Jacob and the Angel. Tell a story full of horror and humor, a story about me, in which you must only refer to me as "him", never "you". You must each prepare your own ceremony, in just a few minutes. You decide how. You will have to direct your colleagues. Sofía, on the other hand, has another story. She has come to look for her father.” This event is the pivotal point around which all of our stories will intertwine. Our pole star is the theme of integration. As usual, the theme for Eugenio’s performance is something topical, burning.

How can we avoid repeating ourselves, after so many years of working with the same people? How do we avoid reverting to our own clichés? Every time we’ve started working on a new performance we have tried to find different strategies to answer these questions. Now, however, instead of trying to escape from the past, we are to dig up fragments of performances that are now extinct: scenes, costumes, objects, songs. Like an organic theatre, we recycle our past, grinding it up to extract a new performance. Everything we pick out is placed in the "store-room" at the centre of the back wall in the Blue room.

We start out from what we already have, offering each item as a gift, a journey into the land of memory.

At the same time we hear Eugenio saying to us: "When you improvise, you are repeating your mannerisms. We have to be able to rid ourselves of these. Details are essential and it is on these that we will work. You do not have to prepare new scores, but you do have to plan strategies to escape from your clichés." Lolito (the angel from the performance The Land of Nod) and the scene with the coins from My Father’s House are among the first fragments to appear. Lolito dominates in the "store-room" where the objects, masks, puppets and musical instruments are stacked. A large quantity of coins fills the space. They are presented as small offerings or a reward for our own actions, but also for those of the other actors. When dropped into metal bowls they produce sounds and rhythms.

"The performance is a great river kept alive by its tributaries: dance and music. But the way we bring the coins to life and cause them to resound is yet another tributary. This performance must be a dance marathon and nobody on the stage should sit still and do nothing”, Eugenio says.

12 February 2008. In the centre of the space we are greeted by a large
rectangular object covered by a cloth. Eugenio says: "Under this cloth there are
two ideas, one is mine and the other is Luca Ruzza's". The cloth is removed and
underneath there is a transparent coffin, like the one in *Snow White*. It is full
of water and in it swims an eel. Eugenio asks Sofía to climb into the coffin. Her
body sinks gently into the water. Her hair floats and billows while the eel slides
along her legs. It seems to be in its element. When Eugenio asks Sofía to come
out of the water, she re-emerges, shivering from the cold and a sense of
repulsion.

The space that Eugenio wants to use measures 5m x 3m. Tiny. Even our
smallest action becomes deafening. We are used to big spaces, and the old circus
horse within each of us makes me and my colleagues exaggerate. Only Torgeir
works in harmony with the space: controlled, always reflective, totally present.
Not a single detail escapes him. Contrary to many of us who, intent on finding the
answers to Eugenio’s requests, often close our ears and minds to what the others
are doing, Torgeir appears always to listen.

Every day, and always in the same order of presentation, we repeat each of
the actor’s proposed scores, together with Nando’s. Every day, Eugenio makes
changes, proposing something new.

During his scene, Tage asks us to repeat the phrases that we’ve heard
Eugenio say ad nauseam over the years. What springs to my mind is, “This
performance has to fit in a suitcase”.

After three weeks of seclusion, the performance lasts 80 minutes. In our
"store-room" fragments of old performances are stacked together with new ideas.
We put them back into the "crystal coffin". We interrupt the rehearsals to go on tour
with our repertoire. We don’t know when we’ll be working on *XL* again. Maybe in
a year. In the meantime, we must create our own characters and at least half an
hour of "musical texture". I don’t have any ideas. I just need to escape from myself.

Coming out of the cocoon of the Blue room doesn’t mean coming out of the
creative state in which we have been immersed. The performance keeps on
growing inside me, provoking sudden desires. In April we’re on tour in Istanbul.
Torgeir and I wander around discovering this extraordinary city suspended
between two cultures. Our path takes us to a road full of music shops and I’m
drawn to one which sells *bindir*, big tambourines made with a seasoned wood
frame and goatskin. Some of them are really beautiful. I go in and start trying
them out for sound. Some are less striking in appearance but have a wonderful
sound, whereas others that are more beautiful produce a sound that is rather flat.
Torgeir is happy to wait for me, reading a newspaper while drinking a beer at a
café opposite. After two hours, I come out of the shop beaming with a splendid
*bindir* in my arms, without even asking myself why.
In June Torgeir and I are in Athens, partly for work and partly on holiday. Walking through Plaka, Torgeir stops suddenly in front of a little shop full of souvenirs where he sees a small instrument hanging. There are others, but it is the one that first caught Torgeir’s attention that we end up buying. It is the simplest looking one, but which has the broadest range of tone and clearest sound. Torgeir says, “You should use this in the new performance”. The baglama, which is what it’s called, is so small that it can fit in my hand luggage. From that moment on, it accompanied me around the world.

During a tour in Peru in the autumn of 2008, I buy some indigenous masks made of thin metal mesh: two female and two male. The female one, with green eyes and pink cheeks, looks completely different from me, and that’s why it’s my favourite. At the market in Ayacucho, I buy two aprons, like the ones worn by the Indian women there, one with red and white stripes and the other with green and white stripes. They have big pockets in which there is room for lots of ideas. In December Torgeir and I go on tour to Kuala Lumpur. Torgeir seems slower than usual. On the last day of the tour we sit next to each other having a Chinese foot massage. At the end of the session the masseur, with a very serious face, says to Torgeir in halting English, “Your body is very tired”. His statement doesn’t surprise us, but the tone of his voice gets us worrying. From that moment Torgeir starts to stop smoking, cutting down by one cigarette a day. By Easter, he has completely stopped and he says to me, “How strange, I don’t miss smoking at all”.

2009

January. A winter of snow and blue skies. I choose to withdraw to create my individual scores in Sanjukta’s tower, surrounded by windows, light and solitude. I climb upstairs with a red suitcase full of objects and instruments, CDs and books of poetry. Timidly I begin to fill the silence, playing my bindir. I explore its different possibilities holding it in different ways and at a certain point the tambourine becomes a tray.

To play the baglama I put on white gloves, whose fingers I have cut off. The baglama is a secret that I share only with Torgeir. I don’t want anybody to know that I’m learning to play it. But after two weeks I need some help and Jan gives me some precious advice.

At home I find some old keys in a drawer. I hang them around my neck with a ribbon. In my dressing room I find an old hand-mirror that was given to me as a present long ago. I use it to put on my Peruvian mask and a platinum blond wig with a page-boy cut that I bought years ago in Hong Kong. I look into the mirror and I don’t recognise myself: it is me and yet it isn’t me. It’s fantastic to feel free
from the slavery of my own appearance. I think of Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*. It’s strange because in that film her hair was black. Quentin Tarantino. Associations. I listen to myself and let myself be guided by associations, however banal they might seem. Our work resides in the elaboration of associations. *Pulp Fiction* takes me to an American diner. Waitresses, stories that are both banal and tragic. The tragedy of everyday life, or the everyday nature of tragedy? How many women with tragic destinies serve us coffee with a smile? I put on a 1950s dress, green with white spots, and on top of it the Peruvian apron with red and white stripes. I find a pair of red patent leather shoes with a white bow and black and white striped heels in a magazine and I order them through the internet. The result is a costume which is decidedly optimistic.

In Sanjukta’s tower I go on a quest for thoughts, ideas. This I do by examining the objects that I brought with me. I give myself a new challenge: to
create melodies with my baglama - melodies for texts written in Danish. I choose some of Janina Kats’s poetry and I set it to music. Eugenio hates hearing me speak Danish. Why do I do it? Because it’s what I need to do at this moment, in order not to recognise myself. And if I were to go in the opposite direction? I remember the songs of my youth. I sing Lucio Battisti and Milly, accompanying myself on the bindir. I know these songs are far too well-known and worn-out. But they are what have sprung to mind here and now, and I am in this here and now. I need to let my thoughts blossom. My task is to discover new possibilities and, if I can, to surprise the director. Then, Eugenio will decide what will work best for the performance.

Torgeir works in another part of the theatre. At home we never talk about our individual work. We like the idea of surprising each other.

4 May 2009. We resume work on XL. We are told that the title of the new performance is going to be: The Chronic Life. "Another of Eugenio’s oxymorons", I think to myself, when I hear it for the first time. It doesn’t strike any chords with me. Maybe it’s simply inspired by his mother’s fate, a lady in her nineties, bedridden, with no memory, and who doesn’t even have the pleasure of recognising her own son.

We’ve had more than a year to create our characters: the characters in a performance, for which we don’t know the story, the context or the text. Helped by Pierangelo’s video recording, we repeat the last scene and then the entire montage. On day two in the Blue room, we are greeted by the new stage set: a floor made of wooden boards with lights that shine through the gaps between them. With a bottle of Polish vodka, Eugenio christens the set "Medusa’s raft" and says that in this performance he doesn’t want visible spotlights. He only wants candles, light sticks and ecological torches. We don’t have to worry too much about the technological side of things. No Jesper Kongshaug light designs. The lighting has to be imaginative and poor. Eugenio informs us that dance, like the music, is one of the central themes of the performance, constantly re-emerging as a form of drone. Another central element will be the fact of being lame. We have to practise hobbling around. This small physical limitation will help us overcome our clichés and will give us new rhythmic possibilities, Eugenio says.

Every day we take turns to demonstrate the results of our research into our characters, our materials, the "sound textures". When it is my turn, I present two characters: Sugar and Lola. They both wear a Peruvian metal mesh mask and a wig: one is blonde and the other is brunette. Sugar plays the baglama, Lola the bindir. For months now both in hotel rooms and at home, I have been practising to learn to play the musical pieces on the baglama without looking at the chords.
Eugenio chooses Sugar and asks me to write her biography. Easy. Her real name: Norma Jones, American, born in Utah, daughter of an Italian woman and a Danish man. Age 60. From 7 to 13 years of age she suffers sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather. By 16, she’s pregnant by one of her classmates. She leaves school. She escapes and goes to live with her grandmother in Louisiana where her son is born. She becomes a waitress in a diner. She gets married and has a daughter. When her daughter is 7, Norma realises that her husband is sexually abusing the girl. (At first I think she should kill her husband, but then I remember that in the US there is the death penalty for this type of crime.) In the meantime, during a car chase, the police kill her 15-year-old son, who was escaping on a stolen motorbike. Sugar’s passion is singing. Eugenio listens and then suggests that Sugar might have cancer of the throat, and it is this that distorts her voice.

When Torgeir shows us his character, I discover that he too is "American" and wears red shoes. Might this be because of the films we watch together? Or maybe it’s the result of our desire to move away as far as we can from the image we have of ourselves, from what we identify ourselves with? Torgeir’s character is an East European spy in the United States. He wears a blue suit with Converse red canvas shoes, a red T-shirt and a red baseball cap. Torgeir’s material is not very dynamic in the space, but has a great interior dynamism. His character attempts suicide in many different ways. He makes repeated attempts but always, at the last minute, life is stronger than his desire to die. Is this the chronic life? Torgeir is a very refined actor. Acting has always been his greatest passion. Over the years, some of us have wondered what we might have done instead of working at Odin Teatret. I’ve never heard Torgeir asking himself this question. He has always embraced his destiny. King of the present, his eyes and heart always wide open to the world, with light steps he has left deep footprints in the hearts of his spectators.

We start working every morning at 8 o’clock in the Black room with two hours of "plant nursery". Here we have the possibility of making the characters we’ve created grow. In the "plant nursery" I visit the space of the various objects:

THE TRAY/bindir - which I use when a waitress and to accompany myself when singing. While carrying it I develop Sugar’s different styles of walking.

THE KEYS. I ask Torgeir’s sister, who at present lives in Yemen, to send me some old keys. They arrive: big and rough, strong and heavy. The idea of the keys is linked to the theme of the door in Kaosmos. It occurs to me that Torgeir’s character in Kaosmos was the man who doesn’t want to die, while in this performance he is the man who does want to die.

THE HANDKERCHIEFS. From the pocket of my apron, a handkerchief protrudes. I use it for polishing, to crush things, to dry tears and to say goodbye...
The handkerchiefs increase in number and I use them to tie my wrists and ankles, to gag and to blindfold myself. I start cleaning glasses and windows.

THE MIRROR. The hand-mirror that I used when adjusting my mask and wig, I now use to illuminate or attract my fellow actors.

To give body to the dance marathon, we take turns in the “plant nursery” to learn steps of the tango and the milonga, in the arms of Ana Wolfs.

My character is starting to come out of her “bubble” and to interact with the other characters. I use the keys to open up their chests and extract their hearts, like a good heartbreaker. I use the hand-mirror to confront them with their own images and defects.

Eugenio suggests that as a waitress I should introduce food that I can offer to the other characters. Food that produces a sound and can be woven into the fabric of sounds being created, together with those of the coins and the dance steps, and the objects of the other characters: Julia’s playing cards, Iben’s sword, Kai and Sofía’s bucket and broom, Tage’s book, Jan’s belt and Torgeir’s broken guitar.

Erect and determined, Sugar walks with small quick steps. Her improvisations have a certain dreaminess about them, where the suggestion of past violence and abuse is ever present. But in her reality there is only space for work and singing.

13 May 2009. The performance space is transformed drastically. Butcher’s hooks have now appeared in the “storeroom”. Objectively they are harmless, immobile, hanging high up and attached to a rope made of tow, yet decidedly disturbing in their starkness. Objects, instruments, and puppets are to hang from these hooks. Suddenly our raft feels threatening.

At the end of this period of rehearsals, I have the feeling that my character is not really necessary to this performance. I have created it to break free from my own mannerisms and to help Eugenio escape from his, but the truth is that Eugenio doesn’t seem to be interested in breaking out of his clichés. On the contrary, he seems to be reaffirming and strengthening them. That is why my character, which is so “different”, doesn’t seem to work, in the sense that it doesn’t have a function in Eugenio’s dramaturgy. But in his talk at the end of the second period of rehearsals for The Chronic Life, Eugenio surprises me when he draws this conclusion, saying, “Now we have the space, the characters. The story is clear: how does a person become integrated? We have Julia’s character who allows herself to be integrated, and Sofía’s who refuses to be integrated. We are free. However, we feel that there is no escape route because we cannot find the key to open the door. The clinking coins are part of the musical symphony that
accompanies the performance, and food is the other element. In this society we eat when we’re not hungry and we drink when we’re not thirsty”. So there I am: Sugar’s keys and food are essential after all.

Eugenio leaves us with individual tasks to fulfil before the next phase of rehearsals in October.

The third phase starts 5 October 2009. We have moved to the White room to allow space for the building of the audience’s tribune. Elena Floris, with her talent and experience as a violinist, has also become part of the ensemble of the *The Chronic Life*, replacing Frans (Winther) who is no longer in the performance.

Eugenio sums up the themes of the performance and asks Julia to change her costume. Her character should no longer be a man, but a woman instead. We all find ourselves in a moment of openness and almost no-one protests.

In the morning we continue with the “plant nursery” and then with the rehearsals, which are always run-throughs, interrupted by Eugenio’s corrections. Sometimes there are periods of tension because we all want to do our best and to use every instant to work on the music or the texts. But in this creative process we need to be aware of the moments when Eugenio is looking for solutions, taking risks. This is when we all need to pay attention, even if the particular scene does not involve us personally. Eugenio needs our help in the form of collective concentration. Torgeir is an expert at this. During run-throughs and work on single scenes, he never thinks of his own work, but remains focused on what Eugenio is doing with his colleagues.

Eugenio asks me to develop the theme of the door/key and to write texts on this theme.

Halfway through October Eugenio starts working on the spectators’ tribune, making it an integral part of the set. Once again we have arrived at the point at which the “boys” become excited about finding technical solutions, and we “girls” become bored to death. We decide that the next phase will be in February 2010.

Two weeks after the end of the third phase of *The Chronic Life*, Torgeir and I discover that the reason for his lack of energy is probably due to a cancer. We listen to the word “metastasis” spoken for the first time by the head of the respiratory department at Holstebro Hospital on 29th October 2009. It is the morning of Eugenio’s 73rd birthday. At noon, together with the other members of Odin Teatret, we all sit at a lavishly set table, listening to speeches, laughter and songs. Eugenio is resplendent at the head of the table. Kai sings a song by Leonard Cohen: “May everyone live, may everyone die, Hello my love, my love goodbye”. I blink away my tears, while Torgeir and I hold hands tightly, hidden under the table. Who are we, we humans, who can conceive the idea of God and
yet be so inhuman with our fellow men; we who can laugh while in pain and cry
with joy.

The morning of the 10th of November we go to the Town Hall to arrange a
date for our wedding after we have lived together for long enough to be
celebrating our silver anniversary. Then to the hospital to hear the results of the
liver biopsy carried out the previous week: small cell lung cancer with secondary
metastases in the liver and a vertebra. Now that we have the diagnosis we need
to find the cure. At the end of the afternoon, Torgeir asks me to summon all our
colleagues to Odin Teatret’s library for a glass of sparkling wine. Then, raising his
glass, he announces his illness and the imminent beginning of his treatment.

19 November, 8.30 am: wedding at the Holstebro Town Hall. 10.30 am: first
session of chemotherapy in Herning.

2010

Eugenio decides not to use the month of February for rehearsing The Chronic Life
as planned, but instead to rework all of Odin Teatret’s ensemble performances,
without the presence of Torgeir. Eugenio wants Torgeir to focus totally on his
treatment and not take part in the impending tours with the old performances.
Torgeir, with his usual ease and kindness, helps us in this harrowing process.

We postpone until May the next phase of The Chronic Life.

From the 10 to 26 May we work in the white room. Torgeir wakes up late and
doesn’t come to the theatre to work in the “plant nursery” or for the first morning
run-through. During the midday break I go home and pick him up. For the first
time in its history, all the members of Odin Teatret have decided to have lunch
together to spend more time with Torgeir. We take turns in pairs to cook. Torgeir
takes part in the afternoon run-through. Eugenio creates new scenes and keeps
making radical changes. He decides that Sugar should speak Rumanian. My texts
are translated. Eugenio asks me to sing a song while I lay flowers on the coffin.
And Sugar sings: “I wanna die easy when I die”. Eugenio says that he cannot find a
place in the performance for the theme of the key, so I abandon the material that
I had prepared with the Yemeni keys. During morning rehearsals, for the sake of
continuity Eugenio asks me to play the part of Torgeir. This means that for me
every rehearsal is different. But for the painstaking presence of Ana Woolf, who
constant tells me what to do, I would never have been able to remember all the
changes suggested by Eugenio. Eugenio also gives some of Torgeir’s tasks to the
others.

The last run-through, which is to be filmed, happens in the afternoon and
Torgeir takes part in it. In the confusion Kai says Torgeir’s text by mistake - as he
usually does in the morning rehearsal - before Torgeir, with the gun in his hand,
has a chance to speak. After the rehearsal I knock at Torgeir’s dressing room door. I find him seated at his desk. “How do you feel?”

“It made me feel good, but I was slow.”

“Yes, but it was me who was slow.”

Then he gives me the gun and says, “Give it to whoever has to use it after me”.

A month later, on the 27th of June, Torgeir peacefully stops breathing, after not even two days in hospital. The three women he loved the most in his adult life were at his side, all the time.

The fifth phase of *The Chronic Life* takes place in autumn 2010. In September, I prepare a scene with Jan. It was one of the tasks that Eugenio had set us. I chose to make Sugar sing *Stand by Your Man*. We start with a series of embraces that develop into a struggle in which Jan plays his instrument and I use my dusting cloths and handkerchiefs.

When we start work again on 29 September, we find that the set has been moved to the Red room. We have once again ended up in the biggest room of our theatre.

Instead of crunchy food, Eugenio asks me to use bread. Instead of offering it to my colleagues, I now have to eat it myself. In addition to the two suicide attempts that I have already inherited directly from Torgeir’s character, Eugenio asks me to add a third. I propose eating a glass, but this is not possible while I’m wearing a mask. As a result Eugenio decides to sacrifice the mask with which my character had started out. But I don’t want to go back to being myself! So I decide to use green contact lenses and to wear heavy make-up. Once again the miracle happens: I look at myself in the mirror and I don’t recognise myself. Now I am ready to give up my mask. I sing a new song while I use the turquoise wings: *What a Wonderful World*. I sing it blindfolded before the second suicide attempt. Thus, Sugar has not only inherited Torgeir’s absurd habit but also his implacable optimism.

I carry on finding different moments and ways to eat bread. In the end I just feel sick. That’s it! Sugar is bulimic; therefore she eats all the time and then vomits. Perfectly in keeping with her story.

At the end of this phase, we are due to present the rehearsals as a “work in progress” at the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw. For this reason, from the 20th of October we interrupt the “plant nursery” to concentrate on individual scenes. Eugenio continues to experiment with the space, placing actors on the stairs and among the audience. The problem is that we cannot take up the spectators’ seats.
In Wroclaw, Eugenio works on the performance in the presence of 40 students. One day he completely changes the space, opening it up for the entire length of the room. We find ourselves moving in the familiar river between two banks of spectators.

The fifth phase ends like this: opening up the space once again.

2011

The sixth phase of *The Chronic Life* takes place within the time frame of February and March. At this point Eugenio calls (once again) on Jesper Kongshaug to correct the light design for the performance. The performance needs his intervention to soar to another level. Jesper is both a genius and very straightforward at the same time. Just what we need.

The end of the performance changes a few times. Now we see a ray of hope, thanks to the simple and fresh presences of Sofía and Elena.

Eugenio’s patience sometimes seems to me to be superhuman. He can wait years for results that he has no guarantee of achieving. He does it because he cannot help himself. There is absolutely no doubt about Eugenio’s intelligence, but there is also another kind of intelligence that guides him.

Eugenio chains Jan to his electric guitar. His character is now a rock musician, and so he cannot play the “folk” instruments that he had proposed during the development of the performance. In one scene Eugenio asks Jan to fall onto his back with the electric guitar on top of him. Not once, not twice, not even three times, but repeatedly. I shudder. Jan is in his sixties and doesn’t have any training as a clown or a stuntman. He is a musician. In an effort to protect his instrument, he ends up tearing a muscle and the pain stays with him throughout the rehearsal period, considerably limiting his possibilities. But he carries on. Like me, like the others. Because we can’t help it. Others have left, but we have stayed, embracing our destiny.

3 July 2011. A year ago we were celebrating Torgeir’s funeral. The birth of *The Chronic Life* runs parallel to his illness and his death. In this performance, for me his absence is intensely present. My character has inherited an essential part of his character.

The self-destructiveness of some of Torgeir’s characters was the fruit of an exuberance for life. It appears grotesque and cruel that an actor, at the end of his life, should create a character with a suicidal mania. Like a successful cross between the Buddha and Prince Myskin, Torgeir persisted in a serene optimism which filled him with light until his very last breath. I, who have shared the last 28 years of his life, have never heard him utter a single word about his own death.

Torgeir started Odin Teatret with Eugenio in 1964, and in May 2010 he
inaugurated the Odin Teatret family grave. There is space for 12 people, but if need be, we will squeeze up and make room for others, just like at birthday parties. □

Translated from Italian by Elena Masoero and Kemal Ibrahim
The Black Madonna (Iben Nagel Rasmussen). Photo: Jan Rüsz
Meaning in Madness

The Blue Room

February 2008

In the beginning there was nothing
in the Blue room
only the sad grey light
through the windows.

The actors came, tired
from years of travels and endeavours,
and the director
surprisingly dressed as a Chinese monk
in faded green,
followed by his assistants and literary adviser.

Then came the hidden story
with its puzzling madness,
and it all began.

From storerooms and attics
the actors exhumed forgotten props
and musty smelling costumes.
Figures and images from past performances
revived in their minds.

In edgy patterns
old scenes were woven with new ones.
After twenty years in a wooden box
the angel Lolito returned to life
with his turquoise wings
and naive features
which looked like one of the actor’s.
And the head of the polar bear Otto
floated over a royal blue velvet cloth,
an old trick
that a circus-clown had taught the actors.

A big aquarium full of water
and a live eel
had been brought from Italy
and the actors covered it
with coloured cloths and fresh flowers,
and adorned it with a seven-armed candelabra
and a bowl full of coins.

"Let the rain come", the director exclaimed
"in affluence"
and the coins flew through the air
and fell on the wooden floor
ruthlessly brutal
while the actors danced in couples,
lingering, with a peculiar sadness.

"To where are we dancing?" they asked themselves
thinking about the performance to come
and their worn-out lives.

"Look, what love has done to me"
they sang to one another,
and the oldest actor
acted out an old scene
in which, pale as if reflecting the moon,
he was born into an unknown world.

And the youngest - in her first performance -
soon became its red thread.
She looked so innocent with her 18 years.
"Let’s blind her", said the director
and tightened a blindfold on her eyes.

Before long, an unbroken sequence
of rough and strange scenes - like figures on a chessboard -
were intently studied by the director,
discussed with the literary adviser and the assistants, in search of a meaning to the madness.

Thus ended the rehearsals in the theatre’s Blue room accompanied by blaring trumpets and the trilling of string instruments.

The Room of Solitude
May 2009

More than one year passed before we again took up the work which we had begun in the theatre’s Blue room. In the meantime every actor - in the intervals between our tours and other activities in Holstebro - had to prepare a dramatic outline with characters, scenes, songs, costumes and props.

The vague silhouette of the character I had sketched during the first rehearsals wore a black skirt and a pink silky dress. A hat with pink flowers covered her head.
The figure appeared so fragile that the least contact or sound would have made her disintegrate. Who was this character, shrunken from every point of view?

In July 2008, during a tour to Malta with Ester’s Book, I bought an imitation of a samurai sword. A good prop, I thought, while I was putting it in my suitcase, hoping not to be suspected at the Danish frontier of planning to behead the Queen.

The sword felt good in my hand, as if made for physical compositions, dramatic postures or surprising actions. I hesitated at length before throwing it above my head, succeeding in seizing it again by the hilt. At other times, the sword fell to the ground on its point, inflicting numerous scars to the floor of the room where I worked all alone.

The shrunken woman had a weapon. But what should be done with her slender voice?

A hissing splinter - thus one might call a tiny piece of wood at the end of a string which produces a humming sound when rotated quickly in the air. I became a storm, a breeze, a tornado, a whirling wind. While the wood fragment flew around me as a bird in a storm, I remembered a copla, an Indian song I had heard in the Andes in Argentina. It matched the object perfectly, like the echo of a human call among the mountains.

In our previous performances we had used Scandinavian psalms that worked well because of Odin’s particular raw way of singing. This time I chose something different: We Stray in the Shadow by Adam Oehlenschläger. I sang it at school and it was one of the dramatic melancholic songs for which I had a weakness.

I accompanied my song with a ron-roco, a string instrument from South America. I also used a small accordion, a present for my birthday. Its chords and the way of mingling song and text were new and stimulating: delicate and crystalline, dissonant and strident, powerful.

My figure’s voices were not Shrunken any more.

When we met again, we first showed our ”materials” to Eugenio and the others. I had an idea for the scenography: every character/actor should stand in a glass case like the manikins in a museum or the saints in a Catholic church. Unfortunately, I was told, the idea had already been used by another theatre group, but it was too good to drop.

At the last moment Kai Bredholt helped me to build a ”glass case” without glass: a platform with four arches of metal wire and a small cross on top. On the back I had attached two white wings. When I stood on it, it looked as if I had wings.

I had not changed the costume, I only replaced the hat with a black headscarf. The tiny Sofía Monsalve was not yet 19, and as well as being the youngest in our theatre, she was also my student. She sat on the floor and handed me the props and musical instruments in the established order.
"Who is your character?", Eugenio asked me after the presentation.
"A saint or perhaps a Madonna", I answered.
"A Madonna?", repeated Eugenio, as if the idea tickled his curiosity. "Hmm - a Madonna."

The Black Room

February 2010

We call it vaeksthus, the plant nursery: two hours at our disposition every morning in the Black room to develop individually our stage figures. How do they move? What clothes do they wear? What objects do they use? The actors fill the room with songs, music and physical actions. We work together, but we rarely relate to one another, and then mostly thanks to the music which is rehearsed in the same space.

It is the most fertile and interesting time during the pregnancy of a
performance. Everything is possible. We actors are at the centre and improvise with objects and physical scores without worrying in which context or scene the materials will be inserted, if they will be used and what meaning they will assume.

The sword, the hissing splinter, the costume, the ron-roco - all are tested, used, developed and improved. Eugenio has imposed only one rule in the væksthus: we must limp.

All the characters must drag a foot, as if someone had made them lame.

One day Eugenio shows me a small image of the Child Jesus which he keeps in his office: the Child wears a brown tunic and three small hands sprout from behind His head like a halo. "Try this for your Madonna", Eugenio suggests.

In The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus, in Kaosmos and in Mythos we used wooden hands carved by a Balinese sculptor. Now I bring them back to life. I take my Spanish shawl and wind it around a Mongolian hat on which I fasten three small wooden hands.

I partially cover my pink dress with a long black waistcoat, and present my Madonna with a small lace handkerchief that she can hold with two fingers, make fly like a bird, and with which she can wipe the blade of her sword or dry the tears on her mournful cheeks.

A small orchestra has gathered in a corner of the room and tries out again and again musical arrangements and songs. Although I don’t automatically follow its rhythm, I feel myself dragged by a wave of energy which permeates my actions and makes them dance: staccato or gently, sudden stops, pauses and counter-impulses that seem to attract or reject my slender character in the Black room whose restricted space I sense as endless.

The puppet Lolito (I have done all I could to help him survive during the transfer from the Blue room) has become my Madonna’s companion. He comes from a previous performance - The Land of Nod - in which he was a naughty and mocking guardian angel. He is rather tall and heavy, and for this reason he produces a certain dramatic effect when I follow the indications Eugenio whispers in my ear. He becomes the Christ, a corpse, a wounded man whom I drag along, raise above my head, embrace on my knees as a "Pietà" or throw over my shoulder as a bundle.

Also for Eugenio - who has followed the development from the first rehearsals together with his small group of assistants - this must be a breathing space, a place of freedom and inspiration. In any case, he gets a lot of ideas. One day he tells me: "Perhaps your Madonna could be black. And speak Latin." Then he adds: "Perhaps Lolito could be a soldier. Let me find him a uniform."

Last but not least: Elena Floris, a young Italian violinist who collaborates with me in Ester’s Book, has joined The Chronic Life.
In the morning, after two hours in the væksthus, we continue elaborating the performance’s structure in the White room. From the very moment we enter, Eugenio holds all the threads. It is the phase in which we actors must mobilise an almost superhuman patience. We are displaced incessantly from the left to the right, in a continuous surge of contradictory information, barely understanding in which direction to move. This is not strange, since even the director is unable to figure out the course of the process and, moreover, considers it a virtue to throw away the compass.
Our two technicians Fausto Pro and Donald Kitt had worked without a pause on the scenic space. They have constructed a wooden floor with a space of a couple of centimetres between each plank through which a primitive light slips out. The planks cover only a little more than half of the performing space and give the association of a raft. All light sources in the performance must be invisible.

We had already prepared a "store" in the Blue room: it was the end wall where musical instruments, props as well as actors, are hung or placed when they are not in action. Some giant hooks make one think of a butcher’s shop or a torture chamber. Also the small platform with the glassless case and the wire arches survived the transfer to the new room, together with the aquarium-table placed in the centre of the floor-raft.

Now comes the long laborious phase in which one scene is connected to another, physical scores and songs are fixed, performed collectively and preferably without false notes, in which nervousness, irritations, frustrations and ambitions battle in order to sink the whole project.

"Perhaps you could be not only a Madonna - Eugenio tells me at the end of the rehearsal period in the White room - but also Kali, the Hindu goddess who destroys, annihilating the demons of falsehood. Perhaps you could speak Sanskrit. Try to learn a couple of mantras."

The Red Room
October/November 2010 - February/March 2011

An era is ended.

Torgeir died of cancer early on a June morning 2010.

We pressed against each other like red blood corpuscles in a wounded body.

The Chronic Life will be the first group performance by Odin Teatret without Torgeir. He who, during the first rehearsals in the Blue room, had presented a scene from Kaspariana, a performance of 43 years ago, with faint sounds and a rare, delicate transparency.

Just a sound, and a life companion has disappeared.

The actors no longer sing "Look, what love has done to me". The text of Junus Emre, the Turkish Sufi, has long been cut away. Other things have been kept longer. But by now they have also been eliminated: texts, songs, fragments of a scene and entire scenes, the hissing splinter, the white wings, the platform with the case and its wire arches and the cross on top, the eel in the aquarium.

The flood of proposals from the actors and the director has been boiled down to something reminiscent of a broth cube. The surviving scenes stand
sharper and the characters have grown and become more clearly defined, with colours and voices.

My shrunken female figure has shown herself to contain both a black Madonna and a terrifying Hindu goddess, whose features I vaguely recognise, and only in the depth of myself.

The Chronic Life wandered through all the working rooms of our theatre. Their walls have been the silent witnesses of our struggles: scenes which became an inextricable tangle, our crises and Eugenio’s desperate fits of anger when his actors, time after time, were unable to grasp his simplest indications. The walls have seen us stagger around in costumes soaked in sweat, with bruises on body and soul, at times in an empty blackness. But - I ask myself: have we anyway, and against all odds, succeeded in discovering that crack, that glimpse of tenderness and reconciling warmth, like a thread of light in the dark?

The answer is concealed in a room which we don’t yet know. It is not blue, black, white or red but iridescent, changing colour and meaning each evening in the meeting with the spectators. □

Translated from Danish by Judy Barba
The Chronic Life

Scenic space
ODIN TEATRET - NORDISKTEATERLABORATORIUM

Odin Teatret was created in Oslo, Norway, in 1964, and moved to Holstebro (Denmark) in 1966, changing its name to Nordic Theatre Laboratory/Odin Teatret. Today, its members come from a dozen countries and three continents.

The Laboratory's activities include: Odin's own productions presented on site and on tour in Denmark and abroad; "barters" with various milieus in Holstebro and elsewhere; organisation of encounters for theatre groups; hosting other theatre groups and ensembles; teaching activity in Denmark and abroad; the annual Odin Week; publication of magazines and books; production of didactic films and videos; research into theatre anthropology during the sessions of ISTA (the International School of Theatre Anthropology); periodic performances with the multicultural Theatrum Mundi Ensemble; collaboration with the CTLS, Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies of the University of Århus; the Festuge (Festive Week) in Holstebro; the triennial festival Transit devoted to women in theatre; children's performances, exhibitions, concerts, round tables, cultural initiatives and community work in Holstebro and the surrounding region.

Odin Teatret's 47 years as a laboratory have resulted in the growth of a professional and scholarly milieu characterised by cross-disciplinary endeavours and international collaboration. One field of research is ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) which since 1979 has become a performers' village where actors and dancers meet with scholars to compare and scrutinise the technical foundations of their scenic presence. Another field of action is the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble which, since the early 1980s, presents performances with a permanent core of artists from many professional traditions.

Odin Teatret has so far created 74 performances, performed in 63 countries and different social contexts. In the course of these experiences, a specific Odin culture has grown, founded on cultural diversity and the practice of "barter": Odin actors present themselves through their work to a particular milieu which, in return, replies with songs, music and dances from its own local culture. The barter is an exchange of cultural manifestations and offers not only an insight into the other's forms of expression, but is equally a social interaction which defies prejudices, linguistic difficulties and differences in thinking, judging and behaving.