

THE COMEDY AND POETRY OF SURVIVAL

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As a young girl on my way to high school one day, between the crazy, loud, staccato noises of morning traffic jams I heard a chafed sound from a saxophone. I turned and saw a homeless man playing the sax lying on a bench in the park. From that moment we started daily conversations about our struggles and joys in life. One morning, on a very cold winter day, he paused in the middle of a sentence and started looking around, searching for something. "Where is it?" he asked. I had no idea what he meant. Then he saw his white plastic cup of beer on the ground, and shouted happily "There it is!" He quickly picked it up, put it to his ear like a phone and said: "Hello?" and went silent for a few moments. He turned to me and said softly "Excuse me, please, It's GOD calling." He got back on his "phone" and continued: "So great to hear from you!... What? ... You've got the flu?... You would like me to take over your job for this week?" Hearing the great news that he would become the leader of the world for a week made him jump up. On his bare feet, he started pacing back and forth with large steps. In a deep voice he asked God: "So, you want me to call the United Nations and end all wars, tell the rich to give money to the poor and create more beer? Consider it done. Go to bed and take a rest. I'll do the job down here!" He hung up turned to me and said: "Sorry, duty calls" and proudly walked off.

This man made me laugh and moved me at the same time. This incident showed me in a very vivid way how people can use their imagination and ingenuity to survive in a harsh world. He turned reality up side down by turning a simple cup into a phone. Using his imagination he transformed himself from a social outcast into the most powerful man on earth with a hotline to God and in charge of beer-production.

I always longed for a theatre where actors could use imagination and ingenuity to create characters that are larger than life: characters struggling to survive in comic, tragic and mad ways--Just like the homeless man. Even though I studied at a four-year Acting conservatory, the moment I participated in a three-day workshop in the Commedia dell'Arte, I was immediately blown away by this form of actors' theatre. I discovered a theatre in which an actor could –by using just one mask- transform and create a whole universe in one instant. A universe filled with characters constantly using their ingenuity in order to survive. As an actor this form of theatre offered tools to discover all scales of emotion, thought and rhythm. It showed me how masks could awaken virtuosity within actors. With these techniques and our imagination we could create a tragic-comic universe that touches and shows humanity in all its complexity. For me as an aspiring actress, Commedia dell'Arte offered everything I wanted.

I decided to dedicate my professional life to this theatre. I started learning as a student and eventually developed a modern actors training. These workshops are inspired by the Commedia and attended by actors and filmmakers from around the world. This training includes physical transformation, acting emotions from the smallest to the most extreme possible expressions and the psychology of the body. We work on the imagination, musicality, playfulness and timing of acting. The essential element is the mask. The mask unlocks the creativity and imagination of the actor. Putting on a mask makes the body speak. Every action, thought, word and emotion is immediately seen. Working from the body the actor can fill his work with a visceral reality that emanates life. Since the actor is stripped of props and décor he must create everything through mime alone. The audience must understand perfectly and believe where the character is, what he is doing and what is happening. Therefore, this art creates great technical skills and pushes the actor to extreme precision. But the effort to be precise inevitably leads to mistakes. And it is these mistakes, these moments of being lost that are a gift. The actor re-trains himself to play with his own mistakes and incorporate them into the character. This leads to fully alive actors and characters, with all their passions, needs and flaws.

The intensity of responses to the Commedia workshops triggered the realization on a profound level that this theatre doesn't only exist of actors playing archetypal characters, but also of spectators having archetypal reactions. Masks can transport the spectator instantly into another realm of experience and awaken within him his own memories, associations and stories. I had mainly focused on teaching these techniques within the walls of institutions and theaters. Now I felt the urge to step out in to the world and find out where these characters live and survive in today's world. Through the masks I wanted to search and perform today's stories around the world.

Out of this urge the international theatre company Theatre Hotel Courage was born. With our team of actors and filmmakers we tour around the world. In each country we visit, we train and explore with local actors, students, refugees, tribal people, and townspeople from different backgrounds. Together we create performances based on the question: "If the world were a hotel, what would be your place and position in this hotel?" In New York a group of actors said: "We would debate in a conference room full of Dottores and decide how the world should be. Then we would open the windows and give a press conference." In India, a young actress who played with the Harlequina said: "I would live at the hotel secretly without the guests noticing. Early in the morning I would go into each room and put flowers next to all the beds, while the guest are sleeping". In a township in Ghana they answered: "We wouldn't have a room in the hotel. We would be the servants fishing out of the coast. That evening the fish would be served as the cook's own freshly caught specialty."

One day while giving a workshop in Memphis an actor wearing the mask of The Old man, turned towards the audience and a young student immediately broke into tears. I asked him what had moved him and he told me he had served in Iraq. “When the actor turned and I looked into the eyes of an old man, I suddenly found myself back in a battle in an Iraqi village. In the middle of that battle, I turned my gun towards an unexpected sound and looked into the eyes of an old Iraqi man. He was very confused and was looking for his wife and children. He was so completely desperate and lost that he didn’t seem aware that he could easily be hit by all the gunfire. I had to push him to the ground for his own safety, but he just kept staring at me with tears in his eyes. When the actor turned toward me I remembered that moment.”

Command of the mimetic and physical skills of Commedia can lead an actor to greater success in playing and improvising with scenes. An example of this was an improvisation in which the actor playing a general obsessed with war re-created his last great battle. Wearing the mask of Capitano, he proudly enters his beloved warfield, salutes the student audience, and says: “Pay attention and learn about the art of war.” He mimes making a small bush, hides behind it and waits for the enemy. At one point the Captain whispers, “Make the sound of the wind to create some tension.” The audience joins in and whistles like the wind. He raises his head from behind the hill and mimes binoculars. He looks slowly to the left and to the right, but when he looks ahead his whole body stiffens. “The great enemy is approaching!” he exclaims. He crawls to the front and mimes perfectly how he digs a hole, picks up a huge landmine and buries it in the middle of the stage. Suddenly he looks up and his eyes become bigger as he sees that the enemy is very close now. He quickly takes out a grenade and throws it in the direction of the enemy, the audience. His excitement rises and he throws another one. All of a sudden someone in the audience throws a grenade back at him. In a reflex the General catches it, to his own surprise and dismay. He looks at it, looks back to the audience to share the state of shock and screams in a very high voice. He then throws it up in the air, dives behind the hill and holds his helmet in anticipation of the blast. Then the actor does something that shows his virtuosity even more. With his body he mimes the impact of an enormous explosion by pretending he is launched five feet up in the air. At the same time he mimes he is holding on to his helmet that is flying off his head. On top of that, while he is flying through the air he creates a hilarious expression of total bewilderment about what is happening to him. Then the actor takes a moment, looks at the audience and decides to raise the stakes further. The General composes himself and challenges his enemy to hit him again. The now fully alive audience responds by throwing more grenades. The General starts dodging the attacks, hiding his hands behind his back, turning his hips and body as an expert bullfighter. He starts moving in a very staccato rhythm, faster and

faster. Eventually he starts clapping his hands and creates a rhythm out of the war noises created by the audience. His movements transform into an extremely fast and highly energetic flamenco dance during which his hands alternate between clapping the rhythm and responding fire. But all of a sudden he freezes. The actor has realized he stepped on the mine he placed at the start. In a very high pitch he says “Click”. The Capitano looks to the mine and then back to the audience, knowing he can’t escape his fate. He scrapes his throat and starts a big farewell speech. He compares himself to his soul mates, Napoleon and Ceasar. He then explains in minute detail the kind of statue that should be made for him. Then he looks at the student operating the lights and says: “This is my last order. Kill the lights.”

In this world of Hotel Courage we explore as many countries as possible. Together with the local actors we create symbolic hotel rooms representing their stories. We do not impose what stories to tell. Every group develops its own vision on the archetypical characters in their own social and political context. In 2016 the different casts will come together to build and perform the imaginary ‘Hotel Courage’ that will have its world premiere in Amsterdam. Last year we traveled to countries such as Ghana, Palestine, India and the United States. I would like to share with you our journey so far.

During our travels it is interesting to create characters in different countries who have the same archetypical behavior. We approach the masks not from a historical perspective but use the archetypical associations that the masks evoke. Pantalone for example represents The Old Man, clinging on to life because he knows death is around the corner. Dottore is the one who thinks he knows everything, but in reality knows nothing. The Capitano is the one who pretends to be everything that he is not. The mask makers make their masks so well the essence of the historical archetypes still remains. The actors in each country we work in learn how to play the archetypical mask and then create their own characters and stories. For instance: an actor from Los Angeles created a Capitano who is the excursion tour guide for the hotel. He gave a speech about the greatness of nature and how the craftsmanship of camping is the essence of manhood. In his speech we were offered facts beyond facts. After he exposed his knowledge, he declared: “I will now give a demonstration in the “art of camping”. We are starting with the basics: setting up The Camping Tent.” Unfortunately this great demonstration turned into a long and tragic fight with the tent itself. A month later, the same mask was played by an actor in a refugee camp on the West Bank in Palestine. Here the actor played the manager in the hotel. This Capitano had the secret ambition to be the greatest manager in the world. But since there were no people to boss around he opened his window to the field of tomatoes behind the hotel and started to tell the tomatoes off for not

growing fast enough. This developed into a big, furious speech to all the vegetables in the world.

In Ghana we worked with the actors of Act for Change, a group of townspeople in James Town, one of the poorest neighborhoods of Accra. Here we rediscovered how the body is already trained by parents, culture and life experience and what happens when the actor puts this at the service of a character. One actress saw the mask of The Old Woman and said “ She is like our mothers and grandmothers who are always busy providing food for us and to keep their spirits high, they sing our tribal songs.” The actress put on the mask of The Old Lady and improvised for her fellow actors, preparing food for her family. But during the scene the actress got emotional and suddenly stopped singing and looked away from the audience. The audience instantly looked at the ground. After the scene I asked her and the group what happened? They told me that it was better to hide their eyes when getting emotional. The next day she came to the rehearsal and said that she wanted to play again, but this time looking at the audience. While playing, the actress looked in the eyes of the audience. She experienced for the first time the intimacy that this evoked. While singing and cooking as an Old lady she started to cry, but kept on singing. Now the town audience experienced The Old lady, fighting against her tears, singing the tribal song, to keep the spirit high. Softly they started singing along.

Last May we worked and created a show with The Freedom Theatre based in the refugee camp of Jenin, Palestine. In many ways this experience made--on a visceral level--very clear to me how powerful the Commedia and its techniques can be in unleashing the energy, emotions and imagination of both the actors and the audience. The Freedom Theatre is a group of young actors using theatre to create a better world while living in a very harsh reality where survival is a daily struggle.

Before we started the workshop I gave the acting students an introduction on the history of the Commedia. The reaction of the students was completely different from the reactions I was used to. When I told that Commedia found its origin in the past when women were not supposed to participate in acting, most people had not been exposed to theatre and theatre groups had to be very clever in finding ways to work around all kinds of taboos, one of the actors asked very dryly: “How do you mean ‘the past’?”

After the first part of the workshop they took us for a journey through the refugee camp, to find out who the archetypes were in their society. They took us to their families and neighborhoods. They took us to the cemetery and showed me the graves of their friends and families. They showed us a small restaurant

with a very big chief cook with a very big moustache. This man constantly talked about the great food he serves, about his skills as a cook. The food was great indeed, but it was an open secret that it was being prepared by a refugee, an old man with no family who lives in the basement of the restaurant. While we were studying, the old man serving the food, and the manager giving a speech to a guest, one of the actors tapped me on the shoulder. This very thin young actor was doing theatre for the first time in his life. He didn't speak English and was very introverted. He would often just sit quietly in a corner and didn't show any emotion. This time, however, he was very excited. He happily pointed to a huge police officer sitting on a big motorbike. With his hand he imitated the long nose of the Capitano mask, indicating that he would love to play this big police officer with his motorbike bigger than himself, wearing the Capitano mask. The first character of the show had been born.

At the end of this five-week workshop the students developed their story, "Courage, Ouda, Courage." At the premiere they performed in front of an audience of two hundred young boys living in the camp; boys who are not allowed to go in or out of their camp and have uncertain futures. For these boys it was the first theatre performance they had ever attended, but they got more involved than any audience I had ever seen.

During the performance one actor performed the mask of Pantalone, the Old Man. He played a refugee named Ouda and we see him walking around on the cemetery. He looks at the gravestones and talks to his mother and friends as if they could hear him. The audience is completely silent and fully immersed. Ouda remembers the past, how he was standing on the beach with his mother, listening and watching the sea. The actor asked the audience, to help him making the sound of the sea. The boys in the audience, who had never seen the sea, immediately respond. Then he points to another grave and asks the audience: "Whose grave is that?". The boys respond immediately. "My father", "My uncle", "My brother" they exclaim. "Is there anything I should say to them?" he asks. After several serious and moving requests one boy jokes: "Tell my brother he still owes me money, I want it back". Instantly the very intense atmosphere changes and two hundred boys break out in laughter.

Toward the end of the show the two hundred boys unexpectedly helped Ouda again. Now we see Ouda when he is young. The actor who played the old Ouda, now plays the young Ouda wearing an Arlecchino mask. We follow him as he flees through the mountains to Jenin. There he lives in the basement of the Hotel. He works in the kitchen of the restaurant. He is not allowed to go out of the kitchen into the restaurant or out of the Hotel. This night there are a lot of

important guests coming to eat and the Chef, who wears the Dottore mask, is extremely excited and very stressed. He bosses Ouda around to take the chickens, who are sitting in their henhouse in the kitchen, to prepare all the food to make the best chicken soup ever. Ouda is working like crazy but the more he rushes the more mistakes he makes and the more panicked the Dottore-Chef gets. While the chef is preparing his speech he sees how Ouda drops food. He raises his hand trying to hit Ouda with a pan. Ouda in an impulse, opens the door to the henhouse and a chicken flies out. The Chef tries to catch the chicken, but misses. He gets ready to hit Ouda again, but suddenly a boy from the audience supports Ouda by imitating the sound of a chicken. The actor performing Ouda looks at the boy in the audience and starts to improvise that another chicken is escaping from the henhouse, flying towards the chief. The Chef starts waving with his arms to avoid the chicken. Another boy stands up and imitates another chicken. Now Ouda opens the hen door wider and all the chickens fly out. Now all the boys in the audience start to imitate the sound of more and more chickens. The Chef starts to escape the flying chickens and locks himself into a huge fridge. A boy in the audience shouts, "Run Ouda!" The actor playing Ouda, looks at the boy and then looks at the forbidden door. Another boy shouts: "Run Ouda!!" Then Ouda hurries to the door, opens it and starts running. He stops for a moment and looks at his friends in the audience... Instantly, like crazy the two hundred boys start making sounds of running chickens. Running for their freedom, along with Ouda.

One evening we performed at the Santal tribe, in a rural area of India. During that show an unexpected friendship was born. Our performance was based on a story an old Hungarian lady shared with us during our visit to Jerusalem. As a child she had been in hiding in a small attic, together with her big sister for three years, during World War II. They were never allowed to make any noise during the night. But when the moon was full they secretly and quietly put on dresses, made themselves beautiful and danced in the moonlight. Just before the end of the war her sister died of fatigue. In our performance we see a young actress playing an Old fragile lady. Tonight when the moon is full the Old lady puts on her dress, brushes her hair, dabs perfume on her neck and starts looking for her sister. She opens the window, looks up to the sky and sees the face of her sister in the moon. She asks, "How are you doing? Shall we dance?" While she dances the night passes and daylight appears. The face of her sister starts to fade. "Where do you go?" She asks.. "Don't go!" she begs "Can I come with you? I don't want to stay. I don't want another day!"

While performing this scene at the village of the Santal Tribe in India, when the Old lady reaches for the moon screaming for her sister, we hear a shout coming from the audience. "Eh!" A very old, small, tribal lady with only two teeth left, jumps up and starts shouting in Santal dialect to the Old lady on the stage.

“Don’t move. I am coming.” She bounds laughing through the crowd of four hundred Santal tribe members until she reaches the stage. The tribal lady looks deeply into the eyes of the other Old lady, grabs her by the hand and says “I greet you, let’s go home.” And they walk off. Instantly the scene that found its origin more than sixty years ago ended in a celebration of long lost sisters in India.

During our tour we have met managers, cooks, cleaners, politicians, secret lovers, refugees, economists, soldiers, travellers, and homeless people looking for a place to sleep. We have seen them working, visiting, escaping, fighting, meeting and remembering in the Hotel. We are looking forward to travel to Japan, Iran and Russia this year. We welcome everybody to The Hotel Courage and eagerly await opening the doors at the Premiere in Amsterdam in 2016.

The Hotel Courage tour is offering us authentic, beautiful and funny stories from around the world told through the masks. The archetypical characters allow stories to transcend time, space and culture and reveal needs we all have in common, showing us a place where we can laugh and cry about how we try to survive in the world of today. And I hope the homeless man with his saxophone will pay us a visit too. We will offer him the biggest suite on the top floor, where he can make as many important phone calls as necessary.