

Aller à la mer^I

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translated by Barbara Kerslake

How, as women, can we go to the theatre without lending our complicity to the sadism directed against women, or being asked to assume, in the patriarchal family structure that the theatre reproduces *ad infinitum*, the position of victim?

Who is this victim? She is always the Father's daughter, his sacrificial object, guardian of the phallus, upholding the narcissistic fantasy which helps the Father to ward off the threat of castration. Like Electra or Antigone, she is eliminated. Or, like Ophelia, she is three times condemned to be buried alive by the three jealous father-figures – Polonius, Laertes and Hamlet – who are in agreement only in laying down the law to her: "Be thou woman, be mad about me, get thee to a nunnery." Locked up and put away. If she is Ophelia, her body banned and her soul violated, she will never have lived. And if, like Cordelia, she finds the strength to assert a femininity which refuses to be the mirror of her father's raving, she will die. For in every man there is a dethroned King Lear who requires his daughter to idealize him by her loving words and build him up, however flat he may have fallen, into the man he wishes to appear: "Tell me that I am the greatest, the me-est, the most like a king, or I'll kill you."

With even more violence than fiction, theatre, which is built according to the dictates of male fantasy, repeats and intensifies the horror of the murder scene which is at the origin of all cultural productions. It is always necessary for a woman to die in order for the play to begin. Only when she has disappeared can the curtain go up; she is relegated to repression, to the grave, the asylum, oblivion and silence. When she does make an appearance, she is doomed, ostracized or in a waiting-room. She is loved only when absent or abused, a phantom or a fascinating abyss. Outside and also beside herself. That is why I stopped going to the theatre; it was like going to my own funeral, and it does not produce a living woman or (and this is no accident) her body or even her unconscious.

This “Vieux Jeu” (Old Hat/Old Game) still involves playing the Role, maintaining the *ancien régime* of performance and mirror-gazing; it encourages the double perversion of voyeurism and exhibitionism, and the division of labour and of “jouissance” (pleasure) (who is “in” the theatre, who works, who is exploited by whom?), and it reinforces the opposition between the real and the imaginary which benefits those in whose interests the pretence exists. Appearing in all the circuses, courtrooms and other scenes of society where men are going to put themselves on display and revel in the sight, the Old Man is overdoing it these days; this is the heyday of directors indulging in ostentation, with too much reliance on elaborate sets, glitz and clever props.

If I go to the theatre now, it must be a political gesture, with a view to changing, with the help of other women, its means of production and expression. It is high time that women gave back to the theatre its fortunate position, its *raison d'être* and what makes it different – the fact that there it is possible to get across the living, breathing, speaking body, whereas the cinema screens us from reality by foisting mere images upon us.

I say “Women,” not “daughters.” *Le Portrait de Dora* was the first step for me in a long journey; it was a step that badly needed to be taken, so that a woman’s voice could be heard² for the first time, so that she could cry out, “I’m not the one who is dumb. I am silenced by your inability to hear.” Again, this is a scene with the Father, but it is a scene in which the relationship is broken off; in the end Dora walks out, leaving the “Vieux Je” (Old Ego/Old Hat) behind her. This journey takes her from dependence, through suffering, until she exits onto an entirely different stage/scene.

If the stage is woman, it will mean ridding this space of theatricality. She will want to be a body-presence; it will therefore be necessary to work at exploding everything that makes for “staginess,” going beyond the confines of the stage, lessening our dependency on the visual and stressing the auditory, learning to attune all our ears, especially those that are sensitive to the pulse of the unconscious, to hear the silences and what lies beyond them. “Distantiation” will not exist; on the contrary, this stage-body will not hesitate to come up close, close enough to be in danger – of life. A body in labour.

The scene takes place where a woman’s life takes place, where her life story is decided: inside her body, beginning with her blood. This will be a stage/scene without event. No need for plot or action; a single gesture is enough, but one that can transform the world. Take for example this movement of women towards life, passed on from one woman to another, this outstretched hand which touches and transmits meaning, a single gesture unfolding throughout the ages, and it is a different Story. It will be a text, a body decoding and naming itself in one long, slow push; the song of women being brought into the world, of the infinite patience of a woman expecting Woman. All it requires is one woman who stays beyond the bounds of prohibition, experiencing herself as many, the totality of those she has been, could have been or wants to be,

moving ever more slowly, more quickly than herself, anticipating herself. It is coming to pass, this arrival of Woman into the world; I hear it from so far away, and no other stage/scene but this space with a hundred simultaneous scenes/stages where she moves, several woman, unchecked in this place expanded by her look, her listening. And if this scene/stage is movement, if it extends to where *everything* happens and Woman is Whole, where instead of being acted out, life is lived, women will be able to go there and feel themselves loving and being loved, listening and being heard, happy as when they go to the sea, the womb of the mother.

NOTES

- 1 This title can be translated as “Going to the Seaside” or “Going to the Mother.”
- 2 In its first version, *Le Portrait de Dora* was heard as a radio play in 1972, before being staged at the Petit Orsay theatre in 1976 (*Le Monde*, 29 February–1 March).
- 3 The original French version of this article appeared in *Le Monde* (28 April 1977).