

The Builders of Bridges.

This was a personal response the members of the extraordinary Meeting Ground workshop in Sibiu, Rumania, that brought together theatre makers from England, Algeria, the Gaza Strip, Serbia and Rumania. May 2002.

The theme of our host, The Sibiu International Theatre Festival, was bridges.

And I must acknowledge immediately that this was no idle thematic decision. Sibiu, in its generous offer of total support to this project, immediately put into practise its philosophy. The warmth, passion and freedom to explore without hinderance, which all involved offered , was itself the bridge that made possible our extraordinary meeting. The beauty of the town and its people released for us the opportunity to discover and celebrate our own beauty. Thank you.

THE GREAT DIVIDE.

When I was thirteen the educational system in England “offered” me a choice- between arts and science (as though they were really opposites- another false bit of divisive wall-building created by my culture). Art chose me, and I’ve spent most of my life in awe and ignorance of the world on the other side of the divide. Bridges remain magical, incomprehensible. When I marvel at the arch of a roman viaduct, or the recent creation of the new footbridge across the Thames (linking St. Paul’s, a creation of the spiritual world to the new Tate Modern art gallery) something in my soul is stirred by these visions of uniting worlds, divided by water, gorges, borders.

But before we can build the bridges, we have to see the divide, and to understand the cost in human terms of that divide. We have to yearn to connect. We have to understand the essential damage we do to our own consciousness, as well as the harm we do to the other, by accepting this false division. We have to recognise how our governments, our religions, our cultures may not want us to build this crossing, may be determinedly building blocks to prevent such meetings, may indeed fear this interchange of common humanity as a threat to its own power.

There are bridges, and there are walls.

The wall may be a river, a sea, a mountain range, a border, a fence, bricks and mortar guarded by guns running across the heart of Europe. Such walls are clear to see. The wall may also be invisible to one side if they have the power and control. Indeed, adapting Augusto Boal’s phrase of “the cops in our head” some of us may

unconsciously be driven by the “bricklayers in our head”, building walls almost in our sleep. Walls that block the freedom of others.

The first challenge to the three of us from Meeting Ground from the other three countries- countries to whom the walls of oppression were stark and clear- was - why were the English, a group from one of the master wall-building nations, organising such a meeting? And how could we, as a race who fought wars at a safe distance, begin to understand the experience of those who had directly suffered from them?

I'd like to take the two questions separately for a moment. And my response will be subjective- my co-directors may well have very different motivations.

ALICE AND THE LOOKING GLASS.

I am English, European. Without going in depth into historic analysis, I'm from a country that has been a major beneficiary of colonial oppression, of technological, military and economic muscle as well as from, with all its paradoxes, a “democratic” political system. I, with my magic passport and economic strength, can travel practically everywhere. If there are walls I hardly notice them. I cross from world to world with as much ease as Lewis Carrol's Alice passed through the Looking Glass. I follow my desire. Holiday catalogues pile up around me, every newspaper carries a weekly supplement on travel abroad, whole TV channels are given over to selling us the world as our wonderland. What temperature would I like, what are my preferred foods, do I want to visit ancient sites in Peru or go to carnivals in Brazil, would I prefer a 4-star hotel in Bali or a Safari trek in Africa?

And this looking-glass on the world blinds me, and my people, from perceiving the real truth. This is a one-way mirror, literally. From the other side, for so much of the world, the mirror cannot be seen. It is a solid brick wall, blocking their movement, their desires. One way traffic. We, the privileged, can move freely through it, deciding at will that one land is too hot- and we will stay away- or that another must change in some way at our dictat to be attractive to us- that, for example, it should grow cheap food that we want, or it surrender up its history and culture in a fashion that we might find entertaining. Strangely it cuts us off from the rest of humanity- we see only what we wish to see and not the reality. We are unaware that in creating the world into our theme park we are also de-humanising ourselves. Because it leads us to believe in our total superiority. And even worse, we live in the soul-shrinking complacency that our economic power also entitles us to be the moral guardians of the planet- as though money itself is not, as the Bible says, the “root of all evil” but the very fertiliser of goodness.

I arrived in Sibiu with the personal, subjective and possibly selfish, hope that this Looking Glass might be shattered, and that, in some small way the wall I have been complicit in building would be revealed to me in such a way that I might then be able to see how to start the process of disassembling it, and using its bricks to begin to build a bridge.

I did not imagine how quickly that would occur.

THE JOURNEY OF THE BRIDGE BUILDERS.

Our Palestinian friends urgent demand to start the workshop with the description of their journey brought the wall into immediate focus for me. Their war-story of the delays, risks, humiliations, and above all else their sheer determination to arrive at our common meeting-ground awoke so many hidden feelings inside me that even now I cannot attempt an adequate description. Followed by the Serbian and Algerian “journeys”- all different in detail on the nature of the walls that had to be surmounted- but all possessed by the same determination to surmount them, moved me, questioned me, took me on another journey. The stories did not stir in me understanding necessarily, nor a complacent identification. What it intensified for me was the acute and painful difference between us. But also in the act of your sharing these stories, something profoundly moving with lies at the heart of our faith as theatre makers.

Because of the honesty, the clarity, the true “theatricality” and overwhelmingly the generosity with which these tales were shared, I began to feel the re-awakening of EMPATHY in myself. And to re-affirm its significance. We operate still inside an archaic and barbaric duality. There is US and the OTHER. The other is everything we are not. Indeed, they are everything we do not wish to be. We are good, they are evil. We are human. They are not. The press, media, politicians and, it has to be admitted, a large part of the so-called art community thrive on this simplistic savagery. Each time we turn away from the others suffering, deny them their voice, add another “crime” to their charge sheet, we add another brick to the world. There is however one weapon, hidden away in our darkness, that has the power to take down those bricks. It is not sympathy, or sentimentality. It is certainly not satisfying our certainty by matching unequal sufferings with the others. It’s empathy- that strange, but ultimately most human of desires (and therefore the one under most control by the systems we live in) to connect, to listen to tales from the other side, to struggle to imaginatively make some kind of contact where the other person (culture, race, faith) is discovered with the same, EQUAL, human face. It is this empathy that not only takes down the walls, but builds the bridges AT ONE AND THE SAME TIME. It is destructive to what needs to be destroyed, and creative to what needs to be

created. So many of us are lost to its intrinsic human value, but it is perhaps the best marker of what one might call our soul. It's both a conscience and a different consciousness.

As those days passed, so few days but so rich, and as each company shared something of its own history and ways of work, and as tales were told so simply, and so profoundly, they began to re-orientate me again to this centre of imagination and empathy. If at times I forget why I love theatre, these days brought me again to a space inside myself - a place of faith. I was shaken by the growing awareness of the wonder of our craft and art to build bridges against time, language, country, religion, sexual divides- to rediscover in this act of sharing a common humanity.

And love. For that intrinsic, hidden desire to empathise is bound up centrally with this indefinable state of being. The tales that were shared were often tragic, painful, of love lost or betrayed, of love driven into anger under oppression, and they forced me to question my own culture and my own complacency if not direct complicity in the act of wall-building.

But in addition, this very act of sharing in the stories was joyous. It was as though the walls- at least within this sacred space and privileged time together- had come tumbling down. And- I can't think of a better word- a kind of comradeship, kinship, suddenly appeared before us. Indeed Tanya and I somehow ended up adopting half of the male population of Algeria! As well as discovering so many other brothers and sisters. Discovering The family of theatre.

Describing the surface events to our friends back home has been difficult- it's hard to communicate how, in the midst of such pain, there can also be such an overwhelming sense of joy. A celebration. This was wonderfully expressed in the in the final dancing and singing at the party, and in the almost unbearable (to an unemotional Englishman) beauty of our partings. Included in this were the radiant Rumanians- so young, generous, and joining in so meaningfully. Whatever the images of video and photos may or may not show, I carry those images in my heart.

And out of this grew another rose in the garden- hope. Not false, sentimental, easily acquired and just as easily lost, hope. But a real hope based on a sense of reality, aware that the walls do not vanish overnight. Indeed waiting for the news that the Palestinians had at least managed to return home it was clear something has changed for us. And that the world itself will only change if we do. Frail and frightened as we might, we have also witnessed something of the awesome power of the human soul, seen it in the "OTHERS" and perhaps have glimpsed a shadow of it within ourselves.

To my friends, I thank you. In what way the work will continue is hard to say. There is no final destination to arrive at. Life is the journey itself. The only difference now is a major one- before I travelled alone, now I am aware we are fellow-travellers, and even if we can't immediately see where our attempts to build bridges will meet in the middle, we can trust that ultimately, in ways not yet discovered by our imaginations, they will.

Finally, I wanted (and forgot) to share a poem I wrote some years ago. I had been in Western Tibet researching a play of mine about the Chinese occupation of Tibet and was fortunate enough to see one of the six traditional folk-operas of the Tibetan people. They were, created in the sixteenth century by a group of players travelled from village to village listening to old fables, songs and dances, which they then incorporated into their own plays. Tibet is a land of mountain ridges. To pass from one village to another it was necessary to build bridges. The theatre group asked for payment for their shows chains from the local blacksmith to create these bridges. The theatre group became literally bridge builders and indeed to this day in Tibet for they are the only route from one village to another. (It's curious to note that the Latin word for "priest" is pontifex- which also means builders of bridges). Here's the little poem.

PONTIFEX. (a song)

**the poet and players
creators of theatre
for three days and nights
their shapes
perform the magic rites-
an oasis
in the years of the village.**

**Dance and the demons
song and the fools
high speech of kings
whispering of lovers
folk tales and coarse jokes
filled the empty space
at the heart of the valley.**

**Asking only for chains in payment
for all the ale and instruction
(the ale and the food
and the unforced love of women
was all part of the celebration)**

**travelling,
the troupe linked the chains
building their bridges,**

**from peak to peak,
across the ravines
uniting valley to valley.**

**Lamas and lovers,
traders and brigands
all walked the way
of the builders of bridges.**

**And the blacksmith
worked hard and long
beating out poems
on the chains of rocks.**

**Stephen Lowe. Nottingham. England.
June 15th., 2002.**

**To my friends. Thank you all for the messages.
I apologise I can only write in one language. This is itself a wall I am
now trying to take down by really working on my French.**