

How Tentland was created and became a caravan crossing the globe

Salvador de Bahia, August 2003

In Brazil, at the Teatro Villa Velha where I am working at the moment, I receive a letter from Iran. It is an invitation to hold a workshop at the Dramatic Arts Center in Tehran. I met the director of the Dramatic Arts Center, Majid Sharifkohdai, in Berlin. We talked about the possibility of mediating between Orient and Occident, of setting out as a theatre caravan. It is strange thinking about working in Iran here. In Brazil there is exposed skin and dancing bodies everywhere; in Iran there are covered up bodies and a dance that is not allowed to exist. The contrast could not be greater.

Tehran, December 2003

In order to get an idea of the situation in Iran, the people and theatre, I have come to Tehran for ten days. There is a lot to see at the moment: everyone is working feverishly on their pieces for the coming International Fajr Theater Festival in February. My impression during rehearsals is that the human body practically doesn't exist anymore in Iranian theatre; it has been erased. A recurrent scene: characters sitting around tables, talking incessantly. I meet actors, authors, theatre studies experts, and ask the sort of questions that one asks when one is gradually getting to know a foreign culture. I ask about dance and the prohibition of women's dance in public and in response I am told that although there is no dance, there is "rhythmic movement". I ask about singing and get the answer that female solo singing is forbidden in public, or possible for a few seconds at the most; then, at the very latest, a second voice has to come in. I ask about touching on stage; I am told that men and women are forbidden to touch each other unless the actors are brother and sister. Or the woman wears gloves. I learn that the capacity for inventing ways to get around the censors is enormous. To be able to show a piece at the festival, directors have to submit the text that they want to stage. The drama is enough, a concept is not necessary. Four weeks before the festival, the censors start examining scene proposals and decide which ones may be shown. The chosen plays are then developed further in the remaining weeks before the premiere. The festival presents them once or twice, then they are staged about twenty times consecutively. On Christmas Eve I fly back to Germany.

Tehran, February 2004

I am in the rehearsal room of the Dramatic Arts Center in Tehran together with twelve Iranian women, on the seventh floor, as if suspended between heaven and earth. We look through a gigantic window on to the metropolis of 14 million. Men stay outside the door, they do not come in. The protective window pane acts as a membrane through which we sense the city, both near and far at the same time. We come up with the 'letters' idea: letters that the performers formulate through dance, music and speech. The very first letter is addressed to God: "Please come back from holiday"; others to teachers and people by whom the performers feel watched. They express wishes and fears, tell of conforming and the performers' search for their niche in private life. Here, people live two lives: one in public and a completely different one within their own four walls, behind closed doors and drawn curtains. They show me a world which the media and common clichés in Europe have distorted more than they have communicated knowledge of life in this society. Today, on the last day of the workshop, we try using two tents, the kind that are found everywhere in Iran. I ask each of the performers to move in and with the tents in order to find out what can be done with them. They show me the second world behind the veil, perform what would not be possible without this second skin. The tents prove to be mobile spaces which liberate as well as restrict the performers. We are sure that with this tent-theatre idea we can "expand the bounds of possibility". We decide to invent a piece about life in Tentland.

Berlin, June 2004

The director of the Dramatic Arts Center was dismissed after the parliamentary election in March. What will become of our Letters? Although I am still in Germany, I can feel something of Iranian reality. People don't make long term plans there, everything is always different again tomorrow. A new director, Khosrow Heshan, takes up office. He knows nothing of our Iranian-German theatre plans. With the help of Farhad Payar, my advisor on Iranian matters, I get an appointment with him. I fly, full of optimism and with five weeks worth of luggage, to Tehran.

Tehran, July 2004

I present the project to Neshan and his colleague Farhad Mohandespour in the Dramatic Arts Center. Both are polite but restrained. I tell them the history of the project, about the Goethe Institute's involvement, list all the international event organisers who are interested in the piece, express my happiness about the German Capital Culture Fund that has agreed to support the piece. Then Khosrow Neshan interrupts me: "What I find most convincing is the enthusiasm you have for the piece. Stay here and start rehearsals. Tomorrow, if you want."

Tehran, July 2004

I stay in Tehran, call my dramaturgist Susanne Vincenz to tell her to join me. We begin rehearsals. Not everyone who was at the workshop was able to take part again at such short notice, so during the first two weeks of rehearsals I cast new performers. The competition is keen. "Six women, that won't be easy!" Khosrow Neshan says to me. But nothing is easy in Tehran anyway. Each performer gets into a tent, starts to give life to it, becomes an inhabitant of Tentland who never leaves her tent as long as it is on the stage.

Together we learn a new theatre vocabulary. How does one deal with this new layer that conceals, but to a large extent also reveals what is inside? What does this second skin show? What gets under our skin? I call it the corset of liberation. We discover possibilities of expression that we had barely known about two weeks ago. We do not have the safeguard of a dramatist, someone to take responsibility for the content of the piece. That worries the performers as it makes them the authors of the piece themselves and therefore responsible for its content. I try to find a way of placing myself before them protectively. Constantly challenged by self-censorship, I remember the words of the director of the Dramatic Arts Center as we said goodbye after our first meeting: "Please don't censor yourself, do exactly what you want in your work. The censors will decide what can be shown in Iran."

Tehran, August 2004

With five weeks of rehearsals behind us, the first phase of rehearsals is complete. Today we presented the results to the Dramatic Arts Center and our first small audience. Everyone seemed happy with the outcome. Khosrow Neshan would have liked to look at the tents for longer, Farhad Mohandespour was amazed how such a convincing portrayal of Iranian society could be created in such a short time. Friends of the performers read the time before 1979 and the time after the Revolution into the piece.

Our starting point was a camp in the middle of nowhere. The dynamics and conflicts of the camp were intended to correspond with the everyday experiences of the performers as well as the history of the country. The camp demonstrates a state of emergency that is life itself. The tents become a second skin for the people. Where do they come from? What paths lie behind them? Where do they disappear to?

Hanover, September 2004

We packed up our tents in Tehran in order to pitch them again in Hanover for a week as artists in residence at the Tanztheater International Festival with a thirty minute try-out in

early September. We have developed a kind of tent vocabulary and devised a story-line that was easily interpreted by everyone in Iran but which proves to be too 'Persian' for Europe, that is, too indirect. As most people here know little about Iran, they request more concrete information about the country. They have no idea of the difficulties with which theatre in Iran is confronted. And to what extent theatre work is influenced by this; how important it is to find images for that which cannot be directly articulated.

Dance 2004 has invited us to Munich. Until then we have time to think about how we can solve this mediation conflict between Orient and Occident.

Munich, November 2004

We are rehearsing on the seventh floor of the Tanztendenz, almost like in Tehran. The view of Munich from the window is great. I show the performers the changes and additions to 'Letters'. The original situation - everyone stays from beginning to end in their tents - does not change. What is different is the structure and narrative style of the piece. A place for the performers, for them to put their criticism into words, is established in front of the curtain, outside the performance space. Once they have broken away from the group, they address me, the authority that established the rules of this game. In this way, they can express their criticism of me, the prejudices I may have, that I have put them in tents and so reduced them to objects. But also, that there are certain advantages to being stuck in a tent. You are not identifiable. At the same time, they are subject to arbitrary direction and their reaction is: that they have had enough of this hiding, that it hurts, drives them to self-harm. By myself coming into play as a 'shock absorber', I can place myself like a shield in front of them. Thus we were able to solve the conflict between Orient and Occident. The two try-out performances on 6 and 7 November in the theatre of the Haus der Kunst confirmed this. Our caravan moves on, to Tehran. To the premiere.

Tehran, January 2005

The mood is nervous, there have been reports of an appearance by an Armenian group at a theatre festival in southern Iran which featured dancing and costumes which did not entirely cover the performers' bodies. How that got past the censors, nobody knows. The festival organisers and the mayor were arrested and are still in prison now, two weeks later. We rehearse, somewhat apprehensively, for another week, make changes, work out new scenes. Two censors come to the final rehearsal. We have to leave out a video on which the silhouette of a female dancer can be just made out. The solo voice of a woman singing, coming from somewhere within the tent-town, is criticised. The singing is finally accepted with bad grace, as long as it is sung so quietly that it can hardly be heard. The word chador, synonymous with tent in Persian, is banished from the piece, as is everything that might indicate that the fate of the people in the tents is particularly women-related. The next day another eight censors announce their arrival. We have to go through the whole thing again just two hours before the premiere. Afterwards the eight censors bombard me with questions: Could you have staged this piece in England? Why are there only women in the piece? Would it have been possible to do the piece only with men? I give explanations with the whole team backing me up. Just five minutes before the premiere we are told that what we call our Post Script has to go. In the P.S., the performers invite the female members of the audience to come with them behind the curtain. Ladies only. For the exclusively male censors, the world behind the curtain remains a veiled country. Thanks to the insistent protests of my assistant director, a famous actress in Iran, we are able to perform "Letters From Tentland" complete with P.S. The Iranian women who come behind the curtain in droves can hardly believe that it is possible to show a piece like this in Iran.

Sara, Pantea, Sima, Mashahd, Zoreh, Banafshe, Rima, Shabnam, Narmin, Susanne, Anna, Karina, Herbert and I are still completely dazed, but tremendously proud.

Tehran, March 2005

We were supposed to perform "Letters From Tentland" again in Tehran from 20 April to 16 May. Because of the coming presidential elections, however, the performances have been cancelled for the time being. And so our caravan moves on to Europe. To Asia. And ever onwards...

Helena Waldmann

P.S.: The diary entries are continued under www.lettersfromtentland.com