

# A true marriage of opposites

Julia Varley

Odin Teatret (Denmark)



Figure 1 - Sr. Peanut, Palacio de La Moneda, Chile (1988).

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**Resumo:** Questões de censura e autocensura são confrontadas através da experiência de Julia Varley na animação de uma máscara de caveira sobre pernas de pau, o Sr. Peanut, e um boneco, a Sheherazade. O Sr. Peanut viaja para diversos países latino americanos, e o artigo lembra de episódios em Ayacucho, no Peru, em Santiago do Chile, e o encontro entre soldados e polícia.

**Palavras-chave:** Odin Teatret. Teatro de Animação. Censura. Peru. Chile.

**Abstract:** Questions of censorship and self-censorship are confronted through Julia Varley's experience of animating a skull mask on stilts, Mr. Peanut, and a puppet, Sheherazade. Mr. Peanut travels to many Latin American countries, and the article remembers episodes from Ayacucho, Perú, and Santiago de Chile, and the meetings with soldiers and police.

**Keywords:** Odin Teatret. Puppet Theater. Censorship. Peru. Chile.

The first step ever I took in theatre was with a mask. I had been to see a couple of rehearsals of a theatre group in a garage in Milan and the next time I went there someone put a mask on my face and asked me to help carry the person playing the 'dead soldier' from a poem by Bertolt Brecht. This group, the Teatro del Drago, had started when Massimo Schuster - who at the time collaborated with the Bread and Puppet Theater - directed a performance with some high school students to make the money that would pay for his flight back to the USA. This happened in 1971.

The mask helped me perform what I had been asked to do. Without it, I would have never been able to follow the instructions. I would have been too embarrassed and self-conscious. I had never imagined myself on a stage. The mask gave me the freedom to be different. It offered distance to me. It overcame my self-censorship. I discovered later that I liked working with clay to give form to the features of an exaggerated face, and then cover it with oil, layers of wet newspaper squares and wall-paper glue, and then paint it. A few years later I left for Denmark to work with Odin Teatret. I had to concentrate on actor's training and for a bit I forgot about working with masks and puppets.

In these days, in May 2020, many people all over the world are wearing masks to cover their mouth and nose and avoid spreading corona virus infections. On television I try to understand what people are saying in interviews without being able to see their mouth. I am told that if theatres reopen in Italy, spectators and actors will have to wear masks. Some years ago, travelling in Colombia by motorbike I had to inform myself in which regions I had to follow the traffic rules and wear a helmet, and in which not because the police wanted to recognise faces as a defence against insurrection or criminals. In Ayacucho, the city in the Peruvian Andes where I was on tour in 1978, the soldiers wore dark balaclavas from which I could only discern their eyes, making them look frightening and aggressive. In Denmark, some children in kindergartens are terrified by actors wearing masks, others find them amusing. Some women

wearing burkas suffer the injustice of a different treatment from men, others enjoy the possibility of going shopping or visiting friends undisturbed.

When I walked under a five-metre-long papier-mâché tiger for a demonstration against imperialism in the early seventies in Italy, or held the banner of the workers union beside an enormous smiling red cloth elephant, or wore a grotesque coloured fox mask in a performance to make counterinformation about the coup in Chile in 1973, the figures had a declared political meaning for the passers-by. All of this would be seen with different eyes and understood in other ways if these puppets were taken to a school to entertain children as fairy-tale animal characters.

A mask can give a sense of freedom and a feeling of oppression, it can allow us to communicate what we are not able to say without it, and it can be banned as socially unacceptable. A mask can express the opinion of power or of those who struggle against power. The context decides the effect of a mask, what it says to every single spectator, and if it is to be considered dangerous or harmless.

Eugenio Barba was recently talking about how when Balinese performers start their Topeng (mask dance) apprenticeship, they are told to 'marry a mask'. The mask is an inanimate object, yet it acquires the value of a living partner. The true marriage occurs when, as a performer, you master the art of making the mask palpitate, quiver, and become alive. When I heard Eugenio explain this, I wondered if I am married to Death. The mask I have used in many performances at Odin Teatret since 1980 until today in 2020, has a skull face. He is called Mr Peanut.

In 1974, Odin Teatret started making street performances, at first in form of parades, then with structured scenes and formations that moved across a town. Performing in the street, where spectators have not chosen to come and see theatre, demands specific techniques. The signs need to be louder, stronger and bigger, the music should be heard at a distance, the costumes can help to focus and give colour contrasting the dullness of roads and houses, the

communication needs to be based on a short, immediate narrative, and the relationship with the spectator to be negotiated continually demanding improvisation and quick adaption skills from the actors. Masks and puppets have helped us establish effective images for audiences that often had never seen theatre before.

Mr Peanut was born in 1976 for one of Odin Teatret's street performances, *Anabasis*, during which he walked on stilts. His skull-like head identified him as Death. He has become an archetypal character of Odin Teatret, a character that cannot die. Mr Peanut has taken different forms, he has dressed as a woman and as a man. He has been 200 metres underground in a Welsh mine, slipped on the snow in Sweden, danced in Hamburg's port district, with the communist militants of the "Feste dell'Unità" in Italy and with the Catholic activists of the Chilean *poblaciones*. He was violently attacked by a terrified woman in Oslo and he founded a club in Wales with children who all walked on stilts like him. He has played football in Montevideo, ridden an elephant in München, learned to play children's games on the beaches of the Yucatan and there, on the sand, he learned to fall and then to get back up on his feet. Mr Peanut has visited newspapers, beaches, supermarkets, libraries, churches, television studios, factories, swimming pools, hospitals, airports, stadiums, markets, schools, theatres, museums, prisons, barracks, and mayors' offices. In each city, Mr. Peanut has stolen hats from policemen, glasses from teachers, ice-creams from ice-cream sellers, he has admired the breasts of beautiful women, visited ambassadors and ministers, the powerful and those who suffer their power. He has defied rules and laws, taking advantage of his height. He has walked on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York when the twin towers still existed, and Berlin was divided by a wall.

Tom Fjordefalk, an actor at Odin Teatret, created the first version of the character and gave it the name of Mr Peanut. The head's shape resembled a peanut and was indirectly reminiscent of a rich peanut farmer who was then President of the United States. I inherited Mr Peanut from Tom and changed him: for me Mr

Peanut was a character full of life: Death began wiggling its bum and was playful and cheeky. Shaking hands with all the children of Holstebro wearing Mr Peanut's mask is one of the experiences that has most marked my development as an actress.

With *Anabasis* Mr Peanut has visited many countries. One of the first trips was to Perú in 1978. He ventured into the neighbourhoods where tourists did not dare to go on the outskirts of Ayacucho in the Andes. There Mr Peanut and his companions were called *gringos gigantes*. For more than 40 years he has participated in Odin Teatret's barter<sup>1</sup>, mixing with the *burakumin* - the pariahs - of Osaka and the girls of Amsterdam's red-light district. He bought souvenirs at the market in Guadalupe in Mexico and raised money with street children in Bogotá. And when, still in Colombia, they saw him return to the village of Raquira, where Odin Teatret had done a barter some years before, they thought that he was the one who had brought the rain that day and they made offerings to him: guavas and avocados.

In Caracas, Venezuela, Mr Peanut participated in a barter in front of the city prison. The inmates watched from the windows and at the end of the performance they threw messages to be transmitted to their families. In Montevideo, in 1986, in the ruined square of Ansina, the old black neighbourhood, Mr Peanut did his first striptease to the rhythm of candombe drums, transforming himself from a man in tails to a woman who danced with a coloured miniskirt. In Salvador de Bahia, Mr Peanut conversed with Augusto Omolú and his dances of the orixá, divinities of African origin. He participated in a demonstration against a new military coup attempt in 1987 in the famous Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. The military wanted to avoid the trials for the enforced disappearances during

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1 "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". Available at: <https://odinteatret.dk/about-us/about-odin-teatret/>. Access on: 27/05/2020. (N.E)

the dictatorship. Mr Peanut carried an impromptu sign made from a drum cover, embroidered with “Olvido?” (Oblivion?).

In 1983 Odin Teatret was in New York with the performance *Ashes of Brecht*, invited by the theatre of La Mama. During the mornings off Mr Peanut visited Central Park to greet the statue of Hans Christian Andersen. He was brusquely stopped in the East Village by a policeman who only wanted to take his photograph. He walked the streets surrounded by skyscrapers that looked like cathedrals and trembled on the Brooklyn Bridge from the vibrations of the cars that drove speedily underneath.

Every ten years, from 1978 to 2018, Mr Peanut has visited Ayacucho, the town in the Andes at the epicentre of the war between the Peruvian army and the Shining Path. At each visit it was a tradition to take a group photograph in the Plaza de Armas in front of the monument to General Sucre.

In 1978 there was a curfew in Perú. To perform, we decided to follow the rules literally, walking in couples at a regulated distance, but in costume and carrying our masks and musical instruments. When we entered the market or peripheral neighbourhoods, the people would order us to play and dance for them. We complied. This resulted in us being taken to the police station, still dressed in costume, on stilts, and wearing masks. We excused ourselves by saying we were foreigners and did not know about the curfew. We were very sorry, and promised that from then on, we would be more careful. From the windows, we could see how the people in the street were amused. The whole situation was quite surreal, the police were serious, we were respectful, and everyone watching from outside was laughing.

In 1988, at the peak of the war, we rented small private airplanes in Lima to reach Ayacucho. When we landed at the airport, the soldiers surrounded us. Once again, we chose the tactic of behaving like naïve foreigners. After talking with the commander and convincing him that the Danish Queen had sent us to Perú to show our culture, we organised a barter in the barracks, pulling out

masks and stilts from our boxes. The soldiers in turn played their violins and danced holding handkerchiefs, after putting their guns on the side in a pile. Then we walked to town, as we had done ten years earlier, hoping the town's inhabitants would never discover we had performed for the soldiers first. We had many friends who remembered our previous visit and who were extremely grateful for our courage in coming again. We had to. Mr Peanut danced in a square on the outskirts of the town with a view of the mountains. Two days later, a bomb exploded there.

After the visit to Ayacucho in 1998, I had to admit that my legs could no longer cope with the weight of the stilts, so Mr Peanut gave up his traditional height, and from that moment on he appeared on foot in many of Odin Teatret's performances. In 2018 the Mayor of Ayacucho knelt in front of Mr Peanut, promising that the city would always welcome encounters of group theatres. Everyone in the room clapped wildly, feeling theatre had won an important battle.

For years Mr Peanut was the identity behind which I could reveal and hide myself. For my first solo performance which I premiered in 1990, *The Castle of Holstebro*, I chose Mr Peanut to speak for me. In the end it was he who forced me to speak. So, with him, I dialogue with myself. At that time stilts were only used in street performances. I decided to go against this unwritten rule by taking Mr Peanut indoors. When Death killed himself with a shot at the skull, I would fall to the floor, take off the stilts and turn into a woman dressed in white. I then dialogued with Mr Peanut's head wrapped in a shawl. He looked like a kind of Sphinx.

One time I have been afraid of performing with Mr Peanut. I was going to visit an old people's home and I was worried that the residents would not like to see an image of death. I imagined they would be anxious of meeting face to face with something so close to them. I learned not to let my prejudice impose a self-censorship on my mask: in the home the old people giggled and danced with this lively character, making fun of his smiling skull face.



In 1988 I was in Chile. Odin Teatret presented the performance *Talabot* in a church. The entire tour was organised by a group of Chilean actors, with the support of the church that there had taken position in defence of democracy against the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. We had come from Perú where we had participated in a group theatre meeting organised by Cuatrotablas. We slept in actors' homes and many friendships were born during the tour. With my hostess, María Cánepa, I visited Salvador Allende's tomb, which did not bear his name, and then, as Mr Peanut, I went to the presidential palace of La Moneda, where Pinochet now lived instead. Mr Peanut carried a heart-shaped piece of bread that he intended to break into pieces to feed the birds. We had no other purpose than a simple act of remembering history. I had started doing theatre in Milan in 1973 to let the world know of Allende's death and now I was in Santiago to honour his memory.

Tony D'Urso's photographs show Mr Peanut, with the heart shaped bread, moving towards La Moneda, where Salvador Allende had died. Eugenio Barba and Iben Nagel Rasmussen accompanied me. We knew we had to be careful because General Augusto Pinochet was still in power, even though his fall was only a year away, and some theatre was beginning to be performed in the streets. What we did not know was that that same morning a special police force had been summoned to face a demonstration.

I stepped over the railing and walked alone towards the middle of the lawn in front of the palace where I started to crumble the bread. The special police force, their faces hidden behind wired helmets, were not impressed nor amused by Mr Peanut's height and mask. They probably had never seen theatre before and just knew this figure did not belong to the normal order of the city centre they were there to protect. Someone was trespassing the president's lawn and they followed orders.

The police came from behind and I did not see them. I felt a blow on the stilts, and I fell. The policemen tried to remove the skull mask by pulling it, while I desperately tried to open the strap

that attached it under my chin. It felt as if they were trying to pull my head off. I finally managed to take the mask off, but the police did not seem to notice that I was a woman or even a human being. They probably did not understand what was under the mask. They grabbed me by the hair and stilts, carrying me to the police van. Eugenio came running. They arrested him as well, together with some other people passing by, and drove us all to the police station.

As we walked along the long windowless corridors of the police headquarters, I thought of the films I had seen about the dictatorship and the people that had gone missing. Of course, I was frightened. Luckily, they put us all in the same room. The idea of being separated from Eugenio really scared me. We had to put in writing who we were, what we were doing, while outside the Danish Embassy had been notified and had intervened immediately. We were released, but Mr Peanut's mask and costume were confiscated by the police. We later had to file a complaint with a judge. One of our organisers, Rebeca Ghigliotto, was a famous Chilean television actress. Her charm convinced the judge to return Mr Peanut's mask and costume, so that he did not remain in Chile forever. For many years I could not look at the photographs nor hear the story of that day. I preferred to forget this adventure.

Up until then Mr Peanut had given me the freedom of distance at the same time as the privilege of being able to approach people of all ages avoiding their defences. The police attack in Chile reminded me that the power of theatre is an illusion. On stage and behind a mask we have a false impression of certainty. As theatre people, we think we can change reality, have an influence on the course of history, put weight on the side of justice against injustice. It is self-deception. All we can do is convince the enemy in turn that we are harmless, not worth wasting time with, and that what we do involves so few spectators we are best left alone in our anonymous world. We can be a Trojan horse in our community, hiding performers, masks and puppets in its stomach - instead of soldiers.







**Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5** - Sr. Peanut, Palacio de La Moneda, Chile (1988).

Another puppet taught me a lesson in the relationship between reality and theatre fiction: Scheherezade. In Odin Teatret's performance *Andersen's Dream*, she dialogued with a puppet companion, Hans Christian Andersen, manipulated by Kai Bredholt. Together they made comments on what the 'real' people - the actors - did. They discussed storytelling, sharing their destiny of serfdom in telling stories to keep alive or earn a living. Were they birds in a cage singing and telling old tales, wishing to be free like a laughing wind? It was during the process of creation of the performance that Scheherezade made me listen to the work and what it wanted to say, rather than wanting to express myself.

Since seeing some Arab women in a shop in Milan wearing a lot of make-up under their chadors, and after a tour to Istanbul, the complex question of the 'total mask' of veiled women has fascinated me. What was behind it? Why did they wear it? Did the women hide voluntarily, or had the mask been put on them in

order to make them invisible and erase their presence? I wanted to address this theme in a performance. I had bought and worn a chador, subsequently feeling an immense sensuality in the moment of uncovering and loosening my hair. I showed my director Eugenio Barba a montage of scenes based on songs about women from all over the world, using the black chador, a mask, a white Arab dress and a red one, balls of gilded thread and a window of inlaid wooden grating.

Then came the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 with the attack to the Twin Towers in New York and the wave of anti-Muslim reactions. I had to set aside all the work I had done. Whatever I said or did my interpretation was no longer free of the prejudice provoked by the situation of conflict which had been generated. It had become difficult to defend basic women's rights without this appearing to be a criticism of religious or cultural choices. But the memory of certain experiences kept alive within me, one from a film I had seen and the other from a voice festival in Belgium.

I was sitting in the darkness of a small cinema in Paris. The film had ended but I was unable to stop weeping. *Closed Doors*, an Egyptian film, told the story of a woman who lived alone with her teenage son in present day Cairo. During the film the relationship between mother and son deteriorated from friendly complicity into a desperate distrust. At the end the son stabbed his mother to death. He could not bear the idea of her visiting a man, inadmissible behaviour according to the religious norms that had attracted him as a way of appeasing his teenage anxieties. While the film's end-credits were scrolling down, I thought that too many women are subjected to similar tragedies. I cried with a sense of impotence in the face of a problem much greater than myself.

Soha had grown-up in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. I met her in May of 2002 at the Women's Voices Festival organised by Brigitte Kaquet in Belgium. I was there to direct a public intervention by mothers, sisters and wives of *desaparecidos* (missing people).

Soha had spent ten years in jail in total isolation after having shot a commander of the Lebanese militia in the service of the Israeli army. She had not succeeded in her intention to kill him. While laughing, joking, dancing and singing with the other ‘mothers’ to the music and songs of women from many African countries, Soha still looked very young. I chose her to read the declaration that had been compiled in the preceding days, while the ‘mothers’ from Algeria, Argentina, Belgium, Turkey, Iran... appeared on stage with their missing relatives’ photographs round their necks. One of the mothers carried eight photographs, another eleven. Soha read with a warm, deep, calm voice. At the end, after the mothers had been welcomed into the audience with a Berber song, Soha whispered happily: “We will make it! We will change the world!”.

Then, during a work session in Italy in 2002, the sculptor Fabio Butera demonstrated a puppet, the construction of which he was still improving. The puppet had an attractive face and a fascinating simplicity of movement. In search of unpredictable directions that might interrupt and recreate the habits and experience of previous performances, Eugenio asked Fabio to build me a puppet that was a replica in miniature of my characters, Doña Musica, with her long white hair; and Mr Peanut, with his skull head. The new puppet would also have a third face, beautiful, charming and young, like that of the original model.

For Odin Teatret’s performance *Andersen’s Dream*, all the actors had to prepare one hour of resource material (scenes, sequences of actions, texts, songs), and choose one of Hans Christian Andersen’s tales to stage. Eugenio had imagined the little match girl from Andersen’s fairy-tale dressed as a young Palestinian woman. To begin practical work on *Andersen’s Dream*, I had bought the cassette *Ladies of the Jazz* and the complete works of Hans Christian Andersen in English. Then I organised my scenic space. I had the black chador and all the objects that I had used before in the room with me. The puppet with its three heads was also there. One day, I dressed the puppet in the chador and placed her on a small silk carpet. The black cloth of the chador emphasised the expression in her eyes and

she began to speak to me. I started to address the actions and texts of the fixed score to her. A sense that I had not searched for started to emerge from the scenes and texts. Suddenly the song that spoke of the leaves tumbling down and the sun going out in September, and the exclamation that damned God, acquired other meanings. Scheherazade was telling the story I had not had the courage to talk about after September 2001. She was telling me what it meant to hide behind a veil, to wear a mask. Some themes cannot be dealt with directly, but through metaphors and poetry. Life appears in a piece of wood or a body of paper mâché.

From that day the chador became the motivation for making the puppet dance. I had to expose and uncover her veiled life, free her from immobility and find her voice, liberate her from the black shroud and give her colour. During rehearsals I tried to see through the puppet, to let my eyes look through her eyes before going out into the space to conquer the spectator's attention. The director would have liked me to look only at her, so that the spectator would only see the puppet, but I rebelled against this destiny. I wore a lace mask to cover my face, but my eyes could see and be seen. I didn't want to end veiled behind Scheherazade, but discover our separate lives, while I still remained married to her, and gave life to the inanimate object. Finally, the spectators would decide what story they were hearing.

Censorship can impose a deadly silence. Self-censorship can be a way for me to understand the context within which I move. I know it is too easy to make general accusations of injustice when I am not involved in first person. There are always other points of view to take into consideration. It was important to know the context when I ventilated opinions about the Kurdish struggle in Turkey, about the baby girls killed or given away for adoption in China, or veiled women in Iran. I need to narrate leaving aside the non-existing objectivity of the third person and discover the always present contradictions of reality through my subjective point of view, while my real being is revealed and hidden by a mask; a true marriage of opposites.