

August 2, 2009

Las Téoulères,
International Center for Theatre Research and Performance,
Labarrère, France

The Punishment of Puntila

Workshop and Performance by Dragon Dance Theatre
June 26 to July 26, 2009



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Review by Sam Kerson, director

To all of you dancers and artists and patrons of the arts,

To the internationals and the travellers and the immigrants,

To you in the Americas and you in Europe, and our friend Richard in Asia

Everyone is gone now including Gabby. The French project at Las Téoulères is over. It went very well, just as you might imagine, but with a few interesting qualifications. This business of renting the farm was very effective, a bit expensive but the participants paid most of their expenses and some of the production costs, the Dragon should recover from the additional, credit card debt by the first of December. The Dragon brought Bernardo from Mexico, full scholarship, and Dan Roth from Spain for a five day musical intervention. Kerstin and Didier came for a few days but they paid their own way and gave a workshop too.

Among the various artists, all of whom were here by choice, away from their daily lives, doing what they wanted, no one was involved in any kind of personal or amorous struggle. No one was suffering or infirmed, or depressed. No one had any sort of crisis going on. Maybe because we were all so far away from our everyday lives.

As the director I could not have imagined a better company. What a pleasure to work with such skilled and dedicated and energetic artists.

So the workshop was very focused and we did a lot of collaborative work and improvised together, and enjoyed our creativity together and made an extraordinary pair of performances. As I imagined in the proposal; together we created a temporary Utopia.

We had very small audiences, that is finally why I hesitate to call our hosts collaborators, they could not really collaborate, they brought no one to the workshop and they were unable to help with publicity and they brought only twenty neighbours to the shows. The best they could do was rent us the space, and run the kitchen, they produced excellent meals, full plates on a grand table that seated all of us even when we numbered fourteen, and it was French cuisine, fresh vegetables, cheeses, regional wines, fresh home made bread and we bought a whole lamb which was slaughtered here on the first day of the workshop. Finally our hosts made all the spaces available to us and did not in any way interfere with the process. And maybe that was enough. The place is big, five or six acres, maybe three hectares, and there is a house where the people we hired the space from live. Mostly we did not see them, the director is German, Katharina Seyfourth, she was with

Grotowski in Poland and she was busy preparing a piece for a Grotowski memorial in Poland which is going on right now. Just to say that Katharina was sympathetic with us, she knew what we were up to and she was able to create a space in which we could do our work. Chris too, the cook and the builder of the table and the buildings here, was very in tune with us and was a great help, the theatre requires three substantial meals a day, especially with the considerable work of putting a show together, Las Teouleres provided the meals, and the country setting and the work space and the sleeping spaces.

Michel Foucherre was with us for the last ten days, he loaned his car to the project which we still have. He made practical things in the workshop and he had a good part in the show, as the prosecutor of Puntila in Demeter's court. By the end he had a tall hat and a robe. He also rode the dragon, a two headed dragon described by Ovid as the vehicle used by Demeter when she sent her messenger to inform Hunger that she should visit Puntila.

In our piece, Erisichthon became Puntila, the character from the Brecht play. Brecht wrote it while he was in exile in Finland. The Finns proposed Puntila as a transformation and contemporization of the Greek myth. Then when Alain started to work with us we realized he must be the other Brecht character Matti, Puntila's servant. So we appropriated two Brecht characters.

Our French companyeros, Michel and Alain Pinol, and Anaïs spoke Spanish so we were saved one corner of the translation triangle. The Finns spoke English so we translated, in general from Spanish to English but not to French, since everyone, more or less spoke Spanish.

Oh, there were two French art students two, girls nineteen and twenty-three, very nice and extremely capable. Raphael and Anaïs, ... and could they draw! at first they came only for the sculpture part and they stayed somewhere else and just arrived at nine AM, and brought their own lunch, they were here for two weeks, they did a lot of work: they made papier maché pigs and the small masks for the clowns, Raphael helped Polo with the Iguana and Anaïs sculpted one of the Dryads.. Finally one of them, Anaïs, came back, full time, in residence for the last week. They joined us because Anaïs sister Laure, had been in the Puebla workshop.

Michel and the four Mexicans were completely compatible and spent hours together, working in the shop and star gazing at night. In fact the whole company was extremely amiable and made the most of their free time, going on bike rides and hikes together, partying in the evenings, the workshops and rehearsals went on at least till ten, even so after supper the friends could be found watching the heavens with Michel and sometimes dancing the Humpah, the Finnish national dance, around the fire or listening to Dan's concert.

The Finns were fantastic, Anna-Kaisa the clown who played the dramatic part, Puntila, who created Puntila, and kept the levels of performance, where I like them, slightly over the top, melodramatic. It was Anna Kaisa who made the intellectual leaps that tied the two pieces together. She was the most experienced cultural worker in the group and she put her knowledge and skill into the creation of the piece. Toward the end we were joined by the coordinator from the Kemi Jarvi Artist residency where we worked in 2007, Leena Mursu, who came for the last week, and was wonderfully capable and able and active and full of energy and concentration and independent and really made some beautiful things for the show like the altar to Demeter, but other wise just stayed in the background and made sure everything worked. They both said they were so strong and energetic and work oriented because they grew up on the farm. They were remarkably frank and direct too, but everyone accepted their way, which was characterized as, the Finnish way, and it was refreshing and communications among all the participants were quite open.

There were four Mexicans; Bernardo who we have worked with since 2004, and trained and who is part of the company, and who is twenty-one this month and was better than ever, improvising texts on the spot but also remembering them and honing them and integrating them. Polo the sculptor from our Puebla project who had a full scholarship from the Secretary of Culture in Puebla. Polo just graduated from University, in plastic arts, great guy, very capable and also a bit trained by us, so he could just make the things we needed, especially the giant Puntilla mask and the dragons. Plus the friends and colleagues Claudia and Victor, from Zacatecas, Claudia worked with us before, in Puebla. Victor is older and has more experience as a designer and theatre worker. He kept everything in order. He really managed the flow of materials. What a great boon. Our chaotic workshop? Not with Victor here! He was the best back stage manager ever! Claudia and Victor painted the signs, the road signs, very graceful and welcoming and the masks of the Dryads and Demeter.

Claudia played Puntilla's daughter, the one who could metamorphose, she changed from a girl to a dog, from a horse to a bird and from an Iguana to a fish. With help from Kerstin who coached her. Claudia also played the *clave* in the improvised band. Banging on found objects, a nice little band with a Latin rhythm we used twice in the show. A rythym band of things we found in the barn. It was fun and effective, and kind of musical. Thanks to Polos' and Bernardos 'and Alains' drumming. Maybe Dan gave us a few tips, but I felt the band was really led by Claudia.

We were happy with the event. We liked the workshop. The show was very dramatic and we were able to say things we felt we wanted to say, especially in the trial of Puntila where we could accuse the industrialist of the crimes we felt they are guilty of: Devestation of the Earth. In this trial scene Puntila could expose himself as the sociopath he really is, he says, "I have the divine right, it is my destiny to shape the world according to my own profits, in fact, I am God". It seemed quite appropriate and maybe also a reflection of reality, that he should be visited by Demeter's sister Hunger and given an insatiable hunger that would lead him to devour himself, isn't that what we see going on in the world? So it was a dramatic landslide of self destruction in which Puntila devours his own daughter who is his only help and friend in the world and then devours himself.

We wrapped the story up by planting a tree, an Oak. A serious process which Michel and Bernardo worked at a lot and which Leena Mursu finally transformed into an altar. This was our final statement, even if, as Puntilla said, we could not stop him, we knew that once he had destroyed himself we were ready to restore the natural world.

At this tree planting we invoked Demeter and called on her, in acknowledgement of our telling her story, to put bread and wine on all of our tables and work in all of our hands, to nourish us all that we might be able to tell her story again.

The process, especially the collective creation, encouraged our collaborators from Finland, who are hosting our next event, November and December in Ii, making a three kings pageant on the ice, "à la Dragon Dance". Just a hint of the idea: we see the three kings as the king of the air, the stork, the king of the land, the reindeer, and the king of the sea, the walrus, all searching for the Peaceable Kingdom and pursued by King Herrod.

For sure Anna-Kaisa left feeling that we could make a great show together, in her home town, of Ii on the bay of Bothnia.

The performances were classical Dragon Dance, one tragic scene, one comic scene, while the public moved through the dark to get from one stage to the next; beautiful starry nights, really dark and totally calm.

The final stage was indoors with a black backdrop, red and amber lights and a giant head of Puntilla.

To warm up the stage, to describe the effect of Demeter's judgement, to describe Puntilla's insatiable hunger, we fed Puntilla two full sized pigs one after another.

In the next scene, Puntila devours his daughter, unknowingly, in the form of a fish. She has changed into a fish to escape the men who bought her from Puntilla as an Iguana.

Horrified at his destruction of his own daughter, who is his only ally; and still unbearably hungry, Puntila demands that Matti cut off Puntila's hands so that Puntila can eat them.

With Dan's recorded music and Anna Kaisa and Alain's strong acting, we all felt a certain sympathy for Puntilla.

Katah provided live music, at least a taste of it on each stage, playing her clarinette and her harmonica. Beautiful sounds under the moon light, the requiem for the Dryad which Dan had sketched out for her, the song of Hunger across the field, on the harmonica, and the parenthesis for the comic market scenes played with real panache on her clarinette.

All of the participants were happy, the Mexicans ecstatic, what an adventure! Michel was moved by the performances, delighted with the company, glad to be part of the cultural exchange. Alain was happy to have succeeded, he had not acted in thirteen years and he did very well here, he thought it was the direction, as people did in general. The Finns were full of their success and their creative power.

Finally, let us say, it was a great pleasure and experience working with all of you. Those of you who were here with us making the scenes painting the signs, acting the parts, and those of you who reached out to us from a distance with your good wishes and encouragement and various forms of logistical, artistic, and financial support. Thanks to Katah for organizing the whole event and for keeping up her good humor and sociability through out.

Special thanks to Michel&Anne, who leant us the R-19 and to Alain and Anaïs, for their help with transportation.

Thanks to Bernardo and Polo and Victor and Claudia for making the amazing journey from Mexico to France. Claudia and Victor flew standby and they had to wait in Barcelona 18 days for a flight back to Mexico.

Thanks to Roberto and Junipero for their help with the Secretaries of Culture in Puebla and in Queretaro.

Thanks to Marc Estrin and Kerstin for helping us think about Puntilla.

Thanks to David Anderson at Clay and Paper for the original suggestion of the story of Erisicthon.

Thanks to Marie Helene and Lilley for the drumming and for the honey.
Thanks to Kerstin and Didier and Dan and Andrea for their interventions.
Thanks to the board of directors for helping us plan this event.

Thanks to Katharina and Las Téoulères for hosting us.

Thanks to Gabby and Bill for arriving at the last moment and helping out. Thanks to Anna-Kaisa and Leena for their conviction and determination to be part of the process.

Thanks to Robin and Jane and Richard and the Bettmanns for believing in these improbable encounters. Thank our lucky stars! We must be in a dark place here, the milky way was never brighter.

A theatre company, like Dragon Dance, which is making original creative events in different countries year after year is a complex social organization, and we who are here at the center of communications feel all of your input and recognize the significance of all of your good will and continuing support.

Here are the photo links:

Images from the 1st week:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/40156021@N08/sets/72157620798220441/show/>

images from the 2nd week:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/40156021@N08/sets/72157621429458196/show/>

images from the 3rd week:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/40156021@N08/sets/72157621672529480/show/>

images from the 4th week

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/40156021@N08/sets/72157621795049228/show/>

We are about to set off for a few weeks in Italy, we will be in touch again when we get to our next project, making a book about this experience at the Atelier Mediterranean near Montpellier, France..

Abrazos we send our love....Sam and Katah