

Deborah Hunt
LETTERA DI UNA COSTRUTTRICE DI
MASCHERE

Nota di Eugenio Barba. *Deborah Hunt, che quando era un'attrice in erba venne soprannominata «the Child Dominator of Death», è oggi un'artista matura e stimata. Da trentacinque anni fa teatro in diverse parti del mondo, lontana da casa (è cresciuta in Aotearoa/Nuova Zelanda), con base a Puerto Rico. Invento spettacoli di maschere, pupazzi e poesia. Le ho chiesto di raccontarmi per iscritto le sue radici teatrali per due ragioni: perché la apprezzo molto come artista e pedagoga. E perché la sua storia sembra materializzare uno dei miti fondatori del teatro: essere «ce lieu de la mort feinte», come sentenziò Michel Leiris, l'etnologo-poeta che scrisse il Miroir de la tauromachie.*

Dear Readers of «Teatro e Storia»,

I was born on an isolated farm in New Zealand. I saw animals being born, mature and die. I saw fields of corn germinate, ripen and die. What fascinated me was death. And so when I was 7, I began practicing different ways of dying.

By lance; by hanging; by cannibalism; by rabid beast; by burial under the sudden collapse of a tall building; by poisoned wine offered by a friend; by eating old bread with blue/greenish mold on it; by burning at the stake; by swimming at the bend of a river and being dragged under and eaten by the Taniwha¹; by a terrible lingering disease that made your face very white; by sharp knife attack from the back while walking down a dark alley; by fast moving train; by Portuguese man of war jelly fish; by drying up after being staked out in the hot sun; by drowning in a

¹ In Maori mythology of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Taniwha are beings that live in deep pools in rivers, dark caves, or in the sea, especially in places with dangerous currents or deceptive breakers. I grew up in a largely Maori community and you never swam in the bend of a river because that is where the Taniwha lives and if you swam there, you could be taken under.

submarine that could never surface.

My brother Tim was my assistant. Two years younger than me, he was desperate for my attention and became my willing helper, handing me the rope, wine glass, knife and fanning the flames. Inspired by the stories on the radio that had sound effects, I became my own personal Foley room; my lances whistled, my death walks crunched on gravel and my cell doors creaked and clanged.

I became the Child Dominator of Death!!!!!!!

The bank foreclosed on the farm mortgage and we moved to another rural area. There I practiced being struck by lightning; being bitten by plague rats when the rivers flooded (rather like death by rabid beast); and death by gathering pumpkins all summer long and perishing on the hard earth.

After a harvest storm wiped out the crops and therefore the mortgage payment on the farm, we moved to the city. My brother didn't like the change and fell asleep all the time. My parents didn't talk to each other which gave me the opportunity to practice death by endless, dense silence. My world was filled with invisible characters and objects imbued with life.

My mother decided to send me to ballet classes. I learnt to place my body in space following verbal instructions in a foreign language; to spin and to present myself to the gods. But there were few deaths. No spears. Not even a little bit of rope.

The Child Dominator of Death faded as high school and glorious future plans emerged.

When I was 17, a group of graduates from the École Jacques Lecoq in France came to New Zealand and offered an intense month long workshop. Among other things, they introduced me to something that changed my life forever, the mask.

I understood that although the mask is an object, it could become alive through the use of my body. I played and practiced, noting the images, sensations and feelings that crossed my mind at the time. Masks were born, lived and died as theatrical works were stored away after their short seasons.

Years and many masks later, three characters appeared as I was preparing a one woman show; Ajax the incompetent night watchman, the sadistic ex-military Cannibal and Hercul, the gentle savior of Ajax. They existed in their own scenes and also in miniature puppet scenes where they appeared greatly changed, without arms, legs and in the case of the Cannibal without a body. I needed a connecting thread; another character who could weave their lives and explain their loss of ex-

tremities. I hit a wall and could not find the loose brick. I asked myself «who would know these stories» and one night returning home I heard my own footsteps crunching on the gravel of the street under repair.

Flash! The Child Dominator of Death! The wall fell; the Child survived and became the weaver. Using a painted apron *cantastoria* she sings of the transformation of the characters:

«Please to remember the Evil Cannibal had torn off the arms and the legs of Ajax the Innocent. And, wandering more in the desert, returned to his formaldehyde stupor.

Hercul called the Grand Sauvage... (whispered) I don't know how... who came on his wheel-lie thing, and carried Ajax to safety.

Ajax phoned the Child Dominator of Death, who was practicing dying by self-mutilation (up and down falsetto) ...and she answered the clarion call.

The Fantastic Child Dominator of Death entered the bunker of the ex-military Cannibal and fending off the agents of the Secret Service, found the very gigantic jar where the Cannibal had immersed himself at great expense until... 2078. Sas! She struck the jar with her magic knife. It broke into a trillion pieces and the Cannibal slithered to the floor... towards... the drainpipe.

Just then, Hercul arrived, on the Grand Sauvage. They'd had also answered the conference clarion call. The Grand Sauvage was overcome by the fumes of the formaldehyde and gasping for air... opened his mouth very wide... before collapsing to the ground. Hercul fell with him, and the teeth of the Grand Sauvage, closed on the arms of Hercul, ripping them off by mistake, because they were very sharp.

The Child Dominator of Death who had finished practicing death by deadly fumes, raced to the drainpipe just in time. With one blow she cut off the head of the Cannibal and, it fell, impaled on her magic knife.

The Grand Sauvage, got to his feet, and the Child Dominator sprung on his back, taking with her... the armless Hercul. They escaped the bunker.

Suddenly the one surviving terrorist agent of the secret service pushed the button... and the world, as we know it, exploded into a trillion pieces».

Even now as I prepare a new work, the Child Dominator of Death accompanies me... because there is always the next death to practice, quietly, through half closed gleaming eyes.

