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SONNING PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

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Dear friends,

I would like to begin with a dream. A man, bound to a stake on the terrace of a temple, tries to free himself. In vain. He persists. Spheres of glass fall from his eyes and shatter into a thousand splinters as they touch the ground. Two jaguars approach, upright, on their hind legs, dancing on the crystal splinters, and their feet - not jaguar paws but human feet - leave streaks of blood on the earth. Suddenly one of the jaguars thrusts a flintstone into the heart of the prisoner. From the gaping wound spurts, not blood but a burning book, and then a second, and a third, one after another: dozens, hundreds of books in flames which pile up in a gigantic pyre at the feet of the man at the stake.

The dreamer, whose name is Kien, is a scholar, a man who loves books. In his troubled sleep he shouts: "Close your chest, close your chest." The prisoner hears him and in a superhuman effort unlooses his bonds, puts his hands to the wound and tears it still wider open so that a stream of burning books tumbles out.

The sleeping man, unable to bear this sight, leaps into his own dream and into the fire to save the books that are turning into ashes. The flames blind him. Hundreds of desperate people scream at him, trying to grab him and stop him from saving the books. He tears himself free from their grasping hands and runs away, shouting insults at them. Once at a safe distance, he watches as men, women and children slowly turn into books and are silently consumed by the flames like heroes or martyrs.

Kien, the dreamer, is the protagonist of a novel by Elias Canetti, a Jew who was born in Bulgaria, studied in Germany and later, in England, wrote the books which won him the Nobel Prize. The same Canetti, towards the end of his life, used to say that one does not inhabit a country, but a language. What then is left of a human being who has lost both country and language? Perhaps the essential. And what is the essential for us from Odin Teatret who cannot be identified by a language or a country?

For the sake of convenience or custom, prizes are often awarded to one person and thereby connected to a name. But that name conceals a microcosm that palpitates, lives and acts. The person and the name are the top of an iceberg whose solid hidden bulk consists of an intricate network of relationships, collaborations, affinities, exchanges and tensions - a living organism that navigates on the currents of time, sometimes following them, sometimes opposing them, but always taking a stand.

It is to this iceberg that the Sonning Prize has been given. It is to the entire Odin Teatret - to this group of men and women belonging to different nations, cultures, religions and languages - that the University of Copenhagen has conferred this honour and a monetary reward in recognition of its life's work.

But this iceberg has slopes that far outnumber those that have formed and still form Odin Teatret. It also includes those Holstebro politicians who welcomed us when we were so small that we could pass through the eye of a needle, when we were anonymous and young at a time when to be young was not a sign of vitality and creative potential, but merely of inexperience. It is to the

whole of Odin Teatret as well as to the Holstebro Town Council which has stood by it for over 35 years that this prestigious prize is awarded today.

The essential always emerges through privation. In the beginning there is a lack, a loss or an exclusion. For Odin Teatret the exclusion was double. We wanted to do theatre, to enter into the milieu and the history of the craft, but were denied the possibility. We were considered incompetent. At that time, in 1964, there were no theatre groups. No alternative performance culture existed to inspire us and in which we could be integrated. We were excluded. Theatre was our personal need. Nobody had knocked at our door begging us to become actors because the world needed us. We assumed the consequences of this situation: theatre was necessary only to us, and therefore we would pay for it out of our own pockets.

That is the origin of Odin Teatret in Norway: a tiny amateur theatre, dreaming of becoming professional, only five people who had to learn by themselves the essentials of the craft in solitude, outside the realms of the then recognised and recognisable theatre.

Barely two years later this little group of people moved to Denmark, accepting the extraordinary offer of the municipality of Holstebro. It was the first time that “adults” - what is more, politicians - looked us in the eyes, bestowing a value on what we were doing. For the first time we were aware that we had a meaning for others too.

By moving to Holstebro we suffered a mutilation: we spoke a foreign language. We lost “the word” which at the time was the essential channel of communication in theatre. In Norway we had been a Norwegian group consisting of Norwegian actors, with a Norwegian author, Jens Bjørneboe, performing for Norwegian spectators. In Holstebro we became a Scandinavian group with actors from Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark with irremediable difficulties of verbal communication with our spectators.

It is impossible to understand the history of Odin Teatret if we ignore these two exclusions: rejection by the theatre milieu and the amputation of language. We transformed that situation of inferiority and mutilation into a sense of honour and a source of strength. But where could we learn the essential? The living were neither willing nor able to teach us. To whom could we turn?

Theatre became the place where the living met the non-living. The non-living are not just the dead, but also those yet unborn. It is to them that you have to turn when the present does not take you into consideration. Then you can speak with assurance, through shouts and silences, to the older brothers who preceded you and the younger ones who will follow, to those who have already undergone the experience and to those who will face the same situations in which you find yourself; derided by the spirit of the time, alone against the indifference of society and the coldness of the craft.

The biographies, the words and the work of the theatre reformers of the twentieth century were the burning books that illuminated our path. Their flames guided us towards that technical knowledge which is an individual way of breathing, something that only belongs to us. Thus we built our performances, with a layer of light and one of darkness, safeguarding the essential: the humblest details, often invisible, which conceal the embrace of opposites, the interweaving of tensions which allow life to flow. Perhaps the living, the spectators, will not be able to distinguish these details, but the non-living will accept your work and judge it by the care taken over these details, by the personal temperature with which you alternate the layers of light with those of darkness.

In order to reach the non-living, those still unborn, your performances must become burning books. You must scorch the sensibility of your spectators, haunt their imagination, illuminate their most personal wounds, coax them on into the mute landscape of their most intimate self, in that part

which lives in exile within them. Only in this way can Odin Teatret become a legend which its spectators will pass on to those not yet born.

It was the theatre reformers, those heretics, nihilists, revolutionaries or mystics - from Stanislavski to Grotowski, from Meyerhold to Julian Beck, from Artaud to Judith Malina, from Brecht to Copeau, not to mention our Latin American colleagues Atahualpa del Cioppo, Vicente Revuelta, Augusto Boal, Santiago Garcia, Osvaldo Dragún - who showed us how to give the most of our most to the spectators who, for their part, come with an extraordinary gift. They offer you two or three hours of their life and place themselves, trustingly, in your hands. You must repay their generosity with excellence, but also with an obligation: you must put them to work. The spectators must be put to the test. With all their senses and all their experience they must scale an impervious wall of impulses and reactions, allusions and meanings, they must themselves resolve the enigma of a performance-sphinx that is about to devour them

The spectators must be cradled by a thousand entertaining subterfuges, sensual pleasure, artistic quality, aesthetic sophistication. But the essential resides in the transfiguration of the transient character of the performance into a splinter of life thrust into the ribs of the spectators and which will stay with them for years to come. Like an insect, the performance makes its home deep within the spectators, gnawing at their psychic, mental and emotional metabolism, and is converted into memory. The actions of the actor must leave an anonymous yet indelible mark on the spectator. This mark is the anonymous and unplanned message that you deliver to those who are not yet born. You must open the spectator's eyes with the same delicacy with which you close the eyes of someone who has just died.

The burning books of our elder brothers whispered all this to us. It is essential to get rid of illusions but not to lose your ideals, especially when recognition threatens to bury you alive beneath a monument. Do not forget that a good performance does not improve the world, but a bad one makes it uglier.

You must be a stone which does not roll with the currents of time but resists them. You must strike roots with which to cling. The currents will change. Sometimes they will submerge you, appear to obliterate you. But you are still alive, visible even to those who may not see you in your lifetime. In order to achieve this, you must grow roots, find the right ground.

El hombre es tierra que anda, according to an Inca saying: man is earth that walks. This wandering earth is our homeland. It is made up of the actions of particular men and women. They are our Polar star, the example to emulate, the frontier to reach. The mute essence to be passed on is contained in this earth made up of the actions of single individuals. This human earth is scattered all over the planet, in many continents, throughout the ages.

A few clods of this earth are in Denmark. They have nourished our roots, helped Odin Teatret to find its destiny. First of all, Ole Sarvig and Peter Seeberg, those extraordinary poets and novelists who gave us encouragement by writing plays for an unknown theatre group. And then Christian Ludvigsen and Hans Martin Berg who guided us in our ingenuousness, helping us to uncover what was fermenting inside us. Finally Kai K. Nielsen and Jens Johansen, Holstebro's mayor and municipal director, who won over the entire town council and received Odin Teatret without obliging us to become integrated in the little Danish garden. They did not ask to see results straight away. They left a strange bush to grow according to its own rhythm, following other seasons, with its wild branches. And thus they allowed the Odin to become a fertile part of the multiplicity, diversity and extraneousness which characterises our contemporary culture.

We began in the shadows and in the shadows we prefer to live. It is in the anonymity of the daily work that we encounter the ceaseless challenge that tests the intensity and the credibility of our motivations. We came from the darkness and you must wish for us that when we vanish into the

darkness again, our last dream will resemble the first one of our youth: to be like the San nomads of the Kalahari desert who move towards the lightning, because where there is storm, there is water, vegetation, life.

Together with the whole of Odin Teatret I am proud of this prestigious Sonning Prize. However we cannot accept the money. The money will journey on, divided into three portions. The first is destined for Holstebro Folkegave, a collection of associations and individual citizens from Holstebro who are building a youth club in Tirana, Albania. The second portion will cross the sea to Cuba for the theatre magazine "Conjunto" which, for 35 years, has witnessed the struggle by the theatre of the Latin American continent against violence and oppression. The third portion goes to Antigone's grandson, the Danish priest Leif Borch Hansen who followed the impulse of his conscience and hid refugees who the Danish police had orders to deport. By doing so he didn't respect the law of the State, following the example of the few Danes who opposed the Danish government in April 1940 when it asked its citizens to collaborate with the occupying German forces.

There was once a group of wandering players who lived in West Jutland. They journeyed to villages and towns, climbed up the tallest building, tied a rope to the roof and threw the other end into the air. Then they walked on it, one after the other, concentrating so as not to make the slightest false move which could jeopardise the balance and progression of the individual and the whole group. Their performance was acclaimed as a great artistic feat. Applause and acknowledgement: this was truly avant-garde at its most extreme, experimentation at its most daring. The years went by and the strolling players were still doing the same thing. They did not renew themselves, they didn't adapt to the times. They used a rope to get closer to the sky, ignoring the latest technological finds: helicopters, jet planes, missiles. Deaf to any comment or advice, they persisted in visiting the same places, meeting again their old spectators whose number was diminishing as time went by, and smiling at the young people who had never before seen such a performance: fixing a rope to a rooftop, casting it to the sky and dancing on it. One day they vanished into the void. Their rope dangled in a stormy sky that was heavy with black clouds and pierced by lightning. The ashes of a burning book fell to the ground. Only a page was left whole. On it was written: "That which you must do, you must do. And don't question, don't question".