

READING AUTHENTICITY IN THE EMIGRES EXPERIENCE ~ Pamela Howard

'Show What Has to be Told "

"..You should show what is; but also
In showing what is you should suggest what could be and is not
And might be helpful... "

(from 'On Judging' :Four Theatre Poems Brecht poems Part Two 1929 - 1938 ed. John Willett and Ralph Mannheim : pub Eyre Methuen)

The scenographer's responsibility is to translate text into vision, so that the space itself speaks reflecting the dialectic of the text , libretto or music. Creating an authentic environment does not mean transporting the actuality of life into the artificiality of a theatre, but rather striving to create an ambiguous space into which the spectator can imagine ' what could be and is not '. When scenographer becomes both the creator/director it becomes possible to choose the primary material , and for better or worse commit to putting before the public visually and dramatically important subjects and themes. Normally a designer has little choice, usually responding to other peoples choices and passions.

When something has to be told, it has to be not only spoken or sung, but shown so as to make clear the urgency and importance of the subject. Ariane Mnouchkine at Le Theatre du Soliel in Paris demonstrated this masterfully in their collective creation ' Le Denier Caravanserail" in which questions that all countries and people are asking about the world problem of immigration and refugees, asylum seekers and moral responsibility were shown through a series of exquisite vignettes that were authentic in personal detail and transformed by the removal from reality to be re- presented in the theatre space.

Projects or productions should be created out of a Passion. Passion for the subject and a sense that using ones abilities to show what has to be told, can even in the most tiny way make a small difference.

The experience of being displaced and dis-located is the common heritage of so many seemingly integrated and assimilated people.In truth the line between belonging and not belonging is very fragile and as we see everyday in the news can happen to anyone. The instant television coverage of forced emigration, people living in camps. viewed from the comfort of a living room makes the actuality seem remote. But what if someone directly face to face asks YOU for help, shelter, asylum ? What do you do when a tornado rips your home apart, or your neighbours burn your house down because you belong to a different group to them ? You have to ask for help, if you are a doctor, and engineer, a farmer, a peasant.. in crisis all are brought to the same level. This is the thesis of the great opera written in 1954-7 by the Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu (1880 - 1959) while living in exile in Antibes, France. Martinu collaborated with fellow exile the Greek writer and politician Nikos Kazantzakis (1883 - 1957) creating a libretto from his book "Christ Recrucified." Both men believed that a work of art should " preserve and confirm human and artistic values " To echo this the scenographer has to create a space in which the characters can authentically operate - Benjamin Britten observed that the 'audience needs lyricism rather than reality to recognise authenticity " (introduction to "Owen Wingrave ").and a space that is tough, rough, vibrant, improvised and full of life , enhanced with light can suggest and be helpful to the audience's understanding.

Pamela Howard has worked as a Stage Designer in the UK, Europe and USA since 1960, and has realised over 200 productions. She has worked at all the major National and regional theatres, including the creation of several large scale site specific works with the late John McGrath. Director/Designer for the Greek premiere of " The Greek Passion " the opera by Bohuslav Martinu & Nikos Kazantzakis for the Opera of Thessaloniki performed in the old Byzantine citadel/ former town's prison. As writer/director/visual artist " The New Jerusalem " - a true story of Evangelism in Britain in 1811. Productions as part of teaching assignments in 2005 for the National Theatre school in Copenhagen "Why do you always wear Black ? ", and " A Labour of Love " (2006) . In 2005 for University of the Arts Belgrade and BITEF Festival " Please take a Seat! " - a memory play. Director/Designer " At the End of the Earth " (Julia Pascal) and " The Petition " a historical Burlesque - a site specific event in the old city of London for December 2006 . She has been Visiting Professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh USA 2006, and is preparing to direct and design a new production of "The Marriage " a comic chamber opera by Bohuslav Martinu for production in 2008/9