

## *Dramatis Personae*

por Roxana Avila

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1.

Interesting word “character”. According to the dictionary, the most common use of this word is in relation to “the distinguishing qualities and attributes of a person, place or thing”<sup>1</sup>. In this way, if we have the opportunity of creating, interpreting or enacting a “character” it should have distinct qualities, setting her/him/it aside from its surroundings. In this case a “good” character would be Medea, being so absolutely different from the rest of the play’s other figures; yet not so with either one of Cinderella’s sisters, since they are so similar to each other. The same dictionary tells us that synonyms of “character” are spirit, nature, genius, personality - attributes, essence, qualities we often dream about possessing in our work, as well as words we also use to praise or denigrate an actor.

We find a secondary definition of “character”: strong moral and ethical qualities, integrity with conscientiousness, morality and mettle, with synonyms being: strength, fortitude, courage, rectitude, honesty, honour. According to this definition Medea, for example, wouldn’t have character, due to her dubious infanticide tendency; neither would Titania, with her lasciviousness for young boys and animals. We would, however, be able to say that Olga or Irina have “character”, despite their terrible life choices. So let’s see: lacking “character” typically makes one flabby and spineless; yet also, strangely enough, some of the strongest theatre figures, like Medea or Titania, could be found to be lacking in “character”.

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<sup>1</sup> ©2000Wordsmyth. All entries from the dictionary where taken from this internet virtual dictionary.

It is only as a third option that the word is defined as “a person in a novel, play, poem, or the like”, with synonyms being *dramatis personae*, protagonist, antagonist, player. With this definition, any being that appears in fiction would be a character, indiscriminately.

A fourth entry offers “a mark, letter, or symbol used in an alphabet or in mathematics”, like an ideogram, number, rune, or any of these symbols I choose from my keyboard to express myself.

A fifth, and informal, definition is related to “one who is considered odd or eccentric”. I could say that - to the rest of the world - anyone whose job is to sweat for hundreds of hours a week trying seemingly useless exercises would be an oddity. The same goes for who rejects most of what is done for hundreds of hours, in order to produce a metaphor of life, to share with others in a space charged with energy. An actress herself becomes a synonym for “character”.

Finally, the last entry for the word “character” relates it to constitution, original, nature, aroma, worth, part, flavour, jester, caution, texture, accent, kind, architecture. Such a broad and all-encompassing definition is almost no definition at all.

In theatre we use this word “character” for the other I within a set of rules and circumstances, distinct from those of our lives. It matters less to what technical and philosophical tradition we belong; when we perform we abide by a different reality. We are our own self, but not really. We cannot say that the character is us, but then again, we can't deny that it is us: it uses our body, our voice, our soul. It is a beautiful paradox and perhaps one of the reasons that some people are drawn to make theatre.

Finally, it is curious how English and Spanish share the variety of definitions of the word “character” or “*carácter*”, save for its usage in theatre; that is, we don't speak of a theatre figure as a *carácter*, but often speak of the *carácter* that a theatre figure possesses.

2.

The most recent play I have been working on is called *Our Lady of the Crabs*<sup>2</sup>. The piece is composed from a broad variety of sources and the character I play is as multiple as the associations of the word itself. I am at once a Goddess and the Priestess who gives her life; both a mother and her child escaping from the drought; a run-down ex-millionaire-turned-revolutionary leader of a futile struggle; the military forces that destroy the shanty town and that same leader; a whole community playing capoeira and the rich inhabitants of a nearby city; a narrator who sometimes is cold and objective, sometimes false and mocking. I play Roxana and an actress; Roxana and a character in a play.

The play, written originally by the Belgian writer Tone Brulin<sup>3</sup>, with David Korish's assistance, is being now re-worked by David and myself in order to make a two-person performance. It blends several strands that speak to a variety of themes, some that respond to long-held obsessions of ours and some new ones thrust upon us by our new friend and colleague Tone.

The play jumps from one image to another, from one voice to another, from past to present to future, to a time that will never come to a time that never was. Its many threads sing and embrace each other in a small circular space with live music. Paradoxically, at the same time, all the characters are part of one single narrator-possessed figure who speaks all these voices.

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<sup>2</sup> The play *Our Lady of the Crabs*, in a version with 14 artists, had its premiere in Holland and Belgium in May and June of 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Tone Brulin is Belgium's most influential director of his generation. He helped to introduce to the European theatre scene important personalities like Grotowski and Kantor and has given voice and space to a variety of so called Third World voices including writers, actors, musicians and performers. He has worked extensively abroad including South Africa, Curaçao, Malaysia and Japan.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what I do as a person and what one of the characters does. I used to think this was a mistake, that there is a very different presence for the fictive and the real, with different rules of existence. But this play blurs that truth. On the other hand it is interesting the ability to “bring to life”, as it were, any of these beings, out of the context of the play. It is as if once created they are there, even if not revisited ever again. Unlike untrustworthy friends who need constant attention, these characters exist, unselfishly and will speak back whenever addressed with care and love.

The play demands an enormous amount of inventiveness from both the director and myself. I have tried everything I know, as well as many things I don't, in order to provide variety, but mostly because I have realised, that at least with this piece, I cannot create these different versions of humanity (and therefore myself), with the same working principles.

Therefore in a secret song and dance of joy of crab-worship, the song is based on an ancient religious melody of a Sufi sage and the dance is taken from Australian Aborigenes’ dances of animals and water. And the creation of Crab-village is a complex play on rhythms - physical, vocal and percussive - performed by the goddess herself projected on a video of beautiful abstract forms. A dialogue between the son and the revolutionary leader occurs as though between a pair of eyeglasses with a thick rabbit-brow and a crab-hat on top of my covered head and body, a mock puppet show of a deep and painful transformation.

When I address the audience from the point of view of “myself”, I lie; and later speak from the point of view of the character and tell the truth. Who is speaking? What is the truth?

In the scene depicting an escape from the drought, we work on a kind of Noh-style walk, changing in speed from fast to slow, while the inner desire of getting closer to the ocean, to salvation, is reflected by drumming on my chest, going from slow to fast. The terribly trying

arrival from the desert to the famous Crab-village, where a local goddess helps all that seek her, is dramatised by the extreme physical demands on myself, a way of making scene palpable, tangible, real.

As for the character of the crab I portray, we videotaped crabs at a beach in Costa Rica and realised that they walk as if on tiptoe, so I have incorporated this walk in certain moments. It adds enough of a subtle quality to my body that I start sensing the crab in me. The lightness contrasts the brutish effort required by humans to break them open, to wedge out the meat of their claws and shells, after having boiled the screaming live crabs. Having seen the crabs on video, experienced how I dance with them and talk to them, the impact of their end at human hands has even greater impact.

Sometimes it is a vibration, discovered while training, which opens the door to a possible voice of one of the faces of the central character, while sometimes it is the memory of an “ethnic” woman in a window-front in the sex district in one of those civilised European countries. Other times, from somewhere I cannot even try to recall, voices of great masters come to me as I try, perhaps vainly, perhaps humbly, to imitate them and therefore produce another character. Sometimes it is a technical decision: one character should be exuberant, excessive and colourful; another, by contrast, reduced, condensed, minimal.

The play is still not finished so the work continues and I am finding the process wonderfully open. Funny how crabs would give me such a freedom! I thank them for having such character!

Translated from Spanish by David Korish

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