

Tiago Rodrigues
Teatro Nacional D. Maria II

By Heart

March
7-24 2019
AUCKLAND ARTS FESTIVAL



13-16 March • Loft, Q Theatre

Synopsis

In *By Heart*, Portuguese playwright and actor Tiago Rodrigues teaches a poem to 10 people. These 10 people have never seen the performance and they have no idea which text they will be learning by heart in front of the audience.

While teaching them, Rodrigues unfolds a mix of stories of his soon-to-be-blind grandmother and stories of writers and characters from books that are, somehow, connected both to the old lady and himself. The books are also there, on stage, inside wooden fruit crates. And as each couple of verses is taught to the group of 10 people, improbable connections emerge between Nobel Prize winner Boris Pasternak, a cook from the north of Portugal and a Dutch TV program called *Beauty and Consolation*, and the mystery behind the choice of this poem is slowly solved.

By Heart is a piece about the importance of transmission, of the invisible smuggling of words and ideas that only keeping a text in your memory can provide. It's about a theatre that recognises itself as that place of transmission of what you can't measure in meters, euros or bytes. It's about the safe hiding-place that forbidden texts have always found in our brains and our hearts, as a guarantee of civilization even in the most barbaric and desolate times. As George Steiner himself would put it in an interview to the TV program *Beauty and Consolation*: "Once 10 people know a poem by heart, there's nothing the KGB, the CIA or the Gestapo can do about it. It will survive." But, bottom line, *By Heart* is a training program for the resistance that only comes to an end when the 10 new soldiers know a poem by heart.

Credits

Written and performed by
Tiago Rodrigues

Text with fragments and quotes by
William Shakespeare
Ray Bradbury
George Steiner
Joseph Brodsky
among others

Set, props and costume
Magda Bizarro

English translation
Tiago Rodrigues
revised by Joana Frazão

Executive production on the original creation
Magda Bizarro
Rita Mendes

Stage Manager
André Pato

Executive Producer
Rita Forjaz

A production of
Teatro Nacional D. Maria II
after an original creation by the company Mundo Perfeito

Co-producers
O Espaço do Tempo
Maria Matos Teatro Municipal

1hr 30mins – 2hrs no interval

IMAGES: MAGDA BIZARRO

PRESENTED BY
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Artistic Note

"The last thing to leave our dying lips may very well be a poem." This is what essayist Joseph Brodsky wrote. Either this or something quite similar. I'm quoting from memory. Brodsky claims that the poem is born as a device to help us apprehend the world, simplifying the task of apprehending it. So rather than an end in itself, the poem would be a means or a tool to reach the goal of knowing a world by heart. Poetry would thus be the art of creating mnemonics.

"As though it were aware of the fragility and treachery of man's faculties, the poem aims at the target of human memory, because memory is usually the last thing to disappear, even when our whole existence crumbles around us, as if we were trying to keep a memory of the disappearance itself." Again, I quote Joseph Brodsky by heart. And I know what he's talking about when he claims that our physiology is helpless against the poetic invasion. Because of my work as an actor, some texts have got inside me, they have settled in and never left me since. They are discreet tenants who dwell in my memory, although they can be awoken at any time.

It is precisely because I am the proud landlord to all of these tenants of memory that I embarked on a journey when my grandmother, who is from Trás-os-Montes, was growing blind and asked me to choose a book for her to learn by heart, so she could read it in her mind after she stopped seeing. This literary and labyrinthian journey is still happening. While I was searching for the ultimate book for my grandmother to keep in her memory, I created a show called

Once 10 people know a poem by heart, there's nothing the KGB, the CIA or the Gestapo can do about it. It will survive.

— George Steiner





By Heart, where I teach a Shakespeare sonnet to ten members of the audience who volunteer to come on stage.

In this show, I tell stories related to my grandmother, to Boris Pasternak or to Ray Bradbury. I quote literature professor George Steiner, who refers to the texts we keep in our memory as “the decoration for the house of our interior,” perhaps ignorant of the fact that in Portuguese, “decorating” is a synonym of “learning by heart” (although I find it hard to believe that Steiner doesn’t know everything). This play is essentially the portrayal of a search for the ultimate book, the only one that my grandmother would keep inside her head once her eyes failed her.

During the show I also recall the story of Nadezhda, Osip Mandelstam’s wife. When the Russian poet was arrested and his books confiscated, she started teaching a poem to ten people at a time, in her kitchen. So that her husband would continue to be published in people’s memories. And that is what I try to do. I teach William Shakespeare’s

sonnet 30 to ten audience members at each performance. One of the sonnets from the book that I chose for my grandmother to learn by heart.

Although I have already accomplished the mission of choosing her last book, my journey continues, for such are the ways of memory. For a year now, I have been presenting this show in Portugal, Spain, France, USA and Canada. I will continue in Germany, Switzerland, Norway, etc. A couple of hundred spectators have already learned this sonnet by my side, on stage, in several languages and I hesitate to believe that, even when the play’s tour is over, this journey will ever be over. Because I know that it is a journey in search of what might be my grandmother’s last words. And perhaps even my own last words. This is how sonnet 30 starts: “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past.”

Tiago Rodrigues

AUCKLAND ARTS FESTIVAL

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[a] brilliantly
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AMERICAN

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Contains strong
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