

A Memoir of Valeska Gert and the Beggar Bar

Judith Malina

When I met Julian Beck, I was sitting in an actors' club called Genius, Inc., in the St. James Hotel on West 45th Street. William Marchant, who at that time used the pseudonym Gauguau Davis, tapped on the window of what had been, in better days, the downstairs bar of the old Midtown hotel, and which now exposed to full view of the street a roomful of unemployed actors, coming together to talk about their adventures in making rounds. Gauguau had alerted me that he was about to introduce me to someone who would be important in my life. That was in September, in 1943, but before that I had already made an important acquaintance there, and come, in a roundabout way, to encounter Valeska Gert, whose work influenced my whole life.

I was seventeen and had already been making the rounds, that is, spending day after day going from one producer's office to another—and to the agents, and to the casting calls—for a couple of years. This valorous effort got me very little: in fact, it didn't get me a thing, until the arrival of television increased the actor's employment possibilities and I had the opportunity to work on *The Goldbergs*, where Gertrude Berg recognized me as a good Jewish type to play a variety of roles.

But at the time I am describing, no such windfall was yet on the horizon. I was happy to pay the small fee that made me a member at Genius, Inc., for here I could hobnob with real actors and actresses—women with false eyelashes—and even a few who had made it and were members of Equity, the actors' union. For a member of Equity, anything seemed possible. At most of the offices I visited daily after high school, neglecting my homework, the first thing I was asked was, "Are you Equity?" and I would brazen it out, "Well, not exactly, but I've done Army shows with the American Women's Service Association and there were Equity members in the cast who . . ." But the secretaries and the well-dressed

receptionists with the power of yes and no in their hands already had said, "No, I'm sorry, we're not seeing anyone like you." It was a tough, depressing life, and the genius of Leo Schull made hay out of our needs and provided us with a tip sheet called *Actor's Cues* in which we could read the latest news of the Rialto, who was casting and who was—oh, idle dreams—looking for a small, thin, dark young woman, timid yet spunky, but above all gifted with a gift she tried to demonstrate to you from spiritual and flirtatious eyes. I was constantly amazed that I could not win, by my sheer presence, the recognition of my gifts. But alas, few knew—and none cared—and we consoled each other in the premises of Genius, Inc., with stories of near-successes.

One day as I was marking the latest issue of *Actor's Cues*, making sure I didn't miss a single opportunity, a young man came over to my table and asked me straight out, "How would you like to play one of the wives of Henry VIII in a new play I'm directing?" I gasped but held my own. Caution, I bade myself. "Do you have to be Equity?" "No, well, it's all right if you are." "I'm not." "That's all right." His name was Charles. I could call him Chuck. He was a round-faced blond young man, maybe twenty, but maybe only eighteen, for his portly figure lent him the weight of years. He went with me to the Automat and over coffee told me the story of a remarkable historical drama. It was written by St. Clair Jones, a man who commanded a princely respect among the group of people to whom I was about to be introduced.

The story of Elizabeth the Queen he retells thus: Elizabeth is the dearly beloved of her father, Henry VIII, but in infancy is accidently drowned through the carelessness of some of the servants. These servants fear the wrath of the king, fear, in fact, for their heads, and therefore determine to hide the truth. They pretend that the drowning victim is Elizabeth's brother, William, who was loved less by the king, so that Henry would be able to bear the loss. The children are exchanged, the trick works, and the boy William is brought up to be Elizabeth the Queen.

Chuck assures me that the story is based on indisputable facts of history—that Jonesy (St. Clair Jones) is a great genius and shows how all the events of Elizabeth's life are explicable by this secret . . . her/his military mind—a sexist thought, that men plan better wars than women do. But perhaps a talent for warfare is a form of superiority that we women can afford to deny. And her relations with her sister, Mary. But above all, it is the explication of the virgin state, her equivocal relations with her lovers, culminating in the tragic beheading of Essex, who, according to Jones's research, knew of her/his sexual secret and had shared in its sexual mysteries, and was silenced for reasons which the play makes evidently dramatic.

I listened with unabashed emotion. So moved was I to be part of this extraordinary play that my friend was soon suggesting that I must play, not just one of the wives of Henry VIII, but Anne Boleyn herself. I was beside myself with joy. Where and when, I asked. Well, it seems—and here a certain hesitation entered into Chuck's explanations—he is a member of a theatre group that is interested in this play, and the group has rented a rehearsal space (a church in Brooklyn), and there is to be a rehearsal, perhaps tonight. He must find out, from Eddie . . . Eddie! Enter Eddie!

Eddie was to become an important personage in my life—it was he would lead me to Valeska Gert—whereas poor Chuck was about to disappear from my story. Eddie was to play Elizabeth the Queen. He approached us regally, indeed. He was tall and gaunt, with long hands and bleak, piercing eyes that sometimes looked like Artaud's. Chuck treated him with regal courtesy. "Eddie, I'd like you to meet a fine actress, Judith Malina, whom I hope we'll have with us, if you like her." Pause. "Judith, this is Eddie La Soeur, our Queen." Eddie extended a long arm. "I'm pleased," he said, as we touched fingertips delicately. "But, please," he added, "call me Françoise. Françoise La Soeur. That means "the sister." I found this last bit absurd, and yet, he had a terribly serious pre-Raphaelite quality that I could not but appreciate.

Françoise La Soeur then began to tell us some fantastic stories from a rich repertoire, how he was married in Notre Dame cathedral to a Duke of France, how he had certain surgical procedures, still in the experimental stage, which were in the process of changing his sex. It was 1943, and such matters were still the realm of science fiction. I hoped that this marvelous creature would indeed play Queen Elizabeth, and that I would play Anne Boleyn. "We will meet at the theatre . . ."

I'm a Manhattanite, and I was taught as a child that Brooklyn was very far away. I feared I'd never find it, so Chuck offered to take me. We agree to meet at Genius, Inc. At eight o'clock that evening.

I hurried home and tried to explain to my anxious mother that this was a special occasion—I might get a part in a play at last. I dressed in my best. Mother was worried as always but also ambitious for me. She wanted me to be the great actress that she had dreamed of being as a girl, which she had renounced to marry a rabbi. And within the strict limitations of the life of a German rabbi's wife, she planned my future. I would be she. I would take up her talent and succeed. Because she was ambitious for me she relaxed the natural strictness of a Jewish mother to give me leave to pursue this Pegasus, this theatrical career that seemed to her, and to me, the single most important thing in my life.

I told her honestly of my encounter and of its consequences, though I did not dwell, nor even touch upon the homosexual aspects of the play and its protagonist. When I left, she said, "Call if you are going to be out after midnight." I took this as license. I was dressed to the teeth, as the fashion of the early forties allowed, in black satin and rhinestones. "Wow!" said Chuck as he greeted my change from bobby-soxer to vamp. We took the subway to Brooklyn, and I don't remember what stop we got off at, or what church it was that we went to. I remember approaching the arched portal, and Chuck saying, "That's funny, Eddie said he'd be here. I don't have the key. But the door is open . . ." He pushed the Gothic-arched door and deep within we saw a small service light. A man in a hat approached and said, "You're both under arrest." I will not try to describe my feelings at that moment.

Not a word was spoken in the patrol car. The police explained only that we were being held for grand larceny. I was both excited and afraid. What was really on my mind was the fate of the play *Elizabeth the Queen* and the danger that my great hopes would come to nothing. At a small Brooklyn precinct house, I stood beside the young man I had met that afternoon and was questioned as his accomplice. "What did you do with the wallets?" said a straight-faced policeman to me. I tried to protest my innocence, I pleaded that I had been sitting in Genius, Inc. when this young man interviewed me about playing a role in a play . . . "Oh, come on! Where are the wallets?" said another, not even mildly interested in what I had done that afternoon.

They questioned us separately and they questioned us together. They tried to be nice, and then again, tough, and then again nice, and then again threatening, as is their wont. It was an exhausting couple of hours of questioning before they, and I, finally pieced together what had happened. Chuck and his friends had rented the old church for their rehearsals, and in it some of the crates wallets were being stored. The wallets had mysteriously disappeared and we seemed to be the only suspects. It was a pretty pickle.

But Chuck was gallant and kept insisting that I had nothing to do with it. Of course, they assumed he was protecting me, but when he actually started to cry they believed him—or maybe they just didn't want to bother with a minor who would be released anyway. Chuck and I were locked in a cell together while my release papers were filled out. It soon became clear that though I might be getting out, he was to be booked and tried.

He, who had approached me in Genius, Inc. with the proud demeanor of a director talking to a potential employee, was now weeping like the youngster he was, afraid not of the cops or the judge or jail, only afraid that his mother would

find out. "I've got to get bail before she finds out!" he sobbed desperately. "My mother would be heartbroken! Help me!" I agreed to try. "Go to the Village, to the Waldorf Cafeteria. Ask for a girl named Stashia." "She works there?" "No, she hangs out there." "But whom would I ask?" "Anyone. They all know her. She's got money and could go my bail, but I'm not sure she'll do it. Ask her, will you?" I thought it strange to walk into a cafeteria at midnight and ask a random stranger for a woman I didn't know, but I agreed. He went on, "If she won't, go find Eddie—Françoise—his name is really Eddie . . ." He was whispering hurriedly like someone in a spy movie. He was terribly excited, sweat on his brow. I was afraid he'd pass out. I silently relinquished the hope of ever playing Anne Boleyn. "Tell Eddie. Tell him what happened. He has no money, but he might talk to Stashia. He works in a place on Morton Street called—write this down—Valeska Gert's Beggar Bar."

I went to the Waldorf Cafeteria in the dead of night. It is a place justly famous in the story of Greenwich Village. In my childhood it was called "Foltis-Fisher" and was notorious because a clientele of particular sexual preferences gathered there, and my earliest hints of what it was, this forbidden kingdom of the gay, were in references to the Foltis-Fisher on Sixth Avenue at Eighth Street. Years later it became the Waldorf, the all-night resort of the poets, thieves, addicts, anarchists, women of the street, adventurers, sellers, and buyers. It faced the dark hulk of the Women's House of Detention, where I later did time for a while, though at this writing, that hideous prison has been torn down, while the site of the Waldorf is now occupied by a glass-and-concrete bank.

But then it was in its heyday. I had never seen anything like it. It was almost 1 o'clock in the morning, and it was like a party. I asked the first table of amiable folk I saw: "Do you know Stashia?" "She's over there," and a thin hand, that seemed subject to guide a syringe to the crook of its opposite arm pointed a few tables away to a hollow-eyed girl. I hesitated, but then, making an effort on behalf of my erstwhile accomplice behind bars, I dared to approach her. "Excuse me, are you Stashia?" "Who wants to know?" "Listen I have to talk to you. Charles . . . Chuck-is in jail. He's innocent. He . . ." Everyone at the table was listening. I felt terribly indiscreet. What if someone told his mother? She couldn't bear it. "Chuck who?" said Stashia, looking disagreeable. "He's in jail?" She laughed. "Good for him!" And then everyone at the table laughed. I thought they were awful. I wanted to cry. For them, for poor Chuck, and for my lost role in the lost play about Elizabeth.

I turned away from their table. Their hilarity grew. They thought me pretty funny. I looked at the address I had written down in the cell in Brooklyn. "3 Morton Street. Beggar Bar." It wasn't far from the Waldorf. I walked from Christopher

Street down Sixth to Bleecker. There, on a narrow street was a dark stairway painted shiny black with a red and a blue light bulb illuminating very faintly the graffiti scrawled in a maroon so dark it was visible only as a shadow on the black wall—"The Beggar Bar." From below, I heard a piano and descended.

Suddenly, a piercing shriek, a blood-curdling sound, broke from the doorway below, shaking the metal pipe banister that I was holding onto. No more music. I leapt back. I couldn't go on with the mishaps of this perilous night. I walked back and forth, hovering around the stairwell, trying to get up courage to go down into that pit, but I couldn't do it. I walked to Washington Square, to the comforting and familiar park that will forever be the playground of my childhood, which in my tenth and eleventh year I made my domain. And I sat on the circular fountain's rim, and I thought of Chuck in jail hoping for bail and the transvestite queen of England and the scream of Valeska Gert rising from the black stairwell.

I read once again the inscription on the Arch: "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God." And I decided to make Stashia my ally. I returned to the Waldorf. I bought a cup of coffee and sat at Stashia's table, where the others made room for me as though I were an old friend.

"Stashia, you know the Beggar Bar?"

"I've been there." Pretty cynical voice. Not much hope here.

"Would you like to go there with me?"

"Why?" She spoke with dry hostility. I hesitated, and she said, "Will you buy me a drink there?"

Sure . . . I could scarcely afford it, but I was determined, and it seemed the right thing to do, even if it barely left me subway fare home.

"They don't serve drinks there. They got no liquor license," said one of the companions of the Waldorf.

"They got an alcoholic eggnog," said another, "which ain't too bad." Stashia brightened. "Let's go," she said.

As we descended the black stairway, we heard the sound of a piano playing a familiar German song. There were no screams. I had gone to get Stashia to lend me the courage to go there, but now I regretted it. I changed my mind when I found that to this bar, the door was shut. "Knock," said Stashia, amused at my timidity.

It was Valeska who opened the door. Valeska tried to express her whole character in her dress, in her cosmetics and in her manner. Her being was completely extrovert. Her virtue was her resistance to inhibition. She seemed very tall, but she was not tall. She seemed agelessly old, as if having surpassed aging. Her face stung me with a sharp look. "Come!" commanded a small, bright red mouth, in a white powdered face. Her eyes were outlined in heavy black cosmetic that emphasized the density of their paranoid pupils. She wore black pants and a black shirt and a string of big red beads tight around her throat. Her hair was pitch black and cut short in a crew cut. Her general appearance was ferocious, and her expression sought to emphasize this fierceness. When she said "Come!" she tossed her head and her whole body back to emphasize the commanding invitation. She urged us past her and we entered the little cellar room.

Before I could get my bearings in the darkness, the tall figure of Françoise La Soeur swept toward me. He was carrying a tray of glasses, which, upon seeing me, he slid down from his uplifted hand onto a table. He wore elbow-length violet satin gloves and a large violet picture-hat whose wide brim swayed ridiculously around his wagging head as he greeted me with inappropriate ebullience.

"Darling, Darling, Darling! How splendid that you've come! How on earth did you find me? Oh, I'm overjoyed!"

"Eddie," I whispered in a small voice. "Françoise!" he exclaimed. "My dear, you must learn to call me Françoise La Soeur. La Soeur means the sister!" He was shouting. I thought he was drunk, but he was not drunk, this exaggerated ebullience was a kind of conduct that Valeska expected from her employees at the Beggar Bar.

He motioned me to sit during his little welcoming speech, and Stashia, I noticed, was already seated on a little barrel, which served for seats in this dingy room. But I didn't think I should sit before I spoke to him about poor Chuck. Poor Chuck, indeed, for this was the last I knew of him. I didn't get to say it to Françoise, because before I could speak of anything, before I could sit down or adjust myself to this cellar where my eyes blinked in the semi-darkness, where an upright piano tinkled behind me, Valeska appeared out of the blackness of the kitchen. She swooped upon me like a bird of prey. With both hands she clutched my upper arm. She glared at me as if she were about to evict me from the premises. Her voice was a shrill, harsh whisper.

"Do you want to be my hat-check girl?" The words came clipped and pitchless. She rolled the "r" in "girl" in a heavy exaggeration of the dramatic German accent.

I was terrified. I was so terrified that I whispered back, very softly, very delicately, "Oh, yes!" Almost fervently.

"Gut," she screamed.

"Maria, we have our hat-check girl!" She addressed a tall, exotic lady who sat in the shadows. Then she turned to me.

"You can sing?" "Oh, yes!"

Her eyes glittered as if in mock greed. "Ach, gut! Very, very gut! You make twice as many tips in the hat-check, if you sing, too."

I was weak-kneed. I was not to play Anne Boleyn, but suddenly I was a hat-check girl in some kind of nightclub—and I had just become a singer!

"You hear," shrieked the eagle voice, "she can sing!"

Maria Collm, a stately, deep-voiced singer, was not amused at Valeska's interest in me increasing my tips by singing badly.

"I haven't heard her yet," she said coldly.

"It doesn't matter. She gets more tips if she sings."

Maria Collm looked the other way. She was an artist and understood as even I understood at that moment that Valeska was merely insulting her, and that that was her motive, and not increasing my wages. I sat down beside Stashia. I ordered two egg-nogs, which Françoise brought, and looked around at my surroundings.

We were in the cellar room of one of those five-story tenements that still stand in the borderline area between Greenwich Village and Little Italy. On the walls were marked in burnt paint "CHI-KEN SOUP \$.25—COKA COLA \$.10" and other such information. Little barrels served as chairs and tables. A small platform for a stage in one corner and a little upright piano. That night there were few customers, mostly Valeska's entertainers sitting in the small space, gossiping together.

I observed them with awe. If not quite actors, they were show business people, working at it—and I, I was to be one of them. But I did not know in whose presence I was, for I had no knowledge of Valeska's astonishing history.

Stashia finished her drink while I sat in speechless wonder at what had befallen me. When Stashia said, "I have to go—it's one o'clock," I remembered that I had to call my mother. I planned out how to say it. Behind the piano was a pay phone. "Listen, Mother, I got a job. It's, well, it's partly being a hat-check girl, and partly being a singer, but . . ."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in this place, it's called the Beggar Bar, but it's not a bar, it's a kind of cabaret. And there's a woman called Valeska Gert. Oh, please, can't I say yes?"

"Valeska Gert?" She paused. It was a name she knew. "Say yes. If you don't like it, we can say no later." She was afraid for me, but she didn't want to risk missing an opportunity, and she knew who Valeska Gert was.

I was afraid, too. These people were not like the people I knew, not even at Genius, Inc., not to mention high school or the circle around my rabbinical family. These people had to be dealt with, and yet they were attractive, they were bold. They were . . . in some way, I thought, they're more like me. When I came back to the phone I spoke to Valeska. I agreed to her plan. She grinned in a wide-mouthed way that seemed to devour me.

And the truth is, I needed a job. Because I had just enrolled in Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop and through a hard-won audition was hoping for a scholarship that would reduce the fee from \$1,000 to \$500. I worked at Consolidated Laundries, counting the dirty wash, and still hadn't enough to cover the school fee, and suddenly here was an offer that could help me study with the teacher of my highest hopes . . .

Someone came in, and Valeska cried, "Get the coats!" almost screaming her stage whisper. I approached the two men. "May I . . . check your coats?"

"No."

"Oh!" But a look of earnest disappointment won me my lost customers.

"Well, ok, for a girl like you I'd take off more than my coat," and they handed me their coats, which I placed on hangers.

"Very good! Very, very good!" She rolled her "r"s in glee, grinning her approval of my tactics as the customers sat down. "Tell me," she leaned over, putting her face close to mine. I noticed the network of wrinkles under the thick pale powder. Her eyes sparkled like little serpents. Lechery overcame her pallor. "Tell me, are you a virgin?"

"Yes."

Suddenly she shrieked aloud. All faces turned toward us. "She's a vir-chin! Look, here is a real, live vir-chin. Where have you seen something like this before? In all the years I have this place I never had a vir-chin here before. Hah! Look how a real vir-chin looks!"

I was not a little embarrassed at being a virgin at seventeen, and must admit that my virginity lay heavily upon me, but I was being particular, and the man I was

waiting for had not yet appeared. Still, no one likes to be publicly mocked and I had to realize that this was Valeska's style—harsh, funny, cleverly vulgar. Her obvious efforts to wear the mask of evil were ever denied by a kindly heart and a soul sensitive to the sufferings, which her grotesqueries exposed and put into a sharper light, for those of us who soften the edges too much, and under cover of politeness obscure the realities. So she put her finger on it, so to speak, on the Achilles' heel below my belly and shouted out what others only wondered about. I labored for Valeska for several years, and all that time I was a vir-chin, and my virginity served me well in that little pit of darkness, and I soon got used to her little joke about my chastity.

Valeska Gert called herself a "Grotesktanzerin" and in her cellar bar she danced and bellowed and enacted her own grotesqueness and that of the rest of the world. She constructed a small world, a kind of hole—a genuine underground, for here, the themes which the underground movement of the sixties confronted were already in question, and Valeska's outrageous little acts traded on them: sexual liberty, greed and the money system, control, sadomasochism . . .

There wasn't much to do, obviously. Not more than thirty people could sit in the little room, and once there one could spend the whole night, so there wouldn't be much turnover in the coat-checking department, which consisted of a metal tube she'd just that night thought of hanging up behind the piano by the telephone.

"Sit with the customers! You are here to entertain them!" she hissed. I didn't yet dare. I preferred rather to sit with Françoise, who told me his tall tales and explained to me the ground rules of this cellar-world. When anyone entered, I rose to take their coats. And I watched the entertainments. At fifteen-minute intervals, one of the entertainers rose to sing or perform.

Maria Collm was tall and svelte, dressed like a great lady. She put a languid hand on the piano and looked poignantly at the pianist, and sang in French, "je me sens dans tes bras si petite . . ." Her voice was very deep, and her face tiny and white with painted features delicately drawn. The contrast of her tender features and her cool, rich voice was emphasized by her satin gowns. She had a mysterious air, smiling knowingly and implying in her behavior a certain superiority to all the world, and especially to the sordid aspects of our surroundings.

Madame Pumpnickel was a comedian. She was only four feet tall and was an astonishing knot of nervous energy. Her act was dour and strange, a bit of Dada with a bitter crust; whereas Sada Gordon was a typical Jewish comic telling funny stories about parties and doctors and daily life. But in that dusky cellar, the facts

of daily life were a bizarre reflection of those long nights when lust and longing brought the lost wayfarers here.

Dante was a copious Italian who sang with blazing vocalism the swallows of Sorrento. He was not a paid singer. He sang to draw toward himself the handsome young men who, admiring his passionate voice, became curious to know more of his passion.

The piano, which Valeska hardly ever allowed to cease its medley, was played by Fred Witt. He won me over instantly by honoring me with a theme song—an old German favorite of my mother's, "Wenn der weisse Flieder weider bluht," which he played whenever I came in to work, or before and after I sang. He was a small man, resignation written on his face along with abundant good will, but always the strain of the shadow on his life, that he was a serious pianist and had come to this. I recognized in him the artist brought to nothing, the plaint of the refugees, the German Jews who constituted the milieu of my childhood, with their endless nostalgia, "Bei uns . . . "

Pancho was another who frequented the Beggar Bar. The most lovable of drunks. Everyone loved him and wanted to help him. He came in and sang a few songs and told a few touching stories. He loved me with the most platonic of loves, and took me around after the Beggar Bar closed to after-hours clubs where he would solicit money for drinks, saying that I was a refugee child from the rescue ship Gripsholm. In *Ich bin eine Hexe*, Valeska invents a delightful fantasy about me (renamed Sara) and Pancho (renamed Panchio): that he later became very wealthy and that he and I were married.

Some unusual waiters, too, who sometimes supplemented Françoise and me on busy nights. Julian Beck came, but he liked it not, all that darkness, and everyone putting on airs. He'd been friends with Valeska in Provincetown, and he didn't want to work for her.

Even my mother, a rebbitzen, so dignified that I don't believe anyone ever spoke a dirty word in her presence, came one busy weekend to help wait on tables. Valeska was appalled at Rose Malina's ladylike appearance. She grabbed one of the red oilcloth tablecloths that covered a wine-barrel table, ripped off a strip of the stuff and tied it around my mother's neck as a Bohemian neckerchief. "Now!" she cried, "Now you look like one of us!" But she stepped back and then shook her head sadly, "No, you look like a lady who has been forced to wear a red neckpiece!" My mother never returned to work there again.

The other waiters and waitresses who occasionally came to work were all artists and poets. Jesse McCloud, who said to me that anything written before *Finnegan's Wake* was too old-hat to count as modern literature. Tennessee Williams, already in his youth melancholic and complaining, mostly that his play *Battle of Angels* was not finding a Broadway production. And Jackson Mac Low, who went on to become one of the leading avant-garde poets of our time . . .

But these people existed here, as I did, not as performers in their own right, but as a kind of entourage for Valeska, who was proprietor, mistress, and star. Her act embodied the whole mystery of the Beggar Bar. Her dance and her voice, and a personal attitude toward the world that made her mold her life and art into the creation of a unique character, consistent and unified. She created a role, and became that role. The way they say that Jarry became, at a certain point in his life, the character of Ubu, diminishing the distance between art and life, abolishing the differentiation between the heightened reality of theatre and the quotidian reality. On the one hand, this is close to what the world calls madness, but when it is accomplished within the hard reality of the world, then the world will make a place for it, too, and admit the character of the eccentric. Valeska Gert was one such, made way for by the world, and she did it with wit and will and a form of life that stands on the opposite shore of the submission that is madness—it is liberty.

Valeska's liberty was a rebellious liberty. Her choice was close to that of the enragés of 1968. She stood in the face of the world and howled against the hypocrisy. The world had set a standard for beauty, and her life howled in its face, "I will be ugly and I will be grotesque, and I will be marvelous." There was a standard for grace and prettiness and politeness, and she said, no, rather crude, honest and grotesque.

The light that lit the little platform in the corner opposite the door flickered on, and the other light in the little room flickered off, except for Fred Witt's piano light, and she stepped onto the stage. She glared with her wild eyes at the people gathered in front of her. She leaned in towards them as if to accuse them of some horrid crime, then jerked herself backward, and in a stringent, mocking voice, announced the title of her piece.

"Now I will tell you how I came to make this place . . ." She leaned forward. Fred Witt played a low, suspenseful background. She confides her first desires to establish a cabaret theatre, then tells bitterly how the likes of her could never get a liquor license in New York, boasts of her emargination and her poverty and how all alone she trudged and pleaded to secure this black cellar room.

But not with sentiment, the sentiment roused in the spectator overflowed in the excess of her small person: a little comparable to Peter Lorre's tenderness under the tough, cruel roles. But artists can't be compared to one another. What Lorre had and what Valeska did were each in their own way art, works definable only by the uncanny power they have to move us, which is always unique and irreplaceable. She bowed upon the little platform, her torso flexing in unnatural ways, her back springing rigid, her upper body drawing sideways away from her pelvis; her hands and elbows at angles that all graceful art has tried for years to hide. She describes her encounter with the neighbors and the church on Carmine Street.

I watched her with an ever-opening eye. So this is the underside of the romantic style that I have been narrowly pursuing; this is the liberation from the classic tenets of high nobleness expressed in softness, coldness. The false majesty of theatrical royalty, crumbled under me. Valeska stamped out, with one story, a seemingly banal tale of the creation of a little environment, a lifetime of pompous myths. "I'm not those queens and great ladies," I thought as watched her perform, as she threw up her hands, all at angles when she described her encounter with the local bishop in a lace robe. I'm a crazy urchin-woman setting my small body like hers all at angles against the falsified orderliness of the old world. She emblemized in her body the painful rejection of the world one loves and hates and needs and rejects. It was not satire that she practiced, it was martyrdom.

Like Jarry becoming more Ubuesque, so she became, perhaps always was, the character she portrayed. She could tell a story or do a single minimalist action. One of her best was the crying of an infant, in which, as she builds from blubber to whine to wail to red-faced shrieking, all the tenderness, all of the normal, maternal response is buried in the disgust that she provokes, a hideous screeching, demonic in its infantile ferocity. It is never an animal cry—only a person could make such a repellent sound—but a person untrained as yet in any humanizing attribute—a raw, fleshly screech of vocal chords and veins of strain that stand out in the face and a mouth, loudly devouring, demanding, relentless.

How she put herself into it! Her body was involved not only in the characteristics she was portraying, but the intensity of her frustration, which she shared with the character, of the total incomprehension of the spectators, either of the intention of the actor, of her character, or of the unspeakable significance and pain that remain in her outcry. Life as a cry of pain—and lest this draw a humanizing pity from us, cloaked in a mocking, sneering, acid scorn of us and of our pity—and in this way like Antigone, never submissive, even if she die for it!

I worked for Valeska Gert until the spring of 1945. Then one night the merry game (Valeska always said, "The Beggar Bar is my toy") ended abruptly. I came to

work as usual at about nine o'clock, and Valeska opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and hissed through clenched teeth, "Sit down, you are a customer." I sat down across from the place I'd sat with Stashia the first night I came there. There were two men sitting across from me who were visibly plainclothes policemen. By whispering, "You're a customer," Valeska was protecting me from arrest.

I ordered a Coca-Cola and put together the details . . . Valeska had hired a young singer, who turned out to be fifteen years old, although she appeared older, and she was arrested for working as a minor in a place where liquor was sold. And at the same time, Eddie was arrested for selling that "alcoholic eggnog drink" of which Stashia's friend had spoken in the Waldorf. That was the downfall of the Beggar Bar.

I vehemently urged Valeska to pay Françoise's bail bond, for none of us (including Valeska) who bought the eggnog in a grocery store on Bleecker Street and not in a liquor store, thus assuming that it was safe, had the slightest idea that we were doing anything illegal. And most reluctantly, out of her good heart and under terrific emotional pressure from me, Valeska paid the bail bond and La Soeur vanished forever. He vanished from New York City, and Valeska was stuck with the forfeited bail, ten times the amount of the bond.

All this happened the week of my first confrontation with Piscator, and I was terrified to meet the great man after years of hearing his praises. And now, at last, I held my breath as the door of his office opened, and . . . suddenly, it was Valeska Gert who came through the door, and seeing me, she screamed in her wildest grotesque voice, "There she is! She is the one! She made me pay the bail bond! She made me lose all my money—it's her fault!"

Apparently, Valeska had gone to Piscator to ask for some financial help in this crisis, and from the look of it, he had refused her. I feared it was the end of all my hopes.

In his cold, dignified manner, he ushered me into the office. I was shaken . . .

Piscator's office was book-filled, strewn with papers, and behind the desk was a huge map of the theatre of war. He had marked the battle positions of the Allies and the Axis with colored pins, indicating which cities had been bombed, as he tracked the retreats and advances.

This was the office of a political man. Nothing here was theatrical—dramatic, yes—but as war is dramatic . . . In front of his spartan desk I danced out my

"Moon" poem. It seemed less outrageous in the light of Valeska's act, yet it won me my scholarship to the Dramatic Workshop.

I never saw Valeska again. I hope she found someone to bail her out.

from the diaries of Judith Malina, January 9, 1980, Torino:

Imke has brought me from Germany a copy of Valeska Gert's *Ich bin eine Hexe: Kaleidoscop meines Lebens*. Glancing at it during rehearsal, I thrill to see that she recounts the story of the Beggar Bar and recalls all our friends there. Imke inscribes it:

Das Lebendige aus der Vergangenheit schopfen, damit die Gegenwart zu giesen umdie mit Liebe zu gestalten. Das ist ein gutes Erbe.

[To create the Living out of the past, watering the present in order to form the future with love. That is a good legacy.]

But my legacy is not so praised by Valeska, who reproaches me for not acknowledging her as my teacher, mentioning on page 171 that I told the photographer Tobias that I discovered my style in her, but that when I learned in Europe that her work in the twenties was unknown, I ascribed my inspiration instead to Artaud.

Surely she is right that I owe her my thanks, and that I have been an ungrateful pupil, though I have tried to make public my derivation from Piscator, outside whose office I had my last glimpse of her, as she pointed an accusing finger at me . . . Now I have with me the Swiss notebook in which I'm trying to write a memorial to her—or rather the story, really, of our days at the Beggar Bar. I am trying to repay in a small way the large debt that I remember too late.

But all of our lives are like that. We regret and reproach ourselves and suffer the misery of "that which I should have done, I did not do," and go on, and are ungrateful to those in our present while we bemoan our negligence of the past.

I look ahead to the final paragraph of her autobiography:

I have no children. My dances have influenced the dancers of the whole world, but they do not know it. I want to live even when I am dead. Therefore, I have written this book. Maybe someone will read it when I am dust, and maybe that one will love me?

She is speaking to me.

Editor's Note: Judith Malina gave me this text some years before her death. It remained unpublished in the PAJ Publications archive until now.

JUDITH MALINA (June 4, 1926–April 10, 2015), one of the great ladies of the American theatre, was a director, actress, and writer who founded the long-lived experimental collective The Living Theatre with her husband, Julian Beck. She is the author of *The Diaries of Judith Malina 1947–1957*, *The Piscator Notebook*, *Love & Politics*, and other writings.