

## **“MY AMBITION IS TO EXPRESS HUMANITY NATURALLY AND DIRECTLY” ELISABETH AUGUSTIN, AUSTRIA**

“I was searching for my real self,” says Elisabeth Augustin, an actress with Austria’s distinguished Royal Theater (Burgtheater).

In sharp contrast to the storms of applause that greeted her stage performances, Ms. Augustin felt a profound sense of solitude when she left the stage. It was as if there was a gap between Elisabeth Augustin the actress and Elisabeth Augustin the person.

Ms. Augustin’s father was a government official, and her mother, a graphic designer. On weekends during her childhood, she, her two younger sisters and her brother used to hold family concerts for friends, as they were all very musically inclined.

On entering elementary school, Ms. Augustin joined a children’s ballet company run by the Wiener Staatsoper (Vienna State Opera), and at 10 she entered a dance school. There she learned a wide range of dancing styles, from classical to Russian and East European ethnic dancing.

However, at over five-foot, eight inches, she was so tall that she stood out from the other students, so she switched from dance to theater. After finishing high school in 1971, she passed the entrance examination for Austria’s top national drama school, the Max Reinhardt-Seminar. Almost immediately she had the opportunity to appear in a TV program which turned into a big hit. She won an award in the process. Her talent was soon recognized by a famous director who came to the school to see her. After graduating from drama school with honors, she was given a contract with the Royal Theater, a long-cherished dream, thanks to the strong recommendation of this director. It seemed that there was no end to her good fortune.

As she challenged every role given to her with youthful passion, Ms. Augustin’s reputation continued to grow. In 1980, she married Rudolf Melichar, another experienced actor. The next year, at 28, she was selected to play the title role of Empress Maria Theresa in a TV drama. It was a wonderful part, that of the dynamic empress who set in motion the transformation of the feudal system of the Habsburg dynasty into a powerful modern nation. The program was a sensation and it was repeated many times.

However, at the gala reception celebrating the success of Maria Theresa, the show’s star was nowhere to be seen. Utterly exhausted, Ms. Augustin couldn’t find the energy to face a large group of people on such a grand occasion. It was as if her heart was enveloped by dark clouds.

Left alone after each brilliant performance, she was struck by a deep sense of solitude. Ms. Augustin’s very success was causing her distress in her private life, especially because of the envy she aroused among her peers. Offstage, the actors and actresses were fiercely competitive, fighting each other for roles or to keep each other from succeeding.

She thought of the self who performed on stage as a different person from her private self, so prone to exhaustion and weakness. Which one was real?

Ms. Augustin’s first daughter was born in 1982. Having to manage both family and professional life further increased the pressure on her. She tried meditation and therapy, but to no avail.

Around that time she started receiving letters from a friend in America, full of talk about Buddhism. At first she wasn’t interested, but the letters kept coming—followed shortly by the friend herself, returning to Vienna on vacation. Despite her friend’s enthusiasm, Ms.

Augustin didn't decide to begin practicing Buddhism. But later, while on a trip to Greece, she again felt a deep sense of solitude as she sat staring at the ocean. Without realizing it, she started chanting like her friend had taught her to do. She felt a warm sense of fulfillment and openness, and so she decided to try practicing Buddhism regularly.

HER husband also started to chant with her, and they received the Gohonzon in 1986. The next year, she was asked unexpectedly to perform at a major theater in Munich, Germany, on a long-term, two-year contract. This was a big challenge in terms of both time and physical strength, since it was not long after the birth of her second child. Ms. Augustin decided to use her practice to challenge herself. Since her husband could not leave Vienna because of his work, she took the two children with her to Munich. Every day was a struggle. She contacted local SGI members in spare moments from her work and participated in Buddhist discussion meetings whenever she could. She also managed to find time to take part in an SGI seminar at Trets in the south of France.

When she returned to Vienna, bigger jobs and a busy schedule were waiting for her, including a domestic tour, and performances at the famous festivals, Salzburger Festspiele and Festspiele Reichenau. She threw herself into her work, and every job was greeted with acclaim. She received a letter from an unknown fan saying that he had been encouraged by seeing her perform and hearing her voice. For her fellow actors, it was her energy as much as her performances that attracted them. Many of her colleagues started to participate in discussion meetings, so she began talking about Buddhism whenever she had the opportunity.

According to Ms. Augustin, her Buddhist practice has become a source of power that sustains her on stage: "In most cases, actors and actresses play their roles in a certain style, but I am trying to move away from artificial styles like that. My ambition is to express humanity naturally and directly. Every performance is a fight to discover the truth. When I'm playing a villain, disguising myself to look like an evil woman is not what it's about: only when I can find and express that woman within me does the character find her soul.

"While chanting, I realize that I am facing my weak self. This used to be scary, but weakness, and the courage to overcome it, are part of the reality of being human. Learning to express this is my struggle." □

*Courtesy SGI Graphic*