

Carran Waterfield

Godiva Rides to America

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Grandma Waterfield's journey to America, her connection with a disenfranchised people and a story about a Jewess in the family, have always held a fascination for me though I have never pursued them consciously in my work until writing the following about my aborted trip to America in June 2004.

My dad's mum, grandma Waterfield, was a hard woman, from what I remember: hard, but funny. She was hardened by life, and too much washing. In her old age she used to sit for hours gazing out of her living room window watching - I imagined - the number 21 bus passing back and forth from Wood End to Coventry town centre. Grandma was always sitting, watching and waiting; every day, waiting. To me, an uninformed thirteen year old, grandma never did anything in the latter years of her life. She just sat and waited for visitors. Whenever I caught the bus to town I could guarantee that if I sat upstairs I would see grandma's face staring out of the window.

My weekly "Red Riding Hood visit to granny's" consisted of a mile and a half trek. I can't remember the name of her block of flats. But, you went up in the lift, stopped at the first floor, turned right out of the lift and walked to number 6. Grandma Waterfield's kitchen overlooked Riley Square. Her block was next to the sewing shop and the big flats with sixteen floors, which wobbled and threatened to collapse on you if you stared up at them long and hard enough. I never went up there in the lift, but I did walk all the way up the stairs one time so that I could test the power of the wind.

The funniest recollection I have of grandma's immobility is the sight of my mum with her head firmly placed against grandma's bum trying to inch her up the stairs to the toilet at our house after she'd had a few Tia Marias one Christmas. I could never understand why grandma ended up in a flat on the first floor when she couldn't even get up our stairs at home. Needless to say, the thought of such a still woman having made a journey all

the way to America was some feat in my imagination; not because it was America, but because I had only ever associated her with Bell Green Flats and 40 Beake Avenue, Radford, Coventry! Soon my walk to school and to grandma's became coloured with the dramatic transformation of the council housed landscape of blocks of flats, brook and shopping centre into the wild forests, mountains, canoe spattered rapids and the occasional white man's settlement - the land of the Mohicans and the Iroquois! I could easily interchange all of this for the opening scene from *The Sound of Music*, the sexy forest scene from *Ryan's Daughter* or the burning of Atlanta City from *Gone with the Wind*. Such is the power of teenage imagination to turn the most mundane into the most evocative film set.

Mostly in my childhood memory and later in my theatre work, I have pursued my mum's family history since its mythical qualities of mysterious parenthood and heroic undertones of wrestling with witch-like matrons have taken a stronger hold on my imagination than the "beyond the shadow of a doubt" stuff from the Waterfield line. So, grandma's story and her connections with America are largely untapped creative resources for me. However, one dramatic aspect of grandma's story that has consistently scratched at my fascination for women on heroic journeys includes her journey to the New World which I learned was a result of the Fiske (grandma's maiden name) family running away from Alsace-Lorraine fleeing Russian anti-Semitism. The family landed in Quebec sometime between 1869 and 1887. They were not exactly pioneers, but, in my dizzy adolescent imagination, their being in Quebec *must* have had *something* to do with *The Last of the Mohicans* which was my favourite television programme in 1970. While other girls postered their walls with

pop stars, I postered mine with Indians; vowing that one day I would go to America and make my protest about the loss of their land. I got as far as an American pen pal and a tentative enquiry at the travel agent's when I was twelve. In June 2004 the reality of a trip to America to present some work, albeit about a famous 11th century naked protest ride, was equally unproductive.

Keep to the path! (And she doesn't.)
Don't eat the apple! (And she does.)
Don't play with sharp things!
 (And she must.)

Milestones or journeys studded with *Dick Whittington* markers can be failures as well as success stories. They are fairy godmothers with warts, fat bellies and fat bums. They are the grandmas who are always there when the going gets tough, chuckling in an "I told you so" and "grandma always knows best" sort of fashion. Maybe we should learn to love them more or at least heed their whisperings at the crossroads of life. Failures or aborted projects have been major milestones for me in my creative journey. Failures *are* the stuff of fairytales and myth.

Transgression and its consequences can be seen as failure but this is the stuff of transformation and development. Often failure comes from the compulsion of youth: "I must have that... I must do this... now!" In my case it comes from the compulsion of middle age which is equally adolescent: "I must have that... I must do this... before it is too late!" Before you know it, granny is hard on your heels with a stern look in her eye and a gnarled finger beckoning you to face the dreaded wooden spoon.

I had always had a vague feeling that connecting with psychotherapists could give me a kind of justification for my work, much of which draws on autobiographical and personal material. I met Nor Hall, the

American psychotherapist and writer, student of James Hillman, on several occasions from 1999 onwards. We often talked about various schemes and collaborations, many of them thwarted by lack of money and so on. However, finally in 2003, we started working together.

In June 2004, Nor and I boldly rode into the southern state of Georgia, USA, on the back of an old mare: *Godiva, the Naked Politician*, and grandma came too!

Following in grandma Waterfield's footsteps, I had braved the Atlantic Ocean - I am not the best of travellers. To pass the time I had indulged my imagination in childhood fantasies of Hudson Bay and the St Lawrence River, remembering history lessons with Miss Peggy Irene Davies, my elegant history teacher who wore cerise twin sets and the most beautiful maroon stilettos; her grey hair always beautifully coiffured. She was the classic woman alone - the antithesis of spinsterhood *and* she had given my dad a decorating job for which we were most grateful when money was short at home. The central focus of the Godiva myth is this sense of the hard-up being vindicated. Peggy Irene Davies was a lady of history and she had sorted my dad's temporary financial blip!

Lady Godiva is famous for her *naked* protest ride through Coventry, supposedly in the 11th century, in a bid to rid the townfolk of the unfair tax collected by her husband, Earl Leofric. Her ride was witnessed by Peeping Tom who was blinded for watching her. There are centuries of re-tellings of this story in every medium conceivable. I did my version in 1995 - being British, I didn't take my clothes off!

I made the show for many reasons: the story had no historical basis for having happened but many people believed it was true and I was fascinated by the ugly

mechanical toy-Godiva that rides out in broad daylight on the hour every hour in Broadgate, Coventry City Centre. Then of course there was the issue of Godiva's age at the time of the protest. She was, like me, a "late-starter" as a performer. The political nature of her act and her identification with the underdog appealed to me.

Nor and I had been invited to the Mythic Journeys Conference in Atlanta City, Georgia, USA. Well, Nor had been invited. On reflection I think I might have been the party act to spice it all up a bit. The Mythic Journeys Conference in Atlanta city, a glittering event, was to be attended by such people as James Hillman and Marina Warner as well as several famous myth-makers from all walks of life. It was dedicated to the late Joseph Campbell *and* there was every reason for me to make this journey to attend as well, taking my place among the great and the good!

Looking back there were many signs that suggested that I might trip up on this particular magic carpet ride. I did.

Two years prior to my journey when I sought funding for the translation of the work for an American audience, the arts officer dealing with my application couldn't see the artistic quality or overall purpose of the project: "The quick answer to your question is that the application was rejected because the project was very broad, encompassing several strands and lacked clarity in too many areas."

So I adapted the idea, because I believe in persevering. I went ahead with it on my own mythic journey, driven by an obsession to revive an old work that had not even made twenty performances. I have never been very good at wasting things; I grew up in a house with rules such as you don't leave the table until you have cleared your plate. *Godiva* was a meal I had not yet finished. I had self-inflicted a detention at



Carran Waterfield in *Godiva, the Naked Politician*.
Photo: Gaz Caulfield

the meal table with tantrum-like obstinacy.

The week before the trip, things looked precarious. I learned that the festival organisers would be hard-pushed to come up with some of the technical requirements, though they were very confident they *could* make things happen. I also knew that Nor's daughter would give birth some time around the dates for the performances, but being totally non-maternal I hadn't given that a thought.

I was hell-bent on this "chance of a lifetime" where I would meet an "ideal audience for the work", which after all, seemed to have lost its savour at home. Giving

everything the benefit of the doubt and not wanting to be in a position of not knowing what it would have been like if I hadn't gone to America, I ignored my inner voices, took a deep breath and made the trip.

I couldn't bring all my own props because of excess baggage. I had left Leofric's chair behind. I now wish I had taken the entire freight regardless of the cost. When I got there the missing props were made or found, but to the wrong specification. The Americans measure in inches not centimetres! This little oversight threw everything out from props right through to ceiling height and stage dimensions.

The final straw came two hours before we were due to perform. Nor got a call from home: her grandson was on his way! She had to fly off, stork-like, leaving me holding the other baby! Needless to say, I blubbered like a baby and cancelled the show.

I am a childfree woman by choice, so that I can do my theatre work without worrying about the children. My sister says I am selfish. To me the making of work is akin to the creation and rearing of a child. Now, I am approaching that milestone in every woman's life, which means there is no more choice about it. You can't be a mum or a grandma anymore, nature has decided for you.

The fact that I didn't get to play *Godiva* again was how I imagined being pregnant for too long might be. I was impatient to share my pseudo-new work and I was aching for a show. The battle of trying to re-stage *Godiva* became a literal re-enactment of the effort of *Godiva's* ride on her horse cloaked in red, neighing with the rawness of a real horse in labour and ultimately in deep distress.

I could write forever about the fury, the embarrassment, the pain, the woeful waste of time and effort, but it would achieve

nothing. One year on I wonder what all the fuss was about. What's so special about putting on work in a foreign country anyway?

At the final session of the Mythic Journeys Conference the President stood on the stage, his face magnified several times on several plasma screens. With Mel Gibson-like verve he addressed the people gathered there. He talked about the "strange disappearance" of so many women who had had to leave the conference to deal with family matters and of those who never even

arrived because they were ill. He called it "the departure of the feminine".

I was still there, waiting for my miracle of recognition. It was a full moon at the time and I have heard how babies are often born in larger numbers around a full moon. Needless to say, my miracle didn't happen. Even amongst all that new age energy there were no spirits floating around with a divine message for me.

This departure from convention is not the act of a young woman. ... The older woman is differently capable of the spiritual choice of



Grandma Nellie Waterfield with Carran Waterfield and Tony Waterfield, 1960.

marrying herself to something unseen for the sake of the whole community, especially a woman who has already carried some creative life or project or child to fruition.

Nor Hall, *White Riding*

Writing about it is little compensation for the mammoth effort involved in me getting on that plane in the first place. The new incarnation of Godiva was not ready to be born. In fact she may now never be born. Or maybe she *has* been born in my now different attitude to performance. At one time I thought I might die if I didn't *do* the work in performance. Now I know I won't. There are more important things.

No longer does the young Juliet-like figure who appears in John Collier's Godiva painting appeal: the one they always trundle out for the publicity leaflets. She is a stark contrast to "our Lady of the Middle Ages" - the Godiva painting in my imagination - whose spirit now inspires me. Indeed, if Godiva ever rode at all she was flabby and middle-aged... past it!

So what is the consolation prize in all of this?

Failing in America is nowhere near as tough as failing at home and nowhere near as regrettable as staying home staring out of the window wondering who is coming on the number 21 bus and if they will come today at all.

For me the "have your cake and eat it" - the children and the career - are as impossible now as they were when my grandma lived. Grandma Waterfield dedicated her life to her children: she had eight. Two of them had their lives cut short through accidents. Last year two of them died naturally of old age. There are now four of them left including my dad. These real lives last much longer than theatre works

unless you are a playwright. I envy those companies able to keep alive that which they have sweated blood and tears over. It is a great achievement to hold up your one woman show forever and a day but it takes a very special situation to make that happen.

My grandma was justified in sitting, watching and waiting after achieving all that birthing and child rearing. I think after only seventeen years of professional theatre-making I need to stop, take stock, sit, watch, wait, wait, wait and maybe wait that little bit longer to see the direction from this most recent milestone.

CARRAN WATERFIELD (Britain) is the artistic director, performer/writer, and founder of the Coventry based international touring theatre company Triangle. Her productions have won several awards. In 1997 she formed the production company Nina and Frederick with her partner Richard Talbot. She also founded Bare Essentials Youth Theatre (1989-1999) and The Little Herbets, a museum theatre project for young people (2001 to present). As well as her work at The Herbert, Coventry, she is visiting director at the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of Birmingham.