

## Fern Smith

# This Imaginary Woman

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There is a long history of artists using events from their own life to inspire or inform their work. I have been involved in making theatre with Volcano, based in Swansea, Wales, for almost twenty years. The motivation behind much of our company's work is political. Our work has always been ideas led, using theatre as a forum for examination and debate rather than as storytelling or presentation of character and narrative. The old but not outmoded slogan "the personal is political" for me encapsulated my reasons for making *This Imaginary Woman*, a requiem for my mother, which explored the nature of bereavement and grief.

Volcano is primarily known for presenting visually distinctive, sometimes physical, often provocative work, performing adaptations of classic plays, amalgamating many texts into one and also experimenting with the prodigal daughter of British theatre, "new writing". *This Imaginary Woman*, I suppose, could be included in this last category, but even so it was quite a radical departure from anything the company had ever made and toured before. For a start, it was a musical - about death - and I was known on the touring circuit as a performer and not a singer.

Both of these facts could have meant that the show would be a non-starter, destined to be an interesting but unworkable and definitely non-marketable project best passed over in favour of something less risky. I knew however, and had the backing of my colleagues at Volcano, that we were a company identified with taking risks and that projects like this needed to happen, even if in retrospect they did not become the cash cows every theatre company on a small subsidy needs for its survival.

Pearl Isobel Smith was born in 1933, raised five children single-handedly and was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in her mid-forties from which she was to die in 1996. I was the youngest and only girl.

The Imaginary Woman of the title was Pearl. I had a picture of her, a hand-coloured photograph taken when

she was a little girl of about five. This little girl, who was later to become my mother, would eventually become the woman diagnosed with an incurable disease. By turns, throughout the process of making, presenting and finally touring the show, the Imaginary Woman also became myself in the days, months and years after my mother's death, trying to build a new identity for myself as a motherless daughter.

In addition, the title was intended as a homage to the imaginary or the created, invented world of art as opposed to everyday reality. It was also a reference to the initial muse of the piece, Anaïs Nin, the 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist infamously renowned for the fabrication or at least embellishment of her personal life in her extraordinary diaries. The piece, whose original intention was simply to be a collaboration between a musician and a performer, in the spirit of Nin's frankness and extravagance, reinvented itself, finding a new form as a modern requiem.

Theatre making at its best is a gloriously irrational process. By irrational I mean that the unconscious, if allowed to, can play a pivotal directorial role. Sometimes it is difficult to ensure that the unconscious operates within a five week time scale - the usual amount of time allocated to the making of a new show by the strict financial parameters typical of the small-scale touring theatre company. With this project, I wanted to explore a more process-led approach, allowing more time for failure, redirection and radical rethinking. With this in mind, the piece began life merely with an intention and desire to truly collaborate with another artist.

In the past I have seen many projects with collaborative aims transform into traditionally hierarchical structures with artists such as musicians, performers and

choreographers at the bottom, increasingly becoming creatively subservient to the vision of the director. Volcano prefer to work in a more democratic way but sometimes make mistakes by inviting intransigent guest-directors, who employ more rigid methods to work with the company. After one particularly bad experience of this, I vowed to pursue the possibility of a different approach, one which honoured the integrity and skills of all of the individual artists involved.

The initial starting point was that myself and Patrick Fitzgerald, a composer, singer and songwriter should commit to something which was primarily an exploration of the creative process between two collaborators, which might or might not bear fruit in a finished production. With this in mind and a desire to explore the nature of sound and energy or sound as energy, we organised a tentative meeting which would mark the beginnings of our search.

I have mentioned earlier that I was known on the theatre circuit as a performer and not a singer. After a university degree in psychology and a brief foray into the world of the labour and trade union movement whilst studying for a Masters in Industrial Relations, I followed my heart (and body) by forming a theatre company with long time friend and spiritual twin, Paul Davies. Both of us had a history of sport rather than theatre behind us, but turned this energetic ignorance to our advantage and formed a company whose drive and style was essentially physical and movement oriented.

We attempted to create a theatre vocabulary which was a synthesis of and attributed equal importance to the voice and the body. At times however, it felt as though the company was associated with and recognised more for its physical work, which appealed to the more dominant visual sense and that the vocal was secondary, both in sound and content. My own explorations

sought to address or re-dress this balance.

I became increasingly interested in voice and identity and my findings and frustrations seemed bound up sometimes in very personal experience and sometimes in my experience of being a woman. This interest led me to seek out and work with practitioners of the voice or body/voice such as Noah Pikes, Frankie Armstrong, Guy Dartnell, Venice Manley and Kristen Linklater among many others. In addition I sought out a singing teacher who patiently worked with me on my singing range utilising the Estill method. I had sung in church as a young girl but then, as often happens, had batted down the vocal hatches as I went into my early teens. The pure pleasure of singing and exploring all the different areas of my voice was so surprising (and addictive) after the many years of thinking "I can't sing" "I don't have a voice". I became increasingly at home in the vocal world and felt that a shift was occurring in my identity as a physical theatre performer. My body/voice was ready to play a greater part in my work.

In my conversations with Patrick Fitzgerald we spoke about words and sound and the fact that as a creative force in themselves, they rarely took centre stage in British theatre. In addition, we recognised the ability of the human voice to move and touch the soul in a way that pure movement alone cannot.

It was singers who had an authentic voice that we were drawn to, the human being rather than the technically accomplished vocalist. Voices such as Patti Smith's, with her shamanistic ranting and tender poetry, were inspirational and in some way *This Imaginary Woman* was written as an unconscious response to *Birdland*, the haunting ballad on the album *Horses* about the death of a young boy's father. Although in those early days, *This Imaginary Woman*

w a s n o t e v e n  
conceived.

In addition to my vocal explorations, I had been reading the work of Anaïs Nin for years, since the year after my mother's death when someone had handed me *Fire* which indeed blazed a trail through my life then and for years to come. Her writings seemed to touch me on a molecular level, triggering connections and expanding my heart and mind by her decision to live deliberately and consciously. Now I believe that I was interpreting her diaries as a manifesto of courage, inviting me to live life as expansively as she had done.

During the initial meeting between myself and Patrick in Ireland we spoke about Nin and we assumed that our project would in some way be based on her writings. Interspersed with reading certain illuminating or entertaining passages to each other Patrick would either pick up his guitar or sit at the piano and improvise, inviting me to accompany him vocally using sound and stream of consciousness words. We did this for two or three days. Sometimes we would exchange stories from our childhood and family history or talk of books, films and music that had become defining moments in our lives. This completely open and non-judgemental sharing provided the framework and the security that both of us needed to go on in our explorations and allowed us to develop a more intuitive working method than I had ever experienced before.

This was uncharted territory for both of us, I had never sung on stage before and Patrick, even though he had released many records and spent years touring the rock circuit fronting a band before going solo, had never performed in the theatre. Towards the end of our first meeting, I confessed that my love of literature made me terrified of committing myself to paper, so rigid with anxiety was I at not measuring

up to these great minds which so inspired me. Patrick, an accomplished songwriter urged me to write. But what would I write? It made sense of course that I should write some kind of diary - real or imagined - but that I should write every day and post the results daily to Patrick in Ireland. We left each other with an agreement to meet in Wales in about two months time.

It was the beginning of 2004. I rented a cottage in North Wales with my partner for the first week of the New Year. It was here that I began to write, more of a dream diary than a recording of day to day events. If I was unable to remember the preceding night's dream I would write a fragment of a story or memory, often inspired by that day's walk in the mountains of Snowdonia. Each day I would put my page of writings into a brown envelope and address it to Patrick in Ireland. I was never influenced, haunted or embarrassed by what I had written since, of course, I started each day with a new blank first page. In addition each fragment was a new beginning and therefore I had no opportunity to re-read and continue with a particular line of narrative.

At our next meeting, Patrick brought along my writing and said that a theme had emerged! I was shocked but intrigued, having no recollection of what I had written. He showed me what I had sent him and I could see that the bulk of it was written about my mother, her life, her illness, her death and the impact that it had had upon me. I was astonished, it was as though a part of myself had made the decision to speak without my conscious awareness and it had needed an outside party to see what I could not - that our collaboration was intended to be about death and grieving, more specifically about Pearl's death and my grieving.

At this point we had a big discussion about whether or not we ought to

pursue this. Could we give ourselves permission to explore this theme and present something publicly where we might bring up feelings in both ourselves and our audience that we could not control? How could we be honest, embrace risk and behave responsibly at the same time?

I had recently read some of the writing of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and spoke to Patrick about the five stages of coming to terms with one's own death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This was echoed in the bereavement literature which mapped out the four phases of grief: shock, yearning, disorientation and resolution. We had the idea that if we could perhaps replicate these stages or phases within the structure of our show, then this might somehow act as a container to hold the emotional space.

Serendipity was obviously in the air as I had enrolled on a training course to become a CRUSE (Bereavement Counselling) counsellor just prior to Christmas. During the next six months I travelled to Llandough Hospital in Cardiff for six weekends, immersing myself in literature about the grieving process and learning the skills to become a volunteer bereavement counsellor. This obviously fed into my work with Patrick, in addition to enabling me to relive some of my own grief experiences in a safe and supportive environment. Throughout the year-long process of making the show, I read everything I could on this extraordinary and enlightening subject, truly becoming the "death bore" parodied in the performance.

*I have become a death bore.  
I embarrass people at parties  
with my morbidity;  
my obsession, with my need to know  
how other people died.  
I want to hear other people's stories,  
I want to hear other people's death stories.*

*Their heart-attacks,  
their car crashes,  
their cancers,  
their suicides...*

Returning to the rehearsal room in Swansea and the revelation that we were embarking on a modern requiem, Patrick invited me to speak more about memories and stories from this time. I would tell him a story and he would begin to play on the piano or guitar the sounds of the stories. This was an extraordinary process since Patrick would translate the words into music by some kind of creative osmosis. These changed, evolved and were refined over the following months, but essentially in that initial period the spirit of many of the songs and accompaniments were developed from Patrick's initial reactions to hearing these words.

Our times together were short, intensive, exhilarating and exhausting physically and emotionally. Never before had either of us been involved in such an all-consuming artistic process which fed into and was fed by the periods in between our meetings. These gave us the time to hold and develop the project emotionally as well as giving us the opportunity to refine the writing or the music.

After a number of meetings in Ireland and Wales, including a surreal rehearsal week in the miniature opera house at Craig y Nos Castle, the home of 19<sup>th</sup> century opera diva Adelina Patti, close to where I was living at the time in the mountains of the Brecon Beacons, we had a working script and ten songs. Although I had gained the confidence to sing alone with Patrick, I still had to master the art of singing in public! Gradually, after an entertaining process of only singing to people in the dark, with their backs turned or with their eyes shut, I finally gained the confidence I needed to sing the songs to an audi-

ence, gradually enjoying myself, becoming less apologetic and finally managing to sing without fear.

Until this point, we had been working very much on our own without an outside eye or director. I now began to speak to other members of Volcano, saying that I thought we had the makings of a show - we even had a title! - and that we would like to take it to the next level of performance and possibly look at organising a tour. The Volcano people in the office were initially sceptical. Questions concerning the nature of the show arose: was it a gig or was it theatre? We said it was both. They also wondered whether something so personal could translate to a wider audience without causing embarrassment or apathy.

At this point we felt intuitively that the show could touch people in a very deep way and that it spoke about the universal and inclusive experience of death and grieving, something that we would all have to face sooner or later. Of course there was also the thorny issue of selling the show, how would promoters react when presented with a musical about death which was neither tongue-in-cheek, ironic or comic.

We arranged a private view for Volcano and a sample audience of friends and members of our board. We performed the song cycle, which also included elements of simple narrative. Patrick had trained as a doctor in his twenties so had a wonderful intimate bedside manner of delivering lines.

The reception was more positive than we could have hoped and questions concerning the relevance or resonance of the piece to a wider audience were immediately answered.

In terms of presentation, we knew that a heightened performance style for the piece was needed, but how to get the balance between reliving grief, acting out symptoms non-authentically and a cooler



Fern Smith in *This Imaginary Woman*. Photo: Graham Matthews

more detached, less emotional quality? I believe that even though we spoke about this extensively, the performance style evolved very slowly and was arrived at weeks if not months into the performance of the piece.

Even though I knew that

re-enacting or replicating grief symptoms such as anxiety and tension, shallow breathing or hyper-ventilation was detrimental to the voice and impeded the quality of the sound, I still believed that I had to suffer emotionally and physically to give integrity to the performance. This

tension was especially present at times of violence, self-destructiveness and anger such as the moment when I would become the voice of the disease. If I were to tear my body and voice apart completely, this would not only be self-indulgent but of course ensure that I would only be able to perform once a week and need to fill the remainder of the time with recovery and therapy! Consciously I knew this to be the case but it took a long time of experimenting to get the balance right and not use the tour as some kind of public body psychotherapy.

Although, as mentioned, I had come a long way from singing with a paper bag over my head (!) there were times when performance nerves and anxiety got the better of me. I would then close in on myself, as if to apologise for the performance, seek refuge in old habits of self-annihilation, self-pity and a tortured detachment from the audience, most notably and ironically at the Giving Voice Festival in Cardiff in April 2004. This was a timely reminder that the right to speak or sing can only ever be given by oneself and seeking permission or acceptance from others is a constant negotiation and should never be taken for granted as a process completed.

The performance persona of *This Imaginary Woman* needed to be electric, contradictory, expressive, theatrical and feminine. The essence of the performer who would sing the songs had not yet been found. We needed another skin and one which had such a transformative quality that it could be said to be imbued with its own spirit. I needed a disguise, a shield, armour, but also attire that would celebrate at times the vulnerability or melodrama of the 'death bore'.

The costume found me in a small shop at the back of Oxford Circus in London, full of feather boas, multi-coloured sequin suits and dresses and feathered head-

gear. The songs of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil, as well as the theatricality of the drag artist had certainly been a great influence on us both and so finding myself in this palace of kitsch cabaret was of no surprise. The dress, a black sequin and beaded halter-neck with matching cuffs and head-dress had the right combination of defiance and demureness, allowing for both elegance and muscular posturing. The Imaginary Woman was beginning to appear in the flesh.

Until this point we had only given thought to the sound of the piece and not the staging. One of our initial ideas was to perform in the dark to allow the aural sense to be heightened and to give the audience a blank screen to imagine their own visual accompaniment. We wanted to enable each audience member to have their own unique experience of the show and to allow their imaginations, memories and stories of love and loss to be present. The practical problems of Patrick playing the guitar and piano in the dark made us rethink this one quickly.

I then spoke to Paul Emmanuel, a friend who was an artist and who had recently begun to experiment with video. I asked him if he could come up with a visual manifestation of Multiple Sclerosis, a metaphor for the disease breaking down the neural pathways to and from the brain which interrupts motor-coordination among other functions. I wondered whether we could create a visual journey of going deep inside the body as it destroys itself or recreates itself on a cellular level.

Paul was working on filming paint close-up as it was squeezed out of tubes and slowing the frames down, resulting in beautiful Escher-like ink blots which seemed to move and mutate of their own accord. We tried front projecting Paul's images as we moved through them performing the song-cycle but we all agreed that it didn't work.

The images gave a dark and sinister feeling to the entire piece which did not allow the many shifts in emotional and energetic quality to take place.

We then decided to experiment with light and colour. Our idea was rather than to come up with a theatre lighting design for the show, to see if we could metaphorically transform the sound waves from the music and song into light waves with matching frequencies. We wanted to create a sound and colour-scape to represent the many cycles of the grief process. Andrew Jones, long-time collaborator with Volcano, understood this wish to design an architecture of light and by suggesting a white dance floor and white cyclorama gave the piece the colour intensity and luminosity that we were looking for. It also allowed us to exploit the cabaret and rock gig aesthetic in which the piece was firmly rooted.

The piece was never intended as an acoustic set. The rawness and sheer volume possible with an electric guitar gave *This Imaginary Woman* its power and also its contemporary feel. It also reflected the roots of both Patrick and myself who became young adults during the raging fever of Punk which swept the British music scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This was our authentic sound and the blind rage of the guitar at moments during *The Disease* or *Proud Strong Woman* were reflections of the intensity of the emotions described in these songs.

The electric piano, although amplified, had a natural tone and therefore allowed for a dialogue which seemed to echo the pain on the one hand and, on the other, the transcendence of the show. Singing and speaking with the microphone also allowed for an intimacy and privacy where even the breath or a sigh became symbolic. There were some who believed that the amplification took the immediacy away from the emotions and put a

barrier between the performers and audience; this was an ongoing debate for all of us on tour, especially when faced with the inadequacies of often defunct theatre sound equipment as opposed to the sophisticated sound apparatus and crew back-up typical on the music circuit.

The final stage of making the show was bringing in co-artistic director of Volcano, Paul Davies, to give advice on the staging and direction. We felt that we did not want to take the piece too much into the realm of physical theatre or movement since we felt that this would undermine the strength of the aural experience. There followed a period of sensitive negotiation to find a middle way between Paul's inclination to make the piece more boldly abstract and theatrical and our instinctive urge to find a delicate balance between performance and reality. Initial choices regarding the staging were made but again revisited and allowed to evolve as *This Imaginary Woman* found her feet in front of an audience.

The show was premiered at Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff in March 2003. It then went on to tour nationally and to Ireland and Malta, giving a total of thirty-eight performances. The show received relatively little attention from the national media, but was reviewed intelligently and positively by the press that did cover it. A recording of the show was made for CD which was also reviewed enthusiastically.

One of the most rewarding experiences was the number of people who would come to both myself and Patrick after the show and share their own stories of grief. Some wrote letters expressing thanks for sharing such an intensely personal journey: "I attended this performance because I work as a bereavement counsellor and wished to experience your play as a further way of helping in my work. I feel sure this will be



the case, but alongside I want to express my deep appreciation for allowing such raw feelings to be expressed openly. The music was to me significant. It touched chords of personal grief and let me experience this in a different way. It was quite strange but for a few days afterwards I felt as though I'd had a cathartic experience. I now recall this is how I used to feel after a strong personal therapy session; the music coupled with the image of grief and its expression brought pain and relief. Thank-you!"

The final performance was on May 27<sup>th</sup> 2004 the day prior to my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday in a converted chapel in the Ucheldre Centre, Anglesey in North Wales. *This Imaginary Woman* really did split audiences in terms of their reactions. Some were bemused and wondered whether theatre really should be a forum for the exploration of so personal a theme, others found it an intensely affirmative experience both creatively and personally, strongly identifying with the theme and its bold presentation. I feel that if theatre cannot allow for such investigations I am unable to be a part of it. There is a very British aspect of theatre which honours both the skills of the great actor and the writers of great narrative but is a little uncomfortable with the emotional vocabulary of such shows as *This Imaginary Woman*. Our greatest reception was in Malta and in Ireland where audiences appeared to welcome, or at least not to be afraid of such extremity of emotion, and who were possibly more comfortable seeing death, illness and grieving as central to life itself as opposed to the denial of death more prevalent within British society.

FERN SMITH (Britain) obtained a degree in Psychology at Swansea University and an MA in Industrial Relations at Warwick University. Fern is also a co-founder and artistic director of Volcano Theatre Company. She has organised many residencies and Summer Schools for the Company in addition to working as a freelance performer with The Charnock Company and in Film Four's version of Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*. She has directed projects for Oxford Youth Theatre, Lyric Theatre Hammersmith Summer School, and Trafford Tanzi for The Network, a consortium of middle-scale English venues. Fern featured as Mary Magdalene in Steven Berkoff's *Messiah* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2000, and appeared as Io in Tony Harrison's feature film *Prometheus*.