

Lena Simic

An Everyday Privilege

I am privileged. I live in Liverpool, in Britain. I am undertaking a practice-based Ph.D. in Live Art at Lancaster University. My research is funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council which pays my university fees and my maintenance. My art projects have been funded by the Arts Council, England. I have a husband and two kids under five. My husband, Gary Anderson, is doing his fully funded practice-based Ph.D. in independent film-making at the University of Plymouth. We are entitled to the full amount of Child Tax Credits from the British government. Even though we are well below the national average household income, with no mortgage, no debts and an old banger for a car, financially we are able to concentrate on our studies and artwork. We live in a housing association flat in a leafy part of Liverpool. We share childcare and household responsibilities. We work on our art five days a week. We try to keep week-ends free for kids.

On my usual week-days I wake up at 7.40 a.m. The day is determined by whether I 'study' in the morning or the afternoon, but the daily routine is pretty much the same. I prefer to 'study' in the morning. "Study" is a word Gary and I use for all kinds of activities like reading, writing, filming, editing, rehearsing, training, walking, running, thinking. By 'studying' we refer to the time spent exclusively on our art work currently in connection to our practice-based Ph.Ds. However, I am sure we will be 'studying' after the Ph.D. completion as well. On average I 'study' six hours a day - three in the morning or afternoon and three after the kids have gone to bed.

Gary and I get the kids, Neal aged four and Gabriel aged two, dressed and ready for pre-school and toddler's group. Gary is responsible for them from 8.45 until noon when we meet for lunch. My work time lasts three hours and fifteen minutes.

My research is about (dis)identifying and re-figuring female archetypes. I play with Medea, Mary Magdalene and Joan of Arc. I read relevant philosophical and feminist

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Medea/Mothers' Clothes. Photo: Gary Anderson

books around my project. I make notes in those books and copy them onto my laptop. I add my thoughts around various philosophical concepts. I open them up. I read relevant performance and live art books and journals. I get inspired. I try to assess my practice in the broader context of live art and feminist performance. I learn and think in new ways.

Lunch is with Gary and Gabriel. Neal is in pre-school. Gary and I exchange thoughts about the contemporary world; we

always end up saying we need to make sure our art has political implications.

I spend the afternoon with Gabriel. I let him watch some television while I do my exercises (a twenty to thirty minute workout). These are my little ways of staying in tune with the body. The big ways happen on Monday afternoons (when I have a one-to-one yoga session with Dale in her flat nearby; she is a friend, a visual artist, soon to be certified Iyanger Yoga teacher and our babysitter), on Thursday afternoons (when I

go jogging or fast walking around nearby Sefton Park - four kilometres all the way round) and on Friday afternoons (community Yoga class, part of a Sure Start initiative for mothers and kids in a local school: it's free and Gabriel gets to be in a crèche). The best opportunities of staying physically in shape happen when I participate in the workshops organised by the Women's Writing for Performance Project at Lancaster University, master classes/workshops at the Magdalena Project festivals or organised meetings between myself and other female practitioners in the area. Our last three day meeting to share and exchange practice took place at the end of June in Preston, Lancashire.

Back to Gabriel: walk in the park; feeding the ducks; seeing other mothers and toddlers; chatting. My art connects to the everyday, the lived, the experiential. I use my little digital camera for my work. It is of a very shaky and unprofessional audio-visual quality. I work as I live. My children are in my films. Gary is sometimes a cameraman. Sometimes I act on film. I pick Neal up from his pre-school.

Dinner is at six with Gary, Neal and Gabriel.

Once the kids are in bed, I am back 'studying' for some three hours. I might be discussing my current performance making with Gary; I might be filming us talk, act, read; I might be writing my performance journal filled with ideas and pre-filming outlines; I might be editing the previously filmed footage; I might be in a performance space if one has been allocated for rehearsals. Each of my projects is initially developed for a specific venue, so my pre-arranged rehearsal schedule will be in connection to the limited availability of that particular space. Often that means using my week-ends as well. I don't have my own rehearsal space, my own studio. For physical creation of my

performance work I use the workshops (organised by a third party) and the space in which I will be performing. I might be using my living room to mark certain actions on stage, to draw them in space. I am not that bothered about not having my own studio space. I don't believe in the supremacy of daily rehearsals. I like my imperfect conditions. They are incorporated into my work. My daily life breathes with my creative life. My art is conceived through my encounters with other friends, artists, mothers, toddlers, children's friends, in urban Liverpool spaces, in public buses, local streets, parks, on journeys back home to Dubrovnik, trains and aeroplanes, railway stations and airports, my housing association flat, through chats with Gary, through email and email listings.

My classical drama training in Bratislava and in London left me with a desire to tackle great myths and epic figures. However, the post drama school reality of living in Liverpool - being pregnant, having small children, feeling foreign, making friends, going shopping, working on occasional art projects, making ends meet - was very different. I realised that myths and epic figures are not suspended somewhere above our heads waiting to be embodied through our performances. Even though I felt somehow connected to my three archetypal figures of Medea (through her foreignness), Mary Magdalene (name connection) and Joan of Arc (Catholic upbringing and youthful desire for a mission) I decided not to feel sacred about them. I was ready to examine them through the everyday as a departure point for making performances. Through my research into female archetypes I developed three performances: *Medea/Mothers' Clothes*, *Magdalena Make-up* and *Joan Trial*.

Let me take you through the process of developing *Medea/Mothers' Clothes*, which was first presented at the Bluecoat Arts

Centre in Liverpool in May 2004.

Medea attracted me as an anti-mother archetype, an ultimate rebel, a foreigner, a barbarian. I wanted to put her epic presence next to my local and everyday living as a mother of two young boys, who demand my full attention. In addition, I was spending most of my time with other mothers in the neighbourhood either attending toddler groups or hanging out in the park, the café or someone's flat. Chatting to other mothers made me realise that we all felt trapped by the mother archetype, the social and cultural representations of motherhood. Mothers were expected to be and do it all. As a reaction to that I decided to bring together on stage the mothers from seventeen Liverpool toddler groups and Medea in my live art event.

First of all, I decided to photograph the mothers. I bought a slides film and made some portraits (I don't think of myself as a photographer at all!). I informed the mothers about my art project on motherhood. I wrote it all on one piece of A4. I also asked them to give me a piece of their clothing. I had an image in my mind of washing their clothes and hanging them up with pegs. I wanted to place all of their clothes together on stage. I wanted to wash them in my boys' blue baby bath with delicate baby shampoo, and in the same careful conditions that we bath our children. I wanted those clothes to take centre stage - mothers instead of children. The paradox was of course, that the more performances I did, the more the clothes got washed. Now the clothes look much more worn out than when I first got them. I decided to project mothers' portraits on a white bed-sheet that was dripping wet.

So, *Medea/Mothers' Clothes* was first envisaged as an image: me (someone in between a Medea figure and other mothers placed centrally on stage) washing the mothers' clothes, while on one side portrait

slides of mothers are projected and on the other a Medea story is projected as a video footage. I wanted Medea to appear from above, from a dream, a theatre tradition, unreachable. I was going to get a professional actress and direct her in a couple of monologues from Euripides' text. However, as I started looking for a suitable actress and realised I wanted a foreigner in England to play her, Gary pointed out that I was probably looking for myself. I was to play Medea on video.

Gary and I started the experiments with my little digital video camera. The first filming consisted of me going over Euripides' monologues, memorising the text, which happened to be Medea's monologue about women's conditions. I had Gary correct my broken English. We emphasised his "proper Scouse" and my foreign accent. We were male versus female, local versus foreign. After the first filming I filled my performance journal - a diary log that I keep for each project I do - with ideas about other situations to film. Trying on a Medea costume in my bedroom; hanging the washing outside in the Medea costume; visiting a local laundrette with kids; trying on the mothers' clothes on top of each other, acting out a monologue on stage as a 'proper' actress, going to the toddler group, having lunch in a local café with other mothers, going to the park with children, going to the supermarket in the Medea costume, ironing the Medea costume, putting on excessive make-up...

I filmed the video footage over three months. I was very adventurous with the Medea costume and wore it in unlikely places. I made films with kids in them. Later on I chose the final video material for the performance carefully. The video film was projected onto a large screen that filled the entire background of the set, behind the action of my washing the clothes on stage and behind the wet bed-sheet of mothers'

slides. My on screen larger than life existence clashed with my humble, repetitive action of washing.

In the early stages of the development of this project I approached the Bluecoat Arts Centre in Liverpool (I had already worked with them on the live art event *Touch Up*). Cathy Butterworth, a live art programmer, helped me apply for Arts Council funding. Bluecoat became my partner: they were to provide me, in kind, with rehearsal space, full technical support during rehearsals/performances and a performance fee of GB£ 500. I received Arts Council money for the project: GB£ 4,487. I budgeted the performance accordingly. I involved my artist-friends Ben Cain and Tina Gverovic as designers. They were responsible for set, costume, programmes and web. We mostly communicated through email. Tina showed up with a magnificent costume for Medea: a dark theatrical costume that would, in its shape, be reminiscent of Konavle folk dress (the most southern 'barbaric' part of Croatia where my grandmother comes from). Ben did impressive stylish programmes that contained personal performance journal extracts and detailed information about the project and a web design. I ended up doing the set design myself, just by being in the space, putting in what was needed and nothing more.

I spent my funding money on marketing (programmes and on the web), artists' fees for Ben and Tina, set, costume, travel to Denmark and attendance at the Roots in Transit Festival. Most of my artist's fee went on an iBook G4 computer, on which I learnt how to edit video. I also paid my friend Ross Dalziel, an audio-visual artist, for his time teaching me all about my new computer toy, and helping me with the finalised audio-visual footage for the perfor-

mance. I have learnt to produce art in collaboration with close friends and family. Needless to say, Gary worked as my collaborator free of charge. I discussed the project with him; he filmed most of my scenes; he helped in the editing; he documented the performances and took marketing photographs.

Now, only my younger son Gabriel is attending a toddler group. Neal is in pre-school full time. He's starting school soon. In October 2005 I'll stop with toddler groups altogether. Time moves on. I am working on a new piece now called *Joan Trial*.

LENA SIMIC (Croatia/Britain) is a performance artist, born in 1974 in Dubrovnik, living and working in Liverpool. She trained in theatre directing/acting at the Bratislava Drama Academy in Slovakia and at the London Academy of Performing Arts in Britain. Lena is currently undertaking a practice-based Ph.D. research at Lancaster University, Britain, contesting female archetypes through live art. Recent projects include www.magdalenamakeup.org, www.medeamotherstheatre.org and www.joantrial.org