

OPEN NEWS

EASTER'S EXQUISITE CORPSE (Australia)

Magdalena Australia continues to exist as a loosely connected network of individuals. There are, however, two groups within the Australian context which have developed more concentrated foci: one in Brisbane and one in Perth.

Mid 2007 saw a resurgence of energy among the women theatre-makers in Brisbane who began to meet regularly and work towards an Easter 2008 Gathering. With the support of Metro Arts and Playlab a gathering of local artists met over the Easter long weekend (March 20 - 25) to share works-in-progress and to work towards a practical, useful and ethical model for seeking and giving feedback on developing work. A dedicated blog documents and reflects much of what occurred: <http://magdalenagathering.blogspot.com/>. The results of this experiment were tabled at a forum during the Australasian Drama Theatre and Performance Studies Association annual conference in New Zealand in July.

The Brisbane Easter gathering stimulated a meeting in Perth where a small group of established and emerging artists sought to link in with the women meeting in Brisbane and New Zealand. The dialogue centred on the interest and possibilities of starting up a Magdalena hub in Western Australia. This led to a second, larger meeting at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts where Julie Robson and Dawn Albinger introduced the Magdalena Project and its manifestation within our Australian context to local women theatre-makers. For the women working in Perth, one of the most geographically isolated cities in the world, the desire to connect was very strong and a third meeting was held last weekend with a decision made to focus on the following three things:

A - Regular meetings to work towards a 2009 workshop event to host local and interstate artists. This event is seen as a stepping stone towards creating a larger, international event in 2010/2011. B - Regular attendance at performance events with post-show discussions. C - Regular casual workshops with each other. A 'round-robin' approach will be trialled, giving us the opportunity to meet each other through our work practices.

Julie Robson and Dawn Albinger

Following is a transcontinental letter to and from Magdalena women in Perth, Brisbane and Wellington.

From The Head (Perth):

March 20th, 2008

Greetings from Perth, West Australia!

Five women theatre-makers have just shared a beer in the hot evening sun after a day spent watching and participating in 'the work'. Today we were Furies re-telling the story of our banishment, mask-makers surprising people on train platforms, and practitioners reflecting on our praxis and how it has led to questions of women's vocal agency and voice-less-ness.

We gather at the end of a hot March day on the eve of the Easter weekend to discover what it might be that women theatre-makers in Perth need and have energy for. And we resolve that the first thing we want to do is to write a letter and create an "exquisite corpse".

This letter is to initiate a transcontinental dialogue with the women gathering in Brisbane and Wellington over the Easter weekend. This letter is potentially a contribution for the next *Open Page* which is themed: Women - Theatre - Letters. This letter is about theatre discourse (as always, in the Magdalena Project, the focus is the work).

Last century the Dadaists developed a drawing technique called the "exquisite corpse". Someone would draw a head, the paper would be folded and the next person would draw the next body part, and so on until an entire body was created. We propose that two of us begin an exquisite corpse letter here in Perth. We are the head. Two more should contribute in Brisbane on Friday (the breasts?), and two in Wellington on Saturday (belly?), and then two more in Brisbane on Sunday (the ovaries!) and two again in Perth on Monday (the feet).

I have been nominated to begin, and I would like to talk about the development of our work and the work-in-progress. Today I was invited to a showing of *The Oresteia*, a work currently being developed by graduates of the Contemporary Performance course at Edith Cowan University. It is an honour to be invited into a process where much work has been done and yet many things are not yet fixed; to be trusted to offer a response that will move the work forward and continue to open possibilities; and to be able to communicate in a way that is at once respectful of the potential rawness of the inviting artists (opening the door on something tender) and yet rigorous in its capacity for stimulating real growth.

The young women today were able to articulate before the showing that they sought feedback on three things: character clarity, dramaturgy, and design elements. In watching their performance I then experienced an interesting process of noting the questions and responses that arose in me as I witnessed the work and wondering which of those three categories could best frame each one of my responses.

In the end I am not sure I completely succeeded in speaking to the specific target areas set up for the feedback, nor am I sure that all my responses opened up possibilities rather than closing them down. But the process of asking these questions has opened a space within me where I am considering who we ask for feedback and why.

Do models for developmental feedback already exist in other art forms? Do visual artists show their half-finished work to others and ask for a response? And novelists, essayists and poets? What if we didn't seek feedback at all?

I have just invited a colleague to witness some material I am developing as I explore whether the Diva icon can usefully inform my feminist theatre praxis. Have I

asked her because she is my trusted colleague of seven years standing? Because I know she will reflect back to me my safe habits and challenge me to push even further into new territory? Or am I inviting her as my Master's supervisor, with an eye to the research question and academic result? Is this distinction real or illusory? Is it useful?

I know that when seeking feedback myself I am most likely to approach other artists, people whose working processes I know something about, and who occupy a kind of mentoring role in my professional life. As part of my Master's research I have invited four Australian women performers to reflect on the role of the Diva icon in their own work and also to form a peer group to witness my developing work and offer feedback. I am currently in the process of developing the frame for their responses, which is why I am so interested in the imminent gathering of women in Brisbane dedicated to exploring this very question. I look forward to learning of the debate that arises from the forums being held this Easter weekend.

I leave you with one last question: when do we know what we are doing is what we intend? When do we know our performance is congruent with our question/impulse for making the work? After witnessing the Furies this afternoon I was struck by the difficulty these young women had in claiming the strengths in what they had just presented. Yet I recognise this tendency in myself - the focus on failings, on weaknesses in my own work. If what we focus on expands, how can I, and others, claim our strengths and expand them, too? And is this part of the impulse for seeking feedback in developmental stages - to help us recognise and claim our strengths to grow our work into the best theatre possible? I hope so!

Warm regards,
Dawn Albinger
From The Neck (Perth):

March 21st, 2008

A letter to someone I trust.

All of a sudden I was really nervous. And it wasn't like I had to perform or anything. But something inside of me said: "I know there are still problems, I just don't know how to fix them." Our presentation began, and as the work-in-progress showing moved along, all I could see and feel were the things that didn't work.

I guess I was nervous and uncertain of the response that we would get from these women - women that I look up to and admire. But they could see the strength of a work that, somewhere along the way, I had lost sight of.

A work-in-progress showing is something that I've learnt to love. I love it because it gives you the chance to have others articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the work. This is especially helpful when you have lost sight of them. I love it because it gives everyone involved in the project a sense of direction, of where to go next. And this guidance I find to be invaluable.

The work that we are currently developing, *The Oresteia*, is still a month out from opening night. I am co-directing the work with friend and colleague Gita Bezar and this will be our first post-university work. Today we invited Dawn Albinger and Julie Robson to see a progress showing of the work. And to be honest, I thought that they would hate it.

And in hindsight, I don't know why I thought that. I guess it's a lack of trust in the material. I didn't trust that what we had worked towards, what we had built together was good enough. And this is really hard for me to say. I consider myself to be the positive one, who always wills the work on, who sees the power and strength. So why is this piece any different? Why do I feel like this?

That's why I love a good-old showing. It

re-inspires me, re-directs me and, like today, guides me through my insecurities. So now I trust the work. I know the strengths of the piece and I know where we need to go. I trust in the work, I trust in the process, I trust my collaborators and, most importantly, I trust myself.

So on with the play. I trust it.

Kathryn Osborne

VERTICE (Brazil)

In the last four years, since Marisa Napolini returned from Transit 4 in 2004, she has promoted meetings with theatre women interested in discussing their practice and creating networks of mutual support, planning mostly regional meetings to discuss productions and share some creative proceedings. Last year wider encounters were thought of, with people from other regions of Brazil, making effective links to the Magdalena Project.

From July 14th to 19th 2008, thirty women from different parts of the country assembled in Florianópolis, in the south of Brazil, to create a Brazilian Magdalena event. Twelve performances mostly from the Santa Catarina region, four lectures, talks, demonstrations, workshops and an exhibition took place at the Centro de Artes - UDESC (University) and Centro Integrado de Cultura - CIC (Cultural Centre). Among those attending were Leo Sykes from Brasilia, Marilena Bibas from Rio de Janeiro, Cris Colla of LUME from Campinas and Julia Varley and Jill Greenhalgh from abroad. Jill Greenhalgh talked about the history of the Magdalena Project, Maria Brígida Miranda about women's presence in theatre history, Eliane Lisboa about the figure of Magdalena, and Julia Varley about Transit Festivals.

For one week experiences, perfor-

mances, feelings and questions were shared. From the first day, the meeting marked itself as an event that would become a reference for the Brazilian women present, also showing that the time was ripe for such a meeting and that many had been waiting for it for a long time. There was a lot of empathy and generosity around and everybody seemed to be happy to be together. There was a lot of laughing and also some crying.

Julia Varley and Jill Greenhalgh contributed with fresh Magdalena currents. They both demanded personal commitment, statement of deadlines, concrete plans and partnerships for the future. Since then Vértice has created a blog and a yahoo group, making a list of promises for writings, translations and publications. Personal reports are arriving little by little and the joy remains from the contacts made.

Vértice is planning the second event in the Island of Santa Catarina in July 2010, including more international Magdalenas and hoping to gather more South American women.

Rio de Janeiro, August 3rd 2008

Dear Magdalenas of Vértice Brazil 2008,

I am thinking about organising the Magdalena Meeting in Rio next year (2009). Not a Festival, but a Meeting - it is a seed towards the 1st Magdalena Festival in Rio de Janeiro. I took this decision during my experience in Vértice Brazil. It has to happen because I thought of it even before Vértice. However, it was in Florianópolis that I found the strength and certainty that I needed to commit myself! The Meeting has a temporary title: Magdalenas in Rio - Connections.

At the Vértice Meeting, I became not only certain of having concretely found a real companion for a precise direction in my theatre work, but I also made a connection



with very strong and interesting women who do accomplish their wishes and values in this world where everything leads us to believe that only the men are capable of doing so.

During the Meeting, I remembered many fragments written by Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own*. I read this book for the first time when I was in Italy training with Teatro Potlach. I started reading and I couldn't stop until I had finished and when I got to the end I started all over again.

Virginia made me realise the importance of writing and become aware of the importance of what women write. As an actress and director, this understanding led me far beyond the written words: the search for a deeper understanding of my own theatre work and creation as a woman was planted

in me.

In Vértice Brazil, some results of this understanding began to appear and new commitments became more concrete. We were among women, building, creating, believing, accomplishing, transforming and, fundamentally, devoting ourselves entirely to our work - in a naturally feminine way.

Not by chance I finally decided to experiment at this Meeting with something I had already talked about with Julia Varley: to take to the stage some strong aspects of my personal history, to speak about myself as a woman in the world, and not only to present characters. Vértice Brazil allowed me to take the first step. In a still confused and timid way, I stopped playing a character and instead spoke of fragments of my history. A high-heeled shoe on stage was the starting point; a meaningful shoe that was passed down from mother to daughter. I started narrating and elaborating issues that I remember from my adolescence, vestiges of male violence against women.

The week of work at Vértice made me understand other things as well: I reflected a little more about the female space of social responsibility, it made me define the theme of Violence Against Women for the research of the second stage of my project *Vozes de Mulheres* (Voices of Women). In the first stage, developed in 2007, I researched and presented a performance about mothers who have lost their children in war, dictatorship and massacres in the slums. My group, Omamê Teatro, and I will work directly with women for the next phase. We won't simply present more plays to them, we will be with them in the same performance's centre to reflect together and build ways of transformation.

The workshop with Jill Greenhalgh showed me the path of Performance and Installation. Now, I need to be brave and work.

After everything that happened, taking up again my daily theatre work in class, I discovered that my voice was softer and different. At the closing meeting of Vértice 2008, when we defined the goals for the near future, as well as committing myself to organise the next Magdalena Meeting in Rio in 2009, I also decided to prepare a solo performance of songs. I am already working on *Canções de Vida e de Mar* (Songs of Life and Sea).

In Vértice I found strong women working for the awakening of the strength of other women. I found sharing, devotion and clarity about female theatre making; the stirring of something we already know, but that still sleeps waiting for a look, a word, a mirror.

The Magdalena Project is Human Ecology expressed as theatre, performance, music, beauty, femininity, feminism and the capacity of doing and transforming. I bought blue shoes without high-heels in Florianópolis. Nice!

Marilena Bibas

TRANSIT (Denmark)

The sixth Transit International Festival will take place at Odin Teatret, Holstebro, Denmark from the 6th to the 16th of August 2009 with the title "Theatre - Women - On the Periphery". Following is an extract from the Festival programme written by Julia Varley:

"As an actress my first thoughts on periphery concern the relationship between my centre - the heart of the action in my torso - and the detailed precision of the extremities - my hands, feet and eyes - which express the narrative and make the action believable. As an actress my main concern is the power concentrated in my centre. So I am confused. Why choose to work on the periphery? Why is being on the periphery



○ Thiasos TeatroNatura, one of the groups coming to Transit 6. Photo: Francesco Galli

so important to many of us women theatre practitioners?

We choose to work on the periphery, both geographically (in places distant from the main cities; in countries at the extremity of the world; in neighbourhoods at the edge of the towns;) and as genre theatre that draws upon film, music, nature, visual art, writing... The choice of the periphery comes as a consequence of where we place our performances, why we make theatre and with whom, from a need to emigrate and travel.

When the Magdalena Project lost its physical centre - the office in Cardiff and its revenue funding - activities mushroomed in events all over the world and the network maintained its

international connections through the website and The Open Page journal. The Magdalena Project became a tangled bond of peripheries, and each of these peripheries was at the centre of our professional and personal lives.

In a global world, in which it is becoming more and more difficult to remain confined within the boundaries of a national and traditional culture, where is the centre and what is the periphery? Each periphery exists only in relation to its centre as each centre to its periphery. Women in theatre are our centre, as the poor as opposed to the rich, mad as opposed to normal, black or yellow or red as opposed to white, young or old people as opposed to middle-aged might be. We make the periphery our centre because we do not accept the world as it is, with its injustice and segregation, its mainstream thinking and order. We make work on the periphery because we are not satisfied with the theatre we have known previously. We choose periphery as the place where small essential human values are cherished.

Women working in theatre are definitely on the periphery of decision makers in the world, but although we know our influence is nearly non-existent we still feel the enormous responsibility of sharing our knowledge which unites body and mind, torso and hands, feelings and actions to promote a different way of perceiving and thinking.

Remembering how the Magdalena Project acquired more life and dynamism after losing its physical centre, I understand that the actress's principle I should refer to when thinking of periphery is another: going out of balance and transforming weight into energy. Abandoning the centre is a way of taking a risk, of accepting the challenge, of needing to move away from an inert centre that no longer feeds us and gives a false feeling of security. Being on the periphery is to explore unknown places with the necessity to make something happen.

The heart of the action, our centre, becomes our profession, and how we manifest it, our periphery. The 6th Transit Festival will gather examples of 'peripheral' manifestations inviting performances and women who are geographically and artistically placed at the borders. The programme will include workshops, site specific events, performances, lectures, master-classes and work demonstrations."