

Lis Hughes Jones

Sand and Milk

I don't feel that my life and work in theatre has followed a continuous thread, or rather, I feel that the only continuous thread is myself. Although I can identify certain beginnings in my work, I can perceive endings within the same events. Beginnings and endings seem to be so bound up in each other. Those events have sometimes been quite marked breaks or changes: changes of direction, crises, births and deaths. They are perhaps the points at which I become conscious of a new understanding, or a new desire. I feel a strong directional force in my life, and at that point I become conscious of what I must leave behind. In the process of shedding the old skin in order to reveal the new one, when does the ending become a new beginning? Is it when my mind understands that there has been a change, or is it when my body recognises it? As for my soul, I imagine that the distinction between beginning and end is not really relevant.

I would like to tell you two anecdotes: one is about a beginning, the other about an ending.

It is 1977. I have just had my twenty-third birthday and have arrived in Cardiff, Wales, to embark on theatre research. I am studying at the University, but I am spending most of my time in the Sherman Theatre, because I really want to become a theatre designer. The only way I could join the practical course at the theatre was to get a place to do a PhD in the English Department. It is week three of the course. I am enjoying it. I go to dance classes every morning and I am already designing the first production of the term.

On the timetable for the Friday are three words: Mike Pearson Workshop. I was interested in design and I thought it would be useful to learn how to use the carpentry workshop. It certainly turned out to be a different kind of workshop! And Mike was not working with wood, at least not then! In the space of that two hour workshop I was confronted with a way of working in theatre which was completely new to me, but which I recognised. Something about it felt right. I think that Mike recognised something in me. Maybe it was then that the link was forged, right there in those first few minutes. I don't remember anything

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very much about the workshop, except one exercise where we were walking and changing the way we walked. I turned in my right foot slightly. It was very subtle. I remember that Mike noticed what I was doing and seemed to like it.

That evening Mike was in the theatre bar and I, who am usually very shy, walked over to him. We started to talk and went on talking all night. On his bookshelves there were books on theatre I had heard of but never read, and books I had never even heard of.

That was the beginning, which also contained an ending. From that point on, there was no way that I could fit back into conventional theatre nor into academic research. Those paths suddenly seemed closed to me.

I began working with Mike as a designer and a maker. My training as a performer really began with observation, watching Mike and his colleague Siân Thomas. I think I must have learned a lot by observing, because when I began to perform two or three years later I seemed to know something about it. In 1980 I had the opportunity to attend some other workshops, but my training was largely solitary, trying to work it out for myself in the room. My "conceptual" training, by which I mean how I learned about making performances, came by doing it, alongside Mike, in ever changing forms and locations.

From that first workshop I remember the feeling, as I was working, that I somehow felt freed. I felt I had been given permission to be ugly. I didn't have to conform to the concern for surface attractiveness which seemed to pervade the conventional theatre. So I felt freed from one tyranny. Of course I had no knowledge at that time of the other tyrannies which would emerge in the course of the following years: the relentless work of being the mother of a theatre group; being driven by a largely male dynamic within the group; driving my own body to always be strong; working with very big egos, including

my own; discovering my rage on the battlefield of love. I had very, very few tools with which to handle those tyrannies.

THE SECOND ANECDOTE

Arrowhead. One shaped pebble among the millions. A missed shot? A successful shot, around which the remains of the guanaco have long since rotted. Some kind of life out there then.

I don't have that arrowhead anymore. It came from the pampas of Patagonia; we found it on our travels in Argentina in 1986. The text quoted above was written by Mike and comes from *Patagonia*, the last piece I performed with Brith Gof, my company.

The very last performance of that show took place on the stage of the Royal Court Theatre in London, which is about as unlikely a place for Brith Gof to end up as one can imagine.

At the end of that final performance a number of things happened which looking back I perceive to be significant. It was a Saturday in May 1992. I was feeling emotional, but trying to hold myself together, trying not to be affected by the significance of that day. We did two performances, a matinée and an evening one. The company presented me with a beautiful bouquet of flowers in the dressing room. I felt tearful, but I tried to laugh it off.

After the final performance, as we were getting out of the theatre, we lost the arrowhead. We were performing on a stage which was covered with tons of sand, and every night, after doing the arrowhead speech, I would place the arrowhead very carefully on the sand. Then after each performance, Mike or I would retrieve this precious thing and keep it safe. But in the rush to get out that final Saturday night, we lost it. It was gone, it disappeared into all that sand that was being taken back, I suppose, to a building site. We searched and searched. But we never found it.

Interestingly, since I have left Brith Gof, one of Mike's new passions has been a re-connection with his first discipline of archaeology. He seems to be sifting through the sand of theatre, trying to establish something to do with the origins of performance, using archaeology as a model for understanding theatre, and theatre to understand archaeology.

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Something else happened at the end of that last performance. My left knee gave way. It was so painful, I could hardly walk back to the hotel. I think my knee was saying: "Enough: give yourself time to let go, and to grieve". But I fought my knee all summer, because I wanted to make a solo performance that I could take away with me, in my name. I worked on *Rhiannon* through the pain, and I chose not to listen to it.

Since then I have been developing a faltering dialogue with my body and it is yielding its wisdom in its own time. Sifting the sand has brought a greater awareness of my body's terrain. My body has made me stop and listen. I have been given time to mourn the passing of old ways of creativity and to watch for the smallest sign of new growth to emerge.

I would like to conclude with the text of two songs. The first, as far as I remember, is the very first song that I sang in a performance. It is based on an Inuit poem.

*Great grief came over me
While on the fell above us I was picking
berries
Great grief came over me
My sun quickly rose over it
Great sorrow came over me
The sea out there off our settlement
Was beautifully quiet*

*And the great dear paddlers
Were leaving out there
Great grief came over me
While I was picking berries on the fell*

The second song comes from *Rhiannon*, the solo performance, based on the Welsh mythic figure of a woman whose son is taken from her at birth. She is accused of killing her child and spends years in penance before the disappeared boy is restored to her.

*What colour is the sea that roars
When I am stirred, what colour stilled
I cannot see for tears or night
Or blind stupidity
I am a drowned thing, rudderless
I sway on the sea bed
I am colourless
I am milk
I am sand the sun has never touched*

Rhiannon was so much an end and a beginning, that I don't think it was ready to be born. It seems to me that death and birth in the performance wanted to eclipse each other. Every time I tried to show this work, I would shake uncontrollably. I had never experienced this before in my many years as a performer. My body refused to perform on demand and my persona as an actress crumbled, as that which had been unconscious began its journey into consciousness.

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