

Sally Rodwell

A Week in Wellington

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DREAMS

I dream the Recurring Dreams. They're about the beginning of Red Mole, the travelling theatre group I've worked with since 1974, and its philosophy - to be non-hierarchical, to do everything ourselves, to perform in unexpected places, to keep moving, to interrogate the actions of the powerful. The dreams are also about now, performers who have stopped in a city by the sea in Aotearoa New Zealand, but are holding on to the vision, while multi-national companies bleed its fragile economy.

In the subversive world of a Red Mole show, there are no winners, only survivors.

First Dream: Truck with Luggage Dream

A truck, filled with boxes and trunks, is parked under a mountain. We are under contract to perform a nightly cabaret for people who have made a fortune from stone quarries. They dislike our show. "It's not fun, there's no story. It's too serious. We don't understand it. We want to laugh. We are paying for your board. So, entertain us!" We are trying to creep away in the dawn to somewhere new where plants grow and people have souls.

Second Dream: Missing the Plane Dream

I am packing bags that won't shut, losing tickets, trying to find a route through the streets of an unfamiliar town, never reaching the airport. Maybe this dream questions the desire always to be in another place, maybe it's time to stop, settle, and produce works with a community larger than the theatre group.

Over stones and broken bricks, carrying parcels of felt slippers wrapped in brown paper, we were trying to go home to the green growing more green.

Third Dream: Landslide Dream

The earth rattles and shakes, the boxes and cases tumble



off the roof of the truck and down the hill-sides in a sea of mud and falling rocks. Actors run and disappear. The bags split open, the masks fly out. This is a terrible dream, yet when all is still, and the remains of our things stacked in a pile, there is a sense of optimism - everything could start again, simpler, less frenzied, stripped down.

Fourth Dream: Stone Ship Dream

This is a recent dream, rowing a boat made of stone across an empty bay. The boat sinks low into the water. It's a dream, I think, about the fear of slowing down, stopping in one place, long enough to become the custodian of archives. Perhaps the stone ship represents attachment to old ways. Is it time for me to let the old go and find new forms and structures that preserve the original spirit but with new allies, new collaborators and new teachers? Am I doing new work?

ACTIONS: FRIDAY, SATURDAY AND SUNDAY Magdalena Aotearoa Office: Friday morning

In New Zealand, theatre is neither politically nor socially influential. People are more interested in sport, fixing their houses, raising animals, complaining, drinking and gambling. Funding for the arts is minimal. Only one in five applications to the Arts Council for funds is successful. Performance artists supplement low wages with long periods on welfare. For those writing and devising their own work, far from prime-time television or popular opera, life can be lonely. Particularly for women who are under-represented in the arts hierarchies, and are more frequently *directed* rather than directors, *written for* rather than writers, *choreographed upon*, rather than choreographers. A network for women was needed here.

I am writing this in the office of Magdalena Aotearoa, founded in Wellington this year. Inspired by a series of events - the

Toadlilies' trip to Cardiff for Magdalena '94, Lis Hughes-Jones' arrival in New Zealand in 1995, and Jill Greenhalgh's visit in March '97 - Madeline McNamara and I established this southern network to connect women in theatre in the Pacific. By an odd twist of fate, Magdalena Aotearoa has found rooms in Trades Hall, formerly home to all the major national unions. Today, the trade union movement has almost been extinguished in New Zealand, membership is voluntary, and most workers, through laws introduced by conservative governments, must negotiate individual contracts with their employers. Room 19, office of Magdalena Aotearoa, was left vacant by the National Distribution Union. The NDU shelters Actors Equity, the union for actors - so long as they are employed. Women who create their own performance work in New Zealand employ themselves! They need something different to Actors' Equity. Perhaps it is Magdalena Aotearoa.

Tea at Eileen's: Friday Afternoon

I have decided to investigate why some people act instinctively on behalf of others. Eileen Cassidy is more than seventy years old. All her life an activist. When I falter I think of her. She always looks out for people, often in distant countries, whose situation is desperate. When we first met, she was a convener of the Eritrea Support Group, and had made several journeys on the back of a truck from the Sudan across the desert to deliver aid to the EPLF, to meet with women's groups and to bring back news from that forgotten part of the world.

From her tiny council flat, she projects herself into other worlds where there is terrible injustice, and works out what she can do. Victims of wars and repression ignored by the daily press find a spokesperson in Eileen. A small woman in coat and headscarf, in freezing winds, she marches in every demonstration.

Up the steep hills of Wellington to the locked gates of the embassies of military regimes, Eileen walks tirelessly. Convinced of the rightness of her cause, she shakes her fists at guards and secret police, and talks sternly to the reporters. I remember seeing her chat animatedly to visitor José Ramos Horta on a protest march against the genocide in East Timor. Short, like Eileen, he had to duck to avoid being jabbed in the nose by her placard. A few weeks later, he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

At 2 p.m., I arrive outside flat 6, block 10. The door is open. Eileen, in a long plaid summer skirt and blue blouse, has tea things laid out on the table, scones and slices of tomato on crackers. A tea-pot with a cosy. Thin china cups. She shows important new things, a card from Palestine, an Aboriginal Land Rights T-shirt, an anarchist book from the 1930s she had bought for a dollar in a second hand store. We talk about corruption, unemployment, young people with nothing to do. It's all "nonsense", says Eileen, of economic theories which insist human beings compete with one another. I ask about Eritrea. Last week she called the Embassy in Australia to see how things were. One of the staff there had driven the truck from Khartoum to the Independent Zone in 1985 at the start of her first visit there. He remembered Eileen. I asked her why some people are compelled to "act" against injustices, while others put up screens and carry on with their own lives. Eileen says if we knew that we would truly understand more about human behaviour. It's evening. I promise to come back next week.

Meditation: Saturday morning

I have settled for the time being in a neighbourhood. Slowly local issues have become important. From drains to bus stops, from pedestrian crossings to playgrounds, from

saving a tree to saving a building, the drama of local issues reflects the structure of the Classics. The antagonists: Government Officials, the City Council's impenetrable laws and by-laws, Secretaries of Departments, Drainage Inspectors, Developers with their Machines and Slippery Lawyers. The protagonists, muttering and disorganised: the People, who wake up one morning to find bulldozers at their gates, or rusty trucks spraying clouds of herbicide. The little hill we live on is under threat. Developers want to cut the top off it to build a mansion. Neighbours call each other by telephone. There is a meeting which resolves to save the hill. I make a model of the hill in clay.

Now we march to the Council Chambers to appeal against allowing the Developer to destroy the site. I carry the clay hill and a kitchen cleaver. The Council is nervous when fifty Citizens walk in though some have never spoken out in public before. The Developers confer with their Lawyers. The hearing begins. When it is our turn to speak, many step forward, including a retired nurse who is radiant with this first exercise of her democratic rights. She says: "This hill has been here for two billion years. Why should we cut it down?" I unveil the clay hill and put it in front of the Chairperson. I lift the cleaver high and then slice it down, removing the top of the hill. The Chairperson closes his eyes. Other Councillors applaud. The vote is taken. The hill is saved! The Developers vanish through a side door. The Press cheer and call their editors. The Citizen-Players lurch joyfully to their bus-stop, reeling from the power of the collective voice.

On Air: Saturday noon

I am on the radio. A chance to work in a new medium, a form of political theatre that is very intimate, like a secret liaison. You have only your voice, a microphone, a

small dark room, a red light, a glass window, the soft pressure of headphones and an unseen audience. The programme is sponsored by the Peace Forum. My theme is Peace in Latin America. I am not paid for this work. When the light flashes red, I whisper what I've learned and improvise from what I think into the air waves. I tell Rosario Castellanos' sad story about Indians from the mountains seeking work in the plantations of the Coast:

Those who survived that long journey were never able to return. The debts would form a cage, link after link, chaining them to their new master. In the eardrum scars there echoed, more and more faintly, the voices of their women, calling them, and of their children dying out.

I read news downloaded from the Internet: there is a dark factory in Haiti owned by Disney where children are paid by the piece to stitch sports caps; I ask listeners to bombard with faxes the CEO of Disney who earns \$97,000.00 an hour. I discuss the rights of the indigenous peoples of Brazil to their inherited knowledge, of medicinal plants for example. Pharmaceutical companies, operating through unscrupulous agents, are raiding this knowledge for a handful of promises, as they once bought land. I play records after these words, a song by Conjunto San Cristobal de Bishongo in Peru, women whose voices, like bells in a temple, conjure a world of snow and ice. Then a red light flashes and the show is over. In the bright street outside, it is still Saturday, everyone is hurrying, cars and buses are noisy. Was anybody listening?

Roadworks Rehearsal: Sunday

My Russian teacher in Wellington is from Riga. One day she took my arm as I left her class and asked if I could direct a show in

Russian, Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. She had assembled a group of students and immigrants, some with little English, mostly untrained in the art of theatre. I said *Da, konyechna!* and, just like that, and unexpectedly, a new project was born.

The group has a name now - Roadworks. There are no auditions, only a demonstration of willingness to work. For most, rehearsal must happen after they have finished work or studies, so we work evenings and weekends. Afloat in this strange rough culture that is New Zealand, the immigrant actors begin to speak their minds. For the Russians this is novel. But after each production, the speaking has become more intense and political. We are friends. Last year, we hired a van and toured to the North of New Zealand to perform works by Dostoyevsky and Petrushevskaya. The Russians think touring is a gas, and we decide that next year we'll tour the world: Manchuria, Tashkent, Irkutsk, Moscow, St Petersburg, Moldavia ... everywhere they have come from.

Right now, the Roadworks women have decided to work on a project together. Tonight is the first rehearsal. We'll show the work at next month's season of *Not Broadcast Quality*, the festival of women's performance that Magdalena Aotearoa produces. Zhenia and Natasha come in Sunday clothes. "Hello!" says Natasha. Zhenia says, "I just had a fight with my stupid boyfriend. He is boring. When we walked to work the other morning, he said look at that woman, she is always on the corner at the same time, so it must be 8.20. I said, you are really boring!" Melanie, a polytech student, wants bright images to finish her photographic assignment. The actors paint their faces and arms with green and yellow make-up. They put on taffeta dresses. We go into the street. (Once, they would have refused in case they met someone who knew them!)

The women recite Russian feminist poetry in the car park, stomping up and down to keep warm. Two men from an agency get into their car and stare, then they turn their stereo up loud so the doors shake with the bass. They accelerate away in a spray of gravel. The Russians let loose with swear words and gestures. Melanie, with her big borrowed camera, poses with the light meter. It is early evening, late spring. Zhenia and Natasha, one green face, one yellow face, stand in front of a red door calling out lines by Elena Shvarts:

*A mad old raven asked for my heart
To feed it to its baby ravens.
Or else, it said, they will bury you down
So deep in the ground
It would take a tractor to dig you up!
I said Get Lost! And threw a stick at it.*

I tell them I think we have made a start. At least Melanie has finished her assignment.

Epilogue: Sunday

Almost midnight. I call Jean in Auckland. She is a composer and singer who writes music for many of our shows and films, and performs in them too with her hot-pink electric guitar. She fights for her community constantly - to have the high tension cables on pylons in her neighbours' gardens buried underground; to stop the privatisation of water; to raise funds to build a hall at the local school so the kids have a place to perform; to have sunhats issued free to every child so they don't get burned in the UV light beneath New Zealand's ozone hole. She always knows what's going on.

"Did you hear Dennis Quigley on the radio this morning?" Her voice is excited

down the phone line. "What a bastard! Did you hear...? Talking about Government plans to punish women on welfare when their kids get into trouble. They're going to withhold their benefits ... that's so sadistic, this punitive attitude, as if he knows anything about trying to bring up a family when you're paying too much rent and they want to charge for water too ... when I heard him say that, you know I was in the car with the kids going to the supermarket, I just got so mad I had to stop. I was beating my hands on the dashboard in rage. The kids were crying, Mum, Mum you're holding up the traffic, you're being embarrassing ... but God, those politicians make me *angry*, you know they are *stupid*, they have *no idea!*"

"Jean," I say, "we've got a small grant from the Government for a festival of women's performance. We'll pay your fare to come down to Wellington so you can play in *Not Broadcast Quality*."

"That's fantastic," says Jean. "That's just what I need, a deadline, I'll write some new songs, great. Let's talk soon."

SALLY RODWELL (Aotearoa), born in Dunedin, New Zealand, was a founding member of Red Mole Theatre (with Alan Brunton and Deborah Hunt), Women's Theatre Ensemble, Toadlilies and most recently Roadworks, a multi-lingual ensemble formed with young immigrants which she directs. She is also co-artistic director of Magdalena Aotearoa which takes place in March/April 1999.