

# Helen Chadwick

## House of Text

*All my work  
is on the cusp between  
song and theatre,  
but it takes many forms.  
All my concerts have theatrical  
elements with stories  
and physical images,  
rhythm and stepping.*

I grew up in a house of text. My father is a writer, a historian, a teller of stories.

When I was a child there were two entrances into his study. One down a dark corridor, the other through a door and then immediately another door. Big oak doors. When I was small I could get through the first door and just squeeze in the gap between that and the second door with both doors shut. I was in the dark between the outside world and the world of text. There we did not disturb him if we could help it.

I grew up with academics, mainly male ones, all around me. I considered writing their sacred domain, the domain of males.

Recently I went swimming with my mother in the North Sea and while in the water she started quoting Shelley's poetry, a line that she remembered from childhood about the sea. She still remembers whole swathes of poetry and Shakespeare which she learnt by heart at school, and which are still a source of nutrition to her.

She with the internal text and he with the text in print.

I remember my sister's first word as a baby was "Dylan". The con-text of her babyhood was Bob Dylan.

In childhood my greatest passions were dance - wordless dance, and piano music - Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*. Only out of my teens I stumbled into theatre and began writing and creating texts for performances in the first company I co-founded. These texts were not written in a study but through improvisation in a studio, always connected to a practical action, a situation or a story.

Later I turned to poetry as a source of truth and began writing myself, words which came from the inner life of a vocal improvisation, from the images I saw whilst in a kind of singing trance. These texts have been like a bed of source material, words to return to. Most of the poems were written in the winter of 1982/3. Some are still waiting for music. Yet another was set as a song on my latest album only a few months ago.

I began writing songs as a way to express text. In the early 1980s I had a kind of breakdown or breakthrough during a

theatre improvisation in the rehearsal room. The images I was working with took me and my voice into an area where I no longer knew what was happening, no longer knew what sounds I was making, where I was no longer operating only in this world. New sounds came into my voice that day. Over the following weeks I kept having to disappear into the rehearsal room toilet to make the sounds and see if they were still with me. It was the combination of a very powerful image with a vocal improvisation on a piece of text that threw me into another space. Since that time, the same recipe has carried me again, five times, into other spaces, each different because of the different images. From these images and these texts have come further texts and from these further texts have come songs.

At that time I began composing songs with the words of poets: Akhmatova, Neruda, Mandelstam, Rossetti, Tagore, Goethe, Rumi, Hafiz, Tsvetayeva, Plath, Stevie Smith, Lorca, Ofeimun, Gibran, Yeats, Novalis, Ono no Komachi, Gorky, Thomas and H.D. I was using their words to express my own truth. The most recent album has more of my own words as I dare to speak my own text, more directly tell my own story.

All my work is on the cusp between song and theatre, but it takes many forms. All my concerts have theatrical elements with stories and physical images, rhythm and stepping. I sometimes work on songs for shows other than my own. There is often a cultural issue about what language the songs should be sung in. Much of my musical and personal life has been spent in the company of ethnomusicologists and for them the issues of cultural plundering are acute. Not so for theatre directors! So I find myself steering a path between these worlds.

This week I have been in the recording studio with a nineteen year old, helping him record his first album. John is a member of a theatre company for young people who have

experience of homelessness. Many of them have had very difficult childhoods. Recently we all went to Ghana to collaborate on a theatre show with Ghanayan street children. While there John wrote many songs for the performance. *Give Me a Voice* was the one which became the title song for the performance and even for the aims of the whole project. Out of this flood of song writing he has found a voice, both in sound and in words. He has found a way to express what his life has been and in doing so make something of beauty. Like me, through song his text can be heard. A room of one's own in which to create. A voice of one's own with which to speak.

When a friend's son died tragically early, she gave me two pieces of his writing. One was a poem written in the last year of his life to his girlfriend, a poem full of love and hope, and also full of the pain he had been through. Yesterday I sang it at the golden wedding anniversary of his parents. Afterwards a woman asked me if I might come and sing it for the victims of torture with whom she works. As sometimes happens, it was the text that determines where I will be singing in the future and to whom.

My own house is now full of shelves of poetry. I consider these words and those of my friend's son, or the Gorky story I have made into a choral piece, or the words which wander into my mind whilst walking in Georgia, or whilst driving to Oxford - I consider all these texts like gifts, teachings, like a presence, personalities in my life, food for my work.

My father is now eighty-four. He recently handed in his latest book to the publisher. Last week we were on holiday together. I was working on a mail out for my latest album. He had just finished a book review and had no immediate writing project on. He began going through files of papers, old lecture notes and the notes for his books. He began throwing pages of text away in the oversized waste paper

H e l e n

bin in his study. There was something poignant for me in seeing this man who had written volumes of text gradually clearing up behind him, as if to say: "My time for speaking is soon over, it is your turn now."

HELEN CHADWICK (Britain) is a singer, lyricist and composer. She performs solo concerts, and works with storytellers as well as with her acappella group Amar. She has worked as a performer in devised and experimental theatre for many years, and more recently as a composer and voice teacher in text based theatre. Her recordings include four solo albums. Her website address is: [www.helenchadwick.com](http://www.helenchadwick.com)