

Sally Rodwell

Roads, Wheels, Roundabouts

The verb "to tour" acquires a transitive meaning. It is possible to tour "someone". As in I (subject) tour (verb) you (object). I tour Stella Chiweshe, Queen of 'mbira, first. Then Jill Greenhalgh, artistic director of the Magdalena Project. We learn to organise concerts, workshops, lectures, travel for others. Inspired, we start Magdalena Aotearoa.

In 1977, in Wellington, Deborah Hunt and I made a dance called *Zucchini Roma*. We named it after a film we loved and set it in a city we could only imagine. Later, we travelled to lots of places as Red Mole Theatre, though never to Rome. Some of the group came home to New Zealand in the 90s with an untidy archive that needed taming, and in 1995, we completed a video documentary about the early years of Red Mole. It burst onto the screen with the title *Zucchini Roma*, named after the dance act we loved. It starts like this:

Black screen

FX: Seagulls, waves, an aeroplane leaving.

VO: *The touring show has stopped here for a while... here by the ocean... Island Bay, Aotearoa, year of the rooster, year of desire... restless days here... nights filled with dreams...*

EXT: Morning. A seashore. Sally walks from the sea, carrying a suitcase.

VO: *A dream once of a travelling theatre, touring the world.*

Time passes and there's a yard where broken cars are abandoned to the salt spray. I dreamed this first as a child in bed with a fever. Now I have a cupboard filled with mementoes: play scripts, film strips, photographs. All that's left from all the performances.

EXT: Birdwoman dancing in the sand and beating a tambourine with a stick. Sally walks towards her.

FX: Bird screeches.

Sixty minutes later the film ends with Sally (me) standing on the breakwater at the end of the airport looking up at a jet plane. It is flying right over my head. I hold onto my black hat, laughing, for travel is exhilarating, especially when you live on an island! When I was a child we had to leave this land, New Zealand, by sea. It took seven weeks to reach Europe. We went there to study, or see where our ancestors had come from, East London, Northumbria, Denmark, Scotland. Or to meet distant relatives, and take a snapshot of everyone awkwardly embracing by a rhododen-

dron bush.

It was a huge journey. There's a photo of me on the deck, five years old, going to England on a passenger ship. The wooden boards stretch back behind us to a white rail and the empty sea. I am holding my mother's hand, and wearing a long skirt, crocheted shawl, felt hat and lipstick, and carrying an enormous handbag. The ship is hosting a Fancy Dress Party. My grandmother is travelling with us. I am wearing her clothes all pinned up, and scowling. My grandmother used to scowl too and pull my hair when she brushed it - she picked me out early as a trouble-maker. So here I am, travelling over the sea, playing my grandmother, and scowling. A young actor. A potential bad egg.

Five years later we sail back to New Zealand. My father has finished his studies, and he is the ship's doctor on a small cargo ship. We are the only passengers, so there is no fancy dress party, only a bizarre ritual enacted by the sailors. I hear rumours that we are about to cross "the line", and first-timers must be "initiated". My brother John and I are exempt, for we had crossed the Equator on the voyage north. But we are scared for our small brother, born in England. A big sunburnt sailor plays King Neptune. He wears a cloak and crown and carries a trident. He sits on a throne by the canvas swimming pool. His men bring metal buckets from the galley filled with coloured paste, green, pink, blue and orange, thick and lumpy. The Initiates are lined up, one by one, harangued by Neptune, painted with the lurid paste and thrown in the pool. The water turns thick and murky, they swim in circles and shout. Neptune's men poke them with poles so they can't get out. Nothing like this had I seen before. Mercifully they spare our baby brother. I hide at the back pretending I am not there, but watch everything, it is so perverse, so attractive... a

theatre show in the middle of the sea... when it's over a bell rings. Everyone gets a certificate.

Years pass, I have left home, it is the 70s, we are Red Mole and we are all at sea, between the North and the South Islands. Here is a photograph, it is Deborah Hunt and me in striped stockings and top hats, performing for passengers on the Interisland Ferry for Free Passage. New Zealand has a sparse population, with few towns. Red Mole's philosophy is to play everywhere, for everyone, schools, parks, holiday camps, shopping malls, agricultural fairs, hippie communes, even the Franz Josef Glacier where we play for six tourists and the Park Ranger. We have no fixed abode, always on the move, attached only to our fleet of try-hard vehicles, the Leyland van, with a front seat over the engine which fries your bottom, the Blue Buick, the Red Valiant, the Golden Holden, and a parade of Drive-aways, U-Hauls and Rent-a-Dents. We teach ourselves to navigate, to stow, to repair, to stuff, to care for the packing and repacking, the padding and lining, *that* mask inside *that* mask, and inside *that* mask the wig, the goggles and the gloves. We take pride in the luggage, the gear, the cartons, carpet bags, sacks, sticks, bundles, cable, rope, labels, trunks, suitcases. We are travellers.

One winter's eve, we see something marvellous. The Paramount Theatre is showing *The Travelling Players*, by the Greek director Theo Angelopoulos. It opens with a long shot, the camera following a line of people, eight or nine, in black buttoned coats, carrying their suitcases through the snow. Some are young, some old, some wear jaunty hats. They carry a costume hamper too, yes, yes, they must be actors! From the sound of gunfire, you know Greece is at war, yet the players are walking resolutely to their next performance. During the war years, the group suffers, there are changes, betrayals,

infidelities, babies are born, some join the resistance, others disappear, but always the shows go on. In the last scene, peace-time now, the actors play against a painted backdrop beside the sea. We leave the theatre ready to expand our horizons.

We go economy class to the USA, to the Land of the Freeway. We buy a second-hand car and drive to New York, to seek our fortune. Later we make a trip to London to see if it is easier to make fortunes there. Crazy idea! We live in squats and sublets, in foyers and dressing-rooms. We live like gypsies. Yet when we carry the puppet booth on Saturdays to the Hackney Youth Club real gypsies throw stones as we pass their camp. We make *Blood in the Cracks*, and present it in the basement of an abandoned hospital at Charing Cross. Our last performance in London is *Dead Fingers Walk*. While we are waiting to go to the airport, Alexander arrives with his suitcase. He loves our puppet shows. He wants to join the group and come with us to New York. He is too little, we take him home to his mother. We'll never forget you, we say, and it is true.

*Now make preparations
for further journeying
For thirty days you transect sandy mesas
and arid plateaux
but at the end of each day there is water*

With children about to be born, we travel out west in a drive-away car to the New Mexico desert. We make theatre projects on the mesa. One day, when Ruby is almost two, we climb to the Payiute Cliff Dwellings. We sit in the limestone alcoves, where the First People sat a thousand years ago, looking down to the valley below, to the plantations of pines. Then we narrow our eyes and look out to Los Alamos on the horizon. It is beautiful, deadly, radioactive. In those laboratories, the first atomic bomb was made.

*And a light that is many suns in one rises
From a tower
And climbs in a fraction of a second
to eight thousand feet
then slowly incarnadines the clouds*

*Your skin shrinks and dries
You are the Destroyer of Worlds
You are one mile below Paradise*

From *Chant of Paradise*, Alan Brunton

It is time to go home.

Back in Wellington, by a twist of fate we meet Madeline McNamara, one of the few who witnessed *Blood in the Cracks* in London. She works with us in Red Mole, then she and I create a piece for two women - *Crow Station*. It is this show that hurls us into the orbit of the Magdalena Project - we travel to Wales for Magdalena '94. We make new friends, many want to come to New Zealand. The verb "to tour" acquires a transitive meaning. It is possible to tour "someone". As in I (subject) tour (verb) you (object). I tour Stella Chiweshe, Queen of 'mbira, first. Then Jill Greenhalgh, artistic director of the Magdalena Project. We learn to organise concerts, workshops, lectures, travel for others. Inspired, we start Magdalena Aotearoa. We decide to have a whole festival! Drawing on our own travel experiences, we set down the essentials: each artist must be warmly welcomed, have a peaceful room, a sensible schedule, skilled crew, good venue, meet local people, and have time for things "touristic". One of us travels with the guests, to organise things - lights, transport, the weather, a full moon, blue sea, empty beaches. Most recently "toured" by Magdalena Aotearoa, was Cristina Castrillo, for the whole month of June 2001, with Teatro delle Radici. Castrillo is the only person I know who has been to Patagonia.



Alan Brunton, Sally Rodwell and Deborah Hunt in New York Photo: Austin Trevett

Patagonia is where I travel (in my mind) after touring (transitive) someone. It is far away, seemingly inaccessible, the distance between the desire and the idea, idea and execution. To get there you turn down the lights, sleep, wait for dreams. After Castrillo's tour, I dream first snow then heat, gravel, vines of *zucchinis* and eggplants, mounds of bricks, a city with broken walls, veiled women crossing a wide dirt avenue. A ruined city. The women are running away. From the newspapers, more images come, refugees on a container boat off Christmas Island, some are children, sailing round and round the Pacific, looking for a country that will take them in. Alan writes a poem for them, which will be part of the new show, it ends like this:

*I was a teacher
They will give me a visa
I will dance flamenco
In the land of infinite restaurants
The court will register me
If I can only get off this black ship
O fantastic voyage
into the black hole of the bureaucracy
Fantastic voyage into God's darkness*

Rehearsals begin. Now the distance travelled is small, it is regular, the walk from the house to the hall. Familiar signs - wild parsley by the steps, weeds by the footpath, the sea at the end of the street, sand piled up by the door, and drifting over the worn wooden floor, take off shoes, start with the broom, the gas heaters hiss in winter, the salt breezes in when it is summer. We first came to this hall twenty years ago, by coincidence, with a Nativity play, on a grand tour of Wellington suburbs. We were playing in churches and community halls. When we got to Island Bay, there was a violent southerly storm. Radios broadcast warnings - everybody stay indoors! We had no audience. We knocked

on houses. Have you any kids? There's a show at the Surf Club. "Come!" we yelled over the sound of the crashing waves. Time passes. We have gone round the world and come back - to work in this old hall, which holds the faint memory of a Nativity and a Storm.

After rehearsal on Thursday, I take Ruby, a teenager now, to the Hutt Valley to see a mandala. Two monks, refugees from Tibet, have travelled to New Zealand from their monastery in India, to create this mandala of compassion. They will make it twelve times in twelve different towns, and twelve times destroy it. Thousands of people come to watch, leaving their shoes at the door. They stand enchanted by the red platform where for hours the monks in blue aprons sit cross-legged, making the mandala with trickles of bright coloured sand, green, pink, orange, blue. It looks like a big round iced birthday cake.

There are offerings of chocolate on the altar behind. Maybe these monks have sweet teeth, like the Ven. Chhimed Rigdzin Rinpoche we met in Berlin when we played *Crow Station* there. We shared the space with him, he giving daily lectures, we performing at night. We were attracted to the Rinpoche, who loved strawberries and candy. We attended his sessions, and were given sips of orange liqueur. This can't be serious I thought. This is too funny. The next day a sweet little dog tied to the theatre gate leapt up at me, growling, and tore shreds of cloth from my skirt. For a few moments, it was a nine-legged monster with purple eyes. At once I stopped doubting, and the beast became a little dog again. The chocolate reminds me of the Rinpoche.

"Don't they get bored doing it again and again, the same mandala?" says Ruby. "It is an act of faith," I say. Like performing a show night after night when you go on tour, doing it for different people in different places.

I feel suddenly jealous of the monks' calmness, the clarity of their task, their sense of mission. And irritated too to think they will happily destroy this beautiful thing next Sunday. And throw the sand in the river. There I go, doubting again. This creates bad karma. There's a parking ticket on the car when we leave.

"You see, we should travel on bicycles", I say to Ruby. "Oh, very funny, Mum". On the journey home we talk about things, Karma and Compassion and Materialism.

"Is it wrong Mum to want new sandals, when some people in the world haven't any shoes? New shoes make me happy. Can I still be a good and compassionate person and like shoes?" "Yes. And you can like chocolate too, and strawberries."

The winter sun is setting over the harbour, the parking ticket flapping under the windscreen wiper. "Ha, ha, ha!" giggles the universe and way ahead a plane takes off from the airport and climbs above the triangular gap in the hills where the road passes through to Island Bay. In the gap, for sure,

we see a big pink lotus flower burst into bloom.

SALLY RODWELL (Aotearoa), born in Dunedin, New Zealand, is a founding member of the touring theatre company Red Mole, and more recently Roadworks (a multi-lingual ensemble of young performers and musicians which she directs). She is also a video artist, writer and teacher, and co-director (with Madeline McNamara) of Magdalena Aotearoa.