

# Madeline McNamara

## Turning Tables

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I read somewhere recently that the Stoics would say "act first to desire your own good opinion", that is the meaning of character. This broadens the discussion of character to include a relationship with the self that is based on some sort of principled behaviour. It implies a way of acting in one's theatre practice, which aspires to be not only a better artist but a better human being as well. It implies an engagement with the world through art which seeks at first to recognise, then to dare to contribute to changing the imperfect conditions of life that surround us, wherever we may live.

To "act" in this way is, for me, to pursue my creative potential to the end, to encourage others, through my directing or performance, to recognise and pursue their own artfulness whatever form it may take. It is also to engage with the world around me, in my communities both locally and globally, and to do this at the same time as managing a balanced home life with friends, family and partner that feeds back into the work.

At forty-six, as I undertake work on my first full-length solo piece these considerations are at the forefront of my mind and are inherent in the way I am approaching this work. They are in some ways the subjects of the work.

In general this new work investigates the role of the political voice in theatre, the speaking up and the speaking out of those things that are important, sometimes uncomfortable and often taboo. It is an examination of the power of the voice to draw attention to injustice, whether that be the persuasive voice of a particularly powerful and inspired individual or whether it be the voices of many raised in song or protest. It also examines the power of the voice of propaganda, popular culture and media to reinforce and uphold the status quo and lull us into quietness and acceptance.

In particular I am searching for a theatrical language/voice to address the tensions that exist as a legacy of colonialism in Aotearoa between the immigrant Pakeha culture of which I am a part and the tangata whenua /indigenous

Maori culture. These tensions are at times both exhilarating and painful but these issues are often left to Maori theatre practitioners to address as if it is only their problem.

I have chosen as my starting point the image of the dance hall DJ, the turn-tabalist, a spinner of discs. Whether in the creation of this work the DJ remains a literal figure or transforms into some other kind of being is unknown to me at present.

The key difference between the dance hall DJ and my own take on that world is that in the place of music I will mix recordings of spoken word, oral histories, interviews, essays, inspirational speech, poetry, and found sound. This brings in voices other than my own but allows me to put my own "spin" on the mix. I play many discs, integrate one beat into another, sometimes I repeat a riff over and over until I am satisfied with, as Anne Bogart says, "one hand on the exact, one hand on the unknown".

Early hunches are that my character is a spinner of tales, extroverted, extravagant, an exaggerator, a liar for effect, an embellisher, and a myth maker. Her flipside/B-side is chronically shy, lonely, introverted, mysterious, disconnected. She works in the moment responding to the intimate energy shifts of her audience, the dancers.

The DJ is the perfect image for me to explore the fine line between art and reality, which is what interests me most in performance. I am not attracted any longer to a perfect mimesis in the theatre, but neither am I moved by the coolness of performance that lacks any connection with the mimetic art form. But there is such magic in the process of transformation, so my character will be close to home but distanced enough from my own self that I can reinvent myself in ways that are instinctive to me as an actor. The character's belief system, inspirations and weaknesses are all my own. We

operate in parallel universes, but it is not me, I am still playing a character.

The sounds my DJ plays are the rare and scattered moments of eloquence, clear sightedness, and insight, plucked from my own, and other's lives. The challenge is to make her light of foot, witty and humorous, clear in her analysis of the world around her and to blend it all in a smooth mix.

I am undertaking a course of theatre study at present and quite by chance have been required to direct a group of young students in the opening scene from the famous 1920s Italian play *Six Characters in Search of An Author* by Luigi Pirandello.

The play is about a rehearsal which is invaded by six incomplete characters who have been abandoned by their own author and are looking for another writer to complete them. They are desperate to live fully for a moment through the actors so they can act out the destinies for which they were initially created. The piece explores the nature of theatrical representation itself and the differences between the opposed versions of reality and theatre that the Actors and the Characters represent.

I am interested in the enthusiasm of the students for the work; the work questions the nature of reality and the play's conundrum is one they enjoy. In rehearsals we examine our own process as we struggle to understand what the nature of acting is, what the nature of reality is. If you are acting a character that is itself an actor of characters and, as that character, you encounter other live characters who want to live through your acting, it brings this question of what character is into particular relief! How much of ourselves do we take with us on this journey into character and how much do we leave behind? We are experimenting with the students acting themselves. Improvisations are based on their

own behaviour as actors in a rehearsal. What is the nature of the difference between acting themselves arriving at rehearsal and actually arriving at rehearsal?

My own explorations into the dance hall DJ investigate this territory as well except that I am also the author of this work. Here the character has a direct relationship with the audience as herself, yet she is still a performer. There is a fourth wall but it is transparent; she is both acting and acting on her audience.

The work leads me into developing my character in all sorts of ways; my performance character and my own character develop side by side. I am finding it necessary to draw on the investigative skills of detective, oral historian and scientist; the writing ability of the poet, story teller and philosopher; and the passion and intellect of the political activist and agitator. I also need the technical knowledge of the sound recordist and engineer, the manual dexterity of the juggler and conjurer and the performance skills of musician, dancer and vocal artist, DJ and actor! Discipline, courage, self-motivation, vulnerability are all required to bring this work into being.

This degree of difficulty is quite profound and one could say, as I am skilled in only a few of these areas, that to achieve a high level of competency in them all would be to set myself up to fail. The bridges between this effort and the desired goal become for me the fertile grounds of invention.

Mis - takes, in rehearsal can so often be rich in presence and truth. The moments of unpredictability when we are tripped up, off balance, not in control, responding instinctively and in the moment are often the most alive. We train ourselves in the theatre to recognise this state, to be open to it, to emulate it while paradoxically maintaining balance and control. It is a conjuring trick.

Enter the Fool - overturning dysfunction, disability and disbelief to offer a contributing voice. The virtuoso fool's convoluted but pragmatic solutions appear magically inspired to the sane. The fool learns to cover her incompetence in many clever ways and hence in surprising ways a character is born. The paths are not obvious but still logical in this fool's mind. The logic of the fool is traceable and, for the audience, there should be pleasure in tracking this unfamiliar pathway to her particular truth. Perhaps this audience might feel tempted to track their own pathways.

For me the image of the contemporary dance hall DJ is rich inspiration. Even as an empty shell she inspires. She is one who plays, she is a rhymer and a riddler, and she can ask questions without having to know all the answers. To be a successful DJ one must have a direct and intense connection with the audience's physical and psychological state, and a responsibility for and awareness of the power of such a role to manipulate human feeling and emotion. It is about balance, playing many sides, integrating different rhythms and it is about entertaining.

She is one who plays, a rhymer and a riddler. She can pose important questions without having to know all the answers.

MADELINE McNAMARA (Aotearoa New Zealand) is a performer, director, teacher and producer of original theatre work by women, currently enrolled in an MA programme in directing at Victoria University, Wellington. She is co-director (with Sally Rodwell) of Magdalena Aotearoa.