

# Jill Greenhalgh

## A Wordy Warfare

*But words fill me with fear  
and I have never trusted  
myself with them.  
I don't assume the right  
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I want to learn to love to write.

### ONE

The first article I was obliged to write was in 1986. I was specifically requested to write a polemic discourse on why I was proposing to mount Magdalena '86 - the first international festival of women in experimental theatre. I didn't know the meaning of the word "polemic".

Some say we only ever have one idea that we keep reworking; consciously or subconsciously, we are struggling to clarify that which we are destined to tell to our species; our one word or our one clear message to humanity. Those who know, love and tolerate me well know that I struggle with words. They would, if they could, bequeath me self-belief in my ability to manifest the things I have to say.

A seminal moment: as a young actress of twenty-three, I was assured by my director that there were no good women writers; this, he explained, was the reason we voiced only men's words and ideas in our performances. This myopic authority left me speechless, and revealed to me that I had no weapons with which to combat callous misogyny. I think I have carried the shame of my muteness since. I was young, unarmed and lacking vigilance; I had no skill with language that might transform my outrage into eloquence. Nor could I offer substantive evidence to justify a sentence that would compel him to retract his ignorant and destructive assertions. Instead, I allowed the legacy of his words to become impaled on my psyche and to dis-able me. Those who know me well know this. And I have since used my dis-ability to excuse my absence from the school of words.

I became a maker of performances employing image, action and sound to voice my political, personal and aesthetic concerns. Words as narrative text or conveyers of meaning were never allowed dominance within the structure of the pieces that I made. After nearly thirty years of work I am confident inside this genre labelled - depending

on whom is defining or criticising the work - as devised performance, physical theatre, image-based theatre, non-text based performance - the list is ever mutating.

Through years of experience, I have gained confidence in my ability to enter a room at the beginning of a performance process without knowing what the outcome will be. Excitement lies in discovering new terrain, travelling without a set of directions and without a map. And I trust that I can and will complete the task within the deadline, and be able to defend my work. Of course, the results are not always successful or satisfying, but the point I am trying to make is that I have not invented nor accepted any dis-ability that might excuse me from completing the task, learning from it and then moving on.

But words fill me with fear and I have never trusted myself with them. I don't assume the right to write. I have lacked the courage to enter unknown territory; to play, juggle, distort, and re-assemble as creative intelligence and instinct allows. I have recognised at last that I have to confront and demolish this self-erected blockade.

I have recently accepted a new position at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, as lecturer in performance studies. This is an alien environment (I did not attend a university in my youth) that I am tentatively learning to navigate. It is said that we teach what we most need to learn. I want to serve my students well.

I yearn to be able to mould words with greater skill and as much fluency as I am able to mould the language of images, sounds and actions in the making of performance pieces. I want to move beyond amateur dabbling and learn to construct new architectures of language relevant and challenging to the contexts and environments which I currently inhabit.

But, I also question myself. Why? Is it because inherently, instinctively, I know that words are an access to power and without them I, and by implication my students, might always be relegated to the margins? It will come as little surprise that 95% of my students are female. But let me leave that question floating for a while and move slightly sideways.

## TWO

I venture that most people would agree that non-verbal languages graft onto our minds with as much efficacy as the written or spoken. Yet, we rely on words as our primary means of communication and explanation. I have always felt words have the greater potential to lie, to confuse or distort meaning or become the root of misunderstandings and the core material of threat. Words can be manipulated to combat even the most morally clear actions. Those with the capacity to manipulate and control words hold the reins of power. Or so it would seem.

The word of God.

The word of Law.

Is the Word the pedestal from which the patriarchy has maintained its dominance? Is it the pedestal of the Word that we need to topple? Or do we, the relatively silent, need to reclaim, cherish and construct language, capable of transmitting "other" and new meanings with the tools that exist - the words that surround us - and be prepared to defend the beauty of a new diction that might reflect and serve our own constituency?

And perhaps we need to consider for whom we write. Which men write with consideration of women's criticism in mind when they make their choices of style, content, and form? Could we be accused of censoring our writing, with male readership in mind - even when we are addressing



Jill's daughter Meg in New York, 2003 Photo: Jill Greenhalgh

women specifically?

Dale Spender's book *Man Made Language*<sup>1</sup> written at the beginning of the 1980s states in its introduction:

*For women, language is man-made, for it encompasses the meanings of men who have arrived at their definitions of the world from a position of dominance, a position which women as a group do not occupy; for women, these meanings are partial, and false.*

And in her chapter entitled *Women and Writing*, Dale Spender cites the following sentence by Dorothy Smith:

*...the means that women have had available to them to think, image and make actionable their experience have been made for us and not by us.*<sup>2</sup> I would ask, that if this still be so, and I believe it is, in what ways are we re-making

language and denting the edifice of man-made meaning?

In recent times, there has been a prolific emergence of women's writing moving beyond content to form, experimenting with textual structures that become multi-layered and narratives that transmit meaning and information through accumulation rather than continuum.

The powerful tenderness and wisdom in the work of Susan Griffin is, for me, a shining example. I absorb her words and her words absorb me. Her writing defies linear protocol and acceptable syntax; she drifts and dives through sentences, catches and throws words to form ideas that we can collect in bundles. She creates layers of meaning from accumulated fragments of memory, fact, knowledge, personal and political predilection. She does not ground her offerings in the linear dialectics of the "well

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1. Dale Spender, *Man Made Language*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

2. Dorothy Smith, *A peculiar eclipsing: women's exclusion from man's culture*, *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, Vol.1, no. 4, 1978, pp. 281-296.

made argument" but instead she gives us word/idea maps of interconnected pathways along which we can navigate at our discretion, from where we can gather mementoes to place on our own mnemonic altars. I find this fragmentary, layered approach to the transmission of knowledge and experience motivating and infusive.

This contrasts with a far more frequent sensation of being suffocated or drowned by words; overpowered and overwhelmed by language I cannot fathom, despite it being in the words of my mother tongue. Like many before me, I assumed this was my ignorance; I blamed my dis-ability. It was revelatory, to finally, recently understand that accomplished philosophers, orators, poets and scholars are those who have the ability to transmit the most profound ideas with eloquent simplicity. These are the artists of words. Those who delight in performing displays of semiotic acrobatics are illusionists. Their words serve only to alienate and obfuscate, creating so much noise and extraneous showmanship that it makes it impossible to pick up a clear signal.

This is not a matter of gender but of generosity.

### THREE

Give me your word.

Imagine that the world stopped words for a week. A word-fast. The spoken or written form was unable to be transmitted. Humanity struck blind and deaf to the form of the word - just for a week. There would be no reading, no telephone communication, no email, no radio, only images and sounds on the television, only photos and graphics in newspapers. No placards. No government chambers of debate. No talking, chatting, imploring, demanding, lecturing. No asking, excuses, advice, criticism, with words. No chiding, encouragement, insults, nor committees manipulating their own agendas

- with words.

Imagine.

What wonders would we begin to notice in their absence? Which other forms of communication would emerge as dominant? What would those with imagination and the will to communicate invent? Which systems might collapse, which be cultivated?

Would it be a holiday or a hell?

Would the weak with words be heard? Would the muted crying of the frightened, hungry and isolated perhaps be heard?

What thoughts might have time to be thought in the wordless spaces? Could a wordless week illuminate, and lead us to acknowledge and respect, the quieter, word-free world? Or would the situation unleash the "chaos" of the irrational and unreadable?

The Maya women of Chiapas, Mexico, brocade and embroider their clothing to create intricate symbols and messages that reveal their ancient history and culture. In the wordless week would we reward the services of scribes skilled in the transmission of meaning and information through sound, painting, sculpture, dance, performance, film, food, craft, embroidery? The skilled artists and artisans might become the influential authority; and their wordless languages learned by those who sought the reins of power.

Imagine.

And, perhaps, after this one week, this metaphorical moment, this empty space that has allowed us to review the chattering world, may have revealed territory which might thence be claimed by pioneers who have yet remained long silent and still.

Women have everything to speak, every-

thing to write: so many, having waited and watched so long, have wells of knowledge digested, embodied, practised, perfected over 2,000 years - knowledge of birth and nurture, service and sight, sacrifice and surrender. Women have evolved a sophisticated survival intelligence that they long to share with the male. Women have deep wells brimming with untold histories, herstories, waiting for the silence to settle and parched humanity to quench its thirst by simply listening.

#### FOUR

In Magdalena events, we have veered away from programming time for discourse and debate.

Experience taught us that much time is wasted listening to the bold and the loud, and in the Magdalena, I think we were more interested in the voices that had been silent, whether self-silenced or silenced by circumstance or social oppression. Those who "do", or want to try, are given precedence over those who "say" - those who talk about what is being, or should be, done. We have favoured an emphasis on creating opportunities for listening and we sense that meaning is revealed through the act of the making of work.

We have established a tradition that has become known as the "round" and this has become our favoured way of coming together in words; of gaining insight and information from our peers. It is a structure employed by many traditional cultures. Participants gather in a circle. Each person who wishes may speak. The only rule being that they are not interrupted, confronted or questioned until they have completed what they need to say. No-one is compelled to speak. Often this process is time consuming - especially in large gatherings - but experience again has

taught us the rewards of patiently allowing the full process to evolve and complete. The more we listen, the more we learn. The usefulness of gathering lies in the opportunity to listen, not to speak.

In a typical week-long event, there might only be an open discussion forum on the culminating day. We have developed a mechanism that transforms this traditional feedback session into an opportunity - a platform - where participants are encouraged to respond with concrete proposals that address the emerging concerns. The initiator of a proposal will understand that in voicing her desire to see an event address specific aesthetic or political issues, it becomes her responsibility to manifest that desire, to organise and realise the "dream".

I have rarely seen these forms of discourse adopted in any dominant state, religious or academic context. And yet it might be argued that it would be the obvious structure for both democratic governance and a learning environment. Instead, hierarchies of vertical ascendance dominate our political and educational institutions. The idea and wisdom of a horizontal structure, despite its clearly apparent egalitarianism has been evaded and true democracy - "a form of governance in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively"<sup>3</sup> - distorted and appropriated by the greed of those scrambling for personal power and status.

In Magdalena Australia (April 2003), we were privileged to have the presence and involvement of some leading aboriginal elders who introduced us to the practice of the Yarning Circle. Participants sit in a circle; a leader will outline the simple protocols for encouraging the sharing of uniquely personal stories, words needing to be told. This ancient spiritual practice is being re-intro-

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3. Chambers 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dictionary

duced by indigenous cultural activists determined that both the traditional stories and ancient knowledge of Australia's first peoples be revived, and that the injustices perpetrated by the colonialists will be voiced, acknowledged and redressed.

I experienced the Yarning Circle a number of times and came to understand that giving time as space for these stories to emerge was the key. To begin, someone, often an elder, may speak, sharing stories or memories, loosening the space for others to tell. They will speak easily and comfortably putting the circle at its ease and from time to time, they will invite contributions or response. If no one wishes to speak, they will continue - talking, sharing, and keeping the circle alive and warm. Sometimes it feels rather protracted but each time I experienced the circle someone eventually felt safe enough to have the courage to tell a hidden, trapped experience or memory. And this moment of revelation, personal truth, becomes a reward to all present. It is a moment that could not have emerged without the surrender of time and the generosity of a community gathered to listen.

Parallels can be found in western cultures. In Quaker meetings, for example, the worshippers gather in a circle; there is no preacher to lead. They wait and give time to silence until someone has something they need to say. If no one speaks then silence remains the experience of the meeting, a rare occurrence among we humans in our times of gathering.

In Magdalena, I believe we have learned well to make space for women who have not been used to being heard. Through *The Open Page* and through a world-wide organisation of events and festivals the network has created a context which has impelled many women to defy cultural legacies of female silence and to challenge themselves to risk failure and success whether in performance,

writing or protest.

## FIVE

So ... what next, where next, how next?

To return to an unresolved haunting: "I know, instinctively, that words are an access to power and without them I, and by implication my students, might always be relegated to the margins."

What responsibility must I accept, now, in my role as pedagogue in a man-made institution built on the canonic foundations of masculine thought, inquiry and hypothesis? The vast majority of my students are porous young women eager to learn and accept all that is offered to them.

I think the least I must do is to encourage them to create and protect their story circles before they absorb the new father tongue and assume that their stories are better kept quiet. Perhaps I should like to break a very British and female taboo and encourage them to love the sound of their own voices - whatever form those voices might take. And perhaps in the process of this teaching what I most need to learn, I might learn to love to write and have the courage to relinquish the safe haven of a place in the margins.

JILL GREENHALGH (Britain) is a producer, director, performer and teacher. In 1986 she founded the Magdalena Project and has remained its artistic director since. Her current performance work includes different groups of women performers across the globe. She has recently taken up the post of lecturer in Performance Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. She is married and has two young daughters.