

Penny Simpson reports on The Magdalena Project's open performance forum exploring the issue of the role of the artist in times of political crisis and conflict.

Actress Maja Mitic, from the DAH Teatar in Belgrade, recently volunteered to spend a week in self-imposed silence in a studio at the Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff. Reflecting on the challenge, she stated that she was compelled to "listen through all of her senses" as a performance was created in front of her eyes by two other collaborators. The Breeding Ground's organiser, Jill Greenhalgh, had introduced this device of "silent witness" to generate debate at a forum, which followed on from a five-day period of creativity for six independent theatre makers and one workshop group led by another member of DAH Teatar, Dijana Milosevic.

Maja's comment stuck in my mind when I began reflecting on my own role as a "silent witness" to the day-long showcase of work and debate generated by the forum's participants. A vow of silence prevented off-the-cuff conclusions or commentary, instead offering an opportunity to reflect and mediate with the performances through other means. The central question about the role of artist in times of conflict implied an immediacy of response; what much of the forum revealed was how conflict has a long-term legacy that must be investigated - whether it stems from an opposition of gender, culture, even tastebuds.

So what is the value of the intervention of the watcher in the studio space? Maja spoke of her sensory experience; another of her "dialogue with images." One wrote a poem, another memorised the processes of working carried out in front of her.

I found myself injecting certain expectations and memories on the images I saw presented in the three commissioned works, most particularly in that created by Sioned Huws (Wales) and Jolanta Krukowska (Poland). In this mesmerising piece of work, two women criss-crossed the bare floor of a near empty studio. Their hands mapped each others' faces and bodies. Sometimes, they just missed a gesture, or they balanced hesitantly in the air, before folding in against each other, like mourners captured at a graveside. They echoed the grieving women of Chechnya, which I had seen in a newspaper that morning. Jolanta has the features of woman in a Kathe Kollwitz print. Extraneous noises filtered in through an open fire door - the sound of falling leaves, a train pulling out of a station.

Historical knowledge, memory and the immediacy of a given moment collided together and informed my response. There was scarcely a feeling of neutrality, or passivity. The movements witnessed exerted subtle oppositions between image and interpretation. Geddy Aniksdal (Norway) later spoke of the need to "look for things in a quiet way" when she began her collaboration with Mike Brookes (Wales). The response to questions of an almost unanswerable nature seemed to be located in investigations of the personal, an isolated gesture of compassion, or a scaled-down domestic horror (a toy car exploding into flame). In an introductory talk, Jill Greenhalgh made reference to the war photographer Don McCullin. She quoted his response to a question he was asked about a working life lived on the frontline of the world's many battlegrounds of the world: "It made me want to do my job better."

That determination underpinned many of the contributions to the forum - whether it was in the

form of a personal statement, or a commissioned performance. Maja described the experience of living in Serbia whilst the NATO bombing campaign was conducted earlier this year. She had been with DAH Teatar at the Magdalena Aotearoa Theatre Festival in New Zealand when the bombs began to drop. The company decided to perform their show as planned, before flying home to be with their friends and families.

"I believe the artist is the keeper of the flame at the bottom of the sea" she told the forum.

The very fact that other members of DAH Teatar and the organisers of that festival were reunited during this week-long programme in Cardiff must have felt like a gesture of defiance in itself. They were performers and they were "silent witnesses;" they shared their individual experiences of crisis and broke down boundaries of fear and misconception. Sally Rodwell, co-director of Magdalena Aotearoa, voiced her concerns about a crisis of imagination.

"We live in a world where we are increasingly being led to focus on the goals of investment and security. It's hard to see where there is space for poetry."

But even the carnage of war failed to quieten the poets. Suzanne Greenhalgh, lecturer at Roehampton University, spoke of the relationship between war and theatre. Battle is often described as the "theatre of war," whilst the world of theatre permeated the writing of the men in the trenches.

"In times of war, we do not live in a serial order of time. The past and the present are a continuous mass. There is fantasy, distortion, myth and lies. Performance treads in this dangerous territory. It is a place of simultaneity and we must engage with this."

The playwright Kaite O'Reilly gave a graphic illustration of such a "place of simultaneity" through a series of diary entries recording her work as a drama therapist in Croatia and Bosnia, alongside those describing her experience of editing a book about the feminist perspective of the IRA in Cardiff and London. (A project halted with the recent bombing of Canary Wharf where the book's publishers were based). These experiences were framed by references to the legacy of the Irish Civil War on her own family. This question of where does a war actually end was one raised time and again.

The forum over, I turned back to my newspaper. On the streets in Belgrade, "the forces of opposition" were, apparently, fighting amongst themselves; in a Cardiff studio, a woman from that same city had fallen silent, but watchful. Maybe silence will breed a new kind of response?

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