

WATER[WAR]S – REACTIONS OF A CLOSE SPECTATOR

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My reactions to Water[war]s have a lot to do with my personal relationship with Jill Greenhalgh, they cannot be reduced to the answers of a questionnaire. Whatever I write has to be read in that light and is totally subjective.

Water[war]s as a title or theme for work appeared when *Child*, a production with Jill Greenhalgh as actor and director and Mike Brookes as designer, was still on tour. It was a time when Jill was moving from Cardiff to Llangrannog, when the Magdalena Project's office in Cardiff was being closed down and when the occasions for Jill and I to meet to work together or see each other's work had diminished. A time of crisis in the Magdalena Project, but also a time that Jill needed to dedicate to her family and a time for new seeds to be planted for something to change.

Water[war]s - the title is very inspiring. It immediately opens to many associations. It connects to our daily existence as we all need water to live and at the same time the conflict that the words imply allow our thoughts to jump from a personal horizon to a social one. It is a title that indicates questions and not answers; it gives a feeling of closeness and an awareness that dealing profoundly with this problematic will bring up more and more doubts of how to deal concretely with the certainties of our ideas and opinions.

Jill told me she wanted to include her family (her husband and two daughters) in the process of work and presentation of Water[war]s. She also wanted to fill a floor with water. Both these needs made it difficult to actually envisage how and when it would be possible to start the work. Compromises along the way were going to be necessary for something to happen. I was programming Transit III in Holstebro for January 2001 and the only thing I was sure of was that Jill should be there to work on Water[war]s. I should have been to Wales to see a presentation, but it did not happen. I sent newspaper cuttings on the theme to Jill and I decided to go to Novi Sad in Yugoslavia to see the work there instead. Jill had been invited to give a workshop and present Water[war]s with her family. Later because of economical limitations Jill went to Novi Sad alone and the workshop became the occasion for some young people to work with Jill and for Jill the possibility of trying out some ideas.

In Novi Sad, we were in a meeting when Jill made an announcement: "What you will see is NOT a performance, but the result of a few days of work; if I should continue I would keep only a few seconds of what you will see or just a couple of images." Already then Water[war]s was not a performance work, but an ongoing process to which different people would give contributions as steps along the way. What will happen in the future is still to be seen. Will there be a final cast of actors? Will Water[war]s take a final form of a production? I doubt it. It is as if the theme itself has turned a theatrical process into a flowing of water, which can take the shape of rivers, lakes, seas or drinks, and within which different kinds of fish and seaweed, pebbles and mud, salt and sugar can be found.

We followed Jill in a single line across the centre of Novi Sad to reach the space, a normal sized room on the ground floor with windows giving out to the street. The room was divided by a rope, which defined a corridor for the spectators around the walls and a rectangular space for the performers. The performers (some moving and saying texts, others playing musical instruments) were on tables. The tables were small and mostly

only had one person standing on them. The tables gave an immediate sense of isolation. The floor was covered with chalk writings about water in different languages taking the shape of waves. The waves of words and the tables made me think of continents and oceans. A sequence of movement and music was presented and repeated as the spectators moved along the walls of the room. Eventually some left, others stopped to watch what was going on from only one point of view. During the sequence one of the performers slowly let some water out of a bottle onto a pile of sand at her feet. The music had a slow, calm part and then a faster tempo. The performers directed some of their texts to the others. The spectators did not leave. Some who had left came back, others kept on watching through the windows. The sequence was repeated again and again. It seemed that it would never stop. But what would happen when the water in the bottle finished?

Jill was able to interrupt and in the disruption one of the performers had landed on somebody else's table. The young people were happy and they showed the satisfaction that came from the work with Jill; they smiled and laughed. Some of the spectators were in tears. Many had been deeply touched by the short sequence of movements and the atmosphere that had been created in the room.

The next appointment was Transit III. To prepare the work a website had been set up. The participants to this new step along the way had a possibility of communicating and preparing before actually meeting. Jill had given tasks. The participants were all new, although some of the Novi Sad performers came to Transit III.

Jill had wanted a big non-theatrical space and she was not happy with what had been found. The presentation of the work had to be moved. Water[war]s became for me a practical problem. First how to find 500 buckets, then how to satisfy Jill's visions of a space, then find the time to fill and empty 500 buckets of water. In between came the director and performers' difficulties in communication. Water[war]s is not a production, but it is even less a workshop. This was made clear in all announcements. But however clear the intentions are, dealing with expectations always implies a certain amount of frustration. During the days of work of Water[war]s in Holstebro I had the feeling that all those involved took turns at being frustrated. Meanwhile Jill would telephone her husband Mike Brookes for advice and assistance.

It was morning when we saw the presentation. Again we were reminded that it was not a result. Jill has a capacity for creating very strong images. Somehow I had been vaccinated in Novi Sad, so I was not as moved as the new audience members, but other spectators cried and everyone left the room in silence. The atmosphere had been recreated with different performers, props, music, words, texts, languages, and even different looking water. The title was the same. The person behind it, Jill, was the same. Otherwise everything had changed.

The 500 black buckets filled with water occupied a rectangular space and three performers like moving statues emerged from the water. One of the performers shot the others and also herself with a water-pistol. Computer texts concerning water were projected on the wall while a voice from a microphone sounded in the room. Music was played on a saxophone. Drops of water were lifted from the buckets. That day it had decided to rain, more and more water was coming down from the sky. I was surrounded by water and I was worried about how the drains of the theatre could take all the water that needed to be thrown away after the presentation. I felt wet, while the texts spoke of the desert of Aral. The idea of salt started to mix in my mind with the atomic experiments

carried out on an island somewhere in the Soviet Union. The size of the world and of its problems became more and more overwhelming and desperate, while I looked upon the water in the buckets and tried to imagine how much it weighed.

In the Novi Sad Water[war]s, water was present through metaphor and in a single bottle. It gave me a strong feeling of water getting used up. In the Holstebro Water[war]s I became aware of the political implications. With so much water around me my heart did not tighten for the disappearing water, but for the ineptitude of people to cope. Obviously a country that is a desert will try to steal water from the river of another country, even if one Bedouin will offer a drink to another. It was size that struck me the second time. So much, too much and all gets out of control.

Luckily the drains were able to take the water from the buckets and Transit III continued its programme.

After Transit III, Jill wrote to me that Water[war]s might be taken to Mexico. The result that for me is most important might be achieved: the water will keep flowing and Jill will keep on working and sharing her images and obsessions. I am happy to have helped the Water[war]s river along its course for some time.

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