

## **The Growth and Future of the Magdalena Project**

*Today - What I want to do is offer, some of **the imperatives** I have come to understand - as a practitioner and as a producer, – as I have navigated and attempted to challenge - a **cultural landscape that it is dominated by patriarchal ideology and constructs**. I want to share what I have learnt on my journey with the Magdalena Project – since its very beginnings.*

*The Magdalena Project, started in Wales in 1986 – so it is 22 years old this year – it has now active all over the globe.*

*The Magdalena has been nurtured as an idea **by a network of self selecting women, who make theatre and performance; they have created autonomous organisations all over the world and are mounting ongoing local activities as well as major international festivals that platform women's performance work.***

*It is an organisation, **a network that** has grown from very humble beginnings with very little state funding. But despite not having mainstream support it has become a world wide haven. A space, a place, an ethic where women artists meet, collaborate, show work, share methods of making work through workshops and demonstrations, engage in critical debate, and **most importantly, to my mind, a place where the contagion of feminine artistic isolation has been defied** and allowed some strong, original performance work to find a context and flourish*

*Future is built on the foundation stones of past experience and the impulse to challenge and invent.*

*In the Magdalena Project – the **stones of experience** are the events that allows us to meet, share, explore questions and concerns on the making of distinct work that might be called feminine, or women's work. And although I would not presume to say we have found so many answers – we have created significant opportunities for interrogation where we have challenged assumptions, and ourselves and many perceived boundaries.*

*Those of us who have been close to the project since the beginning, and there are a few present at this festival, have been thinking a lot about the notion of **LEGACY** – we are in our 50's now – not old but, speaking only for myself - certainly not seeking new projects to define myself/ourselves. [We all have too much to be responsible for already.]*

But we are reflecting deeply on the achievements of the project, the ground we have gained

in 22 years of constant global activity. We are asking what form the legacy should or could take – which stones of experience and learning can be of use to those young emerging women practitioners who are currently forming projects, defining strategies and seeking **relevant** contexts in which to share their work and ideas beyond their immediate communities; wanting to tour, to meet each other. Those building careers now and seeking to survive **from** their work in performance and theatre.

I think we need to work rigorously **to identify and articulate this legacy** and direct it clearly towards those who will take full advantage of the ground gained. We need to ensure that the isolations defied remain in defiance, that the confidence in, and autonomy achieved is employed **to build more havens** – for future women's art.

### ***BUT WHY***

***Why are these strongholds for specifically feminine endeavour necessary? And why do we need to build and protect them.***

My concern has always been that much of the focus of the struggle of women in theatre in and performance is still **wedded to winning a place within existing structures** rather than in questioning the efficacy and utility of those traditional, entrenched, essentially patriarchal artistic and educational constructs. In proposing and building contexts for our own work we might flirt with alternative forms but all too often find ourselves returning **to the habit** of the patriarchal edifices that we are used to and even comfortable with.

Hierarchies of vertical ascendance dominate our economic, political, educational **and** cultural institutions. These institutions determine the funding, commissioning, staging or housing and the dissemination of our performance works, and influence our future: It is the educational institutions, dominated at the highest level to serve a male vision, that perpetuates a male canon. These constructs determine how or even if we co-operate. There are understood rules of engagement. Codes of behaviour, and deeply held and protected beliefs that map the paths to 'so-called' success'. These include many unchallenged assumptions regarding aesthetic, form, delivery, structure, duration, and viable content.

But what if we decide not to play, put the ball down.....invent new rules of engagement. If we stop aspiring to gaining a place within these institutions, we can focus our energy to perhaps re-propose in relation to all of these above mentioned elements and construct parallel or complimentary spaces – if we so choose.

If we begin to deconstruct, to pull the matted threads apart, examine and question some of these presiding definitions of process and product in theatre and performance– we may find that they are **not appropriate** to our aspirations, nor compatible with our personal, political and aesthetic priorities, **nor in fact useful** to us as we make our distinct works. We can

decide not to play by the given rules of artistic engagement and draw new maps of pathways that bypass the obstacles that may have hitherto stood in our way to artistic achievement. We can even define achievement.

***“It can no longer be denied that there is a uniquely female expression...women’s social, biological and political experiences are different from those of men...art is born of these experiences and must be faithful to them to be authentic”***

**Lucy Lippard**

This simple clear statement has been a corner stone of the Magdalena project, and I invite you to consider this fundamental notion of authenticity as I progress through this talk. I invite you to consider what is meant by ‘*authentic*’

I and my colleagues within the Magdalena needed something, **else**. Many of us have worked or still work in group theatres or run our own companies. We work in mixed ensembles and established institutions. Many, for economic reasons, have been making solo performances; others directing and performing freelance. Please lets be clear: all our work is distinct. WE are not following any specific methodology, style, form or dogma. We are each autonomously making very different work. *And – lets also be very clear I do not have to embrace all work by all women. I may not relate to or comprehend or find inspiration in much of the work - . But I do insist on seizing opportunities to witness as much women’s work as men’s.*

What we have all **fed** from is **meeting each other**. We need the form of nourishment that the meetings to share work give us and **to achieve** these meetings across continental divides so we have needed **to take financial and organisational responsibility for the building of events**

***Some time ago Germaine Greer: another quote I very often share:***

***‘ I do think that women could make politics irrelevant – by a kind of spontaneous co-operative action the like of which we have never seen – which is so far from peoples ideas of state structure and viable social structure - that it seems to them like total anarchy and what it really is, is very subtle forms of interrelation which do not follow a hierarchical pattern which is fundamentally patriarchal. The opposite of patriarchy is not matriarchy but fraternity and I think its women who are going to have to break the spiral of power and find the trick of co- operation.’***

I think in our determination to both forge opportunities to inter relate, and to resist the marginalisation of our work we have, over the last 22 years, found some quite clever and practical survival strategies and some tricks of co-operation

We have come to understand that an instinctive desire to build a **strong network**, and the ease with which this evolved lays at the **centre of the success** of our Project. We have learnt that for the network to flourish it must rigorously commit to:

1. Sharing and communicating information;
2. Documenting the work; writing about what we have achieved
3. A consistency of operation that **allows the build of personal relationships**, and a common history. Not through theoretical activity but through concrete live encounter at every level.

And this is achieved by

4. Developing financial strategies and organisational structures to enable these activities.

We have to defy the lack of confidence that prevents us from taking charge.

Some women participating in Magdalena events have been motivated to take responsibility to organise events within their own countries and communities. And here I think we have been instinctually smart in a female way and we have embraced one of our other most distinguishing survival strategies. We have NOT been interested in or practiced ownership

The Magdalena has not held on fast to ownership of the name, rights, etc SO...if someone or a group – like yourselves are inspired by a Magdalena event enough to propose an event under the name of Magdalena you can, with the support from a core of established producer/practitioners, and a set of guidelines, be introduced to lessons learnt from organisational experience and programming structures. We can pass on a wide web of contacts; and a documented history of successful international events - which then enables the approach to funding institutions with evidence that can argue the viability of investment in women's performance. There exists – within this network structure a body of built and shared work, and an undeniable and significant weight of achievement

So - founded on personal relationships based on trust and a shared ownership and responsibility of the name and ethic of the Project, the Magdalena has taken root in many countries. It facilitates an influential international network of exchange, festival opportunity, touring circuits, publications and pedagogical support. We have collectively built a name that has authority and influence.

The Magdalena is NOT a place to which you can apply for your show to be performed, or for funding for your work. It is not a service, in this way. We have NO central funding base. It is a

place where you can choose to take responsibility to make something or propose something and to find personal support. The Magdalena will not hold you up but it can support you as you stand.

**From Concrete EVENT** a ripple effect of activities and new found relationships provokes **new** collaborations, performance works, more questions and debate. As the body of work expands, so too does a progressively layered critical consciousness and confidence. Reflection, based on embodied knowledge and witness of women's performances, as distinct from theoretical or received knowledge, nurtures new critical debates defined by female practice; and a departure from the dominant diet of male critical perspective to which our work has, historically, been subjugated.

I think what we have achieved in the Magdalena is a **horizontal structure and strategy** for organisation and survival. ***A trick of co-operation*** as Germaine Greer suggested ..... which has **managed to make** certain **patriarchal politics irrelevant**.

The horizontal working structure - the net spread - [and here I seem to only be able to describe physically] allows the spread - like water - thinly across the surfaces - perhaps almost invisibly - seeping into the fabric of the cultural landscape, soil, and psyche as opposed to very visible, monumental vertical structures of organisation. The vertical, traditional structures - are projectiles that go up and up and up, layer upon layer and eventually topple. And it is that fear of toppling that creates the need to sustain/maintain power - to build the walls of defence, which separate as opposed to link.

I believe that the idea and wisdom of a horizontal structure, - things lain side by side - despite its clearly apparent egalitarianism has been universally evaded and true democracy "a form of governance in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively"<sup>1</sup> distorted and appropriated by the greed of those scrambling for personal power and status on the vertical ascendancy.

So... the skills of networking, the notion of non-ownership and horizontal structure are some of legacy we might acknowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Chambers 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dictionary