

The Magdalena Project

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The Magdalena Project, International Network of Women in Contemporary Theatre, was founded in Wales in 1986 – it is now active all over the globe. It has been nurtured by a network of self-selecting women, who make theatre. It has become a space where women artists create ongoing international events in order to meet, collaborate, show work, share training and strategies of creating work, engage in ‘some’ critical debate, and most importantly, it has become a haven where the contagion of feminine artistic isolation has been defied.

One of the concerns that I wanted to address from the outset was that much of the focus of the struggle of women in theatre and performance was wedded to winning a place within existing structures rather than in questioning the efficacy and utility of the traditional, artistic and educational constructs. In proposing and building contexts for our own work I observed that we might flirt with alternative forms but all too often find ourselves returning to the habit of the essentially 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 performance works. Higher educational institutions are still dominated at the highest levels to serve male vision and perpetuate the male canon. These constructs determine how or even if we are allowed to 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’. If we play by the rules we may, these days, achieve position at the heights of these constructs. But these environments protect under challenged masculist assumptions regarding aesthetic, form, delivery, structure, duration, and viable content.

As I began to examine and question some of these presiding assumptions it was clear that they were not appropriate to my aesthetic aspirations, neither were they compatible with my personal and political priorities as a woman. Much was not in fact useful to me nor offered more than tokenistic support as I developed and made my own distinct works.

And what happened is that – for the duration of Magdalena events that I organized in the early years at least - I decided not to play, put the ball down and attempted to invent new rules of engagement.

Some time ago Germaine Greer said something I have often shared:

‘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 it's women who are going to have to break the spiral of power and find the trick of co- operation.’

I think what we have achieved in the Magdalena is a horizontal structure and strategy for organisation and survival. *A trick of co-operation*, which has managed, as Germaine Greer has suggested, ‘to make certain patriarchal politics irrelevant’. The horizontal working structure allows the spread of the Project, like water to flow across the surfaces – perhaps almost invisibly – seeping into the fabric of the cultural landscape, soil, and psyche as opposed to erecting clearly 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 defense, which separate as opposed to link. I believe that the idea and wisdom of a horizontal structure, despite its obvious egalitarianism, has been universally evaded and true democracy (“*a form of governance in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively*”), distorted and appropriated by the greed of ego’s scrambling for personal power and status on the vertical ascendancy.

It is permeation as opposed to proclamation that has fertilized the growth of The Magdalena

Project; and it's uncannily extensive horizontal and invisible root system seems to have pervaded theatre culture across four continents. I am not sure how. Except perhaps that need breeds.

The skills of networking, of inter relationship, the notions of non-ownership and horizontal structure are some of legacy we can acknowledge. These are strategies that have developed organically and have served us very well.