

Julie Robson

Seductive Sounds

As I reach into the pockets of my mind, I find four stones...

THE TOUCH STONE

I am five years of age. My family is on an aeroplane to the Middle East where my father is contracted to work. Because I do not yet fully grasp the world map, I am content with the idea that we are off to live in a country with blazing sunsets like those in the Bible Stories for Children books. Not too long after take off, I peer out of the small window into the dark night and witness the land below being ravaged by flames. Distressed at the thought that my country is burning up, I nudge my mother to ask if we are still in Australia. She wakes, mutters a yes, and then resumes her sleeping, unaware of the horror now consuming me. I weep quietly. The solemnity of the moment also compels me to sing. My repertoire at such a tender age is understandably limited and the most important sounding song I know is *God Save the Queen*... It will have to suffice as a lament and my sapling voice is drowned out by the white noise of the aircraft cabin.

One day I will realise that the destruction I saw from that window was merely local sugar cane fields on fire. The misunderstanding however exposes my deep and basic instinct for songs and rituals to mark and honour life's occasions. Listening to this impulse is why I will stage a series of concerts throughout my childhood on the back of a neighbour's truck, why I will belt my heart out in endless school musicals, and, eventually, why I will end up making my living as a performer.

THE SINGING STONE

I am twenty years of age and working the late shift at Café Luna, a mooching place for moviegoers in an inner city suburb of Brisbane. Time passes more easily if I sing while I sweep, so I quietly improvise a melody. It gives me a gentle momentum. One two three, one two three, one two three, one... The tune arriving is persistent, familiar and new, begging for words. By

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the time the dishes are done and the last of the late night customers kicked out, I am walking home with two verses and a chorus, as well as a waltz in my step.

At the end of the week, a close friend on an Arts Council tour through regional Queensland calls me from a lonely phone box. In the swapping of much news I tell her I have written my first song. Insisting I sing it down the line, Catherine presses the phone to her ear so she can hear it over the great trucks rumbling down the outback highway into an opal sunset:

(Verse 1)

*Ten miles I walked to reach the sea
and find the place where I could leave
the world where I'd been strong for thirty years
I jumped to the boat,
hid beneath the sail,
It was cold but I'd escaped
It was cold but I'd escaped*

(Chorus)

*Morning woke me, with a new day,
and a new country
Morning woke me, with a new day,
and a new country*

(Verse 2)

*I walked new earth in search of work
without a friend or coin in purse
with only hope and crumpled dreams in my hand
I looked to the moon
she had tears in her eyes
and I asked if I'd been had
I asked if I'd been had*

*Morning woke me, with a new day,
and a new country
Morning woke me, with a new day,
and a new country*

(Verse 3)

*Only now can I walk with the wind at my back
after years of travelling*

*with the demons, the tigers, the owls with no eyes
and now my face has the lines
that will tell you all of my tales
the tales of a woman, a woman, a woman,
who braved a new country*

*Morning woke me, with a new day,
and a new country
Morning woke me, with a new day,
and a new country*

Catherine arrives home from tour and arranges *New Country* for three female voices. It becomes the signature tune of our a cappella and theatre troupe, Sister Moon Ensemble, which for five years waltzes me all over Australia and abroad. The little song, so humble in essence, marks the much larger milestone of finding my own voice.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

Sailing into my thirties I encounter a sound so beautiful I am pulled dramatically off course and sucked into a PhD programme. The seductive sound is being made by some of the finest musicians in philosophy. Plato has the bass line and is humming to me of archetypes and the mysterious *chora*, making a suitable underscore for Aristotle's well-made melody. Freud and Levi-Strauss warble enthusiastically about myth. Saussure and Lacan join in with semiotic and psychoanalytic harmonies while Jung croons a sweet countermelody on the collective unconscious. The mix is rich. The dissonance of Derrida makes me tremble and laugh brightly.

Lurking behind this acoustic curtain are more contemporary sirens of philosophy: Bakhtin, Barthes, Kristeva, Irigary, Cixous, Le Doeuff... Too many to name, suffice to say that the sound of (French) feminist theory moves me closer and closer toward the rocky cliffs of knowledge. Hitting their stratospheric high notes, the divas of this domain shatter much of my previously held

worldview, and my mind starts flying through new skies of meaning. Caught in their eloquent spell, I am scudding toward the coastline where, like so many before me, I will soon be utterly overwhelmed. If only a crew would tie me fast to the mast and plug my ears with wax, then perhaps I might hear the wisdom of the song and escape its treachery.

My odyssey through academia is an epic journey. I arrive home with a feminist revision of the myth of the sirens, a doctorate in creative practice as research, and adrenal exhaustion to boot. The adventure affirms why I make performance, and why the female voice is historically both feared and revered. I discover that philosophy is so much more than abstract intelligence, that it is inextricably linked with the poetics of images and the practice of image making. That knowledge can be corporeal and embodied helps me to understand why live art has always played such a major part in making meaning for me, why the theatre, at times, can shimmer and sing with such significance. It is another milestone, a crash course in listening to the image and the politics that go with it.

THE MAGDALENA STONE

I have studied the Magdalena Project closely for years, sifting through archival documents, devouring *The Open Page* journals, interviewing its members, but only now am I travelling to my very first festival, Magdalena Pacifica, 2002. The travel guide tells me Colombia is exotic, sensual, wild and complex, and that it is hard to find such hospitable, spirited and stimulating people as the Colombians. In the week before I leave, the newspaper tells me that the country averages 3,000 kidnappings a year. With its reputation of intense political unrest, friends offer me money *not* to go to this volatile paradise... and yet I board the belly of a mechanical bird, clutching my heart full of



Sister Moon Ensemble. Photo: Brett Goodman

curiosity.

In airports from Brisbane to Miami I am checked a dozen times by security for traces of explosive powder on my shoes. The most deadly thing in my bag is a book of Virginia Woolf essays, *On Women and Writing*. From Miami to Cali, the plane flies in on the edge of a hurricane. I am intrigued at the feeling of dangerousness that accompanies a women's gathering.

At an art exhibition organised for the festival, my eyes fall on a small cluster of figurines; six women carved from wood are standing in a bed of corn kernels. The artist says she is contesting the machismo belief that women's minds are empty and so she has adorned and filled their heads with "beautiful things", fertile and abundant things; birds, seeds, foods and wildlife. Her metaphors come to life in the festival's daily political forums on peace, and in the evenings, through female performance. Here, like at so many other Magdalena events, women's thoughts and imaginations



Sacred COW (Dawn Albinger, Scotia Monkivitch and Julie Robson) in *The Quivering*. Photo: Suzon Fuchs

find form and flight. Here, I sense the profound collegiality that has become as necessary as creating ritual, finding voice and making meaning.

To find a "tribe" is to be able to share and exchange the kind of wisdom that can sustain, nourish, challenge and direct. I have been fortunate enough also to find this kinship with my current theatre company, sacred COW. The connection between Dawn Albinger, Scotia Monkivitch and myself was a key factor in being able to organise a Magdalena Festival in our own country. Our committee is indebted to the Colombian organisers, as well as many of the founding members of the Magdalena Project, for mentoring and advising us while we set about achieving this dream - to create for Australia what many Europeans have enjoyed since 1986; a forum for women to meet and support one another in the diffi-

cult but necessary business of theatre.

As I reach into the pockets of my mind, I find four stones... Sitting on the cusp of a new chapter in my life, I lay them out for you here as milestones along a journey of listening, moments in time when I have heard my desire to touch, to sing, to wonder and to share... when I have heard deeply the call to create.

JULIE ROBSON (Australia) is an ensemble member of performance trio sacred COW, co-founders of Magdalena Australia. She has recently moved from Brisbane to Perth to work as co-ordinator of the Contemporary Performance programme at Edith Cowan University.