

Jill Greenhalgh

## The Best Years of Your Life

*If wilfulness and wickedness are not driven out  
it is impossible to give a child a good education  
... over the years children forget everything  
that happened to them in early childhood.  
If their wills can be broken at this time then  
they will never remember afterwards  
that they had a will  
and for this very reason  
the severity that is required  
will not have any serious consequences.*

(J. Sulzer, *Child Rearing Manual*, published in 1748)

This legacy remains, despite its age, and gradual dilution. It has been invisibly passed down through generations of parenting. The consequences of this "poisonous pedagogy" are still yet to be named and recognised.

In 1992 I became a parent. I was thirty-eight years old: like many before me my life was turned inside out ... no prior advice or warning had prepared me for the emotional and practical upheaval ... since then and with the birth of a second child I have had my humanity challenged daily by incessant demands and unconditional love.

### PART 1

It was not when my children were born that I began to think differently.

For the first three years of their existence I carried on - carried by the wave that was my life, my needs, my responsibilities to work, my Magdalena Project. I made projects, festivals, travels, applications for more projects, administration, organisation, administration. I found ways of carrying the two small people along on my surf board. After all, to begin with, they are portable and need little except the breast and somewhere to sleep. Then as they begin to walk you find ways to keep one eye on them all the time - they are enthralled with everything: the other eye remains on

*Too many millions  
of our small  
and  
vulnerable people are being hurt  
by adults,  
beaten, conscripted, fucked,  
ignored.  
They have no vote, no voice,  
no choice;  
we try to care,  
but we fail at this caring.  
This is not sentimentality,  
it is an observation  
of the nature of our society,  
complicit, deadly  
and,  
all too often,  
devoid of compassion.*

the work. The days start very early and any moments for quiet reflection are valued. Nights out are rare, sex a distant memory, tiredness a normal physical state; and the daily organisation, necessary to get to the phone, the rehearsal room, the computer, the meetings, the supermarket, becomes a skill of which you become proud.

And then they start to talk. It is a joy: they are learning - your children - to communicate. Each new phrase, each new articulation, is a surprise. You wallow in self-congratulation at how clever you have been as a parent to create this new human being!

Then they can talk, can demand, can resist, can infringe relentlessly on your time with the articulation of their desires and needs. You learn - so damn slowly - that to resist these demands has an inverse result, it only destroys any space for thought; to give in is the only path to peace (or give them to someone else to care for, for the major part of every day, something I and their father decided we would not do).

At some moment you begin to sense that you are a slave to what you have made and this is the moment that I experienced as the beginning of parenthood.

Then I began to think differently.

It is from this place that I decided to make the performance entitled *Child*. I had begun to experience a fundamental shift in my political perspective. I examined the power base that I had inherited as a parent and how I exercised this power. And I was not proud of what I knew to be true; that too much of the time I was abusing that power. I began to think a great deal about the meaning of The Rights of The Child.

## PART 2

I worked in collaboration with two men. A visual artist/lighting designer and a sound artist. Both also parents of young children. Their only brief was that all the visual and

sound creation had to be constructed only from images or voices of children. The three of us worked separately to begin with. Once I understood the process that I was engaged in I knew I wanted to try to make a performance, in a simple and untheatrical way, that focused attention on the interrelationship between the domestic realities of life as a parent, my memory of my own childhood and the global reality of a catalogue of child abuse that defies comprehension.

I made the performance as an attempt to fathom the answers to two complex and yet parallel questions: a need to understand why adult society seems incapable of protecting and valuing children; and why, at forty years old, my humanity was being challenged by my children, in such a way as to make me feel I had learnt nothing about self control in all my years of political and artistic activism.

I asked my friend - my midwife: "What are the most common things that women scream out when in labour?" She spoke with colleagues and they came up with a consensus of ten. Number one on this list was:

*I want to go home.*

This became the first line of the performance.

I reflected on my childhood.

*My daddy was a soldier  
he showed me too many of his wounds  
when I was too little  
to understand that it was not my fault.*

This became the penultimate text of *Child*.

I recorded things I heard myself saying to my children.

*nobody knows what i do to my children  
nobody knows what i say to them*

*when there's no other adult  
there to hear me.*

I wrote reams of words.

I wondered why, one of the most consuming and significant stages in any person's life - that of having and rearing a child - was so little expressed by artists. Many make performances for children but I could not identify any that placed the issues surrounding the place of children in our society as central to their work. I wondered why more women had not taken this theme.

I contacted child protection agencies; I read books, articles, pamphlets on child abuse, child soldiers, child prostitutes, child welfare, child law, child lawlessness, child slavery, child workers, child psychology, child rearing, child sex offenders. I drowned in all this material - some of which was so painful that I kept it secret from my two colleagues. A series of bald and generally known "statistics" became an element of the installation within which I eventually performed.

I tried to study and understand the history of the complex debate on "The Definition of a Child".

My mother sent me a white dress that I wore at eighteen months old. The only other objects to enter were: an ammunition box, a hand held tape recorder, a coin, a bullet, a hammer, a lighter, a few dried petals and a photograph of my father, age twenty, in uniform.

I found Susan Griffin's book *Chorus of Stones*.

*No detail that enters the mind,  
nor the smallest instance of memory,  
ever really leaves it,  
and things we had thought forgotten  
will arise suddenly to consciousness years later,  
or,  
undetected, shape the course of our lives.<sup>1</sup>*

I came across an article in a newspaper that interviewed child soldiers in Afghanistan. The character of Charlie joined the performance.

*Charlie says:  
"Adults think  
they know what to do.  
They don't know shit."  
Charlie is eleven, Charlie is a killer,  
Charlie saw his mummy's blood  
flowing down the river.*

And the writings of Alice Miller.

*It is not true that evil, destructiveness,  
and perversion  
inevitably form a part of human existence,  
no matter how often this is maintained.  
But it is true  
that we are daily producing more evil  
and with it, an ocean of suffering  
that is absolutely avoidable.  
When one day the ignorance  
arising from childhood repression  
is eliminated  
and humanity has awakened,  
an end can be put  
to this destruction and evil.<sup>2</sup>*

One day during rehearsal, frustrated with my own company, I went to the pub. It was the day after the Dunblane massacre.<sup>3</sup> Three business men were chatting at the bar, one tried to bring up the subject of the terrible killings. The two others became silent. The first pursued the subject until one said:

*Please - it doesn't bear thinking about.*

This became the key phrase in the performance.

And where, I asked myself, does the difference lie in my shouting at my daughter,



Jill Greenhalgh in *Child*. Photo: Mike Brookes

because I can, because I am tired, because she will not do as I request and Hamilton proving a point to the adult world with his arbitrary act of killing. Either way the children are placed in the firing line of the adult's state of mind.

*Even if a feeling has been made secret,  
even if it has vanished from memory,  
can it have disappeared altogether.  
A weapon is lifted with the force of  
a forgotten memory.  
The memory has no words,  
only the insistence of a pain that has  
turned into fury.  
A body, tender in its childhood or nakedness,  
lies under this weapon.  
And this body takes up the rage,  
the pain,  
the disowned memory, with each blow.<sup>4</sup>*

I tried to create a series of simple but resonant images, one after the other, without narrative thread but where the complexities interwove continuously. Within the limits of the elements created by my two male colleagues; and shifting between narrator, person, performer, body in space, as appropriate; I tried to condense the memories of my own childhood, the cognisance of my shortcomings as a mother; and my anger at the abuse inflicted on the vulnerable by those who were once themselves the frightened and powerless child.

The construct proposed by my colleagues provided a strong enough context to allow me, the performer, to calmly navigate and stumble a journey through very simple distillations of memory, personal realisation, self-criticism, factual context, and identify what I needed to say next, find the shortest route, and move on.

The result, when all the elements were interwoven, was a fifty-three minute solo

placed within a ten foot square cube; projected on four sides throughout were snapshots of children accompanied by a continuous sound track constructed from the electronically treated voices of children.

### PART 3

*There are many ways we have  
of standing outside ourselves in ignorance.  
Those who have learned as children  
to become strangers to themselves  
do not find this a difficult task.  
Habit has made it natural not to feel.  
To ignore the consequences  
of what one does in the world  
becomes ordinary.*

The impulse that gave me the energy to begin the Magdalena Project was anger - a moment when my feminism fell from my head to my stomach and I felt the physical sensation of outrage and fury at the injustice that had oppressed women for centuries - it was no longer an ideological commitment, it had become a need. If I didn't do something - anything that I could - the anger would eat me alive! The need to make *Child* came from a similar source, but this time the element of protection and of responsibility was the physical sensation. It is of course knotted in with the Magdalena and its commitment to giving voice to women's experience in theatre. Much has happened in the eleven years of activities within the context of the Magdalena Project. It is possible to witness a growing confidence in the work women are making. For a long while we focused attention on the ways women were making theatre - the *how* as opposed to the *what*.

In the past few years I have become more concerned with the content of the performances that women are making, I am interested to understand if women's political priorities are different from men's and if

those priorities are made visible or manifest in the work that is made. Certainly, for me, the issue of children's rights and how our abuse of those rights reflects the state of mind of our society, is the issue that I most want to tackle in my work. Its apparent invisibility, in the cultural landscape or work of contemporary artists, parallels the place I found myself twelve years ago when my feminism shifted. *Child* was a need - I imagine I shall continue to explore ways of tackling these issues in the only ways I know how - in the making of theatre and the making of gatherings for others to share their theatre.

#### PART 4

While researching *Child* we were forced to re-evaluate our whole working practice. We quickly reached a point where producing the competent and powerful small scale theatre piece that we had assumed we would make in response to this subject matter, and are very capable of, was not enough, and only relevant to the extent of being the context we had chosen.

We needed to question everything, and step out to start at a point just beyond everything we knew; to really try to make a piece of work, with a life in every aspect entirely rooted in that research, rather than merely being informed by it. For whichever way we looked at it, to simply make a theatre show, to accept that as the primary task, and then hold that up as having relevance to the debate, in this situation seemed arrogant and naive.

From that point everything came up as an honest and direct, if often crude, unself-consciously self-accusing response to the subject.

We wanted the performance to have enough space, within it, to allow the spectator the time to constantly question and reassess their position in relation to both the personal, self critical material we were offering and the issues as a whole; as their individual route through the duration of the piece, personal history and point of view dictated.

The breadth and strength of reaction is largely what we expected and hoped for, both positive and critical. *Child* is a considered piece. We knew how wide open we were leaving ourselves by continuing to place it as a theatre piece while choosing to disregard a number of deeply held givens along the way; but that is still very much part of what we are trying to do. The value of that is another debate.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Susan Griffin, *The Chorus of Stones*.

2. Alice Miller - *Child Psychologist*.

3. March 1996, Thomas Hamilton opened fire on a classroom of five and six year olds, killing sixteen of them and their teacher. He then shot himself.

4. Susan Griffin, *The Chorus of Stones*.

5. Much of Part 4 has been taken from the writings and reflections of Mike Brookes, my husband, collaborator and creator of the *Child* installation, who kindly gave his permission to use his words within the context of this article.

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