

Gemma Moses

Dazed and Confused

Seeks Similar G.S.O.H. (Good Sense of Humour)

Women of my generation, who are succeeding in the media - and therefore in theory my role models - are a potent and sexual package. They are there, succeeding - working and earning huge amounts of money - but they do it by appearing in the tabloids and glossy men's magazines in Munchkin's hankies (or less), and by exposing the innermost details of their sex lives - conforming to a tired stereotype.

Do I have anything to say?
Do I?
Err...
Does my bum look big in this?
Doesn't really do much for my tits though, does it?
Are you sure about that?
What do I want to say?
Who do I think I am writing when there is nothing remarkable about me or my story, or my place in the world?
Am I a feminist?
Am I a post feminist?
What the hell is that anyway?
A guaranteed method of delivering the male?
I doubt that I am a feminist - no, really I do.
Actually - and I am sorry - but will that perfect relationship be heading my way soon? And then when/if/whatever turns up, what choices do I have to make about my life in art if I decide to have children?

Choices.

I have so many because of the freedom that my great-grandmothers and grandmothers and mothers have given me, but will I make the right ones? Nope, I can't see any answers coming at me just yet. But at least I know I am not mad and it is not just me - my friends and I angst together about them for hours. And not just my British friends - the fears are universal.

I grew up in Wales, Britain in the '80s, during a terrible recession. Unemployment peaked at over four million. AIDS took over from free love, nuclear war was a reality, and - whatever your politics - we were governed by the first British woman prime minister. She came to power before I knew what politics were, so the fact that she was the first woman was irrelevant to me.

We never questioned going without an education or earning our own living because of our sex.

We questioned whether we would work because of the economic climate; computers might make us redundant or, if we were unlucky, we wouldn't live that long anyway. Grants for college education in the arts were cut and we were told that science was the study of the future. Tory politics taught us that survival lay with the fittest, the enterprising, the economic, the Machiavellian. I am twenty-eight years old and I consider myself to be part of the Second Generation of the Magdalena Project - an international network of women working in contemporary theatre.

1998 was the 70th anniversary of women receiving the full legal right to vote in Britain. I bet very few women of my generation have actively acknowledged this anniversary, or see it as relevant to them.

And yet our grandmothers - *my* grandmothers - were the first women ever in Britain to vote, and they were part of our lives.

How can we actively deny the role that the Women's Movement has played in defining the quality of our lives?

How can we insult the work of our mentors, by disassociating from them with tired clichés that question their sexuality because of choices they have made?

We - Second Generation women - contribute to the continuing marginalisation of the work of women's groups because we enter into ingrained preconceptions of how they function and the work that they make.

The gargantuan media jungle might have some answers.

I think it is one of the most powerful and frighteningly influential tools we have created. My generation and those who come after me, are the media generations; television, magazines, radio, newspapers, advertisements, cinema and the concept of celebrity, are a sizeable chunk of our daily intake.

Television has been used through-out our lives as a time of rest for us and for our parents. How many children are put in front of a television to give their parents a break? The talking box in the corner of our living room influences us far more than we will ever know. Our dialogue is interspersed with phrases and intonations we have subconsciously taken on board from television and magazines. The dictionary defines yearly new words leaked into our culture from the "box".

Women of my generation, who are succeeding in the media - and therefore in theory my role models - are a potent and sexual package. They are there, succeeding - working and earning huge amounts of money - but they do it by appearing in the tabloids and glossy men's magazines in Munchkin's hankies (or less), and by exposing the innermost details of their sex lives - conforming to a tired stereotype.

Apparently this behaviour is a post feminist, post modernist ironic statement.

Pardon????

These are the most confusing and mixed messages to try to read and understand: be successful, but be prepared to exploit your most basic assets?

Or play the game to win?

Or play the buggers (Media Moguls) at their own game, be a *ladette*!

This incarnation of a '90s woman is a response to the regeneration of the lad - slang for young man. The '90s - in Britain at least - has witnessed a backward pendulum swing in the sexual revolution. Men are attempting to reassert their masculinity, as they recognise power slipping from their grasp. The lad is a manifestation of this; a young man who doesn't question his sexual allure to the opposite sex (he is never gay). He is young and upwardly mobile - with an expendable income, an interest in sport (particularly soccer), beer and nicotine,

recreational drugs (with the occasional class "A") and soft porn.

To be a *ladette* is to be able to talk adequately about soccer, drink more beer than a boy, and actively enjoy/participate in "soft" porn. A *ladette*/female lad maintains (and this is very important) her feminine sexual allure with a particular focus (zoom focus actually) on pert, polished, visible breasts. A large number of the successful female British television celebrities, in their twenties, are *ladettes*.

To succeed as a woman is to be a woman being a man.

Why not be a woman succeeding as a woman?

"Girl Power" is global. If only they (the Spice Girls) understood what they were talking about, it would make such a difference. Teenagers, pre-pubescents and I hear the message: "Yeah, girl power, right, it's about doing what you want, when you want, yeah, right."

Yeah, right.

In fact, what we are presented with is five (now four) '90s stereotypes of what men want. We have the one who is always done up in the clingy designer number; the one who gets what she wants by pretending to be a little girl; the exotic in animal prints; the one who wears trainers and likes football; and the one who wanted fame so badly she stripped for photo shoots - also the "intellectual".

They absolutely fascinate me. They are a phenomenon. They are the most successful British band since the Beatles.

Their success is amazing. Their presence has helped bring more women into the pop industry (a notoriously male world) and they have taken control of their own business. But, their random, un-thought-through statements and actions, are nonsensical and

they don't understand the power that they have. They don't write their own material (a man does), they really aren't good enough to sustain long careers and they don't have the capacity to see that they are one-dimensional.

Certainly something that isn't one dimensional about me is my breasts.

The first incarnation of this article was about bras. I love them. I could never imagine burning my bra. Talking about bras seemed to me to trivialise what I wanted to say, but I can't leave home without one, it is the first thing that I put on in the morning, so it deserves its place. I see a burnt bra as a symbol of the freedom and equality sought by the instigators of the Women's Movement. It must have been very uncomfortable for them once all of their bras had gone.

My girl friends and I exchange bras as gifts; a woman who knows you will buy you something lacy, indulgent and sexy. Wonderbras really are wonderful, they enhance the "symbol" of your female form and a woman's first time in a wonderbra will always result in squeals of shock, disgust and delight.

We have chosen to love the thing that others before us have found to be a symbol of their incarceration.

Is this our post feminist, post modernist, ironic statement?

I talk about bras in a flippant and silly way, slightly embarrassed and blushing. I am British and I am talking about sex. Par for the course.

I understand the theory, but I am confused by the choices I have made.

My bra helps me to improve my shape, and that needs all the help that it can get. My arse is enormous, my thighs the diameter of the Eiffel Tower and my stomach resembles the early-to-mid-stages of pregnancy. Some mornings I can't look in the mirror and all my clothes are wrong. I hate my shape and

the roundness of my face. I assume that my perception of my body affects how others see me and I attribute any part of my life that fails to the whale looking back at me from the wall.

When I was sixteen/seventeen, I suffered from bulimia/anorexia.

I would exercise for an hour before school, avoid breakfast, throw away my lunch, come home, exercise for a further two hours and then sometimes throw up a perfectly healthy meal. I felt fantastic.

At the time, I believed I was really in control of my life.

I was an academic success, a real high achiever, the life and soul of the party, boasting how my clothes hung off me - and the opposite sex and I *really* discovered each other. My illness was not because of my family life - that was always stable and very loving, let me make that clear.

For me, the obsession with my weight is about control and success.

To be overweight is to be out of control, hurtling down a spiral to failure or, worse, mediocrity.

I say I am an intelligent woman.

Yet I did this - do this - to my body?

Can I attribute some blame to the pert, the coifed, lithe, sexy and the bold on the box?

- throughout all the media?

Successful women; success = thin.

At twenty-eight I am still tortured and obsessed by my weight.

I suppose I will always be.

Bugger.

As the New Year approaches I resolve to swim more and gym more. But I am afraid of repeating what happened to me when I was younger.

Afraid to lose weight.

Locked in a loop of continual mediocrity - out-sized jumpers on a bad day, clothes bought but never had the confidence to

wear, days without mirrors, days without food.

No, no, really it's fine, I am better.

It is not a remarkable story. Which is what makes it so distressing.

I would say that there really are only one or two women of my age and my acquaintance who have not suffered from an eating disorder in some way and are content with their body image.

On a recent trip to Argentina (a place I found difficult to be comfortable in as a large European, amongst the svelte Latin beauties) to work with women of the Second Generation Magdalena, I was absolutely stunned by a conversation I had with young women aged seventeen to twenty-six from Uruguay. We were talking about anorexia. I made the comment that many of my female friends had at varying times suffered from eating disorders. They categorically denied that they or their friends were influenced by projected images of thin women. Yet, there they were rake-like, denying themselves meals and complaining that the stomachs we saw as concave were overwhelmingly large. If they are not already ill, I believe they might soon be.

In the theatre, that most competitive of worlds, the thinner woman will be chosen for work.

Fact.

But if we make a stand against this, we will be the ones with no work - the thing we learned to fear in our youth.

Have we really made so little progress?

Or are we living out The Iron Lady's dream of the Machiavellian, of the survival of the fittest?

Are we recreating the mould before we break it again?

Are we just being really conniving and using our feminine wiles to get what we want?

In Britain, *Bridget Jones* is a fictional, late

'90s icon. She began as a cult newspaper column, and then became a best selling book. She is a professional woman in her mid-thirties trying to define her place in our culture. She is confused. She weighs herself every day, hoping to be slimmer; she changes her career weekly and has a disastrous love life (I thank God I am not alone, I breathe again). She is obsessed by a man called Mister Darcy, and this is no coincidence. One of the most successful television programmes of the '90s in this country, (again the media) and Britain's all time favourite book is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Women want the crinoline and courting of Jane Austen's world too. As a foil to a brash go-getting life we are looking for a time when we were able to play a gentler kind of game; to be demure and knowing, intelligent and witty, but alluring all the same. As we become more and more exposed to the world and its potential for us in it, so we crave for the xenophobic nature of a village lifestyle where the problems are small, and surmountable. Mr. Darcy is an arrogant, snobbish man, but in *Pride and Prejudice* we assume that he will look after Elizabeth and be her problem solver. But Austen never deals with the happy ever after, nor do we and nor does Bridget.

Is it really too hard for us to function independently?
Are we really that dazed and confused?
Do we really want responsibility to be taken away from us, so we can simply become mannequins and breeding mares?
God I hope not.
But sometimes when it all seems too hard - yes I do.
I can see that in reality I am an independent woman with a priority for her professional well being, but oh for the Beautiful Man on his white charger to take me away from my bills and responsibilities.

I can see that without the Women's Movement, I wouldn't have a voice, but I can also see my position historically.

These are early days.

I can see that we are trying to function in a political, social, economic, and business construct that has been created by men, for men. There are centuries to be undone. I understand business men who say that given the choice they would employ a man rather than a woman for the sake of business (even though she has equal or even superior qualifications) because of the time and money they would lose should she decide to have a family and need maternity leave.

I understand it: I find it appalling.

I belong to the Second Generation. The rag tag-bag of women - who don't have the anger.

We are all as equally bemused; we huddle together, nervous in our journey.

We can't define why we make work about women - if we make work for women (one wonders often if it is just that women turn up on the day) - and, when the topic is debated, we haven't got an answer.

These women all question what feminism is to them; each of them has as many questions as I have.

I try to define my place - justify my place, if I'm honest.

I really value the time that I spend with my female friends and take pleasure in the company of women. I am very lucky - I have a group of female friends that are as close to me now, as they were when I was five. Together we have shared experience, the trials of growing up and of defining our place in the world. We have been through broken hearts, a thousand unfit outfits at the start of outrageous nights out together. We have

at times been mother, nursemaid, counsellor and enemy to each other. Each of these women is very different and has chosen a very different path. A doctor, a nurse, a clinical psychologist, a teacher, a PA, a woman with her own business, an architect, a carer, a props manager, a mother and I enjoy each other's company, and laugh a lot. A lot.

I try to translate into my work the unique sense of community, stability and sheer pleasure that these women have given my life.

Fertile, fun, inventive, creative, insane, and, my God, we have laughed.

When I have been with women of the Second Generation in Wales or in Argentina, we laughed a lot.

We are trying to define a support mechanism for ourselves that will allow us to be dazed and confused and question ourselves - a lot - but together.

Who knows if we are feminist and frankly who cares?

We make work, we enjoy the work and we are becoming our own community. The thing that we have in common and keeps propelling us forward is the fact that we are female.

The young networks are governed by a higher force that manipulates us and dictates how we should be to succeed: thin, blond, malleable. Young women in British theatre work largely in solo performances or pit against each other for jobs: survival of the fittest. I spent the early part of my twenties as an actress in London. I'd trained for years. I was a disaster: short, brown hair, fat. I changed my professional ambitions.

I want to help change the climate for those who find themselves without support in the arts, those who glaze over at the sight of the whale in the mirror, those who volunteer

their meals to their toilets, those who contemplate going under the surgeon's knife or director's penis to succeed.

I believe that it is not just me that thinks that they are on their own without support. It can't just be me - it isn't just me.

I have hope that women will respond to the support and advice that I can offer them, that we can offer each other, the way I responded to the incredible support I got from the first generation of Magdalena women in Britain.

It was a revelation.

It has made me stronger. Most of the time.

Some of the time.

I want to do this despite the maze and the daze.

Whatever kind of a woman I am, however many contradictions I struggle with - and however bad my arse looks in the mirror - I will keep plugging away at those nagging questions.

GEMMA MOSES (Wales) was born in Swansea in 1971. She trained as a performer, but arrived at the Magdalena Project on a bursary to study Arts Administration. She stayed on to organise projects like *Performing Words* and *Raw Visions*. In 1998 Gemma co-founded Penelope Flowers, an arts project based in Swansea giving a platform to emerging artists living and working in that area.