



Jill Greenhalgh Women in Red

I have had a long relationship to the name of Mary Magdalene - a figure; an archetype; a Christian symbol. A woman in red.

...Young girls should not wear red.

In some countries, it is the colour of death; in others passion, in others war, in others anger in others sacrifice

of shed blood. A girl should be a veil, a white shadow, bloodless as a moon on water; not dangerous; she should

keep silent and avoid red shoes, red stockings, dancing. Dancing in red shoes will kill you.¹

Throughout my twenties, I had a pattern of daily activity.

My days were filled with my passion for theatre making as a member of the Cardiff Laboratory Theatre. We started with early morning training, followed by ensemble work and rehearsals. To earn enough to live on, I would then work in a bar from six p.m. to eleven thirty p.m. It was a busy place full of men drinking heavily. I enjoyed the safe place behind the bar, busy and untouchable but still

1. Margaret Atwood, *A Red Shirt*

a centre of attention. Then, wide awake and buzzing, I would go, often alone, to a notorious late night club in Cardiff's docklands, a haven of drug dealing, criminal low lives and good music. It had a huge dance floor and I would dance for hours - sometimes the only person on the dance floor, sometimes part of a swirling mass of bodies - and I loved it - really loved it.

I was known as "Dancer" (which needs to be pronounced with a strong Cardiff accent to reveal its true significance). I played dangerous flirting games, and kissed many frogs that rarely transformed into princes. I was no *coquette*; I despised girls who minced around their handbags, hiding behind layers of make up and shoes they could not even walk in - let alone dance. I displayed myself overtly, fearlessly and, it might be said, naively placed myself in danger. When I look back, I can see how close I went to an edge and now with daughters of my own, I dread to imagine them taking the same risks.

Next morning I would be up early again to make theatre and the Magdalene came too. In the development of performance personas through the early years of my practice - the figure of the Maria Magdalena was a location from which I embarked on new creative journeys. She was constantly "there" in some manifestation: a muse, a point of reference, a guide - perhaps. I adopted her as a symbol of untamed womanhood and made her central to my creative life initially, I believe, to catalyse an overly simplistic analysis of my uncontrolled sexuality and distorted romantic aspirations. I was young and seeking a mate.

I am not a religious person but I have always been fascinated by the stories in the Bible and I have come to view the *New Testament* as the narrative upon which western moral code and socio-cultural structure is built.

Christianity is arguably the deepest flowing defining influence upon our "western" system of behaviour.

During the first centuries following Christ's crucifixion, many laid claim to being the true authority on his teachings. Finally in the 4th century A.D. the convert Emperor Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire and the "official" version of the gospels was established in the Treaty of Constantine. The new Church of Rome decreed that only those writings that had the stamp of "apostolicity" - the authority of Peter and Paul, could form part of the scriptural canon. It was then that all "other" testaments of Christ's teachings were deemed heretical, and, over time, dissenting voices and writings were systematically silenced or burned. Thus, to fit the political expediency of the day, what remains is, inevitably, a distorted record of events and relationships. The testaments of Mary Magdalene disappeared, along with others, leaving the now received notion of her part in the story of Christ related, not in her own words, but by others, predominantly men.

The orthodox perception of the figure of the Magdalene places her as the fallen woman whose soul is redeemed by a higher fleshless love, the woman who weeps, forever, for the sins she has committed. She represents the weak-willed sinner woman, whose rampant animal sexuality must be controlled, lest it tempts good men from the righteous path. Forgive my cynicism. The Magdalene was sanctified as the symbol of redemption through eternal penitence and her depicted iconography, through centuries, has been one of the most powerful propaganda tools for maintaining the subordination of the implicit nature of the female. As Susan Haskins writes, "Mary Magdalene has, like the women she represents, been the scapegoat of ecclesiastic institution, manipulated, controlled and, above all, misrepresented".²

My obsession with the figure of Mary Magdalene began in the early 1980s, at an intimate dinner with a man who had just refused my, rather flippant, offer of marriage. To change the subject, I asked him what he knew about Mary Magdalene. He went to his bookcase and took down a copy of Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*. "Lots about her in there", he said.

I read the novel and it triggered the release of an intricate pathway of associations that have fed my imagination and intellectual curiosity since.

Early in the book, we have learned that Jesus and Mary were betrothed childhood sweethearts. As they grow up, Jesus begins to hear the voice of God and, despite his passion for Mary, he abandons her to his call. Years later, racked with guilt, he returns to ask her forgiveness, not for leaving but for turning her into the woman, he has heard she has become. One particular passage describes Mary, a queen of prostitutes, residing in her brothel at the crossroads of many countries (I always imagine it as Byzantium) being fucked by the whole world - queues of men outside her door, from every country imaginable - waiting their turn to relieve themselves. Jesus places himself in the queue and waits his turn. When he arrives in her rooms, she screams, "You... Why are you here? I don't want to see you... in order to forget one man... I've surrendered my body to all men."

This abandonment and her response caused a strong resonance in me and with an obsession now ignited, I read everything I could lay my hands on that referred to Mary Magdalene. I filled notebooks. I studied paintings of her, of which there are thousands, and I began to interpret the symbolism

held within them from the basis of a personal, emotional and psychological reality and in deliberate transgression of the orthodox distortions. I gave myself wide poetic licence and only employed scholarly reference when it fed my imagination and purpose. The Magdalene I discovered is far more interesting than a lifeless image of impotent womanhood. Some "heretics" say: she was the closest companion of Christ, they were lovers, even married; some say the disciples lived from her wealth, built on her earnings as a prostitute - the other half of the story.

One of my most exciting findings was the Gnostic Gospels. An Arab peasant discovered them in an urn under a rock in Upper Egypt near a town known as Nag Hammadi, in 1945. The urn was full of books and loose papyrus which he took home and placed by the family oven. Much of the loose papyrus was tragically burnt, but the rest eventually found its way to the Museum in Cairo where it was then identified as a Coptic Gnostic library buried sometime around A.D. 400. The manuscripts, it is presumed, were hidden because of their heretical nature during the period I alluded to earlier. The documents reveal a distinct Christian thought, belief and interpretation. Within these texts, which are often tantalisingly mystic and elusive, the role of women is far more relevant and prominent. The women are clearly portrayed as disciples of Christ and of equal rank to the men. Some of the most remarkable writings are those identified as the gospel according to Mary; and the figure that emerges is clearly very different from the conventional interpretations to which we are accustomed. This, of course, further fuelled my obsession and legitimised aspects of my imagined constructs.

Collating personal, orthodox and "so-called" heretical, literary and mystical

2. Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, Harper Collins, 1994.

evidence on Mary Magdalene has revealed a mass of contradistinctions of interpretation of her role in our story of Christ. Perhaps I am enacting just another distortion of history, to fit my contemporary consciousness, but the more I delve, the more my exploitation evolves beyond her signifying simply a figure of liberated female sexuality. She has emerged as a representative of the complexities of my political and feminist concerns. She became a symbol of the silencing of womanhood, and the essential nature of womanhood - the silenced story, the other side of the story. The female side of the story which, remaining untold and unassimilated, allowed the rise of unbalanced and repressive social structures.

The silencing of the authentic story of the Magdalene became a symbol of the perpetual lie. The burial of the words and experience of this woman is the lie, the political and religious stratagem, that soon became a bedrock of the patriarchal misogyny that has since perpetrated 2000 years of western history.

And perhaps, the most virile distortion is the undermining of the Magdalene's role as first, and chosen, witness to the resurrection, arguably the most potent of Christian symbols. Simply, the Jewish social structure of the day could not allow a woman to testify as sole witness to an event of this magnitude, whether the actual event was real or metaphorical.

Men said: "I have it. In the beginning there was the Word. I will tell a fabulous lie so often and with such force that everyone will believe it. Soon, no-one will even notice the deception".³

The first of many manifestations of the symbol of the Magdalene emerged in my work in the Cardiff Laboratory Theatre

performance, *The Heart of the Mirror* (1981). The performance investigated notions of a state, religious and pornographic patriarchy. It employed the figure of Freud and his professional relationship with the poet H.D. as the narrative foundation to explore the distortions of female archetype. The "whore" role came my way, as did the role of Lilith, who preceded Eve as the first wife of Adam. Lilith left Adam because she did not want to be the one lying "underneath". It is said of Lilith that she will dance in the eventual ruins of humanity.

The process of creating this problematic performance took its toll on our company and resulted in the members dispersing soon after its completion. But as the laws of decay dictate, this dissolution gave impulse to a number of innovative new performance structures. Two new companies were founded, Man Act and Intimate Strangers, individuals moved on to contexts in which they created some of their best work; and the Magdalena Project was initiated.

The Magdalena Festival in Cardiff in 1986 was divided into two phases. In week one, we presented a public programme of performances and workshops. In weeks two and three, we closed the doors and we worked together. Thirty-five women theatre practitioners from eighteen different countries - the idea being that we would create a collaborative performance to culminate the three weeks. The collaboration and the resulting performance were more or less an embarrassing disaster; but the process housed some extraordinary moments and meetings fueling the future of the Project.

At the turn of Jolanta Krukowska of Akademia Ruchu (Poland) to lead a morning workshop, she introduced the "square

3. Phyllis Chesler, *About Men*, The Women's Press, 1978.

dance", a simple and very effective structure for group improvisation in which the rules require the participants to traverse the space, in straight lines, only ever changing direction at right angles. There are no other instructions. Half of the practitioners watched, the other half worked. The simplicity of the exercise soon releases the mischief of boredom, the breaking of the rules. Someone making an almost inaudible whispered calling of "Magdalena" first corrupted the structure. The match was struck and the fire ignited. The improvisation involving seventeen performers erupted into a summoning evocation of "Magdalena Magdalena Magdalena". The witnesses of this improvisation were holding their stomachs, rolling on the floor, crying with laughter, which served only to spiral the creative mischief of those working. I could not presume to propose that this hour long experience was anything but a timely and extraordinary release of tension and it would be pretentious to graft any artistic significance onto this event; but it was an undeniably enjoyable celebration, and perhaps, a vindication of the name from which the Project was being given life.

In 1992, I directed a performance entitled *Midnight Level 6* taking the story of the Magdalene and women in love as the springboard themes for collaboration with twelve women performers. The idea for this production impregnated itself the very morning after the final day of the Magdalena '86 Festival, as I approached a red traffic light on my way to work. I don't know where it came from but it would not go away.

I struggled for six years to raise the money for the production and it was only in defiant rage that the performance was finally realised. It was well received and enjoyed modest tours in Britain and Europe. However, it was the process of making the

work that was most rewarding and personally transforming.

In wanting to attract performers who were interested in a collaborative process on these themes, I decided to advertise in the theatre papers. I received more than three hundred letters from women inspired by the notion of the opportunity and imploring to be involved. I still have these letters because, for me, they represent yet another vibrant call; evidence of the desire of women to enter segregated environments to confront their concerns and artistic obsessions.

As the process evolved, the performers each explored their own interpretation of the Magdalene; their work revealed a wealth of concrete images, ideas and co-relatives; connections that I had never imagined and to which I had the privilege of being the first spectator. I believe it was work that could have fuelled prolific performance research but for the reality of financial constraint; and although we touched only a surface of the well of potential in the theme, it was a process of collective personification of Mary Magdalene

At a moment in the process, a new figure appeared. We needed to acknowledge and name Lynette White. She was a young prostitute who was violently murdered in Cardiff docklands on Valentine's Day 1986. Her body was found a stone's throw from the club where I danced.

While we were rehearsing, three men were on trial for her murder (they were later released; her killers have never been identified). In all the newspaper coverage she was known only as the Cardiff Prostitute, and never by her name.

With the benefit of hindsight, I ask myself what I wanted to achieve with this production and what was driving me to complete it? I think it was a very personal excavation. I needed to shed my embodiment of the Magdalene; give witness to the

interpretations of others and, with the objective distance of a director, sculpt the diverse forms into a whole that represented the haunting obsessions that had followed me for years. I wonder if it was a process of exorcism, a tool to dig new pathways, a process of transformation. I don't know if it was co-incidence or consequence but during the final rehearsals of this piece, after such a long and arduous labour, I met the love of my life and became a mother very soon afterwards.

I had found my mate. And since this time, I have made performances that address very different concerns, political rather than personal. Concretely constructing a realisation of my obsessions resulted in a welcome personal transformation. Or maybe it was just age, motherhood and marriage that were the cause. Either way I moved on.

I still wear red on occasions, I should wear it more often. It is the colour of the resurrection of the voice of women, of provocation and provocative women, of staying out late, laughing and drinking with female friends, of freedom of choice and of naming the forgotten. I will dress my daughters in red whenever they ask.

In conclusion, what fascinates me, is that a buried truth or story will eventually re-surface, as though a natural law dictates that nothing can be repressed forever. The Magdalena is an archetype, a mythological figure in the truest sense. Her story re-emerges, century after century in new guises and each time insists that we re-evaluate the representation of the female.

Whenever I am asked why the name

"Magdalena Project", I say: "Oh, because I had a deadline, it was the only thing I could think of." This is true, but only one side of a truth. The depth at which her story eludes, but still pumps through the veins of western culture; and the imperative that her story be revived in her own words is the other side to the truth of this choice.

JILL GREENHALGH (Britain) is a producer, director, performer and teacher. In 1986 she founded the Magdalena Project and has remained its artistic director since. Her current performance work includes different groups of women performers across the globe, and *Las Sin Tierra - 7 attempted crossings of the Straits of Gibraltar* with Nomad Theatre of Spain, in collaboration with Mike Brookes. She has recently taken up the post of Lecturer in Performance Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. She is married and has two young daughters.