

# Dawn Albinger

## The Heroin(e)

*Oh poor me. Look: how hard is my life?  
No one knows how hard it is to be the wife of a junkie. Oh poor  
me. I can't leave the house. What if he comes home and has a  
moment of weakness? It happens all the time. I find little  
coloured balloons in his pockets, antiseptic swabs in-between  
cushions, needles in his bag. I find these things when I am  
cleaning. I clean all the time. What if he is weak? And this time  
I come home to find him dead on the bathroom floor?  
These are old concerns. I can leave the house now.*

Notes from the heroin(e) project

After hosting the Magdalena Australia festival, and losing funding for my theatre ensemble's next show, *the Quivering*, my first impulse in reflecting on theatre and struggle has been to lament the lack of money needed to make good things happen. I wrestle with the business side of making theatre. I strive against an inherently careless nature to reveal detail, to find form. I am inhabited by a stubborn seven-year-old who loves to throw my body around and make funny sounds. She hates doing my tax return. She loves it when I decide with my heart and my waters. We are both disinterested in being rational. Eight times I have started to write this article and eight times I have found myself harping on the same topic in tones heavy and despondent. Yet I resist revisiting the topic of financial viability and sustainability because experience has shown me that making theatre is enormously challenging wherever one is in the world. To write about it, without having some brilliant new perspective or potential solution, feels like sour grapes.

There is something else I need to acknowledge about theatre and struggle, something beneath the endless funding rounds and corporate seductions, beneath the wrestle to turn up to the work and engage physically and perceptually with ideas and impulses, something fundamental about why I choose to make theatre at all. It is something about giving voice to things difficult to say.

*The second comment  
was made to me by a friend  
who told me how brave  
and strong I was  
to remain with my  
heroin-addicted husband.  
I was a heroine. In the silence  
between her words  
I heard something else,  
something about relief, about  
my being a buffer  
between the addict and  
everyone else.*

It is easy to assume, as a white western woman, that I confidently exercise my right to free speech. But this happens more rarely than one would suppose. It is much easier to be outspoken amongst those who love me and whose acceptance is assumed. More difficult to slip the subtle bonds of good behaviour ("don't upset the apple-cart", "if you can't say anything good don't say anything at all", "walk a mile in the other person's shoes") and speak my truth amongst strangers. When I do, I receive all manner of responses. The ones that interest me the most are the ones who say, "You can't say that", or "I wouldn't have thought a girl like you..." or who simply change the subject. If I experience struggle, then, it is a struggle against certain kinds of silence. Out of these silences small works are conceived, carried and ultimately delivered.

*the chrysalid* grew from silencing by past lovers; *ruthless* from three decades of silence surrounding my grandmother's story; and *the Quivering* (for me) from the embarrassed silence that met my grief for a dying friend.

Now I am working on another solo project. There have been many impulses for this work, but a major one has been silence of another kind, a loud silence. A silence so full of words I initially mistook it for discourse. But the words proved to be a kind of propaganda, pushing a simplistic and singular view, silencing authentic voices and difficult, differing perspectives.

Four years ago Australian mainstream media began to cover stories on heroin addiction: editorials and exposés, interviews with street kids and distraught parents, letters to the editor, articles condemning doctors who illegally insert naltrexone implants into the abdomens of desperate addicts. Our Prime Minister, John Howard, lobbed into the fray and delivered to every household in Australia a puerile tract



Dawn Albinger in *the Quivering*.  
Photo: Suzon Fuks

advising parents how to talk to their children about drugs. The "War Against Drugs" was declared and we were all encouraged to enlist.

When the stories and profiles first hit the press I was excited. Something we all

knew to exist yet never spoke of was being publicly discussed. Months before I had struck my angry poet soapbox stance at a few local gigs and felt very topical. But I soon grew perturbed as months wore on and patterns emerged. The stories in the press all had the same plot and characters: all addicts were criminals or lost children, evil or helpless, incapable of taking meaningful decisions for themselves and ultimately dead on the street. Nowhere did I read a story that resonated with my own experience of being close to a heroin addict. Nowhere did I read or hear anything that talked of the wider issues of addiction and dependency in a mature and meaningful way.

During that time two comments were made that reinforced my impulse to break the shame-induced silence surrounding addicts and those close to them. I met a woman who, after a personal disclosure, was stunned and said, "I never would have thought a nice girl like you would have such an experience". As though being nice is its very own protection. I thought: "She can only say this because nice people are not talking about their experiences." The second comment was made to me by a friend who told me how brave and strong I was to remain with my heroin-addicted husband. I was a heroine. In the silence between her words I heard something else, something about relief, about my being a buffer between the addict and everyone else. Somehow my role as heroine absolved her from engaging with something un-pretty and tiresome. I feel compelled to give words to the silence and to respond to what is un-said.

And so I am making *the heroin(e) project*. Struggling, in fact, to do so. It is easier to reflect on the impulses than to make the

work. Hosting Magdalena Australia was a wonderful distraction. And ongoing ensemble work to devise *the Quivering* often overwhelms other creative impulses. I have called this work "my un-becoming solo" because my resistance to making it is often as strong as the need. This is one way I know there is work to do here. A friend and colleague recently sent me a provocation:

*Woman-ly heroism is not the same anywhere as its man-ly counterpart. (Typically it has more to do with endurance than agency.)*

It has captured my imagination and I find myself on the floor with a tissue box as my sole companion, throwing my body through simple choreographies and making funny sounds. My internal seven year-old self is delighted. I am *going where the pleasure is*,<sup>1</sup> slipping good behaviour bonds and saying what I want.

DAWN ALBINGER (Australia) is a writer, actor, and founding ensemble member of Sacred Cow. Among projects that have been presented at La Boite Theatre's Newboards Festival, The Adelaide Fringe Festival, Woodford Folk Festival and Metro Arts Solo Smarts Season are *the chrysalid* (1998), *ruthless* (1999), and *the heroin(e) project* (2002 as a work in progress). Dawn is also Artistic Director of the Magdalena Australia, which held its inaugural festival at the Brisbane Powerhouse, April 6-16, 2003.

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1. Margaret Cameron, Text and Choreography workshop, hosted by Magdalena Australia, Brisbane, August 2003.