



**TO WOMEN WITH BIG  
EYES**

**Helen Varley**

**Jamieson**

**Maria Porter**

**Gabriella Sacco**

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Photo: Rossella Viti

# To Women With Big Eyes

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## Helen Varley Jamieson Letters-in-Freedom

What happens when letters detach from the safe mooring of words and are set adrift on a beam of light? What does each letter gain, and what does it lose, from this freedom? Ordered into words and sentences, letters make stories. But when the process is reversed, the story doesn't completely disappear. A word or a letter on its own is a fragment of many stories, impregnated with memories and contexts that we may or may not know. Like water, letters have memory. Every letter contains the potential for every story, just as every drop of water contains the potential of the ocean. Each letter is a drop of story.

*A letter*

*the letter A  
a sigh,  
the sign of the sound of A*

*A appears*

*here  
and there*

*and here*

*A for Absence*

*as it vanishes into an open mouth*

*A for Appear*

*as it does - solid, magic,  
from her lips*

*A for an Action.*

### **LETTERS OF LIGHT**

*Women with Big Eyes* is a whole lot of letters arranged into words arranged into sentences by Angeles Mastretta to tell a story about stories. *Women with Big Eyes* is also the name of an

ongoing collaboration involving women of the Magdalena Project. We aren't telling Mastretta's story-of-stories in our project, but we took it as a starting point for our own patchwork of stories and so it permeates our work.

The first *Women with Big Eyes* session was held in 2007 during the Transit 5 Festival, which had the theme *Stories to be told*. There were nine of us in this group<sup>1</sup> which was an experiment, really, to see what might happen if these Magdalena women - who had known each other for a long time and had organised festivals and events but never created work together - were put in a room to make a performance together. We all read Mastretta's story beforehand and came armed with material from our own lives, little pieces of our own stories. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I had my tools (computer, data projector, web cam) and some costume items: a beautiful long black velvet evening gown that had been given to me the day before I left New Zealand for the Festival; an ostrich feather fan I had purchased *en route* in London; and a black bowler hat belonging to Sally Rodwell. Sally and her daughter Ruby should have been part of the group, but sadly Sally had taken her own life three months earlier, suffering from unbearable depression since the sudden death of her husband in 2002. Her bowler hat, along with a dress belonging to the Chilean poet María Canepa who had also died in 2006, brought the stories of these two women into *Women with Big Eyes*. Everyone's material - movement sequences, songs, characters, costumes and objects - came with the aroma of its own story. We spent the first day sharing our material, laying it all out like a theatrical flea market and admiring what we had.

The next day we took turns to lead the group in exercises and games around the

proffered ideas and material, drawing on our own particular training or style of making theatre. As I have a fascination with the deconstruction of text(s), for my turn I photocopied and enlarged Mastretta's story then cut it up into phrases and words. These slips of paper were spread out on a table and I invited everyone to make their own stories out of the pieces. We moved around the table, changing a word here, a phrase there, rearranging and recycling words and letters into new stories. For a long quiet time the stories morphed and mutated on the table. Later, some of these phrases would appear as words of light that floated across the wall in the performance, while others fell apart completely and dripped down the wall as single, slippery letters.

Over the next days we tried out ideas - shaping, going back, discarding, experimenting. Not everything involved text, but from the beginning letters had a strong presence in the work: we wrote messages on strips of paper which were tied to a dead tree branch and set alight, and Cristina Castrillo produced an alphabet of coloured plastic letters with which we played various games. There were also songs, texts, writing with water, and physical scores. We created a presentation which wove together many different strands without being dominated by a single one. We were not interested in creating a narrative, but many in the audience would find stories in the performance. We offered hints, traces, residue of stories from which they could imagine their own. I made truncated phrases, backwards handwriting and elusive letters that slid out of reach - small particles of story, atoms, drops of water. The plastic letters became a road which snaked across the stage and when walked on, disintegrated into a crunchy scatter of loose letters. These liberated letters of plastic and light, along with the words, actions and

costumes of the performers, were signifiers of an ocean of stories that lay beneath the surface of the performance.

In January 2008 the *Women with Big Eyes* group met again at the Magdalena Sin Fronteras Festival in Santa Clara, Cuba. Only Charlotte Nightingale was unable to be there - and five more joined the group.<sup>2</sup> Our aim was to build on what we had created the year before, so we began by watching a video of the Transit performance and then discussed what was important to keep and what didn't work or could be discarded. We had little time so this process was necessarily one of swift decision-making. Some of the group had brought new proposals, such as music, movement, and for my part I had come with a piece of flexible mirror. I had begun to experiment with this during 2007 and was intrigued by its potential for moving, distorting and transforming projected text. I had dissected the story into its component words and letters the year before, now I wanted to crack open individual letters and explore the shapes and structures beneath the familiar surface.

We incorporated the video from the first performance by projecting it onto the back of Geddy Aniksdal's grey coat, and as she walked away from the projector, the moving image grew to fill the back wall of the space. Charlotte, now present-yet-absent, negotiated the road of plastic letters (also absent from this second presentation) down Geddy's back and the memory of the first performance flooded the space. Key elements were recreated, with changes: the table, glasses and chairs where several performers had sat became a smaller table with a single chair and glass for Bruna Gusberti, who wore María's dress as she had before; the skeletal dead tree became a lush green-leaved bush; the road of plastic letters became a flowing river of letters of light. We

kept Julia Varley's whispered secrets and singing string, and added Geddy's burning book, but this time we didn't have Sally's hat for her to wear. Free-flying letters broke away from the river of words to dart and dance across the walls, floor and ceiling, morphing into ghostly smears then abruptly crystal clear, as the performers tried in vain to catch them. But it was the letters that caught Cristina, stamped across her back like a burn, and a glowing A slid into her open mouth and was swallowed. Later she spat it out, transformed into a plastic A from the previous road of letters.

During the course of the performance, letters glowed, burned, chased and dissolved; letters were spoken, sung, written, swallowed and regurgitated; there were letters on the walls, floor, ceiling, costumes, bare skin and the leaves of a tree, and in a glass of water. In the small space with eight performers and their voices and actions, this textual cacophony was contrasted with moments of stillness. Finally, Bruna poured water slowly into her glass, overflowing and spilling onto the floor, while Meg Brookes' voice sang hauntingly from the darkness.

*Women with Big Eyes* was a new performance in Cuba, but it was built on the work done the year before and it resonated with that memory. The layers created by the previous performance and the multitude of stories that fed into it, along with the layers of video, live performers, their silhouettes, and the projected text, gave the performance a depth and complexity that made it hard to believe we had created it in such a short space of time.

## LETTERS AS PERFORMANCE

It is almost one hundred years since letters first appeared in paintings (beyond the artist's signature) and the Futurist leader and poet Filippo Marinetti coined the

phrase "words-in-freedom", calling for the liberation of the word from the syntax of speech. Text was already performing as inter-titles in silent films, and in theatre letters began to appear in the set designs of the Futurists, Constructivists and Dadaists. As movies became talkies, visual text disappeared from the cinema (apart from the credits) at the same time as becoming more visible in certain forms of theatre, such as Brecht's use of placards. Now, text has come alive in the form of hypertext - dynamic electronic text - and mobile phone texting is generating a whole new form of writing.

Letters play an important part in my cyberperformance<sup>3</sup> practice: performers and audience interact with each other via text chat, indulging in puns, typos and trans-language word play. In UpStage<sup>4</sup>, I have been experimenting with projecting the real-time chat text onto my body and then re-presenting it within the performance as a web cam image. We can make text float around the virtual stage, appearing as speech bubbles, thought bubbles or independent letters or words, and we can create avatars in the form of animated letters. In this way, cyberperformance facilitates the performance of text, or "the enactment of text" as Antoinette LaFarge, director of the Plaintext Players, described it when her company was performing in text-only internet environments in the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> My experiments with letters of light in *Women with Big Eyes* is an extension of this exploration of letters as performance in cyberspace.

I am interested in what happens when these letters-in-freedom disengage from the story and set off on their own journey. How might a luminous bouncing O or a flying A be received by an audience? Will they catch a whiff of myriad stories past in the droplet?

1. Participants in the first *Women with Big Eyes* (2007) were Jill Greenhalgh, Charlotte Nightingale, Julia Varley, Gabriella Sacco, Geddy Aniksdal, Vibeke Lie, Cristina Castrillo, Bruna Gusberti and Helen Varley Jamieson.
2. Gilly Adams, Roxana Pineda, Luciana Bazzo, Zoe Hammond Green and Malin Bratlie.
3. Cyberformance is live performance that brings remote performers together via the internet.
4. UpStage is a web-based environment for live online performance: [www.upstage.org.nz](http://www.upstage.org.nz)
5. Antoinette LaFarge, *A World Exhilarating and Wrong: Theatrical Improvisations on the Internet*, Leonardo, v. 28 5, 1995.

HELEN VARLEY JAMIESON (Aotearoa New Zealand) is a writer, theatre practitioner and digital artist. She has recently completed a Master of Arts at Queensland University of Technology, investigating her practice of cyberformance - live performance on the internet. She performs with the globally dispersed troupe Avatar Body Collision and manages UpStage, a web-based platform for cyberformance. Helen is the web queen of the Magdalena Project and a trustee of Magdalena Aotearoa.

## From: Maria Porter

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New York, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2008

To Jill, Julia, Cristina, Geddy, Gilly,

The opportunity to witness women of your age and experience working together represents a piece of history that falls in line with one of the Magdalena Project's aims: to give women their voice in theatre history - to write the history of theatre from a woman's perspective. As individuals you have clearly made tremendous contributions toward these aims. But the gathering you call *Women with Big Eyes* is something unique. Your presence together with the 'younger ones' who have been directly influenced by your work is like a living exhibition of the way teachings are connected. How diverse practices can converse, and for me personally gives a depth and meaning to my history of teachers/teaching/performers.

OK. I would also like to see the practice of apprenticeship make a comeback in my country where the newest and best actress is between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age. And while I have many examples of your individual work, or your work in your 'home' groups, the collective force of your combined efforts is deeply moving to me. *Transit 2001* changed the path of my artistic life - I saw women over thirty-five dancing, moving, speaking and articulating in three dimensions. For some reason I can't articulate, *Women* strikes me as equally inspiring. I'm not sure why, but it's whispering encouraging words to me about how I can go on, and the possibilities of relationships forged over time and generations and place. I find it hopeful and necessary.

So I am wishing that the time and space can exist for this work to grow. And now I am hearing Julia's voice in my ear about how I ought to...

Love you all,  
Maria

MARIA PORTER (USA) is a teacher, director and actor from New York. She is a master teacher of the Suzuki method, and is the head of the acting programme at CW Post/Long Island University. Maria saw the presentations of *Women with Big Eyes* at Transit Festival in 2007 and at Magdalena Sin Fronteras in 2008.



**Gabriella Sacco**

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## **Robust Madonna**

*Women with Big Eyes* is a project/performance involving different generations of Magdalenas. It started in Transit 5 in January 2007 and continued in Magdalena Cuba in January 2008.

As a contributor to both work sessions, I am writing to all the women artists involved. I feel it is important for me to share with you, through a confession and an image, my connection to our work, my belief in what we are doing, although scattered all over the world, with different degrees of artistic and/or friendly relationship, varying levels of interest in the Magdalena Project and in the *Women with Big Eyes* process.

While sitting in the last round in Magdalena Cuba, I looked around and I saw how big were the eyes of all the women sitting there. And I also perceived in myself the desire to create and share with all of them. This letter is to them too.

The writer is a robust Madonna.

A fearless artistic fighter.

An idealist with a daily practice of body and voice work.

A tendency I would like to increase.

I like to recognise uniqueness in events; that's what keeps me connected to them.

My knowledge of cultures and practices has never come through books. I possess two tools for the encounter with the outer world: one is my imagination - a tricky tool some would say. The other is the people I meet. The world is people, in my experience; the power, the skills, the images, the teachings, the words, the rhythms they carry.

I do not know if this is because I am an actress at heart, if such a thing exists, or because in my spiritual research I consider myself an essence-seeker, but I counter my tendency to rebellion by fitting in, yet always remaining aloof. I've been able to fit in among punk-rock groupies as much as in devotional spiritual communities. In contrast I could with joy and sincere participation share hours with the Church volunteers my mother meets for tea and make them truly

believe I am one of theirs, while engaging my mind in plans and images which would make their hair stand on end. This is a gift I've recognised at times. If applied in life without control, this is a curse - I know. I am totally in something and yet I am totally out of it. Everything involves me, nothing embraces me. Is it because deep down I am a liar? A hypocrite? An individual without personality? An opportunist?

To save myself from my own harsh criticism, I observe the nature of human dynamics and detect a magma phenomenon: most people come together in groups and become identical. This is actually what they create groups for: to recognise themselves in the image of others without feeling the discomfort of carrying around their own egos. If this is the case, why should I be the one spoiling their game? There's more: this dynamic answers an intrinsic need for security and comfort which obviously I myself am not immune to; so why spoil my opportunity for a socially healthy treat?

I find these mechanisms do not escape the realm of theatre practitioners: they come together in groups sharing the same ideas, the same patterns, the same behaviour, sometimes the same shoes. This obviously has its purpose and use (maybe excluding the shoes). However, this has always been my problem in mingling with theatre groups: you become part of something which shapes you from within and you can't help it. But what if the influence of that specific individual is not something I want to absorb? What if my choices are no longer possible in this creative, comfortable yet tightly clutched matrix?

To me, one of the striking features of the Women with Big Eyes is their high degree of heterogeneity. Most groups I've come in contact with are homologous stock, tight nets to capture a single frequency, a strong impression of impact without individuality.

When I heard of the Magdalena Project, I was not interested; the slogan indicated a magma of a temperature which didn't fit my interests, at least at that time: a women's theatre network. On more than one occasion I listened to Ana Woolf or others explain the dynamics of the Magdalena Project and I never thought much of it, neither good nor bad. What I believe now is that this was precisely because there was not much to think about, without knowing in person and specifically without participating. It is only through participation that I discovered how the world of Magdalena, despite talk of generations, of knowledge/practice transmission, of influences and borrowings, was a dynamic world of individuals.

It is a container preserving the dignity of its contents.

I would like to present to you the figures of the *Sapta Matrikas*.

Last autumn I was on a tour/pilgrimage/trip in India for more than two months. Most ancient Indian monuments stun me, I stroll about the still standing remains in awe and excitement and I could never get tired of walking around. The huge stones fill my eyes, my mind, my heart. When I visited the Ellora caves in Maharashtra, I found a special spot in the architectural maze of the huge Kailash temple: the room of the *Sapta Matrikas*, the seven mothers. This is how archaeology manuals describe them: "The internal force of their regal and detached stances diffuses quiescence and power. They are sensuous, elegant, tender, beautiful, yet haughty and grand. Quintessentially the creatrix in their mobility and ambiguity, they are accompanied by Ganesha (the Deity of knowledge) and Kala (the Deity of time/death)". This is their collective description, but this result, this taste, this *rasa*, comes from the union of very specific, different and unique characteristics.

While I was there with the seven mothers distilling the power of the Earth, I couldn't help thinking of the Women with Big Eyes. Yet, something disturbed the analogy: the occurrence of a motherly quality which I knew the Magdalena 'Masters' were unhappy with. After the Magdalena Festival in Cuba, this image still lingered in my mind together with the unhappy residue of the element disturbing the analogy.

I did some research and mythology came to my rescue with three powerful details: first, the *Matrikas*, in Ellora represented as a symbol of measured harmony and rhythmic grace, are in fact goddesses of the battlefield, who help Lord Shiva by drinking the blood of Andhakasura, the demon who could produce a new fighter from every drop of blood which fell from his body; second, although often listed as seven or eight, Vedic literature recognises the existence of many, many, many *Matrikas*, at times almost in unlimited numbers; and third, when not depicted in shape but in sound form they are symbolised by the seven *aksharas* of the Sanskrit alphabet indicating the notes used in Indian Music: "Sa", "Re", "Ga", "Ma", "Pa", "Dha", "Ni".

So in these three features I find what for me is the strength of the Women with Big Eyes/*Matrikas*: they are fighters, they are numberless and they have a voice. A group which instead of limiting, enhances the power of the individual stances.

I leave you with some words from a punk rock song I often chuckle about,

because it makes me think of all you Women with Big Eyes:

*These are the words  
But not the truth  
God bless them all  
When they speak to you  
But that's all right  
On an empty stage  
Sing out when  
There's no other way*

*Come drift the town  
Where secrets lie  
Where friends and neighbours  
Keep drifting by  
But that's all right  
You're here to stay  
Sing out tonight  
The empty page*

Sonic Youth, *The Empty Page*, from the album *Murray Street*, Geffen Records, 2002.

GABRIELLA SACCO (Italy) is an actor, director, drama-therapy counsellor and English teacher. After being engaged in theatre for ten years, she left it to dedicate herself to her studies of the culture of ancient India, travelling to India and living at the Centro Studi Bhaktivedanta in Italy. After taking part in a workshop in Turin, Gabriella has worked with Julia Varley since 2005, creating the performance *The Taste of Oranges*.