

# Jill Greenhalgh

## Off with Her Head!

*But this time as I look I see that  
it is not male territory but fields  
of my own making,  
keep out signs that I myself have  
created as a consequence of my  
own work. And I realise that in  
order to continue my trespass  
I have to not walk through these  
lands but elsewhere. And  
where? Along the already  
trodden paths? Back the way  
I have come?*

From the moment the title theme of this Open Page was proposed I have found the word “trespass” haunting me. I love this word and I have dithered beyond acceptability in the completion of this article and because deadlines must rule I have to accept that the process is incomplete. I have tried to fathom this love, to unravel my personal definitions of the word in order to place it as part of my vocabulary. I still do not yet know if this has or has not been a futile exercise.

Since the founding of the Magdalena Project in 1986, and indeed from the moment I began to make theatre, my dominant aspiration has been to try to discover an artistic language with which, using my own criteria, I believe I am not lying. This is distinct from believing that I am telling the truth - suffice to say.

I have striven to understand the voice of women and their experience and why their knowledge and intelligence has not been recorded and passed down through culture, art and history, but silenced. As time has passed I have accepted the limits of this endeavour and attempted to transform the naivety and idealism of this grand aspiration into realism. The busy journey has allowed me many experiences and meetings which, had I stayed safely at home would have remained hidden to me. These experiences and meetings have naturally informed the decisions upon direction at each of the many crossroads that I have encountered.

With the benefit of hindsight I can reflect upon significant decisions taken in the development of my work and I see that each encountered crossroad has led me to choose trespass as opposed to following the road already mapped out for said journey - the accessible “man-made” road, the public footpath. I, and many of the women that I have met on this journey, have trespassed on hallowed ground, private (male) domain and we have left footprints - traces - on their enclosed earth.

What is the penalty for trespass?

Recently I have come to the most hazardous crossroads of my professional life - it has been a very challenging period. I am still stuck at the crossroad, unable to make a committed choice. I do not know, again, which way to choose. The signposts are all clear, but - as before - I do not wish to follow any of them. None of them seems right, marking, by definition, someone else's already trodden path. Is this just pride, stubborn defiance, compulsion or is it intuition?

I look to the ground enclosed, that inside the high fences, that which says "Keep out - Trespassers will be prosecuted", where I might go on to trespass. But this time as I look I see that it is not male territory but fields of my own making, keep out signs that I myself have created as a consequence of my own work. And I realise that in order to continue my trespass I have to not walk through these lands but elsewhere. And where? Along the already trodden paths? Back the way I have come?

These conundrums, this twisting and turning, this absolutely non linear logic, this all-over-the-place, this chaos, makes sense to me. My world turns upside down and inside out and I feel like *Alice*.

Something began within the practice of conundrum when I had to confront the accusation that I was muddling the personal and professional. This accusation was a freeing thing. It made me think hard, it shook me, and then it made me realise that what I stood accused of was exactly what I was striving for the right to achieve.

Women - at least from my perspective - have very different phases in their lives from men. The biological differences impose very different rhythms and responsibilities on our bodies and our psyche and yet most of us seem to be trying to live our lives and make our theatre ignoring those distinct female rhythms and biologies. In order to make our



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mark on *History* we choose to impose a linear regime of work and service that seems to lead only to the construction of the edifice of our incarceration; physically; creatively. Unless the secret can be unravelled. Unless we can find a rhythm of work that functions alongside the shifts and organic growth of our work and that does not insist on the denial of the feminine phases of biological and psychic change.

I examine my truths. These I name as the thoughts and ideas that will not go away, that keep returning until I solve, confront or accept them.

I have a strong visitation at present of two women whom I have known for many years but have seen nothing of recently. But I have been thinking of them daily for months. They are haunting me - not because of their work but because of their disappearance from the work. Or at least the map of work that I perceive we are

commonly treading.

They have both taken themselves to rural situations - right to the edges - where theatre does not really matter to the communities that they have elected to settle in. They have prioritised and devoted time to their children and they have made small things happen that few people in the "big" world will hear about. I have come to realise that I admire and respect their courage to disappear and I want to go there also - at this phase in my life when I have small children, when I need some rest and to take time for quiet uncluttered reflection; when I want to consider new territory and how it can be sown in order to yield which crops; when others within the Magdalena Project have taken up the baton and are investing great energy in making big things happen (Magdalena Aotearoa) or new networks (Magdalena 2a Generación), new publications (The Open Page, The Book), because they need to.

So at this cross-roads, I choose not to go and trespass. Instead I believe I shall turn and go back the way I came. I shall look again at the landscape I have already passed, and try to see what I might have missed in my rushed journey and at intervals I shall meet those coming the other way, those who have chosen to follow the same path I have already trodden.

The land that I find myself entering now is my own land - literally. I have turned my back on the city. I have bought a beautiful old house in a small village in a valley by the sea on the most western coast of the British Isles. I have a woodland garden. I have

started a venture called The little arts school / *Ysgol celf ag ati* together with some other women in the village for the children here in this tiny community. I have been touring my performance called *Child*. And I have been reflecting constantly and exhaustively on the future of the Magdalena Project as I prepare to experience her manifestation in Aotearoa in March.

And my most difficult task is in defying my guilt at "not doing" and struggling to respect my instinct, my rhythm and my intelligence and trust that this is the right "work" for me to be doing at the moment - in this phase of my professional and personal life.

And I remember that the idea for the Magdalena Project was born at a festival near Rome in 1983 which took the title *Il Segreto di Alice* (The Secret of Alice).

*Child*