

Helen Chadwick

Pages from My Notebooks

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In the Caucasus they say that one of the secrets of longevity is to live in one place all your life. The nature of performance is to move, hunting out audiences willing or keen to listen to our songs and stories. I am forever buying new suitcases with wheels.

The only diaries I ever write are when touring abroad. So the bookcase has a whole section of small notebooks, dog-eared notebooks, spiral leaf, occasionally rather nice drawing books - small enough not to add extra weight to the bags of instruments I carry.

My most treasured notebooks are three called Colombia '90. Three because Claire Hughes and I were touring our performance *Songs for the Four Parts of the Night* there for all of eleven weeks. After the official purpose of our visit (The Bogotá International Festival) we went to Villa de Leyva to collaborate with Beatriz Camargo. She had heard us singing in Cardiff, Wales. During our remaining nine weeks we travelled around to perform in small places. One church belonged to a closed group of nuns called Las Clarissas. When we turned up on the prearranged concert day and asked if we might rehearse, we found ourselves in a little office. It was divided in two by a metal grill that was covered with a curtain on the far side. In the middle of this grill was a kind of wooden turnstile on which you could place offerings of gifts for the nuns, a cabbage, some cheese perhaps. The curtain was pulled back enough to reveal the one nun whose job it was to deal with the public. "What exactly are you going to sing?" she asked a little suspiciously through the grill. "A song about waiting for the Holy One in the small hours of the night", I answered. "Ah, *el Señor, el Señor*", she answered gleefully. I didn't dare tell her it was a poem by Rabindranath Tagore from the Hindu tradition. When we finished she asked for "*Otra! Otra!*" Another. Another. The curtain was pulled back a little further to reveal a second nun. We launched into a Spanish lullaby which also provoked "*Otra! Otra!*" and the appearance of a third nun. Gradually we sang them almost half our concert

repertoire, as bit by bit the curtain opened and the entire nunnery of twelve nuns appeared. They then passed us glasses of home-made fruit wine and shortbread biscuits through the turnstile. They asked: "Wouldn't you like to join us as nuns?" Later that evening we performed as planned in the church, full, with many standing at the back including babes in arms and various animals. Upstairs in a screened off balcony we could just make out the dark figures of the nuns.

Whilst staying with Beatriz in Villa de Leyva, she took us to sing to an old man, almost blind, called Don Alfonso, who lived in a mud house in a desert landscape. When we sang to him, he smiled and said, "It doesn't matter about the language, the true ear hears."

In 1992 I went to visit a community of Quechua people living at 13,000 feet. My partner was living there for ten months studying their music and ceremonies. The village had existed much as it was since before the conquistadors, retaining many of their ancient rituals. We took part in a marriage between the mountain and the plain, between the bull and the virgin, a ritual for fertility. I went with the women into one of the small dark earth huts and made bread rolls in the shape of the bull and in the shape of the virgin. Another ceremony was for the coming of rain. It was the dry season and they were longing for rain. It had been the season of frost and for the first two days of this fiesta, which involved singing, drinking maize alcohol (*chicha*) and dancing, they played a small pan pipe called a *siku* which was associated with frost. The men also played small guitar-like instruments called *charangos*, and the women sang. Only the unmarried women were allowed to sing. It was thought to be so alluring that no woman, once married, was permitted to sing. The young women sang verse after verse on very high notes, sometimes a B above the

treble clef, notes that few singers anywhere could sing reliably for any length of time. They danced. On the third day of the fiesta, the men began to play a kind of flute associated with rain (*pinkillo*). During this third day they took the *sikus* out of the homestead and buried them. At that very moment there was a massive downpour of hail and we all rushed into our huts. The hailstones were enormous. We looked out from our doorway to our neighbours. We asked: "Is it because of the *pinkillos* that it's raining?" They laughed, "Of course, and it's frosted rain because of the *sikus*". When we looked around, a white blanket of hail lay on the farmstead where the fiesta was taking place. But looking further afield, there was no hail on the mountain beyond, none on the community on the other side of the valley, and none on the mountain behind. The hail had only fallen where the ceremony had taken place.

A couple of years ago I went to Brazil to do some solo concerts, first in Rio and then in Recife in the North East. In Rio I performed in a small theatre with a beautiful Steinway piano. In Recife, there was no piano, so they borrowed an electric piano for me. When it was plugged in, it exploded with a small fizz, and that was that. The director of the festival, a good friend called Carlos Sandroni, offered to play some of the accompaniments on his guitar. Just half an hour before the concert we sat in the dressing room, and played through the songs once each, with no sheet music. He was note perfect; he had only heard me rehearsing and performing them a few times in Rio. I wondered how many festival directors in Britain would also have such staggering musicianship.

In July 2000, I went to Ghana with Streets Alive, a theatre company for young people with experience of homelessness. We went to the North of Ghana, to Tamale to

collaborate with street children in a project funded by Action Aid. During a fortnight of collaborations the young people from Britain created a piece of theatre about homelessness with the street children. The differences in their experiences were marked. The local children seemed well adjusted, happy, open and physical; they danced, they sang. Our group were more reserved, some had experiences of child abuse, drugs, broken families. All the local problems were to do with lack of money, whereas the British group had many social problems, not all directly caused by a lack of money. The leader of the local project was very concerned for the street children not to be introduced to drugs, as this was not a problem amongst their young people. Together the two groups created songs, dances and masks and enacted a story about life on the streets. This was later performed in a huge field on the edge of Tamale in front of many hundreds. For the performance a cable with a few light bulbs on it was strung around the area on a sort of washing line. This was attached to a generator. It was so loud that when it was on, nothing of the performance could be heard. However, it often coughed, and the lights would flicker desperately and die, leaving a lovely quiet for the performance, in which nothing could be seen. Finally three cars were driven onto the field, one from each side, and the performance was done in their headlights. No one was fazed by any of this and the performance was a hit. There were some women Praise Singers there. Their leader was a magnificent singer called Aisheytu. She and I spent many hours on a doorstep singing and dancing together, these being our only shared languages. When I first heard her sing, I knew she was one of the five greatest singers I would meet in my life.

On my second trip to South Africa, I went with a British actor, Richard Hahlo. He

and I were invited by the Market Theatre Laboratory to work with the community artists who support township theatre and dance companies around Johannesburg. Our first five days consisted of a series of visits to Soweto, Alexandratown and other townships, to watch the theatre and dance companies rehearsing. Those days redefined my idea of the words *professional* and *amateur*. I remember watching one group of boys rehearsing. They were amateur in that they were not paid. But they rehearsed every day for six hours after their work or school, so that they were putting in the same time commitment as professionals. The nature of the work itself was quite different to what I had seen elsewhere in the world. Most of the productions were telling real stories. Often people cried on stage, not acting, but because they were telling a true story from their own life that would never stop moving them. I remember the one group we visited that was directed by a woman. The area where this group lived was an ANC area with Inkatha hostels, where Inkatha men came in for the week to work and then went home many hundreds of miles on buses at the weekend or once in every few weeks. There had been much violence between the two ethnic groups and many murders. In the play, a woman married a man. Later she discovered that the father of her husband was one of the hired killers who had killed her parents. Scenes of forgiveness and reconciliation followed amid tears and song. It was intensely moving.

For the next three days Richard and I attended the Community Theatre Festival at the Market Theatre Laboratory where we were to run workshops after the festival. There were about thirty companies from all over South Africa, including those we had watched rehearsing, and some from Zimbabwe. Most of the groups wrote songs for their shows, perhaps fifteen songs in one

play, usually with dancing, all with stunning harmonies. The subjects of these conversations and of the plays were often so devastating, that the form was not so important. The public often wept with the actors.

In recent years, travel has even become the subject of some of my performances. *A Norfolk Songline* is a performance with a storyteller and three singers about an ancient walkway in England called The Peddars' Way. This we performed in the villages near these old tracks. During the course of the show the stories moved northwards up the Way as they moved from myth through the Roman times, the Bronze Age, medieval times, and on up to the present day. Local children from these villages were involved in telling one of the stories and making masks and music to accompany it. A sculptor was commissioned to inscribe great slabs of stone with phrases from the songs. These were placed along the path as way markers, so that something from this live performance remained within the landscape.

One of my current group acappella song/storytelling performances is called *A Song in my Foot*. It is based on my South American experiences. It includes lyrics by Pablo Neruda, and words that were chanted at a women's demonstration in Bogotá against the violence. The text to another song is a word in the Muisca language meaning joy, which was given by Beatriz while we were walking up to a lake near her home in Colombia. The forms of the songs and the stepping patterns are also influenced by those travels: the Quechua women in Bolivia step in a pattern of six and sing over the top in ten. One song has body percussion that is influenced by some children's clapping games in Brazil. There is a song with a samba rhythm learnt at the breakfast table near Recife in Brazil.

This week I will look for another suitcase with wheels. The last one died in



Helen Chadwick Photo: Simon Richardson

August coming home from a solo concert in a small village high in the Italian part of Switzerland. It may not be a life of longevity and tranquillity, but it seems to me that seeing distances with the eye is food for the soul.

HELEN CHADWICK (Britain) is a singer, lyricist and composer. She performs solo concerts, and works with storytellers as well as with her acappella group, Amar. She has worked as a performer in devised and experimental theatre for many years, and more recently as a composer and voice teacher in text based theatre. Her recordings include four solo albums. Her website address is: www.helenchadwick.com