

On the Issue of Belonging: Thinking through Networks and Generations

Meeting in the Suite Royal of the Odin Teatret with Helen Varley Jamieson, the webqueen of the Magdalena Project

Lena Simic

Abstract

This contribution discusses the issue of belonging in relation to the creation of artists' communities, networks and generations. Written from a particular position of a woman artist/scholar engaged in both professional performance practice and practice as research academic culture, this contribution is a working through of a momentary politics of belonging to a generation. It posits the interview with Helen Varley Jamieson, the webqueen of the Magdalena Project, as a premise through which such questions of belonging are posed. Through this contribution I am concerned to address the particularities of multiple belongings, which are open, temporary and generative rather than exclusive.

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I don't much like the word community, I am not even sure I like the thing.

(Derrida, 1995: 335)

The word community derives from *communio* (fortified on all sides) and *munis* (defence), terms, which have military roots of building a common defence and keeping foreigners out (Caputo, 1997: 108). In her essay 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference' Iris Marion Young (1990) critiques the ideal of community, which thrives through the metaphysics of presence, denying difference and creating exclusions. Young is sceptical about community presumptions that 'subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves' as well as the desire for community which in her

view 'relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism on the one hand and political sectarianism on the other' (Young, 1990: 302). The arts culture as well as the knowledge industry (including the practice as research wing) both thrive on networking, email lists, numerous journals, publications, symposia, events and festivals, each creating and perpetrating a certain kind of community, with its inevitable violence of exclusion. No arts festival, network or publication is exempt from committing acts of the communal violence of exclusion. However, as an arts practitioner as well as a budding academic, I am well aware of the inevitability of belonging somewhere in order to produce, showcase or write about arts practices. My question is how to make sense of our multiple belongings to all different contexts and allow the spaces those contexts create to become generative rather than exclusive?

I am attending the 'International Women's Theatre Festival Transit V: Stories to be Told' in Odin Teatret, Holstebro, Denmark. The festival is directed by Julia Varley, a long-standing actor and pedagogue at the Odin as well as one of the founders of the Magdalena Project, an international network of women in contemporary theatre, which has existed since 1986, directed by Jill Greenhalgh.¹ Both Transit and The Magdalena Project 'are committed to nurturing an awareness of women's contribution to theatre and to supporting exploration and research by offering concrete opportunities to as many women as possible, both in the profession and in study' (from Transit V festival brochure). It is January 2007 and I will be showcasing my own solo performance *Joan Trial* at the festival. I happened to be part of Transit and the Magdalena Project. Throughout the festival, I question my position of belonging.

One of the festival's highlights is the performance and a work in progress 'Women With Big Eyes – Work on a Magdalena Story'. The title 'Women With Big Eyes' is taken from a book by Angeles Mastretta, a collection of stories about women. This performance was born out of the desire to bring together a number of the Magdalena Project women into a creative space, to work together for some time during the festival. These Magdalena women, Jill Greenhalgh, Geddy Aniksdal, Julia Varley and Cristina Castrillo, are the generation that set up the network in the eighties and have been influential throughout its twenty years of existence. All of them decided Transit V was a good opportunity to take time to create and perform again rather than the usual handing over of the

workshops to the festival participants who mostly happen to be younger, emerging performers. 'Women With Big Eyes' also features five other performers: Bruna Gusberti, who is Cristina Castrillo's closest collaborator at Teatro delle Radici, Helen Varley Jamieson, who oddly, all on her own, cannot be easily categorized and three young girls, possibly the dawning of a new generation, Charlotte Nightingale, Vibeke Lie, and Gabriella Sacco. I am most interested in Helen, self-described as a gatecrasher to this performance.

On stage we see the older generation of the Magdalena women (including Bruna Gusberti), all very individualized, almost like characters, in different costumes, with props, very well defined, acting, doing their politics on stage. Younger women are all dressed the same, all in white, voiceless and blindfolded. They are finding their way through the alphabet (colourful children's letters spilt across the stage). They seem incapable of taking action: they need guidance and they need to be led. Helen sits outside the performance space and controls the performance through the use of technology. She pulls the strings for the old and the young. Helen doesn't belong. In a good way, she doesn't belong.

My involvement with the Magdalena Project is four years old. 'Transit IV: Roots in Transit' Women's International Theatre Festival and Meeting at Odin Theatre, Denmark in January 2004 was my first encounter with the network. It was then that I first met Julia Varley, Jill Greenhalgh as well as Helen Varley Jamieson, the webqueen of the Magdalena Project. I attended the festival as a workshop participant and an audience member only.² Participation at Transit V in January 2007 and the performing of my solo piece *Joan Trial* was my fourth encounter with the network.³ I felt that my participation at Transit V was a kind of upgrade to artist status that provided me with a firmer sense of belonging to the Magdalena/Odin clan. This time I got to stay in the Odin Theatre building. In addition, such a sense of belonging was also initiated through my having a greater share of collective labour during the festival. Shared labour within the third and feminist collective theatres means that all members, and therefore festival participants, do all the jobs. This was apparent from the moment I landed in Esbjerg airport and was waited for by Jan Ferslev, Odin Theatre's actor/musician. Our three hour drive from Esbjerg, the Ryanair airport, to Holstebro was rather informal and jolly: we chatted all the way covering professional, private as well as political affairs. The Odin clan welcomed

me. My own part in the collective labour included daily cleaning tasks, in particular the two communal Odin spaces: the stairs and foyer leading to the Suite Royal (my sleeping space that I shared with seven other participants). I also took turns with Helen Varley Jamieson and Anna Correa to work nights in the bar.

I was staying in Suite Royal and sharing it with seven other participants, all young princesses and emerging artists. These included Gabriella Sacco, Charlotte Nightingale and Vibeke Lie, who as I previously mentioned when describing *Women With Big Eyes*, in my opinion came to represent the dawning of a new generation, Helen Varley Jamieson, who inspired me to write this article, Angie McCormack, a young American techie, Anna Bollini and Annamaria Talone, two dramaturg/directors with whom I got to practice my Italian. In the wooden loft of Suite Royal, I felt like a proper artist-bohemian. The warmth and cosiness of the Odin environment got to me. I recalled my Odin-like aspirations as a student when I wanted to be like Grotowski and indulge in theatre training skills. This was the time when I understood the theatre to be a purely physical space for interaction with others, a space for ritual-like collective affections. I was even shown Grotowski's favourite bedroom: so small and cosy, perfect for developing great ideas. Theatre, once again, as I experienced it during *Transit V* in Odin, felt sacred, poor and indulgent. Such theatre is, unfortunately, not in tune with my contemporary living. I make solo performances and I often rehearse them at home.⁴ I have no access to theatre as a physical training space, except for very short limited scheduled rehearsals. I am a product of our late-capitalist economy, which demands of artists to be employed through performance projects instead of in permanent companies. In relying on my everyday life and autobiographical material I found a sustainable way of living and making arts, which sits within the categories of performance art, live art and feminist performance practice. Coming across the Magdalena Project took me back to Odin, theatre and the ideas I had whilst attending the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Bratislava, Slovakia.

After presenting my solo performance *Joan Trial* in the White Room of the Odin Theatre I realized that, in a funny way, I could make that elusive claim 'I've made it'. I could now go back to my Drama School in Slovakia and proudly proclaim I performed at Odin. The event of being and performing at Odin in January 2007 has for me become a personal symbolic liberating act of my final farewell to Theatre. I was finally free to fully embrace

my position as a performance artist, a divorcee of Theatre. The question I still have unanswered is my relationship to the Magdalena Project as a women's network. Whilst I am interested in generating an interventionist feminist arts practice, I am unsure whether to invest my time and energy in belonging to international women's networks like the Magdalena Project. I am aware that such networks provide an emergent performer, like myself, with a meaning and context, give encouragement and a reason to share an arts practice, but I also know that I might be better off flying solo in the cruel world of international art.

What makes me uneasy about 'properly belonging' is that the Magdalena Project is a work of a particular generation. Regardless of the network's numerous membership, the driving force for the organized meetings are the so-called 'Magdalena grandmothers' (Jill Greenhalgh, Julia Varley, Teresa Ralli, Brigitte Cirila, Geddy Aniksdal, Gilla Cremer and Gilly Adams amongst others).⁵ The 'Magdalena grandmothers' are a group of women around the age of fifty who all very much belong to the twentieth century modernist theatre tradition, which is one of extensive training, experts and 'masters'. Even when Magdalena is the strongest and the most numerous international network for women in contemporary theatre which includes a diversity of performance languages and styles, it is because of the Magdalena grandmothers' strong presence that the network is intrinsically linked to the modernist avant-garde tradition of Odin Theatre. That is evident financially (Odin Theatre funds their annual journal *Open Page* as well as hosts Transit Festivals) and aesthetically (most performances at Magdalena events could be classified as coming from the tradition of physical theatre, where the emphasis is placed on the performers' body skills). In addition, that particular performance aesthetic is reinforced through the delivery of various workshops, often based on training with an emphasis on developing performers' skills.⁶

Whilst the Magdalena network might have started out as a political, cultural and creative drive of a particular moment in time and was fuelled by frustrations that the women in theatre felt during the eighties, right now I sense that one of the network's main drives is pedagogical. The emphasis is placed on passing down the knowledge and skills to younger generations. One of the most influential Magdalena workshops 'Performing Words' devised and delivered by Geddy Aniksdal and Gilly Adams has been presented at numerous Magdalena events, inspiring young performers everywhere, from Singapore

to Lancaster (where I myself attended the workshops in the spring of 2004 and winter of 2005). However, with pedagogical activities there comes an inevitable distinction between those who give and those who receive. The workshop facilitators adopt the roles of teachers, masters and experts, while the workshop participants, on the other end, become recipients and absorbers of knowledge. Inevitably they will develop a great sense of respect for their teachers, respect that can work to create a certain sense of closure about the network. The network no longer offers a free platform for all, where all its participants have the right of say. The network holds onto its hierarchical structure with the Magdalena grandmothers at the top and the fresh young performers at the bottom, clicking away at the network's website, answering calls for proposals and saving money to attend festivals and workshops. This new blood is however essential for the network's survival: they have the potential to become the network's new generation.

The publication of Chris Fry's *The Way of Magdalena: A Chronicle of the first ten years of The Magdalena Project, An International Network of Women in Contemporary Theatre* (2006) and its launch proved how important the generational thinking is within the network. The book launch celebrated the first ten years of the Magdalena movement. The event was devised as an opportunity for the elders to pass on traditions and stories to the younger. The walls of Odin's White Room were decorated with large photographs, moments in time from the past Magdalena events. The 'Magdalena grandmothers' took the participants around the photographs and recounted the Magdalena stories. The event was followed by the distribution of beer and a dance, a celebration. As I was looking at the dancing crowd, I wondered whether or not I should become a willing participant in the creation of this new Magdalena generation. I felt stuck in the middle. I wasn't so wet behind the ears to be overwhelmed by the experience of participating in workshops and admiring the skill and mastery of the teachers, but neither was I the well-established artist and solo performer beyond influence. At any rate I knew I didn't fit in this context, in this dance of belonging.

I therefore turn to Helen Varley Jamieson, the network's more radical member, a Magdalena of the cyber generation, the web queen of www.themagdalenaproject.org (which is often for young performers the first encounter with the network). I am intrigued to find out what makes Helen want to run this network. To me Helen is Magdalena's younger, cooler, hip sister. Is it that Magdalena needs Helen just as much? To what

extent does Helen feel she belongs to the Magdalena Project? Does she call herself a Magdalena? Why is she not spending time setting up a new network rather than working within the old one? I put it to Helen that within the academic world the Magdalena Project is still often seen as carrying the dead weight of cultural feminism and last century's modernism. I admit that I would feel uncomfortable saying I was one of the younger Magdalenas anywhere else than right there in Odin, within the drunken trance of a dance and mesmerising Scandinavian winter light.

Helen's perception of the Magdalena Project is different than mine. Whilst the project has been initiated in Europe and has grown out of European-centred modernist theatre traditions of the 20th century, it has also taken on a life of its own in South America, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. Helen belongs to Magdalena Aotearoa – the New Zealand branch of the project, which is very different from the European one, specifically since the New Zealand theatre does not rely on the tradition of the performer's trained body. Helen assures me that if the Magdalena Aotearoa were to be generalized in New Zealand's public eye, they could easily be dismissed as a bunch of middle aged women doing community theatre in church hall that is not very good and has low production qualities. Such generalizations, usually made out of ignorance, are a way to marginalise the work. Helen concludes that one should therefore not rely on general perceptions. She adds that the Magdalena is incredibly diverse and includes a great variety of performance styles. She also points out that the Magdalena Aotearoa has had a significant queer involvement, something I failed to notice at the other international Magdalena festivals I had attended. However in Helen's words 'just because "queerness" is not overt does not mean it is not fully accepted'. The Magdalena network can have many different faces, aims performance styles and objectives; it is as Helen says 'a network that exists beneath the work, or rather around it'. She elaborates:

Magdalena exists because women need and want it. A network is what the individual participants make of it. You become a participant as much or even more because you have something to contribute, than because you want to get something out of it.

Helen's trust in belonging to this network is in line with her geographical position and a feeling of a certain sense of isolation in New Zealand. Her cyberformance⁷ has come to

be an example of a different kind of work within Magdalena, one that defies my proposed modernist set for Magdalena aesthetics, heavily reliant on the performers trained body:

In terms of my own practice, which could be perceived as almost antithetical to the tradition that prioritises the performer's body, the Magdalena network has been a source of both support and important interrogations. Magdalena has provided me with a platform where I have been able to present some pretty experimental work and receive an honest response from peers whose opinions I respect and trust. I've been challenged to develop my practice at a level that could not have happened had I been working only within the New Zealand community.

In order to create work, Helen needs no physical space for training. Her performance happens in the virtual space of cyberspace. Helen's work has been presented at Magdalena events and supported by Magdalena women; it is through the Magdalena Project that she found a way to present her work within the theatre context, rather than new media, where her work can also be positioned. On the question of networks, Helen sees herself between two worlds: theatre and new media, with a foot in both camps. She is a member of several other networks including faces: network of women in new media <<http://www.faces-l.net>>, Eclectic Tech Carnival: women in open source technology <<http://www.eclectictechcarnival.org>>, Netbehaviour: networked artists' community <<http://www.netbehaviour.org>> and Rhizome: online arts community <<http://rhizome.org>>. However, the Magdalena network is for Helen the most important of the lot:

Even though my practice is pretty different to that of most of the other artists in the Magdalena Project, I have a strong sense of belonging within the network. That's because I have a specific role, as web queen, but it's also because there is a reciprocal interest in the work; it's about exchange. Collaborating with others in the network is a very rich exchange.

The Magdalena project kept Helen in arts: it is because of Magdalena that she decided not to get on with 'normal life and a good corporate career'. Additionally, with Magdalena

being a women's network, Helen felt it provided her with enough time to engage, listen and learn about the integrity of arts work.

Helen's labour on the Magdalena website with its discussion forums, email list and regular newsletter are, after all, what makes the Magdalena Project present in my everyday life, along with over 1000 other email recipients across more than sixty different countries. Helen articulates her unique position: 'I do feel like the spider sitting at the centre of the web, connected to women of theatre in many corners of the world and often acting as a go-between for their communication. It's a very privileged position, but also a lot of work and responsibility.' She talks about the productive tension between her skills (in web/internet) that are uncommon amongst theatre practitioners but that have become essential to Magdalena network. In spite of a very high number of Magdalena countries, Helen argues that recruiting doesn't exist and that people find the Magdalena Project because they are looking for something like that on the internet. We both agree that the majority of people who are making theatre around the world are usually educated and in a reasonably privileged position, wired to the world wide web. I mention Kage and Jaa, two actors I worked with in Tadu, Contemporary Arts Centre in Bangkok. Both took expensive taxi rides to get to our rehearsals. At the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow in February 2007, after my chat with Helen, I would meet a renowned Thai performance artist Chumpon Apisuk, who himself knows Kage. Our international performance world is rather small.

However, it is also worth remembering that the word 'international' within an art world context means only around a third of the planet. Katy Deepwell, the editor of *n.paradoxa*, the international feminist art journal, addressed the issue of disproportional representation in her paper 'Global vs. transnational vs. international visions of the art world' when she spoke at the V&A Museum's one day conference Diasporic Futures: Women, the Arts and Globalization in July 2006. The biggest arts exhibitions like Documenta and Venice Biennial still only 'cover' and represent a relatively small number of countries: at the most around seventy out of 244 political entities in the world.⁸ In that sense Magdalena is doing well with sixty. The most inclusive organization on the planet is actually FIFA with 208 members whilst the UN has only 192 member states. It might be inspirational to think of football as radical. In her Guardian interview Sarah Kane says: 'I frequently walk out of the theatre early without fear of missing anything. But

however bad I've felt, I've never left a football match early, because you never know when a miracle might occur' (1998: 12). The immediacy of the live game and the sense of not knowing what follows next unite the players and supporters. True networking should also always be in the making, without knowing when a miracle might occur.

Still, international football comes with its own uncomfortable sense of nationalism, something worth intervening into. My act of watching football is contradictory: as a foreign (Croatian) national I start to belong to England by supporting its football team. As I support England, I am carving out a space of resistance within my chosen space of belonging. Similarly I am interested to belong to the Magdalena Project by resisting their dominant performance aesthetics. I am interested in not properly belonging. As Gayatri Spivak puts it: 'People are similar not by virtue of being similar, but by virtue of producing a differential, or by virtue of thinking of themselves as other than a self-identical example of the species' (Spivak, 1990: 136). My perception of the world gets shifted through the act of watching and supporting Other football teams, seeing Other performances and belonging to Other networks. To get back to the issue of recruiting, the radical element of inclusion and acceptance of Otherness, be it cultural, political or aesthetic, is unlikely to be just in numbers or already drawn up general policies. In my experience, radical connections happen elsewhere, within the immediacy of each particular encounter, on a personal level. Such an encounter might have the ability to change our minds and allow for that miracle to occur.

Sara Ahmed calls such encounters strange and sees them as a part of feminist transnational activism. Ahmed argues for close encounters as a form of transnational feminist action, but close encounters that remain strange, with the open question of discovering '*what it is we may yet have in common*' (Ahmed 2000: 189). Accidental meetings between artists who are willing to relate to one another differently and play with the idea of discovery of Ahmed's '*what it is we may yet have in common*' allow for and enable political activism. It is through the experience of producing and encountering artwork that we can politicize our positions and engage in the world politically. My talk with Helen was created out of the desire to have a chat, talk about her work, find out her thoughts on the Magdalena project and finally record our meeting through the writing of this article. Our chat stayed open, both of us willing to be affected by the other: we were to discover '*what it is we may yet have in common*' without knowing when a miracle

might occur. Furthermore, my and Helen's meeting happened in time taken out from the Transit V festival, in our own 'personal time'.

The Magdalena festivals have provided me with mini networks, special meetings, email correspondence, inspiration, possible collaborations and friendships. I have made my mini connections. I am making sense of my life within the moment, through the desires I have. I face up to my own personal timeline. Similarly Helen spends a lot of her personal time belonging to the Magdalena network; she actively participates in its re-creation. She believes the Magdalena Project is worth it. I am spending my time writing about it. In my right here, right now it might be useful to share these thoughts with a wider academic community. Right here, right now, it might be useful to join the big network. Right here, right now it might be time for me to work solo. Right here, right now it might be time for me to form my own small, possibly short-lived network.⁹

I believe that we need to understand the many different contexts running through us and use those in order to highlight and act upon our possible multiple belongings. I believe we must put into place criteria of belonging according to the depth of our personal time. I believe we must not allow our multiple belongings to collapse into a generic, superficial postmodern of post-cool Britannia, corporate chic media, sassy culture with no depth nor integrity. We must put into action our personal, contextualized priorities. I have written this article because of my momentary preoccupation with the thought and desire for my own generation. A friend, a potential candidate for 'our generation' wrote in a letter:

The generation thing is hugely important. I also have a will towards it: I don't want to just be me, I want to be a generation. But to be honest I don't think it exists of itself, things are too fragmented – unless we make it. We can make ourselves a generation. ... It is, I think, part of the politics of my interest in research/discussion: the need to find a way to generate solidarity, to be active not only yourself, but as an advocate for something. 'Just' doing projects is not enough politically, somehow. Some kind of reasoning/argument has to be brought to bear. (personal correspondence with Zoë Svendsen)¹⁰

On a final note, I want to ask whether the creation of *Women With Big Eyes* at Transit V is in any way a vehicle for a new generation and express my hope that the three blindfolded girls take over, address their own concerns and run with it all in performance.

Endnotes

¹ For more information refer to project's website <<http://www.themagdalenaproject.org>>.

² For a fuller account of that experience, see Aston, Elaine, Harris, Geraldine and Simic Lena (2006) "It is Good to Look at One's Own Shadow": A Women's International Theatre Festival and Questions for International Feminism', pp. 169-89 in Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (eds) *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ In January 2005 I attended and performed at 'Magdalena Sin Fronteras' (Magdalena Without Borders) festival in Santa Clara, Cuba and in July 2005 I attended The Articulate Practitioner – Articulating Practice' forum in Aberystwyth, Wales which was organized by Jill Greenhalgh.

⁴ I write about my working processes and methodologies in Simic, Lena (2006) 'An Everyday Privilege', *The Open Page: Women, Theatre, Practice* 12: 95-99.

⁵ The title 'Magdalena grandmothers' was short-lived: invented at Transit IV in 2004, but rebuked at Transit V in 2007. I refer to it in this paper as a useful device through which I can better construct my arguments about the generations. For a photograph of the Grandmothers relaxing at the closing Banquet of Transit IV visit <<http://www.themagdalenaproject.org/archive/transit4.htm>>. This picture includes Jill Greenhalgh, Julia Varley, Teresa Ralli, Brigitte Cirla, Geddy Aniksdal, Gilla Cremer and Gilly Adams. Two prominent members of the network who do not appear in the picture, but could have 'grandmother' status are Cristina Castrillo and Ana Correa.

⁶ At Transit V, the workshop participants could choose between five different workshops: 'Characters, objects and story-telling' with Anna Correa and Cristina Wistari Formaggia, 'The shadow and its body' with Ana Woolf and Ni Nyoman Candri, 'Polyphonic spaces' with Brigitte Cirla and Nathalie Mentha, 'Conversations between movement and song' with Claire Heggen and Helen Chadwick and 'Mask, mood, montage' with Deborah Hunt, Gilly Adams and Raquel Carrió.

⁷ For more information visit <<http://www.avatarbodycollision.org>>.

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries>.

⁹ See Factory Floor <<http://www.factoryfloornetwork.blogspot.com>>. This workshop network grew out of the workshops held at the Lancaster University in 2003-2006, as a part of Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris's AHRC funded research project 'Women's Writing for Performance' <<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/theatre/womenwriting/>>. Factory Floor is a network for women solo performers and writers intending to create a forum for

exploring, sharing and testing solo work. Members include Abi Lake, Caroline Wilson, Clare Duffy, Emily Underwood, Louie Jenkins, Kerstin Bueschges and myself.

¹⁰ Zoë Svendsen is a translator, director and researcher, artistic director of METIS <[http:// www.metisarts.co.uk](http://www.metisarts.co.uk)>.

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Lena Simic

Lena Simic, performance artist, born in Dubrovnik, Croatia, living in Liverpool, UK. Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at Liverpool Hope University. Completed practice as research PhD '(Dis)Identifying Female Archetypes in Live Art' at Lancaster University in 2007. Lena is interested in generating an interventionist feminist arts practice which is informed by its relation to everyday lived experience. Her most recent live art event *Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Simic* (MAP Live, Carlisle 2008) staged the daily routine of mothering. In collaboration with Gary Anderson, Lena is currently running *The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*, a project of events and residencies in the spare room of their council house.