

‘Telling Stories’

Transcription poems
by
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From the words of Julie McNamara

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Greta Minto

Me mum's mum was Greta Minto
she was the best story-teller I ever had.
She taught me everything I knew
about telling a good story.
She kept a tin of photographs,
an old biscuit tin that she'd recommissioned
for her trading stamps for pain.
And she had a story for each one.

Every time I needed soothing,
she would sit me right next to her
and tell me a story about the people in these pictures.
Some stories became favourites and I'd go back and say
tell me about Uncle Charlie from Chicken Farm.
She'd say oh, that man, oh what I know about that man.
And then there'd be a new story.

There would always be some new detail
of the old stories as well and I'd think
'She didn't tell me that last time.
'She never said he had a ginger beard.
'She never said that at all.'
So then I'd ask about the ginger beard
and she'd go off on one about the red beard
and where it came from really.
So she was a fascinating character.
I used to love to listen to her.
So I guess that's where it began.

My family

Much of my early life has been reconstructed
by the story tellers around me.
And by God my family are storytellers.
So my father's Irish Catholic,
my mother's Protestant,
they each came from quite feuding families.
We learnt about conflict around the table,
whenever we got to the table.

It was a very poor family,
we had to move about a lot.
Oftentimes we moved
because we were moving from neighbours,
or we were moving
because our families were not getting on
and they'd just up and go.

Another earliest memory is
suddenly piling everything up
in the back of this van.
And we couldn't fit the dog in, Shep.
Me dad was really pissed off with this dog
because it didn't even belong to us to begin with,
it kind of chose us and stuck to us.
I just remember watching Shep
disappear down the road
because he was chasing the van for a long while.
The dog could never quite catch up with us.
So I never saw Shep again.

My Father's Story

The story my father always told
was that I was born lucky,
because I was born on the full moon.
He was sent down the hill from Mersey Park,
to go down to the Essoldo Bingo Hall
and go and fetch the midwife,
because they'd been knocking up and down the street
to find out where was the midwife.
There were three pregnant women
in that same little run of hovels at the edge of the park.
So the midwife was in and out of the houses pretty regularly.
He couldn't find her, and he was told
that she was down at the bingo.
When he got down the hill, she'd won a line.
So she wouldn't come. He had to wait
until she was allowed to play the next game.
Then she won house.

She didn't actually make it up the hill in time.
She stopped for a sherry.
Me dad was there getting more and more anxious
but this is why he said I was born lucky,
because not only did she win a line, she won house.
Then they made it up the hill.
And finally when they got in I was already born.

My Mother's Story

Now me mother's version of that story is that
the midwife had popped in earlier that night
and told me mum to run up and down the stairs
to start the baby off. And she kind of left her to it
and she said you're not crowning,
you're nowhere near giving birth.
And then she told her to keep some cold water
in a bath up there and if the time came
to run up and down and get some hot water.
Imagine telling a nine months pregnant woman
ready to give birth...anyway whatever.

So she was supposed to get the kettles ready,
get the hot water and go up,
but she had a bath of cold water ready,
because that was supposed to be used,
she was supposed to be using
hot water to cold water to help her give birth.

By the time they got up the hill I was already born,
but the umbilical cord was wrapped very awkwardly
in between my legs, round one leg and then up.
And she said that, you know,
she didn't know what to do with it,
she was exhausted. They walked in
and me dad went ballistic with pleasure
because he thought he'd had a boy.

So she said, he was a drunken eejit,
she said I've no doubt he'd stopped
to celebrate this bloody game of bingo
and by the time the pair of them came in slightly tipsy
I was already born.
She said you might as well have been

sat there smoking a pipe
as far as your father was concerned
because you were a boy.
And he started singing 'Kevin Barry'
and I was going to be called Kevin.

Me mother was obviously distressed by that
and said this is a girl
and then the midwife stepped forward with the scissors
and snipped the umbilical and tied the knot.
He went apeshit and threw her out of the house.
'Dismembering my child.'
So, I mean he was mad, he was mad.

You don't know how much of that was drunken talk
and how much of it was him genuinely believing
that he had the son he'd longed for at last.

Josephine

My mother never believed in going to the hospital
because her first baby was taken from her and set to one side
and she was never allowed to see or touch that child.
She knew she'd had a baby girl,
because she saw them lift the baby out
and she saw the sex of the baby.
So she got as far as naming her Josephine.
I think she called her after herself,
Shirley Josephine Patricia, me mum's named Shirley,
but they took that baby from her
and they set it aside and 'let nature take its course'.
My mother never forgave them
because the next day, the day after,
she'd be crying for her baby, because she said
everybody else had been given their child.
Nobody talked to her. Part of this was punishment
because she was only eighteen and she was an unmarried mother.
She'd been sent up to Edinburgh
where she was at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital
where she gave birth.
It was a medical hospital with its own museum attached.
She remained convinced that they'd kept that baby.
She was screaming to the nurse
to bring her baby, bring her baby, bring her baby.
And the nurse said to her oh you wouldn't want that,
nobody would want that,
it's been thrown in the incinerator.
So of course my mother was screaming
at the thought of her baby
being thrown into an incinerator, why, why?
And the Matron, (this is old-school days),
the Matron came and slapped her face,
told her to pull herself together
and she said, 'You've had a monstrous birth'.

And so those stories were in my life
very early on. Very early on.
Which is why it's mattered so much to me
to be working with the museums
over the last couple of years.

Little Boy Blue

My very early years were kind of coloured
by my father's disappointment for not having a boy.
Because even before I was born
he'd painted the cot blue, the room blue
and everything else blue
and he treated me like a son.
Which is where the story of 'Pig Tales' comes from.
My father writing
the landscape of his disappointment
across my life.
But in the first few years, I was a boy.
And so I was dressed like a little boy,
I behaved like a little boy,
my father took me more seriously.

The child that was born just after me

The child that was born just after me
died after four hours or something.
My mother's first born was the child
that was described as a monstrous birth,
who was literally laid aside,
and not supported to live,
'let nature take its course'.

Then there was our Denise, who has spina bifida.
She had quite a difficult childhood
because my mother never let the nursing staff know
that she'd had an earlier baby who died.
So Den was experimented on in the early parts of her life
and she had quite a lot of
I would say unnecessary operations,
because they thought she had polio.
But if my mother had fessed up to this first child,
they might have put two and two together
and realised it wasn't polio at all.

On the steps

One of my earliest memories
is my grandmother marching us down the cinder path,
which leads to a quarter of a mile
of Merseyside's concentration of care homes.
We were left first of all at St Catherine's Hospital,
I just remember being left on the steps by me grandmother.
And all I can remember, it's weird really,
is I remember the walk,
I remember being left on the steps
and I remember looking down and seeing our feet side by side.
And we had slippers on. And I was ashamed
because I knew we shouldn't have slippers on outside.
And I can still feel my sister's hand
in my right hand sitting on those steps.
But to this day I can't remember
what happened afterwards,
after the Matron telling us off.
I just remember she had great big tits actually
and a sort of blue uniform, I'm sure it began there.
And her yelling at us, what are you doing here?
Well as if we knew what we were doing there!
Know what I mean?

And the reason we were there
was because my grandmother couldn't cope.
But also because my mother
had been put inside St Catherine's Hospital.
And she was giving birth to Linda and Linda died.
And my mother went mad with grief,
so whatever went on,
you can see why the poor woman never liked hospitals.
We were then put in care.

Boots

Disability was a big part of my life from Day One,
from a very early consciousness of the world.
And that was my normal world,
I remember regular appointments,
being taken with my sister
and having our feet measured up.
We were compared like twins.
And they watched me growing and her growing
and measured us constantly.

It always irritated the hell out of me
that she would get an injection or something
and spoonful of something and then a sugar lump.
And I didn't get that. Why didn't I get that?
I always thought whatever she had going for her
she had undivided attention.
So we used to scrap like hell.

She had a caliper on her leg ,
because her foot started turning inward
as she started to walk.
Then the foot stopped growing,
so it was smaller than the other side of her.
She had spina bifida occulta,
which is not as complicated as full-blown spina bifida
where you have a kind of knotty neurons at the end of your spine
and the sac sometimes grows outside your body.
Hers was a much more internal mashup.
It messed with the way her leg grew.
So she has quite an interesting,
well I say has, she hasn't any more
because she had the leg removed four years ago.

She wore a caliper with metal rods and she had great boots,

I was always jealous of those boots.
She had these beautiful brown leather boots.
And I used to think why don't I get boots like that.
And you look back and you think what a shame,
I was the tomboy who thought I was a boy
and was reared as a boy for the first few years.
And she was such a pink fluffy girly girl,
she wanted to do jazz, tap, ballet, Latin American, all things I loathed
and she had to wear these bloody boots that were a constriction.
I remember when we were being bathed
I would leap out of the bath first
so I could try her boots on and stomp around in them.
And my mother would go nuts and clip me one.
'You've got two perfectly good feet, what's wrong with you?
Wear your own shoes.' And I'd think, I really want them.

And the other thing those boots remain in my mind for is
I would get a good kicking out of those boots from my sister
cause when she was annoyed with me
they came in really handy to beat the shit out of me.
And then my mother would come in and my sister would go Waaa,
those kind of crocodile tears. And I'd be the one bruised and beaten.
And me mother would then be smacking me round the house
and clipping me, going how could you do that to your poor sister,
can't you see her struggles?
I'd think she's not going to be struggling at all,
she's whacking me there, she's tooled up.
So these are all early memories that have served me well, let me tell you.

Observations

Quite early on really
we were identified as a problem family
and social services became involved in the family.
I was quite imaginative as a kid,
and so on the one hand whilst I knew things
were in deep shit back at the ranch,
I also knew that there was bigger shit out there.
So I never ever opened up
to the social services or anyone
who snuck into our family to try and offer help.
Poor woman came in, trying to talk to us
and we just closed ranks, it was like,
no, there's no problem inside here.
Move along the bus. Nothing to see here.

I was a wizened, watchful child very early on.
And that's stood me in good stead.
I'm quite a shrewd observer
of the worlds about me, and I move through many worlds,
got friends in high places, friends in low places.
That comes in handy.
It has fed me in terms of the theatre I make,
or the mischief I make on stage.
I've always had a really strong sense of social justice.
Because I kind of knew from an early age
that the mess this family was in,
the mess this family was making,
was very much to do with poverty.

Arrivals

Now, a lot of our family would say
The McNamaras were trying to get out of Ireland
for a long long time. And a lot of people
who saved up and saved up to get a ticket
were hoping to go to the New World.
They really wanted to go to the freedom of America.
And nobody really understood
how long it took to get there.
So the ten hour crossing from Belfast to Liverpool,
they would have thought
after all of that sea-sickness etcetera,
they'd come to the New World.

So a lot of people were just dumped
at Canning Dock or Albert Dock
or wherever they were docking at the time
and said 'we're here'.
And then it took them a while,
maybe a few weeks to realise
they're not in America at all,
they're in a place called Liverpool.
It's not much different
from where they've just come from,
d'you know what I mean?

And that has been the hardship
of a lot of people's stories
of the original kind of the duped tickets, you know,
people who came to the land of the free
and ended up with a life of bloody hard work
in a tiny little city that was actually built on slavery.

June Lancelyn Green

My first interest in theatre was from a teacher,
a drama teacher who was sick and tired
of seeing me up for detentions
when I was so naughty in the early years of school.

I think I was a bright kid but I had too much energy.
I was a bored kid at school,
and so I was always trouble.
I was always *in* trouble.

Her name was June Lancelyn Green.
She said, ah, I can't believe it, not you again,
I'm not sitting in this room with you again.
I went oh alright then I'll go home
and she said no, you won't, you're coming home with me.

She took me home in her car,
these long winding lanes took us past the farmland
and into this place where there was these old grey crumbling walls.
I thought oh my god, the poor woman lives in a care home.
It was like one of these big places you put people away.

Then she sat me at this long, long table,
she opens this bloody big fridge
that was big enough for a homeless family
and gave me a bowl of cold soup.
Then she said,
I'm gonna give you something to read,
and you're gonna read it
and you're gonna read it aloud.

This cold soup I now know
was probably something like Vichyssoise
or gazpacho or something.

I just thought that was really tight,
she'd run out of money for her meter.
Really tight, I thought how sad.

Anyway she had me read,
the first time I'd ever read a play,
never been to theatre or anything like that, you know.
(Theatre for me was working on the market,
that was bloody theatre. Which I loved.
I remember next door to me
'Come on, girls, don't be shy,
get your knickers off Auntie Vi.')

What she gave me to read was 'Othello'.
I would have been thirteen.
And I had never read a play before.
And when I first started to read it, I went,
'There's all these voices, what are all these voices?'
And it really excited me that you could write something like that
that had all these voices come alive on the page.
And I started reading it out loud.
And she said, no, don't read it like that,
read it in your own voice.
So I read it in my own voice.
And I could hear these people speaking to each other
and I was going 'why's he so bad?'
And she said, now, you think you're an outsider, do you?
What do you think was driving Othello?
And there was a really clever way
she got me to think about this guy.
I'm still passionate about that play.

I've often thought actually,
wouldn't it be interesting to do that
with a group of people in a psychiatric hospital,
d'you know what I mean?

People who really are outsiders
and people who really are
absolutely down to the raw base emotion
when it comes to,
'Why did that nurse give you drugs then?
And I've gotta wait for mine.'
'Who gave you that pass to go out last weekend.
'Who gave you that pass then?
'Why were you given a pass and not me?'
You know all of that,
the base kind of animal jealousy
about I ain't gonna let you live unless you let me live.
And relationships built in fragile, fragile spaces.
'Who was that you were consulting with in the day room?
'Who said you could dance with him?
'Who gave you that lipstick?
'Who put that lipstick, did you put that lipstick on?
'I've seen that very same lipstick
'on Soandso's handkerchief.'
All of that, I thought wow!

Art college

I left home about seventeen,
went to art college in Chester,
decided I was gonna be a ceramicist,
I was gonna be a potter first of all
and a photographer.
Then while I was in Chester
I got embroiled in a theatre company.
They were very excited
that I could write stories very swiftly
and move people about in a space very swiftly.
I can imagine them,
because it was such a vivid world I'd come from,
you know I think back to my grandmother really,
Greta Minto with all those stories
and all those children she had to entertain
with her tin of biscuits with no biscuits in.
So I started getting interested in theatre.

Breakdown

I made the biggest mistake of my life
when I was nineteen
at Loughborough University.
I had just chosen the wrong courses really.

Oh my god it was so structured.
And they locked the studios
and you weren't allowed in
unless there was somebody there guiding you,
they were Health and Safety nuts, for god's sake.
Which, raised in the kind of household I was,
just made absolute nonsense,
there was no logic to it whatsoever, d'you know what I mean?

One of the reasons I took a breakdown was because
I couldn't live in this plastic environment, you know,
having worked on the market stalls
and come from the kind of family I did,
being in a university where I was put in these halls,
where you never saw a cat, a dog, a child or an old person,
and were being moulded in a certain way,
it was like Kafka's trial. It was very odd,
very odd for someone like me anyway.
So it didn't sit well with me and I kept getting into trouble.

I did not know what I was doing there,
I was so depressed, I didn't know who I was,
I couldn't fit in, I couldn't find my place there.
I'd so chosen the wrong place to be.

I was adrift without my people;
no matter how dysfunctional my family are,
I knew where I came from.
You look back and you know where you've come from

in order to know where you're going to.
I looked about me and I saw nothing familiar,
I didn't see myself represented anywhere.

The only friend I had
was an indigenous artist from Australia.
We had a bad falling out,
we had a really bad falling out
because she called me a guttersnipe.
And I hit her and I knocked her out.
I'll never forget the shame of it.
And our head of drama took me into his office.

He said, I have to say
she's one of the most difficult women
I've ever worked with,
and I just want to sit here
and have a drink of whisky with you.

And then he said,
I know you've had a really tough time here.
I thought you were the one that could handle her,
I didn't think she'd push every button you have.
He said but there must be some satisfaction
in having hit the target. And I went
well yeah but I wasn't gonna admit that.
He said well, I was quite pleased.
He said look, it is not the way to behave,
you're going to have to publicly apologise,
I have to present an argument to the Dean to keep you
and I said you don't need to do that, I don't want to be here.

So that was the beginning of my unravelling really.
I was absolutely at the end of my tether
and I didn't know how to get out of there.
Or how to step forward and where to go.

He said I think you're getting very depressed
and he said you are very high-wound
and you don't strike me as somebody who would hit out,
and I said well not usually,
I can get angry but I don't usually hit out.

Anyway I was sent to the Occupational Health Team
and they said we're sending you to see a psychiatrist.
They were very worried about my mental health.
Then I just started unravelling
because I wasn't sleeping,
and I was really profoundly depressed.
I couldn't see my way out of there at all.
Everybody else was having a great time
having sex and finding lots of different partners
and all that. But I wasn't, I was just lost.
Trying to find my way
through this bloody awful maze.
And I was so lonely, so lonely.

So I became a psychiatric patient
when I was about twenty.

Transfer

I had to meet with the Dean of the University,
a panel of tutors that I'd had contact with.
I had to provide them with
a sound educational reason for leaving
and a sound economic reason
why I was a good investment for the future.
They're pretty tough questions to ask a nineteen/twenty year old,
especially somebody who's bonkers.
But I represented myself at that meeting.
And I tore shreds off them.
I knew enough to know that I'd been told lies,
that actually when I came down for the open day
the things they'd promised me they'd never delivered.
I'd already spent a year at art college
so I did not need to be spending another six months
doing the golden section.
We weren't even introduced to the studios.
I managed to give them enough
to know that I was gonna be moved.
And I'd already chosen where I was going.
I'd chosen to go to Nottingham, to Trent.
There was a brilliant team there
who had said to me basically
that they were inspired by what I brought to the table,
the ideas I had and the reasons I gave them for leaving.
And I said what I wanna do is combined arts.
And I wanna do drama and art, and I said
I'll decide what I want to do with that later in my life.
Right now I wanna create me own combined arts degree.
So they said there was something called creative arts
and I could choose what I majored in
and what I did to support that. And I said,
I'm coming in to the second year,
I'm not doing another year here,

I've done a year at art college,
I've done a year at university
and they've wasted my time.
I've already planned two placements,
so I'm going to be working in the community.
If you can live with that, so can I.

Reminiscences

I did a term at Trent
and then I did a term with Bazz Kershaw
who is very well known in reminiscence theatre,
working with older people, telling stories and retelling stories,
old people's lives and songs of their era.
He had a company called Fair Old Times.
Bazz Kershaw put a lot of time and investment
into me and the little team we were working with,
I wasn't the only student that wanted to do that.
For a whole term we were out in the community,
gathering stories from people, building relationships,
going back to the various care homes
and retelling those stories with the scripts that they'd given us,
we'd carved if you like, and the costumes they'd chosen
props and objects and artefacts from their day
and we brought them back and brought the show together.
It absolutely thrilled me that we could do that,
that it had a meaningful impact.
Something we were learning about,
something we were doing was about building communities
and making the relationships and reminding people
that actually we're of equal value. All of us.

Pilgrimage

There were spin-offs about being a patient.
I guess I came from such a difficult family,
at least I had somewhere to talk about it.
I became really popular in the student bar
because I had interesting drugs for sale.
I sold most of my prescription drugs.

I hitched to Rome to see the Pope,
to see if the Pope could absolve me.
And I went to the Vatican and he was out.
Took me three days to hitch to Rome.
And I took a mate of mine,
but she had the presence of mind
to stop for a sleeping bag and a pair of knickers.

I didn't stop. I had the clothes I stood up in,
I had nothing, I was filthy,
I had nothing to sleep in,
she wouldn't let me share her sleeping bag.
Yeah, fifty quid and a passport, that's all I had.
But we hitched all the way to Rome.

That was one of the funniest journeys of my life.
And also one of the most dangerous.
It was like a hero's journey.
We were in constant scrapes.

And I learned very swiftly
that men were predators
and that that drive they had,
particularly in their early years,
was basically to nail
the most vulnerable woman they could
and screw her. So I had to protect

the person I was with
because she was much younger than me.

So we went on this crazy journey
to see the Pope, who was probably
out kissing airports across the world.
And then we came back.
And I was put in hospital for a while.

And then I was kind of
in and out of various clinics.
And trying to make sense
of the past and the present
and trying to think about
what was the future gonna look like.

(That was largely why I chose
to train as a drama therapist,
'cause nobody's gonna do that to me again, mate.
I'm gonna find out how you did it.
And it ends up giving me useful tools.)

Mike Devenney

I got into all sorts of trouble the first few years of uni,
crazy trouble really. I had to agree to see a psychiatrist,
and I was an outpatient at the same time as I was completing my degree.
So three times a week I was at Mapperly Park,
St Anne's Hospital, three day week.

I remember coming out of the session at St Anne's
and I'd see this guy sitting on the second floor of his balcony.
Er Er Er ah, are you a nu'er.
Don't you fucking call me a nutter, you spaz.
I'm a spaz. You a nutter?
I went yeah. What in there? Yeah, St Anne's.
Come in here. I got a beer. So I went up to get to know him,
cause I thought any spaz who's got a can must be alright.
So I went up to speak to him and it was Mike Devenney.

Mike Devenney became a great mate of mine,
he gave me my first ever job,
proper job, not like market stalls.
He said he'd been watching me for the last year or so.
Three days a week I'd go into this place
then at the end of the day I'd come out again
and he'd think what the hell are they doing in there.
So he just was interested.
I went up there, opened a can with him,
he said, d'you want to come to a nightclub,
we went to a nightclub and it was a gay club.
And I was just fascinated by this guy.
And I realised he knew a lot of the mates I knew
And then he booked me to do this job
and we became great mates,
we went to all sorts of places together. It was great,
I was writing a piece of work with him
around the music of the Gay Gordons,

because the way he moved,
the way his body leant in a particular way
was just da diddle da dum, da da,derdedededum, da diddle da dum.
And we were doing this
round and round the living room
after a bit of speed and a pint.
The Gay Gordons with me and Mike Devenney
dreaming this mad show we were gonna do one day.
Sadly, we never got to do it.

But we did write quite a bit together
and I made these picture test cards of attitudes to disability,
a whole series of psychological test cards.
We talked about interrupting Rorschach ink blots
and creating our own, sneaking in disabled people
to see if we could get anyone to see disabled people differently.

So Mike became very important in my life.
And then I didn't see him for a while.

'Kill the Fatted Calf'

I wrote a number of plays
that went to Edinburgh,
'Venus and the Fly Trap',
'Cock and Bull Stories',
I can't remember them all.

'Kill the Fatted Calf' was an interesting one.
That was all about gender play,
talk about a precursor to 'Pig Tales'.
It was about how my father
had written his disappointment
across the landscape of my body,
and that I was the prodigal son,
destined to be butchered for the family.

So there were quite a lot of plays
that came before 'Pig Tales'.

Banner Theatre

I got involved with Banner Theatre,
which is a Socialist theatre company.
What I loved about them was
they were passionately political.
They collected stories from other people,
so it was very much like me grandmother's tin really.
They called it actuality.

I was involved at a time when
Pete Yates was the musical director there.
He was utterly brilliant and encouraged me
to write for them as well.
We co-devised this work,
'The Little Red Mole and Other Stories'.
And the little red mole was the Socialist Worker's Party basically.

We'd go in and interview people for the rag.
We would go into factory floors,
we went on the front lines of pickets.
I remember the nurses' strike,
which would have been in 1987 or 88,

We went to the picket lines
and we gathered people's stories.
We'd record them on our little Marantz recorders.
And we would play them out on stage.

I remember going to the miners' wives' club in Stoke on Trent,
we went to Sutton Coldfield, we went around
all of those very kind of left-wing political galas
and delivered this work that we'd pulled together.
So I loved working with Banner Theatre.

Harperbury Hospital

And then after that
I had a quite pronounced mental health issue,
so I was in and out of various clinics.
I decided I was gonna live in Harperbury hospital
where I was on placement,
because some fuckwit of a psychiatrist
had told me I was too sensitive for theatre
and I should try training as a drama therapist.

I had shitloads of therapy
which was cheap I suppose
but for two years I had to be in analysis.
I had to be in group therapy
and in individual therapy
which was quite intense.

But actually it was bloody brilliant
because it gave me an understanding of group processes,
the systems of how power is created,
the structures we put in place to hold power
and how power is moved swiftly
when you're in group or out group.
Those kind of processes have always been helpful to me.

I learned all about psychiatry and psychology
so at least I could piece together
what they'd been doing with me in the clinics.
I understood the systems of,
the power dynamics that would run round a group,
the power dynamics between your psychiatrist,
your consultant, your nursing team,
your crisis management team, and me as a patient.
That was really helpful.

Knitting circle

I ran a knitting circle for about eight to nine months.
It was a women's group in Harperbury Hospital
and you're not allowed to do anything political there
so they insisted I ran a knitting circle
even though I can't knit.
I've never been able to knit
and I've no interest in knitting,
d'you know what I mean?

But it was one of those activities
that was forced upon women patients
and seemed to be soothing and therapeutic
but actually it was because
they could knit things for the hospital shop
and so the hospital made money out of them.

The two years I was at Harperbury
actually changed my life
because I realised I could use
my own experience as a patient
to reach people.
People had a much easier way
of connecting with me
than lots of other staff members
who were still into playing power games
around people that, quite frankly
should never have been patients.

So I spent two years there
but I did get very depressed.

Closing down

Closing those big bins was no bad thing.
However there was nothing in place in the community.
The resources were people's families.
We were literally doing ring around
to anybody we could find in the case notes,
those case notes that were still in existence,
'cause they destroyed a lot of the notes.

People's notes had been doctored,
altered if they were in existence
and most of them were destroyed,
especially for patients who came from wealthy families,
especially for patients whose names had been changed
to protect the family members out there
who'd sexually abused them,
women who'd had babies out of wedlock,
who were defined as 'morally degenerate'
or 'morally deficient'.
People had been put away
for the most spurious of reasons.
And they were all encouraged
never to talk about the past.

Medical

I got a job as a residential social worker.
I had just got the letter saying
they were delighting in the success of my application.
It was to work in a place called Bleak House.
I'd gone to meet the staff, we'd sorted out the rota,
we'd been for a Christmas meal together
and I was due to start on the sixth of January.

On the day I was due to start
a letter arrived under my door, hand-delivered.
It basically said they were very sorry to disappoint me,
I'd been unsuccessful in my application.
So I ignored that letter,
and I turned up for work to shame them.
The guy that answered the door just went bright red in the face.
He said, but we sent you a letter.
I said and what would that letter say?
He went, I'm really sorry, you failed your medical.
I went, what medical? I didn't have a medical.
I then discovered I had failed a medical
that I was never invited to attend.
So I said who failed me? He said, your GP.

I went to see that GP. I told him he'd lost me a job
and that he needed to put that right.
Actually, he was quite a reasonable guy,
and he said well let's have a look at what's in your notes.
I said, well let's have a look at what you wrote to the occupational health team,
let's start there and work our way backwards.
What he'd written will never leave me.
Because he wrote two lines.
'This woman is fundamentally emotionally unstable
and unfit for work.' And we'd never met. We'd never met, Allan.
I said is there anything you want to say

before I go further. And I said,
I will of course go for legal advice.
And you and I know I will win.
He apologised, actually,
and he said I will do what I can to put this right,
I'll get in touch with the occupational health team,
I'll suggest they see you for a medical.
I said, you know what, I'm gonna go one better than that.
I'm going to suggest you see me for a medical.
Because you've never met me before.
I'm going to suggest you 'fess up
and say you've made a terrible mistake,
you've never met this woman before,
she's new to the town and only just registered.
And you'd mixed me up with somebody else.
That's what I'm gonna suggest for you.
And that's what we did.

While I was there I said,
I'll tell you what we'll also do.
I want to go through my notes
and you tell me why you came to that decision.
What on earth have you possibly read
in somebody's notes you've never met?
I said you were clearly frightened,
so I said what frightened you so much?

He said, he'd read stuff about my mother's attempted suicide,
my sister's attempted suicide,
I said okay so you think I'm going to commit suicide.
I said, more than anything, I'm more likely to kill them.
So I said, had you spoken to me,
you would know that I'm not likely at this point in my life
to try and attempt suicide.

Anyway the long and the short of it was,

he did the medical and agreed.
We went through the papers,
I ripped up my notes that I didn't want in there.
(Sadly I found out later that they follow you round,
that they're on some kind of computer nowadays
and they reappeared in the notes.)
But I ripped them up in front of him
and put them in the bin. And he wrote a letter
to the effect that of course I was fit for work.

Placement

It was a residential setting for people with learning disabilities
and for me it was a move on from Harperbury Hospital.
I felt like I'd become very depressed working there,
d'you know what I mean,
because I thought I was only on placement for a few months
but once you go into a place like that
you can't give up on people.

I was determined to try and get people out.
And I did use all of the kind of
drama therapy techniques and group processes I had
to try and inform the people I was working with
to give them a chance to have an impact
on decisions made about them.

We would use our sessions
to role rehearse the case conferences.
I would literally encourage them
to say what they needed to say. To work through
who they were most frightened of in those sessions.
And how they might behave differently
so that they could change the outcome.
Maybe they could have an impact
on choosing where they wanted to live next.
Choose who they wanted to live with,
choose how they left that place.

Almost all of them
had very, very little say.
There was no such thing as a review tribunal
or a proper case conference
where you were represented.
All I had was me, lunatic here,

offering them role rehearsals
and forged paper work as preparation.

All of those things had an impact

All of those things had an impact
on who I became and what kind of work
I was going to write about or make on stage.
All of those jobs, all of those earlier struggles
had a bearing on who I later became
and who I am today, you know,
the decisions I've made.
I've come foul of the police,
I've been sectioned on a 136 twice,
petty messy sections,
I lost my job, my home,
my life as I then knew it.

I remember at one point ringing Joe Bidder up
from a police station and going Joe,
I'm allowed a phone call, I'm afraid
you're the only number I can ring just now but it's because
I think you thought I was compering tonight, didn't you?
And he went ooh yes,
I'm so sorry Julie, where are you.
And I went well I think I'm with Haringey police team.
But we're gonna be going
to St Anne's Hospital tonight.
So I won't be compering your show,
sorry about that.

Hilary Porter still cracks up laughing about it.
Most people when they're mad
would try and get out
and it'll be a phone call to a solicitor
or a phone call for help,
you, no, you don't wanna let someone down
so you're ringing Joe Bidder going
I'm sorry I can't compere tonight,
d'you mind taking the show?

So there's been times when my own mental health
has been to the edges of despair.
And there's been times when, really
I'd ripped up my own life and started again, you know.

Skyros

When I first left Harperbury Hospital,
I responded to an advert in City Limits magazine.

They were looking for a creative arts therapist
to set up a personal development holiday village
out in Skyros island. So I thought, 'I can do that'.

I end up joining this team of twelve people
setting up a therapeutic community out in Greece,
on an island called Skyros.
I worked for Skyros for twenty-six years.

That's probably the longest relationship in my life,
my relationship to that island.
I found a lot of peace there.
The island is beautiful,
it has the oldest traditions in Greece
still alive in Skyros.

I met some extraordinary humans
who were into personal development
and I met some equally bonkers humans
gathered on those strange spaces and places
where creativity meets madness.

I found a way to make peace with myself.

I found a way to make peace with myself.
But there were some quite big struggles along the way.
Mostly around getting acceptance
from my family and my own communities,
I say plural because Catholic, Protestant,
different factions in the family,
around being a lesbian or bisexual.
Or even refusing to marry
or not being interested.
Or, you know, there were all sorts of things like,
they were all so disappointed
when I left university, so disappointed.
I remember me father writing to me
and saying he longed to have my photo
in a cap and gown on his television set.
That really touched me for a while,
and I ended up crying about it.
Then I sat and thought about it,
I thought how bloody selfish!
I was having hell on earth at that place,
where I just got utterly lost.
You want a picture of me
in a cap and gown on your telly.
You don't even have a television.
And I started thinking about where he lived
and I thought, he hasn't lived in his own home
for god knows how long.
Him and me mum split up when I was twelve and a half,
because he was very violent.
And drunk. And mad.

Hackney Independent Living Network

I came back to Hackney
and was part of a community
of people with learning disabilities,
an independently living network.
And it was about setting up community
for people who were in independent flats,
but they needed a meeting once a week,
cooking together occasionally,
a way to have a friendship group.
They also needed somebody there as a first port of call,
very much the way we ran the community out in Skyros,
community meetings every day,
creating friendship groups and what have you.
And so I was running a sunny funny farm
in a Hackney highrise.

Training nursery

I saw an advert for a research worker down here in London.
It was attached to Southwark Training Group.
They wanted to set up a nursery
because they'd decided they wanted to work
with children under five,
but also people who train them,
people who teach children under five
and people who train nursery workers
because they were working with
the whole concept of 'childcare shapes the future'.
The research funding came from the GLC,
and it was about finding people to work with
who were going to challenge the structures of traditional education.
They were gonna work
with an equalities structure and integration.
And they were passionate about integration
around race, culture, sex, gender, sexuality and disability.
They were not so good around class,
they were not so good around religion, I would say,
it was probably their worst.

I worked with them for two years.
I bullshit my way into that job,
because I've never worked as a researcher before.
I read a chapter on statistics
the night before I set foot in there.
And so my research was flawed,
my methods were completely made up
on the back of an envelope that I'd carried
since reading a chapter the night before the interview.
Made the whole bloody thing up myself.
However it was to raise funds for a training nursery
and the training nursery was to be a model of good practice.
I espoused all of their beliefs around social justice,
I was absolutely the right person,

thinking and doing the roll-out and action plan
around disability and integration,
but I was absolutely the wrong person
in terms of presenting them with a written argument
backed up with statistics and research. I was not a researcher.
But neither were they, so they didn't know
what they were looking for at the interview.
And so I started to rebuild my life.
I worked in adult education institutes,
I became a special educational needs lecturer,
whatever that is, special educational needs,
there are all those labels.

I moved into further education, adult education
and I still worked in Skyros every summer,
creating new courses. It gave me
a place to experiment, working with groups,
looking at power and abuse of power,
I made some incredible creative networks.

Then I had another breakdown,
massive blowout in '94.
And I lost me job in Hackney Adult Education Institute.

Spate

I went through a period of a lot of deaths.
There were eleven deaths in ten years.
It started with my best friend's younger cousin,
who was about to come and live in my house,
he was renting a room off me.
And he was murdered.

It changed my feelings about that house,
it changed everything in our lives at that time,
but it's just bad luck, a string of deaths, you know.
One was a mate of mine
who died of cancer at the age of 28.
It was just an extraordinary,
this is through my early thirties to early forties,
you know that ten years,
eleven deaths was quite extraordinary.

We'd just come out of the other side of the eighties,
when a lot of gay men were dying of AIDS,
and AIDS-related conditions.
I knew people who had died,
and my best friend from Skyros,
the love of his life had died with an AIDS-related condition.
So there was all that shock of the eighties kind of thing.
But I felt I'd got by that
because as a lesbian it didn't impact in the same way.
But also I didn't know anybody that close,
even my friend Julian's partner,
I wasn't that close to him when he died.

Suddenly in the early '90s,
there was this whole spate of deaths
which sent me mad with grief.
I was working in Hackney Adult Education Institute
and I took time out.

And first of all I did three weeks
in this place called The Arbours,
which was a crisis centre set up by Joseph Burke and R.D. Laing,
they were kind of known as the anti-psychiatrists.
I got a lot of help and I thought
oh, this is great, d'you know what,
I could go quietly mad here,
do a bit of pottery, bit of dancing,
interpret me own bonkersness, whatever,
music therapy, great!

And by then I was well involved with Survivors Speak Out,
Joe Bidder and Frank Bangay,
Debbie McNamara, Ali Smith.
I've remained friends with all of them. So that was my new tribe.
And then I got involved in disability arts
through Colin Hambrook,
Joe Bidder had asked me to do some writers' workshops,
I'd got involved through Nuala Conlan,
who was researcher at the psychiatric department in Hackney,
got me interested in Survivors' Poetry.
And I thought oh, this sounds just up my street.
And I loved it, absolutely loved it.
My tribe is disability arts, I'd met my people.

London Disability Arts Forum

It would never have occurred to me
to apply for a job at LDAF
until Jeanette Copperman,
who I was writing stuff with at the time,
because I was part of a women and mental health network
and we were writing these academic articles,
we were running a newsletter and all the rest of it.

Jeanette Copperman was on that network
and she said to me one day
I've just seen a brilliant job advertised,
it's got your name on it.

I went what are you talking about?
I said I haven't had a job for years
and I don't know what I think about it,
(cause this is after I'd lost my home and my job
and you know, spent four years with nothing
and felt like I'd made a complete mess of me life).
She said no, have you heard of LDAF
and I said I think they're in the same office as Colin.
Well, there's a job going. As the Co-ordinator.

I went they wouldn't want me,
I said that's for disabled people.
She went have you seen the length of your psychiatric record?
And I went, yeah, what you saying?
Well, I'm just saying that actually,
under the social model of disability,
that will disable you for the rest of your life.
I mean, a psychiatric record that length,
frankly you will never get any equal par
with your non-disabled peers in the labour market.

So I started reading up on it,

the social model, thinking about it.
I had this application in me bag for ages.
Then I took it home one day and filled it in.

Festival

I ended up working for eight years for LDAF.
Set up the London Disability Film Festival in '98,
we ran the first one in '99, on May 1st.

It was the day after the bomber,
the nail bomb in The Admiral Duncan in Old Compton Street.
I'll never forget suddenly feeling
very queer and very at risk and in London
very aware that people had died last night
and here we were at the Lux,
opening our Disability Film Festival.

I'd been thinking and thinking about it
since I went to Turin in '98.
I remember looking round the room
and saying there's a gap in the market,
I know we can do our own Disability Film Festival.
I said it in the room and Deb Williams
who was working with us on the Consortium for Opportunities for Volunteers
said no, you got no budget, you'll never do it.
I'll get people to charge us later, I said,
I bet you we'll get enough people coming in
to make money on the ticket,
we can pay em afterwards.
I'll get people who are interested in film
to come and talk to us.
That's how we got people involved in the first festival, you know,
we had no audio-description,
I remember sitting whispering to people on the third row,
telling them what I was looking at, not one clue,
I think we had two sign language interpreters
who'd donated their skills for next to nothing
and their hands were worn out,
God love em, and their brains were fried.
And the Lux, of course,

the Lux gave us their venue for nothing the first year.

Commission

In 2000, Pat Place was talking to me
about Xposure Festival of Disability Arts.
She was putting a call out for new playwrights,
So I said 'what about born-again playwrights?'
She said 'what do you mean?'
I said 'well, I've been writing plays since I was fourteen
but I haven't written for a long time'
and she went 'I didn't know you write plays'. And I said yeah.
So actually what they were looking for at that time
was just the treatment,
before you wrote the play.
I can't remember what the theme was,
it was something to do with the flawed body, basically
or the body imperfect.
And so I wrote 'Pig Tales'.

'Pig Tales'

'Pig Tales' was about a character called Pig.
It's set inside the nursery rhyme
'This Little Piggy Went to Market'.
Five stories gave us a great structure
so this little piggy went to market,
this little piggy stayed at home,
this little piggy had roast beef,
this little piggy had none,
this little piggy went wee wee wee all the way home.
And the thread though the narrative was Pig's experiences
set against the psychosis of the Catholic church.
And the psychiatric hospital.

The confusion between religion and psychiatry
has always been a thread through my life.
That was about Pig's experiences
of both the church and psychiatric system.
And what happens to Pig as a character
when they hit the streets with that certainty
that they're a boy and they're a manchild.
It's about being confronted
with other people's assumptions of who you are,
and the assumptions they write across your body
when they see you and how you present in the world.

I had as a young child dressed in my father's clothes,
but even as a tiny kid
my father had treated me as his son,
he always treated me more seriously
than the other girls in our family.

Which actually meant
I was taken seriously, I had privileges,
I was taught how to steer the boat,
and how to handle the oars,

how to scull, how to deal with the engines,
how to drive, I was driving at fourteen.
All of those privileges
that the others were not offered at all.

So 'Pig Tales' was very much about my experience,
but it was also about smashing the binary
and the idiocy of gender fixity.
And the treatment of women and girls
inside that ludicrous system,
which we're socialised into.

Long before all of the politics
around gender confusion or gender fixity now,
I was smashing binary apart, way back then.
I wrote my piece in 2000.

Finally it hit the stage in 2001
and then it toured for four and a half years internationally,
long before it toured this country,
because it was picked up by a psychiatrist
called Dr Bernie de Lord, who was working
with the Mental Health commission in New Zealand.
So it went from Oval House Theatre,
where it did a three week run,
straight out to New Zealand.
And Philip Patston saw it in New Zealand
and booked it for his Giant Leap Festival in 2005.
And then from there it was picked up for a festival in Sydney.

And so it started doing New Zealand, Australia and it went to Canada
and then finally Jo Hemmant came to talk to me about
what she had seen when she saw it at Jackson's Lane.
She said have you thought about
coming to us for funding at the Arts Council?
It never occurred to me
I could get Arts Council funded.

She said we have something
called an emerging artists award.
So in my early forties I got an emerging artists award,
which always strikes me as ironic, you know,
like you're gonna be emerging for ever, aren't you,
especially if you're a disabled artist.

'Pig's Sister'

Pig's Sister was many many years rolled forward.
It's about Pig on respite in a care home
in Pig's ageing dotage
coming across his ancient embittered sister,
who was left in a care home
when she was an infant
and refused to leave.

I remember the set design,
staring into the corner of this room
with a great big TV screen on one side,
the remote out of distance, out of reach
and these two embittered people
at each end of this row of chairs.
Underneath is
the dead nurse who's died on duty.
The whole conceit of that play
was how these secrets are gradually unveiled
as the corpse is rotting between them.

The joy of my life
was when I directed that piece.
First of all I acted in it,
we had Jessica Higgs directing.
After Edinburgh Fringe
it went to Liverpool to DaDaFest and I directed it.
So I stepped out of the action
and cast two men in the roles of the women.
Playing with gender again.

My half-brother, Michael McNamara, played Cissie,
who is the embittered sister
who's been left on the care steps and refused to leave.
And conducting Fay Christiansen
who played the dead nurse,

literally choreographing her rigor mortis.
The beats in the story
were like the beats in her body
when she had these spasms in her legs,
her feet, she wore these ruby-red slippers,
which I've still got at home,
and she would click her heels at certain times.
That was a joy to do, that piece.

Vital Xposure

I was an anomaly funded by the Arts Council as an RFI,
there was something called Regularly Funded Individual Artists.
And then they changed the goalposts in 2010 and said,
we want to keep funding you
but we can't fund you as an individual artist any more.
They said you have to join another company
or create your own. And I thought
nobody's gonna want me, who's gonna, honestly,
who's gonna recruit me,
that's not gonna happen. I'm too mouthy,
I'm too difficult and I speak the truth too often.
And so I set up a company.

And the two groups of people
I still feel are the most disavowed voices in society
are mental health users and people with learning disabilities.
And so they are constantly the people
whose stories I'm mining and bringing in centre stage
and constantly the people I wanna work with actually.

Vital Xposure began in 2010.
We registered the company at the beginning of 2011
and we've produced 'Crossings', 'The Knitting Circle',
'Let Me Stay', 'The Disappearance of Dorothy Lawrence',
'Blue Pen', 'Voices from the Knitting Circle'.

And then I've also written
'It's My Move' for Face Front Theatre,
'Laundry Boy', part of the writing team for Face Front,
'Whisper Me Happy Ever After' which is written
from the testimonies of children surviving violence,
'Pullen's Parade', 'Pullen's Party',
'Hold the Hearse', 'Medicine's Monstrous Daughters',
So we produced about ten plays since 2011.

'Crossings'

A young woman who's heavily pregnant runs on to Canning Dock.
She's been impregnated by this gang
and she's trying to escape the drugs
on the front of the docks in Liverpool.
She runs on to a ferryboat
and this ferryboat mists off
into the middle of the Mersey
and transforms into the Zong,
which is Liverpool's ship of shame.

It is the ship that was at the heart of a scandal,
the ship's doctor who had
disposed of 133 enslaved African people.
The captain was done for fraud
because he tried to claim for losses at sea.
He was never done for murder,
he was done for fraud.
But that was the first time that in a court of law
a price was put on a human being's head
and 132 people died, but the 133rd person survived.
They crawled back up the bow of that ship
and got inside the food store where they survived
and they hid until they reached dry land.
And then they told the tale
of what had happened to the other 132 people.

So the conceit I created was that
there were three women,
three ghosts in that ship,
who collide across time and space
and they're like the ghosts in a modern-day Scrooge really
and they present the young girl who's pregnant
with stories from the past,
moral dilemmas that challenge and test her,
so that in the end she has to fight

for the life of her unborn child
before she's allowed off that ship.

So it's a great moral tale actually,
but it's about sexual slavery, it's about forced migration
and it tells the real stories
that I found on museum walls.
So the griot in the story I found in the British Museum,
Nzinga was the name I gave
the slave who had survived the Zong.
Katherine Heggerty was a story
I'd found on the walls in Petone Museum,
which is a settlers' museum in New Zealand.
And her story's also told
in Te Papa Museum in Wellington.
And Shelley's story, the young girl who's pregnant,
was from a girl in a gang in Liverpool
who spoke of what she'd had to do for thirty quid.

'The Knitting Circle'

'The Knitting Circle' I think is my strongest piece of work and it's the one I'm probably most proud of.

It's written from the testimonies of people who survived those hospitals, that long-stay care system.

I found an old cassette tape in the basement of my flat, I found that in about 2010 and I started listening to it and I thought oh my god they're the women from that knitting circle, I wonder what happened to them.

So I started putting feelers out through Survivors Speak Out, through Out of Sight Out of Mind, which is an online community of former patients and, actually, mostly former staff, I put feelers out through national MIND, through local MINDs and I put feelers out through the Mental Health Media Foundation, who were gathering testimonies of people who'd survived those bins.

I started writing 'The Knitting Circle' in 2011. The first scene I wrote is probably the funniest scene in the whole play, where they all come in and they look at what seems to everybody else outside the system to be an identical circle of chairs.

No. Everybody knew those chairs intimately. Every scratch, every pick of paint, every mark, they knew whose chair was whose.

It was a scene I remembered very well when I met a former patient called Betty, wonderful woman, who actually came from a very wealthy Jewish family

and they had put her away because she'd been sexually abused.
So she was put away for bringing shame on the family.
And she was an amazing patient, an amazing human,
she managed to keep privacy around her bed
and she was the only in-patient I knew
who had her own things nobody would touch.
She was fastidious and clean
but she collected shit. She rolled it up
and she kept it in all of her things.
So nobody would touch her handbag, her clothes
because she had it in her pockets,
she knew exactly which shit she'd done where
and where it was going to be.
And unbeknown to me
she took a liking to my knitting bag
with all the needles and the patterns in.
And so the scene I wrote was
the scene about the shit in the bag.
Because she took that bag out to the toilet with her,
did a shit in it and brought it back
and nobody wanted to sit near her,
nobody wanted to touch that bag or do knitting on that day.
So that's the first scene I wrote in the Knitting Circle.

And the rest of it was from stories that we gathered
because I cast six actors who had
some knowledge of mental health issues,
either their own lived experience
or connection with someone in the family or they'd trained.
And I matched them up with six former patients
and six former members of staff
and I sent them off with three questions.
Who are you? What are you doing here?
And where should you be?

And I brought the six actors back
into an annexe next to the hospital

and hotseated them with the director
and asked them questions
and we got the stories out of them. I recorded it.
And then what I did was gathered the themes
out of all those responses and put those themes
that kept coming through the responses into the play
and wrote the play from the gathered testimonies.
But I ended up with something like seventy-two story-tellers. I was flooded.

I didn't realise that people had never been given an opportunity
to talk about what had happened to them,
there'd never been any counselling,
there'd never been any space
to actually tell how it was,
what was it like for them.

Reunion

Colin had published something in Disability Arts,
and somebody got in touch with Colin
and said they were trying to reach me.
Was I the artist who'd worked in Harperbury Hospital?
Colin gave them my email
and they got in contact with me.

So I rang them up and this person was a care worker.
And she said I've got some people here
who'd like to meet you again.
She said I want you to meet us
in the grounds of Harperbury Hospital.

And they were three of the original members
of the knitting circle.
Anyway we talked it through and I said okay,
I'll come and meet you.

I couldn't believe it was still in existence,
the only thing they'd changed was
they'd brought down the pillars on the front gates
so they were smaller. And they'd brought in
the perimeter fence so you couldn't see
some of the awful big institutionalised lock-in wards.

And then the three women
who'd been in the knitting circle
arrived in a minivan.
But that was great
because they turned the tables on me
and they wanted to interview me
and talk to me about their life experiences in there.

One of them took one look, she went
'That's Julie! We know 'er

'she used to give us all the money, didn't she?
'She used to bring all the money in.'
I thought god, that is what I did.
Because they had never managed money,
and they were about to be decanted into the community
I would bring in bags of coins
and we'd play shop together,
or we'd play banks together.
It was all part of rehearsing
what would happen when they went out.

We had an extraordinary reunion
of all our yesteryears.
And we stayed in touch ever since.
They then came to see The Knitting Circle,
they wanted to see the show.
And what was wonderful was
them just laughing uproariously
at the characters and these stories they could hear.

I'm very proud of that piece of work
because it was faithful and because it was creative.
People were hearing their own stories at last.
They had a sense of completion, of being heard.

Magdalene Monologues

I think it was in 2013,
Taoiseach Enda Kenny in the Dáil in Dublin
declared a public apology
to all the women who'd been put away
in Magdalene laundries.
We didn't hear anything
over here in England, there was no apology
for all the lives that were lost, the years,
countless years wasted in those systems.
And so I began to make a link with the Magdalene laundries
and made a public apology at the end of every show.

In 2016 I was asked again
could I take 'The Knitting Circle' over
to some of the Magdalene Laundries survivors in Ireland.
I'd taken Deni Francis, who was one of the actors
who'd worked in all three stages
and her heritage is Indian Irish.
I said you're absolutely perfect
to bring into Ireland to do this show.
I want you to do three monologues,
a monologue from a former patient,
a monologue from a former member of staff
and a former patient who became a member of staff,
who still lives in one of those hospitals. She never got away,
but she uses her role to change the system.
And that's what Debbie did,
that's what we did between us.
And we went to Ireland
and we delivered an abridged version of the Knitting Circle
and Q and A sessions
for the survivors of the Magdalene Laundries
who were at that conference there.
And it's still gathering momentum as we go.

‘Whisper Me Happy Ever After’

I’m very pleased with
‘Whisper Me Happy Ever After’
which is in its sixth year of touring London schools.
That was created from testimonies
of children between nine and twelve
who’d survived violence at home
or violence in their country of origin.
And what that had done to them
in terms of the mental health issues they carry.

It’s a play that tells their stories
but that gives them three possible endings.
It’s done through forum theatre,
so that they can challenge the story
and turn it around,
they can step back into the story at the end
and choose how the ending or the outcomes work for them.
And they can choose differently than, you know,
the negative stories they’ve lived.
I’m particularly pleased that that’s still doing the rounds.

Telling the Truth

I'm not interested in making it palatable,
I'm not interested in making it nice
you know 'let's be the National Theatre of Disability' nonsense.
Not a damn bit interested.
And if they want to take the funding away from me they will.
I keep saying it and they haven't yet,
I said it in Disability Arts Online recently.
I will unveil some unpalatable truths
but they need telling.

The thing I'm playing with at the moment
is layering access inside the work
before we get it on stage,
because I'm sick and tired of seeing
really dodgy aesthetics with access plonked on somehow,
some uncomfortable clunky sign language
in dialogue mirrored on stage and then I think
what ever happened to the access aesthetics?

So I'm exploring that at the moment
through a whole project called 'Trouble with Access'.