Chapter 6

Alchemical Adaptations:

Performing Leonora Carrington’s *The Hearing Trumpet*

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This is the story of how our theatre company, *Dirty Market*[[1]](#footnote-1)*,* made a stage adaptation of Leonora Carrington’s *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974)*,* how our understanding of the book and its author changed over time, and what happened to us when we tried to stage it.

In *The Hearing Trumpet*, Marian Leatherby, a ninety-two-year-old woman who is very deaf and lives in a hot country far away from her homeland, dreams of returning to the snowy north of her youth. Marian’s adventures begin when her eccentric friend gives her an intricately decorated hearing trumpet she has found in a flea market. This curio reveals hard truths; Marian’s unloving family are sending her away to a sinister sounding home for old ladies, run by religious charlatans. Marian’s despair soon turns to curiosity however, when she meets the characterful fellow residents, is transfixed by the disconcerting portrait of a winking abbess overlooking the dining room, and is given a secret text revealing the truth about the nun and the suppressed herstory of the world. The residents band together, find their collective voice, and, through initiation into ancient female mysteries, recover their innate ability to resist. Together they survive the ensuing apocalypse, overcome the patriarchy, and restore cosmic order. In this way, Marian transforms dreaming into doing, takes her own authority and finds her way to the north of her memory - or it finds its way to her.

Believing at first we were adapting the book, we came to realise the book was adapting us –personally, creatively and collectively. This chapter is about that adaptation process: our struggles, failed attempts, incomplete revelations and breakthroughs. Rather like Surrealism’s Exquisite Corpse[[2]](#footnote-2), it is made up of a series of apparently mismatched pieces; its trajectory, certainly not linear, is more like the “seed collecting” Ursula K. Le Guin talks about in her *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986)essay, which we will refer to later. *Dirty Market* is also a constantly shifting and changing entity, and this chapter charts our deepening sensation of commonality with narrator Marian and her Santa Brigida care home companions. Marian would not have been able to make her transformative journey without the unique and peculiar contributions of her unlikely comrades. So, *Dirty Market*’s ragtag collection of performers, writers, musicians and artists, brought exciting, deep, amusing, supportive and creative elements to the process of adapting *The Hearing Trumpet*. The pasted fragments to be found here form a scrapbook of memories, a little like something Marian might have kept in her time-resistant, practical, tin trunk-for-survival - or the kind once found, perhaps, lying at the bottom of a packing box in the attic of Crookhey Hall.[[3]](#footnote-3). Our references are sometimes child-like, and this chapter responds to a process of making that was filled with red herrings, misdirection, double backs and sudden tumbles down metaphorical rabbit holes, or perhaps, up ladders and down snakes bringing us back to square one. As painful as this often was, we also experienced exhilarating lucid intervals in our process of coming to understand the book, witnessed performance breakthroughs, and consumed copious amounts of tea and biscuits along the way.

Begin at the beginning

We are theatre makers, co-founders and directors of *Dirty Market Theatre Company*, and alongside meeting the demands of other jobs, families and our lives, from 2014 to 2017 we immersed ourselves in the world of Leonora Carrington. Our production of *The Hearing Trumpet* opened to audiences in April 2017 at Theatre Deli’s Old Library[[4]](#footnote-4) in South East London, and played in an “unplugged” version during June 2017, to a special audience of local primary school children and older adults with dementia, at the ORTUS[[5]](#footnote-5) in Camberwell, London.

For over a decade, we have worked as a theatre collective building up a repertoire of devised work. We use a magic realist lens to focus on the murkier and more ambiguous aspects of domestic relationships, and to explore our internal landscapes; emotional, psychological, and spiritual. For example, in 2007, we began working with Euripides’ *The Bacchae*. In our adaptation *Bacchaefull*, the chorus was made up of a community group of real life city workers; choruses were collaged out of their life experiences and personal responses to the play. The show took place in a disused Victorian sawmill in Peckham, London. Inspired by *Electra*, we made *Something About You (makes me want to hurt you)* in 2011. This explored the repressed rage of an emotionally abandoned young woman, manifesting itself in the troubling appearance of an ancient mythic world, disturbing the woman’s contemporary reality. In 2013, we made a piece called *Oxbow Lakes*, where parents become lost in their own child’s disturbed and frightened mind, and are forced to confront their ambivalent feelings towards him; this piece was inspired by television detective serials, dark fairy stories and witches’ covens.

In fact, our company title – *Dirty Market* – references a childhood nick-name for a local flea market, lost now to regeneration. The original Dirty Market was a smoky place, filled with mountains of what could easily be classified as rubbish – old curtains, furniture, geegaws, books, china, kitchenalia and so on – but if you knew how to search through the chaos and murk, there were magical treasures to be found. This memory inspired a theatre-making process for us, where all material is considered potentially valuable – even if the content and connections are not immediately visible – and where the rehearsal, devising and writing process is about realising that material’s power, discovering its place in the whole. When we met as a company early in 2014 to begin work on our next project, we started as usual, sharing what was preoccupying each of us at that time. This meeting touched on a broad range of topics: from nineteenth-century spiritualists, gurus and con artists, to Teresentadt, the Nazi “show” concentration camp where inmates were made to pretend that they were being well looked after for the benefit of international inspectors. We were all interested by questions of age; how age is perceived, how care of the elderly is in crisis in the UK[[6]](#footnote-6). We also thought of our own parents facing the journey into their later years and how they were dealing with this new reality.

The Rabbit Hole

And then we came across *The Hearing Trumpet,* and felt this book was just the right thing for us:

“There are times,” said Carmella, “when I am clairvoyant. When I saw the trumpet in the flea market I said to myself ‘That is just the right thing for Marian’. I had to buy it at once, I had a premonition.” (Carrington, 2005:12)

This strange, short novel seemed to synthesise all our material: abject ageing, cults and gurus, show camps and fakery… and a voyage inside.

After reading it with the other members of the company, we decided that, for the first time, we would have a go at a formal adaptation, and applied to The Carrington Estate for permission. This felt like firm footing, a good step forward for us as a theatre company. We chatted confidently about how Leonora’s work would be a perfect fit into our company’s vision and trajectory… little realizing Leonora doesn’t fit into anyone else’s world, and, rather like Lewis Carroll’s Alice and her journey into Wonderland[[7]](#footnote-7), it would be us, reforming ourselves again and again, to fit into hers:

“Well I’ll eat it,” said Alice, “and if it makes me larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me smaller I can creep under the door; so either way I’ll get into the garden, and I don’t care what happens!” (Carroll, 1993: 23)

In fact, we often use an extant text (usually a classical play, but not always) as a base structure or source when constructing new work. Typically, after an initial reading and discussion, we respond imaginatively to the text, creating micro-performances pieced together out of images, threads and themes. We devise around the source material, write our own content inspired by this central work, compose music and choreography, aiming to create some kind of hybrid Frankenstein’s monster of a piece, which we hope, will end up taking on a life of its own without destroying the creators in the process.

An Encounter

“In imagination at least, I often find myself, eyes blindfolded, back at the wheel of that wild car.” (Breton, 1999: 153)

In a footnote towards the end of *Nadja* (1928), André Breton describes a moment where, driving along together, Nadja places her foot over his, presses the accelerator and moves her hand to cover his eyes. He resists. Looking back on this moment, however, he comes to understand the subversive potential contained in the offer, the potential for true sight in the moment after he closes his eyes: “…the oblivion of an interminable kiss, desiring to extinguish us, doubtless forever, save to each other…” (Breton, 1999: 152).

We felt, during our first attempts adapting *The Hearing Trumpet*, a little like Breton at the steering wheel. Eyes fixed unblinking on the road ahead, resistant to the voice whispering to us to close our eyes and trust instead in some kind of inner sight. Too much was at stake: this was not the right time to leave behind tried and tested methods, to go into the unknown.

At first, our adaptation process followed traditional page-to-stage models, focusing on pure narrative storytelling. However, *The Hearing Trumpet* resisted this straightforward approach; the spirit of the book was more anarchic and elusive than that and, by slavishly following the events of the novel, time and again, we lost the spirit of it. Rather like the Abbess’s story revealed to Marian in the novel: “What I actually came for was to bring you a little book. I know you do not enjoy reading. This will be different” (Carrington, 2005: 72), *The Hearing Trumpet* started to “act” on our company in a profound way. Once read, we could not unread it, or un-know it, and we couldn’t step away from it. It riddled us, it provoked and taunted: why did something so light-hearted present such an enormous challenge? Why would the simplest moments turn into forty-five pages of convoluted script that simply didn’t work? Why did a scene, that seemed so good on the computer screen, fall apart when we got it on its feet? And how were we going to stage the apocalyptic end on a limited budget?

It was only after we began to look at the book as an active encounter, rather than as a fixed text, and attempt to think of the adaptation as a way to give an audience an experience of that encounter, that progress began to be made. Was it a Surrealist encounter, an uneasy but vital meeting: the kind where you get not what you want, but what you need? In her essay “‘*Pri*è*re de Fr*ô*ler*’*:* the touch in Surrealism”(2001), Julia Kelly suggests the verb *fr*ô*ler*, to brush against, as a suitable image for an encounter with a Surrealist painting or sculpture. However, there is also eroticism bound with the notion, as described in Breton’s *Mad Love* (1937)*;* a mix of vulnerability and desire. To foreground the erotic in an encounter with *The Hearing Trumpet* seemed slightly misleading; after all the desires of the male Surrealists located themselves on young female bodies, not the bodies at the centre of this story*.* As Leonora said of the artist Max Ernst’s taste in women: “‘Once you were over twenty-five, you were pretty well out’” (in Aberth, 2011: 38). On the other hand, the idea of an encounter did allow us to begin to accept the book on its own terms, not as material that needed to be shaped or moulded into some pre-existing structure, but as its own entity that demanded we enter into a dialogue, or embark on a journey, with it. We were most misguided perhaps, in our search for “meaning”. We looked for essential elements in the book that would reveal to us the central intention of our piece. This was a mistake; if the book does have an essence, then perhaps, perversely, it is a refutation of essentialist systems. Leonora’s alchemy travels in the opposite direction, *endarkening* rather than enlightening. Leonora’s alchemical kitchen is a place of mixing up magic – not distilling it. She has provided a maximalist recipe, a cacophony of flavours that delights as it unsettles.

The book presented therefore a very specific challenge: to have our distinctive theatrical voice; and, at the same time, very clearly present an adaptation of *The Hearing Trumpet* that respected and revealed the subject, as well as working as a piece of theatre. We wanted to keep the courage of our convictions regarding our own maximalist approach – what we call theatrical bricolage, where we construct work, consciously incorporating the elements of play and preparation that often get discarded in traditional rehearsal, and use performers from different disciplines because we are interested in the clash or harmony of their responses and styles. Bricolage is our system for creating work using personal responses, montage and multiple modes of performance. It is a way of liberating the performers from the restrictions of their training, and a way of creating a new theatrical language less hidebound by the usual delineations between physical and naturalistic or contemporary and classical theatre styles. But could a balance be found between this rich mix and Leonora’s own powerful broth?

To achieve even a part of what we hoped for the piece would require an enormous amount of work to accomplish. Tangling with Leonora seemed to demand it. She became a figure in our imaginations who was difficult to please, our own Snow Queen setting us impossible puzzles, a task master who would test us to our limits to see if we deserved to spend time in her presence - after all, it had happened to her as a young artist when she studied painting with Amédée Ozenfant: “As Carrington tells it, Ozenfant warned her from the beginning: ‘Now you’re going to work.’ Then he made me work like bloody hell” (Aberth, 2010: 21).

But what kind of book is *The Hearing Trumpet* exactly? This slim volume revealed a subterranean world, a vast subverted vista of multiple myths, allegories, and yarns. For instance, it references the “Snow Queen” fairy tale, and Tarot, the nonsense world of *Alice in Wonderland*, and the Welsh myth tales of Taliessen, the Celtic Sidhe, the Arthurian myths, the Greek myths of Tartarus and Barbarus (echoed in Marian’s beard), the saints’ tales with Santa Brigida and her tower (mirrored in the Old Ladies’ home); fiery six-winged avenging apocalyptical angels (the terrifying Sephira); even the books lining the shelves of the Abbess’s study allude to a famous female queenly alchemist of history, Agrippa Von Nettesheim … let alone all the in-jokes and allusions to Leonora’s own friends and fellow artists, and figures from childhood, and the horrors of life at the Spanish asylum, and so on and on.

The realization of the enormity of this task, and rethinking our approach to the work began to drive us slightly mad. By the summer of 2015, the group had started to splinter, take other jobs, move far out of London – meetings happened less and less. In 2016 we stopped trying to meet altogether, instead allotting each company member a different scene to adapt, sharing script fragments online rather than meeting in the room… the process became nebulous.

An Exquisite Corpse

We would leave the book for a bit, only to pick it up once more and start puzzling over it. Strange dreams began to haunt us. Just like the Abbess in *The Hearing Trumpet*, Leonora’s name became an evocation: our co-producer, Lucie Regan, had a vivid dream she was visited by Leonora, who had flowing hair and glowing skin and joked she hadn’t really been born in 1917, so everyone was celebrating the wrong year… but don’t tell them. We’d send each other messages saying: "This is it!” “It has to be like this.” Or we’d be struck by sudden revelations: “The final section of the book follows the same structure as the song ‘The Man of Double Deed’, mentioned in the opening pages…Can you see it?”

Just like the Surrealist game The Exquisite Corpse, or Leonora and Remedios Varo’s private writing game (De Angelis, 1991: 40), our company started to combine its incongruous responses: Georgina Sykes became “Red Eyebrows”, a sardonic stand up comedienne (see fig. 6.1), caught permanently in the middle of her act, in the smoky New York night club of her imagination; Marian, at the start anyway, became Twigs – a small pile of dry sticks, manhandled by her heartless, distracted family; the Winking Nun, became a Butoh dancer riffing on the joke of the decaying body[[8]](#footnote-8), or as Queen Bee, she transformed into a magnificent Carnival Queen of Death[[9]](#footnote-9). We pieced together the head, body and legs of our creation. It became a kind of dramatic monstrosity:

[…] the walls split open like a broken egg. One tongue of flame shot out from the crack like a spear, and a winged creature that might have been a bird emerged. It paused momentarily on the brim of the shattered tower and we witnessed for a second an extraordinary creature. It shone with a bright light coming from its own body, the body of a human being covered with glittering feathers and armless. Six great wings sprouted from its body and quivered ready for flight.” (Carrington, 2005:133)

Please insert Fig 6.1 approximately here

Our piece was musically eclectic too, with original compositions made for this production, by members of the company. For example, a song done in Brechtian style gave us a way into a potato-peeling scene, evoking life in Santa Brigida. Set in the morally suspect care home’s kitchen, this song allowed us to expound the dangers of unquestioning obedience to brutal regimes, and the importance of maintaining your inner life, more playfully and effectively than any speech or dialogue might. Songs also allowed us to open up Marian’s dreaming, poetry and memory-wandering about Mother, and Venice, and Marlborough. They added a sense of time and place, the romance of the past.

During this period of time, we experienced a gradual shift of thinking, and deepening of understanding, which is still ongoing. We all became infected by Leonora’s attitude, so embedded throughout *The Hearing Trumpet*, to being an artist, being alive and being a part of the world. The book is infused with a rebellious spirit: the collective heroes of the tale have completely independent visions; and nature itself, with its wolves, bees and earthquakes, ends up fiercely defending the old women. For instance, in a glorious final heist sequence, the women with the help of a peculiar assortment of animal friends, rescue the Holy Grail, which was (according to this book) dropped to earth by the Goddess Venus, taken by Mary Magdalene – a high initiate in the mysteries of the Goddess – and sold to Jesus and then hidden by his violent, perverted priesthood:

Propelled by Supernatural intelligence, the swarm of bees whirled into the house and returned in a few moments carrying the Holy Grail, which they bore off to some secret part of our cavern, leaving a trail of honey in their wake which glittered like gold in the snow…a stream of infuriated ecclesiastics and secret police chased out into the garden. They were beaten back by the wolves and we made good our escape, with our pack bringing up the rear. (Carrington, 2005: 158)

Working this way, instinctively, feeling our way in the dark, like Marian feeling her way down to Hell: “However feeling about in the obscurity I found the wall, and I leant on it as I descended” (Carrington, 2005: 136), meant a deal of material got produced. Like the fairy-tale porridge pot, or *The Hearing Trumpet*’s own cauldron, the symbolism bubbled up, spilling over the sides of our rehearsal process, growing increasingly difficult to define and control. The piece took on a trumpet-like shape, each idea starting small and manageable and growing ever bigger. Each paragraph and image seemed to point to another important reference. The sweet domestic scene Marian paints of her world at the start of the book, a world only as big as the room she inhabits, and which we started to build through character portraits, references the star Venus: “I always pray to Venus, she is such a brilliant and recognisable star” (Carrington, 2005: 12). We find out later that her friends at the care home are hand-maidens of Venus and, after initiating Marian into their cult, they must rescue the Goddess’s Cup – the Holy Grail – to give the world a chance of a future and restore cosmic order. We should have been able to guess at the Holy Grail motif, for did we not meet Marian’s disappointing and traitorous son Galahad in the first few pages of the book? But how to hold that connection for the audience in amidst scenes of fudge poisoning, pseudo-science and dreams of Venice and past loves? Marian has a beard, “Indeed I do have a short grey beard which conventional people would find repulsive. Personally I find it rather gallant” (Carrington, 2005: 3). We might suppose this is some comment on ageing – and perhaps it is – but as we find out later, the Abbess rides out into the night “under her usual disguise, a gentleman of nobility with a short reddish beard” (87). Leonora gave us a clue early on in the book, we would meet this manifestation of Santa Barbara de Tartarus, the bearded saint of the underworld, riding on her black stallion Homunculus: as Marian approaches the Santa Brigida care home at the beginning of the story, she describes, “The place would have had a certain charm if it did not smell so strongly on wet days of the paper factory… A drop of rain and the whole place is invaded by a frightful stink” (23). Paper factories give off the smell of sulphur, forcing us to ask the question, was it really a paper factory she was smelling? But again, how to lay those subconscious clues for the audience – verbal detailing is off-putting and slows live action, but a stink bomb might empty the theatre.

Finally during the trippy, underground initiatory sequence in the penultimate part of the book, Marian finds out that the trans abbess is in fact also herself; Marian and the reader come to know her true suppressed but extraordinary female power. She is both a tiny, decrepit, old lady and a manifestation of supernatural Goddess energy, as all the crones in the story are. If only the author had prepared us for the psychedelic, multi-dimensional levels of the journey we would embark on by reading this book. Well, she did, on the second page: “There is, however, a fine back yard which I share with my two cats, a hen, the maid and her two children, some flies and a cactus plant called Maguey” (2); the Maguey is a Mexican name for the miracle Agave plant, its root Peyotl, containing the active principle of mescaline, which can be chewed for its psychedelic effect. Perhaps we should have offered the audience a tequila worm or shot of mescal at the top of the show, and certainly chewed on the diabolic root ourselves before attempting our adaption. Just like the contradictory and frustrating advice offered to Alice in Wonderland, the author seemed to be everywhere providing pages and pages of clues, and yet at the same time, refusing to offer anything concrete.

We tried the Surrealist trick of opening a book at a random page for guidance and answers. When *The House of Fear* was delivered, co-director Georgina, excitedly closed her eyes, flicked through the pages and placed her finger on a sentence, asking Leonora herself, what should we do…? The answer, from *Little Francis* read: “‘Get away,’ shouted Uncle Ubriaco, fending off a flying beer bottle, ‘I’m not interested.’ The young man made a grateful and difficult retreat, escaping with only minor injuries” (Carrington, 1989: 109).

Georgina dropped the book in shock. There were two ways to read this, she thought: don’t even bother with this adaptation, or just get on with the job and stop bothering people in the afterlife. She settled for the latter option and we ploughed on.

Structure: Anti-structure / All Bodies: One Body

The Exquisite Corpse in the book – the Unholy Trinity of Marian, the Winking Nun and the Bee Queen – held a structural clue: we could embrace our multiple, individual versions of *The Hearing Trumpet*, embrace the impossible mix. An email from Leonora’s son, Gabriel Weisz Carrington, also gave us a thread to grasp in the labyrinth. He asked us to respect the ageing body – he said all the bodies were Leonora:

Dear Georgina and Jon, I would like you to know that Leonora was always very careful when dealing with the body. That is to say that she handled her characters with great respect; especially when an old body was concerned. Because after all she was describing her own imaginary bodies. (G. Weisz Carrington, Private Email to Dirty Market, 2015)

The images from Marian’s past, mix with the stories she has read, the experiences she has had and the multiple worlds she inhabits. It is an incredible journey that travels both deep into the mind and out into the world simultaneously. And it holds a connection between these opposing trajectories… the frozen landscape as she approaches her inner repressions, and the earth heated from deep within as she encounters herself: the “I” at the very core of the earth, the earth as self:

Alone, Leonora had a breakdown, drinking orange blossom water until she vomited: “I hoped that my sorrow would be allayed by those violent spasms which tore my stomach apart… I had realised the injustice of society… My stomach was the seat of that society, but also the place in which I was united with all the elements of the earth.”(Lewis, 2015:1)

*The Hearing Trumpet* was all of the above, an entangled mass of ideas that have their nexus in the lived experience of Marian.

A house for a ritual, and an allegory for a 21st century audience

We discovered The Old Library, one sunny afternoon, in the middle of a park, a short walk away from where we live. We had been searching for the right space for *The Hearing Trumpet* for about a year and had tried to hire disused hospitals, underground tunnels, all the places we had done shows previously, many now knocked down or converted into luxury flats and offices, ubiquitous in London. We had even applied for funding to do the play in a circus tent; all with no luck.

We were not exactly looking that afternoon, but had gone for a wander to clear our heads. We knocked on the door of The Old Library, and were surprised to find someone we knew inside.

Please insert Fig 6.2 approximately here

The space itself, a purpose-built but now defunct, *Art Nouveau*, Edwardian lending library and reading room, felt like a grand old lady (see Figure 6.2). It had a central kitchen area where once books had been stamped in and out. Painted white and dove grey, it had several spaces, where different parts of *The Hearing Trumpet* could happen. It was distinctly, curiously female, and outside was a wonderful cherry tree as old as the building itself. In the basement, where the children’s section had once been, on the walls underneath the copper pipes and electricity cables, was a frieze of Alice in Wonderland, hand-painted in 1923. In the basement of that disused Edwardian reading room, in the middle of a park in South East London, Alice was on the walls. Leonora, so delighted by Lewis Carroll’s writing, would have been six when it was painted… We took it as a sign.

We did the play eventually in The Old Library. The space is now managed by *Theatre Delicatessen*, who co-produced our adaptation of *The Hearing Trumpet*, which was supported by Arts Council England. It was April, and being a sunny April, the cherry tree burst into flower. It was hard not to see magical and encouraging signs from Leonora everywhere, especially when the crows started nesting all around us in the park, and foxes would accompany us on our walk back home after the show every night.

The space helped us think more clearly about the audience’s journey. We began to develop this idea of the play as subverted ritual, the audience accompanying the protagonist, becoming the protagonist. We created rituals for ourselves too: after the Press Night performance, once all audience and staff left The Old Library, the company had an impromptu gathering outside the building in the pitch dark of the park. Tipsy, giggly, and relieved the stressful event was over, the company found some sticks lying around and burned them in a little pyre in honour of “Twigs”, our first manifestation of Marian, and Leonora. In the darkness, local boys buzzed around on motorbikes. Each night after that, the company gathered and chose an old lady who had been an independent, eccentric, tough or loving character, and important to the company member choosing, and we dedicated the show to her. This small ritual grew in significance for the company. We thought too, of the audience as witness to an initiation: the body of the audience eventually becoming the initiate, preparing for death. We wanted to inhabit the space in a way that would evoke a communal spirit – or the spirit of the piece. As the audience entered, they were met first with a strange room filled with the work of older artists attached to the company: Simon Weller, Susan Sowerby, and The Egg Man (Martin Harris). It was a kind of mini-exhibition that quietly laid clues for the journey to come, and helped us begin with the feeling of being outside looking in, before leading the audience deeper into each new space, each new part of the story, until they were inside the cauldron with Marian – and eventually in the cave, surviving with her at the end of days.

Please insert Fig 6.3 approximately here

Our designer, Bryan Woltjen, created a room the audience could sit inside[[10]](#footnote-10), where all the walls were made of lace and could be pulled up or down (see Figure 6.3). It was a mutable space sometimes like an old lady’s parlour, or the ruched lining of a coffin, or the snowy landscape of Lapland, the Land of the Dead. Since the walls moved, this also gave a sense of the house as keeper of secrets, a powerful character in its own right, carrying all the magic realist power of the domestic space, echoing Carrington’s words that “[h]ouses are really bodies. We connect ourselves with walls, roofs, and objects just as we hang onto livers, skeletons, flesh and blood stream” (2005: 13). We tried to create a series of spaces and experiences, so the story could be understood, by turns, as an epic tale of empowerment, a mystical manifestation, a recount of a revolution, a journey through apocalypse and survival together. And also as a simple, personal story of an old lady’s journey, inwards at the point of physical death, where the outer landscape diminishes and the internal vistas widen and tip and crack, eventually becoming endless vast wastelands of whiteness: the reflections and imaginings of death.

We attempted to entangle the audience, rather than ask them to watch politely: the piece gently offered strategies for resistance, some more obvious, some more internal - how are we going to deal with “the cop inside our head”? When Marian enters hell, or “the Womb of the World whence all things come” (Carrington, 2005: 137), we turned the play into a kind of subverted game show. This idea, brought by Benedict Hopper on day one of rehearsals, was developed by Francesca Dale, both long-standing company members. “Up or Down” became our way of challenging the audience’s expectations of and engagement with the story. We broke the narrative open to make a space where the audience could playfully consider their attitudes to death, before taking them through Marian’s rebirth and encounter with herself. We tried to hold the serious and irreverent in the same moment: the body of Maude had a ritual washing and the most lyrical of speeches, but revealed a crocheted penis beneath. Some of the audience laughed knowingly at the low-brow, English smut smattered throughout the play – true to the book, and surely part of the sexual energy and nature force that drives the narrative – others were not amused.

The piece suggested we start listening for something deeper.

Worldings

Conceptually, our perception of *The Hearing Trumpet* became more focused when we read about the “worldings” described by Donna Haraway. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway calls for a new kind of story in an attempt to break free from *prick tales*, and offers a non-human centred alternative perspective. Referring to the (hu)man-centred vision of planetary life, she says: “That history must give way to geostories, to Gaia stories, to symchthonic stories; terrains do webbed, braided and tentacular living and dying in sympoietic multispecies string figures; they do not do History” (Haraway, 2016: 49). This new kind of story decentralizes the human and strives for a perspective that sees the interconnectedness, and interdependence of all of the world’s “critters”.

The myth-making of *The Hearing Trumpet*, with the secret pursuits of the Spanish Abbess and her quest to reclaim the Holy Grail for its guardian the bearded Epona beneath the mountain, and for Venus herself; her quest to aid the transformation of Venus’ offspring, Cupid, into the apocalyptic, six-winged Sephira, all serve to help guide Marian away from her devalued existence in the human-centred world of her family and the Gambits, helping her find worth in *becoming-with* the earth. As the world crumbles above and Marian descends into a womb-like subterranean cavern she sees herself, not as hero, but as a hybrid of human and bee (see fig.6. 4). In this new form she meets other hybrids - werewolves - and we are left with an optimistic image that it will be animals that repopulate the world:

After I die Anubeth’s werecubs will continue the document, till the planet is peopled by cats, werewolves, bees and goats. We all fervently hope that this will be an improvement on humanity, which deliberately renounced the Pneuma of the Goddess. (Carrington, 2005: 158)

Please insert Fin 6.4 approximately here

This multispecies “worlding” legitimises the releasing of oneself to nature. In one sense perhaps, it comes with the realisation of an actual death, as we physically return to the earth, but in another, it is a becoming-with, an attempt to reconceptualise the world, “with littermates who find rich wallow in multispecies muddles” (Haraway, 2016: 31).

Marian’s sense of being is collapsing in on itself. As the story opens she is described from the outside as a rotting corpse. Already having encountered the abject, mortality, all the expectations of living are imploded, revealing a new body, a body without limitations, without time but which is connected to the earth:

There was a slight pause and Christabel, as if to avoid further discussion, pulled a very small tom-tom from under her shawl and began to pat it in rhythmic beats. We began by nodding our heads in time to the drumming, then our feet. Soon we were dancing round and around the pond, waving our arms and generally behaving in a very strange manner. At the time, none of us seemed to find anything unusual about our weird dance. None of us felt tired… We seemed inspired by some marvellous power, which poured energy into our decrepit carcasses. (Carrington, 2005: 117)

In some respects, that mirrored our intention for the audience’s own journey, from individual at the start of the evening, to collective body by the end of the night.

Suiting Ourselves

The chances are, the story was put together… out of all sorts of bits of other stories long ago and far away, and has been tinkered with, had bits added to it, lost other bits, got mixed up with other stories, until our informant herself has tailored the story personally, to suit an audience of, say, children, or drunks at a wedding, or bawdy old ladies, or mourners at a wake, - or simply to suit herself. (Carter, 2005: xii)

Carrington, inspired by the rebellious modernist spirit, was also dismissive of the manifestos and claims of authority that went with it. She developed a fiercely independent vision, distinctly her own. As our understanding of Carrington’s world – one not centred on humans – deepened, we noticed the protagonist herself is described throughout the book as barely human: “Grandmother,” said Robert, “can hardly be classified as a human being. She’s a drooling sack of decomposing flesh” (Carrington, 2005: 10).

Please insert Fig 6.5 approximately here

The principal characters could be described as anti-human: they are not the archetypical young and healthy heroes championed especially by popular culture, but reveal the failures and ultimate decay of the human (see Figure 6.5). *The Hearing Trumpet* admires and elevates the abject, the grotesque; and this is what we celebrated in performance, with gaudy, lumpy, character-body aprons, and glamorous, wrinkled masks, which the actors wore on the side of their heads to create a Janus effect – inspired by the mask Leonora created for Remedios Varo – all made by artist, Susan Sowerby:

That day, I remember, she was dressed in a long kimono and red trousers, Chinese style… Her hair was cut in a long bob and although no longer abundant was cleverly arranged over a small bald patch to give the impression of a casual pageboy coiffure. Her eyes must have been large and beautiful before the pendulous mauve flesh had gathered underneath. However they still had a rather daring expression, accentuated by mascara applied with certain inaccuracy around the eye-lids.

(Carrington, 2005: 32)

By identifying with these characters, we identify with humanity in decline, with impermanence, with vulnerability. We read *The Hearing Trumpet* as a manifesto for the anti-human, anti-humanist, anti-heroic, as well as anti-patriarchy and anti-all-the-governments-of-men. In an interview with Leonora, Paul De Angelis asked her about writing *The Hearing Trumpet*:

PDA: Were you thinking about getting old? LC:  I suppose I must have been. I wrote it in the fifties, so I must have been about forty. I typed it myself on a Remington… about as big as a refrigerator, very noisy and you couldn’t lift it.  (De Angelis, 1991:40)

We too are in our forties, and tussled for a long time about whether we had the ‘right” to tell a story about old age. Two things happened: we performed our very first “scratch” version of the piece at The Albany Theatre Deptford’s BOLD Festival and we were unnerved to find out a group called *Entelechy* were coming to watch. They are a wonderful company creating theatre with elders, mainly that night, West Indian ladies, most not a day under eighty. We braced ourselves and performed our “scratch” show, complete with a routine where Muriel and Galahad unceremoniously washed one of our versions of Marian, a small pile of sticks called Twigs, breaking her in the process, and tossing away the evidence. Our commentary here was, of course, on ourselves and our society. We all have the capacity to be the selfish, treat-stealing Muriel, or spoilt, heartless Robert or the no longer chivalrous, Galahad. We held our collective breath, watching the *Entelechy* women; would they take offence at this brutal, bad behaviour and walk out? They laughed drily at the whole affair. Afterwards we asked them directly, since we are not old yet, do you feel we have the right to tell this story. “You are artists,” one woman replied, “you can do what you like.”

Secondly, over time working on *The Hearing Trumpet* (or it working on us) we came to understand the experience of old age as described in the book, was in fact a reflection of the world experienced by a part of all of us, regardless of age. In our discussions with Jo-Anna Van Den Bosch, Consultant Drama Therapist at South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, about her work with older people with depression and dementia, we understood our societal rejection of older people, who are clearly regarded as being non-productive, not-beautiful, undesirable, in fact reflected a part of all of us that feels out of place and time, a failure, not-beautiful-enough and unsuccessful. Social media often celebrates the 100-year-old who still runs marathons, does ballet or body-builds, but we have difficulty finding any cause to celebrate those not capable of such feats, especially those with dementia[[11]](#footnote-11).

*The Hearing Trumpet* points to a complete reassessment of old age, where elders are not acceptable to us because they are somehow age-defying but rather are admired for the bags and baldness, for being lost in vivid memory, for their weird selves. In this jokey, deadly serious, anti-manifesto, Leonora’s vision suggests our inability to fit in is our true super power. We increasingly identified with Marian’s experiences. When Marian is side-lined by her family because she has become too much of a messy problem, we acknowledged, we all live with this messy, secret self, a self that does not fit with the “fitter, happier, more productive” (Yorke, 1997) image of progressive humanity. We have all walked into the room at the wrong time and caused embarrassment. We have all told something like one of Marian's parrot stories to an audience who does not want to hear.

Disobedience

*Dirty Market* has tried to make many plays addressing this secret self in one way or another; *The Hearing Trumpet* led us directly to it. We also connected to Marian and her friends in terms of feeling powerless in the face of those who control the flow of bread and jam. We identified with Marian’s feeling of redundancy and valueless-ness, of trying to exist in an alienating and inhospitable environment. We wanted to make a play in part about being divided and distracted by our convenient, comfortable, and amusing society – how devaluing our compassion, hooking us on cheap eats delivered to our door and the Seretonin hit of the social media “like”, locking us behind our screens and separating us through the neurosis of our image driven world, all ensure our commodity value. We know our world is dying – we have access to more information than ever before – but rather like Marian in the absurd nursery landscape of Santa Brigida, we find ourselves, no matter our age, infantilised by, dependent upon the systems that make decisions on our behalf. So, we wanted to make a play about waking up, and the power of finding community, of risking discomfort in order to secure something tangible and sustainable. This has moved out of the fictional now, with the rise of activist groups like Extinction Rebellion[[12]](#footnote-12) and rather like the old ladies in *The Hearing Trumpet*, organising a campaign of mass civil disobedience in order to secure a future for our dying planet.

In *The Hearing Trumpet*, the Gambits take over from a family in denial of their fundamental lack of love and human feeling, to become the principal manifestation of the oppressive forces at work in our society. The disingenuous couple enforces a strict regime of self-doubt, self-censorship and negative self-judgement. Without agency of her own, Marian's ability to resist and counter such forces, whilst being totally dependent on them for food and shelter, seems absent. The Gambits are in the business of self-aggrandisement and brainwashing. Underneath their veneer, they operate as examples of the senseless bureaucratic systems that cover for and prop up brutal, ruthless regimes. They give treats and status to the women who pay more and control the rest through the withdrawal of food. The Gambits use their shaming and pseudo religious psychobabble to confuse and distract, separate and control the Santa Brigida ladies. By rigorously enforcing the importance of ideology with “the work”, or work itself in the form of endless peeling of potatoes, the Gambits effect totalitarian control. It all feels horribly familiar. Not exactly “grinding old ladies into breakfast cereal” (Carrington, 2005:12), but certainly “extremely sinister” (ibid): “‘Mrs Gambit says I deserve to live in a boiled cauliflower, but they didn’t have one made.’ ‘What a diabolical idea,’ said Carmella, ‘They must be sadistic’”(ibid: 13).

Is Carrington suggesting that all employment, all work done for others, simply to earn a wage, is a distraction from your inner life and your higher, or lower self, and, if you can resist it, you can fulfil more of your “selves”, or become more yourself, more alive? Of course, it’s easier to take this position, to be an artist at all, if you’ve had a privileged upbringing, - in her case, paid for by her father’s extremely successful capitalist ventures - and have developed the self-assurance that comes with that:

“If you are in a condition of social inferiority, I think it affects you very much creatively,” Carrington has observed. “You might have incredible visions but you might be too bashful to show them. Your creativity becomes inhibited.” (in Aberth, 2010: 38)

However, in the case of *The Hearing Trumpet*, all is not lost. Despite Marian's natural reticence, and the ladies lack of structural power, there is an urge to find their own voices, to form a collective and to survive on their own terms which enables them to take the risk needed to survive the very worst. As Carrington goes on to say in the interview with Paul de Angelis: “But we do know that an oppressed people are primarily concerned with being not oppressed”(1999).

Trumpet

Carrington’s heroine, who refuses to conform to any of the social norms, who finds happiness in regression, who moves forward by eschewing action, who refuses progress in material terms – she particularly hates the television and her grandson's motorbike, for example – is perhaps also a prophetic model for an aspect of philosopher Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman. Carrington’s Surrealism, her rejection of the bourgeois capitalism of her upbringing and the game as played by the boys, leads her and us into a new territory altogether. The posthuman has to break free from the humanist legacy – and in some respects therefore, the very notion of the self as an individual. As Marian muses with her disappearing Cheshire cat-style, tennis-playing lover of memory, “…why so much fuss about individuality?” (Carrington, 2005:18).

In the traditional / normative stories of our culture, in difficult and oppressive situations, the principal characters tend to follow the story structure described by mythologists like Joseph Campbell[[13]](#footnote-13): a hero’s journey of individual struggle and transformation, vanquishing enemies, conquering demons. Curiously these stories can have a rather dispiriting affect – most people are very unlikely to slay a dragon and would probably run and hide, or worse still stand by whilst the dragon gobbles up someone else. One of *Dirty Market’s* previous plays, *Be Good Revolutionaries*, explored the idea that our addiction to heroes leaves us impotent; we wear Che Guevara on our T-shirts, but could we ever become a real freedom fighter in the jungle? The T-shirt suggests this is fantasy. Even if these symbols did activate us, the heroes referenced are sometimes morally questionable characters, displaying psychotic traits; variations on the lone wolf male. Ursula K. Le Guin describes the phenomenon in her essay, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1996):

So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing and killing, I never thought that I had, or wanted, any particular share of it; they were human, fully human, bashing, sticking, thrusting, killing.” (Le Guin, 1996)

Marian Leatherby excited us because hers is a voice that rarely gets heard, and her story was one of a slow and profound transformation through her engagement and curiosity in her community. This search for an alternative approach to storytelling that activates our company, the quality we recognise in Leonora’s spinning of yarns, this need for other older, female voices to find different ways of communicating and to see themselves inside a story, is described by Le Guin thus:

Wanting to be human too, I sought for evidence…but if that’s what it took, to make a weapon and kill with it, then evidently, I was… not human at all. That’s right, they said. What you are is a woman

(ibid)

Carrington offers us a different vision. From the depths of despair, Marian Leatherby doesn’t pull herself together and fight the good hero’s fight; rather, she lets herself go. This counter-traditional storytelling subverts the structures and logic we expect. Marian doesn’t dominate or reshape the world, but becomes part of it. She doesn’t blow her trumpet but listens through it.

Marian’s story is not about saying or doing anything, but experiencing and listening. It is not a story of contending against the world, but yielding to it. Receiving it. We understood the hollow trumpet, or horn of plenty, Epona’s cornucopia, allies with Le Guin’s *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,* proposing a more ancient truth and storytelling mode. What if, before weaponry, there was something else: “a thing that holds something else… A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient” (Le Guin, 1996). Or the bell of a trumpet?

Recipes not manifestos

We discovered, as we went along, we were holding this story, or rather trying to find or make the space to hold it, both in ourselves and in terms of finding resources and a home for it. *The Hearing Trumpet* has become an alternative manifesto for us, or book of recipes, spells, or runes… a different revelation with each reading. We are beginning to understand the difference between a traditional narrative adaptation and, something like, an *exquisitecollagedsubterraneaencounter* perhaps. We are not proposing pure abstraction and deconstruction here (we rather like passé concepts like character, situation, a good joke, a song or dance), but rather, the thing we make, whatever it is, does not end up being a flat thing that points in one direction only. Also, that it is wise to avoid pinning down meaning, as this will likely close routes to alternative understanding. The maker might not know or be trying make a work that is *saying* anything– this idea is completely radical, especially when as theatre makers, we have to be conscious of marketing, which comes with the demands such as “describe your show in 100 words, describe your show in 50 words, describe your show in one word”. What if you trust the piece has a life of its own, a will to live if you like, and you don’t really know what that is? What if, as the maker, you simply cannot describe it?

Although Carrington dislikes discussing the images of particular paintings, feeling that too specific an explanation robs them of other kinds of meaning, she is generous in sharing the sources of her knowledge.

(Aberth, 2010: 142)

The provocation we have decided to work with, is to be bolder with ourselves, to keep the material open, and up for interpretation, even as the audience sit down on Press Night, to allow the viewer to make their own meaning, trust the piece will work on them over the course of time, in an unusual subterranean way, acknowledge they may both hate it and think about it for years after, hold our nerve and build a collection of experiences - true collage - rather than getting caught in a perception of story and plot, to resist the urge to fix meaning onto a moment… to suit ourselves.

Cooking is different to reading recipes and making theatre is different to reading a book. This *Alchemical Adaptation* became not so much a distillation as transfiguration of our process of reading and hearing this small, vast novel. We suggest our encounter with Leonora’s work, and subsequently the interpretation we offered the audience, was more of an entanglement, than an adaptation. It was not perfect. We could not get every jewel-like detail into the whole. We had many crisis of identity, just like Alice… Mary Ann… Marian. It didn’t finish us off, but it discombobulated us, changed us: “You may not believe in magic but something very strange is happening at this very moment” (Carrington, 2005: 17).

And there’s unfinished business: we may just have to step back through the looking glass, one day when it’s snowing outside and we’ve been playing chess, and the fire is burning and we’re feeling a little sleepy and, like Alice, dreamy and bored…

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1. www.dirtymarket.co.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Invented in 1925 by André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Yves Tanguy and Jacques Prévert the game involved one player at a time drawing a head, torso or legs of a person or creature with the paper folded in such a way between each go, that the other players cannot see the preceding player’s drawings. This resulted in some very surreal creations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Leonora’s childhood home: “It was the cavernous and theatrical Crookhey Hall, with its views of the Irish Sea and Morecambe Bay, which would exert the greatest influence on Leonora’s imagination and childhood memories” (Aberth, 2010: 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.theatredeli.co.uk/in-camberwell [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.ortusevents.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/04/ageing-nhs-loneliness-co-housing> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/10/care-for-elderly-crisis-how-to-improve-quality-of-life> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/aug/29/care-home-worker-hidden-camera>

   <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/windrush-man-misses-daughters-wedding-home-office-joseph-bravo-a8316276.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Carrington was an artist, “who has cherished the subversively witty Carroll her entire life, and who can still quote him extensively, word for word…” (Aberth, 2010: 128). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kazuo Ohno suggests that there are two ways to dance a flower, to mime it would make it a generalised representation, whereas to, “place the beauty of that flower and the emotions which are evoked by it into your dead body” would create something personal and true, thus engaging the audience more deeply (Ohno in Viala, 1988:23).  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Robert Graves, in *The White Goddess*, suggests that the reason one can be so moved and affected when reading a ’true poem’, is that it is, "an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of all Living, the ancient power of fright and lust– the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death” (Robert Graves in Aberth, 2010: 79). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://www.bryanwoltjen.com/Bryan\_Woltjen/HOme.html [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ballet dancer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tP214lJtKlM> gymnast:

    <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKDrOWdxLQo> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://rebellion.earth [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Campbell. J. (2012) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. US. New World Library [↑](#footnote-ref-13)