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## INTERVIEW

### ‘And while I am falling, I listen’: on translation processes in *I turned away and she was gone* (2014) Jennie Reznek\* in conversation with Sruti Bala

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Jennie Reznek is Co- Artistic Director and Trustee of Magnet Theatre in Cape Town, South Africa. *I turned away and she was gone* is the fifth solo work that she has developed under the banner of Magnet Theatre. It was nominated for six awards and published by Modjaji Books in 2019. The interview took place in the framework of the research project on translation and performance (in collaboration with the University of Cape Town and the University of Amsterdam, 2016–19) in July 2017 at Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts & Research in Pondicherry, India. Reznek shared her reflections on the artistic processes of translation in the solo performance *I turned away and she was gone*.

**Keywords:** myth; solo performance; Magnet Theatre; Demeter and Persephone; Jennie Reznek

*Jennie Reznek is Co- Artistic Director and Trustee of Magnet Theatre in Cape Town, South Africa. She is a graduate of the University of Cape Town Drama School (BA/ Performers Diploma and MA in Drama) and studied in Paris with Jacques Lecoq for two years (1984–1986). She has worked as an aerialist and clown in the circus; a movement director and choreographer; a puppeteer with Handspring Puppet Company and is responsible for the bulk of the creative and youth development programmes of Magnet Theatre. She is the head of Magnet Theatre’s flagship project, the Fulltime Training and Job Creation Programme, which she manages along with Mark Fleishman and Mandla Mbothwe. She is an award-winning actress and has had 24 international tours with Magnet Theatre’s Every Year, Every Day I am Walking. I turned away and she was gone is the fifth solo work that she has developed under the banner of Magnet Theatre. It was nominated for six awards and published by Modjaji Books in 2019. She has been responsible for developing theatre for the early years in South Africa within the context of the Fulltime Training and Job Creation Programme and co-directed Scoop, the first ever South African piece for mothers and babies under the age of 12 months. The early years’ work under her direction has toured to the USA, Italy, Germany, France, Reunion and the UK.*

*This conversation took place in the framework of the research project on translation and performance (in collaboration with the University of Cape Town and the University*

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of Amsterdam, 2016–19) in July 2017 at Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts & Research in Pondicherry, India. Reznek shared her reflections on the artistic processes of translation in the solo performance *I turned away and she was gone*.

**From the programme notes of *I turned away and she was gone*<sup>1</sup>**

Three incarnations of women: a mother, a daughter and an old crone. Drawing loosely on the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, this play explores the process of individuation, the inevitability of the journey into the shadow and into the unknown, of the bonds that connect mothers and children to each other, of loss and the dense beautiful soaring life that we are all travelling through. Reznek takes the audience on a journey of discovery of the bonds that connect mothers and children; the cycle of daughters transforming into mothers and then ageing parents and the inevitable loss of life.

A performance about the haunting of past, present and future selves.

**How did you come to work on this performance?**

For me, to make theatre is to engage with who I am, to explore my identity, my context, my obsessions and how those intersect with a broader story of being South African as well as being part of the human community. I am the founder member of Magnet Theatre – a 32-year-old company based in South Africa, that foregrounds the language of the body as the central source of meaning in the theatre. Since its inception we have created over 40 new South African works that reflect our creative enquiries and the relationship with the South African context. All the productions focus strongly on the body and on image. Aside from the production work we now also run a pyramid structure of youth development work centring around our flagship professional training project, the Fulltime Training and Job Creation Programme. These are projects aimed at transforming the lives of talented young performers in South Africa, who do not have easy access to tertiary education and/ or employment in the theatre industry. We always juggle our commitment to youth transformation and training with spaces where the three artistic directors (Mark Fleishman, Mandla Mbothwe and myself) can explore our own obsessions as theatre makers, both personal and political. *I turned away and she was gone* was the result of space that I made for myself as a mature performer within the company to engage with my own process of aging, my place as a woman and mother in a violent society and to exercise my own skill as a creator and performer.

**Can you sketch your artistic background and the features of your work?**

Initially I was trained as an interpretive actress at the University of Cape Town. When I graduated in 1980, I was employed by Professor Mavis Taylor as part of the People's Space outreach project – the People's Space Roadshow. The People's Space was a radical theatre initiative that provided a space for all South Africans to come together to make and watch theatre during the apartheid regime. We were tasked with creating performances to tour to different communities around Cape Town. We found that we were having to develop performance that was based in image and in the body rather than text so as to be able to function in the multilingual context that is South Africa. At that stage no one in the company was skilled in what

it would mean to create work that foregrounded the body as the primary source of meaning in the theatre. We worked with puppets and dance and explored as best we could. As a result of that experience I decided that I wanted to learn more about the body – its ability to talk across linguistic divides, its ability to translate. I ended up studying for two years at Ecole Jacques Lecoq, learning what he calls *théâtre du mouvement*. When I came back to South Africa in 1986, I brought with me a powerful toolbox for making my own new work. In fact, I often refer to my training at Lecoq as having given me ‘the gift of myself’. At the heart of this toolbox was my individual body, who I was, and how my movement, my body could tell my own stories. This formed the creative methodology for my four previous solo works (*Cheap Flights*, *The Show’s Not Over’ Til The Fat Lady Sings*, *I do X22* and *53 Degrees*) as well as Magnet’s most travelled show *Every Year, Every Day, I am walking*. In all these works the performance ‘text’ was first developed on the floor through embodied improvisations and the written text came later, almost as the last resort. And often there was very little text. I had always felt tricked by words in the process of theatre-making, as if the cerebral nature of the written word obscured a layering and complexity that seemed to exist for me in the language of the body.

**In that sense it is surprising that the performance *I turned away and she was gone* features a lot of text. How was this work developed?**

This performance was developed differently from other works that I had previously done. The gateway was not the body as it had been before. It ended up being a written text. At Magnet Theatre we seek different creative methodologies for each new work that we are engaged with. Perhaps in this work there was something in the rigour of the structure of language that was required to be in conversation with the body; a way in which the two kinds of languages resisted each other and became part of the drama of the story.

But the beginning, as always, was messy and it seemed from my notebooks that the first images were not as coherent and the themes not as neatly known as I later constructed the narrative of how the work was developed to be. At the beginning I seemed to have walked into an empty space with just a desire to make a new work. Whatever was pushing me was subterranean and totally opaque at that stage, at the very beginning. For instance, in my journal notes from the first day of rehearsal, I wrote: ‘There are stories about going into an empty room. About trying to get the unconscious to talk to me. Trying to find something to listen to.’

The moment of going into the empty space is both terrifying and exhilarating for me as a performer. There are many moments when one sits in terror and nothing happens. I am daunted by it, but I crave it at the same time. That empty space is very important for me in starting solo performance work, in that it is an invitation to endless potential and elasticity. In this process it seems I was lost for a long time. The notebooks I have from those early days attest to this. I had a lot of questions. Some of the questions quite clearly indicate the path I was to take with the work: ‘Is it a piece about transition, birth to life, girl to woman, woman to mother, mother to mature woman, to grandmother, to death?’ or ‘a little girl falling and falling and falling and it looks as if she will never stop’. I tried to make sense of some of the emerging hand gestures and actions: ‘How to make

these gestures work? Massaging, changing nappies, brushing hair, making sandwiches. They don't seem to be going very far'; but also 'Do I want to look at my father's story and the loss of him and WW2?'; 'Is there a story or just images?'; 'Is it a two-hander? Perhaps I should make the piece with a young dancer' and other such thoughts. Going through my journal notes, I observe that the threads slowly became clearer, pathways were uncovered and choices were made that cohered into the final piece.

I settled on wanting to look at the moment of change in my own life, my own processes of moving to a different phase in life, this moment where who I was, was being translated into someone new, someone different. I was a woman going through menopause, turning into a crone. It became clear I was going to focus on my own changes and at the same time, in my own house, the changes my daughter was experiencing. Her identity as a girl was being translated into that of a woman. She was going through adolescence at the same time I was going through menopause. I also wanted to draw on my experience of witnessing my mother undergoing the most profound transformation from matter to spirit, being present at her deathbed as she made that journey. The work thus grappled with this broader theme of transition and was configured with three women representing these different moments in time: girl, woman, crone.

I seemed to have been happy for a while improvising on the floor and exploring certain possibilities. And then the process seemed to hit the wall. The tried and tested methodology from my previous work was not bearing the same fruit. My initial improvisations felt increasingly flat and unsatisfying. It seemed like I was trying to work with too many theatrical languages simultaneously (text and body) and that in fact they needed to be developed separately. It also seemed as if the story I wanted to tell would not be most successfully told as if it were my own. I needed to find something further away from myself to allow for the elasticity of play. So together with Mark Fleishman, who directed the work, we started to look for texts or stories that could serve as containers or channels for the ideas and aspects I sought to explore. We found the long poem *Averno* by the American poet laureate Louise Glück (2006) that uses the character of Demeter and Persephone to plumb the mysteries of loss and grief. The poem led me to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, from where I found a number of feminist interpretations which departed from the conventional readings of the abduction and rape in the story, and instead proposed a reading of the myth as a process of individuation, of leaving the known and being forced into a dark, dangerous, fearful space, in order to become oneself (Agha-Jaffar 2002, p. 47). Glück's poem also hints that Persephone might have left of her own free will.<sup>2</sup> I found such a reading of the myth productive, as it relates the question of individuation and finding oneself to the artistic process of stepping into an empty room, of having to confront the fearful unknown in order to make or create something new. The underworld resembles the rehearsal space in that they are both completely unknown, you just don't know what or who you will find there. Each time I go into the rehearsal space as the starting point for making a new work, I embark on a journey into an unknown part of myself. It is rich and fearful. I was lost in that unknown space until we discovered the container, the myth of Persephone and Demeter that translated my inner story.



Figure 1. 'Her thirst ungovernable and utterly irresistible'. Image: Mark Wessels.

### **What does myth offer you as a performer?**

Once we had decided on using the myth, Mark Fleishman (my director), suggested that I sit down and write the play. I was shocked and enticed at the same time by this suggestion. I was not a writer, in fact I distrusted words. How could I find the same pleasure in writing that I had previously done working with my body on the floor? But there it was, my laptop in an empty room and I started to write. I cannot explain why this process was different, why it suddenly felt like a gift, enjoying being a wordsmith, feeling my way to the work though a stillness in front of a computer, exploring the poetry of the text as being a match for the poetics of the body. All I know was that once we had found the structure of the mythical story and the four very distinct characters as they appeared in the story, it was easy to write. As if the piece wrote me and I was just occasionally filling in the blanks.

I think that this question about what the myth offers, brings up an important point around translation in relation to how I used the myth as a theatre maker. What was translated? What was the original text as it were? Was it the myth? Or my story? Did my story translate the myth into a contemporary moment? Or did the myth translate my story onto a more universal one?

The myth definitely provided a container. It provided, in terms of a process of working, a way of structuring my personal experience of change and loss into a text that we could work with. In the end it was the key that allowed for the ideas to flow into performance. I did not set out to work with the myth, to tell the story about Persephone and Demeter in a contemporary South African setting. I set out to tell something of my own story and used the myth as a structuring device (both in terms of narrative and character), as well as an amplification device. Do we need to know what is the primary text or is there in this translation of my story into the myth and the myth into my story a kind of fluid exchange that is at the heart of what it means to translate something?

Once we found the story, the myth, it was very easy to write, because it gave me a dramaturgical architecture. I found a simple dramatic structure of three sections: the recreation of that which was lost (the garden and the idyllic early relationship with the

mother and the daughter), the process of losing (the daughter being enticed away from the mother by her own power, energy and sense of her own individuation), and the consequence of the loss (the mother's tragedy and search for her lost daughter and after many years, the uncomfortable meeting and reconnection). This dramatic structure, simple as it was, offered me immense scope in pouring in all that I wanted to articulate, all the details about my own life, my childhood garden, my own suffocation in my mother's life, growing older, my daughter's growing up, my mother's passing, her death.

Aside from the story of Persephone and Demeter and the container that structure provided, the myth provided a conduit to a bigger story, of which my own was simply one small part. To work with the Greeks is to work with amplification; the stories are profound, deep and connect to huge stories about what it means to be a human being. The personal story, when it is linked to the Greek myth, can no longer be 'quotidian' or ordinary. I think this is what working with myth as a performer and a solo performer offers: access to a very resonant pool of experience. This is useful also as a solo performer, it offers a gravitas, a weight that transcends the potential smallness of an individual body in the space. The mythical stories connect individual experience to a collective which amplifies them, deepens them, makes them more resonant. There is a sense of freedom when dealing with the archetypes of mother, crone, young girl. It released me from having to pick at the details of the particular relationship with my own mother and daughter and instead use the frame to engage with those aspects that were personal but also universal. I was thus intrigued when women who saw the show interpreted the work entirely from their own experiences, relating the story to their own story of daughters who were lost to them as a consequence of mental illness, families who were lost to children as a result of educational (dis)advantages that isolated younger generations from their family narrative, mothers and daughters who came repeatedly to see the show together to establish a bond of understanding previously broken. I do not think the work would have been accessed in the same way without the myth.

Play is another important aspect of translating the myth into contemporary performance. I am not talking about play as improvisation (although this was a technique that I relied on to generate material) or the activities that are the domain of childhood. I am talking about play as elasticity, the play between one thing and another, especially if those things are at a remove from one another. So the myth and characters in the story – these gods and goddesses – allowed for a play between the details of my own life and story and those of the ancient Greek one. These details made Persephone's and Demeter's story more translatable, understandable in a current context and gave my personal story a breadth and dimension that it could not have achieved without it. This movement from the individual to the Greek or archetypal universal and back again was deliberately surprising and unsettling, offering a kind of drama of opposites that I think was important for the performance, allowing audiences to feel activated and share in the story. I think that the distance between the myth and my personal narrative allows audience members to insert their own story and to understand it as part of a larger narrative of aging, changing, leaving and arriving. The myth thus offered a kind of resistance to an overflowing personal narrative.

**How did you concretely approach the translation of the myth of Demeter and Persephone into contemporary autobiographical performance?**

In my early notebooks which reflect the first stages of exploration, I was already mentioning that there were going to be three women in the piece. A young woman, a middle-aged woman and an old crone. I knew that the work was going to witness the battles between these different incarnations. But I couldn't quite get their relationships right. Who were they to each other? How were they connected? In the myth there were actually four archetypal women in the story, each representing different stages of a woman's life. There was Kore, the girl who later becomes the young woman Persephone, her mother Demeter, and Hecate, the older woman, the crone who became the grandmother in my story. Many women are caught in positions of caring for older parents while parenting young children, so I brought Hecate into the family, as it were, as Demeter's mother, although in the original story, she is not related to Demeter. These four women offered me the possibility of marking four interconnected but clearly distinct voices in the play.

I knew that I didn't want to focus my story on the rape and although Persephone's narrative is commonly understood as a story of rape and abduction, I don't use that as a point of departure. I understand the myth as being about a process of individuation, of becoming an individual. In psychoanalytical terms, this process necessarily involves having to move away from the mother, from that which is known, into your own unknown, scary, unformed self. All the myths that deal with journeys or quests are about this moment of leaving something that is known in order to discover oneself.

In order for Kore to become Persephone, a grown-up version of herself, she has to leave her mother and go into the underworld. In the original myth, the underworld is a place where she is forcibly taken, it involves an abduction, it is associated with a rape. For me, the underworld is actually the uncharted territory of who she is and might become. It is possibly the place where we dream from, the unconscious, the place where life happens, and things are sometimes cruel, and so through experiencing it, we understand what life is about, separated from this place of the neat garden and home, where everything is controlled, which our mothers create for us. In order to translate these ideas into the theatre, I went in search of a series of images. The image I created for this underworld was that which was at the edge of my own mother's tended garden. At the edge of my mother's garden was a wildness, there were no clear paths, it was messy, it was unknown, it was life. So I created an image in the play of 'the wild', and in the middle of the wild was a pool of water. Kore looks into this pool of water and sees a reflection of herself and the woman she is becoming. It is a kind of sensual awakening to herself as a sexual and powerful woman. I could connect this in terms of my own relationship to my mother, who I experienced as very controlling, not wanting me to leave, needing to have me as a reflection of herself, rather than finding ways of reflecting who I was. I think she was a needy, possibly frightened person herself; bonded quite firmly to what was expected of a woman growing up in the 1940s. And what was expected of her as a wife. Her father had forbidden her to study architecture or medicine and her husband had forbidden her to get a job. Perhaps it was impossible for her not to trap me in the way that she felt trapped. For me the underworld was this space where my mother couldn't reach me. But if she can't reach me, she also can't protect me. The underworld is also associated with things that we can't necessarily



explain, which remain mysterious. It feels like the underworld, in this sense of the unconscious, is absolutely essential for all of us to grow up. I think particularly so for women. Women have to turn their face to themselves, as opposed to turning their face to the father or to patriarchy, or trying to be the good mother or wife, as determined by the system. They have to force their face away from what is expected in order to engage with themselves. That comes back to what I was saying earlier about the solo performance and why I am attracted to it, because there is a need in me to break my face away from that which is expected of me, to go into that empty space and define myself. Each piece is a part of that process of breaking away from doing what is expected of me.



Figure 2. ‘Stop the cells from multiplying, the leaves from uncurling, the roots from deepening, the stream from flowing’. Image: Mark Wessels.

### **What interests you in the solo format of performance?**

I see two aspects of solo work: on the one side, there is the solo creation of the work, and the other is the solo performance, and these are two distinct things for me.

The space of the solo creation is the space to translate the self. The material in solo work is oneself, the drive to work alone is the drive to have a conversation with oneself. Particularly in the context of South Africa, it is more common to find female performers opting for solo work, in comparison to male performers. Possibly this might be explained by the patriarchal social set-up, which makes it necessary for women to find a space in performance that might be claimed and investigated as one’s own. My sense in South Africa is that the male solo performers I know work much more in narrative and story-based theatre, rather than creating space for the identity of the performer to engage with the space and opportunity of performance. Certainly for me, the solo performance is a way for me to engage with my identity and translate my experiences into a performative encounter that I can share with an audience.

The performance of the solo allows for a very personal encounter of the performer’s self with an audience. Particularly in this production, we orientated the stage space in order to refuse a separation between performer and audience. We created a performance space around which the audience sat on three sides. We deliberately put

it in that form because we wanted the performer, myself, to be very close to the audience. I wanted them to feel intimately connected to what was happening on the stage. I didn't want them to feel that they were at a remove. The audience can see each other through the stage, on the other side, they can see other people responding, I can see them watching others. I wanted that, not only for the challenge that it offered me on the level of skill, but also because it forced me to really have a 360-degree body. If you look at the choreography and the way the body is placed, it is not an exclusively frontal orientation, we try to retain a multi-directional connection to the audience. But it also really allows me to encounter them, to reach out and literally touch audience members on the different sides. There's something that really excites me about those kinds of moments. I once did a performance for a group of around a hundred 15–16-year old schoolgirls. There was such a wonderful sense that I was performing this piece about a young girl translating herself into a mature woman in the midst of this group of young girls, themselves on the cusp of transforming themselves into mature women. Since I was so close to them, I could see the resonances, the responses and empathy flick across their eyes. So, the work was intimate and the staging amplified this, doing away with the fourth wall allowing for this close encounter with the audience to be at the centre of the performance experience.

But solo work is rarely made alone – 'solo' – and this I think is where I am very fortunate. The piece has been midwifed by a whole host of incredibly skilled collaborators. Their offerings become my partners in the space. Neo Muyanga's music and sound design, Ina Wichterich's choreography, Craig Leo's design props, the objects and costume and Mark's lighting and direction, they are all continuously at play with my body and the text. They are translating, containing and helping to structure all the time.

Creating and performing alone also brings me face to face at each stage of the process with doubt. The doubt is a generative rather than crippling impulse. It becomes a battle that I have to fight at each stage to defend myself and my impulses and the strategies I have to make work. Nothing is ever known or a given and has to be found and made at each stage.



Figure 3. 'She tries to hold the water, catching it in her hands, but it always falls through'. Image: Mark Wessels.

**The performance employs a specific gestural vocabulary that is repeated throughout. How does this serve as a translational device?**

All the images (the water, the containers) that came into the design as well as the physical language in the piece were translations of something else. The water translated the sense of time and constant flow of life that cannot be stopped. It also represented the element that is present at most moments of transitions, at birth, baptism, at death. The containers translated the kind of paradox that as humans we are engaged in, the desire and attempt to stop time but also the way in which we are defined at certain moments of our lives, as girl, woman, mother, grandmother. Craig Leo, the designer, brought in a lot of different containers, buckets, jugs, basins, which were all about capturing these brief moments or different points in our lives.

When I wrote the text, I knew that there were certain aspects of the story that could not be translated by the written text. I knew that I wanted to work with the physical body to explore, translate those moments. So I left gaps in the text. For example, Kore's discovery of her reflection in the water in the wild and the beginnings of her engagement with herself were all left to be explored and translated into a physical language.

Early on I started making a list of things I loved about my daughter, and about my mother. I made a list without separating what was about whom. I wanted to put all those times and loves together, thus translating the love of the mother to the daughter, and the daughter to her own daughter, into one moment, without separating the time. It didn't matter ultimately who it was, it was more about the moment of the mother and the daughter loving each other in all its complexity. I left spaces for this too, to pursue the expressions of this love in physical form.

I developed this physical language, a kind of 'hand gym', as a series of heightened actions akin to dance but not entirely, together with the choreographer and my long-time collaborator Ina Wichterich.<sup>3</sup> I was very clear about where and what I wanted the physical body to translate, so we started with some very specific impulses. We explored and created several sets of physical sequences. I had thought a lot about what my hands had done, around the bodies of my children, the repetitive actions of care that had extended over years and years; and around my dying mother, the washing, massaging. We began with an exploration of the gestures that form a part of the repertoire of caregiving: washing, rocking, massaging, wiping tears, brushing, combing and so forth. We worked for hours on identifying a set of 16 gestures that formed the basic structure of the language, which could be repeated in different ways and which I then employed throughout the performance. I also used a number of gestures related to water and washing, which were used in different moments of the story. There was another set of gestures related to the opening and closing of doors, connecting to the sense of entrapment and escape. Ina also wanted to work with turning, that being the central image of the title and also reflecting the sense of time and the clock, and necessitated by the seating configuration. At the beginning, I couldn't turn and gradually learnt to turn. So, turning became a major component.

The gestures that we developed created frames around certain sections of the work and translated the core feeling or one of the main impulses that underscored that particular moment. So, for instance, in the scene titled 'The things they loved about each other', the text is interspersed with and contained within a structure of movements that all relate to this process of care giving. These gestures are repeated and extended in different ways around the text, giving a sense of how the actions of caring are repeated

in different ways over time and for different people, daughter, mothers, grandmothers, granddaughters. These gestures might not be immediately recognizable to the audience, but contribute to translating the sense of tending and care.

The gestures that formed the base of the physical language around Kore's leaving and diving into the depth of her own unconscious were based in washing and the tango. They translated the sense of how water is used at many moments of ritual transformation and framed Kore's journey as she moved from one realm to another. They also suggest particularly when married with the sweeping extensions and rootedness of the tango, something of the sensuality of Kore's journey to womanhood and how it is located in private, intimate attentions to and awareness of the body.

Gesture translates an idea, feeling, thought or moment from a story for the audience, but its destination is uncertain. I find this a fascinating feature of gesture as translational mode. The impulse does not necessarily arrive translated exactly as it was intended, the meaning of the physical image proliferates and so engages uncertainly with an audience.



Figure 4. 'Her unbearable beauty; The stranger in her green eyes'. Image: Jesse Kate Kramer.

#### **Talk about the title of the performance.**

I wrote the piece almost completely before I came to the title and when I looked back at my files, most of the work was saved under the working title *Breathe*. One of the contenders for a title was *A moment ago* and after much discussion I settled on *I turned away and she was gone*. I think because it encapsulated much of what was in my main impulse for the piece, i.e., to understand the changes that were happening to myself as I was transforming from a child-bearing woman into an old crone; the changes that were happening to my daughter as she was changing from child to woman and where my own mother now was, having transformed from matter into spirit. I was fascinated by these disappearances. Where had the child gone in my woman/ daughter? Where was my own younger version of myself hiding? My father had also commented when he was alive, looking down at his 80 year-old legs, that he didn't recognize the veins and fragile skin, that his younger, stronger, muscular legs had disappeared and left imposters in their place. The title captures this lapse of time, of looking away for a moment and facing the disappearance of the previous versions of ourselves. I think the title also helped me reflect the terror of parents in

relation to the possibility of abduction of their children, of being absorbed for a moment in something else and then the worst thing happening. So, the title was both reflecting an inward position in relation to the passing of time and a reflection of the horror of the possibility of abduction, which is embedded in the Demeter story and informing the context of the play.



Figure 5. 'I was glorious once; until you reconfigured me as this old hag'. Image: Jesse Kate Kramer.

**In its exploration of themes such as motherhood, violence, ageing and a woman's quest for self-understanding, the performance can be read as feminist. How would you describe your artistic strategies of translating feminist concerns to performance?**

I am a woman. My gender and its relationship to the world is fundamental to my playmaking. My understanding of the patriarchal silencing and repackaging of the female voice and experience has meant that by insisting on making work that highlights my own experience I am inevitably concerned with feminism. But to be honest it is not a strategy, it is an urgency. An inevitable result of what it means to be who I am, female, aging, a mother and a play maker at this point in time.

Part of the impulse to make the performance was suddenly being alerted to the fact that I was invisible on the streets, whereas as a young woman I was extremely visible. I was shocked to discover an older body and greying hair. It was as if I was literally disappearing. With the loss of my youthful body came a loss of visibility to men and conventionally, a loss of value. I was looking in the mirror and no longer recognizing the person that was there, instead an older version of my parents was staring back at me. In a way the piece attempts to grapple with that. When I walk with my daughter on the streets, I see how men look at her, she may not notice it, but it's so powerful when you are on the other side of it, because they are not looking at you any longer. I can see how the gaze of men lands on her as she is young and her youth is magnetic. It was shocking for me to realize what had happened, and to also ask: who am I without that gaze? And also, knowing the potentially predatory nature of that gaze, how will my daughter negotiate that? And how can I protect her from a toxic masculinity?

What the journey of the work offers me though is very liberating, because I can be all of it. I am that old woman in the bath, and when I am the old one, I can talk back

to everybody. I can speak my mind and care nothing for what anyone thinks of me. It allows me to go through all those stages, from the young woman's admiration of herself, to the mother whose role is identified by the caretaking of the daughter, to the older woman who sees and understands everything and whom no one listens to. And lastly, I can face that final freedom in the transformation from matter to spirit. The piece allows me to inhabit all those aspects of being a woman rather than just dwell in what one has lost. This sense of freedom counters also the position that we as women find ourselves in a dominantly patriarchal and violent society. Freedom is the opposite of violence. To be more than one thing is also to be free.

As I am falling, my body twisting and turning, hurtling down,  
 I start to look around me.  
 Whizzing past me I can just make out  
 The shape of trees – long, tall trunks of trees.  
 And I notice that they are quite beautiful, very tall and straight and full of leaves.  
 (Reznek 2019, p. 5)

Translation is about loss. The piece allows me to be more at peace with those losses as one changes from one thing to another. Falling is one of the central images in one of the dreams in the piece. Demeter dreams she has fallen into a volcano and as her body is plummeting down she notices that she is falling through a forest, that it is beautiful and that she is surrounded by the sound of birds. The falling is terrifying but at the same time very beautiful. The losses are hard but also contain something redemptive. The text came from a dream I once had of falling into a volcano I had visited on Reunion island. When I worked with the dream, trying to unravel the feeling, this fearful thing of falling and changing and losing, it seemed that the falling obliged one to let go. And then it might be possible to notice the beautiful things around you. So, in the end of the performance, I use this image of a beautiful young girl jumping up and down, water streaming past her, in fact an image of surrendering, and the delight that follows letting go.



Figure 6. 'Over and over they go; They disappear, they vanish, they evaporate, vacate the warm space of their being'. Image: Mark Wessels.

### **How does the performance speak to contemporary South Africa?**

The writing references the context of South Africa very specifically, it is not overt but it is there and sometimes uncomfortable. For example in the text I describe the garden that my parents made, and there is an afterthought reference to the fact that the garden would have been made not only by them but with the toil and labour of a black gardener employed to help my parents with their huge property: 'Demeter, Kore's mother had made this garden. Well, not alone – with the help of her father. And Johannes'. 'And Johannes' is repeated again later, locating the work firmly within the colonial paradigm of Pietermaritzburg in Kwazulu Natal and referencing the way in which white landowners marginalized and made invisible the labour of black men and women in the creation of colonial homes and spaces. I think also that locating the story so specifically in my mother's colonial garden in Pietermaritzburg was alienating for some audience members, who felt that they couldn't find a way into the story via that garden. I think this is where the myth provided a way of translating that privileged experience into a broader story that in the end was more inclusive.

Because I had changed the original myth to exclude the abduction, I felt that it was important that the performance did not ignore the context of a toxic masculinity and the plague of violence against women that exists in South Africa. If we were interpreting the myth in the way that Kore left of her own accord, then we would not be reflecting a cruel truth that is unfortunately very specific to South Africa, where up to 40% of women can expect to be raped in their lifetime. In South Africa, most girls do not 'go' of their own accord, the movement to adulthood is often through rape, and untimely through some kind of a violent experience. For me, being the mother of a teenage girl in South Africa, it is impossible to ignore the issue of rape and sexual violence and therefore we couldn't ignore the element of abduction and rape in the myth. So, Hecate is the character that insists that the performance speaks directly to contemporary South Africa. She is the character that knows and sees everything, she is the political or social voice if you like. She witnesses every abduction, every rape, every violation. Because in my play she is old and marginal, and no longer the powerful goddess she used to be, what she witnesses is ignored. She is ignored as are the statistics of gender-based violence in South Africa by the structures that could find realistic ways to change the narrative. In the mythical world, she is the goddess of witchcraft, the moon, night, magic and crossroads. She was also the only one, the only divinity to witness Kore's abduction in the original story and help Demeter in her search. So, while I did not spell it out in that way, to the audiences in South Africa it was immediately clear that what Hecate describes and sees references the war on women's bodies in South Africa.

I think there is also another way in which the piece speaks to us here in South Africa as a so-called post-conflict site, a site that has undergone huge political transformation and where democracy is still fragile and disappointing. I consider Kore's journey as inevitable and political in some way – in order for a person to become themselves, for a regime to change, for attitudes to shift, the old discriminatory narratives have to be gotten rid of.

And now, in 2019, 25 years after the first general election, in order to find or become something new, to save this failing democracy we have to turn away from old ways of solving the crisis of economic inequities that is the legacy of the system

of racialised segregation. We have to find something new, something perhaps currently unknown to us that will change the extremely violent and the violently inequitable society that we have continued to be, into something new.

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### Notes

1. *I turned away and she was gone* premiered in 2014 at Magnet Theatre in Cape Town. Written and performed by Jennie Reznik; directed by Mark Fleishman; choreographed by Ina Wichterich; original music by Neo Muyanga; set design by Craig Leo; lighting design by Mark Fleishman; credits for images: Jesse Kate Kramer and Mark Wessels.
2. In the poem 'The Myth of Innocence' Glück writes:  
  
She stands by the pool saying, from time to time, *I was abducted*, but it sounds wrong to her, nothing like what she felt. Then she says, *I was not abducted*. Then she says, *I offered myself, I wanted to escape my body*. Even, sometimes, *I willed this*. (Glück 2006, p. 51)
3. Wichterich was one of the choreographers on Mark Fleishman's productions of *Rain in Dead Man's Footprints* and *Cargo* (collaborations with Jazzart Dance Theatre) and she also helped with some choreography in *Every Year Every Day, I Am Walking*.

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