



# CHOREOGRAPHY

Prison Notebooks

## TREATMENT

An Exploration of Dance  
& Movement to portray  
the subconscious and  
conscious world of  
Dorothy Macardle  
Sharon Mcardle  
DMAPP

## CHOREOGRAPHY

A number of key theories have been identified as having potential towards the creation of a rich and meaningful Physical Vocabulary. They include;

- Walter Benjamin's Profane illumination, whereby all human experiences are revealed to have revolutionary potential, which is revealed via dialectics of shock, the blurring of real and dream worlds combined with a radical concept of Freedom.
- Todorov's Fantastic Effect, which experienced the uncanny or supernatural phenomena.
- Agamben's State of Exception and which explores the Reduction of life to biopolitics to bare life (Homosacer), deprived of rights, where female prisoners are placed outside the law and the state of exception prevails as in Macardles Prison tortures.
- Maud Ellmann's The Hunger Artists, exploring the disembodied nature of hunger striking as a metaphor for protest, a weapon of resistance and its' affinity with artistry.

We have consulted with a movement director whose role will require; energising moments in the drama, focusing on Character movements and assisting in achieving the stylised dance transition into the expressionist final act.

The performance space itself will be considered to allow the audience experience the confined physical world of the imprisoned women in contrast with the expansive, imaginative life of Dorothy Macardle - an encaged artist.

Key concepts relating to Prison Notebooks were expressed and the Movement Director recommended a number of choreographer/dancers whom she considers having strong resonances with the aforementioned psychological and philosophical underpinnings.

The following trailblazers were researched and their movement style was explored in our rehearsal room to help shape and influence the piece. They included:

- Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) for her Ghost like movement style, inspired by ancient Greek forms, Walt Whitman & Nietzsche.

- Valeska Gert's (1892-1978) *The Grotesque and the Beautiful* is of particular interest to us when considering Macardle's juxtaposed experience of being a prisoner of war. Macardle is torn between the horror of Hunger strike, Executions and Tortures and her commitment to the Republican cause
- Mary Wigman (1886-1973) notable as a pioneer of expressionist dance and Greek Chorus.
- Lucia Joyce (1907-1982)

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES ON THE ROLE OF THE CHOREOGRAPHER

2/7/20

We have invited Ella to join us for our first table reading next Tuesday, to bring a choreographer's "third eye" to our continuing work, and contribute ideas and techniques that will help us to achieve our key aim: namely to bring our audiences deep into the subconscious as well as conscious world of Dorothy Macardle in prison.

In these notes, I try to be clear, but hopefully not prescriptive, about the perceived role of the choreographer in this intimate solo theatre project. What place has formalised movement in a wordy drama that is adapted largely verbatim from the handwritten diaries of a literary writer?

Dorothy's unpublished prison notebooks are unlike any other Irish gaol journal we are aware of. Like other political prisoners' accounts, they contain fascinating insights into the everyday deprivations of internment and the politics of the era (the Irish Civil War). But more than this, Dorothy's journal presents the interior reflections of an artist; a visionary and a woman with psychic sensibilities. She writes in detail about dreams, her own and those of her companion, Betty. She seeks meaning in the dreams while describing them with the same attention to detail and the same sense of immediacy that she gives to her conscious experiences. While it is resolutely positive and optimistic, the journal is also a chronicle of personal doubt and shared trauma: she is surrounded by sights, sounds far removed from the polite society she has just left behind: the hollering of drunken soldiers and male guards; indiscriminate shootings of cats and people; the wailing of a woman having a breakdown; washing in freezing water; hearing and reading drip-fed news about external atrocities, including the execution of her mentor and great friend, Erskine Childers; ministering to a mature and famous woman depleted by hunger strike, and so on.

We have looked not only at the diaries and short stories she wrote while in prison, but her later works as a celebrated gothic novelist and Hollywood screenwriter, and drawn from all these sources in imagining her psychic journey over six months of incarceration without trial. Her political intuition and her solidarity with women, both those with whom she has common cause and those who argue a different approach, prefigure activist tendencies and political developments far ahead of her time. In one dream, she anticipates the greatest split within the Irish Republicanism that will come in the following thirty years. In prison she develops the prescience of the shrewd political analyst, the futurist eye of the artist and more than a hint of the foresight of the psychic (or indeed the ancient “seer” poets”).

While the journal text is quite “literary”, and we have been assiduous in deciphering and transcribing faithfully Dorothy’s own words, there are spaces and gaps and nuances of meaning which we have sought to enlarge with the multiple sensory layers that live performance allows and indeed requires. A sophisticated soundscape is planned; and we shall work with a lighting designer – seeking to draw inspiration from certain 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre, cinematic and literary traditions in which Dorothy was immersed; but above all we invoke the potent alchemy where the actor’s craft and the audience’s imagination connect to evoke atmospheres, emotions and inner landscapes. We do not use projected images, however. We have resisted the use of screen technology to achieve effects that we believe can better be conjured in live performance through this magical “contract” where the kinetic, storytelling actor engages with the active, engaged audience.

There are moments and episodes within all of this that seem to us to call for an even deeper exploration of the physical and visual possibilities of the confined space, the committed performer, and the “willing suspension of disbelief”, to represent the unconscious side by side with the conscious. This is where we believe that choreography can help us achieve what cinematography (in a theatre setting) can often serve to undermine.

In short, we hope that Ella will look with us at certain scenes in particular, not to add decorative movement, but to express more eloquently certain meanings and emotions behind and beneath the words.

I have marked the script where I feel such collaborative enhancement is needed or to be valued. The list is not exhaustive. Some of these scenes may reveal themselves readily without any formal “choreography” – other scenes not listed here may call for more complex movement in rehearsal. But given the practical realities of time, travel and budget limits, I

hope this pre-selection, based on our intimate understanding, already developed over 18 months on the project, will ensure that we work efficiently as well as creatively.

I also hope these notes will help us to have a transparent and shared vision of the different but overlapping roles of the devising performer, the writer-director and the choreographer as we progress.

Scenes of “particular interest” for choreographed movement

“Dreams”. Dorothy describes a series of sleeping dreams which are related mainly in voiceover. It is envisaged that this sequence involves “mesmeric, gentle dance” and esoteric Indian music.

Transition to Act 5 – Dorothy’s “Psychotic Reaction”: Dictated partly by the reality that the verbatim diaries from her final two months in gaol were lost in a deliberate fire – and partly by an intuitive dramatist’s need to “explode” the narrative, the script describes a convulsive fit that projects Dorothy into visions of her own funeral and her long and varied future which will include repeated traumatic episodes of arson and ill luck with fire. A soundscape of voices is underscored with a rock song from the 1960s - a few years after her actual death – chosen deliberately to hint at her psychic prescience and because its psychedelic beat and lyric have the desired “explosive” effect. The sequence concludes with a “spent” Dorothy encountering the spectral figure from the Prologue, assumed to be her own postmortem self, who assists her to piece together the final traumatic story of the “Kilmainham Tortures” riot.

The Prologue: Currently described in relatively conventional terms whereby we hear a spectral figure – inferred to be Dorothy after her death – open a narrative doorway to a fragmented memory play. The language, setting and references to “kaleidoscope” and “whirligig”, suggest perhaps a minimalist gestural element that might set the precedent for more sustained movement work later on.

“Early Days”: Dorothy has an “out of body” experience which turns out to be a fainting fit and its aftermath.

“Vigil”: A passage by the bedside of hunger striker Mary McSwiney describes the strange experience of time passing – a theme she returns to soon after, in her first short story. This may succeed best simply as currently written – a short, heightened piece of static live speaking – but might also lend itself to voiceover and a more physical approach.

At the very end of Scene 7 where she mourns the murder of Erskine Childers and must then endure a night of vulgar, “Gran Guignol” shouting and shooting by the drunken soldiers outside. There may be a case for a very brief “foreshock” here – a tremor of horror that anticipates her major convulsion after Act 4.

Feast of the Immaculate Conception: Dorothy “walks around in a square” in a half-dream as the newsboys’ cries about a political assassination merge with Dorothy’s groggy, waking awareness of the Catholic women processing to attend a December 8<sup>th</sup> religious ceremony. We have already roughly worked up this scene, but there may be ways to reimagine or enhance it.

Dorothy has a “brain-sick”, claustrophobic dream in which “happy childhood places” become centres of paralysis and panic.

Dev in Dundalk Dream: Dorothy finds herself in a dream with surreal elements and yet of true political import, whereby she anticipates a sundering of friendship (which will actually occur 10 years later) between DeValera and Mary McSwiney. The out of control “whirligig”, an image she uses a few times, is key to the bloody ending of this sequence.

Finally, the riot/resistance scene which begins with Dorothy – apparently not in full recall – reading her own essay “The Kilmainham Tortures” about violent transfer of dozens of resisting women out of Kilmainham, will benefit from a moment where physical re-enactment is added to the vivid description, capturing the horror of the scene and the bravery of the revolutionary women.

#### Reference Videos

Isadora Duncan

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtAaeC-BFVc&list=PLOEGromsyJ\\_9sMqn48xn2l1PbXOLMx5JV&index=12](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtAaeC-BFVc&list=PLOEGromsyJ_9sMqn48xn2l1PbXOLMx5JV&index=12)

<https://www.contemporary-dance.org/isadora-duncan.html>

Valeska Gert’s

<https://www.numeridanse.tv/en/dance-videotheque/tanzerische-pantominen>

Wigman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFCVWVaeevA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFCVWVaeevA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFCVWVaeevA>

Pepper’s Ghost

<https://www.yokoseyama.com/works>

