

# Helen Chadwick

She uses the theatre of songs as a gentle tool for committed activism. **Katie Rose** pays a visit.

It's a beautiful June evening and I'm walking the lightswept avenues of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich in search of Skittle Alley, a once cryptic-bowling alley for retired seamen. Having failed to navigate the Festival map effectively, I catch sight of a man wearing a press tag who is also heading that way. We join a hushed huddle in what feels like an underground war bunker, dressed with dust covers, overturned tables and all the equipment required by the War Correspondents who are the subject of Helen Chadwick's latest song theatre piece. Our voyage of voice has begun.

"I never grew up thinking I was an activist, it kind of crept up on me." Helen tells me she played piano from an early age, trained in Theatre and embarked on what is a truly polyphonic career of composing, performing and devising. Having joined Cardiff Laboratory Theatre, Helen began touring as part of the women's international theatre movement Magdalena. She taught voice workshops at the National Theatre Studio for 20 years and participated in projects in Georgia, Bolivia, Lithuania and South Africa. Her song theatre pieces, which she describes as "more real, closer to life than opera," include *White Suit*, based on the testimony of a Colombian woman

landmine survivor and *Dalston Songs*, a piece which began with an intention to "interview her neighbours about home" and resulted in the stories of Palestinians and Kurds being represented on stage at the Royal Opera House. Of the activism evident in her work, she feels "like it's happened to me by default, although once I'm at it I really mind about it."

A prolific composer for opera, theatre and radio, Helen's latest album, *House Of Light*, follows six solo albums and a previous group album with the Helen Chadwick Group, a fluid collective of actors and singers. "I love change and I love creating new things, making new performances – I'm a sort of generating engine." *House Of Light* features striking vocal arrangements of lyrics by writers such as Sherko Bekas, exiled from Kurdistan by the Iraqi regime. "Some part of my work has turned out to be giving a new way that some of those voices can be heard," she notes.

Helen considers herself "amazingly lucky" to be born into an era of creative exchange between international artists, which meant she was performing Bulgarian songs at the age of 23. She describes herself as "influenced in very light ways" by musical forms including English folk, ballads, classical music, Brazilian body percussion, overtone and Georgian music

which she first experienced "like a lightning bolt going down through my body." She cites Frankie Armstrong, David Hykes, founder of the Harmonic Choir, and jazz singer Maggie Nicholls as being the first three people to inspire her. As such, the vocal terrain of her work is vast and shimmers with a multitude of influences.

*War Correspondents* is formed of diverse vocal textures woven from interviews with journalists including Martin Bell, Giulina Sgrena and the poetry of writers such as Pablo Neruda and Samih al Qasim. Words drawn from the depths of conflict ricochet like bullets in harmonic formation, yet the delivery remains light of touch, combining vocal dexterity with innovative physical choreography by Steven Hoggett. A torture scene is portrayed by an exquisite movement sequence and Erich Fried's poem *What Happens* – "It has happened / and it goes on happening / and will happen again / if nothing happens to stop it" – is sung to the increasingly intense rhythm of a cup game.

This lightness of touch characterises Helen's portrayal of vast issues such as war – "my aim is that I do want to touch people, I want to move them." In 2002, frustrated by the government's decision to go to war in Afghanistan despite public protests and feeling "I've got to do something you can't argue with," Helen initiated *Sing For Water*, a mass choral event which has raised over half a million pounds for WaterAid and introduced global repertoire to a vast number of singers. Whilst visiting a project in the Afram Plains, Ghana, Helen noted the impact goes "way beyond the water" and sanitation which WaterAid provides, making a "gobsmacking" difference to the quality of health, education and life of villagers.

By touching people lightly, through the beauty and power of song, Helen's work demonstrates the difference music can make and the truths it can illuminate. Light sources such as mobiles, candles and lamps are used throughout *War Correspondents* to create multiple perspectives, exposing the stark realities of war. As I emerge from Skittle Alley into the long midsummer light, the words of Liberian war reporter Kenneth Best are left ringing in my ears – "I keep hoping that some day, if we keep telling the truth, it will be better for all of us."

*War Correspondents* World Premiere Tour continues in Autumn 2014

*House of Light* is available from Helen's website.

[www.helenchadwick.com](http://www.helenchadwick.com)



Photo: Simon Richardson