

# **Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman**

Reinventing Menstrual Rituals Through  
New Performance Practices

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of  
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## Abstract

*Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman, Reinventing Menstrual Rituals Through New Performance Practices (DCIBW)* is a revelatory, illusory, horror filled, taboo breaking bricolage; a multimodal research project that proposes to reinvent menstrual rituals through new performance practices. *DCIBW* is a spectacular touring live art carnivalesque performance work premiered in 2015 and documented in this written thesis. It draws on menstruation studies from the fields of anthropology, feminism, live art and performance, entertainment history, popular culture, activism and ecology. Informed by an autoethnographical framework, it uses my experiences as a woman and a performance maker developed through the creation of a Practice as Research (PaR) live performance project. It critically engages with theories of indigenous stories, menstrual synchronicity, horror and abjection in feminism, women in variety entertainment traditions and generative eco feminist frameworks. It explores the overarching themes of cyclicity and renewal that became apparent in researching the reinvention of menstrual rituals.

The live performance features a cast of research participants who are a group of diverse intersectional queer live artists and circus skilled performers presenting physical acts in the context of an experimental performative lecture and of the theatricalised personal revelations of life experiences created through our PaR methodology.

The creation of the work explored through the thesis and the show included monthly menstrual ritual performance devising workshop weekends, qualitative interviews, group discussion, work in progress showings and live performance touring experiences. The workshops utilised existing research methods on menstrual synchronicity and the devising methods for performance drew on my existing live art and cabaret practice and the performers' skills. The PaR explored spectacle and taboo

in popular entertainment traditions including the traditional variety arts of stage magic, cabaret and sideshow, highlighting new propositions for the term Showwoman as opposed to showman to be used in contemporary performance vernacular, defining the Showwoman as using her spectacular vision in acts that are transformative and collaborative and an antidote to the entertainment traditions of the exploitative tropes of the showman.

The revelations of the touring performance and associated events of post-show talks saw the emergence of the activist group the *Menstruants* which went on to independently organise events and public performative interventions at the same time as the show was touring. This further informed the project to propose new methodologies for the creation of menstrual ritual and activism. The PaR, the writing of the thesis, the performance of the show and the staging of activist events resulted in the introduction of a new proposition for a theoretical term - the *Menstrocene* - that can contribute to a wider ecofeminist performance activist landscape.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction:</b> The Autoethnographic Origins of Dr Carnesky's Idea .....	1
Jews and Forbidden Blood and Tattoos.....	8
An Emotional and Bloody Rollercoaster.....	18
Bloody Practice as Research .....	24
<b>Chapter 1:</b>	
Anthropology and the Menstrocene .....	32
Menstrual Ritual and Taboo in Anthropology .....	33
Serpentine Bodies.....	35
Practice Menstrual Rituals Versus Proving Menstrual Synchrony.....	42
The Perfect Potency for Ritual Practices .....	46
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	
There's No Women Like Bloody Showwomen .....	52
Menstrual Magic.....	57
Sawing the Suffragette In Half .....	66
Horror Power.....	71
Theatres of Blood.....	77
Acting Up on a Monthly Basis .....	88
Menstrual Activists and Spiritualist's Unite.....	94
<b>Chapter 3:</b>	
Conceiving <i>Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman</i> .....	98
Bloody Devising Processes .....	103
Workshop Flows.....	105
Workshop One -The Red Round Table.....	107
Workshop Two - Menstrual Ritual Performance Making .....	110
Workshop Three -Menstrual Documentation .....	111
<b>Chapter 4:</b>	
Dr Carnesky, The Menstruants and Menstronauts.....	113

The Menstruants .....	118
Collecting The Research.....	128
National Theatre Studios Week Long Workshop December 2015 .....	131
Reclaiming the Sawing In Half Routine.....	132
Menstrual Hair Hanging .....	136
The Show.....	136
The Menstronauts .....	137
Menstruants and Menstronauts Unite .....	139
<b>Conclusion: Menstrual Company Catharsis.....</b>	<b>140</b>
Performing The Menstrocene .....	142

<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>145</b>
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## **Appendices**

1. Creative Backstage Team Bios and Tours.....	156
2. Menstronauts Interviews .....	160
3. Full Script.....	178
4. Documentation.....	194
5. Selected Press Coverage .....	195
6. Signed Ethics Consent Forms.....	203
7. Psychological Profile Form.....	213

## Introduction

### The Autoethnographic Origins of Dr Carnesky's Idea

This introduction traces the journey of my performance career and research interests which led to the formation of *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman - Reinventing Menstrual Rituals Through New Performance Practices (DCIBW)*. It examines how this body of work contributed to the process of 'Practice as Research' (PaR) for *DCIBW*. This PaR, in process and outcome, examined hegemonic religious and cultural menstrual rituals with the intention of devising new epistemologies through the reinvention and sharing of alternative performative menstrual rituals. The project created a methodology for the new rituals from devised performance practices combined with a queering of theories of menstrual synchronicity and notions of the generative in ecofeminism. The sources of the theories ranged from psychological studies on Western menstrual synchronicity, anthropological studies of menstruation as a taboo and pollutant and of groups of women in traditional human cultures working with menstrual cyclicity for communal gain. A reflexivity in the research enabled the revisioning and reinventing menstrual rituals as contemporary feminist performance and activist practices. Aesthetically the performance work draws on traditional entertainment tropes of bleeding women in popular culture and media, from classic horror film imagery of women possessing paranormal powers when menstruating to women bleeding in stage magic performance.

My work as an arts practitioner engages with aspects of autoethnography, my own life experiences and cultural heritage often acting as the catalyst to inform my research interests. Autoethnography as a form of qualitative research that can communicate diverse perspectives from the portal of the personal has been unknowingly implicit in my process of making performance work since the 1990s. Yet it was only as a doctoral student that I became familiar with the term. My awareness of performance artists like Karen Finlay and Annie Sprinkle in the 1990s inspired my earlier work

to use my lived experiences to examine my place in the cultural landscape and to make work that spoke to audiences on an emotional and personally political level. My politics were informed by an exploration of cultural identity as a child of third generation Jewish immigrants and as a young adult with a strong identification with anarchist youth subcultures inspired by the punk movement.

In *Jewess Tattooes* (1999-2002), my own experience of growing up identified as Jewish and the conflict of this with my choice to be tattooed became the backdrop of the work that explored the complex relationship and cultural contradictions of identity and belonging. The work examined my dual position of both an emotional attachment with Jewish cultural traditions and yet a desire to break free from Judaeo-Christian religious structures. Ultimately, beyond my own joyful childhood memories of my Jewish upbringing, the work focused on how my identity has been shaped and marked by histories of genocide, immigration and the changing landscapes of Europe. The marks expressed through tattoos performed as a visceral map of my conflicted sense of heritage and cultural dissidence. Tammy Spry identifies how autoethnography serves as a framework for performative approaches to narratives of lived experience, being 'about the continual questioning, the naming and renaming and un-naming of experience through craft, through heart, through the fluent body'. (Spry 2011, 509). My tattooed body became a fluent landscape, examining, exposing and proposing how to embody inherited cultural trauma and gendered politics. These tattoos were then a way for me to challenge traditional life choices through my newly tattooed queer body.

My work is strongly influenced by the counter cultural characters in the media of my 1970s and 1980s childhood, a sense of 'Punk' in performance that had an anarchic message which embodied Guy Debord's situationist notions of *détournement* (from the French, 'to overturn or derail'). *Détournement* appropriates and alters existing media and cultural representations with which an audience is already familiar, in order to give them new, subversive meanings. In *Jewess Tattooes* the



taboo of the tattoo in Judaism is turned on its head and reclaimed as a subversive expression of my complex relationship with my Jewish identity. The archetype of the Whore of Babylon riding her hydra headed serpent and Lilith's relationship with the serpent of Eden, represented as demonic manifestations of women's sexuality in Judaism, serve in the work to connect me to ancient Jewish representations of women's menstrual blood, sexuality, cyclicity and synchronicity.

My theatricality embodies a camp sensibility drawn from practices of radical clown, alternative drag, feminist erotica, surrealist painting and esoteric ritual. Alternative popular music and performance artists, prolific in the UK in the 1980s, influenced this sense of aesthetics - Siouxsie Sioux, Psychic TV, The Lindsay Kemp Company and Danielle Dax. Playing with shifting sexual identity and taboo, their performances created access to a forbidden and colourful dystopian world.

These artists created their identity as alternate to heteronormativity, offering a seductive and exotic escape from the humdrum of the suburban upbringing of the majority of their audiences. London's subculture of the 1980s was an invitation into the transgressive cultural possibilities of the forbidden body and the esoteric unseen through the promise of unknown sexualities and transcendence from conservative religious morality. Amidst this performative culture of gothic nightclubs, witchcraft covens, animal activism and vegan squats, I created my first live art and cabaret works. The word cabaret is culturally synonymous with the word camp, cabaret suggesting a world of the crude, the sexual, the bold and the grotesque, a signifier of the notion of bad or crude taste. Cabaret thus represents a form of exploitation art that takes popular cultural signifiers and parodies them in less formal settings than traditional theatre spaces. In this détournement cabaret as a performance form has the power to lie between high and low art, inhabit and embody the Camp and the anarchic.

In Susan Sontag's famous essay *Notes on Camp* (1964) she muses on the line Camp treads between high and low culture. Evolving and refining

the aesthetics in my practice to harness the subversion of my white Jewish British middle-class background meant for me playing with perceptions of good taste in terms of class, gender, European and religious identities. The sense of theatricality I connected to was bold, bright, dramatic, melodramatic and moreover Camp. With this Camp approach I queered the identities that I had culturally inherited and newly embodied. These characters came from my fascination with Jewish mythology, immigrant stories, esoteric rituals, activism and theatrical women. My cultural obsessions drew from the popular culture of my childhood, turning it on its head in a grotesque carnivalesque reclamation. In my punk informed identity, I created what I believed to be refined anti-art works of art, embodying the highest appropriation of the best bad taste, an act of Camp which Sontag identifies as asserting 'that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed a good taste of bad taste.' (Sontag 1964,119)

In 1980s British media, sexually provocative images and characterizations of women seemed relegated exclusively to the idea of bad taste, and a queering of them the domain of men in drag. Creating a Camp parody of the outsider woman, in my case the witch, the immigrant or the whore, was territory ripe for a feminist reclamation. In working with these subject matters, I began to touch on the taboo that would later inform projects like *Jewess Tattooess*, *Carnesky's Ghost Train* and *DCIBW*. Exploring the perception and cultural representation of menstruation was perhaps the most significant subversion of popular taste undertaken in my career, seeking to create a show that is a feminist reclamation of that (menstruation) which is frowned upon as possibly lower status than even excrement itself, and elevate it to the highest cultural signifier.

Finding alternative cabaret, live art and performance communities, arts practitioner led social scenes offered a further creative and involved mode of expression for devising alternate realities and new modes of living. In the early 1990s feminist voices of performance practitioners who drew on their own counter-cultural diverse life experiences such as Annie Sprinkle,

Cosey Fanni Tutti, Guillermo Gomez Pena and Ron Athey introduced me to new forms of performance vocabulary.

Identifying menstruation as a subject to explore in my practice started in the early 1990s, after attending lectures of the Radical Anthropology Group (RAG). Decoding fairy tale and researching menstrual symbolism in indigenous myths were central enquires discussed at RAG. This fed into my interest in identifying potential feminist readings and re readings of the symbolism in fairy tale and myths through the works of Angela Carter in books like *The Bloody Chamber*. It coincided with my discovery of the work of performance artist Annie Sprinkle's reclaiming of sex work, sexually explicit performance and frank dialogue about women's sexuality and bodies. The growing 'sex positive' feminist culture she promoted was typified in shows like *Post Porn Modernist* (1989-1996) which opened new feminist potentialities to rethink the boundaries of the sexual body and its representation. This work was part of a radical rethinking and questioning of censorship and the politics of pornography in feminism. I joined Feminists Against Censorship (FAC), a London based activist pressure group founded in 1989 that met at Conway Hall in London. Members included sex educator Tuppy Owens, journalist Melissa Benn and author Avedon Carol.

I attended a performance of Sprinkle's *Post Porn Modernist* in San Francisco in 1994, the same year Sprinkle invited me to pose for her *Post-Modern Pin-Up Pleasure Activist Playing Cards as The Nice Jewish Girl* (Sprinkle 1994). At this point I had begun a performance practice looking specifically at my identity as a Jewish tattooed female performer in pieces like *The Third Traum* (Marlborough Theatre, Brighton 1991). I performed these works at arts spaces including the ICA, the Pullit X Gallery and at alternative sex positive focused events like *The Sex Maniacs' Ball*. Working with FAC I programmed and produced the New York inspired London version of *The Smut Fest* with its founder Jennifer Blowdryer and Tuppy Owens in Camden in 1994. In embodying sexually explicit imagery in my performance work, I examined cultural and religious taboos

surrounding the Jewish sexualized female performing body. This included attempting to uncover possible hidden meanings in mythological Jewish symbolism associated with blood, menstruation and taboo. By questioning the boundaries of the culturally acceptable and unacceptable use of my body on stage I sought to create a performance language that embodied and represented the conflicts and contradictions of my newly formed identity as a tattooed Jewish performance artist.



Marisa Carnesky in *Annie Sprinkle's Post-Modern Pin-Ups*, photographer Annie Sprinkle 1995

Through engaging with anthropological research on menstrual ritual in early and traditional human cultures through the RAG lectures I was made aware of books including Chris Knight's *Blood Relations and the Origins of Culture* (1991), Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove's *The Wise Wound* (1999) and Judy Grahn's *Blood Bread and Roses* (1993). I did not make a piece specifically addressing menstruation at the time, however the themes which would inform my current touring work, that developed out of this PhD, were taking shape through each performance I created. This was in the form of images and monologues creating versions of mythological characters like Medusa, and re-appropriating images from fairy tale engaging with images of blood, nudity and the outsider in the show *Jewess Tattooes*. The relationship of blood taboos in Judaism, explored later in this introduction, meant that the exploration of the cultural

status and relationship of women to blood was now firmly set in my concerns as an artist.

Women in entertainment history and particularly women as sexually provocative performers in striptease and burlesque were areas I had researched prior to creating the work *Jewess Tattooes* (1999), both as an emerging performer in arts contexts, nightclubs and galleries and at the Theatre Museum Archive formerly located in Covent Garden. This research led to the formation of the company Dragon Ladies and the season of work in at what was then the infamous sexual entertainment venue the Raymond Revue Bar in Soho (1997). With sculptural body pieces made by the late artist Amanda Moss that featured caricatured enlarged breasts, tattooed skin and a vagina dentata made of layers of latex. This was expertly rendered through Moss's vision to create eerie imagery that looked sexually explicit yet at once nostalgic and emotive. The work weaved feminist readings of myth and fairy tale into a surreal sexual cabaret revue landscape. We had the work featured in the Independent on Sunday, with the headline 'How do you get a £5000 Arts Council Grant to bring grotesque burlesque to the Raymond Revue Bar?' (Anne Treneman, Independent 7<sup>th</sup> February 1998).

One of the quotes I gave in this article sums up my desire to create a sexual queer camp aesthetic at the time and play with the boundaries of women in popular entertainment history, sexual representation and taste:

The big word for me is Melodrama ... Everybody looks down on it. They think art is about minimalism. They think it has to be classy. But art can be dirty, sexual and real. Its melodrama, burlesque with too much going on. Trashy, tacky and overdressed. We do that.

(Carnesky, at time of writing Carr, Independent 1998)

The theme of women and blood reappeared in new guises in each and every performance work and character I made in the 1990s. The Dragon Ladies project harnessed my creation of the character *Bloody Pearl*, the

ancient prostitute who haunted the docks of old England tormenting sailors for the production of *Grotesque Burlesque Revue* (1997). The Dragon Ladies was one of my first attempts at artistically directing a company of artists and performers. The name was chosen directly in response to my engagement with RAG at the time and their research on the symbolism of the dragon or serpent as a tabooed symbol of menstrual power and from my childhood awareness of the popular Judaeo Christian perception of the serpent as a demonic symbol of women's sexual deviance and shame.



Flyers for *Enter The Dragon Ladies* at The Raymond Revue Bar, 1998, Design by Amanda Moss

After the Dragon Ladies company came to an end I continued to explore and research how to combine popular entertainment traditions with my research interests in sexual and cultural identity. Having taken on producing and directing a show in the belly of Soho's sex industry with the venue - Raymond Revue Bar - itself being part of the concept, my interest grew in the possibility of creating an iconic purpose-built venue of my own, which two projects later would become *Carnesky's Ghost Train*.

### **Jews, Forbidden Blood and Tattoos**

Unlike the blood of circumcision, which is associated with fecundity, the blood of menstruation may be linked with defilement, estrangement from God, and death. The seriousness with which separation from a *niddah* was taken in biblical times is evident in

the fact that sexual contact with a *niddah* is also forbidden in Leviticus 18:19 as among those sinful acts punished severely by *karet*, or extirpation from their community.

(Baskin 2002, 24)

Raw wet blood, in any form, the cutting or changing of the body and drawing of blood from animals or humans bears particular significance in Jewish traditions and holds different statuses. Yet as Baskin outlines, possibly no form of blood taboo bears as strong punishment or deathly attributes as menstrual blood. My awareness of the notion of forbidden blood, and of the blood of wounds, the blood of menstruation and the blood of animals as taboo, came from my research on the ritually clean and the unclean in Jewish religious practices and rituals. The act of eating blood under Orthodox law has severe implications and could lead to exile from one's family and the community itself, the Torah stating that: 'Ye shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh; for the life of all flesh *is* the blood thereof; whosoever eateth it shall be cut off' (Leviticus 17:14,143)

The eating of animal blood breaking the connection to familial kin highlights the different status and role accorded to different forms of blood and its presence in Jewish tradition. Menstrual blood and animal blood take on the status of ritually impure. Yet the blood spilt from male circumcision is regarded as having the highest ritual status:

Blood also represents holiness. Priests purged ritual impurity and consecrated members of the priestly cult with blood. Every male born, adopted, or converted into the Jewish community enters a sacred "covenant of blood" through ritual circumcision.

(Frankel 1996,157)

The *niddah*, the term for the menstruating woman in Orthodox Judaism, is associated with notions of ritual impurity and menstrual uncleanness. Menstrual blood is not sacred like the blood of circumcision, but taboo and in some interpretations actually seen as dirty and a contagion:

And if a woman have an issue, *and* her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even.

(Leviticus 15:19, 140)

The *niddah* separates herself from the community, to re-join only after the ritual of the *mikvah* bath. Feminist debate on the rituals of menstruation practiced in current Judaism as outdated and misogynist are counterbalanced by some as a reclaiming of the Mikvah as ritually empowering as a woman led space. Rabbi Charlotte Fonrobert reflects on current Jewish thinking on the *mikvah* ritual:

Sometimes the ritualization of menstruation and its designation as menstrual impurity with the concurrent requirement of purification are evaluated as an index of the sexism of traditional Jewish culture. This polemical position depicts the psychological consequences of this ritualization as ranging from absolutely crippling to somewhat damaging. A more apologetic position emphasizes the positive aspect of the ritualization of women's bodies and its affirmation of women's physiology.

(Fonrobert 2000,15)

Unlike Fonrobert, who suggests that the reclaiming of the tradition of the *niddah* is at best an apologetic position, Haviva Ner- David suggests that the tradition of *tumah*, the ritual impurity surrounding the *niddah*, was misinterpreted in a misogynist medieval culture and calls for change in Jewish interpretations of menstruation as ritually impure through a more considered use of the term *tumah*, removing the stigma of the ritually unclean from the *niddah*:

It is now in the hands of women to reverse what was put into play centuries ago by refusing to abide by those few still remaining restrictions that hark back to *tumah* avoidance in order to reinterpret



*tumah* so as to create a positive understanding of what it means to be a *niddah* and to replace medieval interpretations of *tumah* that include notions of pollution, danger and filth.

(Ner-David 2005, 197)

The relationship between taboo blood, menstruation, sexuality and bodily decoration in Jewish tradition, and my choice to become extensively tattooed informed my autoethnographic journey into the performance project *Jewess Tattoos*. Conversations with Rabbi Herschel Gluck OBE in Hackney East London in 1999, chairman of the Arab-Jewish Forum and chairman and founder of the Muslim-Jewish Forum led to further research on Jewish mythology and the decorated woman, folk tales, demonology and occult practices in Judaism and Jewish burial rites. *Jewess Tattoos* looked at the representation of mythological Jewish figures like Lilith, at representations of women's sexuality as demonic and in particular at blood taboos around marking and drawing blood from the skin. The supposed ban and taboo of tattooing is attributed to the Leviticus quote; 'Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks on you: I am the LORD'. (Leviticus 19:28, 146)

I was not alone as a young counter cultural punk feminist in my decision to challenge my cultural heritage through the ritual of tattooing in the 1990s. This was being echoed across a generation of women transforming the tattoo as 'a reclaiming of their bodies and a form of resistance to normative femininity, or at least an alternative to it'. (Thompson 2016,6)

On another level my draw to tattoos was a response to a cultural heritage of persecution. Learning about the numbers tattooed on the victims of the Nazi Holocaust and seeing images of multiple starved and dehumanized bodies piled up, indiscernible from each other, made me want to have a body that could not become unidentifiable. I wanted to consciously embody my identity through my skin in a form that could not be erased. Thompson identifies a similar impetus in the desire to be tattooed by institutionalized and military personnel:

Both military personnel and inmates live in total institutions, in which their personal identities are erased by the imposition of a uniform appearance. Both enlistees and inmates attempt to individualize themselves and identify their group membership by acquiring tattoos.

(Thompson, 2013, 26)

This work focussed on my choice to be tattooed as a medium and metaphor through which to question my cultural heritage. The struggle with generational and cultural disagreements within the traditional Jewish family setting was expressed through the transgressions on the body. As Thompson identifies:

Becoming heavily tattooed changes women's bodies and, potentially, their social relationships. Women overwhelmingly express their tattoos as a form of self-empowerment, especially because of their potential for self-expression. The visual content of their tattoos is often symbolic of important issues within women's lives.....The process of becoming heavily tattooed means letting go of social expectations of normalcy in appearance. This decision represents a certain authenticity to the self.

(Thompson, 2013, 53)

This change in social relationships in a Jewish community and letting go of normalcy certainly surfaces in the work. While transforming the body permanently through the act of tattooing, I documented myself getting tattooed, and I was photographed during each stage, reflecting and writing about the entire process. The tattoo which covers my entire back took eleven five-hour sessions of tattooing over nine months to complete. I also recorded conversations with the tattooist Alex Binnie during these sessions and the sounds of the tattoo gun entering my skin, as well as collecting all the drafts of the design in process.

This process of collecting material led to a one hour performance work *Jewess Tattooes*, revealing these findings through creative vignettes that were woven together to create a montage of spoken word, film and performance actions in a non-linear visual and spoken narrative that utilized found images and newly commissioned video work by filmmaker and collaborator Alison Murray, collected stories, new monologues, choreography and stage illusions and an element of live tattooing. The work contrasted the blood drawn by self-inflicted tattoos with the ancient menstrual blood taboos surrounding the Jewish woman's body. It looked at the representation of the decorated sexual woman as a symbol of demonic powers in Jewish mythology. The work was devised by drawing on personal memory and family heritage as well as stories from Yiddish folktales. It incorporated material collected from Holocaust survivors of transforming, by choice, concentration camp number tattoos with new decorative tattoos and the taboos against marking the body in Jewish tradition. Through a weaving of this material I examined the complex relationship of the tattoo to Jewish culture.



Marisa Carnesky in *Jewess Tattooes*, London 2000, photo by Manuel Vason

This image was created from the performance with photographer Manuel Vason (2000). It shows a scene from the work where I put my feet in 1940's snake skin shoes that were filled with stage blood and walked on the stage which was covered in a giant Star of David Jewish symbol I made from

copied pages of the prayer for forgiveness from transgressions known as the *Kol Nidre*, sung on the 'Day of Atonement' in the Torah. As I walked, I left bloodied marks on the pages. The image reveals the claw that curves round my hip, of the then newly inscribed large dragon back tattoo that spurred me to create the work, and a Star of David tattoo which had been tattooed live in one of the performances just visible on my thigh. Roberta Mock situates the work as part of a cultural phenomenon of Jewish sex positive women artists looking to embody their lived experience of the Jewish sexual body:

Carnesky creates body spectacles that conjure the diasporic dispossessed. She became the freakish woman who, post-Shoah, chooses to be tattooed as an expression of individuality and an affirmation of morality. Like me, Sprinkle and Carnesky are continuing a lineage of performing women who re-conceptualise a version of Jewish female identity by including foundational positions in its construction and presenting it as material "effect" on, and sometimes in, the body.

(Mock 2008, 176)

The work featured live performative actions that respond to filmed characters I played of a Rabbi and an Eastern European fairy tale style grandmother figure. The taboo of women's blood in Judaism was touched on with the action of using a tattoo machine to mark a Star of David around my belly button through drawing blood to the surface of the skin. This was in part a homage to Marina Abramovic's *Lips Of Thomas* (1973) piece (accessed online at National Galleries Scotland) - Abramovic used a knife in this piece and carved a pentagram star on her stomach. Creating a wound shaped as a Star of David live on stage was an image that sought to consolidate the emotional complexity of the work through a fully embodied performance action.

For the diverse audiences that saw the work the metaphor of tattoos highlighted the wider theme of radical forms of reinventing and expressing

new cultural identities. Creating subcultural expressions that embody inherited stories of loss, torture, genocide and escape was a regular subject raised by audiences in post-show question and answer discussions. The work then evolved through the practice of performing it in different contexts, which ranged from the ICA and the Battersea Arts Centre, the Los Angeles International Festival to an outdoor theatre festival in the medieval Palestinian/Israeli town of Acco for the Acco Festival of Alternative Theatre and contemporary theatres in Madrid, Dublin and Ljubljana between 1999 and 2004.

Touring *Jewess Tattooes* to the Acco Festival in 2003 in Israel/Palestine raised some extraordinary responses which indicated the significance of autoethnographic practice and lived history. Situated in a predominantly Palestinian Christian medieval port town in Northern Israel, the Acco Festival is a unique experimental theatre festival that brings together Israeli, Palestinian and international artists. Performing the piece to a mixed secular and religious audience raised extraordinary responses. A Hasidic woman—an ultra-orthodox practicing Jew—was very moved by the work, coming over to me to say: ‘I understood ... I feel the pain of these taboos on my body also, even though it is not tattooed.’ A Palestinian Christian man found the work moving, seeing the clash between cultures ‘that was written on the body’. Yet a secular, non-religious Israeli woman viewed it as unproblematic for a Jewish woman to have tattoos. This was because national identity was more important to her as a Israeli Jew than religious Jewish customs. Performing the work at the Acco Festival opened new questions about the placement and context of the work affecting the premise of the concept. As a British Jew from a conservative diasporic cultural tradition, a tattoo estranged me from my Jewish identity, yet in Israel, in this context, it did not.



Marisa Carnesky in *Jewess Tattooes*, London 2000, photo by Manuel Vason

*Jewess Tattooes* sought to create images of decorated sexual characters in Jewish mythology like The Whore of Babylon, Lilith and the Queen of Sheba and [re]-present them as important and empowered icons of women's sexuality and desire. These seeds of exploring the abject and the taboo in the form of women's blood and womb imagery were planted in this work and would surface later in my work in the material for *DC/BW*. As the resonances of the tattooed woman as an outsider, a ritually unclean woman, with the menstruating woman had become apparent in *Jewess Tattooes*, so did the resonances of the travelling sideshow performer with the displaced immigrant woman in the idea for the work *Carnesky's Ghost Train*.

Part of the engagement with the culture of tattoos had led me to explore the traditions of tattooed women in entertainment history. Researching tattooed performers who worked in variety and sideshow traditions had led me to the National Fairground and Circus Archive (NFCA) at Sheffield University which holds extensive collections on the history of popular entertainment in the UK from the seventeenth century onwards including material from fairground, circus and allied industries such as sideshows, magic, variety and amusement parks. Images of rides and fairground facades, temporary travelling entertainment palaces fascinated me, particularly images of Victorian ghost shows.

The further themes raised in *Jewess Tattooes* around immigrant identity, cultural displacement and generational culture clash surfaced in discussions with Eastern European performers I worked with in the London cabaret scene, many of whom had fled the Balkan wars and also worked as dancers in the traditional London striptease venues. The possibility that immigrant journeys and refugee experiences from East to West, particularly women's stories of displacement and struggle, had not significantly changed in a century of changing borders, resonated with the stories of women I was meeting. When performing the piece at the City of Women Festival in Slovenia in 20 I met researcher Rutvica Andrijasevic, whose work on sex workers and migration in Europe confirmed these notions:

As the main areas of origins of migrants in the sex industry are non-EU Eastern European and Balkan countries (37%) and the new EU member states (32%), we see that the main migration movement in Europe is intra- European, namely from Eastern to Central and Western Europe.

(Andrijasevic 2013, 1)

Hearing their stories of exile and displacement and the way they navigated low paid and illegal work as a survival strategy brought to mind the familiar stories of struggle and displacement of Jewish refugees over a century earlier. Sex workers, like the Eastern European Jewish migrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also have a history of migration from East to West, which according to Andrijasevic dates back to the same era as my family's journey to seek asylum in the West :

While the contemporary presence of migrants in the sex industry dates back to the beginning of the 1980s, prostitutes have migrated as workers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even earlier.

(Andrijasevic 2013, 2)

An idea emerged for a new project, a travelling 'ghost train' ride that explored images of disappeared women between borders. In an interview with Josephine Machon in regard to the experiential quality and visceral impact of my practice, I discuss how *Carnesky's Ghost Train* developed from the practice evolved through *Jewess Tattoos*:

*Ghost Train* came out of that show, from the (filmed) Grandma character with Eastern European, Yiddish folk tales and the travelling show-woman and exhibited tattooed lady, the tattooed body as a funfair side-show exhibition, that got me interested in fairground more and more. *Ghost Train* is not focusing particularly on a Jewish story. In fact, the story in *Ghost Train* has evolved so it now follows a mourning mother looking for her disappeared daughters in an unknown town somewhere in Eastern Europe.

(Carnesky in Machon 2009,128)

In this work, the theme of writing on the body then becomes a structure, a temporary building that houses performances and images of a series of nomadic bodies: the body of the *Ghost Train* purpose built and inscribed as a living memorial to disappeared identity.

### **An Emotional and Bloody Rollercoaster**

*Carnesky's Ghost Train* was a large-scale production which involved building from scratch a state-of-the-art operational ghost train touring venue, designed in a collaboration I led with a creative team of designers, engineers and artists. Inside the ride moving sets, performance stages and bespoke illusions were built to house the cast of performers. This work grew from the earlier one woman show *The Girl from Nowhere* (Riverside Studios 2003) in which I rode around the stage in a singular fairground ghost train carriage disembodied from its original ride, whilst telling stories of women's migration from East to West, including those of my own Jewish families. It also featured images I created, drawing on magicians' assistants levitating and enclosed within confined magic box



spaces. From these scenarios, I told stories I had collected through a series of research interviews with women I was working with as an exotic dancer in London's East End who had migrated from Eastern Europe during times of conflict. It followed the theatrical traditions of a stage magic show, featuring increasing levels of spectacular illusion.

Focusing on themes of disappearance and defying physical and geographic boundaries, the stories increased in dramatic intensity as the performance progressed. In the performance the magician's assistant is divided and her transforming body becomes a metaphorical site of political conflict and carrier of multiple identities. These images and stories fed the creation of *Carnesky's Ghost Train*, bringing the woman's body as a site of magical and cultural change into an ensemble piece where a series of characters and scenarios could be created. The context of a haunted house/ghost train ride provided a holding form that promised a thrilling journey into darkness and the unknown.



*Carnesky's Ghost Train*, Manchester 2004

The work explored images and stories of war-torn refugee and disappeared women crossing haunted borders between Eastern and

Western Europe. It toured successfully for five years in the UK and Europe and then became the resident art project on Blackpool's Golden Mile for five years, between 2009 and 2014. It received critical acclaim in the Times and the Independent with a four star review in the Guardian, (see [carnesky.com](http://carnesky.com)) and was ridden by an audience of over 50,000 people over its 10-year life.



*Carnesky's Ghost Train* cast members, Blackpool 2011

The ride followed the story of a mourning protesting mother informed by the *Women in Black* activist movement looking for her daughters who had disappeared from a devastated town. The performers played the ghosts of migrant women who embodied the liminal spaces between loss of culture and identity, geography and memory. These ethereal characters wore menstrually blood splattered dresses and were situated in trains that went nowhere, never arriving at their destinations.

The characters I created were all on a journey that had no end, a mother looking for her lost daughters, her daughters looking for her and the way out. The language and metaphors were bold and immediate. The desire was to create a work that would resonate emotionally with truly diverse audiences from a multiplicity of ethnicities, age range, racial, social and economic backgrounds. The intention was to create a travelling nomadic ghost ride that could be presented outside of traditional contexts of both arts and fairground positioning the work politically as neither and as both.

The ride grew from exploring an immigrant heritage and looking for answers on identity from a disappeared culture. Locating a lost heritage in order to construct new identities. Geographic borders crossed by ancestral blood families leading to new cultural and sociological borders, crossing between a time of nostalgia and inherited sadness now mingled with the resonances of new feminist futures, unfixed, unmarked and open to all possibility.



*Carnesky's Ghost Train* interior set, Blackpool 2010

*Carnesky's Ghost Train* sought to knowingly use the 'scare attraction' genre in all its tawdry exploitation art of gore to create a sense of the uncanny and place lessness, where old world nostalgia and emotive images of loss and disappearance collided with the shlock abject horror of a fairground ghost train. Buckets of blood red paint were thrown over the set and the use of stage blood to represent wounds on the performers bodies and costumes worked with the popular horror tropes of bloodied ghosts and wounded zombies. The costumes and performances did not suggest genderless, abstract ghouls but the unique relationship of women to blood and the abject. The tropes of the traditional horror ghost train then were turned on their head, with the shocks, thrills and fear rooted in history, cultural identity and the emotions of intergenerational loss.



*Carnesky's Ghost Train* cast, Glastonbury 2006

The performers in *Carnesky's Ghost Train* wore large bloody menstrually suggestive stains on their skirts. The choreography had frenetic movements where some of the performers made clutching movements on their skirts as if protecting a pregnancy or in pain. It was always my intention to show images and stories of displacement from a female gendered perspective. I wanted to create images specifically of women's memory and loss between borders and between lives. This art experience falls not just between genres but between history and location, as Machon suggests:

Structurally and allegorically, this ride encapsulates the possibilities of being betwixt and between: just as *Carnesky's Ghost Train* as an artistic event falls between the borders of art and fairground ride, poetry and politics, the histories it reveals are of those forced to flee, those who are neither here nor there.

(Machon 2013, 250)

Bill Luca posits that ghost trains are thought to be derived from the famous American *Pretzel* brand rides premiered in 1928 created by Leon Cassidy; the first dark rides in which people in carriages were jolted around a sharply turning track (Luca 2011). This was fused with the earlier tradition of the ghost show, magic lantern and phantasmagoria presentations. These were exhibitions of illusory light and smoke effects with ghostly projections popular in the late nineteenth century such as the exhibits of

French showman and inventor Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, whose phantasmagoria show Marina Warner describes as:

Teemed with devils, ghosts, witches, succubae, skeletons, mad women in white, bleeding nuns, and what he termed as 'ambulant phantoms.....witches preparing for the Sabbath and flying on broomsticks, while the Moon turned the colour of blood.

(Warner 2006, 149)

The shock and fascination of taboo topics including the undead, the odd and curious body feature across nineteenth century popular fairground, carnival and sideshow entertainments including waxwork sideshows, freak-shows and theatrical booths. As part of my initial research when creating *Carnesky's Ghost Train* I rode ghost trains wherever I found them on my travels, including the since burnt down ghost train on Brighton pier. This ride with my collaborator choreographer Mim King proved a more bizarre experience than expected which would inspire our ideas as the mechanics failed and my colleague and I were left sitting in the dark half way through the ride in a stationary carriage by a lonely looking large dusty green monster automaton for over ten minutes. A live actor in a grotesque mask and dressed in a garbage bin liner appeared and did his best to keep us scared for the duration. It was a live performance inside a dark ride that created an abject thrill; the performance a bizarre improvisation using sound, breath and performer proximity to disorientate and disarm. Unknowingly, in its broken state with the impromptu performer, the ride combined aspects of a variety of fairground entertainments creating a new horror narrative affected by real events.

Similarly, *Carnesky's Ghost Train* sought to tell the horrors of real events of migration and disappearance, structured and contextualized through the narrative of the experience of riding a ghost train:

There is a sense that, in the total somatic experience of *Carnesky's Ghost Train*, Carnesky and collaborators are playing with the

rhythms of trepidation and fear, of wonder and delight, contrasting these effects cleverly with the illusionist's rhythms of the otherworldly, of memory.

(Machon 2013, 249)

The marketing of *Carnesky's Ghost Train* drew on the aesthetics of the fairground and horror cinema in an aim to attract diverse audiences through popular culture tropes. Posters and flyers used fonts and colours from traditional British fairground sources and typography from 1970s horror films. The intention was to draw on the well-established western leisure activity to visit the seaside and go on a theme park or fairground ride or see a magic variety revue featuring a line-up of circus skilled showgirls, even if the ghosts are immigrants and the showgirls are women who bleed. In outlining my performance history here I have shown how my work has involved autoethnography, drawing on my life experiences and cultural heritage; my cultural identity as a child of third generation Jewish immigrants and as a young woman identifying with subcultures inspired by punk. I have explained key influences in my work such as feminist performance art and a camp sensibility, and the development of my performance style, focused on the transgressive, taboo and carnivalesque. I have shown how I developed that style through detournement, challenging the boundaries of the acceptable and unacceptable, subverting popular entertainment, creating feminist re-readings and reclamations of archetypes and myths. My work involves radical forms of reinvention and focuses on women and their bodies, on displaced women between borders, as immigrants, as skilled sideshow performers and entertainers, and as liminal figures.

### **Bloody Practice as Research**

The idea for *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* came from my autoethnographic approach, based on personal experiences of painful menstrual cycles and the loss and trauma of recurrent miscarriages. This led me to an exploration of the blood of menstruation situated in a wider

cultural context. The overarching desire of the work was to expose ingrained social taboos in mainstream Western consciousness, explore hidden mythologies, reframe popular representations, raise awareness and expand notions of the cultural meaning of menstruation.

Menstruation and its cultural representation had fascinated me since the beginnings of my practice as a performance maker as I have shown in this introduction. *DCIBW* as an idea for an actual show, a performance, a theatre piece, evolved from a singular image. It was part of a response to the experience of recurrent miscarriage; the shock of the blood loss, my lack of conception and the change in my relationship to the menstrual cycle. The idea manifested as a visual idea, of a woman in a bleeding dress that would explain and reveal menstrual truths through this dress. This was consistent with past performance projects, starting with an image that led to an autoethnographic research process induced by a definitive personal choice that raised difficult issues with my Jewish cultural heritage such as tattooing my skin.

Whilst there are occurrences of representations of menstruation in advertising from leading menstrual products brands, at the time I had the initial idea for the project in 2013 and still today, there seemed to be very few arts projects looking at menstruation or miscarriage. Memorable representations of menstruation I encountered as a child were traumatizing. Images from horror films *Carrie* (1976) and *The Exorcist* (1974) gave me sleepless nights and a sense of shame about my period. Karen Houppert connects this shame of our body's fluid functions learnt in childhood as a signifier and the beginning of shame and the disconnection and repression of women's sexuality:

What does it mean for her to sift through rhetoric in order to understand what sex and desire have in common with blood and cum? Because the shared code of silence surrounding them implies connection. What's a fourteen- year-old to make of all this?

(Houppert 1999, 104)

In addition to my reading on menstrual anthropology and psychological theories of menstrual synchronicity I began to explore the growing popularity of the Red Tent movement and the emergence of menstrual activism. Menstruation as a topic for debate in feminism and a subject to inspire arts practice is having a resurgence in the light of new debates on tampon tax, women's marches and menstrual taboos exemplified by new waves of menstrual activism, art, performance, symposiums, talks, workshops and exhibitions. Practice as Research (PaR) has unknowingly been the corner stone of my work as an artist since the beginning of my career as a performance maker. Although I was cognizant of the significance of research in framing and forming my practice, I did not consider it in these academic terms, nor was I familiar with the term as a methodology. Robin Nelson identifies that this is common amongst arts practitioners:

Artists engaging in inquiry through their practices may not have thought of what they did as 'research', even though they were aware of an exploratory dynamic to address issues and achieve insights.

(Nelson 2013, 3)

In *DC/BW* the framing of the project as part of my PhD research encouraged a new way of viewing my multimodal approaches to my practice and a new way of recording the outcomes. As a practitioner positioning the project as a PhD was a challenge I undertook to develop my academic research skills. I did not want to stop the practice I had been honing through my career, but rather to engage with it more reflexively. I sought to create a 'living' PhD, an embodied exploration of a performative 'lecture as theatre' that could work both as a live art experience and stand up academically, working to illustrate a cross disciplinary PaR project in action with my practice 'at the heart of the methodology of the project.' (Nelson 2013, 26) by making the central narrative of the show the revelation of new insights gained from the process of the PaR of creating



new performative menstrual rituals. Within this framework the creation of the rituals were central to my practice as research. I brought together a group of skilled live artists and cabaret performers from diverse backgrounds to take part in a series of experimental workshops to make work that explored personal traumas and difficult questions of identity through a led process of communal creativity, drawing on mine and others personal stories around menstruation, conception and miscarriage.

The creation and practice of new menstrual rituals within an experimental workshop structure is the methodology for *DCIBW*, constructed in response to identifying the performance making process as a PaR project, and as a PhD. This became not only a new way of making the work for me but a central dramaturgical device in the performance work itself. The inclusion of material from the group's life experiences helped communicate and authenticate the relevance of the performance work to contemporary audiences. Through the shared identification with the diverse menstrual issues of the group, the performance sought to connect to wider notions of community experience. John Freeman's definition of autoethnographic performance practice reflects my own approach and intention in this respect:

Autoethnography differs in that, whilst it can present an individual performer's perspective, it is one that draws on and connects to a collective understanding.

(Freeman 2015, 167)

In addition, from the outset, the investigation was framed as an experimental touring live art/cabaret show. The performance and touring of the live work opened up further challenges; the fusing together of feminist, activist and anthropological research on the taboo of menstruation with my approach to performance; the complexity of the subject with my intention to produce an accessible and tour-able show that was entertaining and engaging. This format also opened up opportunities

for the audience to engage with the work as research *in action*, as a theatrical experience.

Creating *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* drew on my experiences and continued fascination with the ability of live performance to shock, thrill and break taboos, to fuse entertainment traditions and techniques with avant-garde feminist live art that has autoethnographic roots and evolves into work that is highly accessible for wide audiences. It was and continues to be my intention to make work that cuts across expectations of art and entertainment, to appeal to a diverse demographic of potential audience. This thesis pursues the creation of new menstrual rituals, informed by an artist led process, as a powerful and inclusive antidote to the notions of menstrual shame, exclusion and pollution in contemporary mainstream Western religious practices.

*DCIBW* explores how menstrual seclusion in traditional human cultures contributes to cultures of women's synchronized monthly group activities such as contemporary pagan Wicca witchcraft practices and the now international Red Tent Movement of 'women honouring culture' (Alisa, online 2013) that started in the US. Can this tradition of 'collectivity' around menstrual actions and practices then be recognized as a phenomenon that continues to occur or perhaps has re-emerged with new and current feminist artworks and actions about menstruation? This research asks the question of whether the performance of menstrual rituals play a role in the phenomenon of menstrual synchronicity. Moreover, it asks whether menstrual synchronicity is beyond the context of only cis gendered and currently menstruating women. Could there be any significant change in health, monthly energetic experience and group connectedness and cooperation which replicates menstrual synchronicity regardless of who physically bleeds? What is important about creating new feminist menstrual rituals, is it necessary or useful to feminism to reinstate cultural menstrual rituals?

Chapter One identifies the anthropological research on pollution and taboo theories on menstrual practices referencing Emile Durkheim, Mary Douglas, theories of menstrual synchronicity from Martha McClintok, Cutler, Law and Weller and Weller. It examines world myths, religious menstrual rituals, symbols, stories and practices from theorists including Chris Knight and Camilla Power, Thomas Buckley, Alma Gottlieb and Victor Turner . It engages with ecofeminist theory on notions of the generative from Donna Haraway and reflects how this relates to the current wave of menstruation themed art and activism.

Chapter Two explores ways in which historical women performers harness the spectacular and the taboo in popular entertainment traditions and identifies the potential for reclaiming and recognizing the potential usage of the term of the Showwoman. It further draws parallels with new performance practices of women treading the margins of cabaret and live art and the way they too question, inhabit, disrupt, and represent taboo through the deployment of the spectacular and open new lines of feminist enquiry through representations of the spectacular and taboo body in horror film, live art and popular culture. It references stage illusionists and theatre academics including Josephine Machon, Vanessa Toulmin, Edwin Dawes, Michael Mangan, Ricky Jay and Jim Steinmeyer. The chapter examines representations of women in magic entertainment traditions. It identifies the popularity of magic acts of the cutting of women's bodies that were popularized in the 1920s and in particular *Sawing the Woman In Half* and similar associated 'matter through matter' or 'penetration' illusions in stage magic language. It draws reference to medieval witch trials and the work of Silvia Federici on the relationship of the imagery of stage magic and the torture of witches. It looks at indigenous myths of halved bodies through Claude Levi Strauss and references the ritual magic practices of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and contemporary Wiccan practices influenced by Gerald Gardner. It examines horror through popular films like Stephen King's *Carrie* and theorists Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz, Barbara Creed, Mary Lupton and Margrit Shildrick on abjection, embodiment and boundaries. It surveys the work and thinking of

artists, theorists and activists including Viv Albertine, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, Eve Ensler and Judy Chicago, referencing Emma Rees. It explores menstrual activism and spiritualism in feminism, from groups such as FEMEN and menstrual spiritualism of the Red Tent movement and through theorists including Chris Bobel. Some of the central themes that are identified in the performance work reveal hidden universal cultural menstrual memes including temporary death and rebirth, women and serpents, women and the moon and looks at the places in popular culture where these images occur. It goes on to look at feminist issues around new reproductive fertility technologies and artist activist groups like SubRosa and at theorist Helen Hester's Xenofeminism.

Chapter Three outlines the methods used in the practice phase of the research and a detailed account of the process undertaken. From the creation of a collective of diverse intersectional cast of women performers including Fancy Chance, Rhyannon Styles, H Plewis, Nao Nagai and Missa Blue whose practices cross the lines between live art and cabaret. The chapter looks at how we engaged with a unique time-based PaR process that encompassed both aspects of autoethnography, notions of the abject and taboo around menstrual blood as a substance drawing reference to Kristeva's theories on abjection. It references theoretical perspectives on subjects that the artists explored including body shame through Luna Dolezial, trauma through Dorothy Allison, trans identity through Susan Stryker, menstrual symbolism through Penelope Shuttle, Peter Redgrove, Judy Grahn and Anna Fedele on Mary Magdalene menstrual ritual cults. It documents how we utilized menstrual questionnaires supplied in consultation with psychologist Professor Van Den Akker. Furthermore, it examines how I engaged with the idea of a menstrual synchronicity experiment as the framework for a live art devising process. It outlines how the experiment drew on anthropological theories and religious menstrual rituals in traditional indigenous and western mainstream human cultures and goes onto to explore the troupe's connections with popular cabaret forms that we engaged with in the creation of the work, including the conceptual decision to work with and re

appropriate the sawing in half illusion as a centre piece of the performance.

Chapter Four reveals the findings of the practice including testimonies from the participants, scripts created for the stage show that revealed the findings in a theatrical context and press and public responses to the work. Drawing on autoethnographic practices making reference to John Freeman and Tamy Spry it looks at how the content for the work was devised and specific performance pieces that were made that drew together the PaR. It explores how the work sought to fuse aspects of a performative lecture, performed live art rituals, circus skills, personal testimony and cabaret tropes into a cross artform contemporary feminist performance work. It examines the shows use of dramaturgical references to ethnographic sideshows through Bernth Lindfors. It goes on to explore further outcomes of the work in the form of the activist group the Menstronauts actions that were staged and the relationship of the Menstronauts to *DCIBW*. Finally, it looks at the development phases of the live project and it proposes new ideas for the evolving performance work and possible publication.

The conclusion draws together the multi modal aspects of the project, from how the analysis of the research into popular entertainment and live art, anthropology and mythology fed into the PaR creation of the performance. Furthermore, it outlines the formation of the activist group the Menstronauts, proposing new methodologies for representing menstrual rituals and creating menstrual theatre, art and activism and reframing myths. It references theorists Frances Babbage, Margrit Shildrik, Donna Haraway and Lynn Margulis in arguing that menstruation is too commonly associated only with themes of reproduction and motherhood, and that its mythological characters, indigenous rituals and cyclical qualities point to its reinvention as a metaphor for spectacular ecological activism through projects like *DCIBW*.

## Chapter One

### Anthropology and the Menstrocene

This chapter identifies colonial and postcolonial anthropological discourses and interpretations on and of menstrual rituals and taboos in indigenous, traditional and Western human cultures and identifies selected menstrual synchrony studies that have taken place in the last fifty years. It compares this material with ecofeminist discourses on notions of the generative. In this material I look for references and theories that can partly inform the practice of reinventing/revisioning menstrual rituals through new performance practices. My focus is to explore what these new rituals could be in an ecofeminist, intersectional, queer, corporeal performative landscape. The project however does not propose the appropriation of indigenous, traditional or religious rituals, and recognizes that anthropological perspectives offer interpretations that differ from embodied knowledge and lived experience.



*Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman cast, Southend 2015 Sarah Ainsle*

The research does not seek to suggest that indigenous, traditional or religious rituals themselves should be altered or reinvented by these contemporary discourses. The intention of the work is to identify

anthropological knowledge on various menstrual ritual practices and working with a group of performance artists, create an informed response to the devising and practice of new menstrual rituals. The project also does not purport to be a synchrony study or seek to prove data from a scientific perspective. Rather, inspired by the enduring idea of menstrual synchrony and its relationship to menstrual ritual, both in indigenous myths and in new feminist practices, the structure for the performance work was informed by and drew on elements of the synchrony studies as a devising process and narrative device, combined with the creation of live art rituals. Furthermore, I explore how the reinvention of menstrual rituals from this framework might contribute to menstruation studies and wider feminist, ecological and live art practices.

### **Menstrual Ritual and Taboo in Anthropology**

The sociologist Durkheim identified that menstruation plays a role in social organization (1897:50) because blood held a status as a pollutant across many world cultures. His research was based on fieldwork by Spencer and Gillen (1899) with the indigenous people of the Arunta culture in Australia. As a structural functionalist Durkheim theorized that religion gave people structure, and this was a universal feature in human society. Durkheim identified that there must be a connection between religious taboos in a culture and its social structure; the menstrual body then symbolizing the potentialities of the power of blood as a substance of danger and pollution, thereby resulting in women in a menstruous state as separated from the everyday and played out and signified by menstrual rituals and taboos. He wrote:

During menstruation and especially at the first onset of menses, women are impure; and at this time they are strictly sequestered; the men must have nothing to do with them. The bull-roarers, the *churingas*, are never in contact with the dead. The sacrilegious person is excluded from the society of the faithful and forbidden

access to the cult. Thus all religious life gravitates around two opposite poles, which share the opposition between pure and impure, holy and sacrilegious, divine and diabolical.

(Durkheim 304-305: 1915)

Douglas continued this line of enquiry, engaging in person with fieldwork and studying the Lele culture in the Congo. The ritual power and potency of menstrual blood is explored by Douglas in terms of its status as a pollutant in religious terms, giving it a special place in the symbolic order which she calls 'out of place'. It is a substance that contains danger, the danger to disrupt, undermine and threaten a state of chaos to the socially acceptable order:

A menstruating woman was a danger to the whole community if she entered the forest. Not only was her menstruation certain to wreck any enterprise in the forest that she might undertake, but it was thought to produce unfavorable conditions for men.

(Douglas 1966, 151)

Douglas wanted to explore further what essential commonalities occurred between different peoples. Challenging colonial modes of research Douglas applied anthropology to Western cultures, moving away from hierarchical notions of the 'primitive'. She researched the practice of Kosher dietary laws practiced by Western Jews established in Leviticus, likening the taboos around eating pigs in Judaism to the taboos around eating the pangolin in African Lele traditions.

Buckley and Gottlieb however suggest that Douglas's pollution theory is 'overly idealistic and simplistic' (1988:30), ignoring more informal structures where women may have exercised greater choices and decision-making powers and overgeneralizing about menstrual pollution, and argue that in some systems 'menstruation may be coded ambiguously or even positively' (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:32). They suggest that menstruating women in their liminal state are the holders of ritual spiritual



space in many cultural traditions, western and indigenous. Therefore, menstrual taboos and rituals across cultures may be in place foremostly to shield women from those who are not in this state, rather than to protect non menstruators from the bleeding woman's perceived polluting danger.

Chris Knight was a student of Douglas at University College London in 1976-7 and acknowledges thanks to Douglas for her personal encouragement and launching him on his research project at that time. I came to learn about Knight's research in 1997 through the group he founded – The Radical Anthropology Group (RAG). Attending these classes in the 90s influenced my performance work at the time in reworking fairy tales from feminist and anthropological perspectives and stayed in my consciousness, resurfacing to inform my PhD nearly twenty years later. I was particularly influenced by Knight's theories of the Rainbow Snake, menstrual synchronicity and origins of collective action.

### **Serpentine Bodies**

That humans as a species are in trouble and face extinction because of their impact on climate is now recognized as an unparalleled challenge of our times. Donna Haraway proposes in *Staying With The Trouble* (2016), strategies which at heart recognize the collective and generative qualities of life on earth. I argue through this thesis that menstruation as a cultural symbol has a significant contribution to make to contemporary revised strategies of collectivity and generative ecologies.

The cultural rites and rituals of menstruation, of cyclicity and of rebirth are themes that surface across a variety of stories, folk tales and myths in early and traditional non- Western human cultures, outlined by a number of colonial and post-colonial anthropological researchers. The aboriginal Australian story of the Wawilak sisters and the rainbow snake originating from the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land region of the Northern territories, is thought to be one of the oldest in human culture. Knight translates this as a story about menstrual synchronicity, quoting

anthropologist William Lloyd Warner's field work in 1926-29 of the Murngin people in Arnhem Land:

'The cycle of the seasons with the growth and decay of vegetation, copulation, birth and death of animals as well as man, is all the fault of those two Wawilak Sisters' ((Warner 1957:385) Had the sisters had not menstruated into the Snake's pool, there would have been no birth and no death, no male and no female, no wet season and no dry. (Knight 1985:463)

Knight's interpretation of the Wawilak Sisters story suggests that images of menstruation are at the heart of this story of human origins and unlike the Judaeo-Christian story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the rainbow serpent personifies the cyclical nature of women's bodily cycles, not deviance from male authority. Knight positions the Wawilak story as representing menstruating women as symbolically connected by the serpents pool, sharing its cyclical power to shed its skin and renew, and its connection to the wetness of rain and floods. Knight proposes that the story represents the concept of menstrual synchronicity, illustrated by the sisters bleeding together and the snake eventually swallowing them, making them into one synchronized bleeding entity. The Rainbow Snake then becomes the image of menstrually synchronized women joining forces.

Knight cites Australian anthropologist Frederick McCarthy's work on String Figures researched on the American Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948. String Figures are commonly known in the West as a children's game of making string shapes with your hands and holding the tension between two players. Knight draws on McCarthy's work to propose that the concept of menstrual synchronicity is symbolically represented in the craft tradition of making 'cats' cradles' out of string by the collaborative joining of forces of the two Wawilak sisters in the action and their being swallowed together by a snake, becoming one:

According to this myth, Two Sisters invented string when they went on a long journey. Towards the end of this they 'sat down, looking at each other, with their feet and legs apart, and both menstruated'. The story identifies 'string' as inseparable from these sisters' menstrual flows. Having sat down and bled together, the women continued with their ritual: 'Each one made a loop of the other one's menstrual blood, after which they put the string loops around their necks.' This led to their being 'swallowed by a Snake'(McCarthy,1960,426)

(Knight,1991, 445)

Haraway is also interested in the power of the symbolism in indigenous and western traditions of playing with String Figures, one of the 'SFs' she sees as potential strategies for new ways of thinking: 'of speculative fabulation, science fiction, science fact, speculative feminism,' (2016,31), She suggests they are metaphors for communal actions, in both rhythm and stillness. Here, like Knight, Haraway references collective human games that emphasize connected and embodied rhythms and cooperative action:

String figures can be played by many, on all sorts of limbs, as long as the rhythm of accepting and giving is sustained. Scholarship and politics are like that too-passing on in twists and skeins that require passion and action, holding still and moving, anchoring and launching.

(Haraway 2016,10)

In colonial and post-colonial anthropological menstruation studies of indigenous human cultures, as geographically far apart as Aboriginal traditions of Northern Arnhem Land in Australia in Knight's work from the 1990s and in Douglas's research on the Lele traditions of the Congo Basin in Africa, undertaken in the 1960s, notions of both the danger of blood as a pollutant and taboo and the positive sacred elemental power of the menstruating woman echoes across human belief systems and practices. Rituals of women's separation and seclusion from men, resting in

darkened spaces, wearing special clothing, painting the body with red ochre and menstrual blood, ritual bathing, making ritual sounds, mimicking hunters and wounded animals, creating crafts from menstrual blood and eating specific foods feature amongst the women's practices. Amongst men there are dances and rituals of blood-letting as well as symbolic simulations of menstrual bleeding. Knight asserts that the indigenous rituals of menstruation may be the origins of communal action, strike and human solidarity:

Aboriginal women from the earliest times phase-locked with the tides, and correspondingly conceptualised themselves as immersed once a month in a 'flood' of blood-symbolised togetherness transcending the individuality of each participant. In their monthly menstrual immersion or sex strike- as in any strike the participants would have felt their individual identities being transcended in that of the great kinship coalition which together, they formed.

(Knight 1991,82)

He suggests that a form of collective menstrual solidarity, as opposed to biological synchronicity occurred, a result of this 'phase locking with the tides' and kinship coalition between women which is represented repeatedly in indigenous human cultures as the symbol of a serpent. The serpent's mythological association with the menstrual cycle, the shedding and renewal of its skin, echoes the moon's monthly cycle, from new to full and back again. Barbara Creed finds that the pain of menstruation is described in a variety of mythologies as a snakebite; 'the young girl begins to bleed when the snake-goddess, or god which lives in the moon, bites her. (Creed 1993, 64) Simone De Beauvoir also highlights the association of the serpent and menstruation in the Judaeo Christian Old Testament and in Persian symbolism, arguing that:

The serpent is an epiphany of the moon; it sheds its skin, renews itself, it is immortal, it is an influence promoting fecundity and knowledge. It is the serpent that guards the sacred springs, the tree

of life, the fountain of youth. But it is the serpent that took from man his immortality. Persian and rabbinical traditions maintain that menstruation is attributed to the relations of the woman with the serpent.

(De Beauvoir 1949,181)

Knight argues that the symbolism of rainbow snakes and dragons connects to the notion of menstrual synchronicity and suggests that a group of women become in a sense one body that flows in a watery and fire red bloody world. This magical serpent's body is a symbol of menstrual synchronicity - the women connected by a joint flow come together cyclically, monthly, to renew themselves like a giant connected single entity:

A snake is liquidly 'flowing' in its movements - flowing as no other animal can be. But in southern Africa as elsewhere, there can be no doubt that 'the Snake' signifies 'that which flows' in a much wider symbolic sense, including streaming water, torrents of rain, rivers- and above all blood, whether animal or menstrual.

(Knight 1991, 485)

While Knight identifies the dragon-snake as a worldwide, culture-wide image connecting to menstruality and cyclicity, Haraway focuses on the eight-legged Cthulhu spider and 'critters' that possess the qualities of the 'tentacular' to signify her calls for a more symbiotic and generative response to this ecologically troubled era, naming these times the 'Chthulucene' rather than the Antropocene. She asserts that a re-focusing of our interests as 'critters' inhabiting a multispecies earth with 'myriad tentacles will be needed to tell the story of the Chthulucene'. Where Knight's interpretation of the myth of the rainbow snake opens possible worlds of menstrual synchronicity and collective action, in Haraway's writing the fast slinky chthonic creatures that 'creepeth upon the earth' (Leviticus 41:12) and the beneath the earth, the creatures that Jewish

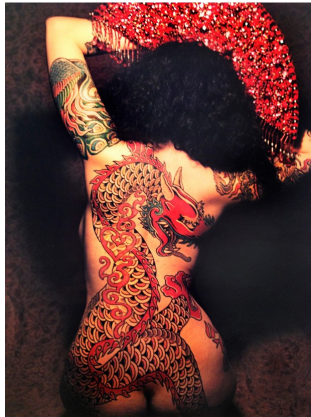
traditions shun as ritually unclean become the symbols for a generative revolution:

Tentacularity is symchthonic, wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings, passing relays again and again, in the generative recursions that make up living and dying.

(Haraway 2016:33)

Haraway's conceptualization of the Chthulucene draws on the imagery of the spider, the web and tentacled creatures, yet does not cite cyclicity as conceptualized through menstruation, of temporary death and rebirth. Perhaps in doing so she misses a potential ecofeminist trope that would support the inhabitants of her earthbound terraopolis. Yet Haraway opens new dialogues and theories that weave resilient, nuanced, far reaching, strong spidery webs of support to visions of collective and generative speculative futures. Now that we must work together in a time of ecological crisis, perhaps the solidarity of Knight's menstrual commune could act as a useful metaphor for Haraway's collection of SF's, already present, below the radar, in the Wawilak Sisters story and its proposed connection to the origins of the String Figure games she revives.

As I approached the decision to make a piece of work entitled *Jewess Tattoos* (1998) post the experience of heavily tattooing my arms, I decided to tattoo an image of a large dragon covering the surface of my back as part of the project, growing the tattoo and the show in tandem. The choice to have a dragon as an image tattooed on my skin was inspired partly by my research into Knight's work on women, dragons and cyclicity. This connection of women to dragons across world cultures especially the imagery of the subversive biblical sexual figure of the *Whore of Babylon* riding a many headed red dragon, as well as the dragon tattoos on tattooed ladies in 19<sup>th</sup> century carnival sideshows, all informed the choice that the dragon was the tattoo I wanted.



Marisa Carnesky in *Jewess Tattooes* 1999, Photo By Manuel Vasson, Dragon Tattoo By Alex Binnie

In the Chthulucene we are not passing relays and generative recursions that just make up living and dying, because these recursions make up the very basis of the cyclical generative body, the body that has the small deaths of menstruation, of sperm, of wounds that heal and sickness that is restored. I offer the Menstrocene as a further alternative, or variation, encompassing all that is both Chthonic in the taboo creatures and the human cyclical body, a word that can reclaim the abject as a great earthly teacher. What then is the symbol of the Menstrocene? The dragon. The dragon is a potentially unifying cross cultural worldwide mythological chthonic symbol of cyclicity, scaled and serpentine and embodying elemental forces. In Eastern cultures it can symbolize healing and positive forces, in the west a pagan threat to Christian purity.



*Woman of The Apocalypse* (Rev12 :3) also referred to as Virgin Mary de Guadalupe, Artist unknown

As a breather of fire, the dragon has the power to begin and end a life cycle. The choice of tattooed ladies across the world, the dragon appears in the performance of *DCIBW* in the lecture, in the form of my back tattoo in a film where I bathe in blood and then again being slain, underfoot of the image of the *Woman of the Apocalypse* referenced in *Revelations* (12 :3,309), also referred to as an image of Mexican Virgin Mary, the Guadalupe.

### **Practice Menstrual Rituals Versus Proving Menstrual Synchrony**

Whilst *DCIBW* recognizes that science has not been able to prove the reality of menstrual synchrony in humans in a variety of cultures and communities, it acknowledges that the pursuit of proving menstrual synchrony has spanned fifty years of research. As menstruation becomes less taboo and better represented in mainstream culture, new period cycle tracking website/apps like Clue continue this popular line of enquiry to find the same results (Bell, online: 2017). Yet there is a persistency in the potency of the synchrony story. Why has the interest in menstrual synchrony endured beyond science fact? Is there a creative function to the myth that can inform the creation of artwork? I explored a series of synchrony studies and theories outlined below to see if I could answer these questions.

The notion of menstrual synchrony came into mainstream consciousness due to the work of psychologist Martha McClintock on cohabiting female students living collectively at Wellesley College in the early 1970s. In her 1971 paper published in *Nature*, the world's most cited scientific journal, she identified what came to be known as 'The McClintock Effect', which suggests that menstrual synchronicity occurs amongst modern women:

For example, the distribution of onsets of seven female lifeguards was scattered at the beginning of the summer, but after three



months spent together, the onset of all seven cycles fell within a four-day period.

(McClintock 1971, 244)

A number of methodological flaws were identified in the study and in 2013 a review of menstrual synchronicity studies found inconclusive evidence. Whilst McClintock's research was unable to officially 'prove' menstrual synchronicity in the 1970s her research infiltrated popular culture to the extent that the idea that women synchronize their periods if they lived together became a powerful cultural meme, a contemporary feminist folklore reaching across student dormitories worldwide. Living mainly in communal houses with women most of my adult life the idea that we all synchronized at times was a popular conversation and one that brought a sense of unity and belonging to the communities.

A number of researchers made further menstrual synchrony studies up into the 2000s. Some replicated aspects of McClintock's study focussing on women cohabiting in college or work situations. I am more interested for the purposes of this thesis in studies that looked at the relationship of lunar cycles and ritual practices such as Cutler (1987, 59) and Law (1986,45-8) who explored menstrual synchrony and its relationship to lunar rhythms and in studies that looked at women living together in communities such as Weller and Weller who researched women living in Bedouin communities in Israel and whose results showed 'unequivocally the existence of menstrual synchrony' (Weller and Weller 1997:143-151).

These and other studies explored the relationship of women living and working closely together and their environment as a basis for its occurrence. Anthropological studies of menstrual ritual link group menstrual seclusion and the performance of ritual acts as illustrative of menstrual synchrony. This informed the PaR journey and project devising structure and the question that would become a narrative device in the

scripting of the text for the live performance. As the character Dr Carnesky I ask the audience:

Could it be that the secret ingredient behind menstrual synchrony is in the performance as a group of rituals? That the enactment of rituals is as important to the notion of synchronicity as cohabitation?

(Carnesky 2017,2)

Knight suggests it is the collective power of the group decision, whether conscious or unconscious, to synchronize menstrually, which eventually became enacted and marked cyclically through the performance of rituals and that those rituals are an intrinsic tool by which the synchronization can take place. Furthermore, he proposes that it is the creatively powerful ritual traditions of menstrually secluded women, that created the iconic image of witches:

Since synchronicity's old conditions were vanishing, anatomically modern protowomen had to seek ways of preserving their menstrual and reproductive harmony- their witchcraft or magic as it would become conceptualized- in novel ways.

(Knight 1991, 255)

Whether Knight believes that women of early human cultures had the mental power over their bodies to make a choice to synchronize their cycles with the dark moon and ovulation with the full moon is a question that he does not clearly answer. He suggests that it is the group exposure to light and proximity to the tides that are the probable causes of ovulatory as opposed to menstrual synchronization. But he suggests it is the women's emotional life as a group, structured and channeled through ritual enactment that effect the ability to synchronize both in ovulation and menstruation with the tides and moon (Knight 1991, 215). Menstrual synchrony experiments often explore the connection of menstrual practices to lunar and tidal cyclicity, to seasons and weather. Could Knight's assertion that menstrual ritual symbolism in indigenous and early

human cultures represents menstrual collectivity and communal action inform ecofeminist practice as a new form of, as Donna Haraway calls it, SF? With its multiple uses in a troubled world, the science fiction, science fact and speculative fabulation of menstrual synchronicity could impact as a useful creative concept to join a new ecofeminist revisioning of possible cyclic futures. Perhaps the destruction of ecological systems has negatively impacted on the occurrence of menstrual synchronicity in humans, indeed even wiped it out. Haraway suggests synchronicity is 'flipping out all over the earth'. Could it be flipping out inside our bodies and the way they relate to each other and the wider ecology?

Sea ice, glaciers, and permafrost melt: people, animals, microbes, and plants can no longer rely on the seasons, nor indeed on the temporally punctuated solid or liquid forms of matter crucial to their perceptions and ways of getting on in life. Eating each other properly requires meeting each other properly, and that requires good-enough synchronicity. Synchronicity is exactly one of the system properties flipping out all over the earth.

(Haraway, 2016, 73)

Can menstrual synchronicity in humans, like religious symbolism and myths of death and rebirth, have a social, cultural and ecological function? The research of anthropologist Camilla Power, co-organizer of RAG with Knight, supports the idea that menstrual synchronicity is as important as a cultural concept as it is a possible biological occurrence. She suggests that actual menstrual synchronicity may not ever have literally fully encompassed the whole female community within hunter-gatherer cultures, taking on board gynecological and pregnancy differences between women, but the notion of menstrual synchronicity personified by myths like the Wawilak Sisters and the Rainbow Snake of aboriginal Australia worked in women's favour to create solidarity and support and a strong network amongst them, working as a group to protect their interests in terms of childcare and maintaining the loyalty of male partners within kinship systems. Here the revolutionary potential of menstruation is

recognized as a significant contribution to what makes us human, connected to the origins of human culture.

### **The Perfect Potency for Ritual Practices**

Menstruation, which is thought of as an inconvenient hygiene issue in mainstream Western culture, comparable to other bodily excrement as Kristeva explores in her work on abjection, is a horrific signifier of danger, to be managed as a solitary practice and with the potential to be threatening and divisive:

Menstrual blood ... stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual): it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.

(Kristeva, 1941 :71)

Whereas the research on menstrual rituals in indigenous cultures that I have focused on in this chapter assert themes of cyclicity, synchronicity, transformation, role reversal, rebirth, renewal and temporary death, more traditional anthropological research emphasizes the themes of pollution, abjection and taboos of menstruation. Buckley and Gottlieb argue that this may be because this kind of research has been dominated by a male perspective, often not engaging or asking women themselves in indigenous communities about their beliefs about menstruation.

The assertion that the mere presence of the menstruating woman and any contact with her or anything she has touched holds power to harm others in her proximity has endured across continents and centuries. It is as present in western myths, religious stories and folktales as in indigenous myths from Africa, Australia or South America. Perhaps the most famous story of a menstruating woman in Christian story of Jesus healing the Bleeding woman or 'woman with an issue of blood'. Jesus, the only mythical Judaeo Christian man who himself has the power to bleed and

not die on the crucifix, who can die temporarily and be reborn, is not cursed by the touch of a bleeding woman. Yet her touch has the power to harm him and drain his godly power and take 'the virtue' (Luke 8:46) out of him. The scripture suggests her touch is vampiric, draining, sucking divine energy. She is healed from her twelve years of 'that plague' (Mark 5:29) or endless menstrual bleeding by touching the edge of Christ's garment. 'And the woman was made whole from that hour' (Matthew 10:22). Jesus then can make the woman 'whole' by stopping her endless bleeding.

This power appears in European traditions in rural Portugal in the town of Vila Branca where menstruating women are fabled to have the power to 'spoil pork' at the traditional Portuguese annual pig killing *Matanca* (Lawrence In Buckley and Gottlieb 1998:122).

The idea that menstrual blood acts as a form of women's poison, that it is a pollutant, that it is actually lethal. Douglas identifies menstruation as a taboo around food across a series of traditional human cultures. She explores research on the Mae Enga traditions of New Guinea, and their belief that the supposed polluting danger in menstrual blood can be disempowered through magic practices:

They believe that contact with it or with a menstruating woman will, in the absence of appropriate counter-magic, sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting, 'kill' his blood so that it turns black, corrupt its vital juices so that his skin darkens and hangs in folds as his flesh wastes, permanently dull his wits, and eventually lead to a slow decline and death.

(Douglas 2002 [1966],182)

Elizabeth Grosz identifies both Douglas' and Kristeva's reading of menstrual blood in relation to notions of borders, an analogy I worked with in the images of bleeding women as representatives of 'haunted borders' in my *Ghost Train* project:

Douglas refers to all borderline states, functions, and positions as dangers, sites of possible pollution or contamination. That which is marginal is always located as a site of danger and vulnerability.

She, like Kristeva, conceives of the fluid as a borderline state, disruptive of the solidity of things, entities and objects.

(Grosz 1994,195)

Whether her abject body is polluting or sacred, a threat to life because of its power or a signifier of life, menstruation, the menstruant and menstrual blood is potent. It has the qualities of liminality both in the experience of it and the fluid itself. Its representatives in culture have the role of a signifier of this state, a state often perceived as magical. The disruptive non-solid world of the menstruant and her blood make them the perfect representatives and providers of ritual activities and states. Menstrual rituals still hold power, even in the most marginal performance culture of intersectional live art cabaret, have the power to create shock and disgust, horror, reverence, solidarity, pathos and community catharsis. The Menstruant as performer, as holder of ritual is a magician, a sorcerer of flowing emotion and taboo:

Such are the forces upon which the sorcerer acts, those which arise from corpses and menstrual blood, those freed of every profanation of sacred things etc. The spirits and malign genii of every sort are their personified forms.

(Durkheim 2008 [1915] 409)

Whilst the words menstruation, menstrual, menses or even puberty do not appear in Turner's work on 'The Anthropology of Performance' his writing on the origins of ritual and liminal states could be clearly applied to menstrually secluded women in traditional human cultures as well as Western women practicing new 'Red Tent' menstrual rituals:

Rituals *separated* specified members of a group from everyday life, *placed them in a limbo* that was not any place they were before and

not yet any place they would be in, then *returned* them, changed in some way, to mundane life.

(Turner 1987 25)

It is this liminal state outlined in anthropology in accounts of the menstrual body and menstrual rituals and achieved in theatre and live art which I sought to unite in the PaR and resulting performance of Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman.

In Power's thesis *the Woman With The Zebra's Penis* the author looks at menstrual rituals as a unique time of ritual, gender mutability and paradox, a time when women and men can ritually transgress the boundaries of their gender:

In certain African hunter-gatherer cultures (the Khoisan and Hadza), gender appears mutable and paradoxical with respect to sex. During initiation ritual, girls acquire 'masculine' characteristics, such as penises and hunting weapons; boys are treated as menstruants. Anthropological models of a hierarchized 'masculine' v. 'feminine' correlated with biological sex, would not predict such reversals ... the model thereby supports predictions made by the 'sex-strike' theory of the origins of symbolic culture.

(Power 1994 3)

In the menstrual rituals of the Yolngu women decorate themselves in red ochre and sound a bull-roarer to declare their ritual power and status. In Hadza menstrual rituals gender becomes mutable, the biological women becoming ritually empowered by dressing as the male hunter and the Eland antelope, wearing horns they mimic the act of hunting, a young menstruating girl initiated by shooting arrows in the personification of a male hunter. They wear belts made of Zebra penises as they embody the hunted Eland's spirit. The biological men become ritually empowered by staining themselves with Eland blood, depicting both wounded animals and menstruating women. A sense of transformative power, play-acting or

theatre is indicated in these rituals, a time for subversion from the norm. This performative ritual transitional state bears resemblances to clown traditions in circus and sideshow entertainment traditions where the clown mimics the jobs and working roles of mainstream culture yet remains a figure of transience and undefined gender. The transience of the menstruant signals a potential danger to the ordered world, like clowns as Bakhtin explains:

...(clowns) represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors.

(Bakhtin [1965] in Morris 2003, 198)

Traditional readings of myths and representations of women within them have been questioned by feminist theorists, radical anthropologists and mythologists alike. Reinterpretations from feminist discourses on myths propose alternative readings that break the censorship and silencing of taboo subjects like menstruation and their place in cultural representations. Frances Babbage outlines how myth undergoes cultural shifts in interpretations through time:

Feminist thinking has recognized the vital function of myth in transmitting and shaping cultural beliefs, often in forms that make these accessible to the minds of the youngest children and has repeatedly argued that any claims made for myths as embodiment of unchanging or universal truths must be treated with profound suspicion.

(Babbage 2011, 22)

The role of menstrual epistemologies I have identified in shaping and potentially reshaping cultural ideas about women and the body and in informing ecological theories like Haraway's notion of the generative,



suggest that aspects of menstruation could be applied as a metaphor or a proposition, a cyclical way of seeing. Taking this notion into a series of PaR workshops with a group of five artist participants from diverse queer, intersectional and gynecological perspectives, I sought to create devices through theatre, cabaret and live art exercises where the research would enable questions to be raised through the process practice and embodied performatively,

Through the live performance of this thesis I explore the themes of embodiment, cyclicity, regeneration and rebirth, proposing that anthropological research and feminist practice can inform and feed each other. The performance raises questions of how new menstrual ritual practices can be informed by indigenous knowledge without appropriating them. The work then draws on mythologies and traditional stories that feature of gender fluidity, liminal states, transformation, communal action and cyclical states, that also run through experiences that the women in the show connect with personally, so whilst we do not replicate or appropriate indigenous stories, we identify with aspects of them and are inspired by them. Thus we attempt to not disrespect cultures that we are not a part of. Through the research I decided on following a methodology of creating rituals in a performative devising process with the artists during the new dark moon, once a month for three months. The material created would be the PaR that would inform the creation and further devising of the live performative aspect of the research, both of which are then reflected in this thesis. In the following chapter I examine research from stage magic and the variety arts to inform the creation of my notion of the term Showwoman. I explore menstruation's representation in horror film, live art and feminist activism which further informed the creation of the work and how and where these fields intersect in the devising process of *DCIBW*.

## Chapter Two

### There's No Women Like Bloody Showwomen

I am not the greatest showman. Because I am not a man. And I am not a showboy. Or even a showgirl. I am a Showwoman. With two Ws in the middle, one for the show and one for the woman.

(Carnesky 2019, 1)

The abject thrives in fairground, circus and variety traditions. The notion of the volatile body, the unfamiliar body are stock in trade exhibits of live entertainment history. The disappearance and re-emergence of sexualized identities, the taunting of the taboo, the transgression of the outspoken bleeding body cutting against religious tradition, the spectacle of the corporeal, the tricks of the trade, the mesmerized snake nestled in the show woman's corset: these concerns have been reiterated throughout my practice as research as I outlined in my introduction and led me into an exploration of what 'Showwomanry' could be.

From women who were stone eaters to fire walkers, women who hypnotized alligators, women who presented crucifixion shows, from wall of death riders to escapologists, the closeness of death as entertainment and the edges of known boundaries are themes which have preoccupied audiences and women entertainers over the last two centuries. These entertainers, regardless of their extraordinary acts, would have been commonly referred to as showgirls, even though they were soloists with rare individual skills, often topping the bill in variety entertainment.

The word Showwoman is currently a marginal term associated only with women proprietors of fairground rides or circuses. It does not, as the term showman does, denote a special flair for entertaining, spectacle and bravado, or for breaking of taboos through an exploitation of the extraordinary, exemplified by PT Barnum and his exhibition of differently abled bodied performers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. How could a Showwoman

differ and yet have an equal status as a consummate entertainer and provider of spectacle, beyond running the fairground ride or the circus ring?

If such a term as Showwoman were to be elaborated on and represented fully in the dictionary, it would potentially identify women who have the power of Showwomanship, a bombastic theatrical flair and an extraordinary skill, most likely within the worlds of 'low brow' variety entertainment. It could also define a woman who manages and produces large-scale spectacular shows with a great talent for creating a buzz and getting publicity in inventive and risqué ways.

Without the Showwoman in the common vernacular we are exposed to a society of the spectacle drawn by the patriarchal Showman, and he can be cruel, exploitative and brash. I suggest a Showwoman could expand and be defined beyond the above, in and of itself and have different qualities to the showman. She could not only be a new kind of grown up showgirl in charge of her own material and career, that harnesses her taboo, abject, forbidden, death defying or extraordinary body in spectacular feats, but she could possess collaborative as opposed to exploitative revolutionary potential. We need to wake up the term Showwoman to offer alternative visions of spectacular matriarchal entertainment utopias.

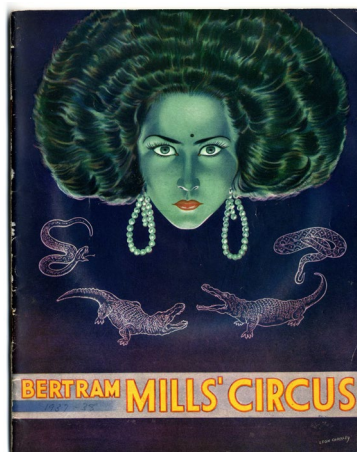
With the term Showwoman we can have this new identity, this new kind of risqué performer, that does not exploit or control her cast, the women she shows, as perhaps the showman is thought to. They are a collaborating group, a coven, a collective bound by shared experiences of visceral euphoria, applause, loss, shame, abjection, hustle and struggle, marginalization and the fight against patriarchal injustices. Because the woman menstruates and shares this taboo with other women, her troupe can inherit the proposed power of the menstrual collective, as a group bound to each other with a body that defies temporary death and taboo. If her women though do not menstruate, if her cast are trans, non-binary, men or animals, she still has from the menstrual collective, the model of

the cyclical group that can perform acts of ritual and separation from the everyday as part of a process of group identity.

Historical British Showwomen, in what Professor Vanessa Toulmin, founder of The National Fairground Archive, calls the 'illegitimate entertainment' variety genre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, could include Koringa, working in the Bertram Mills Circus in the 1930s who hypnotized crocodiles and put her head in their jaws, the stunt motorcycle rider known as Marjorie Dare who toured a wall of death to English seaside towns in the 1930s and Florence Shufflebottom, a snake handler and a knife thrower touring a western skills circus shows in the UK during the 1950s. Shufflebottom passed away in 2014. In an article by Oliver Wright for the BBC News Leeds and West Yorkshire website he describes elements of her acts:

She was used as a target for her father's knife, axe and tomahawk throwing act and, from the age of five, performed as a snake-charmer. Her final trick - named the Kiss of Death - was to place a snake's head inside her mouth.

(Wright, 2014)



*Koringa 1937, Bertram Mills Circus, Courtesy of The National Fairground and Circus Archive*

Koringa's work was also preoccupied with the image of a woman's relationship to the serpent. An act somewhere between magic and circus,

she was a headline speciality act, rare for a women, let alone a woman of colour in the UK in 1937. Her performance character came from the western fixation with Orientalism popular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Toulmin 2007) As well as her crocodiles and snakes she climbed a ladder of swords, walked on broken glass, had a concrete block broken on her stomach, laid on a bed of nails and levitated. She is often seen in pictures with the cross of Lorraine, known as the mark of the French Resistance drawn on her forehead and Toulmin suggests she was an active spy that worked for the French Resistance, hypnotising animals to help soldiers cross enemy lines. She exemplifies that showwomen not only existed in the heyday of British variety but had subversive performance personas and were involved in political activism of the time. In the popular history of cabaret and variety as a transgressive form during the second world war in Europe, the Weimar Republic is cited as a hotbed of sexual transgression and radical cabaret exemplified by performers like Anita Berber who 'consciously broke every social and theatrical convention of her time' (Gordon 2006: 1). In the UK theatres 'went dark' in 1938 and performers including Koringa were lost from the British cultural landscape. In a time of rising fascism and ecological emergency perhaps remembering forgotten artists like Koringa as the ground-breaking intersectional star that she was is more pertinent than ever.



*Koringa 1937, Bertram Mills Circus, Courtesy of The National Fairground and Circus Archive*

Evatima Tardo was a Showwoman that impressed Harry Houdini himself; he described her as a “woman of exceptional beauty, both of form and

feature ... and a fearless enthusiast in her devotion to her art” (Houdini in Ricky Jay 2003, 26). Tardo performed in America in the late 1890s, her work involving the exhibition of her claimed ability to not feel physical pain. On stage she would be bitten by poisonous snakes and stop her own heartbeat by stopping the circulation of her blood flow. Tardo also had a popular crucifixion act in which she had herself nailed to a cross and suspended there for over two hours at a time, as reported in the Chicago Chronicle in 1898 in which she was quoted: “Before I gave the nails to the doctor I had them steeped in deadly poison...there wouldn’t be any fun unless I had prussic acid on the ends” (Jay 2003, 27).

The crucified woman with snakes ritually bleeds without dying like Jesus, transforming and perhaps returning the Christian spectacle of rebirth from a patriarchal to a matriarchal image. The crucified woman in league with her serpents, not the victim of them. She ritually embodies the role of menstruant and transcends the role of showgirl and stage magician into shaman. Showwomen who topped the variety bills and traded in skills of spectacle, shock and wonder remain obscure in entertainment history.

Yet their legacy lives on in the extraordinary women performers who are part of a re-emergence of radical corporeal feminist cabaret, contemporary working Showwomen like Empress Stah, neo-burlesque aerialist infamous for her extraordinary ‘Lazer Butplug’ invention and aerial act *Stargasm* that she tours with radical queer pop star Peaches, Miss Behave, *La Soiree’s* premier female sword swallower and inventor of the anti-variety variety show *Miss Behave’s Gameshow*, transferred from London and now running in Las Vegas, and Fancy Chance, tattooed cabaret artist and circus hair hanger. With my reworked illusions, new writing and body art performances, these are women that I have worked alongside for nearly twenty years, as a co performer in cabaret clubs, theatres and circus tents in their curated shows and they as performers in my curated shows.



Empress Stah *Stargasm* London 2017. Courtesy of The Artist, Photograph by Graham Power

We form a new community of women performers that can be defined by a new application of the word Showwoman. By reinventing the context of the variety show as a platform to expose bodily taboos and misogyny, the work offers up new visions of potential feminist variety personas. The new Showwoman then has the potential to rewrite the practice and performance of historical extraordinary entertainments, as Toulmin explains:

Koringa was not the first female performer to step out of the traditional role of the magician's assistant and take centre stage. Artistes such as Okita (1852–1917), Iona (1888–1973), and Talma (1861–1944) mesmerized audiences in the early 1900s; contemporary “beautiful dames” as diverse as performer and sex-activist Annie Sprinkle, artist and show woman Rose English, diva of magic Romany, and performance artist Marisa Carnesky continue magic's hybridization with not just circus, but many other striking and provocative performance genres.

(Toulmin 2007)

## **Menstrual Magic**

In the stage performance of *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* my character, created through the PaR process, begins the show as a knowing, old fashioned and formally dressed lecturer who cites

menstruation as the world's original and greatest magic trick. Later in the performance the character of Dr Carnesky transforms into a more candid and provocative stage version of my real self, revealing taboo and personal experiences in both in words and images. There are a few showstopping spectacular acts that occur, and one is a radical gender non-binary menstrual rework of the sawing in half illusion featuring the revelation of a naked blood covered trans performer Rhyannon Styles. I began to create the show through the questions I outlined in Chapter 1, exploring the connections between traditional menstrual rituals, stage magic, ritual magic and menstruation in popular culture. I went on to look at illusion devices in western magic shows, which are historically steeped in imagery that feature women performers as assistants to be manipulated and used as demonstrative bodies by male performers to covertly operate, openly glamorize and discreetly misdirect attention from the stage equipment. I began to identify links between these illusion devices in magic stage shows and imagery in non-western indigenous folk stories and rituals, in witchcraft traditions and the persecution of witches, in imagery in Judaeo Christian stories and in and contemporary ecofeminist and pagan practices.

For example, magic historians Edwin A. Dawes and Arthur Settington (1993) cite 'Cup and Ball' tricks of street conjuring traditions as the origins of the craft of stage magic illusion. The first known account of 'Cup and Ball' tricks was published in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (Scot, 1584), a book which sought to demystify common beliefs about the existence of occult powers that were informing the ongoing witchcraft hunts and trials of the early modern period.

Scot believed that it would help to reduce fear of witches if he could explain how the wonders of sleight-of-hand performers were achieved purely by natural means and not by diabolic assistance.

(Dawes and Settington 1989,14)



This clear differentiation made between stage magic and witchcraft is stated by Scot as a tactic to quell the fear of witchcraft as something 'diabolical' instilled into the culture of the era. Yet did magicians appropriate any aspects of witchcraft as the art of conjuring emerged? As I explored in Chapter One, Knight traces the notion of witchcraft and ritual itself as originating from secluded groups of menstruating women in early human culture - "the first representatives of ritual or 'supernatural' authority were menstruating women" (Knight 1991,491) - suggesting that witches and menstruation have an inviolable cultural relationship. Cixous outlines how the witch hunters of medieval Europe upheld the taboo of menstruation as a magical polluting ingredient:

...in the witches' case, contagion spreads through bits of bodily waste and through odours...wastes, nail clippings, menstrual blood, excrement, a lock of hair; these scraps of the body will act as a charm.

(Cixous 1975, 35)

Silvia Federici suggests that the trial and persecution of women as witches in the medieval period in Europe is bound up in a transition from a feudal system and the rising of revolutionary ideals of working people:

Throughout Europe, vast communalistic social movements and rebellions against feudalism had offered the promise of a new egalitarian society built on social equality and cooperation

(Federici 2014, 61)

From an era where social change was being fought for, a time where possibilities existed of collective work where women had control over reproductive and midwifery practices in their communities, to an era of capitalism where thousands of women had their inherited practices stripped from them and were tortured and murdered made way for an era where science, Cartesian dualism and capitalism disconnected women from the land and their bodies. Federici sees this horrific and

underrepresented holocaust of women in the witch hunts as specifically related to the transition into capitalism in an attempt to change the woman's body into a commodifiable property:

... there can be no doubt that the witch-hunt destroyed the methods that women had used to control procreation, by indicating them as diabolical devices, and institutionalized the state's control over the female body, the precondition for its subordination to the reproduction of labour-power.

(Federici 2014,184)

There are parallels that can be drawn between this and the history of indigenous peoples and their practices being destroyed and taken by force away from their inherited lands to make way for the exploitation of natural resources, just as the Amazon forest burns in August 2019 and indigenous women march in Brazil in protest. The war today against the last indigenous peoples of the world echoes Federici's theories of a capitalist conspiracy fueling the persecution of women in the witch-hunts. Today in the Amazon, as in the witch hunts, the inherited practices and social power of marginalized people that in any way contravene expansion of commercial interests are being literally burnt out to make way for world capitalism's continual need for growth and accumulation.

One of the most enduring themes played out in stage magic illusions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was isolation, physical confinement and dismemberment by sawing in half of a sexually provocatively dressed woman followed by her magical restoration and spectacular re-emergence. First accounts of the illusion are recorded by 'The Father of Modern Magic' (Dawes and Setterington 1989, 28), conjuror Jean Eugene Robert Houdin in his 1858 memoirs, (not to be confused with escapologist Houdini whose name was inspired by Houdin over a century later). The first performance recorded is credited to have been by British magician PT Selbit in 1921 at the Finsbury Park Empire Theatre in London. (Steinmeyer 2003, 281).

Are there any parallels between the illusions like sawing in half and the historical image of the tortured witch? Some stage illusions can be divided into categories that include the terms transformation, production, levitation and penetration. The latter is explained as an illusion where a magician passes one solid object through another. A number of penetration illusions rely on a blade in the form of a hand or electric saw such as in the sawing in half illusion and the basket trick or 'Temple of Benares' where a magician stabs a performer who is inside a basket or box multiple times with multiple swords, but the performer comes out unscathed.

The violence and pretend stabbing and dismemberment of sexualized women in exposing costumes in stage magic does have resonances with images of the horrific and extensive torture of women in the witch-hunts:

According to standard procedure, the accused were stripped naked and completely shaved (it was argued that the devil hid among their hair); then they were pricked with long needles all over their bodies, including their vaginas, in search for the mark with which the devil presumably branded his creatures (just as the masters of England did with runaway slaves). Often they were raped; it was investigated whether or not they were virgins- a sign of innocence; and if they did not confess, they were submitted to even more atrocious ordeals: their limbs were torn, they were seated on iron chairs under which fires were lit; their bones were crushed.

(Federici 2014,185)

Yet the enactment of the penetration tradition in the traditional magic show generally celebrates the reformed and living woman post her ordeal as an act of great mystery and power on the woman's part as well as the male magicians. The woman overcomes her temporary death and is victorious at the moment of her reformation, she becomes the focus centre stage and star of the show, the male magician in a secondary role to her for this moment of revelation. A moment of Showwomanship grips the audience, where the sexualized marginalized woman cannot be contained in a box

and cut into pieces. She can possess the stage and transform and the magic is all hers. She can die a thousand small deaths and be reborn, just like the menstruant in indigenous menstrual ritual practices.



*Magic War*, London Soho Theatre 2007 Manuel Vason

For me, as a magician using popular illusion tropes to explore cultural and political taboos, and as a feminist artist trying to re-imagine the role of theatre as a place for rituals of cultural change, the new project presented itself clearly: a magic show about the cultural representation and rituals of menstruation. A show that aims to put the magic back into menstruation, onstage and off. A place where the witch herself gets to be magician, expert and mistress of ceremonies, like the occult practices of a Wiccan High Priestess. Yet is there any relationship between contemporary goddess worship in Wicca, stage illusion and feminism?

Forty years after stage illusionist Houdin wrote his memoirs, magic as an occult practice in Victorian England was gaining popularity and practiced through secret societies like the Hermetic Order of The Golden Dawn, formed in London in 1888, founded by men who practiced Freemasonry. It became popular in bohemian Victorian circles, its members including women who were notable artists and activists of their times including arts patron, Annie Horniman, activist, Maud Gonne, actress, Florence Farr and

artist Moina Bergson Mathers, with its famous male members including Aleister Crowley and Willian Butler Yeats. The combination of ceremonial traditions from masonry combined with practices including divination, scrying, rituals connected to elemental forces and astrology included the use of altars, wands, ceremonial costumes and props, much like the popular stage magicians of the day touring kit and the supposed properties of the hunted and tortured medieval witch. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn are thought to have influenced the ideas of 20<sup>th</sup> century occultism and one of the founders of contemporary Wicca pagan practice, Gerald Gardiner, who in turn added to the practice of witchcraft in the UK with his own anthropological research of indigenous practices from growing up and living in Borneo. In recounting a witchcraft ritual of regeneration, he describes the equipment and action used:

I have seen one very interesting ceremony: the Cauldron of Regeneration and the Dance of The Wheel, or Yule, to cause the sun to be reborn, or summer to return. This in theory should be on December 22, but nowadays it is held on the nearest date convenient to its members. The ceremony starts in the usual way. The circle is cast and purified in the usual manner, and the ordinary business of the cult is done. Then the small ceremony is performed (sometimes called Drawing down the Moon) so that the High Priestess is regarded as the incarnation of the goddess. The Cakes and Wine ceremony follows. Then a cauldron is placed in the middle of the circle, spirit put in and ignited. Various leaves etc., are cast. Then the Priestess stands by it in the pentacle (goddess) position.....

(Gardner 1955, 25)

It is unclear if there were notable stage illusionists recognized as having been members of the Golden Dawn or in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day very few stage illusionists claiming to practice Gardnerian or any other Wiccan traditions. Yet the Magic Circle in London continues to have a strict policy of secrecy and complex processes to gain membership. There

are thematic parallels and performative traditions that can be drawn between stage magic, magic societies and occult practices. Yet in both stage magic and the founding of 20<sup>th</sup> century occultism in the UK, men are centre stage, influencing the practice, and whilst feminine deities and themes of regeneration are present, no rituals using menstrual blood or representing menstrual blood are commonly practiced. The creation of a feminist live art magic show that draws on both stage magic, ceremonial occult magic practices, indigenous rituals and ecological activism, might then bridge the gap across the term of magic and its associated practices, returning the woman to the centre of the stage, her bodily fluids and the notion of cyclicity as its main source of power.

Magical charms, from the magic wand to the magic top hat, objects imbued with fictitious magical powers, are the stage magicians stock in trade. Questions emerged for the creation of my menstrual magic show. What would a stage magic version of a menstrual ritual and its objects look like? Who is the menstrual woman magician; how does she move, dress, speak, reveal, create wonder? How could she evoke an audience reading of menstrual blood as a substance containing magical powers? I started with my idea of a showgirl dress that magically transforms and begins to bleed, and a radical reworking of the classic sawing in half illusion. Ideas ready to take into a practice-based performance ritual workshop. Yet in looking for inspiration from existing women stage magicians there was little evidence of women subverting male magicians' traditions of violent bloody illusions. There was also little change in the appearance of the woman from assistant to lead magician. Gay Blackstone, magician and TV producer, identifies that the lack of women in the lead magician role was connected to the difficulty of performing magic illusions in tight sexually provocative costumes:

There was one woman who was very prevalent in the '60s, Celeste Evans, who did a bird act in a form-fitting evening gown, and nobody's ever had a clue where those birds came from. So, have

there been a few women who got around it? Absolutely. But it's not quite as typical.

(Blackstone 2013)

Romany Diva of Magic is a lead magician and winner of The Magic Circle Magician of the Year (2006); she, like Evans combines the sexually alluring and embellished image of a showgirl with the skill of a sleight of hand magician. In her interview in 2014 with Claire Griffiths for *Alt Blackpool* she suggests that female magicians who use their sexuality in a typical showgirl glamour style have had to re-invent and adapt magic illusions to specifically fit their costumes:

I don't think the female perception of magic or 'magical' is very different to a males, but certainly I have to adapt the evolution of nearly every trick to fit female clothing and movement.

(Romany in Griffiths 2014)

Why do so many women magicians continue to uphold the image of the sexually adorned showgirl as a trope for women assisting and even leading stage magic? If menstrual rituals—as this thesis identifies—can be seen as at the heart of the origins of ritual and magic, stage or otherwise, then could the symbolism of the decorated and sexually provocative woman as magical be connected to women's ritual adornment traditions in menstrual rituals? If women and 'magic' practices are connected through menstruation, how could women use stage magic to re-appropriate menstrual rituals and expose and transform menstrual taboos? How can the Showwoman transform the popular folkloric notion of menstruation as a curse through spectacular performance? It was through the PaR of the reinvention of menstrual rituals, using elements of stage magic props and tropes, that *DCIBW* attempted to find out.

## **Sawing the Suffragette In Half**

Congratulations to Selbit on his clever idea and still more clever handling of the publicity side of the production, to offer Christabel Pankhurst £20 a week as a permanent sawing block, that was genius.

(Steinmeyer 2006, 85)

The *Sawing the Lady in Half* illusion is thought to have first appeared and been invented by Percy Thomas Tibbles, stage name P.T Selbit in 1920. It was first publicly performed on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1921, at the Finsbury Park Empire. One of Selbit's most famous publicity stunts was to invite Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst, daughters of Emmeline, to be the regular victims of his new illusion. The sawing in half has become one of the most enduring images in stage magic, yet little is known of the possible connections to its creation as a reaction to the suffragette movement as Jim Steinmeyer, illusion designer and magic historian suggests:

The very act of victimizing a lady in 1921 was to victimize the newly enfranchised lady, to remind with this theatrical revenge, of the previous decade of tumult.

(Steinmeyer 2006, 86)

In order to represent the injustice and subjugation of women, suffragettes performed feats of physical endurance, not dissimilar those in world traditions of magic including street performance and acts of bodily endurance such as regurgitation, laying on a bed of nails and fasting. By chaining themselves to railings, going on hunger strikes and taking beatings from men who sought to oppose and control them, the suffragettes employed tactics of performativity as a collective act of resistance. As suggested, it seems that stage magicians used the suffragettes' actions to reintroduce acts and images into popular culture akin to the medieval torture of witches, with devices that could contain,



split apart, drown, stretch and control the life force of the female body, as Mangan suggests:

What links can be made between the date of Selbit's sawing trick and the comparatively recent legislation which had been passed, allowing for partial female suffrage in the United Kingdom? Does Selbit's sawing routine (which was a huge success in the day as well as becoming one of the iconic images of the conjurer's act itself) represent some kind of subconscious in revengeful mood? Does its misogynist violence represent, on some level of codification, a backlash against the perceived threat of growing female social, political and economic power? It could certainly be interpreted this way.

(Mangan 2007,xii)

As Mangan concurs, what may have begun as a boy's club joke on the struggle and physicality of women's protest, exploited the physical extremity that suffragette activists went through to make a timely entertainment trope. What Selbit was possibly not aware of in his creation of the illusion was the inclusion in his design of a form of bodily rebirth and renewal in the act of the assistant's restoration. Mangan cites magician and magic historian Eugene Berger, who although he does not connect this rite to menstruation, does recognize its imagery of catharsis and rebirth:

Sawing a woman in two can be horrible or humorous. It can also be holy. Saying this I have not forgotten that it is both witnessed and performed as sexist. Even so, it is in essence, holy. My assumption is that this twentieth century trick is our leading example of what magic is about, an example that has roots as old as magic itself. The theme is death and rebirth....The horror remains, as does the humour, but both performer and audience are also given the opportunity to participate in the holy. A real magic show is not an

arena for secular distraction, but a relatively safe space for us to experience the sacred.

(Burger and Neale, 1995, 97 in Mangan, 2007, xiv)

Menstrual ritual stories pointing to the origins of human culture, feature these themes as I show in Chapter 1. The similarity of the sawn in half woman to the story of the Hunter Monmaneki and his Wives that appears in Claude Levi Strauss' *The Origin of Table Manners*, and which Knight translates as a menstrual story, is uncanny:

After this adventure, Monmanéki married a girl of his own people. Every time she went to the landing-stage, which was some distance from the house, her body divided into two sections at the waist: her abdomen with the legs remained lying on the bank, while her chest, head and arms entered the water.

(Levi Strauss 1968, 2)

In this story originating from the South American Tucuna culture of the Amazon basin Monmaneki's wife splits herself in two, she enters the water to be bitten by piranhas and becomes bloody, she transforms into a parrot and flies away. Knight reads the Monmaneki story as a menstrual metaphor, the menstruating woman splits herself at the water's edge and after a series of abject encounters restores herself, moves away from the wet river and becomes a bird, no longer wet. Her husband does not instigate the splitting or putting back together of her body. Her body was hers and changed at her own will.

Taking the woman apart and bringing her back together, enacting her temporary death and re-emergence from the seclusion of a confined space, continued to be dominant themes in magic performance, performed by Paul Daniels—Britain's most famous TV magician of the 1970s and 80s—with the sawing in half of assistant Debbie McGee, an act regularly

featured in Daniels' show. In a typical sawing a woman in half illusion the woman's body is suspended from action and dismembered by sheets of glass and a saw, stage blood is rarely used and was not used by Daniel and McGee. Perhaps the sado-masochistic suggestion of a man putting his wife into locked boxes was strong enough for family audiences, without the further horror of a potentially enslaved and dismembered woman covered in blood. In their 1982 ITV recreation of PT Selbit's 1921 version of the act, dismemberment and bondage are represented in a fetishized and formalized stage magic code using fine rope to tie McGee's ankles, wrists and neck to the magic box who remains smiling throughout the act in a pink showgirl dress.

Stage blood was used in a version of the sawing act by second generation Peruvian illusionist Richiardi Jr. in 1971 which took the illusion to new levels of shock and gory horror. His 'buzz saw' act featured his female assistant (played by his daughter) brutally sawn in half by a large electric buzz-saw, resulting in the spilling and spraying of huge amounts of stage blood on the woman, staining and dripping off the sheets on the table she is lying on. The assistant in her blood splattered white nightie is eventually restored back to life and emerges, released from the restraint straps and buckles that shackled her to the illusion table, bringing to mind popular cinematic horror images of the era such as *Carrie* and *The Exorcist*, in which the young woman's menstruation connects her to latent occult powers.

The magic team of Penn Fraser Jillette and Raymond Joseph Teller, popularly known as Penn & Teller, reworked the idea of the 'buzz-saw' act to an even more extreme level than Richardi Jr. when in their 2008 broadcast they suggested they would reveal how the illusion is done. As they began to describe and reveal the workings with the assistant inside, they then made a 'mistake' with the safety catch causing the saw to go through the showgirl assistant, her guts and blood spilling to the floor. They then comically walked off quickly, suggesting that they would be taking no responsibility for the death of their female colleague on stage.

This is possibly the worst and most misogynist reworking of the sawing in half recorded, because the woman cannot recover and is closest to a sadistic re-enactment of the torture of witches I have found. Yet for the majority and most popular and enduring renditions of the sawing in half act, a different interpretation is possible, one where the woman does have agency and control of the illusion, where she is covertly plotting to subvert the image from inside the confines of the magic box through the power of her reformed body.

The illusion on many levels conjures up imagery of the torture of witches, yet the male magician, whether knowingly or unknowingly, when sawing the woman in half more typically undermines the status of patriarchal witch hunter figure. If the magician's assistant has resonances with the tortured witch, she, unlike the witch, is still holding her archetypal power as an agent of catharsis and signifier of cyclical new beginnings, like the menstruant. Her twentieth century rebirth from being sawn in half defies the terror of the witch-hunts. The witch has survived, and she has defied her captors; she returns from the dead to reinstate her dismembered body to its whole shamanic status. She puts herself back together and takes centre stage. In the performance of *DCIBW* I employ a comic droll tone as the lecturer cum magician cum witch. Standing centre stage, as if challenging the audience to a duel, I end the first monologue with a proposition; told almost in the style of stand-up comedy to reveal to the knowing audience, perhaps suspicious or shocked at the taboo of menstruation as a theme that could be entertaining, a radical menstrual magic proposition:

The woman sawn in half has defied death and torture. When the incredible bleeding woman takes centre stage, perhaps it is her, not the magician who merely operates the equipment that possesses in a sense true magical powers, that is the nerve to perform a series of dangerous small deaths that she defies with grace, power and exemplary Showwomanship. Perhaps even Jesus bleeding on the cross from below the rib and through the palms is himself a symbol

of patriarchies appropriation of great menstrual metaphor, of temporary death and rebirth through the power of the wound that will never heal.

(Carnesky 2017,1)

Spectacular performances that break taboos and defy deathly scenarios can serve to act as a form of therapeutic catharsis, perhaps as menstrual rituals did and do in traditional human cultures. If a woman takes up the saw in the classic *Sawing in Half* illusion perhaps she invents a new performance ritual that reclaims the possible menstrual origins of magic and in doing so makes a powerful feminist commentary. The interpretation across world cultures of the menstruating woman's body as an inherent polluting risk to those near her and her seclusion as a protection for others, could be seen to resemble the male magician's control of the female assistant's body onstage. The need to bind and contain her risqué, sexually active, seeping, uncontrollable and provocative body. My show investigates how menstrual taboos and rituals circumscribe that danger and how re-imagining menstrual rituals can change this. The power of horror, of the potentiality of abject outcomes thrill and repulse simultaneously and relentlessly.

The abjection of the bloodied woman can be connected to horror power in Western media, horror entertainments the place in culture where representations of menstruation have thrived as a trope that possess taboo, paranormal and polluting power, the continued fear and repulsion of the witch's sexuality and menstruating body played out in extreme special effects.

### **Horror Power**

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva identifies the theme of menstruation as a pollutant through the lens of the abject, that which repulses and is rejected from the body. The menstrual blood of women as a trope reached wide popularity in 1970s horror film, its abject power resonating with an

era where explicit representations, gore and pornography met with expanding industries of special effects and shifting opinions on censorship. Mainstream media could now represent the most unspoken desires, fears and cultural taboos, but still from a predominantly male gaze where menstruation was considered as a subject of disgust.

What are the origins of the association of menstruation with occult and supernatural powers in myth and fairy tale and how is this harnessed in horror film? I undertook an exploration of a series of horror films from the era of my childhood which focused on the pre and pubescent female body as a site of fear and repulsion. Just as the work of feminist artists and activists of the time often sought to de mystify and question menstrual taboos, much of 1970s horror used menstruation as a dramatic device to create female monsters. Horror cinema used menstruation as a spectacular device to horrify audiences, blurring the line between cultural exploration and exploitation of the female body as a site that breaks taboos.

The suggestion of menstrual blood as a signifier of witchcraft and esoteric powers is exemplified in cult horror narratives such as Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), and associated original film of 1976, and remake of 2013. Firstly blood is used by Carrie's oppressors to shame her but her fully bloodied figure comes to represent the presence of occult powers. The tradition of the image of a woman stained red through the use of red ochre permeates traditional human cultures. Power calls this the *Female Cosmetic Coalitions* model, as currently practiced by Himba women in Namibia; a signifier of woman's taboo ritual power, her coalition with other women and her fertility, of the power and cyclicity of her womb:

Females within coalitions would begin to use blood-coloured substances as cosmetics to augment their signals. This is the Female Cosmetic Coalitions model of the origins of art and symbolic culture. In creating a cosmetic coalition in resistance,

females deter alpha males by surrounding a menstrual female and refusing to let anyone near. They are creating the world's first taboo, on menstrual blood or collectively imagined blood, speaking the world's first word: NO!

(Power accessed online 2018)

The book of *Carrie* appeared in 1974 and the film opened in 1976. The novel of *The Exorcist* was launched in 1971 and the film in 1974. These films emerged in a time when women had had access to the pill for under a decade, in the newly liberated era of the 1960s when sexual morality had only just started to shift, and when feminism and equal rights were still a new and controversial option for many women. It was an era when the cultural fear of the emergence and untapped power of female sexuality was at an all new high.

The notion of the new age, where esoteric and pagan ideals, once the preserve of the wealthy and educated, became pervasive throughout culture and in popular forms. The popularity of the figure of the witch and her associations with the moon, the abject body, her connections to the rhythms and mysteries of a 'natural order', her wanton disregard for Church and State and the rule of men and her status as forbidden and erotic, meant that representations of menstruation from childhood were frightening, unknown, threatening and most definitely taboo:

In *Carrie* and *The Omen*, the girls' transformation into witch or female devil follows on from the onset of menarche. *Carrie* provides a particularly interesting representation of woman as witch and menstrual monster.

(Creed 1993,77)

*Carrie* is perhaps the most famous depiction of menstruation in mainstream culture outside of advertising for the 'sanitary' care industry. Based on the Stephen King 1974 novel the film revolves around a teenage

girl who is an outsider at school due to her naiveté and eccentric religious zealot mother. The onset of her menstruation marks her as both a victim of bullying and her realisation, as she tries to defend herself, that she possesses paranormal powers of telekinesis. King wrote of his expectations of the novel, which differs from the published dates in current publicity :

*Carrie* was written after *Rosemary's Baby*, but before *The Exorcist*, which really opened up the field. I didn't expect much of *Carrie*. I thought, 'Who'd want to read a book about a poor little girl with menstrual problems?' I couldn't believe I was writing it.

(King 2014)

It is the famous locker room shower scene in which she begins her menstruation. Seeing the blood come out of her body she thinks she is dying and is subsequently jibed by her classmates who throw tampons and sanitary towels at her; these acts of aggression along with the shock of her menstruation bring on her first telekinetic moment. The film and book build to a crescendo in which Carrie, having been further taunted and marginalized, covered in pig's blood at her school prom, the victim of a dirty trick to humiliate her by her persecutors, moves into a dramatic sequence in which she embodies the archetype of the raging sorceress and witch, Kali-like in a sea of blood, as she destroys all who have taunted her. Punk progenitor originally of *The Slits* fame and contemporary feminist thinker, Viv Albertine brings Carrie's mother's famous monologue to mind as she recalls her own miscarriage experience:

Sticky black blood, it seeps into the sofa cushions and dips down onto the floor, like we've split a tin of molasses over our laps. Here it is haunting me again, my old enemy, Blood. Bugging me again. Bloody bloody blood. Always there when I don't want it and never there when I do. I jump up, a river of red gushes down my legs. We're in the middle of a bloodbath, like the prom scene in *Carrie*. In



my mind I can hear Carrie's mother screaming 'The curse of blood  
is punishment for sin!' (Albertine 2014, 371)

*Carrie*, in all its abject positioning of the menstruating girl as potential witch, was the only mainstream artwork I encountered as a child that explored in any way the sense of social shame that teenage girls experience at the onset of menstruation. It presented menstruation as possessing magical uncontrollable female power which can transgress the boundaries of organized monotheism. *Carrie* draws the occult power of the archetypal witch into a fanatical Christian setting from which it rebels and rises. It makes the menstruant a monster, but also a witch that gets revenge on her persecutors.

*The Exorcist* (1974) also draws on archetypal menstrual fear of puberty's loss of innocence. A child on the verge of menstruation becomes possessed by a demonic power and begins a series of grotesque, abject, sexual, and animalistic sequences of behaviors, destroying the innocence of the child and challenging taboos of femininity and human physicality. It is only the power of the patriarchal, Christ empowered male exorcist that can restore order in this boundary less, abject, menstrual female world and lead the girl back into an acceptable body. The story bears resemblances to the Jewish folk tale of the Dybbuk, where a young woman is bedridden and possessed by a demon as popularised through interpretations like Issac Bashevis Singers' *Taibele and her Demon* (1953 )The special effects and timing of the film make the breaking of taboo an illusory spectacle, with images of levitation and disembodiment drawn from the magic show to extreme proportions, as Barbara Creed explores in her work on the monstrous feminine in horror film.

Regan's carnivalesque display of her body reminds us quite clearly of the immense appeal of the abject. Horror emerges from the fact that woman has broken with her proper feminine role – she has 'made a spectacle of herself'- put the unsocialized body on display.  
(Creed 1993,42)

In mythology, folk and fairy tales menstrual figures continue to masquerade unrecognized, below the radar. The Medusa, the Dybbuk and the Kali all can be read as menstrual stories and symbols but rarely are recognized as such. Popular menstrual terms passed down from generation to generation of women like 'the curse' fix the image of menstruation as a form of wound, a sickness that cannot be healed, a tainted destiny for women to suffer as some source of gender shame.

The menstruating woman is dangerous only because she is sacred, and infantile simply because she possesses "magical powers" Like the witch, like Kali, so the Medusa, with her capacity to instil terror through her female 'wound', emblematises women's menstrual empowerment.

(Lupton 1993, 138)

Andrzej Zulawski's 1981 art-house horror film *Possession*, considered shocking for its time and dubbed a 'video nasty' but now seen as a cult classic, is one film which deals with this. Starring actor Isabella Adjani, includes a scene in which she experiences a very bloody, surreal miscarriage in a Berlin subway that leads her to experience a frenzied movement sequence, a hysterical tarantella in her never-ending blood pumping dress, like a wound that never heals.

Are images of impaled and bleeding sexualized women that covertly feature and adorn so many ghost trains, that star in horror films, exploiting a fascination with violence towards women's bodies or tapping into a deep and timeless unconscious human image of the magic of the menstruating woman? Reading *Carrie*, *The Exorcist* and *Possession* as a critique of patriarchy is possible where the protagonists are both victims and perpetrators of the breakdown of symbolic order and who deliver catharsis through their paranormal episodes. This drew me into a decision to work with horror film imagery of bloodied women in a focused attempt to address this in performance:

Bleeding women reappear again and again across popular culture, bleeding women are bound and tethered in the magic show, captured and chained and the ghost train, stifled and tortured in the horror film. The witch enslaved in what was once her own domain. How then can we use magic to reverse the curse?

(Carnesky 2017,3)

## **Theatres of Blood**

In approaching the research and creation of *DCIBW*, I sought to discover how a selection of contemporary activists and artists including performance practitioners, authors, visual artists and film directors have dealt with menstruation in the last five decades and where memorable menstrual narratives currently live in culture. My research explored a lineage in feminist theatre, activism and art practice and *DCIBW* and the Menstronauts, an activist group that grew out of the audience of *DCIBW* became additions to this lineage with their own multi-disciplinary performative activist languages that reach new diverse audiences and participants.

Menstruation as a subject appears in the works of feminist artists including Eve Ensler, Aila Magda Elmhady, Orlan, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Viv Albertine. Artworks created by collectives like Subrosa, Ukrainian activists Femen and the earlier Womanhouse collective who exhibited artist Judy Chicago's installation *Menstrual Bathroom* in the 1970s remain a benchmark for feminist representations of menstruation. Chicago describes the implications of women viewing menstrual artworks:

Menstruation is something women either hide, are very matter of fact about, or are ashamed of. Until I was 32 years old, I never has a serious discussion with my female friends about menstruation. The bathroom is an image of women's hidden secret, covered over with a veil of gauze, very, very white and clean and deodorized, -

deodorized, except for the blood, the only thing that cannot be covered up. However we feel about our own menstruation is how we feel about seeing its image in front of us.

(Chicago 1972)

Chicago's infamous *Menstrual Bathroom* was not her first foray into the subject. Her 1971 work *Red Flag* created an iconic and revolutionary image that echoed the pop cultural use of applied colour layered photographic images identified with Warhol's work. Its combination of black and white photography layered with a single coloured tampon being pulled out from a vagina worked in image and title to deliver a radical proposal of the subversive power inside the womb. Emma Rees connects Chicago's imagery to the rituals of the Jewish Mikvah ritual bath, a cultural heritage I share with Chicago and discuss in my introduction:

*Red Flag* vividly violates all sorts of taboos, not only the seen/unseen dichotomy of the female body, but also the religious codes of, for example, the Jewish *mikvah*, the immersion pool believed to reinstate both a woman's 'purity' after menstruation, and *taharat hamishpachah*, that of the family home too.

(Rees 2013, 122)

In *DCIBW* the reclaiming of the Mikvah draws from Chicago's *Menstrual Bathroom* and horror film tropes of women bathing or drowned in blood baths. I created a scene where I talk about and show a film of me bathing in blood which is represented as a ritual through which I explore miscarriage, telling the audience about my recurrent losses. The act of bathing in the blood acts as both a reference to reclaiming the Mikvah and a symbolic suggestion that the blood of menstruation is powerful in a positive way, elevating the blood to a symbol of renewal and rebirth. It becomes a powerful act of self-love, to hold the symbolic blood of miscarriage, blood from inside the body, and embody it from without. Images of bathing in the blood of the womb lining should be more reassuring than we might imagine, according to science and

environmental writer Shreya Dasgupta. It is indeed the first bath a human entity experiences:

In horses, cows and pigs, the embryo simply sits on the surface of the womb lining. In dogs and cats, the foetuses dig in a little more. But in humans and other primates, a foetus will dig through all the womb lining to directly bathe in its mother's blood.

(Dasgupta accessed online 2015)

Artist and activist Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues* (1995) was influential for my practice in the 1990s feminist performance culture when I saw her perform the work in Islington in the King's Head theatre pub in 1999. Finding the work after I had discovered performance artist Annie Sprinkle and her *sex positive* message which she delivered through cross genre visual performance, Ensler's simple and powerful collection of diverse voices exploding the taboo of talking about the vagina differed in its ground-breaking series of monologues. The script addressed menstrual taboos in the monologue, *'I Was Twelve, My Mother Slapped Me'*, which describes a diverse group of young women's and girl's accounts of the experiences of the onset of their first menstrual periods. The title came from the description of the orthodox Jewish tradition of slapping a girl on the onset of her menses:

Fifteen years old. My mother said "Mazel tov." She slapped me in the face. Don't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

(Ensler 1996, 30)

The monologue shows a variety of experiences both positive, negative, shaming and strange, charting the complex territory of experience and cultural traditions around starting periods. The *Vagina Monologues* and the extraordinary tapestry of diverse voices it brought together culminated in Ensler moving further into activism establishing *V-Day* in 1998:

V-Day quickly grew into a mass movement active on every continent. It has become a crucial catalyst in the global fight to stop gender-based violence, attacking the silence-public and private-that allows violence against women to continue and bringing attention to issues of harassment, rape, battery, incest, female genital mutilation, and sex slavery.

(Enslar 2018, 170)

The ethos of V-Day underlines the lack of recognition of the importance of and cultural disregard for the gendered politics of the corporeal. Whilst Enslar's activism does not focus specifically on the way menstruation continues to be a source of taboo, inequality and shame for women and girls across the world, its wider vision encompasses the struggles and injustices that surround menstruation. Establishing V-Day led Enslar and her team to widen their remit even further and start the One Billion Rising movement, a worldwide action to unite communities against misogyny through the power of dance as a form of collective protest:

Launched on Valentines's Day 2012, One Billion Rising began as a call to action based on the staggering statistic that one in three women on the planet will be beaten or raped during her lifetime. With the world population at seven billion, this adds up to more than *one billion* women and girls.

(Enslar 2018, 204)

Hearing Enslar speak at the Women of The World festival at the Southbank in 2016 helped me think about how the relationship of DCIBW to the Menstronauts might work, drawing on the way that the medium of dance in One Billion Rising became the living embodiment of the activism:

One Billion Rising has demonstrated the power of art and dance and the astonishing political alchemy that occurs when art and activism happen simultaneously.

(Enslar 2018, 205)

Enslar suffered and survived cancer and speaks eloquently on the notion of the disconnection from the corporeal that pervades the dualist mode of thinking about the body, which she draws on to highlight the human crisis at the centre of ecological concerns:

I think this mind-body split, with the body being considered lower and not to be trusted, is being changed by all that's being discovered about emotional intelligence and body intelligence. The intelligence in the body has been unvalued in the same way the earth has been.

(Enslar accessed online 2013)

In an interview with Donna Seaman in 2013, Enslar talks about the violence imposed on women's bodies as a metaphor for the violence imposed on the wider ecology of the planet:

One of the things that became clear to me is how our disrespect for the body, the way women's bodies have been dishonoured and disrupted and invaded and raped, is just so similar to what we've done to the earth. It's almost embarrassingly obvious. Yet when you make this point people get really upset with you. They think it's too literal.

(Enslar accessed online 2013)

Enslar's work, which as well as actively creating and effecting change for women in numerous social and activist scenarios and events, also spotlights how violent mistreatment and disrespect of the boundaries of the body clearly can be seen to correlate with human mistreatment and disrespect of the planet. Focussing on menstruation as a metaphor, I

began to see the Menstronauts' activist project as highlighting the politics of ignoring the importance the notion of cyclicity in the body and in the environment. The sense that there is a misogynist understanding of menstruation as abject, taboo and polluting by women themselves, and that this is learnt by girls very young, echoes a wider crisis of the cycles of the human body in relation to the cycles of the planet. Elizabeth Grosz, like Ensler, explores the shame and negativity women come to associate with their bodies early on in their lives:

For the girl, menstruation, as associated as it is with blood, with injury and wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable, not in sleep, in dreams, but whenever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out of control status that she was led to believe ends with childhood.

(Grosz 1994, 205)

As with One Billion Rising there needs to be a recognition that change needs to happen around the way young women are taught to perceive and embody their own menstruation and projects like DCIBW and the Menstronauts aim to address this through performances, talks and street activism.

Grosz looks at the polluting status of menstrual blood versus other bodily fluids which can be viewed as purifying as in the case of tears, and life giving as in the case of seminal fluid. Grosz suggests that menstruation as a taboo pollutant then informs a cultural reading of female sexuality itself as polluting abject force:

The representation of female sexuality as an uncontainable flow, as seepage associated with what is unclean, coupled with the idea of female sexuality as a vessel, a container, a home empty or lacking in itself but fixable from the outside, has enabled men to associate women with infection, with disease, with the idea of festering



putrefaction, no longer contained simply in female genitals but at any or all points of the female body.

(Grosz 1994, 206)

The liquidity of menstruation, the perceived messiness that interrupts the social order cutting against patriarchal structures and schedules, its unknowable uncontrollable appearance personifies the menstruator as a transgressor of boundaries, of the body and as a cultural identity of an uncertain, uncontainable, unknowable entity. Margrit Shildrick draws on Grosz and expands on the notion of woman as uncontrollable, open ended symbol of seepage and leakiness:

In monthly menstruation both the loss of vital blood and the confirmation of an internal build-up of noxious waste material further underlined the dissipation of women's bodily vigour and their reduced intellectual capacity. Moreover, the very sign of fertility, the menses, has been regarded as evidence of women's inherent lack of control over the body and, by extension, of the self. In other words, women, unlike the self-contained and self-containing men, leaked; or as Grosz claims: 'women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage' (1994:203) the issue throughout Western cultural history has been one of female lack of closure.

(Shildrick 1997,35)

But for something to lack closure and leak or flow, can also be a cyclical metaphor, sea like, forever returning, mutating, growing, regenerating. The menstruators' embodiment of flow needs to be framed not as a threat of chaos but as a signifier of the embodiment of the earthy cyclicity by which all life is affected. As Shildrick suggests, female leakiness should be explored as an 'especial immanence':

...the female sex stands in a different relationship to embodiment than does the male, such that women both exemplify the effect of, and manifest, that threat. What I have in mind is both the especial

immanence of the female body, as it is frequently represented in ontological theory, such that it emmeshes women themselves; and its putative leakiness, the outflow of the body which breaches the boundaries of the proper.

(Shildrick 1997,17)

It is the feminist artist's job to reveal and reframe the mythological female figures that embody the monstrous, the abject and the grotesque. Medusa, secluded in darkness, red-eyed and snake-haired, is interpreted by feminist performance artist Orlan as a menstrual figure. In her 1981 performance *The Head of Medusa* the audience viewed her menstruating genitals through a magnifying glass lest direct contact with her cursed blood should endanger those who come into contact with it.

The controversial 1976 show *Prostitution* at the ICA in London by performance group COUM Transmissions featured performances and installations addressing themes of menstruation by live artist Cosey Fanni Tutti, the only female member of the group. The exhibition caused much outrage in the press who branded the group as 'The Wreckers of Civilisation', a name that went on to become the title of the 1999 biographical book by Simon Ford that documents and charts the work of both performance group COUM Transmissions and co collaborative industrial music group Throbbing Gristle.

One of the many supposed offensive pieces in *Prostitution* was a collection of Cosey's blood-soaked tampons and images made with her menstrual blood. Cosey recalls exhibiting the piece, its description bringing to mind later work by the Young British Artists movement such as Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* exhibited in the 1997 Sensation show in the Royal Academy of Art which featured a rotting cow's head in a glass case being eaten by maggots:

Via our performances we used to work out our own inhibitions and this was one of them. It was quite a taboo to show or even admit

that any woman used Tampax or even went to the toilet. So, we used these Tampax of mine and the maggots lived off them and hatched out.

(Fanni Tutti 1999)

A more recent controversial and anarchic performance work, bringing to mind the practices of women artists from the 1970s such as Fanni Tutti, is 'The Famous' Lauren Barrie Holstein's *Splat*, performed at the Spill Festival in 2013. The work featured images that played on childhood imagery of women in fairy tales, internet pornography, popular culture and girls performing ballet. Exploring taboos around menstrual blood included inserting a test tube of tomato juice into her vagina and slashing water balloons filled with tomato juice against her inner thighs. As with Fanni Tutti's work in the 1970s and 1980s the work used a corporeal approach to expose the exploitative nature of popular cultural media representations of female sexuality. In both artists' work the exposed body itself becomes the medium of critique of popularly projected paradigms of 'the bad girl' to create a subversion of the explicit sexualised image through body actions.

In 2009, the British-based artist Ingrid Berthon-Moines was featured in *The Guardian* for her video at the Venice Biennale showing her playing her tampon string to the song *Slave to the Rhythm*. The article featured one of her photo pieces which showed women wearing menstrual blood as lipstick. Irish live artist Helena Walsh's piece *In Pursuit of Pleasure* from 2012 also uses real menstrual blood in an exploration of the autonomy of the reproductive female body from the perspective of her Irish cultural identity, performed as part of *Labour* at Performance Space Hackney:

My performance in LABOUR questions the territorial control of female reproductive autonomy in an Irish context and the cultural ideologies that situate penance as a condition of female sexual pleasure. The performance proposes the assertion of empowered forms of female pleasure as significant to women gaining full rights over their bodies in an Irish context. (Walsh 2012)

Beyond the woman's body as a biological entity, I suggest that menstruation offers a creative, ritualistic and cultural force to all people who identify as female or menstruators who do not, including biological women and women who may have been born biologically male, women who have had hysterectomies or never menstruated, and gender non-binary people. This is exemplified by Trans musician Anthony's writing about menstruation as a powerful metaphor against patriarchy and organised religion as part of the *Future Feminist* manifesto that was part of a New York event curated by Kembra Phaler:

It's a very indigenous idea that the Earth is a female, that the Earth menstruates, that the water of the world is the blood of a woman's body and that's what we crawled out of just in the same way that [sic.] we crawled out of our mothers' wombs. It's the most basic idea; any child could come up with it and it's so obvious.

(Anthony accessed online 2012)

Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens developed the terms Ecosexual and Sexecology and have been performing, publishing and making films including *Goodbye Gauley Mountain an Ecosexual Love Story* (2012). Ecosexuality combines ecological research and green activism with sex activism, seeing earth and the eco system as our lover as opposed to mother. It differs from Ecofeminism in its rejection of any essentialist understandings of the relationship of women to nature. It draws from Donna Haraway's work on posthumanism and on human/non-human relationships which influenced Stephens' doctoral study which contributed to the movement:

We are polymorphous and pollen-amorous. We educate people about ecosex culture and community practices. We hold these truths self-evident: that we are all part of not separate from, nature. Thus, all sex is ecosex.

(Sprinkle and Stevens accessed online 2017)

Yet the ecosex movement does not mention in its manifesto or online materials concepts of renewal and changing cycles, though it does mention sustainability. A menstrual theory could lend a significant conceptual framework to the ecosexual movement, the notion of the Menstrocene having the potentiality of cyclicity, renewal, recycling, seasonal and planetary change and relationships to the body. 'The earth is our lover, not our mother' say Sprinkle and Steven. A menstrual theory would suggest we are the body of the earth itself and disembodied from the earth's cycles has disembodied us from our corporeal fully realised selves. In the Menstrocene the earth is not separate or related to my body, the earth *is* my body.

Many of the artworks discussed in this chapter address menstruation in its position as a western hygiene issue, seeking to expose its status as abject and taboo and regain a sense of acceptance and experiential pride. Yet menstruation and its potential as a cultural signifier that is transformational, embodied and cyclical remains marginal and unrecognised. *DCIBW* draws on corporeal, postmodern, ecofeminist and posthuman theories, allowing menstruation and its anthropological and political associations to become free flowing, a case for cyclicity, to inspire art, transformational identities and ecosexual activism that personify the Menstrocene.

Menstruation becomes a place, a position and a theory through which the reinvention of rituals can take place, where myths can be reframed and dialogues on the politics of bodies, organs, gender and cycles in relation to wider ecological, feminist and queer frameworks can be united.

## Acting Up on a Monthly Basis

Sometimes for a laugh I wear a tampon- dipped in reddish brown paint, so it looks like stale blood- looped over my ear like an earring.

(Albertine 2014, 166)

Menstruation as a subject explored by feminist activists and punk artists is recorded in Albertine's autobiography charting her experiences of the punk era in all female punk band The Slits who were known as taboo breaking dissenters of feminine norms with songs like *Typical Girls* (1979):

The DJ asks us what the question is, I say, 'Ask the listeners to list the colours of the stains on a girl's knickers throughout the monthly cycle'. Me and Ari have been talking about writing a song around this subject ('Girls and Their Willies'), we think it's quite beautiful. The switchboard lights up, we get loads of insults, which we laugh hysterically at, then a girl comes on the line and says, 'White, pink, red, dark red, pink, white.' 'Yeah! She wins!!'

(Albertine, 2014, 238)

Continuing the punk spirit of shock tactics and confrontational expressions of sexuality are young feminists on the frontline of activism such as The Radical Cheerleaders who started in the US in the 1990s campaigning against global femcare industries and highlighting controversies like toxic shock syndrome. In Eastern Europe Inna Shevchenko, founder of Ukrainian feminist activist group Femen says she uses the term 'Sexstreamism' to describe Femen's performative activism that involves topless protests where women write controversial political statements on their bare chests and backs, often featuring blood smeared on their bodies, against political injustice and the repression of women in patriarchal culture.

Literally embodying their activism through the taboo of their nudity defines Femen's activism and has been photographed extensively. Yet even with the eye of the world media on their efforts, controversy, threats, kidnapping, torture and suicide have been outcomes that Femen activists have suffered. Shevchenko stated on Femen's website in 2015:

We couldn't predict that with this tactic we will press on the nerve of the patriarchal system and we realised that one naked woman in a political context controlling her own body and writing her political demand on her body and using her body as a poster can commit sort of a revolution that would last 2 minutes or sometimes even 30 seconds until she will be arrested we realised that provoking patriarchal system like this we succeed to show its real face and what do I think about them I definitely think they fear us.

(Shevchenko accessed online 2015)

Femen were again in the world news in July 2018 as one of its founders, Oksana Shachko who had faced persecution, kidnappings and beatings from authority figures was found dead in her Paris flat:

Femen said Shachko was among three members "kidnapped" by security agents and forced to strip naked in a forest after staging a topless protest mocking the Belarussian president, Alexander Lukashenko. The agents poured oil over the three women, threatened to set them on fire, and cut off their hair, Femen said. Shachko was abducted again by unknown assailants during a visit by Putin to Ukraine, according to the group. A lawyer for Shachko said she was beaten so badly that she was briefly hospitalised.

(The Guardian, accessed online 2018)

The similarities between the Femen activists' violent persecution and the historical persecution of witches is frighteningly apparent. Creating taboo breaking live art and street protest in the UK has been a passion and an

art for me, but women artist activists in other parts of the world are at risk of misogyny, torture and death for practicing their art and expressing their politics through embodied actions.

Femen member Aila Magda Elmhady, an Egyptian feminist blogger and artist, used menstrual imagery as part of her work, in August 2014 posting an image on Facebook that she made of herself and another woman menstruating and defecating on the Islamic flag. Their work was supported by the Charlie Hebdo Parisian satirical magazine whose staff were the victims of terrorist murders in January 2015 which sparked worldwide demonstrations in favour of the right of freedom of speech. Femen posted a statement on their website in response to The Charlie Hebdo murders:

They died for their freedom of expression, their freedom of speech, their freedom to laugh about Islam. They were killed in the name of the prophet Mohammed. They were shot down in the name of religion. As they would have wished, we will continue to fight and not to yield to terror. We will carry on within us the anger and the rage of an indescribable sadness. WE ARE CHARLIE. WE WILL REMAIN CHARLIE. CHARLIE AKBAR.

(Shevchenko accessed online 2015)

Shevchenko explains that the picture was a direct response to the video showing the murder of journalist James Foley: "With our photo message we propose our own 'way of execution' of Islamic State ideas," she said:

Our caption to the photo reads: 'Animals, our execution of your ideas looks like that! Watch it well! We don't demand ransoms, we don't threaten you with new killings, we just SHIT ON YOU, ISIS!'

(Shevchenko accessed online 2015)

Elmhady describes her experiences of menstruation growing up in Egypt, which I related to from my experiences of attitudes to menstruation of members of the Orthodox Jewish community I encountered as a child:



After I got my period, I was shocked by the way I was sexualized and was expected to act. I was expected to be less playful but I missed jumping around without feeling every atom in my body as a frame around me. I had to lock myself in the bathroom for long periods of time to avoid my father seeing me with a pad in hands. Some seller's hid pads in paper and black plastic bags as if they were illegal. Islam forbids women from praying, fasting or touching Quran while on their periods because considers menstruating women impure.

(Elmhady accessed online 2014)

Elmhady used a graphic image of herself sitting face forward legs apart menstruating on the Islamic State flag, alongside a woman with her back turned defecating on the flag, highlighting the power of menstruation and using the image of a menstruating woman's body as an extreme political symbol of resistance and protest against patriarchy and injustice. This, in a sense, is a menstrual ritual used as a political act, embodying and rejecting the shame, negativity and devaluing of the body she had come to associate with the culture she grew up in. Femen's performative activist tactics would go on to inform my ideas about activism in *DCIBW*.

Menstruation has also been in the media in other contexts. Global fashion chain American Apparel launched a sell-out designer t-shirt in 2013 by 20-year old artist Petra Collins, perhaps inspired by the activism of feminists like Femen, known as the 'Menstruation T-shirt'. It featured a line drawing of a hand touching a vagina with blotches of red on it:

I'm really interested in what is hidden from our culture. We are always repressing or hiding what is natural to a post-pubescent body. We're taught to hate our menstrual cycle and even to hide masturbation.

(Collins accessed online 2014)

The new stories surfacing in the media represent growing trends amongst young feminists that question notions of shame around menstruation and a reclaiming of its importance for a new generation. A menstrual détournement of its time. The women utilize the power of social media in Showwoman style publicity that courts controversy and attention through spectacular actions and images that point to the very core of institutionalized misogyny.

The cycles of women's bodies as a site of political action are the focus of US feminist art collective subRosa. They question the ethics and practices of the menstrual care products industry as well as new fertility technologies and highlight the crisis in reproductive identity amongst Western women. subRosa's work explores and critiques the intersections of information and bio technologies on women's bodies, lives and work through publications, performance and social activism:

In the Biotech century, women's bodies have become flesh labs and Pharma-commons: They are mined for eggs, embryonic tissues, and stem cells for use in medical, and therapeutic experiments, and are employed as gestational wombs in assisted reproductive technologies (ART). Under such conditions, resistant feminist discourses of the "body" emerge as an explicitly bio-political practice.

(Subrosa 2012, 3)

Helen Hester in her outline of Xenofeminsm or XF outlines its commitment through technomaterialism to anti- naturalism, opening all possible worlds of gender and a feminism not defined by any essentialist ideas of the maternal or the reproductive, with nature understood 'as a technologized space of conflict that fundamentally shapes lived experiences' (Hester 2018:13) Hester advocates for new gender queer non-binary feminist landscapes of technologically enhanced possibilities. This is perhaps a world where queer menstrual collectives could flourish with as many kinds of women and wombs and menstruation as could be imagined or invented.

Where trans women without wombs have period pains and trans men ritually bleed and share eggs with menopausal cis women. This would be the world of the Menstronauts, where cyclicity reigns over gender. Yet whilst ecofeminism is discussed, cyclicity is not on the agenda of Xenofemism:

Xenofemism is gender abolitionist in the sense that it rejects the validity of any social order anchored in identities as a basis of oppression, and in the sense that we embrace sexuate diversity beyond any binary. (Hester 2018:31)

Menstruation is an uncomfortable bed fellow for Hester's Xenofeminism, who researched the Del-Em menstrual extraction device as a tool that could be useful and emancipatory to women:

Rather than menstruating and cramping for five to seven days, a woman could have her period removed all at once.

(Hester 2018,71)

A feminism that sees menstruation only as an essentialist problem of 'nature' to be resolved through extraction resonates with Victorian notions of menstruation as an illness to be cured. Xenofeminism misses the radical solidarity of women's inheritance from menstrual ritual, the strike forming, collective potential for all genders and biologies to practice cyclical politics and life-styles.

In patriarchal constructions of time each day of the month is equal in its aim for maximum production and output. In the Menstrocene time is not measured by consumer productivity but in tandem with the cyclical changes of the body and the earth, not just the biological female or male body, but the non biological female and male body and all gender non binary bodies, male bodies and their differences. Cyclicity in the Menstrocene is created in collectivity and solidarity with body and environment. Maximising productivity has not proved a successful strategy for human life on earth. Phased cyclical productivity with monthly inactivity

and the halting of production in order to focus on the creative and replenishing transformation of waste could prove more successful. I suggest Xenofeminism would benefit from working on genderless inventions to give all humans time off once a month, working to create a new feminist framework of time inspired by menstruation and ecological views that we should be lowering the productive possibilities of humans, not increasing them.

### **Menstrual Activists and Spiritualists Unite**

Menstrual activism is at the forefront of current feminist debate, uniting in its cultural diversity ritually unclean, the disempowered, sanitised and tabooed bleeding women. Germaine Greer's famous quote 'If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your own menstrual blood - if it makes you sick, you've got a long way to go, baby' (Greer 1971, 57) is still as relevant today as it was in the early 70s, joined now by new questions of how we understand bodily diversity, queer bodies, cultural difference and the relationship of menstruation to ecological issues.

Drawing its name from Anita Diamant's 1997 bestselling novel *The Red Tent*, a growing trend of menstrual spiritualists in the US known as the Red Tent movement combine a feminist spiritualist approach to celebrating menstruation as a sacred rite of passage to be shared between mothers and daughters on a girl's first cycle and continued through the rest of menstrual life.

The Red Tent movement is about creating regular feminine spaces for women to share their stories, rest and gain strength to meet the challenges of our time and their daily lives. This is work that we believe will make a difference not only to women themselves but also to all the people around them. In short, we "know" that the simple act of creating safe and empowering feminine spaces is life and world changing work.

(Red Tent directory accessed online 2019)

Offering a new supportive collective menstrual environment where women can share stories and experiences is a fundamental step in recognising the importance of the female bodily cycle and addressing its common devaluing and medicalisation:

With menarche you meet your wisdom, and with your monthly bleeding you practice your wisdom, and then at menopause you become the wisdom.

(Bobel 2010, 57)

Red Tent feminists meet in moon phases, bringing together communities of women in temporary spaces with red decorations in their reclaiming of menstruation's importance, but they risk reductive stereotypes of femininity defined by reproductive function. They potentially exclude women who for a variety of reasons may not menstruate or not see reproductive function as central to their identity. Whilst this reclaiming of menstruation promotes a more positive understanding of the role of menstruation and makes reference to notions of goddess concepts of spirituality, it is critiqued by feminists who find its practices leaning towards gender essentialism and therefore exclusionary to many who identify as women, creating 'a false idea of unity' (Bobel 2010, 73) around the idea that all women are connected through the act of bleeding.

In DCIBW we addressed this by meeting monthly as the Red Tent does, but with a diverse group of women who did not all bleed, or want to be mothers, or even have periods. We set out to look at what a menstrual spirituality would look like through the lens of new queer diversity.

Third wave feminists who call for a blurring of gender roles and identities reject the idea of an exclusive safe space focussed on women's reproductive potential. A *Red Tent* including the diversity of all people who identify as feminists is necessary to engage with

current feminist debates, 'transgender, androgyne, inter-gender, bigender, bio, third gender, neuter/neutrois /agender, genderqueer and gender fluid, and more'.

As I have shown in this discussion, my idea for *DCIBW* grew initially out of the lived experience of a history of life long painful menstruation, recurrent miscarriage and failed IVF cycles. Over time menstruation took on a new signification of unsuccessful attempts at pregnancy, which prompted me to search for cultural representations of menstruation that could be cathartic to create a view of menstruation as a sign of continued fertility and physical renewal and not failed conception.

As I have outlined in this chapter, this search has encompassed histories of stage magic, Showwomen, popular culture representations and feminist art, performance and activism. My research in these areas has informed the reinvention of menstrual rituals in my PaR and performance and enabled me to identify how I have built on the traditions of Showwomen of many kinds to create a conceptual framework for my project.

In the following chapters I will clarify and unpack how this influenced my PaR, how I created a group of collaborating artists and how we drew on our personal experiences to develop the project. Discoveries from my research opened up questions from which *DCIBW* project started to emerge as an experiment in cross disciplinary theatre performance.

Rituals of menstruation in traditional human cultures sound not unlike rituals of queer and experimental cabaret artists in London. Transgression of gender norms, transformation through costume and makeup into a ritualised persona, enactments of rebirth, destruction and reconstruction of identity, breaking sexual taboos, all these themes are regularly played out by cabaret artists in popular cutting-edge London cabaret clubs like Duckie in The Royal Vauxhall Tavern. The first work in progress performances of *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* took place at *RAG* and *Duckie*,

placing the reinvention of menstrual rituals in front of audiences in the heart of subversive London.

## Chapter Three

### Conceiving Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman



*Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* Cast, Edinburgh 2017

In an attempt to answer the questions that the research posed through my practice, I divided *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* into three main phases. The first involved the secondary research outlined earlier in this thesis. In the second phase I drew together a group of 'menstruants', a collective of intersectional experimental cabaret artists who agreed to take part in a performative menstrual experiment that drew on theories of menstrual synchronicity, anthropological research, ideas about magic in performance, *Red Tent* practices, histories of feminist art and activism and queer cabaret and live art devising processes.

This involved the six artist participants including myself, plus a production assistant Amy Ridler and our producer Lara Clifton, meeting together twice a month over a three-month period in opposing lunar phases of a typical 28 day menstrual cycle to take part in workshops where we created new menstrual rituals drawn from my research, our personal experiences, our



sexual identities and traditions from our individual cultural heritages. Before the three-month menstrual ritual workshop process began I had a month in residence at the National Theatre Studios where I was given an office space in September 2014 amongst other playwrights and theatre practitioners. This was a month where the research was mapped together, the central tropes to be used in the performance decided on, an initial script of my opening performance lecture drafted and a plan of practice-led experiments and exercises designed from my secondary research sources and live art experience.

Performers were brought together who had previously worked with Carnesky Productions in different contexts, in queer cabaret clubs, devised theatre projects, and courses at *Carnesky's Finishing School*, with a view to ultimately performing in a new touring production. The artists invited to take part in the work as practitioners all shared political, aesthetic and collaborative sensibilities.

Amongst the group gathered were women who menstruate, women who were not born as women and do not menstruate, women who planned on having children and women who did not want to have children. Through performing regular devised live art cabaret rituals on themes of human cyclical renewal and by gathering findings from the monthly workshop exercises, my research looked for any significant changes or similarities in our bodily cycles, whether our menstrual cycles changed or synchronised, our energy levels followed a cyclical pattern, our dreams had any similarities or memorable images, and whether we noticed any significant changes in our mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. I encouraged the participants to explore and research their own perspectives on menstrual rituals through a series of workshop experiments and questions and we worked together in the creation that would be refined into film and stage material.

There was no essentialist agenda to prove any idea of the 'naturalness' of women or of the menstrual cycle and the group was not exclusively made

up of cis gendered women with regular cycles. The work was to use the symbol of menstruation as the starting point for creating performance from which to branch out, explore and experiment with, devising techniques, collective action, cultural and social discussion and understanding as an intersectional queer feminist troupe working with notions of cyclicity.

The structure created for the devising process of the performance work embodied and was inspired by menstrual synchronicity research and Knight's propositions of communal menstrual action. Instead of measuring the scientific outcomes of women living together in menstrual synchronicity, or as a political act of joint strike, the research asks what the cultural impact of women performing regular menstrual rituals might be. It looks at what would happen if we took a typical theatre devising process and ran them on lunar phases, focussing on ideas around menstrual and ovulation rituals, constructing the devising exercises to create new menstrual themed performance material.

The idea of menstrual synchronicity, whether it is something that can be proved through scientific research or is a myth that has infiltrated popular new age notions in feminism, is something that the project plays with as a theatrical conceit in the creation and devising of the piece of performance and of the practice as research framework. The workshops combined multiple perspectives and approaches to creating and researching practice, from the artists' personal menstrual experiences, live art and new cabaret approaches for creating new menstrual performance material. These involved discussion, improvisation, ritual enactment, spell devising, meditation, dance and prop and costume making. In revealing the findings from the three-month experiment through public performance, we would contribute to the lineage of feminist menstrual art and activism and highlight current feminist issues on menstruation through our personal journeys and the performance itself at various stages of the project's development. The public reactions to it would operate as a growing potential source of further research and dissemination opportunities leading eventually to the formation of the Menstronauts. The responses of

the audience and critics and my success in encouraging the formation of an activist group were also my means of measuring the success of the experiment, rather than the gathering of any biological data that measured the bodies' responses and the blood of the menstrual cycle in relation to performing the rituals.

The final performance work devised from the outcomes of this experiment was to be revealed in a performative lecture/devised experimental theatre show that would seek to question traditional western medicalized perceptions of menstruation and delve into forgotten, overlooked and taboo cultural representations and experiences. Using the performative lecture style and 'scientific' questionnaires in the workshops became ways of incorporating academic styles and procedures into the mix of practice and performance I developed. I wanted the work to reflect the authenticity and seriousness of the research and at the same time work with comedy and popular cabaret tropes to reach an audience beyond UK Live Art contexts.

The cast I approached embodied this crossover with entertainment culture. Veronica Thompson, known as the cabaret artist Fancy Chance, works with cross genre practices including the rare circus skill of hair hanging, is a heavily tattooed feminist comedy cabaret singer and burlesque/drag performer and writes autoethnographic one woman shows. She had worked with me previously on *Carnesky's Ghost Train* and it was watching her solo show 'Flights of Fancy' at the Soho Theatre as a work in progress in rehearsal in 2015, which drew on her personal experiences as a Korean refugee adopted into an American family, that led me to ask her if she wanted to get involved in the project. We discussed how she would be interested to reflect on not wanting to be a biological mother and her relationship to her menstrual cycles as a biological function. As a woman of colour who had been adopted as a child into a white family, she wanted to explore the connection between her menstrual cycle and her sense of biological belonging and how her relationship to birth control created a disconnect for her, yet protected her from unwanted pregnancy.

I approached Rhyannon Styles, who had been a Carnesky company member since 2008 performing in *Carnesky's Ghost Train* and *Carnesky's Tarot Drome*. Styles started her career as a performer when she was still identifying as Ryan and trained in mime and clown at the Ecole Philippe Gaulier in Paris. After her transition she became a writer and was *Elle Magazine's* first trans columnist and wrote a memoir 'The New Girl' that was published in July 2017. Styles had been with the company on two major projects pre transition and it felt like an obvious development for us to continue collaborating. Because of the subject of menstruation and her transition she offered an important voice in the work touching on significant current debates around gender and identity.

H Plewis has also worked as a performer and choreographer with Carnesky Productions since 2008. She is an associate artist with Duckie, collaborating with the collective for over a decade. An all-round live artist specialising in dance, Plewis had worked across many contexts. During the experiment and after three months of practicing menstrual rituals, Plewis conceived. Plewis went into labour on International Woman's day 2016 whilst the rest of the company were on stage performing a work in progress at UCL as part of a RAG event. This led in the following performances to the addition of the research findings graph comic scene in the work claiming the birth of her daughter Sula as a research outcome. In following tours of the work she also introduced and brought Sula to the stage and this became a pivotal moment in the performance.

Nao Nagai is a London based Japanese artist who immigrated to the UK at the age of 15. She has worked with postmodern pop performance pranksters Frank Chickens. She trained as a lighting designer and has worked in diverse genres including cabaret and live art, touring nationally and internationally. She came on board the project firstly as production manager and lighting designer but as someone who was also a performer, she became an active member of the workshops and developed work that became part of the performance in the live staging.

Nagai wanted to work with myths from her Japanese childhood that connected to the snake symbolism in the research I presented.

MisSa Blue had been working on the circus/sideshow and burlesque circuits since 2011. She came to *Carnesky's Finishing School*, a course I ran at the Bethnal Green Working Men's Club in devising performance, to evolve her existing skills. Impressed with her openness to experiment, interest in both cabaret and live art, and her cabaret skill set of dangerous stunts, I asked her to join the team which was a departure from her regular work in the global burlesque and cabaret circuits. Blue had recently experienced a major sword swallowing accident on stage and wanted to explore how her body's cycles affected her dangerous stage skills.

### **Bloody Devising Processes**

Typically, the devising processes I have led in my career as an artistic director have involved curating groups of practitioners to collaborate on a theme using discussion, improvisation, image making, and devising exercises and performances for the duration of a week. The group would then process the workshop and meet up again a month later for a longer rehearsal period to fix and define the final performance when designers from the areas of lighting and sound, costume, set and props would join the team. *DCIBW* reworked this process to fit into a schedule of the workshops meeting twice a month, every new dark moon for a night and a day and every full moon for a shared evening session.

Playing with the idea of collecting scientific data on menstrual synchronicity as a theatrical trope became a theme to inform the workshops, and an idea to subvert and therefore de-medicalize our menstrual cycles. Following guidance regarding the use of questionnaires in measuring and analyzing psychological data on menstruation from psychologist Professor Olga Van Den Akker of Middlesex University, the participants were asked to measure changes in their menstrual cycles and record the data at certain times on forms and graphs. These were

analysed by the group's opening discussion on memories, emotional and physical relationships to their menstrual cycles based on individual experiences, patterns and behaviours. This was explored alongside material on mythology, art and religious and cultural rituals around menstruation. The participants were also asked to sleep with their curtains open during the duration of the experiment and experience natural moonlight, following Knight's theory that exposure to moonlight is a possible factor affecting menstrual cycles.

The creation of focused menstrual ritual actions and performances was the central aim and objective of the workshops, to establish and create our own menstrual ritual acts that could be repeated and developed and shared, as a form of group ritual and personal catharsis, as stage performance material and as public political performative actions. The aim was to see how the process and then the performances changed the lived experience and psychological attitudes the artists had to their cycles and to see if any form of synchronicity occurred. Moreover, an objective of the research was to create performance material that emotionally affected audiences and created new debates and discussion around the cultural importance of menstruation. I adapted the moon phase charting calendar used by the Red Tent movement and Van Den Akker's menstrual psychological profiling forms and distributed copies of these documents to the group. We also used diaries recording dreams and bodily changes over the duration of a monthly cycle and I documented the devising of the performance at specific lunar and light phased times, twice a month for three months, the time of a pregnancy trimester.

We met on the evenings of full moon and daytime and onset of the new (dark) moons and stay overnight in the same house. We drew on the anthropological research on traditional hunter gather cultures of Knight and Power that suggested that it worked in women's favour culturally if synchronicity of ovulation occurred on the full moons, a time for fire, celebration and meat and that women would then encourage the synchronicity of menstruation at the new dark moons. Following on from

the exposure to the monthly cycle of moonlight being a possible cultural and even biological factor in menstrual synchronicity, we followed the idea from Knight that sexual politics, exposure to light and the tides could impact on the menstrual body clock:

If certain populations of protowomen were synchronising consistently not only with one another but also with the moon and the tides, it would not have been because in the localities concerned such environmental rhythms were so powerful as to entrain or enslave women. It would have been because detecting the appropriate cues in order actively to synchronise was in these particular females' sexual-political interests.

(Knight, 1991 254)

We plotted our schedule with access to real fires and for those that ate it local meat on the full moons and observing ritual separation as a group staying near water to create rituals exploring more internal landscapes during the new dark moons.

### **Workshop Flows**

The project was able to secure support in kind from Metal, a unique artist residency house in Southend in Essex and this became the location for our three daytime new moon workshops and overnight stays over the three months. It worked on a number of levels as a location, being next to a large body of water and accessible for everyone from London. Usually artists are invited to stay there for a week to create work away from the stresses of home. We asked if we could have the house on the dates of the dark moon from April to June 2015. Winning the support of arts organizations in order to create, finance and disseminate challenging work requires grass roots support in the form of space and time and Metal's contribution to the project came at a crucial point to its development. The project was explained in depth during an extensive meeting with Stephanie Stevenson, a programmer at Metal. After agreements on

boundaries and health and safety concerns were met, the company was given exclusive use, with no other staff in the building and the keys and the codes to the alarm. Chalkwell House was, with possibly some trepidation, handed over to the Menstruants.

The workshops were to be communally based shared experiences for everyone in the group, working on the creative performative aspects in a mode that induced a reflective and focussed zone outside of the grind of everyday routines, so we decided not to document the majority of the workshop time until we had developed performance pieces to show each other. We agreed as a group to switch off our phones for the duration of each new moon workshop. We took part in a group meditation in the mornings before breakfast and in the evenings. We agreed to be silent from the first meditation before the evening meal throughout the meal and the night, through morning meditation and breakfast and resume talking at the commence of the creative workshop. This gave the workshops a feeling of a retreat, with the shared experience of communal silence unifying rather than disuniting the group.

In the first workshop we utilised a large suitcase of all the red props and costumes from the company storage collected over twenty years. Red stilettos from *Jewess Tattooes*, red velvet costumes from *Carnesky's Ghost Train*, red cheerleader pompoms from the cabaret school. Collaborators were asked to bring red costumes, personal artefacts and props. The group was introduced to ideas from the RAG research of the importance of menstrual rituals in traditional and early human cultures. Different members of the group connected to various aspects of my research which I offered in discussions and a collection of books I brought to the workshops, sharing as much of the findings as possible, encouraging the artists on their own paths of enquiry.

What we came to discover through the practice as research process was strong common shared experience that many of the group had with either having lost their mothers at an early age or coming from a background of



adoption. Of the seven of us only three of us were raised by our biological mothers who were still alive.

### **Workshop One – The Red Round Table**

The artists were issued with a questionnaire each in advance of the first workshop. We began the first day of the first workshop in a group discussion of our experiences of menstruation and going through our responses to the questionnaire.

Certain unforeseen issues surfaced when the group sat together round the table and entered into the discussion. With menstruation experienced by many of us as a hushed and unspoken subject, dialogues about menstruation usually happen in cis gendered 'women only' private spaces. Certainly, for the majority of the participants it was kept away from fathers and brothers, and only spoken about in code. We found we were taught early on to hide all visible signs of menstruation, never to express pain, with the shame of the discomfort, the smell, the fluid itself, the possibility of the revelation of blood seeping out through clothes onto furniture. For the women round the table mostly growing up in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s a recurrent memory of the social attitude to menstruating girls was indeed one of shame and denying pain.

Admitting menstrual pain was shared as an experience by the majority as an admittance of weakness, a lack of strong enough will, and thought of as attention seeking. The experience of pain differed to extremes amongst the women. For some it had been extreme, debilitating and it seemed that menstrual shame and hiding accompanied extreme pain in the group's experiences. For others this was the first time they had drawn focus to their cycle, having been raised to see it as unimportant and something to control.

The question became apparent that cultural menstrual shame and repulsion was so deeply entrenched in some of the cis gendered women

participants that they felt some unease and embarrassment to talk about their experiences in front of Styles, a transgender woman. Would this push Styles out of the group if she was unable to relate to these experiences? How would Styles experience and embody such a direct and frank talk about menstruation – a dialogue that begins in our adolescence in school toilets and dressing rooms?

There was a concern of self-censorship amongst the group when talking about the visceral reality of menstrual blood and pain with someone who has not had a personal experience of it, would the cultural taboo censor the personal ability to speak out about menstruation? Styles eased any sense of needing to self-censor by listening and speaking frankly and honestly about her own complexities of understanding her own womanhood. It had been agreed with all the participants in advance that we wanted to explore the territory of trans identity and menstruation. Whilst trans men such as Alex Bertie have written about their experiences of menstruation (2017), Rhyannon found it hard to identify research about the absence of menstruation as a trans woman. In Susan Stryker's essay *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix – Performing Transgender Rage* she includes poetry and personal reflections:

Everything's fucked up beyond all recognition. This hurts too much to go on. I came as close today as I'll ever come to giving birth—literally. My body can't do that; I can't even bleed without a wound, and yet I claim to be a woman. How? Why have I always felt that way? I'm such a goddamned freak. I can never be a woman like other women, but I could never be a man. Maybe there really is no place for me in all creation. I'm so tired of this ceaseless movement. I do war with nature. I am alienated from Being. I'm a self-mutilated deformity, a pervert, a mutant, trapped in monstrous flesh. God, I never wanted to be trapped again. I've destroyed myself. I'm falling into darkness I am falling apart. (Stryker, 2001,91)

Rhyannon set out, inspired by writers like Stryker, to explore what it meant to be part of a menstrual collective and not bleed. We looked at research on transgender identity in a wider ecofeminist landscape and notions of the generative as opposed to the reproductive which resonate with Haraway's slogan, *Make Kin Not Babies*. In Karen Barad's response to Stryker's essay she introduces the concept of the 'anarchic womb' and its own alternative fecundity:

Toward the end of the piece, Stryker embraces the fecundity of the "chaos and blackness"—the "anarchic womb"—as the matrix for generative non heterosexual-reproductive birthing, "for we have done the hard work of constituting ourselves on our own terms, against the natural order. Though we forgo the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth."

(Barad 2015,393)

Rhyannon's inclusion in the group opened the debate and the research and impacted on the show and my research. In reading Stryker and Barad's work, as a cis gendered woman who has not had children, I found a great identification with notions of the anarchic womb and the generative as opposed to the reproductive body. This inspired me to look at how Gaia Theory might inform our work and if a queer reading of the generative was possible, which I go on to explore in Chapter 4.

The secondary research I presented to the group informed the devising process, instilling symbolism including water, snakes, dragons and rabbits in connection with menstruation, rebirth and fertility through antiquity. The artists were asked to research their own choice of myths, fairy tales, stories and images that could be related to and bring them to the next month's workshop and they were given a version of the Red Tent Movement's *Moon Cycle Chart* and asked to fill in the chart, noting for the three months when their menstrual cycles occurred in the lunar calendar.

They were asked to write down their dreams on waking from the first mornings of the new dark moon for the three months when we were together. If they menstruated they were asked to write down their dreams on the first morning of menstruation, exploring the notion that menstruation affects dreams and that they become more vivid when bleeding, an idea explored by Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove:

So the woman who is developing techniques of reverie or dream-recall of approaching her unknown country in her periods, must not be surprised if she encounters, as in fairy tales, speaking animals, or a man with a beast's head whom it is her task to turn into a man, as in the tale of Beauty and the Beast.

(Shuttle and Redgrove 1978,117)

## **Workshop Two – Menstrual Ritual Performance Making**

In this next month the focus was for the performers to bring in research that furthered their idea from the first workshop. The performers were asked to bring red objects with them that had personal memories and meanings as well as favourite red pieces of clothing. The focus was on creating images that explored the notion of rebirth, temporary death, transformation and shedding. We began with an exercise in the creation of tableaux vivant, a series of three iconic images that developed and led from one to the other and could be repeated in a cyclical loop. It was here that H found the mother/maid /crone tableaux and Styles found the cheerleader image shedding white balloons. H focussed on the works of Anna Fedele on the menstrual rituals of the contemporary Mary Magdalene cults of Europe who

emphasised the need to consecrate matter and reclaim a deep connection with Mother Earth. They saw the menstrual cycle as a key element in the process of reversing Christianity's systematic devaluation of the body, particularly the female body.

(Fedele 2013, 145)

H had also started to research the association of the rabbit in the moon myth connected to notions of rebirth and was creating a ritual that utilised both of these lines of enquiry as visual and thematic content for her piece. Nao worked with creating a menstrual interpretation of the snake headed figure, inspired by the Japanese mythical figure of the Yokai from Michal Dylan Fosters work (2015). Missa was interested by the mythical Greek figure Baubo, with a face painted on her womb, interpreted as a bawdy representative of female power by Winifred Milius Lubell (2009). Fancy started by looking at Judy Grahn's work on menstruation in relation to cosmetics and red lipstick, decoration and dressing in her theories of ritual origins:

All the earliest cosmetics-menstrual blood, slashed blood, and tattoos of blue or red lines suggestive of blood on the face-must have enabled women to free themselves from some of the severest world forming taboos.

(Grahn 1993,78)

In the 2018 tour Chance created a further monologue exploring her relationship to birth control as a woman who neither wanted to be a biological mother nor wanted to control her cycle from chemical birth control, looking at Ellen Peck's popular 1972 book *The Baby Trap* as a starting point.

### **Workshop Three – Menstrual Documentation**

For the final weekend in the experiment we were joined by documentary photographer Sarah Ainslie to perform and capture more rituals and images that had been devised over the three months through the workshops, the collections of dream images, the group sharings around emotions and lived experiences as well as the collections of research images, stories, objects and costumes. We were all present at each other's performances and prepared them with costume and props and

some choreographic planning. It was both a preparation for a film and photography shoot and a time to create the ritual environment. Selected footage of the rituals are featured in the final performance which can be seen in the DVD documentation attached to this thesis.

I entered into the workshops hoping these processes would result in the devising of strong material which could be developed for a performance project. Moreover, I hoped that the performance material would convey the journey of proposing a new methodology for the creation of menstrual rituals that we had devised. None of us knew whether the workshops and the approaches taken to merge theoretical approaches with the PaR framework would be a successful route to finding good performance material that also worked on a critical, academic level. By the end of the process it was clear there was a wealth of material we had not expected to find. A structure for performance emerged that showcased the process itself, with autoethnographic reflections on creating images and actions which also drew on the theoretical research I had shared with the group. Indeed, the group PaR became the proposition for a narrative structure of the live performance work itself. And as well as revealing these *Menstruant* workshop findings, the finished show of *DCIBW* would draw on my research in art, anthropology and activism and the group members' skills and experience in live art and cabaret to create a Showwomanly camp activist queer menstrual aesthetic of its own.

## Chapter Four

### Dr Carnesky, The Menstruants and Menstronauts

The performance work that evolved from the PaR process resulted in a performative lecture led by my character, Dr Carnesky, which I developed from aspects of my cabaret persona created in clubs and live performances throughout my performing career and from aesthetic references drawn from my secondary research on menstruation in culture. Dr Carnesky is a camp showwoman, a magicienne with sleight of hand tricks, a sideshow performer posing as a doctor.

Yet she is also an academic lecturer and an eccentric theatrical anthropologist who at once upholds and defiles the institution. Drawing on representations of Aunt Flo in menstrual advertising, the popular euphemism for getting your period, the character is both an educational and a formal Mistress of Ceremonies, crossing into moments of hysteria and horror.

The Showwoman character is at once a representation of a supposed medical authority figure and of an illegitimate entertainer dealing in shock, taboo and spectacle. She is the anthropologist who presents evidence of magic in menstrual practices in traditional human cultures and a feminist performance artist that parodies the hegemonic role of the Western anthropologist analyzing indigenous practices. As in queer cabaret practices where radical drag artists like David Hoyle and Christeene mimic and deconstruct contemporary women entertainer characters, my persona was a form of drag but created as a cis women, a drag of my own identity mixed with a punk-cabaret détournement of the archetypal Aunt Flo.



Marisa Carnesky in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, London Royal Vauxhall Tavern 2015 Sarah Ainslee

In playing with traditions of the ethnographic show, the politics of cultural appropriation and perceptions of traditional anthropology, the stage character of Dr Carnesky undermines sideshow traditions in England in the nineteenth century that included the exhibition and exploitation of women of colour. These shows were personified by women like Sarah Baartman, shown as 'Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus' (1810-1811), who was exhibited by two showmen, Hendrik Cesars, a free man of colour and William Dunlop, an English doctor:

The Hottentot was produced like a wild beast, and ordered to move backwards and forwards, and come out and go in her cage, more like a bear than a human being....

(Lindfors in Thompson, 1996, 208)

The cruelty and exploitation shown to her during live shows was taken up in court by members of the African Institution, although dismissed as Baartman testified she had consented to being exhibited. The work subverted archetypes of western showmen like Cesars and Dunlop in creating the notion of the Showwoman as a opposite to this, a signifier of spectacular activism and collaboration, not exploitation, exemplified by the conceit at the beginning of the show where Dr Carnesky introduces the geographical origin of her live 'exhibits':



Please welcome to the stage the extraordinary Fancy Chance who joins us all the way from the exotic Dalston Kingsland!

(Carnesky 2016,3)

As the show progresses, we begin to reveal that the culturally diverse and physically different cast were all from the east end of London and were a commune of menstrual Showwoman co-conspirators, and that Dr Carnesky is neither an exploitative showman or colonial anthropologist.

She presents her lecture with slides and films on the magic of menstruation and asks the audience to consider her evidence and to question the very origins of magic from the very opening of the show 'What if I told you the origins of all magic, of all ritual, since the beginning of time was menstrual, would you believe me?' (Carnesky 2015,1). She introduces the unique performance experiment in synchronicity that she and the other Menstruant participants took part in and presents them performing their devised rituals live. Questions are posed to the audience and evidence given, the performance swaying between the fictional, the factual and the personal, working with abject images, horror and variety stage tropes.



Marisa Carnesky in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, cabaret excerpt, Paris ,Cirque Electrique 2015 Zoe Forget

Dr Carnesky goes through a transformation in the show, where the camp cabaret persona gives way to a performance of a more confessional live art monologue that uses life story and abject imagery to convey an emotional and thematic shift, creating an audible reaction from the audience that suggests an emotional response, a reaction identified in autoethnographic live art performance practices by Freeman, where ‘...the telling of stories ... are so laden with emotive detail that they elicit a similar emotional reaction in the reader’ (Freeman 2015, 2)

It is the moment where I reveal something personal about my connection to menstruation, something usually culturally hidden and connected to shame and trauma. I speak about the number of recurrent miscarriages I experienced and the questions it brought up for me as a cis woman who was not able to have a biological child. I delivered the words in a factual, calm voice, with a film projected on the screen behind me showing my naked heavily tattooed body bathing in a bath full of theatrical blood in a nineteenth century clinical setting, which was actually filmed in a disused Victorian morgue. As the film played I spoke in direct address to the audience:

From the two of us that became pregnant immediately after 3 months of dark moon rituals the miscarriage was mine. I had been trying for over a year since my previous miscarriage when I conceived. I have had four miscarriages in total and I have not had a child. In the process of having miscarriages over the last 7 years I came to dread getting my period. Each month my menstrual cycle seemed to be a painful and bloody reminder of not conceiving, almost like a mini miscarriage. The most upsetting miscarriage I had of all of them was what is called a silent miscarriage when I was three months pregnant which means my baby died inside me. I was induced to pass the foetus overnight in hospital and I went through a labour. When it came out my foetus looked like a little fish flung out of its bowl. It was very upsetting for a long time. I sought

a different strategy to cope, to see my monthly blood in a different way and decided to try to find a deeper cultural and creative understanding of the role of menstruation. What art, what literature can we create when menstruating, what is its creative power and potential? And moreover what is its political power...? If we all synchronised could we bring down the government? What is menstruation's purpose- without a baby- is its power then, the power of the witch, the power of magic, of making change through creativity? So what I discovered, what we discovered, I hope you'll agree is truly truly incredible.

(Carnesky 2018,10)

In creating the piece and developing it over the touring life of the work I was asking through the experience of my performance practice how autoethnography driven by traumatic life events, transcends the personal and becomes strong stage material. Performing the work over seventy times my own emotion shifted and rather than being a retelling of life events that led me to a painful emotional state, I made a work that could identify experiences of miscarriage addressing the taboo, shame and sense of loss, naming what I had experienced as hidden in the culture when I had sought art that could communicate my trauma. In doing so I delivered a cathartic message that could be shared with audiences. Dorothy Allison talks about the complexity of writing and teaching about trauma from her perspective as a rape survivor:

And we can talk about how to craft the story, but we're squatting on a razor. We're walking between narrative and experience and we're in the room with people who need us, need us to be fully adult, grown up, helpful, useful, useful in big, complicated, layered, textured ways.

(Allison In Casper and Wertheimer, 2016,249)

The key was to move to a place where I was no longer traumatized without dissolving the important impact these events had on my life, to

bring the horror to the stage every night yet be able to move past my initial tears on retelling the experience. My intention was that the show would then become a stage to perform a ritual enactment of telling this story, which in essence, through becoming my own catharsis, then became catharsis for others, identifying the unspoken loss of miscarriage, naming the unnamed pain. As Allison rightly identifies, this is not a comfortable position to put yourself in:

The secret of this work is that you must accustom yourself to discomfort. And you have to redefine what that means. You have to be in the room with horror.

(Allison In Casper and Wertheimer, 2016,249)

I chose to tread a fine line on stage talking about painful personal experiences about miscarriage. Yet from a scene which I was unsure of when it was written, fearing it was too personal, the realisation of performing the work live with audiences was that in revealing the experience through live monologue and film was one of the moments that connected most with the audience on an emotional level, as it connected most with my original reason and need to create the work.

### **The Menstruants**

The performing artists' group in the project that became known as the Menstruants wrote down their research journeys from the workshops at Metal through to performing in the production in various locations and stages. Because of the qualitative approach to research the results or outcomes live in the execution of the devised performance rituals and in the success of how the many strands of research inhabit and are implicit in the performance work. The accounts they wrote of their journeys inform material in this chapter and can be read in full in Appendix 2. I asked *the Menstruants* to reflect on their experiences from the work and answer a series of questions about how the project affected them:

- 1) What was your relationship to your menstrual cycle like before joining the project?
- 2) What were your thoughts on joining the show?
- 3) What was your experience of the process?
- 4) What is your experience and relationship to the menstrual cycle?
- 5) What are your thoughts on joining the show- your fears, excitement and motivations?
- 6) What is your experience of the performing?
- 7) Did you have any significant dreams whilst doing the workshops at Metal that have influenced your practice in the project or your relationship to your menstrual cycle?

From these questions insights to different aspects of the PaR process and debates raised by the project emerged in a physical journey from workshop to stage.



Nao Nagai, H Plewis and Amy Ridler at  
*Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman* workshop, Southend 2015 Sarah Ainslee

H Plewis chose to create her workshop ritual in the gardens by a stream outside the house. She had collected her menstrual blood each month during the experiment and frozen it. She had explored the menstrual connection in the mythology of rabbits and hares with the moon as a symbol of fertility, sensuality, rebirth and resurrection. For her ritual she created a red fruit jelly moulded in the shape of a rabbit and put some of the menstrual blood inside it that she had collected and stored in her

freezer. She had the group sit in a circle which she stood in the centre of. She placed objects around the outer edge in front of where we sat. Plewis created rituals that explored her relationship to motherhood and the loss of her mother as a child, cultural identity and girls' bodily shame around menstruation:

Looking back, I can understand that my mother dying at aged nine will have directly affected my attitude to my changing body. There was no matriarch to show me the way or to celebrate my entry into 'womanhood' and as a result I felt lonely and unsure of myself. This confusion led to a deep shame that has persisted into my adult life, manifesting itself in a variety of ways.

(Plewis interview 2017)

Shame around menstruation surfaced in many conversations in the group: shame of admitting to menstruating, shame around bleeding, fear of leaking and the social disgrace of menstrual blood showing on clothes. Shame presents itself as a dominant emotion in the menstrual experience as identified by Luna Dolezal:

Menstruation, in particular, is a source of anxiety. The 'disgrace' of menstruation, and subsequent interiorization of the female body, is embedded within cultural and religious structures which designate menstruation as impure or unclean and exclude women from certain rituals or activities while they are bleeding.

(Dolezal 2015,106)

Dolezal identifies that enabling social change and the subversion of experience of female body shame is difficult without a collective women's movement to counteract a narcissistic consumer-orientated culture which perpetuates social isolation. I suggest that the reinventing of menstrual rituals, created from personal experience within a collective structure can have a role in unifying and subverting female body shame. Plewis

exemplifies this in her performance piece, exploring performative language around bodily shame, working choreographically with images of concealment and hiding:

I asked myself if my menstrual shame was trans-generational. Had my mother held on to bodily shame from her lapsed Catholic past? A hooded Mary conceals her shame, the Mary who is 'all our mothers'. A Mary for our modern secular times - a neon tartan Mary who lifts up her skirt to cover her head only to reveal her arse instead. Tartan linking to my Gallic /Irish heritage, my Scottish family.

(Plewis interview 2017)



Plewis in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, London Soho Theatre 2016 Sarah Ainslee

In her final performance Plewis embodied and challenged her shame performatively holding her taboo blood in her hands, transforming between images of maiden, mother and crone, using her grandmother's rocking chair onstage and manipulating her tartan fabric. The jelly rabbit, a quivering translucent red symbol, both endearing and arresting, trod a line of the uncanny and the abject, being both emotive and taboo:

So I mixed it with gelatin and set it in the shape of a rabbit. This way I could touch it, hold it, arrest it and capture it. Destroy it and reform it

with every performance. I could take control of it and with it my past shame. That was the ritual that became my act – the collecting of my blood, the freezing it and thawing it and molding it. Then, in a cheeky hooded tartan costume, in a dim lit magical glade, I cradle it and carry it and dance with it and smash it. On a rocking chair, site of maternal magic I rock my baby into being.

(Plewis interview 2017)

Rhyannon Styles evolved a cheerleader, a covered face clown like image, drawing on her training and work as a mime artist. She went to the beach to perform her piece where she had blown up a number of white balloons. At first Styles moved across the sand with the balloons with the red slash tinsel fringe on her costume billowing in the wind. She moved in the sand on her belly burying white balloons reminiscent of a turtle, and wore red high heels which kept sinking in the sand, both clown-like and sexual, with a sense of the ridiculous, yet the way Styles moved made her presence one of pathos not comedy:

The crux of my idea was to shed the final layer of Styles' previous identity, as the performer called Ryan, and bury the props what he was known for, white balloons, in the sand. I wanted to release Ryan and let go of him on the beach and besides the river to allow the currents and shifting sand to release him.

(Styles interview 2017)



Rhyannon Styles in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, London Soho Theatre 2016 Sarah Ainsle



We stood around Styles as a group unaware of what she would do next. She ran fast towards the sea, losing her shoes, as she ran she began to make loud deep screams and noises, and we knew she had gone beyond a state of performing for us and into a cathartic action and experience. She let out deep screams that could be heard across the beach until she fell down, exhausted. Styles' evolving stage performance combined the film footage of the ritual that had taken place with a direct address monologue to the audience on what menstruation had come to mean to her through the process of the project, her own reflections on her gender identity and her own bodily connection with ecological cycles:

Throughout this process of research, I discovered that whilst I don't have a menstrual cycle I do experience cycles in relation to the moon. During the three-month research period I recorded my moods, energies and emotions using a diary and discovered similar patterns recurring over the time period. In relation to the cycle of the moon - with the dark moon and full moon being obvious signifiers - my moods and emotions became synchronised. I noticed that I would feel the fatigue around every full moon and more energetic around every dark moon - give or take some days. Acknowledging this lead me to believe that although my 'sex' is male, I still experience a cycle in relation to the universe.

(Styles interview 2017)

Styles also took part in a sawing in half routine where, after a series of workshops, the politics of her nudity became central to how the piece would work conceptually and politically:

It was important for me to use nudity within my performance to reinforce the importance of a transgender woman within this discussion. By allowing audiences view of my naked self I wanted to challenge pre-existing notions around the definition of woman,

and contribute to the show with themes of transformation, rebirth and renewal using the body I have.

(Styles interview 2017)

Nao Nagai brought remains of her late mother's umbilical cord which she had kept all her life. She performed in the rose gardens outside the house. She dressed in a traditional kimono and created a dance structure that the entire group took part in, holding and weaving a large length of red fabric around and in between each of us. She put on full white face make up and then she climbed a tree and cried in the tree as we stayed at the bottom of it. After the ritual Nagai said she had been unable to cry as an adult and had wanted to find a way to tap into this emotional state:

When we started to talk and share stories and research of our menstruation on the dark moon and new moon, I became more involved in the group and the subject. I joined every discussion, took part in workshops and participated in creating performance rituals where I created a short cabaret piece [the Long Neck Woman act] and my performance ritual (I climbed up a tree and made myself cry).

(Nagai interview 2017)

Nagai's performance piece which became her stage show drew on the Japanese mythical figure of the Yokai which she interpreted as a shape shifting menstrual figure. She created an extendable head which projected out of a kimono and hid her real head- a serpentine, surreal and comedic act. Nagai had a red ball hidden in her mouth and after the fake head had greeted the audience, giraffe like, she pushed her face through the costume and the red ball out of her mouth. She had a large piece of red fabric rigged above her head and finished the act by wrapping herself in it. Nagai's piece and work within the project in the dual role of lighting designer and production manager drew her closer to the show and the group:

We are individual women with different values, different desires, yet through sharing the story, ritual and performances, we connected using menstruation as a vehicle to carry us through our personal journeys in a current social climate. I believed (and still do) this process empowered subversive movement for the feminism in our time in both personal and collective sense.

(Nagai interview 2017)



Nao Nagai in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, London Soho Theatre 2016 Sarah Ainslee

Missa Blue explored a variety of rituals, references and images during the workshop, including the image of the Greek goddess *Baubo* and the idea of an image of a face on the stomach. Dressed in red veils and underwear she ran in the sea and then knelt to let the water soak her and her veil, repeating these actions until she felt depleted. Indoors she constructed a ritual performance act with piercing needles topped with beads with an eye design, exploring her idea of an image made into a ritual where eyes pierce the womb. This work drew on practices of Blue's body modification at Fetish Clubs like the Torture Garden in London. This was a very strong image where blood drawn from the skin of her stomach surfaced and was tried out at a work in progress show at the National Theatre Studio. At the

time Blue was training as a sword swallower and she wanted to bring this into the show, so discussions began about what a menstrual sword swallowing act would be. She reflected on a sword swallowing accident she experienced and this informed the piece she would then devise:

For a long time I could not imagine how to bring this research onto the stage. Maybe because - as I said – I never had big issues with my period and ignored that others have. I knew it was important to talk about it but had no personal connection to it. Because I never wanted children my cycle was pointless to me. So I felt for a long time really empty in terms of my own part in the show. This was until I had a horrible sword swallowing accident that was so closely connected to my menstrual cycle. I finally understood how much my body was changing every month and what sort of impact this had on my work. After the accident I finally found material to talk about and could create an act connected to my cycle. This made me finally grow a real connection to the show.

(Blue interview 2017)



Missa Blue in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, Edinburgh Pleasance 2016 Rod Penn

After Blue's sword swallowing accident that left her hospitalized she had to decide whether to carry on with honing the skill or giving it up. After much discussion with other practitioners in the field she decided to continue and develop her skill. She was told by other international women sword swallows including Lucky Hell, working at the time as a headline act at the Lido in Paris, that it is commonly thought that the oesophagus mirrors the womb and swells during the menses, making female sword swallows more at risk of accidents when they are menstruating. Blue's accident had taken place on the first day of her period. She went on to devise a piece using thirty swords which we commissioned for the work, with the length of the swords correlated to the days of the cycle so she could use smaller swords when menstruating.



Fancy Chance in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, London Soho Theatre 2016 Sarah Ainslee

Fancy Chance brought her red satin wedding dress from her previous marriage, with a larger blue dress which she put over it. It was a windy and chilly day in May but Chance wanted to submerge herself in the water. Southend is on the Thames Estuary and the beach outside of Metal House was teeming with oysters. Fancy walked barefoot out to the estuary over the shingle and oyster shells and submerged herself in the icy water. She took off the blue dress whilst under the water and remerged in her red wedding dress soaking wet:

I also liked the idea of the ritual of baptism and how one comes from the water a changed/transformed soul. By submerging myself in water under my own volition to acknowledge my menstrual cycle, the transformation comes from my female body rather than some celestial man spirit. Shedding the blue dress under the water to emerge in a red dress was almost a purely aesthetic choice for metaphor's sake but because the water was so cold and my feet sore from walking over the rocks for so long, it ended up being a rite of performance development as a result.

(Chance interview 2017)

In Fancy Chance's re-enactment of her menstrual ritual as a performance piece at the beginning of the show, a film of her walking into the sea in Southend is played as she walks naked through the audience onto the stage where she pushes a box into the centre and stands on it. She surveys the audience taking in and returning their gaze. She takes a lipstick out of her vagina, reminiscent in shape and context of a tampon, and applies the bright red makeup which becomes more and more exaggerated until she has a clown like red mouth thick with lipstick. She traces a red line of lipstick from her mouth down the front of her body until she reaches her vagina and pushes, tampon like, the closed red lipstick inside her body, gets off her box and pushes it off the stage. With the baptising image of her changing colour in the sea on the film as a backdrop for live performance and the tracing of a red line from mouth to vagina, she embodies herself as a menstrual signifier who at once parodies the taboo of exposing and disappearing things from the vagina as a performance but as a minimalist performative protest where her body, covered in red lipstick becomes a site of ritual reclamation as opposed to sexual titillation.

### **Collecting the Research**

Whilst the project never set out to be a quantitative study of the possibility of menstrual synchronicity, playing with the idea that we could measure

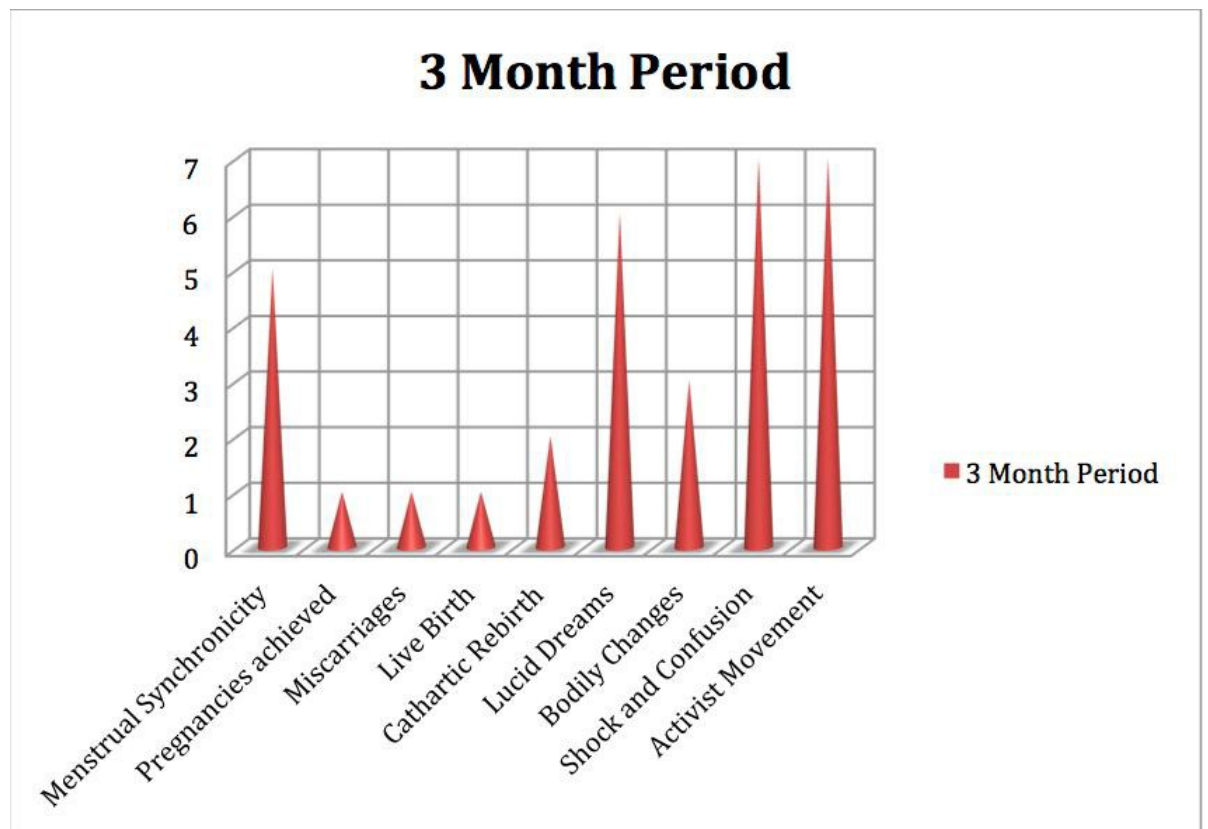
results of possible menstrual synchronicity through devised performance rituals became a narrative device that would steer the live performance. The impossibility of any biological menstrual synchronicity in our diverse queer group of women then informed the conceptual framework, that, if we were proving anything it was something non-essentialist, connected menstruation metaphorically to wider debates in feminism and ecology. The experiences between the participants opened new questions about the reach and effects of performing menstrual rituals as a powerful tool for creating community, artistic collaboration, the lived experience of the menstrual cycle and cultural identity.

Yet according to the forms that everyone filled in and the dates of menstrual cycles submitted, synchronicity did occur amongst five of the seven Menstruants within the three-month period. The dates submitted by the group showed late and early onsets of the menstrual cycle starting in month two of the research process, suggesting that five of the participants synchronized their menstrual cycle during the project for one or more days. Two of the women who did not menstruate regularly or at all embodied a form of catharsis during their ritual and experienced cyclical patterns of their energy changing during the month. Six of the group experienced vivid dreams during the process with imagery that connected to the research. Two of the group became pregnant directly after the research experiment had finished, missing the next menstrual cycle due. One of the pregnancies resulted in miscarriage, I experienced my 4<sup>th</sup> natural conception at 44 before the research project had ended and sadly miscarried at 7 weeks just after the project had finished.

One of the pregnancies resulted in a live birth; Sula Marjorie Robin Plewis was born ten months after the three-month research project took place. Four of the group experienced extreme bodily changes during and after the process, myself due to a pregnancy and miscarriage, Plewis due to a pregnancy, Styles through her continued transition and Blue through her sword swallowing accident. The also show birthed an activist movement,

the *Menstronauts*, which continues to meet, share information on social media and plan live actions.

This information gathered from the PaR, with the artists' full collaboration, was what I used as material for the script of the performance and led to a scene in the show where I play with the idea of the scientific graph and disseminating the research findings. It reveals the first mention onstage of difficult autoethnographic material in the work such as miscarriage, interspersed with the humorous proposition of the shock experienced by local residents coming across the Menstruants performing unrecognizable menstrual rituals on the landscape of Southend. The numbers represent the number of performers affected by each subject listed along the bottom over the three months of the workshops; the script which accompanies the graph can be found in Appendix 3:





## **National Theatre Studios Workshop December 2015**

All the research to date, including all the Metal scripts, collections of images in development, film material, objects, props and costume possibilities, were brought to the National Theatre Studios for our one week residency where we were granted access to a large rehearsal space and technical support.

It was at this stage that artist Kira O'Reilly joined the process as dramaturg. The time was structured at NTS to have a session with each solo performer, the director/writer (myself) and O'Reilly. There were an additional three sessions with O'Reilly staging the body of the main script as a performative lecture using the specially created quick change dress by Claire Ashley. There was a session with Tom Cassani, a stage magic consultant, a session with Fancy Chance and an aerial rigger to create her hair hanging flying off as well as her sawing in half illusion table. Lighting designer Marty Langthorne led the technical performance day. The workshop's final day brought together all the performers to stage the first version of the full show.

The shared voice of the company of performers in the work shifts from identifying the connections in past and current menstrual research to exploring how this connects to our lived experiences and presenting this for the audience's potential emotional and personal identification with varying aspects of menstrual life experiences:

Autoethnographical and autobiographical performances are ultimately authorised fictions, and all that we can know as authentic is the here and now.

(Freeman 2015, 171)

These performances of the company were delivered in direct address, traversing between cabaret and academic style to reveal and reflect serious emotional and political themes and experiences of the work. The

work stylistically slides between an irreverent nod to 1970s horror film camp aesthetics, inviting the audience to question the validity of 'Dr Carnesky' and her research subjects the Menstruants. The script plays with a metanarrative tension between Dr Carnesky as an academic versus a Showwoman peddling new age myths with her troupe of showgirls, whilst operates as a cross genre feminist performance work with a team of cutting edge Menstruants- live artists who articulate a radical PaR project.

### **Reclaiming the Sawing In Half Routine**

The company had acquired an original 1970s sawing in half illusion bought at the Blackpool Magicians Society. It was agreed that for the scratch of the show at the NTS workshop, we would utilize this illusion and look to work it up into a menstrual metaphor. My research into anthropological studies on traditional human cultural rituals and stories had pointed to the idea of menstruation as a temporary death and rebirth. Our idea became to reclaim the sawing in half routine as a menstrual metaphor of male magicians seeking to control the menstruating female body as a central anchor of the show:

I propose then that the classic Sawing in Half Illusion has appropriated ancient menstrual ritual and when male magicians re-enact this trick they are unknowingly attempting to subjugate and control the menstruating female body.

(Carnesky 2016, 3)



H Plewis, Rhyannon Styles and Marisa Carnesky in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, London Soho Theatre  
2016 Claire Lawrie

Plewis was cast as the magician's assistant based on past cabaret collaborations and Styles offered herself as the assistant to be put in the sawing in half box. This had strong implications for the reading of the act with two cis gendered women cutting in half the trans woman in a show about menstruation. Yet it became clear that the illusion could be reversed to explore the idea of a menstrual ritual as an act of temporary death and rebirth. Instead of cutting Styles in two we would put her back together again, we would make a woman. She would be brought on already cut in half, torso and head in one box and seemingly body from the waist down and legs in the other and put her back together. We would make a woman and give her life through the gift of a magical menstruation. The bloodshed on stage as a result of performing the routine would not be the result of a supposed murder of a woman.

The revelation of the stage blood would be a radical proposition: a celebratory signifier of rebirth, of the powerful cultural symbol that menstrual blood has the potential of being. This would be the very opposite of the tradition of the sawing in half routine as explored in the earlier chapter. It would make a radical departure from reworks such as that of Penn and Teller, becoming a cultural détournement, a reclamation of menstrual rituals and a spectacle of a trans woman's rite of passage through a magical, feminist ritual.



H Plewis and Rhyannon Styles in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman*, London Soho Theatre 2016 Claire Lawrie

Early on the idea for the rework was to feature a strong image of the pelvis and legs of the assistant in the box extending out of one end of the box covered in and dripping pools of theatrical menstrual blood, as a subversion of the exposed cut in half murdered body of the assistant in the Penn and Teller version of the illusion. In meetings with Jonathan Allen, visual artist and member of the *Magic Circle* and Tom Cassani our magic consultant, discussions took place about how to create this illusion without revealing the trick and for the piece to continue to operate as a working illusion and a solution was arrived at which would enable the desired image to be achieved and the illusion's trick to remain intact.

When we first performed the work Styles was dressed in a gold bikini inside the box. After performing the piece as a work in progress at the National Theatre Studios, Duckie at The Royal Vauxhall Tavern and for the Radical Anthropology Group's International Women's Day event at University College London's Archaeology Lecture Hall, Styles decided she wanted to come out of the box naked showing her breasts and her genitals covered in the stage blood (Styles as a preoperative trans woman has a penis and breasts).

The revelation then of the illusion works on a number of levels: we perform a reverse of the sawing in half by bringing the sawn assistant on in two

halves, with one performer playing the role of lead magician and the other as a second assistant to the performer already in the box. The magician and second assistant are both cis gendered women and the first assistant in the box is a transgender woman. This trinity of three women echoes the theme of three witches, the connections of magic and witchcraft having been outlined in the opening lecture.

The two cis gendered women have control over the trans woman's body in a scene that becomes a form of a birth of a newly transformed woman or menstrual rebirth as opposed to a death. This use of the trick subverts its possible roots in misogyny and fear of women's liberation. Finally, the illusion is a pivotal image in the work because of the theory proposed in the lecture that the sawing in half illusion is an unknowing unconscious male appropriation of ancient menstrual ritual, and that menstrual ritual is the origin of all magical practice.



Fancy Chance hair hanging in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Woman* cast, London Soho Theatre 2016 Sarah Ainslee

## **Menstrual Hair Hanging**

Fancy Chance, aka Veronica Thompson, had developed and taught herself the rare skill of hair hanging which she presents in cabaret and theatre shows internationally. Thompson agreed that we could create a final scene with the skill in order to create a menstrual resurrection. In her lying down position a circus rigging piece of equipment – a karabiner - is clicked into the ‘D ring’ she wears in her hair. Her body is pulled up through her hair only and the table beneath is pulled away. The company gathers under her in a circle and she starts to spin around. She rigs bags of theatrical blood into her hair which she pops with her hands so that the blood drips down her body. This is the final image of the performance, suggesting a ritual which has connotations with circus, Christian images of martyrs, indigenous human endurance rituals and rites of passage, and death and rebirth.

## **The Show**

The performance work of DCIBW completed nine tours over three years which comprised of over seventy performances spanning three continents (see Appendix 1). Lyn Gardner, at the time a theatre critic at the Guardian, gave the work a strong four star review:

While it celebrates the female body and its wonders, the show also has an emotional edge heightened around issues of conception and giving birth. This definitely isn't all for laughs, particularly in the way it deals with the pain of repeated miscarriage, when blood is not a symbol of fertility but infertility.

(Lyn Gardner 2016)

The work combined a series of performative strategies that took audiences on unexpected new journeys written directly through and from our PaR journey. The personal testimonies were both serious and emotive and the evidence we presented both rigorous and a spoof of research modes

themselves. The performance drew on aspects of autoethnography, memoir and imagined fictions to combine and intersperse aspects of lived experience into a performative landscape both real and fictional. To conclude, the show reimagined illusions and circus spectacle, bringing disparate voices together into a grand cinematic stage ritual and an image of activist collectivity to leave audiences with a sense of empowerment and a revisioning of the cultural potentialities of the menstrual cycle.

## The Menstronauts



*Menstronauts Action, London 2017*

One of the lines of research throughout the project was the exploration of menstrually inspired activism and how *DCIBW* might contribute to that landscape. The performance activist vein grew as the project developed from the first devising workshops and the group's engagement with performing the devised rituals in public outdoor spaces, through to the call to arms to the audience within the show. The work was shown as a work in progress at the National Theatre Studios and at Duckie in the autumn/winter of 2015. It was at the last work in progress preview that was staged for International Women's Day at the Archaeology Lecture Hall and performed as a special event for the Radical Anthropology Group that a question and answer session after the performance opened up the idea of an activist group.

The menstruants and Dr Camilla Power agreed in response to audience feedback to start an activist group that any woman could join based on the proposition of the show to create menstrual rituals in inclusive intersectional queer groups. The initial idea was that, like the performers in the show, the group would meet on every dark new moon to create and perform ritual actions outdoors on the landscape:

Menstronauts feel that a disregard for the cycles of the human body echoes a disregard for the cycles of the planet and for each other. We seek to reclaim time through respect for the bodily cycles we evolved as humans, and for the original cultural means of counting time -- the waxing and waning of the moon.

(Carnesky and Power *Menstronauts Facebook* 2016)

A small group started to meet, made up mainly of women who were participants of Carnesky's Finishing School, *the DCIBW* cast, audience members from the show and members of the Radical Anthropology Group (RAG). The Menstronauts started to take shape in April 2016.

The Greenwich *Moontime* June 2016 gathering was the first outdoor performance action. We held a meeting at Hyde Park Corner and joined a demonstration in support of Polish feminists against oppressive abortion laws. We performed a parade around the streets of Soho with a giant wolf puppet during the Halloween season which we named *the Menstronauts' Red Riding Hood and the Wolf March* in Autumn 2016. We met on 26<sup>th</sup> Feb 2017 to commemorate the Match Girls strike which we entitled *Women, Blood and the Red Flag*. An action was made on Downing Street on International Women's Day March 8<sup>th</sup> 2017 with London Fourth wave Feminists. These actions were documented by members of the group and by photographers Claire Lawrie and Ruth Bayer. The last meeting to date was held in June 2019, with plans for the autumn brewing.





*Menstronauts Action, London 2017 Claire Lawrie*

The Menstronauts' activism asks of its participants what *DC/BW* asks of its audience: inviting them to reinvent menstrual rituals through new performance practices. These queer feminist acts, whether inside a theatre or on the streets, seek to support women's menstrual rights, harnessing diverse lived experiences to inform their creation.

### **Menstruants and Menstronauts Unite**

The power of devised feminist performance can be measured in the immediate reactions of the live audience which may be positive and celebratory but may also include experiences of shock, discomfort or sadness and in the long-term resonances of how the material operates affects what the audience takes away with them from the work. The work's contribution to culture can also be assessed in the first instance through reviews from critics, post show talks and question and answer sessions and in the way it infiltrates the audience's engagement and connection to its themes and how that might then be played out in their lived experiences. The opportunity for audiences to become part of an ongoing dialogue and performance activist project enables the work to mutate and live on as a culturally active entity that can be experienced by the activists and by spectators on the street. The intention and experiences gained from the show take on new dimensions through the Menstronauts and the practice then extends and develops beyond the touring life of the theatre tours.

## Conclusion

### Menstrual Company Catharsis

Reinventing menstrual rituals through new performance practices involved reframing and reclaiming mythical imagery of women that embodies serpents and cyclicity, temporary death and rebirth, blood and violence through a feminist cabaret punk détournement. It drew on imagery from popular culture, performance histories of stage magic and Showwomanship, from anthropological accounts of menstrual rituals and scientific attempts to measure menstrual synchronicity. Drawing on the life stories of the cast themselves and activist propositions and events the work created new menstrual stories and rituals through multiple modes of performance. As we engaged with attempting to rewrite the menstrual script we attempted to liberate the menstrual taboo from its sterile misogynist prison and rewrite its place in contemporary culture. We re-interpreted myths that have been overlooked, in doing so reinstating menstruation to a more powerful cultural status, in line with the project of feminist analysis that Babbage describes:

...to re-examine the narratives of mythologies sacred and secular, and especially to deconstruct supposedly archetypal images of the feminine to reveal how these – far from being ‘timeless’ entities outside the processes of human development – are reflections of the symbolic order through which cultures are produced.

(Babbage 2011, 22)

My discussions when casting the work with the individual artists and then as a group at the start of the process helped us to devise a clear agenda from the outset; the work would explore the subject through the lens of my secondary research but also through the primary PaR process that we would engage with, drawing on our own life stories. Exploring a topic that is as taboo as menstruation, a subject shrouded in humiliation for centuries and performing confessional monologues about shame, loss and

breaking moulds around identity, exposes the artists in a number of ways and the artists have to decide where their own boundaries lie within the work. Very few performance works combine both the revelation of the explicit body and personal emotional experiences in direct address to the audience. I was asking my collaborators to break taboos and tread the lines between forms of live art, theatre and cabaret, to create fantasy menstrual ritual landscapes and draw on their own lived experiences in ways that would reveal personal and sometimes painful information. The direction of the personal revelations of trauma onstage were realised in collaboration with the artists, deciding what worked as material was an important part of the process of making the work and creating a strong company and performance. In bringing personal material to the safety of the workshops and experimenting with how it could be translated into art practice, stories were identified that we could use and equally stories were identified that we could not. As artistic director of the project and with the work being situated as my PhD PaR as well as the creation of a touring live art piece, I completed an ethical review of the process (See Appendix 6) and signed ethical agreements with the artists, defining the boundaries of how the material was going to be publicly disseminated was put in place.

As we created the show we worked through the material and the experience of performing the sections that were from our personal experience so that we were not traumatised by performing the material and that repeated showings of the work did not devalue, dilute or disempower the life experiences we revealed.

We discovered how to engage with this approach through the modes in which we delivered the material and the audience reactions to it. We turned our lived experiences into performance texts and images and in turn the experiences into a fiction of their own, enabling them to then act as a catharsis for the artists in facing their truths before live audiences of strangers, as well as being therapeutic for the audiences who identified with the stories. We hoped that what we offered was brave and timely and

'touched a nerve' for the audience. The work was made gradually, with care, attention and respect to its artists. This collective approach grew a strong and robust team who practiced support and kindness and was able to weather long runs and difficult working conditions at tours like the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and Soho Theatre.

### **Performing the Menstrocene**

Gaia, a tough bitch, is not at all threatened by humans.

(Margulis 1998, 149)

Through the PaR of *DCIBW* a model for menstrual theory emerges that has a generative and collective centre. The Menstrocene offers an ecological theoretical model that can be both fluid, fixed and yet forever changing and transforming, and which recognises cyclicity and return: a theory to effect and create communal efforts for change.

*Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* in its performance acts as a ritual that proposes the model of the Menstrocene, providing an informative and cathartic experience for the audience and making accessible a clear path to the activism of the Menstronauts. It makes an urgent call to arms for action and change in order to reconnect us to the scope and possibility of the cultural and ecological importance of our bodily cycles as a feminist project which aims 'to uncover the mechanisms of construction, flaunt the contradictions and transgressions which destabilise the binaries, and insist on a diversity of provisional bodily identifications.' (Shildrik 1997,60-61)

A new feminist model that is menstrual that can be performed has to embody the capacity to think cyclically, fluidly, be able to transform, reinvent, rebirth, renew, move, remove, change and recognise phases of experience in relation to the phases of the physical world we inhabit. As we must embody and connect with ourselves and each other, address oppositions of mind/body, man/woman, black/white so must we address

and unite oppositions of the body in the environment, body/seasons death/rebirth, fresh/waste, new/old. I argue that it is the Western capitalist disempowering of menstruation that has disembodied women from traditional human stories and symbols of cyclicity that inform greater ecological, generative and communal cultures. Through a collective queer feminist reclamation, menstruation has the potential to be representative again of embodied knowledge, straddling the corporeal and the cultural, with a new model of 'the embodiment of the feminine as precisely the site from which new forms of knowledge could emerge.' (Shildrik1997,10)

In ecological movements and in new age feminist tropes, the earth mother persists. I suggest we need to change the paradigm of woman as mother equals natural and woman as mother is nature, with a Gaia who is 'no vague, quaint notion of a mother Earth who nurtures us' (Margulis 1998,154)

Sprinkle and Stephens suggest earth is not mother but lover but I disagree. Earth is not always our lover either. The archetypes of woman as cyclical balancer of justice, as a warrior that uses weapons and abject creatures, the Kali, the Medusa, the woman connected to flows of culture is just as earthy a role as mother and lover. A metaphor of menstruation can embody a Gaia theory informed ecological activism in bold bloody ways. Donna Haraway calls us to 'Make Kin Not Babies' (2016,139). But perhaps we must make revolutionary armies with our kin to fight for the survival of humanity. Denying the cultural and ritual power of menstruation and disembodimenting women from it as a creative source of change and an ecological metaphor has enslaved the witch for too long.

I am not proposing an essentialist dichotomy of the bride/warrior as mother/menstruant as was good girl/bad girl. Fundamentally I am not reclaiming menstruation as a signifier of fertility and reproduction. I am reclaiming it as a signifier of cultural cyclicity, a framework where you can be many things at different stages, mutating and always changing, transforming in multiple never-ending cycles, regenerating queer stories

with multiple meanings and no endings, only rebirths and new beginnings, so that history gives way 'to geostories, to Gaia stories, to symchthonic stories: terrains webbed, braided, and tentacular living and dying in sympoietic multispecies string figures...' (Haraway 2016,49)

Performing the Menstrocene then is the Showwoman, wing-ed, tenacled, crossed with the creatures that creepeth and crawleth, that live and die by the moon, in the belly of the earth, all dark, all damp, all mud, all earth, that die and are reborn cyclically, seasonally, the collective of the abject, of shedding, of bleeding, of getting back onto the stage though you feel you have lost everything, wriggling, remembering, re-invisioning with her segmented body, her colony, her insides, her structures of the soil. The transspecies Showwoman's body is transformative. Like the monarch butterfly, her extraordinary feats of flight are always under horrendous threat. So now is the time of the Showwoman with her shedded skin, her old marks and her brave new connections. Like the tarot reader her plight is a divinatory return to the generative, from the ruins of the city in the forgotten cabaret theatre she enacts a never-ending rebirth, from stillness to flight, from caterpillar to butterfly, her imagery is earthly and fleshy. She is the new 2020 punk Britannia. She delivers us to a new era not of the Anthropocene but the Menstrocene, she is the bloodied child of the compost, she brings cyclical return, she calls for transformation to balance and justice. The revolution will be bloody, the revolution will be menstrual.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1**

#### **The Creative Backstage Team**

The project went through a number of phases of development and collaboration to bring it to the stage. The following list outlines the team at various stages.

#### **Dramaturg - Kira O'Reilly – Development National Theatre Studios**

Kira O'Reilly recently led a new MA pilot in Ecology and Contemporary Art in University of the Arts Helsinki. Her practice, both wilfully interdisciplinary and entirely undisciplined, stems from a visual art background; it employs performance, biotechnical practices and writing with which to consider speculative reconfigurations around The Body.

#### **Assistant Director - Florence Peake- Soho Theatre**

Florence Peake is a London-based artist who has been making work since 1995. With an extensive training in dance and a background in painting, Florence Peake's performance practice uses drawing, painting and sculpture materials combined with found and fabricated objects placed in relationship to the moving body. Site and audience live and recorded text, wit and humour are key to her work.

#### **Costume Designer- Claire Ashley – All Shows**

Claire Ashley is a London based costume designer who runs a studio offering bespoke costumes and clothing, including quick change and vintage inspired costumes.

#### **Magic Consultant- Tom Cassani – All Shows**

Tom Cassani is a graduate of Carnesky's Finishing School where Marisa Carnesky runs courses in devised solo performance. Trained in sleight of hand, misdirection and prestidigitation, Tom now uses these skills of

deceit as an artistic framework to explore truth, honesty, manipulation and fabrication through performance art.

### **Lighting Designer - Marty Langthorne**

Marty Langthorne is a Lighting Designer for theatre Live art and Dance. He studied at The National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). Always interested in experimental work, he became involved in the London live art community.

### **Film Making and Editing** Nao Nagai, Claire Lawrie, Tom Cottey

### **Producers**

#### **Lara Clifton - Development and Soho Theatre**

Lara Clifton created the popular Burlesque club Whoopie in the early noughties. She went on to become an independent producer working with Carnesky Productions, Long Player and a number of solo practitioners.

#### **Flora Herberich - South Bank and Edinburgh**

Flora Herberich has worked as Circus Producer Fellow at Roundhouse, formerly circus performer/director/producer and community facilitator in Belfast and currently with Canvas and Jacksons Lane.

### **Stage Management and Production Team:**

#### **Natacha Poldecia - Soho Theatre**

Natacha Poldecia has worked as stage manager across many live art and new cabaret productions including Whoopie Club, Duckie, Chris Green and Carnesky's Ghost Train.

#### **Claudia Palazzo – Underbelly Festival**

Claudia Palazzo has worked as a performing artist with Carnesky's Finishing School, Lucy McCormick and Grace Nicol.

#### **Sarah Morris – Edinburgh Festival**

Sarah Morris is a Production Manager and Development Manager for Third Mind Productions.

**Amy Ridler - Research collaborator and child chaperone**

Amy Ridler has been working with the company since 2011 as an associate artist and production assistant.

**The Performances**

The performances started in public as works in progress and went on to perform runs across the UK. The project toured internationally to Croatia in October 2017 and a solo version of the work was presented at the Adelaide Fringe Festival in 2018.

The following list charts the development and touring of the work.

- Duckie Artist In Residence Work In Progress at Royal Vauxhall Tavern December 2015
- Radical Anthropology Group Work In Progress at University College London International Women's Day March 2016
- Soho Theatre Main House Xmas Run 2016 - 17 performances
- Underbelly Festival Southbank June Run 2017 - 7 performances
- Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2017 at Pleasance Courtyard - 30 performances
- Croatia Zoom Festival – 2 performances
- Adelaide Fringe Festival 2018 – 10 performances

- Attenborough Centre for The Creative Arts Re-development Residency Summer 2018

#### 2018 Touring

- Attenborough Centre- 3 performances
- Colchester Arts Centre – 1 performance
- Norwich Arts Centre- 1 performance
- Lancaster Arts Centre- 1 performance
- Sheffield University – 1 performance
- CCA, Glasgow – 1 performance
- Soho Theatre – 7 performances

## **Appendix 2**

### **Menstruant Interviews**

#### **H Plewis**

**MC : What was your relationship to your menstrual cycle like before joining the project?**

**HP:** “My relationship to my menstrual cycle has been tenuous. Until recently my cycles passed me by with a dim-lit acceptance, leaving their mark only on my bed sheets and pants. As a child I did not want to grow up and sought to arrest my development into a woman through hiding the start of my periods from my family and friends. I had no idea how to make the transition from childhood to something other and wanted to flush any physical evolution away, along with the bloodied scrunched up toilet wads I fashioned.”

**MC: How did your experience of losing your mother in childhood affect your relationship with your periods?**

**HP:** Looking back, I can understand that my mother dying at aged nine affected my attitude to my changing body. There was no matriarch to show me the way or to celebrate my entry into ‘womanhood’ and as a result I felt unsure of myself. This confusion led to a deep shame that has persisted into my adult life, manifesting in a variety of ways.

As a result of the work we have done together, beginning with the careful and considered attention to our menses, I have found an entirely new way to engage with my cycle. I have come to respect the inner workings, to feel nourished by the on-going journey, to wonder at the power and magic of this process and open a channel through which to express my deepest creative drives.

Now in my mid-forties, armed with knowledge and positive experience I know that I can face the coming changes of menopause emboldened, happy that I have at least and at last cherished the experience of my period before it stops altogether.”

**MC: What are your thoughts on joining the show? Your fears, excitement and motivations?**

**HP:** “Before embarking on any creative process, I am prone to common fears: ‘Will I get it right? Will I produce something good?’ However, this feeling was not so pronounced with the Bleeding Woman project, due to the research-based approach Marisa set out being completely integral to what we were creating.

The subject matter demanded solidarity among participants, and this was enabled by the way the project was structured and presented. The working group was characterized by a supportive attitude to one another, this being built and sustained through every aspect of the process- from the full moon dinners, to the moon lit walks, questionnaires and provocations- all fed into the final theatrical presentation.

It was a privilege to be educated and entertained by the menstrual stories of other women in the group. It was exciting to see how, through listening and sharing our individual stories, we began to cross-pollinate, one person’s idea bleeding into another person’s, becoming blood sisters.

It was very special to witness Marisa’s vision for the show emerge and develop- to see how the work brought people, especially women, out of themselves and towards a positive expression of a much-maligned collective experience.”

**MC: What was your experience of the process?**

**HP:** “I had many heterogeneous ideas that were eventually distilled with, and subsequently directed by Marisa and Kira O Reilly.

My main sources of inspiration were:

- two books: *Women Who Run With the Wolves* – Dr Clarissa Pinkola Estés and *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* – Angela Carter. I was especially interested in the stories of Inuit and African origin, finding their dark and wild sense of humour enthralling.
- my own childhood,
- my mother’s imagined attitude to her period,
- my ethnic heritage, both imagined and known,
- my present desires and drives.

These research channels bore the following images and ideas:

I am straddling atop a mountain of salt. Bleeding red into the white. The mountain slowly (dis)colours. This image led me to perform a ritual where I poured out a circle of salt around me and rubbed salt into the wound of my bleeding vagina.

I imagined myself in a dress made of turf. I wanted to connect my animal, primal self with the learned shame of my hidden bloodied knickers. I wore branches as antlers on my head. On them I hung up a pair of white knickers— purposefully decorated with period blood. I over-painted my lips like an Alexander McQueen muse - a huge red gash – no apologies for spilling out of line.

I asked myself if my menstrual shame was trans-generational. Had my mother held on to bodily shame from her lapsed catholic past? A hooded Mary conceals her shame, the Mary who is ‘all our mothers’. A Mary for our modern secular times - a neon tartan Mary who lifts up her



skirt to cover her head only to reveal her arse instead. Tartan linking to my Gallic /Irish heritage, my Scottish family.

I read a story about Inuit women who mould babies out of whale blubber and bury them in the ice in the hope of bearing children. I wanted to mould my blood, my desire for fertility. As a child in the late 70s and early 80s we had rabbit jelly at birthdays. I remember it shimmering in the centre of a laden table. Though now, I thought, as well as sweet, the jelly reminded me of the viscous lumps I would find in my period knickers. I wanted to capture my blood and transform it, to recreate it. So I mixed it with gelatine and set it in the shape of a rabbit. This way I could touch it, hold it, arrest it and capture it. Destroy it and reform it with every performance. I could take control of it and with it my past shame.

That was the ritual that became my act – the collecting of my blood, the freezing it and thawing it and moulding it. Then, in a cheeky hooded tartan costume, in a dim lit magical glade, I cradle it and carry it and dance with it and smash it. On a rocking chair. Site of maternal magic I rock my baby into being.”

## **Rhyannon Styles**

**MC: What is your experience of and relationship to the menstrual cycle?**

**RS:** “As a transgender woman I have never experienced a menstrual cycle. Since transitioning five years ago, the absence of menstruation in my life has never made me feel any more or less of a woman. I have never thought about menstruation as a signifier of my own womanhood, and I've never desired it. I have never desired to carry my own children; I castrated my own chance of fertility through the medication I was prescribed through transitioning. If I was given the option of menstruation in my life I would decline, as I

don't understand why I would need it. I accept that there are differences between my physical body to that of cis-born females, and to me this represents the spectrum of female identities we find within society.”

**MC: What are your thoughts on joining the show? Your fears, excitement and motivations?**

**RS:** “My motivation for doing the show was to represent a transgender voice within a subject and experience only discussed within cis-woman conversations. I think it's important for trans identified bodies to be involved in these discussions, because as a whole we represent all aspects of the definition of 'woman' and all contribute equally to that terminology”.

**MC: What is your experience of the process?**

**RS:** “Throughout this process of research, I discovered that whilst I don't have a menstrual cycle I do experience cycles in relation to the moon. During the three month research period I recorded my moods, energies and emotions using a diary and discovered similar patterns recurring over the time period. In relation to the cycle of the moon - with the dark moon and full moon being obvious signifiers - my moods and emotions became synchronised. I noticed that I would feel the fatigue around every full moon and more energetic around every dark moon - give or take some days. Acknowledging this led me to believe that although my 'sex' is male, I still experience a cycle in relation to the universe”.

**MC: What is your experience of the performing?**

**RS:** “It was important for me to use nudity within my performance to reinforce the importance of a transgender woman within this discussion. By allowing audiences' view of my naked self I wanted

to challenge pre-existing notions around the definition of woman, and contribute to the show with themes of transformation, rebirth and renewal using the body which I have. Revealing my naked body on stage was the final obstacle I had to overcome within my performance practice and something which I had desired to do for a long time. Combining the subject matter and method of revealing myself, allowed me to find the confidence - I felt supported by this group of women - to execute my point and reason to be involved in the show.

Whilst devising my piece I looked at images of turtles laying their eggs on beaches, particular how they buried them in the sand. I also looked at images of English Folklore, particularly around the costume of traditional folk dances. Thirdly I revisited images from my own performance career because I knew that I wanted to use a balloon or several balloons in my piece, and I wanted to create something which I hadn't done before.

The crux of my idea was to shed the final layer of my previous identity - as a performer called Ryan - and bury the props that he was known for - white balloons - in the sand. I wanted to release him and let go of him on the beach and besides the river to allow the currents and shifting sand to release him.

Once on stage I had to rethink the staging of my piece because it would be impossible to recreate it. I decided that I wanted to show the video footage of my ritual and perform a slow meditative dance/choreography alongside it, releasing white balloons which were attached to wrists and ankles in unison with the primal screaming you hear in the footage.

Whilst performing my piece, the staging of my piece changed. In December I felt that I should speak and wanted to use the opportunity to talk about my experiences during the process in

terms to being a transgender woman. The ritual influenced my act, by way of allowing me to find confidence within myself to talk from a very personal perspective on stage.

My act is now a monologue which I say whilst the video is playing behind me, this works well in allowing the audience to view my ritual as it happened but also hear my story too.”

**MC: Did you have a dream you wrote down in your dream diary when we were at Metal that you consider significant to your artistic process in the project?**

**RS:** “I was rollerskating down a country lane, with a boombox on my shoulder and Madonna (the singer) by my side. I was holding a red slash glitter curtain in my hands above my head, and let it blow around in the wind. There was a cottage in the distance which in the dream was my home. The bushes on the side of the road flashed quickly past me as I cycled towards the cottage.”

**Nao Nagai**

**MC: What is your experience of the menstrual cycle?**

**NN:** “My menstrual cycle has been irregular all my life, characterised by a couple of days of extreme hunger, a release of pressure and a relief of not being pregnant.”

**MC: What are your thoughts on joining the show- fears, excitement, motivation?**

**NN:** “Firstly, I didn’t quite know what I was going to be in for. My vague understanding for my role was that I joined as a production

manager /technician for the research and show period though this often was a blurry line to me.

I had mixed feelings but mostly looked forward to joining a new group of women. But of course, I was slightly nervous whether I could fit in the group or what's the group dynamics would be like as I didn't know anyone that well.

Somehow I had assumed people knew each other already (it turned out people did, but through Marisa, and not as a collective). As much as I could be sociable in work environment, I could be incredibly shy in my private life. I didn't quite know how it might go talking about menstruation which seemed at that time extremely private matter I didn't necessarily share with people even my closest friends.

**MC: What was your experience of the process?**

**NN:** When we started to talk and share stories and research of our menstruation on the dark moon and new moon, I became more involved in the group and the subject. I joined every discussion, took part in workshops and participated in creating performance rituals where I created a short cabaret piece (the long neck woman act) and my performance ritual (I climbed up a tree and made myself cry).

In the beginning, I did it to feel part of this collective and be a part of it. But still I thought it was for the research for "the show". I had no intention to be in it. But when Marisa asked me if I could perform in it, even though I was very hesitant at first, the answer was yes.

Because I felt that it was important at that time that everyone including me on this project's voice should be equally heard regardless the role. And through each one of our personal

engagement led by Marisa and Lara, we have become the true collective of showwomen in some ways. We are individual women with different values, different desires, yet through sharing our stories, rituals and performances, we connected using menstruation as a vehicle to carry us through our personal journeys in a contemporary performance setting. I believed (and still do) this process has empowering subversive potential for feminist debate in our time in both a personal and collective sense.

**MC: What is your experience of the performing?**

**NN:** I still think I'm not really a performer, but I enjoy performing in this collective with its contents and though it still fascinates and discombobulates me how I ended up being performing in it. Also, I started to notice that what seemed an irregular cycle of bleeding seemed connected to the new moon (now I know I'm a new moon bleeder). I became aware how easy yet complex it is to notice small realisations that can make big shifts in your understanding.

**MC: Did you have any significant dreams whilst doing the workshops at Metal that have influenced your practice in the project or your relationship to your menstrual cycle?**

**NN:** In the early days, I seemed to dream about not being able to do what I wanted to do, like I tried to go somewhere, and it gets disrupted by a very fat lady - like Michelin tyre character or trying to write this into a diary and then ink bottle breaks in a dramatic manner, then the ink solidifies instantly.

In another dream I'm on the roller coaster facing backwards and being flung off it but realise I'm attached to it with harness. There was no fear, no worried despite the fact I had to dodge all the metal pillars as we passed probably in 100mph. then I couldn't get off at the place where people usually get off.

In a particularly memorable dream I go to work and my mother (who has passed away in my real life) picks me up and we go to supermarket. I forget to buy a cling film. Later on, we embrace and I confessed that I had a difficulty connecting quickly with people, then a longing feeling for my mother surged and I cried. My mother cried. Because we were wailing and crying so dramatically, we both started to laugh how funny the situation was.

In the last dream I remember I was on the train and going through a peacock sculpture park. Driving on the canal in the car, I could see my mother and myself the daughter lost in the water. As I was driving Madonna (the singer) was by my side. I was holding a red slash glitter curtain in my hands above my head, and let it blow around in the wind. There was a cottage in the distance which in the dream was my home.”

## **Missa Blue**

### **MC: What is your experience and relationship to your menstrual cycle?**

**MB:** “I have very open-minded parents who had no problem talking about the female body and the menstrual cycle and they prepared me well for the day it would set in. I was very late to the party and remember all my girlfriends already has their first period at least year before me. I was almost 16 when it happened. I was so happy to finally be a woman. I remember my cycle being very temperamental until was about 20 then I settled into a 30 day cycle and still now 20 years later it’s a steady 30 days.

Most interruptions I had have been put down to other illnesses I encountered during these past decades. My periods where 5 days and pretty pain free. I used tampons and have not really put much attention to them. In recent years my periods have become a little

more heavy. They are now 6-7 days long and the first 2-3 days I bleed heavy. I also have cramps on the first day now that do bother me a little bit. But in the big picture the cramps actually allow me to stop working for a day and just rest. Something I have problems to do otherwise. When I was younger I experienced much worse PMS than I do now. Especially during my early thirties.”

**MC: What are your thoughts on joining the show? Your fears, excitement and motivations?**

**MB:** “As talking about menstruation did not seem so revolutionary for me, growing up with very liberal parents in Germany where the taboo seems to be slightly less around that subject I joined the show mainly because it was an honour to be asked to work with Marisa Carnesky. The outlook to work alongside amazing and strong female performers was a bonus. I was nervous to spend so much time with women I didn’t know but was sure the process would bring us closer together. I was hoping to find out new things about the female body, the cycle and the female trans body.”

**MC: What is your experience of the process?**

**MB:** “Once we started researching the subject matter I was very shocked by how big the taboo around menstruation really is. I felt like I had ignored a huge issue. I almost feel I had not put any attention to my own period most of my life because it’s such a taboo. But further down the line I think it was both. I also really was never bothered by it. I really enjoyed talking to other women and hearing their stories. Sharing was empowering and creating the rituals felt like magic.

For a long time I could not imagine how to bring this research onto the stage. Maybe because - as I said - never had big issues with my period and ignored that others have. I found the importance to



talk about it but had no personal connection to it. Because I never wanted children my cycle was pointless to me. So I felt for a long time really empty in terms of my own part in the show. This was until I had my horrible sword swallowing accident that was so closely connected to my menstrual cycle. I finally understood how much my body is changing every month and what sort of impact this has on my work. After the accident I finally found material to talk about and could create an act connected to my cycle. This made me finally grow a real connection to the show.”

**MC: What is your experience of the performing?**

**MB:** “Personally, I am a performer that digests the material before bringing it on stage. I go through an emotional process and then make work out of it. By the time I get to go on stage with the matter I have already left the emotional stage behind and just focus on creating quality work. This is how it was with the bleeding woman show so it hit me pretty hard to realise how moving the work was for our audience. It certainly gives work another deep layer of importance if it resonates within the audience to such an extent as the Bleeding Woman show did. Seeing women cry during the show and feeling their tension was a completely new experience.

Talking to people after the show became a lovely moment of connection to total strangers. Often I left the theatre with the feeling I had really given something more to my audience than just entertainment. This ‘something’ is sharing and understanding pain. The aspect that another woman could share the pain of my sword accident through sharing stories connected to menstruation and the female body was a discovery that changed my view on making work. I am deeply touched that sharing my own pain can inspire or even comfort other women. Further it is really empowering to perform on a regular basis with such a strong group of women talking about a subject classified as taboo. We have made a show that educates

people in a fun and almost upbeat way and I believe everybody who was watching so far has learned something new.”

## **Fancy Chance**

### **MC: What is your experience and relationship to your menstrual cycle?**

**FC:** “My mom was fairly good at letting me know what to expect and I was excited when I finally started my period. I felt like I was finally on my way to being a "woman" or whatever that meant to me at the time. Of course she forgot to say that I didn't have to change my sanitary towel every time I bled into it or that I would feel pain from cramping and morally felt conflicted when I wanted to use tampons as that implied that one day I would have sex. I've never intensely felt the societal taboos of blood or shame of menstruation, partly I think because I never bled heavily leaving me in uncomfortable situations in public or have never suffered intense cramps beyond what I was familiar with other females having.

As time has passed, I've been lucky enough to have spent a great deal of time with a variety of numerous "liberal" women and menstruation has always been a thing we discussed and have been open about. I've also had the luck to never feel that it was "dirty" from the perspective of various sexual partners. When I was 19, I ended up taking a new birth control shot called Depo-Provera. It was supposed to last for 3 months. I ended up being depressed and gaining weight; I basically felt fat and insane and eventually suicidal. I didn't go back for more shots but I didn't end up menstruating for about a year. I recall (in my state of depression) feeling useless as a woman; not only could I not procreate but I felt like I was useless as a woman because I wasn't even bleeding.”

**MC: What are your thoughts on joining the show? Your fears, excitement, motivations?**

**FC:** “As a showwoman who has always included politics and feminism in my shows and a woman who has always felt that the shame around menstruation was disgusting and wrong, reading the brief for this show got all my bells ringing! I was excited to do research into menstrual ritual, to explore the politics and history about it, learn the experiences of the other participants and discover what we could create in the controlled environment. I felt that this was important work both to explore and educate about a human's relationship with our bodies beyond the Christian idea that we are merely sinful beasts.”

**MC: What is your experience of the process?**

**FC:** “Spending so much creative time with the participants was profound. We were given a safe space to explore, discuss and create work around a subject that people commonly don't speak about in an open way and it made me feel like our voice was more powerful because of this. When I conceived my ritual I knew it was going to be much more about the experience of it rather than the aesthetic and the bodily movement which was a departure from what I'm used to creating for stage. I was nervous about how far I had to walk across the jagged rocks covered in sea-shells to find a pool in the cold sea so I could submerge myself in a blue dress to come out in a red dress. As simple and uncomfortable as this was, having other participants filming and walking with me filled me with resolve and purpose that our rituals were much bigger than ourselves, that we were larger body.

One thing I noticed in particular was with how water was reappearing in the tales I was looking into. That Thor bathed in a

river with menstrual blood in it; flowing liquid obviously occur again and again across all of the tales.

I also liked the idea of the ritual of baptism and how one comes from the water a changed/transformed soul but that by submerging myself in water under my own volition to acknowledge my menstrual cycle, the transformation comes from my female body rather than some celestial man spirit. Shedding the blue dress under the water to emerge in a red dress was almost a purely aesthetic choice for metaphor's sake but because the water was so cold and my feet sore from walking over the rocks for so long, it ended up being a rite of performance development as a result.

My stage performance obviously could not emulate my sea ritual so I looked for something simple, that could represent the notion of blood in relation to cosmetics and we created a piece where the lipstick I was to apply came literally from my vagina. While the film of my sea ritual was ending, I emerged naked with my hair down, pushing a box. This box to me represented a labour (if you will), travelling and time.

I stood on the box and tried to look at every person in the eye with a placid/neutral expression; in a way this neutralised the fact that I was fully nude. I pushed out a tube of lipstick from my vagina to apply the lipstick to my lips carefully and then in a more kabuki/clown fashion spread it beyond the boundaries of my open gapping mouth and ran it down my body in an almost indiscernible motion until it reached my pubis and was then reinserted into my vagina so I could then return to my journey and push the box off the stage.”

**MC: What is your experience of the performing?**

**FC:** “After our scratch performances/showcases and the runs in Soho Theatre and in Edinburgh, the effect on the audience was almost palpable to me. I saw tears, heard giggling, spontaneous shouts and felt a sense of liberation, power and relief coming from them. It's left me with more resolve to keep an open dialogue going both in my performance and personal life about the validity of the acceptance, celebration and importance of the menstrual cycle and its relationship with ritual and the human body.”

**MC: Did you have any significant dreams whilst doing the workshops at Metal that have influenced your practice in the project or your relationship to your menstrual cycle?**

**FC:** “There was a beach and a bonfire. We went swimming in a river and were climbing rocks maybe where the river lead to the sea. The waves crashed through the copper coloured rocks but we weren't scared. Then it's like I was watching something, they were lions in a forest of trees with blue leaves and red ground. Zebras (this was just something we seemed to know) lived in the plains and had to come into the forest to eat what the lions normally ate because they were starving. They ate berries that looked like bits of cotton fluff off of shrubs and it was like candy/acid. The zebras started fighting and then the lions couldn't help but attack them because of the blood. Everything went berserk and they were fucking and eating each other but it was because of the berries. The sky was red as if the whole thing happened at sunset”

**Amy Ridler**

**MC: What is your experience of menstruation?**

**AR:** “I started my period age 14 and absolutely hated it. From the first time it came, it was very heavy and very painful. My cycle was irregular, but I would know when it was due to arrive because the

back and stomach pains would start 2 days prior. At 15, I went to my GP and they advised that even if I wasn't sexually active, I could go on the pill to regulate my cycle and also to help ease of the heaviness. For a few years, I took the pill which did regulate my cycle. As I got a bit older, I started to question why I was taking hormonal contraceptives, and giving myself terrible mood swings and feeling miserable, just to suppress something that was natural to my body. I stopped taking the pill and decided to just embrace the fact that my periods were a lot heavier than that of my college friends, but it was just something I had to deal with- and make sure I always carried a packet of painkillers in my bag! Me and my menstrual cycle were certainly not friends, but I had come to accept it as a painful and unwelcome yet tolerated visitor."

**MC: What are your thoughts on joining the show? Your fears, excitement, motivations?**

**AR:** "When I was asked to join Marisa in the research project for her PhD/show I was very excited and eagerly accepted a place in 'the coven'. I had spoken to Marisa previously about some of her ideas and was very interested in the research she was undertaking. As I was the only one of the group who is not a performer, I did feel slightly apprehensive about what joining this team would mean for me, but there was no way I was going to miss out on being involved in such an interesting project with a team of such strong feminists, some of which I had collaborated with on previous projects."

**MC: What is your experience of the process?**

**AR:** "Whilst working alongside the other women in this project, I felt I not only became closer to them, but also closer to myself. We shared very private and personal stories and memories with each other, which made me feel vulnerable but, in the environment, we were in, completely safe and at ease. We discussed our

experiences and Marisa shared her research with us, as well as reading passages together from books.

Not only did we talk, we also ate dinner together, went to sleep at the same time, woke at the same time, and performed meditation on the beach every morning after a silent breakfast. I felt this really brought the group together as one, and there was no temptation to get distracted. The research process really changed the way I see my monthly cycle. We performed rituals and looked at the solidarity of women across the world, and throughout history which changed the way I treat my body during menstruation and would encourage others to really look into the origins of menstruation.”

**MC: What is your experience of the performing?**

**AR:** “As I am a writer, not a performer, I did not show my piece in *Dr Carnesky’s Incredible Bleeding Woman*. I did create a piece, whilst we were in the research stages, that I showed to the group but was not comfortable performing it to a live audience. In my piece, I laid in a bath, whilst Fancy Chance stood up on the edges of the bath looking down on me. As I opened my mouth, she spat blood from her mouth into mine. I spat it down myself and then immersed myself under water where the blood would wash itself away. We repeated this 3 times and it was documented by Sarah Ainslee. My piece was focused on renewal and repetition, and that these menstrual traditions are passed down through generations of women, even if they are unspoken and taken as fact.”

## Appendix 3

### Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman Script

#### Updated for 2018 Autumn Tour

1. Marisa walk on Intro and uncover body:  
**Music: Come Un Madrigale**
2. Marisa Speech: **Slides**
3. Fancy on box: Beach film, **Music: Add N to X music**
4. Marisa speech: **Slides**
5. Missa Sword **Music: Presence**
6. Haitch slope: **Music: Harry Partch**
7. Marisa Spine dance: **Music: Rosemary's baby**
8. Marisa slow change dress, **no music**, Mary slide
9. Rhyannon and film. **No Music**
10. Anatomical tea party. **Music: La Dama Rosa**
11. Graph and miscarriage: **No music**
12. Sawing in Half: **Music: Suspiria**
13. Haitch Caesarean Scene and Sula- Marisa and Fancy assisting: Film of psychic surgery. **No music**
14. Missa Speech, **No music**
15. Fancy Nurse: **No music**, new graphic of moving words
16. Ritual speech with spit screen film: Activists and hair hang **Music: Evening Scars.**



***Red = Lighting Cues - (V) – Visual Cues***

*Yellow & Black = Qlab cues on words after or before if it's placed at the end of the paragraph. (V) – Visual Cues. (Auto) – multiple automated slides*

***Set - Preset Lectern Stage Right***

***LX 1 - Preset***

*Qlab 0.5 - House Open- Black slide & Preshow*

***LX 2 - Clearance - House lights out***

*Qlab 1 - Fade down Preshow*

***LX 3 - BEAT after B/O - central wash up***

***Mic – Marisa (Mic1) ON***

***Scene 1:***

*Marisa uncovers anatomical model extracting blood choreography to track 1- Bruno Nicolai.*

***Scene 2:***

*Marisa Monologue at Lectern with slides*

***LX 4 (V) - as Marisa walks to lectern - lectern special up***

Good evening. My name is Dr Carnesky and tonight I'd like to introduce you to my research on reinventing menstrual rituals.

What if I told you the origins of all magic, of all ritual, since the beginning of time was menstrual. Would you believe me?

What if I told you the magic was guarded by a giant mythological snake that shed her skin once a month and that inside the snake presided a group of mythological menstruating witches.

They live in the giant snake hidden from view, below the radar for all time. But now they emerge they each have their own snakes to play with.

### *Qlab 1 - Medusa (on first words after this)*

One of these witches is Medusa, secluded in darkness, red-eyed and snake-haired, her moonlit gaze so powerful that it must be deflected by a mirror.

### *Qlab 2 - Whore of Babylon*

The Whore of Babylon is another, riding her hydra headed serpent, stealing sperm by night in her decorative attire.

### *Qlab 3- Kali*

Kali is here too, the archetypal goddess destroyer, scythe in one hand, severed head in the other, snakes entwined around her limbs, with multiple arms she presides over a sea of blood harkening the violent end of one cycle and the bloody beginning of another.

### *Qlab 4 - Slide of carving of snakes on building*

Across world cultures, images of snakes and dragons reoccur and can be connected to the notion of menstrual synchronicity. Professor Chris Knight of the Radical Anthropology Group, or RAG as they are known for short, reads that this symbolism suggests that a group of women become in a sense one body, once a month in a cyclical bloody liquid world.

### *Qlab 5 - Slide of row of 1950s women*

This magical serpent's body is not then a literal serpent but a symbol of menstrual synchronicity and women's solidarity.

### *Qlab 6- women's march and logo (Auto)*

The women come together to renew themselves like a giant connected single serpent. Together they shed a united skin, together they hold a bloody monthly strike from sex and men.

### *Qlab 7- Slides of us as group in front of pillars followed by*

### *Qlab 8- Slides of international menstrual activists*

Like the menstrual activists of today, women unite across borders, across cultures and across time to call for justice, for change, for revolution.

### *Qlab 9 - Wawilak sisters*

### *Qlab 10- Slide of Male clown*

### *Qlab 11- Slide of afro woman*

In indigenous stories images of women connected by blood in the dark of the moon abound. Women between worlds, ritually transient, connected by their bodily cycle. The menstruant, like the clown and the witch is a figure of transience, a potential danger to the ordered western world.

*Qlab 12-Slide of woman standing on moon*

*Qlab 13 - Make up advert,*

Painting one's lips and fingernails red is said to be invented by the earliest humans using menstrual blood.

*Qlab 14 - Blood lips*

Wearing blood was the signal that menstrual seclusion was over, ovulation had begun, and it was time for making love.

*Qlab 15 - Divine*

In this sense whenever we transform ourselves through cosmetics, we continue the early human behaviour of menstrual drag regardless of the sex of our biological bodies. When in make-up, we are all menstruants.

*Qlab 16 - Synchronised swimmers*

The notion of menstrual synchronicity came into mainstream consciousness in the 1970s due to the work of American psychologist Dr Martha McClintok, who analysed the menstrual cycles of co-habiting female lifeguards. The 'McClintock Effect' sought to prove that menstrual synchronicity occurred amongst modern western women. Yet her research methods remain disputed probably by a group of old white men.

*Qlab 17- Slide of menstrual bathroom*

Could it be that the secret ingredient behind menstrual synchronicity is not just women living together, but in the collective cyclical performance of menstrual rituals?

*Qlab 18- Slide of uterus drawing*

**If we treated menstruation as more than just a hygiene issue, if we created our own new cultural menstrual rituals, what could they be?**

*Qlab 19 - Carrie and series of horror Film pictures (Auto)*

**Bleeding women reappear again and again across popular culture, we are obsessed with the image of the bleeding woman. They are bound and tethered in the magic show, captured and chained in the ghost train, stifled and tortured in the horror film.**

### *Qlab 20 - Possession*

**There seems to be a need to bind and contain her polluting, risqué, sexual, seeping, uncontrollable and provocative body. The witch is enslaved in what was once her own domain, the magic world. How then can we use magic to reverse the curse?**

### *Qlab 21 - Sawing in half*

**Cutting the woman in two and bringing her back together, enacting her temporary death and re-emergence from the seclusion of a confined space, are themes that occur in some of the oldest stories in the world.**

**These same themes used by male stage magicians on their female assistants. I propose then that the classic Sawing in Half Illusion has appropriated ancient menstrual ritual and when male magicians reenact this trick they are unknowingly attempting to subjugate and control the menstruating female body.**

### *LX 4.7 (V) - as M moves to CS – CS wash*

**The woman sawn in half defies death and torture. When the incredible bleeding woman takes centre stage, perhaps it is her, not the magician who merely operates the equipment that possesses true magical powers, the power to perform a series of dangerous small deaths that she defies with grace, elegance and exemplary showwomanship.**

### *Qlab 22 – on “showwomanship” Fade out Sawing in Half*

**Perhaps even Jesus on the cross bleeding below the rib and from the palms is himself a symbol of patriarchies appropriation of the great menstrual metaphor, of temporary death and rebirth through the power of the wound that can never heal.**

**As the Grinch stole Christmas, perhaps we could say that Men Stole the Magic of Menstruation *Set lectern on fire with flash paper.* Do you believe in menstrual magic yet?**

### *Scene 3:*

*Fancy beach film and box lipstick act. Music add N to X LX 5 (V)*  
*LX 5 - Box*

*Qlab 23 (Visual) Lectern Off stage —Southend film and*  
*Soundtrack – note this happens in BO*

*Scene 4: Marisa Menstruants Speech: Slides, no music*  
*LX 6 - Lectern*

That was the extraordinary Fancy Chance who joins us all the way all the way from the exotic Dalston Kingsland performing her menstrual ritual.

Let me introduce you to the practice as research project known as the Menstruants. Who and what are the menstruants, you may ask.

*Qlab 24 - Nao*

They are part of a unique performance experiment that took place last year in Southend on Sea.

*Qlab 25 - Southend*

Renegade research participants in this extraordinary enquiry.

*Qlab 26 - Fancy*

They are a small collective of London based radical experimental cabaret artists who I asked to meet with me once a month for three months on every dark moon and together we created new menstrual rituals.

*Qlab 27 - Haitch*

Some of our bodies, in the menstruant group menstruate once a month, some more sporadically, and some don't menstruate at all.

*Qlab 28 - Rhyannon*

We set out to explore what menstrual rituals would do to all of us. As Professor Chris Bobel asks, is there room in the red tent for all of us? And furthermore as menstruants we ask – do we need a tent; can we go outside and menstruate now?

*Qlab 29 -Missa*

Would practicing them change us mentally, physically or emotionally?

Would we synchronise menstrual cycles, dreams, nightmares, moods, successes, failures? Would we all remain friends?

*Qlab 30 - 3 Friends*

This evening I am thrilled to say we will be sharing with you some of our menstrual rituals.

*Qlab 31 - US in the Red Sea*

*Qlab 32 – Fade out US in the Red Sea*

So it's time. Let's meet the menstruants.

*Scene 5: Missa Sword Dance*

*LX 7 - Centre*

*Scene 6: Haitch Slope act; Music Harry Partch*

*LX 8 - Slope*

**Marisa:** The amazing Missa Blue from Seven Sisters and her sword swallowing spectacle followed by the marvellous H Plewis from marshlands of Walthamstowiva performing with her own famous secret recipe menstrual jelly.

*LX 9(V) - With Qlab*

*Scene 7: Marisa Spine Dance: Music: Rosemary's Baby*

*Scene 8: Marisa change dress act*

*Qlab 33(V) - Marisa moves to CS Virgin Mary*

See here the Virgin Mary, the Mexican Guadalupe adorned in her divine blue drapery, personifying the mother, the purity of the feminine, the womb of the earth watery and blue, salty and deep, the bloody red dragon of her sexuality and her monthly menstrual shedding, her snake like sloughing of a bloody red lining from her internal body suppressed and restrained, held at bay, controlled.

*Standing Centre of diamond stage*

Blue women of the divine **do not preside** in the darkness of the forest or the bottom of the garden with the witches and the spiders and the slugs and the centipedes and the untouchable night crawling creatures that live in the deep dark soil.

*LX 10 - on "do not feed" - slow fade to red*

They **do not feed** off the rotten, the fermented, the remains of death to replenish themselves.

They **do not partake** in the uterine renewal that comes with the serpent's dark moon.

The slimy loss of skin, when the moon turns thin and the night sky darkens.

Divine blue idols are only blue, only new, only fresh and clean. They **do not** take part in the dirty red cycles of the planet and the female body. Mary did not have to ovulate, did not have to menstruate.

She was untainted by the cycle of the serpent, no river of blood or sticky egg white snail trail flowed from her vagina regardless of the phase of the lunar month.

Lining, lining, lining the womb, shedding, shedding, shedding the skin  
the inner skin the blood skin

the blood that wilts flowers,

that turns the crops sour.

the blood of life and death

that draws away

that comes apart

that turns a man to stone

that is nothing

that is everything

secret shedding blood skin forbidden blood within.

### *Scene 9: Rhyannon Speech and Film*

#### *LX 11 - Stool*

#### *Qlab 34 – Rhyannon Film*

Hello. My name is Rhyannon Styles I'm an author, an artist and a menstruant. What you've just watched is documentation of my menstrual ritual following our 9month research period in Southend.

In that performance I was using white balloons to symbolise my fertility. The fertility I've lost through the process and pursuit of my desire to be female. I'm a transgender woman, and due to the medication, I take I've made myself infertile.

I think it's important to discuss fertility from this perspective.

If I'm honest, did I ever desire to father my own children? No not really. Have I ever wished I could experience a monthly bleed? No not really.

But the significance of a trans narrative within this show is huge. I'm talking about menstruation, a subject I clearly have no experience of, and a subject used as a rule of thumb when deciding who gets to 'access' women's spaces.

'Does the womb define the women?' because if so, I'll be invalidated for the rest of my life. My physical body and experience may not be the same as another woman, but I don't believe that any two persons is. I'm all for safeguarding the security of women's spaces. But that shouldn't come with the exclusion of any woman still likely to suffer abuse.

Once I went to an appointment with a psych, this was a really important day for me, because it was him who would decide if I could proceed with my medical transition supported by the NHS. In the appointment he asked me 'If I wore 'dresses and heels at the weekend?' because I'd turned up wearing jeans, sweater and trainers, much like every other woman in the waiting room, that cold October afternoon.

You can't reduce womanhood to a dress, it's just fabric, yet I've been called 'A man in a dress' more times than I can remember, and also so let's address the dress? Through transitioning I have taken on the cultural, political, social, emotional and hormonal aspects of womanhood. Do I feel like a Women? I don't know, it's impossible to say what defines a 'Womanly feeling'

But I know how it feels to be woman, because I'm treated like one in society. And that's the point. That's why I'm included in this show, because it's not about our biological differences, It's expanding the conversation so that its inclusive of all women.

Going back to the research, just like the tides of the Thames estuary and the shifting sand of the shoreline, I discovered that cycles did occur, by recording my moods, energies and emotions. There were repetitive patterns of behaviour, like the seasons of the planet and the cycles of the moon. Like my body and like your body, nothing is permanent, everything is always changing, we are all connected, so therefore are we all menstruating?



*Scene 10: Anatomical tea party choreography; Marisa, H, Rhyannon. Music: La Dama Rose*

***LX 12 - Slope***

*Scene 11: Graph and Miscarriage*

***LX 13 - Lectern and centre***

Now you might be wondering: What did happen to the menstruants post the three-month ritual experiment. Did we synchronise? Did our lives change? Did we change the lives of others?

*Qlab 34 - on “.... others?” - menstrual graph*

This graph illustrates the findings of the control group and the effect that the practice of three months of the creation of menstrual rituals on the dark moon had on the subjects. I would to disseminate this data to you now.

*Centre stage with pointy stick*

**Menstrual Synchronicity 5 of 7**

**Pregnancies achieved within 1 month of research practice 2 previous time trying to conceive 1 and 2 years respectively.**

**Miscarriage 1**

**Live Birth 1**

**Cathartic Rebirth Energy Release 2:**

**By Tears Up a Tree 1**

**By Primal Screaming on a Beach 1**

**Vivid Dreams containing Blood, Serpents or Zebra penises 2  
Revelations of groundbreaking cyclical bodily changes beyond the changes of the womb, 2**

**Confusion to dog walkers and Sunday strollers in Southend 10**

**Creation of Menstrual activist movement 1**

Is anyone in the audience menstruating tonight? We are trying to see if the audience start synchronising when seeing the show...

*Marisa moves to Centre stage*

*Qlab 35(V) – As Marisa moves to CS - Blood bath film*

***LX 14 - with Qlab - CS spot for M***

From the two of us that became pregnant immediately after 3 months of dark moon rituals the miscarriage was mine. I had been trying for

over a year since my previous miscarriage when I conceived. I have had four miscarriages in total and I have not had a child. In the process of having miscarriages over the last 7 years I came to dread getting my period. Each month my menstrual cycle seemed to be a painful and bloody reminder of not conceiving, almost like a mini miscarriage. The most upsetting miscarriage I had of all of them was what is called a silent miscarriage when I was three months pregnant which means my baby died inside me. I was induced to pass the foetus overnight in hospital and I went through a labour. When it came out my foetus looked like a little fish flung out of its bowl. It was very upsetting for a long time. I sought a different strategy to cope, to see my monthly blood in a different way and decided to try to find a deeper cultural and creative understanding of the role of menstruation. What art, what literature can we create when menstruating, what is its creative power and potential. And moreover what is its political power.... If we all synchronised could we bring down the government? What is menstruations purpose- without a baby- is its power then, the power of the witch, the power of magic, of making change through creativity? So what I discovered, what we discovered, I hope you'll agree is truly, truly incredible.

***LX 15 - BEAT after "incredible" – Centre stage wash***

*Qlab 36(V) – As Marisa exits – fade out Blood bath film*

***Mic – Marisa (Mic 1) OFF - if relevant Haitch (Mic4) ON***

***Scene 12: Sawing In Half – Music Suspiria, H and Marisa and Rhyannon***

***LX 16(V) - As you see box roll out – Sawing in half state***

***Scene 13: Haitch Caesarean Scene and Sula- Marisa and Fancy assisting***

***LX 17 - Slope***

*Qlab 37 - Film of psychic surgery*

Shall I tell you a story....?Once upon a time, before I was pregnant with you, I collected my menstrual blood and stored it in the freezer. And do you know what I did then? I used it to make Menstrual Rabbit Jelly.

Do you know what that is? Well, I'll tell you...it's my blood mixed with gelatine and hot water then stirred up together and poured into a rabbit mould, and set in the fridge til it goes all wobbly.

By making my Menstrual Jelly I transformed a personal history of shame and confusion into an experience of visceral sensuality. I held my blood in my hands. I realised its extraordinary, natural, normalness.

You see I was confused I think because when I was a little girl, about this much bigger than you (hand gesture) my mummy, your grandmother, went to the moon and she didn't come back.

(Zoom zoom zoom we're going to the moon...) Where's your mummy? The end.

O look there's Auntie Marisa come for a play.....

*H lies back on plinth*

*Fancy on*

*Film on*

The circumstances of Sula's birth were fraught with many tensions: familiar, familial Familiar familiaial familiar familiy familiar - (repeated like a tongue twister) And completely new. When they told me she wasn't growing. When they told me she wasn't grow.. when they told me ...what?

When they told me she wasn't growing and would have to come out early, I didn't believe them. How could they know my body, my baby, better than me?

And hang on a minute - what about playing the 'Earth Mother'? No no no I wanted to roar out my primal pain for hours on my own bedroom floor. To rock my baby into being with traditional Buddhist chanting, perhaps a wind chime or two and just a stick of nag champs to mask the smell of sweat, piss and shit, the beautiful shit. Instead Sula was fished out of my womb in a matter of minutes like a little minnow. A tiny scrawny featherless bird. But now she is a little ox.

***LX 18 - H conclusion***

*H sits up*

*Fancy fades off*

It's tricky to understand the resentment I feel towards the months Sula spent in hospital, given the fact that were the professional not there, it's very likely that Sula wouldn't be either. I suppose it comes down to a deep need to feel a trust and connection to ones own bodily magic and having that severed can be hard.

### *Scene 14: Missa Speech*

#### *LX 19 - Centre*

I never had connection to my cycle maybe as a result from never wanting kids. I've seen my body more like an instrument to use for training and performances.

As a sword swallower I swallow pieces of metal up to 19inch long.

The sword enters my body through my throat. Slides down till it reaches the heart. It pushes the heart slightly to the left. Passes the heart, passes the lungs and then slides through the opening of the stomach. It travels all the way through the stomach and then rests comfortably on the bottom if it.

In 2016 I had an accident on stage. I cut my oesophagus on 3 different places and had o spend a couple of weeks in hospital.

I immediately decided to carry on with performing but started a research into the reasons why the accident happened. My conclusion is there are 3 major factors at play:

- 1) Wrong equipment
- 2) Stress
- 3) Dehydration

Now dehydration can be induced by factors like not drinking enough, hot weather but also menstruation. Since my accident happened on the first day of my period I looked further into this and realised that not only the womb swells on during menstruation but also the oesophagus. It can swell so much that some women experiencing throat pain on their first day. So the first day of the Period Is a very bad day for sword swallowing.

This accident has lead me to pay more awareness on my period. In fact I am now monitoring it closely. I guess I took my own body for

granted and nearly had to die to learn about the importance of the female cycle find a deeper connection with myself.

*Scene 15: Fancys Scene plus graphics of words*

*LX 20 - Nurse*

Birth control you only have to think about 4 times a year? Sure You'd like to have kids eventually but until then, it's depo provera.

Depo provera is the only birth control method that gives you 99.7% effectiveness against pregnancy coupled with 4 times a year convenience. And it's reversible. After stopping you can become pregnant within a year. It's perfectly safe and has been tested and Used for over 30 years on women worldwide whether they knew it or not.

Side effect may include:

Breast cancer, osteoporosis, cervical cancer, weight gain, excessive bleeding, difficulty getting pregnant, thinning of vaginal tissue making it easier for hiv transmission, decreased sex drive (thanks a lot) suicidal thoughts.....

a 19 year old adopted Korean female with no known biological connections or family tree may experience existential crisis about her body and the importance of flesh connections as periods may stop altogether for up to a year ..... perhaps prompting her to question What are my functions as a cis female? Is my flesh made to make babies? .....In this world with so many ways to connect and find kinship and create alternative families, Can I be a free radical? Radically free? A single unit not bound to multiply?. .....If you've never thought or wanted to have children you may be perceived as a Disappointment, selfish, incomplete, deficient, childless, spinster and Feel punished for making what people view as a choice. Oh to be just called a bachelor. ....the convenience of not having a period may leave you feeling isolated and unable to connect with your body's rituals and leave you longing for one of the only things that provides communion with your singular family tree that is your body.

It's easy. Ask your doctor about depo provera

*Scene 16: Marisa Speech standing on slope with Ritual films split screen, Music: Evening Scars*

*LX 21 - Marisa slope*

What is a menstrual ritual, why did we make them and what do we hope to achieve?

We are the Menstronauts that meet every dark moon and create and perform politically engaged ritual menstrual actions in the landscape of London. We believe that disregard for the cycles of the human body echoes a disregard for the cycles of the planet and for each other. We seek to reclaim time through respect for the bodily cycles we evolved as humans, and for the original cultural means of counting time -- the waxing and waning of the moon.

Synchronise, Realise, Conceptualise, Revolutionise! Join us!

*LX 22(V) - As the SL Door opens – Activists Enter*

*Scene 17: Bleeding Activists: Masks, placards, blood illusions.  
Music: Evening Scars*

*LX 23(V) - As Fancy DSC – bright state*

**Fancy:**

As showwomen we have levitated over ancient relics.

As showwoman we have hung by our hair off of trees.

As showwomen we have dripped our menstrual blood on holy texts

As showwomen we have swallowed dangerous swords

As showwomen we have transformed our identities from those of which we were born.

But perhaps greater than all of these, our greatest trick as showwomen is that we perform an act of temporary death each month and then are miraculously resurrected. We regularly endure pain and blood loss of dramatic proportions. Together we prostrate our bodies to cycles of the moon. This astounding act of wonder is called non-other than menstruation.

**Marisa:** What if we could synchronise our bodies like one giant connected powerful snake.

**Rhyannon:** In line with the cycles of the planets and the tides just like the earliest humans.

**Nao:** Do you think we are selling you a snake oil?

**Marisa:** No! A brave old ecology for a brave old world

**Haitch:** Rise rise rise then in a sea of menstrual anarchy!

*LX 24 - on "Bloody" - bump up bright state*

**Missa:** The Revolution will be bloody.

**All Together:** The Revolution will be menstrual.

*LX 25(V) - As they turn upstage – red state*

*LX 26 - Post Show*

*End*

## Appendix 4

### DOCUMENTATION

[Trailer for Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman by Tom Cottey](#)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nhi\\_qDeKtYE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nhi_qDeKtYE)

[Film of full show Soho Theatre January 5th 2017 by Tom Cottey](#)

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bz1I9N3\\_z2ePQnJyNFZnTjVOWUk/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bz1I9N3_z2ePQnJyNFZnTjVOWUk/view)

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## Appendix 5

### SELECTED LONDON PRESS

Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*, December 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/dec/19/dr-carneskys-incredible-bleeding-woman-review-soho-theatre-london>

★★★★

#### **Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman review – menstrual mystery tour**

4 / 5 stars 4 out of 5 stars.

**Soho theatre, London**

Marisa Carnesky's exploration of the menstruation taboo starts off cheeky and turns into something downright hair-raising

[@lyngardner](#)

Mon 19 Dec 2016 14.33 GMT Last modified on Mon 22 Oct 2018 14.44 BST

A woman, naked but for a pair of blood-red shoes, walks to the front of the stage. She removes a lipstick from her vagina and applies it to her lips, transforming them into a crimson gash. Then she draws a scarlet line from her mouth to her pubis.

Welcome to the world of Marisa Carnesky and the Menstronauts, who meet monthly under the dark moon, discombobulating Southend's dog walkers and reclaiming their matriarchal heritage through ritual. The aim is to forge new futures – and that includes both babies and revolution. The latter is likely to be bloody.

There is something delightfully po-faced and deliciously tongue-in-cheek about this 75-minute oddity that begins with Carnesky on stage, as if giving an academic presentation, and turns into something far more cheeky and personal, eventually morphing into the downright hair-raising.

Carnesky has always been a supreme show-woman, with projects such as the fairground ride-inspired [Carnesky's Ghost Train](#) making theatrical capital out of the sideshow, feeding off their tawdry glamour and recognising the similarities between the 19th-century freak show and the outcasts of our own era. She has also always had a good instinct for taboo-breaking.

Drawing on the skills of an all-female group of live artists, Carnesky turns menstruation – a subject still seldom talked about publically – into a series of turns. A woman is sawn in half and put back together again not at the behest of the traditional male conjuror, but as a sign of renewal and rebirth. Performer H Plewis smears herself and the stage with red jelly that may – or may not – be made from her own menstrual blood. MisSa Blue swallows a sword, the length of which is determined by the stage that she is in her monthly cycle. There is some very unusual puppetry.

“Anyone on right now?” enquires Carnesky, and it’s hard to tell whether she’s joking or not when she announces that she hopes that by the end of the Soho run, the entire audience will have synchronised in harmony with each other. It may sound daft, and the show revels in its own off-beat strangeness, but there is a serious point to be made, too, that if we pay scant regard to our own bodily cycles, it may reflect a deeper disregard for the cycles of the planet itself.

While it celebrates the female body and its wonders, the show also has an emotional edge heightened around issues of conception and giving birth. This definitely isn’t all for laughs, particularly in the way it deals with the pain of repeated miscarriage, when blood is not a symbol of fertility but infertility.

With a twinkle in her eye and using images from Medusa to the whore of Babylon, Carnesky ponders female myth and speculates whether Jesus’ bleeding wounds on the cross are just an appropriation by the patriarchy of the great menstrual magic ritual. Maybe not quite magic but nonetheless a weirdly entertaining evening.

- At Soho theatre, London until 7 January. Box office: 020-7478 0100

## **Dorothy Max Prior, Total Theatre, January 2017**

<http://totaltheatre.org.uk/carnesky-productions-dr-carneskys-incredible-bleeding-woman/>

### ***Carnesky Productions: Dr Carnesky’s Incredible Bleeding Woman***

in [Reviews](#) | by Dorothy Max Prior | [No Comments](#)

What’s the time, Mr Wolf? Oh – it’s that time. Time of the month. Lady time. Time for your little monthly visitor. Dr Carnesky eschews these euphemisms, preferring to explore the metaphor of the snake shedding its skin, to emerge renewed. The mythology of menstruation is her subject, and we are treated to a potted version of her PhD thesis, slide-show enhanced, which rattles us through musings on female icons Medusa, Hydra, and Kali, to confront the conundrum of the stainless Virgin Mary, taking us eventually to the notion of the crucified, bleeding Christ as a prime example of womb envy. Blood, death, resurrection. Move over, Jesus – it happens to us all the time. We learn along the way that make-up – rouge, red lipstick – can be traced back to the symbolic smearing of menstrual blood on the face, at which point Carnesky suddenly, as if by magic, has a bloodied face and hands. ‘Wearing make-up, we are all menstruants,’ she says.

And, bloody Nora – she’s not alone. Bleedin’ women, all over the shop. One (Fancy Chance) with a lipstick hidden in her fanny, conjured up to enact a ritualistic rouging of her body. One (MisSa Blue) a sword-swallower who injured herself a while back when performing whilst menstruating – the oesophagus swells in sympathy with the womb, it would seem. One (HP Lewis) who performs a flowing dance with blobs of her own frozen menstrual jelly as a prop, reappearing later with the ultimate fertility symbol, her baby daughter Sula. One (Molly Beth Morossa) draws witchy circles of salt that she writhes within, whilst the screen behind her shows an image of a full moon. One (Rhyannon Styles) is seen on screen performing a rite of passage ritual on Southend beach, as her live self tells us that as a transwoman, she may not bleed monthly but she certainly experiences a cycle. One (Nao Nagai) who appears in a whole-body mask as a Yokai, a comedic phantom from Japanese folklore. Carnesky herself is seen on film bathing in blood as she tells us that she has experienced four miscarriages, and needed

to find a way to work through the disappointment of the arrival of the blood that signified that the pregnancy was ending. Voila – the Menstruants! Or is it the Menstronauts? They seem to be both. Regardless, this group of women (which also includes Priya Mistry, who is not performing this evening) have met regularly at Dark Moon – the time of the birth of the new moon – over many moons to research the lore of menstruation, to enact ritual, and to create performance.

The resulting research is presented to us by Dr Carnesky, resplendent in a midnight blue gown with red-sequined cape, who uses a form familiar from many of her previous shows, a performance-lecture that is both serious and tongue-in-cheek at one and the same time, interspersed with contemporary sideshow vignettes that both celebrate and subterfuge the popular theatre, circus and cabaret traditions of the show-woman making a spectacle of herself. ‘Do you believe in menstrual magic?’ she asks the audience. Yes, we shout – the loudest shout coming from a very young girl in the gallery.

The Doctor is on great form – her voice dips down into Thatcher-esque depths, then rises into girlish cheekiness. She moves from university lecturer mode to music hall entertainer with ease, addressing the audience directly: How many of us are on the rag tonight? Hands are raised. More than last night, Dr Carnesky observes with a twinkle in her eye – by the end of the run she predicts that the whole audience will be menstruating in synchronised harmony, and that includes the men.

Sometimes the performance mode moves into a poet’s declaiming rather than a professor’s explaining. The screen behind returns many times to the image of the moon, as we are reminded that observing its waxing and waning was the original means of calculating the passing of time.

The ‘lecture’, the live performance vignettes, and the still and moving images segue together seamlessly, for the most part – although some of the film work is not of the best quality. The music is a lovely mix, embracing fairground waltzes, sultry foxtrots, and Pierre Henry-sounding vintage electronica. All of the performance pieces are strong: I’m particularly blown away by Carnesky regular H Plewis – and let’s face it, you can’t beat a hair-hanging finale number (Veronica Thompson aka Fancy Chance on fine form).

It’s great to see this usually taboo subject bursting onstage in all its bloody glory, Dr Carnesky continuing in her ongoing quest to use sideshow, magic and popular entertainment forms to explore serious subjects. Here, not just menstruation and menstrual rights, but also female body shame, what it means to be ‘female’, issues around fertility, and the lost herstories of our matriarchal past. Yes, the revolution will be bloody – prepare to be cleansed and regenerated, shed your skin, and emerge born anew with the new moon.

**Maddy Costa, Exeunt, January 2017**

<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-dr-carneskys-incredible-bleeding-woman-soho-theatre/>

## **A visit from auntie Flo**

It’s a crisp figure Marisa Carnesky cuts, no matter how opulent her cobalt frock, gleaming red applique seeping across it like a stain. As crisp a figure as a favourite aunt, perhaps, the one you can rely on to give the most piquant answers to questions about love and life; or a bustling matron on a hospital ward, the one who’s wiped up more shit than you’ve had breakfast smoothies. Her specialist subject is secretions, too, although the front-bottom variety. You know: the blob, bloody Mary, that time of the month when the painters are in. Shark week. My god we’re inventive with [our euphemisms for menstruation](#).

Carnesky may be matter-of-fact, but that doesn't mean her appreciation for monthly bleeding is unpoetic. As mistress of ceremonies, what she delivers is essentially a condensed version of her PhD research, although much less dry than that suggests: a playful survey of mythology and religion and art that has, over the centuries, attempted to capture and control the menstruating woman, harness her power for patriarchy's advancement. Christianity, Carnesky argues, "stole the magic of our menstruation" by transforming the bleeding womb into Jesus' bleeding wounds. As if Mary's virgin birth and the punishment of Eve weren't already insult enough.

### **Surfing the crimson wave**

The incredible bleeding women – contrary to the title, there are seven of them, besides Carnesky herself – reclaim that magic by enacting menstruation rituals of their own devising: a carmine carnival of sword-swallowing, body-sawing and hair-hanging, carnal in its original sense of human, of the flesh. H Plewis ploughs into a red jelly that, she admits, with the ghost of a raised eyebrow, was mixed with her own menstrual blood, before introducing the being that once nestled in this womb lining: her little daughter Sula.

It's typical of her reverence for menstruation, and for the complexity of experience, that Carnesky keeps in view the notion that each period is a "small death": the shedding of an unfertilised egg – or, and this is another, more painful, social taboo, a fertilised egg lost to miscarriage. Including her own. There is much that is icky and sticky about this show, much that is cheeky and comic, but also much that prods at the heart.

### **The curse**

In the time between seeing the show and writing about it, I had my own festive period, whose arrival was heralded on Christmas Eve with a crying jag so uncontrollable it felt like vomiting. This is what my period does to me: it makes me miserable. Not necessarily while I'm shedding the blood itself, more in the rhythm of the cycle: the first slump will happen roughly 10 days before, and the second a day or two, although I've never had a regular cycle so can't even rely on that. I never used to talk about it, but reading Megan Vaughan's twitter feed, through which I've followed her adventures in cystitis, moon cups and indeed sore tits heralding imminent bloodshed, encouraged me to be bolder, not least in acknowledging the hormonal connection between menstruation and also-arrhythmic low-level depression. My reverence for monthly bleeding has, for most of my life, been non-existent, and with it my appreciation for the poetry of menstruation. Watching Carnesky and cohorts, I noticed anew my own fiercely internalised misogyny.

## Lady time

For the past couple of years I've been having an intermittent conversation with performance maker and excellent human [Emma Frankland](#) about feminism and transgender womanhood: about the performance of gender, passing as female, practising with make-up and more. It interested me that many things I experience as difficult in womanhood, she embraces with the fervour of new discovery. At one point, I mooted that [trans-exclusion among cis-female feminists](#) – from which I wish to distance myself, and with which I wholly disagree – might have its roots in a fury that transgender women haven't had to experience the curse that is menstruation. She, rightly, brushed me off: not all women menstruate, and after all some men do.

There is much that is wonderful about *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* – its wisdom, its celebration of fierce women, its worship of Kali and Medusa, snakes and dragons – but perhaps the most wonderful is its insistence that we “are all connected, all menstruate”. Several of the show's rituals were created by the sea, its tidal flow a natural partner to the body's flow of blood, and the piece presented by Rhyannon Styles is a hymn to both, a film in which she gives herself to the water's edge and it embraces her back. It is so incredibly right that one of the bleeding women is transgender, and that she talks about her own, individual experience of the menstrual cycle – a cycle we all live within, in the turning of the planet, the pull of the moon.

## Red army

As long as menstruation is gendered, it will remain a weapon with potential to demean and mortify women. Inspired by Carnesky to read some of that poetry about periods I've been dismissing for decades as, well, embarrassing pants, I came across [The Period Poem](#) by Dominique Christina, and lit up like a torch at the way she takes down a “twitter dummy” whose violent language about menstruation made her teenage daughter despair. Over on [Christina's blog](#), there's a link to a piece by her published by *International Business Times* (!), in which she, too, surveys the treatment of menstruation across multiple religions and finds it toxic in its misogyny. There is a glorious, gyno-centric feminism out there that I've been ignoring, and Carnesky has pulled me to it with the force of gravity.

The thing that makes her radical call to activism most attractive, however, is its inclusivity: not just of all humans, but the environment that holds us and keeps us. She jokes, during the show, that perhaps if she could get her entire audience to synchronise their periods by the end of the run, it might “change time and reverse the world order”, but beneath that is a more serious point: that the menstrual cycle can be seen, as Styles puts it, as a

metaphor for all ecological cycles, the natural rhythms of the planet that patriarchy and capitalism entwined are destroying in the hubris of declaring mankind – mankind, note – paramount. Carnesky isn't just out to break the taboo surrounding menstruation: she's calling for revolution, if necessary bloody, and offering tools through which to begin its march. And as the new year begins like the old, with news of a shooting in a nightclub, of a lone gunman opening fire in a public place and killing other humans with a peculiarly particular indiscrimination, I wonder: what do we have to lose?

*Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman is on at the Soho Theatre until 7th January 2017. Click [here](#) for more details.*

### SELECTED EDINBURGH PRESS

**Mary Brennan, Herald Scotland, August 2017**

[https://www.heraldscotland.com/arts\\_ents/15484120.fringe-physical-theatre-the-narrator-zoo-southside-dr-carneskys-incredible-bleeding-woman-pleasance-dollhouse-dance-b/](https://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/15484120.fringe-physical-theatre-the-narrator-zoo-southside-dr-carneskys-incredible-bleeding-woman-pleasance-dollhouse-dance-b/)

★★★★

TABOOS, especially those that society attaches to women's status and behaviour, have always set Marisa Carnesky's creative juices flowing. Her latest project is a further bravura episode in a series of transgressive performances where serious researches meet show-time glitz tinged with guignol dramatics and a whiff of carney sideshows. Now Dr Carnesky has turned her attention (and her PhD material) to the myths. moon-magic and physical facts of menstruation and – with five similarly frank and feisty Menstruants on-stage – she is celebrating the potent energies of women who bleed every month. If there's a mischievous, tongue-in-cheek air to her performance-lecture, the humour is unerringly calculated to debunk the superstitions and misogynistic attitudes that demean menstruation as something distasteful, not to be spoken of in public. Carnesky's witty, upfront riposte is that a woman's menstrual cycle is the life-blood of all humankind, a positive affirmation that is given unstinting (and often

gloriously naked) witness by the personal stories, re-enacted experiences and poetic rituals of the alt-cabaret performers who see, speak and show their red-bloodedness with powerful and affecting honesty.

Runs until August 28

**Ben Walters, Scotsman, August 2017** <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/theatre/theatre-review-dr-carnesky-s-incredible-bleeding-woman-1-4532391>

★★★★

## **Theatre review: Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman**

**Edinburgh Festival Fringe: Marisa Carnesky has a provocative proposition: all magic is menstrual. Every expression of mysterious power, every ritual that appeals to unknown forces, can trace its origin back to the natural monthly cycle of fertility and feeling that for millennia has been demonised, medicalised and made taboo.**

### **Pleasance Courtyard (Venue 33)**

The theory emerges from Carnesky's real-life academic research and she unpacks it in a heightened, cod-professorial style accompanied by images from mythology, religion, art history, underground culture and light entertainment. What might at first sound far-fetched coagulates into a powerful case.

This capacious imaginative framework is brought to life through a diverse series of short acts from Carnesky's fellow "menstronauts" – performers from the alternative cabaret scene who have been deeply involved with the project's evolution.

Their responses range from the intimate to the humorous to the surreal. Nao Nagai channels a shapeshifting serpent from Japanese mythology to bizarre, mesmerising effect while Fancy Chance illustrates the connections between menstruation and maquillage in deadpan yet

explicit fashion. Rhyannon Styles explores in friendly, conversational manner the metaphorical – and unexpectedly physical – implications of the subject for trans womanhood.

H Plewis sketches through dance an eerie, witchy domestic space of motherhood, movement and mess. And sword swallower MisSa Blue draws on a real-life brush with death to show periods have effects well beyond their usual associations.

Add in video, social activism, parodic stage magic, beautiful costumes (by Claire Ashley) and exposed, extraordinary bodies and you get a show of many parts.

Different audiences will find them differently stimulating, amusing, empowering and absurd – as is to be expected from a rich and distinctive approach to a neglected and marginalised subject. The result is deeply personal and highly political, a multidimensional journey by radical showwomen setting out to reclaim the power of nature and magic.

Until 28 August. Today 2pm.

### **Awards**

*NOT TELEVISION AWARDS – Edinburgh 2017:*

*Best radical feminist reclamation of a classic stage-magic routine*

*unconsciously rooted in patriarchal appropriation of menstrual ritual power:*

Thanks to **Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman**, sawing a woman in half will never seem quite the same again. Nor will lipstick, Medusa or oesophageal swelling. Also wins the award for cutest cast member.



## Appendix 6



This form is for staff and students in the School of Media and Performing Arts.

However, if your research involves human tissue (including blood) please use the form and process for the Natural Sciences Department. You can find this [here](#). For psychological research please use the forms and process for the Psychology Department. You can find these [here](#). If your research falls under the auspices of the Mental Capacity Act it must be reviewed by NHS NRES. You can find more information about this [here](#). If you are working with children or in healthcare you will need a current Disclosure and Barring (DBS) Certificate. You can find more information about this [here](#).

You may need to refer to a number of other documents as you complete this form. These are;

Data Protection Act checklist

MU Statement on the use of animals in research

Risk Assessment checklist

The University's Code of Practice For Research: Principles and Procedures.

The relevant Code(s) of Ethics appropriate to your research field and topic. You can find more information about this [here](#)

For advice and support in completing this form please contact xxxx

### Section 1 – Applicant details

<b>1.1 Name</b> Marisa Carr (artist name Carnesky)			
1.1b Department/role: Media and Performing Arts	1.1c Qualifications: BA Visual and Performing Arts, AHRC Fellow		
1.1d Email:marisa@carneskyproductions.com, MC1595@live.mdx.ac.uk			
<b>1.2 For Masters and PhD students</b>			
1.2a Programme of study/module: PHD	1.2b Supervisor and supervisor's email j.machon@mdx.ac.uk		
<b>1.3 Details of any co-investigators (if applicable)</b>			
1.3a Name:	1.3b Organisation:		
1.3c Role:	1.3d Email:		
1.3e Name:	1.3f Organisation:		
1.3g Role:	1.3h Email:		
<b>1.4 Details of External Funding if applicable</b>			
Does this research require External Ethics Approval?		Yes	No
If 'yes' please provide details: <b>The practice based performance element of the work has received funding from Arts Council England, independent arts organisation Duckie and support in kind from National Theatre Studios, Metal Southend and University College London Anthropology Department. Each</b>		x	

<b>organisation has approved the ethics of the project and their support of it within standard contracts and agreements.</b>		
<b>Section 2</b>	Yes	No
<b>2.1</b> The research DOES NOT involve human participants or animals (e.g., it is a theoretical discussion, review of existing literature, analytical and simulation modelling)		x
<b>2.2</b> The research involves only secondary data analysis. Approval to access this has been given. The research DOES NOT involve access to records of personal or sensitive information concerning identifiable individuals. The research DOES NOT involve sharing of confidential information beyond the initial consent given. <i>Please provide evidence of approval.</i>	x	
<b>2.3</b> The research already has ethical approval from another UK Ethics Committee (e.g., a UK HEI, NHS NRES) and the liability insurance is provided by the other body/institution*. <b>Arts Council England standard terms and conditions of funding and contract of funding</b> <i>Please provide evidence of approval.</i> <i>If MU liability sponsorship is required please complete all sections of this form.</i>	x	

**If you have answered YES to any of the questions above, no further information is required.**

**Please complete Section 9 and sign the declaration in Section 10.**

**If you have answered NO to any of the questions above please complete the rest of this form.**

**Section 3 – Details of proposed research project**

<b>3.1 Research project title:</b>	<b>Carneskys Incredible Bleeding Woman</b>		
<b>3.2 Proposed start date</b>	October 2013	<b>3.3 Proposed end date</b>	October 2016
<b>3.4 Main aims of the research project:</b> To reinvent menstrual rituals through new performance practices			
<b>3.5 Methods to be used:</b> Practice based research workshops in devising performative menstrual rituals and new performance writing were informed by feminist, live art and anthropological theory with selected artists utilizing their cabaret and circus skills.			

<b>Section 4 – Research Data Collection</b>	Yes	No
<b>4.1</b> Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the research project without their knowledge and consent at the time, e.g., through covert observation? <i>If 'yes', please provide justification and details of how this will be managed in order to respect the privacy of participants and in order to minimise any risk of harmful consequences:</i>		x
<b>4.2</b> Will the research involve methods of data collection where respondents may be identified? <i>If 'yes' please provide details:</i>	x	
<b>4.3</b> Will the research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given? <i>If 'yes' please provide details:</i>		x
<b>4.4</b> How will you ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act* in terms of anonymous data collection, maintaining confidentiality, storing, sharing and disposing of research data, and research dissemination plans? <i>Please see DPA checklist.</i>		
<b>4.5</b> Will you use an experimental research design (ie. any attempt at treatment/intervention in order to measure consequent changes in participants)? <i>If 'yes', please provide details of treatment/intervention:</i> <b>Monitoring changes in perception, physical symptoms and any synchronising of menstrual cycles within group.</b>	x	

4.6 Is pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study? <i>If 'yes' please provide details:</i>		x
4.7 Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life? <i>If 'yes' please provide details:</i>		x
4.8 What has been done to assess, obviate or minimise potential risks and how will participants be supported? <b>Full risk assessments and discussion with participants, full company approved performing contracts, post workshop and show discussion sessions.</b>		
4.9 Will the research involve the participation and/or observation of animals*? <i>Please see MU Statement on the Use of Animals in Research.</i> <i>If 'yes' please provide details:</i>		x
4.10 Might the research have a negative impact on the environment? e.g. air, water, land contamination, noise pollution, damage to habitats, plants or sites with sensitive features, or involve the importing of plant material, pests, soil or growing material into the UK. <i>If 'yes' please provide details:</i>		x
4.11 Will participants receive any reimbursements or payments? <i>If 'yes' please provide details:</i> <b>The practical workshops and performances are supported through small arts commissions from a number of funding sources which are existing Arts Council funding to my production company Carnesky Productions Ltd, commission from independent arts organisation Duckie, technical and support in kind from National Theatre Studios, Metal Southend and University College London Anthropology department. Performers receive fees from these sources for participating in workshops and performing in presentations.</b>	x	

#### Section 5 – Research Participants

5.1 Please indicate the types of participants that will be included in the research project: e.g. under 16yrs; patients; MU students; general public; specific groups; vulnerable adults unable to give informed consent <i>All research that falls under the auspices of the Mental Capacity Act must be reviewed by NHS NRES</i> The five project participants are working cabaret artists in London who were selected for their specific performing skills and interest in utilizing these skills in the research project.
5.2 Number of participants ( <i>for each type of participant, if applicable</i> ) <b>Five</b>
5.3 How will you gain access to participants? <b>They were approached as working artists through my professional theatre production company Carnesky Productions Ltd</b>
5.4 How long will each data collection session last, how many sessions will there be and where will they be located? <b>The initial sessions took place in 2015 over a three month period, the artists meeting twice a month on the full moon in London at my home and on the new moon in Southend at the artists residency house Metal.</b>

#### Section 6 – Safety and legal issues

6.1 Does your research project raise any safety issues for you and for your participants and if so, what mitigating actions will be taken? <i>Please specify:</i> <b>The stage presentation of the research involves performed live art and circus skilled sections. Performers involved hold their own full public liability and full personal injury insurance and are members of professional performers unions. Carnesky Productions holds its own full public liability insurance for public performance including the circus and illusion techniques used.</b>		
6.2 Does your research project raise any legal issues for you and for your participants and if so, what mitigating actions will be taken? <i>Please specify:</i>		
6.3 Do you hold a current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Certificate? <i>You will need this if you are working with children or in healthcare.</i>	Yes	No
		x

Section 7 – Research Collaboration	Yes	No
7.1 Does the research involve an international collaborator or research conducted overseas? <i>If 'yes', what ethical review procedures must this research comply with for that country, and what steps have been taken to comply with these?:</i>		x

Section 8 – Protocols for ethical research	Yes	No
8.1 Will you ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act? <i>Please see DPA checklist.</i>	x	
8.2 Will you aim to avoid harm to your participants?	x	
8.3 Will you inform participants that their participation is voluntary and that they have a right to withdraw from the research at any time?	x	
8.4 Will you ensure your research is independent and impartial?	x	
8.5 Will you obtain Written Informed Consent directly from research participants?	x	
8.6 Will you obtain Written Informed Consent directly from gatekeepers (if applicable)?	x	
8.7 Will you tell participants that their data will be treated confidentially and the limits of confidentiality will be made clear in your Participant Information Sheet, if applicable?	x	
8.8 Will you inform participants of the limits of anonymity they will be afforded as participants? (e.g., their identities as participants will be concealed in all documents resulting from the research)	x	
8.9 Will you provide a Participant Information Sheet?	x	
8.10 Will you provide a Debriefing Sheet? (if applicable)	x	

If you have answered **No** to any of the questions above, please explain below:

Section 9 – Other issues	Yes	No
Does the research project involve any <b>other ethical issues</b> not covered above? <i>If 'yes' please give details:</i>		x
Does the research project involve any sensitive topics or issues? If so, do you need to take any steps to address this? Do you require any support from the University to enable you to deal with this? <i>If 'yes' please give details:</i>		x

#### Section 10: Declaration – to be completed by all applicants

Please read and sign the following declaration before submitting the application.

#### In signing this research ethics declaration I am confirming that:

1. I have read and understand the University's *Code of Practice For Research: Principles and Procedures*.
2. I have read and understood the relevant Code(s) of Ethics appropriate to my research field and topic.
3. I understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that the research is conducted in accordance with the relevant Code of Ethics and with any other relevant professional/statutory/regulatory body Code of Conduct/ /Research Governance frameworks.
4. The research ethics application form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.
5. I agree to abide by the procedures which I have outlined in this form.
6. There is no potential material interest that may, or may appear to, impair the independence and objectivity of researchers conducting this project.
7. I have received and will submit evidence of authorisation from the relevant authorities to carry out the research with this application if applicable.
8. I agree to inform my Supervisor/School/Institute or Departmental Research Ethics Committee of any problems.
9. I understand that the project, including research records and data, may be subject to inspection for audit purposes at any time in the future.
10. I understand that personal data about me contained in this form will be held by those involved in the ethics approval procedure and that it will be managed according to Data Protection Act principles.
11. I will notify my Supervisor/School/Institute or Departmental Research Ethics Committee of any proposed changes to this methodology.

12. I have seen and signed a risk assessment for this research study (if applicable).

**For supervisors:**

1. I confirm that I have reviewed all the information submitted with this research ethics application.
2. I accept responsibility for guiding the applicant so as to ensure compliance with the listed research protocols and with any applicable Code(s) of Ethics.
3. I understand that research/data may be subject to inspection for audit purposes and I agree to participate in any audit procedures required by the University Ethics Committee if requested.
4. I confirm that it is my responsibility to ensure that students under my supervision undertake a risk assessment to ensure that health and safety of themselves, participants and others is not jeopardised during the course of this study.
5. I have seen and signed a risk assessment for this research project (if applicable).

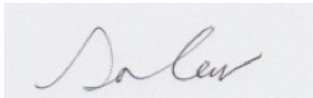
Signature: Principal Investigator/Supervisor



Print name: Josephine Machon

Date 11/02/2016

Student's signature (if applicable):



.....

Print name: ..Marisa Carr.....

Date: 09/02/2016. ....(dd/mm/yyyy)

**Please submit to your relevant School/Institute or Departmental Research Ethics Committee.**

Please attach the following documents where applicable:

1. Participant Information Sheet
2. Informed Consent Sheet
3. Debriefing Sheet
4. Completed risk assessment form
5. Copy of questionnaire/interview guide/details of materials for data collection

**School of Media and Performing Arts**

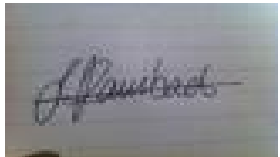
*Title and REC Reference Number:*

**Informed Consent Form**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions and seek further information.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
3. Any risks and benefits associated with taking part in the project have clearly been explained to me.
4. The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.

Sarina Kambach

09/02/2016



Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Marisa Carr (artist name Carnesky)

09/02/2016



Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

**School of Media and Performing Arts**

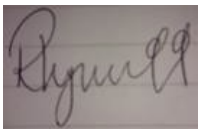
*Title and REC Reference Number:*

**Informed Consent Form**

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3. Any risks and benefits associated with taking part in the project have clearly been explained to me.
4. The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.

Rhyannon Styles

09/02/16



Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Marisa Carr (artist name Carnesky)

09/02/2016



Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

**School of Media and Performing Arts**

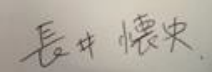
*Title and REC Reference Number:*

**Informed Consent Form**

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2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
3. Any risks and benefits associated with taking part in the project have clearly been explained to me.
4. The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.

Nao Nagai

09/02/2016



Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Marisa Carr (artist name Carnesky)

09/02/2016



Name of Researcher

Date

Signature



**School of Media and Performing Arts**

*Title and REC Reference Number:*

**Informed Consent Form**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions and seek further information.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.


Any risks and benefits associated with taking part in the project have clearly been explained to me.

The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me.

I agree to take part in the above study.

**Veronica Thompson**

09/02/2016



Name of Participant  
Signature

Date

Marisa Carr (artist name Carnesky)

09/02/2016



Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

**School of Media and Performing Arts**

*Title and REC Reference Number:*

**Informed Consent Form**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions and seek further information.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
3. Any risks and benefits associated with taking part in the project have clearly been explained to me.
4. The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.

Helen Rebecca Plewis

09/02/16



Name of Participant  
Signature

Date

Marisa Carr (artist name Carnesky)

09/02/2016



Name of Researcher  
Signature

Date

## Appendix 7

### Psychological Profile Form

#### Menstrual cycle attitudes and coping with discomfort or distress

Please complete each question as best you can. There are no right or wrong answers

How old are you?		.....	
How old were you when your periods first started (menarche)		Years	... months...
What is your ethnic background?		White	Asian
		Black	Other
Do you practice a religion?		Eastern	Western
		Other: .....	
What phase of the cycle are you in now?		Pre menstrual	Menstrual
		Post menstrual (middle of cycle)	Not applicable (Pregnant /Other)
How long are your cycles? (Number of days between each period?)		.... Days	
Have you ever experienced any menstrual problems?		Often	Sometimes
		Never	Never
Have you sought medical advice or treatment for menstrual problems?		Often	Sometimes
		Never	Never
Have you sought any other advice or treatment for menstrual problems?		Often	Sometimes
		Never	Never
Do you think you will (or continue to) have menstrual problems in the future?		Yes	No
		NA	NA
Have you ever experienced any pre menstrual problems?		Often	Sometimes
		Never	Never
Have you sought medical advice or treatment for premenstrual problems?		Often	Sometimes
		Never	Never
Have you sought any other advice or treatment for premenstrual problems?		Often	Sometimes
		Never	Never
Do you think you will (or continue to) have pre menstrual problems in the future?		Yes	No
		NA	NA
Have you experienced any other reproductive health problems?		Yes	No
Please describe		.....	
<p>Menstrual Attitudes Questionnaire: Please complete each question.            Rated on a 7 point scale ranging from: 1= strongly disagree To 7= strongly agree</p>			
A woman's performance in sports is not affected negatively by menstruation		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Women are more tired than usual when they are menstruating		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I expect extra consideration from my friends when I am menstruating		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
The physiological effects of menstruation are normally no greater than other usual fluctuations in physical state.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Menstruation can adversely affect my performance in sports.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I feel as fit during menstruation as I do during any other time of the month.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I don't allow the fact that I'm menstruating to interfere with my usual activities.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Avoiding certain activities during menstruation is often very wise.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I am more easily upset during my premenstrual or menstrual periods than at other times of the month.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I don't believe my menstrual period affects how well I do on intellectual tasks.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I realize that I cannot expect as much of myself during menstruation compared to the rest of the month.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Women just have to accept the fact that they may not perform as well when they are menstruating.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Menstruation is something I just have to put up with		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
In some ways I enjoy my menstrual periods.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Men have a real advantage in not having the monthly interruption of a menstrual period.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I hope it will be possible someday to get a menstrual period over within a few minutes.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
The only thing menstruation is good for is to let me know I'm not pregnant.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Menstruation provides a way for me to keep in touch with my body.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Menstruation is a reoccurring affirmation of womanhood.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Menstruation allows women to be more aware of their bodies.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Menstruation provides a way for me to keep in touch with my body.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Menstruation is an obvious example of the rhythmicity which pervades all of life.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
The recurrent monthly flow of menstruation is an external indication of a woman's general good health.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I can tell my period is approaching because of breast tenderness, backache, cramps, or other physical signs.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I have learned to anticipate my menstrual period by the mood changes which precede it.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
My own moods are not influenced in any major way by the phase of my menstrual cycle.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I am more easily upset during my premenstrual or menstrual periods than at other times of the month.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Most women show a weight gain just before or during menstruation.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Others should not be critical of a woman who is easily upset before or during her menstrual period.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Cramps are bothersome only if one pays attention to them.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
A woman who attributes her irritability to her approaching menstrual period is neurotic.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
I barely notice the minor physiological effects of my menstrual periods.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Women who complain of menstrual distress are just using that as an excuse.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Premenstrual tension/irritability is all in a woman's head.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7
Most women make too much of the minor physiological effects of menstruation.		1	2
		3	4
		5	6
		7	7