

THE MAGDALENE MYSTERIES

By Antonio La Cava

Who was the real founder of the Church? What is it true in the controversial hypothesis that it was a woman, and not the apostle Peter, the leader of the Christian community at the beginning?

That woman, in the opinion of some, was Mary from Magdale, known as the Magdalene, the sinner of the Gospels; the first woman to see the risen Jesus, a woman freed by seven devils and that, according to some Apochrypha, would have to succeed to the Messiah.

To give an interpretation different from the holy texts – coming into the limelight with *The da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown – about the role that the Magdalene could have had after the Christ's death, is the one by the company *Vocal Motion Elastic Theatre* in *The Magdalene Mysteries*.

Following a phenomenon of media attention about a historical indefinite character exploited by speculators and fiction writers, actually *The Magdalene Mysteries* has a more intimist approach, far from the aim to charm the audience through the conspiracy theories of the history of Christianity, and betting on the expressive performing of its actors, dancers and singers.

In fact *The Magdalene Mysteries*, which is an "imaginary journey across the life of Mary Magdalene" is a show that cannot be labelled in a definite genre, where the arts of dance, song and acting interlace.

The art director, Jacek Ludwig Scarso, by drawing on canonical texts (as the four Gospels) and on the apocryphal ones (as the Gospel of Mary Magdalene), has told the story of this mysterious character, seen not as a simply repentant sinner, but as a bold and charismatic leader, "a rival of Peter in the leadership of the Church", but also a woman tormented by her past, her doubts, from her being woman in a time where women had no voices.

The music, liberally based on extracts from the liturgical songs of Hildeergard Von Bingen, selected sections of the Misa Crolla – wonderful synthesis between sacred and folk music written by the contemporary Argentinian composer Ariel Ramirez – as well as

traditional spirituals, are not a background in the show but an important part of it.

There is not an imbalance between acted, danced and sung parts, but they interlace, crating a new drama. "Song and contemporary dance were introduced as narrative, rather than decorative elements, to allow scenes to take place through these, to avoid crating new text additions".

But it is in its expressive richness that we may found the weak side of this production, sometimes slow and uncoordinated.

In fact to perform are professionals, from different artistic fields, not suitable for a show similar to a musical but different for the specialisation of the actors.

If Christ, played by a good Theo Lowe, is a dancer that performs only through dancing, the movements of his body and his intense expressiveness of his looks does not counterbalance the moving act by Sandra Shirley as the Magdalene, creating thus a deep hanging in the acting, an imbalance among the characters, between actors and singers, dancers and supporters.

Good performance by the actor Vincent Jerome as Peter, and resounding the soprano Maya Sapone's voice who, with the other singers, has given a deep sense of spirituality to the show.

The most moving act of the production has been the dialogue between Magdalene and Peter, the latter depicted not as a faithful disciple but as a man of doubt, of insinuation and of contrast. It is him that points at Magdalene as a visionary, jealous that the Messiah has chosen a woman first to show himself after his death. And for this reason Mary Magdalene shouts against him, asking "Who are you to reject me?", and then recall him that *he* denied Christ three times.

But it is the same Magdalene to be overwhelmed from her anguish by her three Shadows, played by three dancers, which reflect the interior distress of a woman who centuries of history separate by us. A woman who might have crossed the path of Christ and maybe destined to mark the steps of History.

But that will be, for ever, in the history of mysteries.

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