

**Caroline Horton is a writer, performer and theatre-maker based in Birmingham, UK. After studying English Literature at Cambridge University she trained in theatre with Philippe Gaulier in Paris. An associate artist at The Bush Theatre and the Oxford Playhouse, Caroline has devised and written several shows which have toured widely both in the UK and abroad. Her first one-woman show, *You're Not Like the Other Girls Chrissy*, earned her The Stage Award for Best Solo Performer at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2010 and later a nomination for an Olivier Award (2013). More recent shows include *Mess* (2013) – a comic exploration of the subject of anorexia – and *Islands* (2014-15), which focused the world of tax havens. Caroline's solo show *Penelope RETOLD*, a fresh take on the Homeric Penelope, was commissioned by Derby Theatre and premiered there in 2014; it toured venues across England in 2015.**

**This interview with Emma Bridges was recorded in Derby on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2015, while Caroline was in rehearsal for her tour with *Penelope RETOLD*.**

**EB.** Today I'm in Derby to talk to writer and performer Caroline Horton, who is currently in rehearsal for *Penelope RETOLD*. The play, which was specially commissioned by Derby Theatre, premiered here in 2014, and will soon go on tour across England. Caroline devised and wrote *Penelope RETOLD*, and performs solo as the title character.

Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today, Caroline. I wonder if I could start by asking you what it is about Penelope that you feel makes her such a compelling subject, and why this particular character from ancient mythology might still seem relevant to us today, in the twenty-first century?

**CH.** It was Sarah Brigham, the artistic director at Derby Theatre, who approached me with the project – it didn't come from me initially, but I got really hooked after that point. Sarah was doing a main show of the *Odyssey* at Derby and she wanted a female solo show in the theatre studio, and that was the brief which I got. I was interested in what they were doing with the *Odyssey*, and that involved looking at it as the story of a soldier coming home from war, and bringing the war with him – his struggle to reach home in a broad sense, emotionally, rather than just the geographical sense of 'home'. They were talking a lot in their research process about how his encounters along the way – with Circe, or the Cyclops, or whoever – related to his mental struggles. So I did quite a lot of reading initially about the experiences of military spouses; it was quite eclectic research, but really interesting. I read some books specifically on Americans returning from the Vietnam War – there's a lot of literature on that, so that's what I came across – and one particular book about Vietnam wives.<sup>1</sup> There was a particular chapter in that which somehow spoke to me of Penelope's experiences, on wives who wonder whether to stay with their husbands or go; I found that really affecting, to read about that pull, that feeling of being torn, which lots of them have.

**EB.** What was your experience of Penelope's story before this? Had you read Homer before, for example, or did you approach her story from a different angle?

**CH.** I did English Lit at university, the Cambridge English Lit degree, where there was one big paper, on tragedy, where you have to read everything written by the Greeks. I'd read bits

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<sup>1</sup> A. Matsakis, *Vietnam Wives: Facing the Challenges of Life with Veterans Suffering Post-Traumatic Stress* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Baltimore: Sidran Press, 2006) .

before but that's what made me really dive into it, when we were encouraged to read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But that was when I was twenty or twenty-one – I'm thirty-three now so could sort of remember it, but it was when I was rereading the *Odyssey* that one part jumped out at me. I got to the point where he [Odysseus] comes back and you're like, "yes, he's come back – great!" and *then he leaves again*. I'd completely forgotten that, and I just couldn't get past it – it's too awful. Lucy [Skilbeck, director of *Penelope RETOLD*] and I were just talking about it again yesterday and I was saying how it's as if you've done your prison term, it's your release day, and then you're going back to the beginning of your prison term.

**EB.** Do you think that Penelope comes across as being quite resigned about that?

**CH.** Well, I don't know. I'd say I'm not sure. I think we get so little of her response. We reread it yesterday in rehearsal and Odysseus tells her this after she's said, "Hold on, whatever it is you're hinting at, tell me now," and then he says that he's going off with his bloody oar to find these people who don't know what an oar is to make sacrifices and appease the gods. He doesn't even say, "and then I'm *definitely* on my way home"! It's completely open-ended – what a nightmare! Then he says that when he went to the underworld Tiresias told him that he would end his days peacefully in old age, and the sea would take him. Penelope just says in response to all of this something like, "Well, it's good that you know you're going to get old, so you'll find some peace." And then they go to bed. After *twenty years*! Oh my God, what a nightmare! So maybe she's resigned, or maybe she just operates on two different levels; there's what's on the surface, and there's also a deep pool of turmoil underneath. This related very strongly for me to the 'stay or go' chapter in the *Vietnam Wives* book which I mentioned earlier: trying to hold everything together on the surface and be what everyone expects you to be, and then underneath there's a tumultuous emotional life, where you're pulled one way and another, and there's hate and rage, and fear and loneliness, sadness and depression – all of that, and you're pulled from one to the other.

**EB.** And that's the point at which we meet Penelope in your play?

**CH.** Yes, it's at that point – that endless moment after he's left again – that I've put the show. Then on the face of it we wake up with her. She's on a bed, but it sort of looks a bit like an island. It's quite expressionistic, I suppose, in that I wasn't really interested in retelling the *Odyssey*; I was interested in delving into her experience, so we go on a huge rollercoaster with her through all these different states, and she relives a lot of stuff. So we relive with her a bit of her wedding, which is the part I've just been rehearsing; we relive a few times the moment when she sees him again after he's been away for the first time; we relive the moment where he tells her he's going away again. She churns all of this around. We hear a little bit about her childhood as well – not that we know much of it – but there's the myth that her mum was a nymph and very much of the sea. The sea is very present throughout the show. Then we have more moments which I just invented in my head – so there's one bit where she's having a dialogue with herself but it's almost like she's having a dialogue with a therapist, or counsellor, and again it's that stay/go dilemma. There's another bit where she sings a song about how perfect and faithful Penelope is, but she might possibly be being ironic – or at least, if not ironic, there's a real anger in there, underneath. So those are all the different influences and colours that come into it.

**EB.** So where does your Penelope end up after she's been through all of this?

**CH.** Well the end of the play continues to pose that question, “Will she go?” I think we build towards a point where it feels like today’s the day, but I think at the end we really don’t know. When we spoke to people after the play’s 2014 run, some thought, “Yes, she *definitely* goes,” but other people said “No! *Why* doesn’t she go?” That’s what we wanted – we didn’t want it to be straightforwardly hopeful. There’s a bit in the *Odyssey* where she wishes for death; that stood out for me, although it’s curled up with a load of other little experiences rather than being a big section of its own. Penelope exists in these tiny little excerpts and I suppose I wanted to give her a fuller voice.

**EB.** Is there something about Homer’s characterisation of her – or lack of it – which invites that kind of imaginative response? Do you think we almost have to project our own ideas and emotions onto her?

**CH.** Yes, definitely. Exactly that – being outraged on her behalf, because she doesn’t seem to express it. You go “What? Come *on!*” It’s like watching your friend blithely put up with a relationship that is unbearable. And yet it felt really important as well to show that there is something that holds her to him, she’s not just being dutiful. She wants it to work and she wants it to be good – so we’ve got the push/pull. I think that was what was really understandable in that chapter from *Vietnam Wives*: it felt like I as a reader desperately want her to leave, but at the same time I understand why that is almost unimaginable. Something we’ve been talking about as we’re reworking is what that moment is where there’s the potential for her to actually leave, because in the show that I’ve made, it’s not like there’s going to be an event. I’m not really interested in something simple like, oh, she gets a telegram to say that he’s died – but what is that little window that somehow opens to her and we think, “Oh my word, she’s going to go?” We’re also talking about how her world has shrunk and shrunk and shrunk, and at what point she stopped going out, or at what point she got really locked in – and what it is that we need to see. At the moment, the show ends with her talking about going out to swim in the sea. Obviously we don’t see her do that, but we feel like that’s what she might be doing. Hopefully that doesn’t mean she’s going to swim off and drown, but maybe it does. It seems like something opens in her mind at the end. Whether that’s a death wish or a wish for a different life, well, I think it depends on who you are in the audience, and what your own story is.

**EB.** So how are you thinking of playing it this time around?

**CH.** What we’re still searching for as we’re reworking is what is that little thing. It might be something simple... Initially she’s in this big pouffy skirt which looks like the underskirts of a wedding dress, but then underneath she’s got long johns and a vest that are quite grubby, and underneath that she has a swimming costume. I ultimately end up in the swimming costume, and we were playing this morning with the idea of whether instead she just feels it, and realises that she’s always had the possibility of going... Something as simple as that, but it’s that fascinating thing about the mind, that when you can’t see that you have a choice, you cannot make that choice. So that’s what we’re playing with, teasing it out a little bit more at the moment.

**EB.** So it’s as if the clothing represents the different parts of her psyche, or the different layers of her character?

**CH.** Yes. It’s like she takes off some of the shackles, but then, underneath, the swimming costume is a bit of a surprise to her. I’ve been thinking a lot about friends, or past

relationships of mine that have had an element of not being good for you, but for some reason you're still there. My sister very recently was in a relationship like that – it only finished at the end of last year – and I remember her inability to see that she could have a different existence. That was something which it was impossible to give her – she had to get there herself. In the end she just had to move away, and that happened almost as if it wasn't a particularly different event, but it was in the move away that she could see the issues. It's like a little crack in the door, and you realise with surprise that the door's open. It's the prison of our own devising.

**EB.** You talked earlier about your rereading of the *Odyssey*, having studied it quite a long time ago and come back to it more recently. I'm curious as to whether you engaged with other reworkings of Penelope's story, or whether you consciously avoided those. The obvious one is perhaps Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, but also I wonder whether you've encountered other versions. For example, I've recently been reading a volume by an American poet, Jehanne Dubrow, called *Stateside*, in which she writes in the voice of a marine's wife and weaves themes relating to Penelope in and out.

**CH.** Fascinating – I hadn't heard of that. I didn't read Margaret Atwood, mainly because I didn't want to get side-tracked by it. I operate like that with anything I'm doing – I'll look for influences and inspiration but not too directly as there's a risk of not being able to get that out of my head and making my own thing. So I read the *Odyssey* and a lot of things about military spouses as well as watching a hell of a lot of stuff on YouTube. There's a thing called the Military Spouse Tag which is fascinating for that whole thing of keeping the surface really shiny and this [*makes frantic paddling gestures*] going on underneath. There are all these American military spouses just like, "I'm, like, SOOO happy, but we don't know quite when he's home." You're seeing this person in such pain, and they're keeping this image going. I also delved into my own experiences of long distance relationships as well as talking to someone who is also an actor, Daisy Leverington, who is the Duty Manager at Derby Theatre and whose first marriage was to someone in the army. She was happy to have a really frank discussion. My own husband was also away for long chunks of time last year to study at the theatre school in France where I'd studied, and I think that caused us a lot more problems than we expected. It was really interesting for me as I was making the show in between two big chunks of him being away – I did crazy things like move all the furniture around, or take a load of stuff to Oxfam, completely change my hair, buy new clothes, as though I was defining something. I talked to Daisy a lot about those acts of putting myself in control of my own world, even though I'd sometimes feel that control had been wrested from me by someone else and the pain that caused. So things like that then inform a scene.

**EB.** What about the process of reunion? It's intriguing to me that often – especially for people who have no experience of a long-distance relationship, or in particular a military relationship – there's an assumption that it's a moment of pure unadulterated joy, perhaps because we see in the media a lot of heartwarming scenes of military reunions. Actually, that's the point at which for a lot of couples, new challenges begin to surface. Do you think we get a sense of that in the *Odyssey* when Penelope keeps Odysseus at a distance, saying that she doesn't recognise him?

**CH.** Yes, definitely, and that's in the show in its own way. Daisy and I were also talking about that moment where they [absent husbands] come back and they're suddenly in *your* house, and you think, "It stopped being *our* house while you were away." That's there for Penelope, and I love that moment with the bed. That's why the bed became for me this thing

on which she was stuck. When she threatens to move the bed out of the room it feels like her having a jab at him, and a very effective one, out of pain, not because Penelope's being an idiot, but sort of, "How do I deal with you being here again, when you don't belong here any more?" and, "I'm glad you're back, and yet...and yet..." I was interested also in the feeling of being cut off that Penelope is experiencing. She's very alone at this point – it feels like it wasn't always like that but her world gets smaller. Her son grows up, he kills the maids with whom she already had a dodgy relationship anyway. Even the suitors are gone. These populations vanish, then Odysseus goes again, and the second time he leaves, who is there? Telemachus has grown up and is being a bit of an asshole to her these days – this sort of mimicry of his dad, wanting to be his dad, and Penelope just dismissed and put in her place. That's something we've been talking about a lot this time around as well – if she was lonely before, now it's on a whole new level. For another project I've been doing a lot of research into suicide, and suicide attempts, and a psychologist I was talking to who works with suicidal adolescents used an extraordinary phrase about being "held in mind". If we feel that there are some people who hold us in their mind, we're much safer in terms of suicide risk; for Penelope that has been depleted and depleted and depleted. She's so isolated now that it's hard to know how she would hold on.

**EB.** I'm also curious about what you said a little earlier about military wives as having this outward persona which shows them as coping, and everything being OK, when actually under the surface everything is in turmoil. Do you think that comes across in Homer's version of Penelope, and how do you translate that into your own version?

**CH.** I think you see both – in Homer in the parts where she presents herself to the suitors, or where she first encounters Odysseus again, there's a lot that is unsaid, but you do also get the scenes of her throwing herself on the floor in her bedroom and revealing the pain underneath it all. But for us, she's at a point which is way beyond that, but she reminisces about it. There's a little scene, for example, where she's mocking the "everything's all shiny" approach of the "Military Wives' Club", as she calls it. She's playing a character who gives instructions and tips to them on how to cope. She's really really jolly, and it's about how to be a successful military wife. That was influenced as well by conversations I had with Daisy, who didn't feel like she was able to fit with that lifestyle – which must be true of a lot of people, I imagine, in different ways. One of the elements of that doubleness of Penelope is also the way she's held up in contrast with other Greek women – so in the underworld we hear about different wives like Clytemnestra, then there's virtuous Penelope. We have a jazz song – it's quite near the end so Penelope is very emptied out emotionally – and it goes, "Oh that is she, the one you should aspire to be, Penelope! She's not too hot to cause a stir but my, you'd be lucky to have her. Born faithful and faithful she'll be, my darling depend on Penelope." Underneath she's as complex as anyone, and it's interesting how the men in the *Odyssey* just give her this label, and as a woman reading it I think, "Yeah, she might be saying that, *but...*" Then when she says that she's going to move the bed it seems like a simple sentence but I reckon that's pretty loaded.

**EB.** I wonder whether you could say something about the ways in which you updated this for a contemporary audience in terms of the setting. For example, I know that your Penelope posts a profile on a website for military wives, and that she listens to the shipping forecast for news of Odysseus. How does that whole idea of the marriage of ancient and modern work, and was it a difficult thing to achieve?

**CH.** Well I suppose because the structure of the show is almost dreamlike, and impressionistic to a degree, it's not by any means inaccessible. It's very much with the audience, but it is as if we're in this character's head and – as I explain it to myself – she's in that endless moment after he's gone again. I think if you wanted to push it you could say that she's existed in that waiting from then until now as a myth. It's actually really fun mashing up the two – so there's a point where she's filming herself doing an interview about her experience of being a military wife, and some of the questions are “How did you meet?” or “How did he propose to you?” and she says, “Well, he didn't, he won me in a race.” We play with the naughtiness of doing that. I felt that I wanted to have fun with it, to bring a lot of me to it, and to find my way into it because it wasn't initially my project so I had to find my own response to Penelope. I think very strongly always with something that's staged, especially something as personal as a one-person show, you have the performer's self and life so present with you anyway as well as telling the story. I instinctively feel that there is room for both. But in terms of the logic of it, it's that Penelope is forever stuck, waiting, because that's where Homer leaves her and we don't see her again. So that's where I in the twenty-first century then met her; in the play I joined them up. When I devise things I play a lot of games, so there'll usually be a game going on underneath it – sharing a little secret with the audience as Penelope's character operates in different layers – so she's pretending at one point to be in a cabaret bar and flirting with audience members and then she sings a song about being Odysseus' fabled wife. It didn't feel complicated. We had to get clear about what it was logically for us, and then once we'd done that we could be quite free with it. I wanted people to experience her mental state, and her battle, rather than retelling the story of the *Odyssey*.

**EB.** You talked about the use of the bed trick, and the bed is an important symbol in the *Odyssey*, being used to signify marital stability as well as the sense of rootedness which represents home for Odysseus. Did you also think about the symbolism of Penelope's loom and how that relates to the story?

**CH.** Actually we've been thinking about whether we need to have more of the weaving in it, and at the moment we're thinking not really. There are elements of it there, for example there's this poem where she's talking about him going off and she imagines a thread connecting them and then the thread snaps. Also the fact that it's this stay or go cycle, so she is constantly creating something and then she goes back the other way and changes it; so subtly it's there, but we're still playing with whether we want to bring that element out a bit more.

**EB.** So did this version evolve in the process of performance too, and do you anticipate that it might change during the course of this run, or is it something that you will have nailed down before you open and it will stay the same for every performance?

**CH.** Usually it won't change. I might make tweaks, because it's only me and if there's something I want to try I tend to try it. I'm a perfectionist! The first four days when we did it I came in saying to Lucy [Skilbeck] that I'd rewritten the ending; it wasn't totally different, but it was trying to get the balance of it right. I'll probably play a little but I won't drastically change anything, unless we have a disaster where the audience look at me blankly at any point!

**EB.** How does the performance space influence the way in which it's received by the audience? I know you're going to be performing in a range of different venues, from studio theatres to village halls and so on. Does that affect your relationship with the audience?

**CH.** The important thing for us for this one is a feeling of intimacy, so last time around we had a horseshoe of the audience quite close to the bed, and all of the action happens on the bed. I talk to the audience at points and I need them to be there with her, so the less of a barrier we have, the better. At points the house lights come up, like for example in the military wives bit I'm pretending a member of the audience is called Amanda and has a fondness for red wine. It's very playful but at the points where she's really raw and vulnerable I don't want the audience to be able to escape from that; I want them to be in the room with her.

**EB.** One final thing I'm curious about is how you see the relationship of this to the other things you've done. Before we started recording you mentioned *Islands*, which has just finished – from the reviews I've read that sounds very Aristophanic, by the way – and so I wonder where *Penelope RETOLD* sits in relation to the rest of your work?

**CH.** You're right – *Islands* is Aristophanic in many ways! In a way *Penelope* was a departure as it's the first time I've been asked to make a piece by a specific theatre. Usually I'll initiate my own projects and build a team, or another company will get in touch and ask me to write or direct something for them, or I'll be asked to perform a specific role within someone else's project, so the set-up of this one did feel a bit different. I have done a few one-woman shows before, though – the first show I did under my own name was a one-woman show called *Chrissy*, and I've done a couple for other companies. It's a form I really like, and get quite excited about, and I'm interested in telling female stories, or giving a female take on stories. That was interesting for this project as the *Odyssey* is such a male book, and there are these little cracks in it where we see a bit of Penelope or a little bit of Eurycleia, so it felt quite exciting to say that I was going to rip all of those out and make them into something big, something strong and full of life.

**EB.** Thank you so much, Caroline. It's been fantastic to talk to you. I'll let you get back to your rehearsals now – I hope the show goes really well for you and am looking forward to seeing it in Leeds later in the run.