

# How Can the Dying Teach us How to Live?

written by Mick Gordon



I think about death often. I used to think I was unusual in this, and that thought frightened me. But now I know that I'm not unique in imagining my own death, or the death of my loved ones. Apparently, most of us do. I don't know why I was surprised by this, many great works of art deal with life in relation to death.

*On Death* was born of the wish to lesson my own fears of death and dying. But it was inspired by a remarkable woman called Marie de Hennezel. Marie is a psychologist who worked as part of a team of doctors and nurses in a hospital for the terminally ill in Paris. She is also a delicate and perceptive writer, and it was through one of her books, *Intimate Death*, that I first came to know her.

*Intimate Death* tells of Marie's experience in accompanying patients and friends in their final days. It is a compassionate and intensely emotional account of their, and her, experiences. She introduces us to people, shares with us their stories, and encourages us to enter into an intimate, imaginative relationship with them. It is a beautiful, painful, joyful memoir. But above all, it is a lesson for the living.

The experience of sharing the intimate deaths Marie witnessed, gave me relief and freedom of spirit. Somehow during my reading, a concomitant narrative began in my mind, where I was being accompanied on my own imagined death by Marie and her patients. Strangely, this gave me a space to consider the thing I was deeply frightened of, and this brought me calm and somehow, a sense of joy. It also fired my imagination as a theatre maker. I wanted to share this space I had discovered.

I began working with Marie and a group of actors in late 1997. Very quietly we explored the presentation of some of the intimate deaths about which Marie had written. We had a moving and difficult time but felt that our work was coming across as second-hand. We met with bereavement counsellors, staff from London's Trinity Hospice and nurses from the London Lighthouse and they helped us greatly with our work. However, it was the experience of meeting and working with the terminally ill which allowed our work to enter a new phase.

Humbled, shocked and instilled with a new confidence of purpose we returned to the characters in Marie's book. This time, however, instead of trying to reach them, we brought their stories closer to our own. We would share our selves, our own intimacy. Each actor brought the characters to life, using and developing their own imaginative engagement, using their own speech patterns, introducing their own idiosyncrasies. And we decided to bring Marie to life, in front of her.

Three great ladies, Selina Cadell, Guby Lloyd, Sarah Kestleman and Gillian Barge played Marie at one point or another. But it is to the memory of Gillian that this theatre essay, *On Death*, is dedicated. Gillian Barge created her Marie during one of her several brushes with death. She did so with grace and authority, teaching me and her other colleagues a great deal about what it means to be alive. I remember you often.