



# THE OTHER SIDE OF THE UNDERNEATH

*A film by Jane Arden*









# The Other Side of the Underneath

By Penny Slinger

Much in the way Alejandro Jodorowsky approached the making of *The Holy Mountain* (1973), the making of *The Other Side of the Underneath* was a journey of self-exploration and self-discovery. An experiment on many levels – in community, in co-creativity, in identity.

The film grew out of the Holocaust theater production of *A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches*.

When Jane Arden held a meeting in London's Covent Garden in 1970 to create an all-women theatrical troupe, Liz Danciger and I were the first to raise our hands. Liz and I had become friends while students at Chelsea College of Art. She was much more politically motivated than I was and the political meetings she took me to left me cold. I felt they were only dealing with people from the neck up, whereas I was looking for a more complete experience. This meeting was different as it was focused on bringing a group together to make a creative statement about women's plight. When I heard Jane speak, I was sold.

I was fortunate enough to achieve early recognition for my art. I was included in the exhibition *Young and Fantastic* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1969, the year I left college, and Sir Roland Penrose became my patron. I had written my thesis on the collage books of Max Ernst and considered myself a modern Surrealist. Although I went on to solo exhibits at the Angela Flowers Gallery, I did not feel the sense of connection and exchange as an artist that was at the heart of the Surrealist movement. I wanted to move beyond my own personal ego and lend my creativity to a group.

At this time I was living with filmmaker Peter Whitehead. When we met I was working for Vaughan Rogasin Films (who distributed the films of Kenneth Anger) for the summer. I gave up the post graduate position I had been offered at the Royal College of Art Film School to make films with Peter – but nothing materialized; he took up falconry and I joined Holocaust.

Rehearsals for the production of *A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches* generally took place at Jane and Jack Bond's beautiful house by the canal at Little Venice. I suggested that Susanka Fraey (Su) also join the group.

I had met Su at Chelsea College when she walked out of the entrance exam. When I heard that a few weeks later she tried to cut her wrists, my initial attraction to her became a strange fascination. How could anyone actually do that to themselves? We had become friends and I thought Holocaust would be a good vehicle for her to express herself and to work through her issues.

Nothing about our approach was traditional – our rehearsals were more like workshops. The basic brief was to delve into ourselves to discover our deepest traumas and denials, then pull them out to shape and crystallize them into creative offerings. It was gut-wrenching and cathartic – it was meant to be. Our aim was to unearth all the pain and anger that was bottled up inside and reveal the seething underbelly of our own psyches and, by extension, the collective consciousness/unconscious. There were a couple of professional actresses in the group, but otherwise most of us had not performed before.

The process itself I found revelatory and fun. It was intriguing to watch the layers of the onion peel away – in myself and others. Jane was good at holding space to let someone unravel before her without flinching. I felt I was serving an apprenticeship.

On a typical day we would have a morning workshop, break for lunch, then go back to work, often with a puff of marijuana to help us go deeper. And help it did! As a student I had not wanted to smoke as I associated it with 'dropping out', and I was very ambitious. I was in awe of how the groundwork laid in the morning sessions would just open up to whole new levels, whole new depths, in the afternoon. The process was truly a group effort and we felt empowered by being able to bring forth and offer our own creativity.

At the time, R.D. Laing was revolutionizing the field of psychiatry with his Anti-Psychiatry movement. He lived side by side with his patients and dissolved the patient/psychiatrist roles. His work was a guiding force. Jane was also familiar with the work of Arthur Janov, around *The Primal Scream* (1970). In terms of the arts, there was Peter Brook's theater production of *Marat/Sade* (1967), set in an insane asylum, and, of course, the work of the Surrealist and Dadaist artists and their films, such as those of Buñuel and Dalí.



If we were mental patients, we viewed the whole world as insane and we were using ourselves as examples to reveal the collective malaise – a malaise centered around the treatment of the feminine, and the roles it forces us to play. On a flyer for Holocaust's *A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches*, which played at the Open Space theatre, London, and at Edinburgh Festival, we were all branded with these roles – collude, corrupt, submit, deform – and wore with pride these marks of shame.

Jack and Jane decided to make a film (*The Other Side of the Underneath*) of the play. A pub in Wales was being rented and, for the course of the filming, we were to live as a collective: all the women, plus the men and women who formed the production team. My partner Peter did not want me to participate and I felt very torn, but the experiment seemed just too intriguing and I felt I had to see through what I had started. I had to go.

The experience of making this film turned out to be a major life experience.

Jane set the film in Wales, where she was brought up. It became more of a vehicle for her to express her own journey than was the case with the theater production. Elements of the play were translated into textures of this surreal and grueling offering, which documents the mental landscape of a young woman as she struggles on the edge of schizophrenia. Inner and outer worlds clash and collide, merge and intersect, in this bleak and frightening world. The scenes are cut together with group therapy sessions of the women in the cast. As the lines blur between sanity and madness, fantasy and reality, so the film blends performance and documentary footage. 'Alice through the looking glass' without the candy coating.

The film starts with a young woman being pulled from dark water and resuscitated. There is a horrific parody of a Punch and Judy show: Punch, the male archetype, is always beating up weak and submissive Judy, the female archetype who here becomes merged with another archetype, the ventriloquist's dummy. This is a nightmarish pantomime of pantomimes.

In my first scene I am engaged in the 'mirror game' with Su. The game consists of trying to find our reflection in pieces of broken mirror strategically placed on each other. The game turns edgy, then violent. I try to defend myself with a knife but when I am willingly seduced by a kiss, the tables turn. We were looking at where reflection becomes competition, and at the transfer of power. I start wearing a trilby hat which Su has on by the end of the scene.

Next is the 'Dirty Girl' scene. When we created *A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches* I performed this piece on stage. *The Other Side of the Underneath* presents a much more graphic and gut-wrenching – literally! – version. Set in a shrine we created, with cross and candles on the altar, the vignette is based on exposing the schizophrenia of a set of beliefs that sees the body, a source of pleasure and allure, as unworthy and unclean. In my dramatic rendition I play out the duality of socially engendered self-disgust versus self-pleasuring and the use of feminine wiles.

In the second part of the scene, Jane hands me the sacrament in the form of bread and wine. I gobble it down desperately, only to regurgitate it again and again. The symbolism of this intense portrayal was the rejection of the body of Christ if served by a religion that denies the body. In this context, the mother is also rejected, and a glyph created for the compulsive syndrome that later came to be known as bulimia, where women eat to fill the void inside but reject the food to maintain body images manufactured by society.





The 'mock wedding' was filmed at night in front of a church. My character from the play, 'The Shadow Man' (representing a woman wanting the power of a man) played the groom, and as he/she kisses the bride, we are showered in chicken feathers. Two key ceremonies in life are blended in this vignette: the wedding and the funeral. In a classically surreal moment, Su is lowered into the grave in her wedding gown while the child throws yellow petals. The following graveyard scene, where a wide-eyed Su moves amongst the tombstones – images of war projected on her while marching songs play – was an homage to those brides made widows by war.

'Castrating Mum' was designed for the theater production. Taking it to a Welsh working men's club was quite an experience. The 'Gypsy Party' was even more intense, at least for me personally. To set the stage for this, I want to illuminate aspects of how we worked on this project.

The therapy scenes were filmed in a number of sessions. We were delving into our personal and collective psychoses. Who are we and how are we seen by others? Is that reflection what defines us? These were the questions we were looking at, within the group, and as a microcosm of the world. As the sessions advanced, a number of us took a prescribed dose of psychedelics – first time for most of us. We wanted to go deeper. My session was a private one and, although a number of sound bites from that experience are woven into the audio track at various points, none of the footage appears in the movie. I was asked to go into the journey on the theme of 'oppression', but my experience was very far from that. So, although not suitable for the theme of the film, my journey has been a touchstone for me throughout my life. I found my own unshakable center and connection to source, which transcended all neurosis.

Before the 'Gypsy Party', we were making plans for the finale of the film, which involved pyrotechnics being set up at the colliery so the tower at the mine would be burning. There was a lot of emotion being stirred up around this as it brought back the memories of mining disasters where many had lost their loved ones. I had been asked to perform on my stilts on a platform of the tower. Due to the expansion of consciousness that we had been experiencing during the process of making the film, I was highly sensitized and felt convinced that things were psychically set up for there to be a ritual sacrifice (!). As I suffer from vertigo, I didn't want it to be me, so, for the first time in the production, I refused.

The 'Gypsy Party' was set up to gather the outcasts and those generally not accepted by traditional society. Jane felt somehow more at home amongst them and had a great time at the party. On the other hand, when I saw a fight break out between two young men and I looked at their bloody faces

and the dazed look in their eyes, I felt they had become the unwitting pawns of our drama. I did something I didn't think myself capable of: I went in between the fighting men, holding them apart, and asked, 'Why are you fighting? Do you know why you are fighting?' In the movie edit I can be seen being pulled off by another man, but I did prevail and stopped the fight.

Jane asked me to do an erotic scene with her partner, Jack Bond. Because I dislike dishonesty and subterfuge, I called my partner Peter before the shoot. He didn't want me to do it and told me to come home. I explained that he could come and do it with me instead, but he didn't want any part of it. I went through a torturous decision, deciding I needed to finish what I started and do the scene for the sake of the art.

As we are walking up by the river in our white robes, I hesitate and am overwhelmed by the thought of doing this. It was only when I felt Jack's fear of inadequacy, somehow representing the fears of all men in that moment, that made me proceed. There has been much controversy about whether we were actually making love or not. I think we will leave it in the land of rural legend...

The scene with Su on the cross, representing the crucifixion of the feminine, adorned with blood-stained sanitary pad, is not without its humor. The women needed a bit more muscle to lift the cross. However, in a number of places it is evident that our helper, Kristof, is not 'one of the girls'!

The movie ends with a life cast of Liz Danciger's face being held up. As 'Visual Consultant' for the movie, I was responsible for the life casts and collaborated on many visual aspects of the film.

Jane says, 'Tell me about your head'.

Liz answers, 'I don't know very much about my head'.

*The Other Side of the Underneath* is neither pretty, nor nice. It is challenging from beginning to end, both as a movie and as a production experience. However, as I wrote at the time, (in *Ink Magazine*):

'I have the greatest respect for Jane Arden to whom the initial vision of the theater belongs. She is using her profound insight to take us all further along the path of self-discovery and to make concrete forms out of what is exposed... We must dissect the reality of being a woman from those comforting myths which obscure women to men and to each other, and result in losses on both sides. I believe that if we succeed in our vision, the explosion will reverberate beyond us all.'



I wrote in an article in *Cosmopolitan* in 1974, 'The experience was too intense. After the film was completed, the group itself broke up.'

A tragic codicil is that Martin Pullinger (who appears briefly in the film in the gypsy scene), the husband of Sally the cello player and father of Sophie, their little girl who appears throughout the movie, set fire to himself in Holland Park a few months after the completion of the film. When I heard the news, I cried and cried, feeling that he was the ritual sacrifice which, for some unknown reason, had somehow been called forth.

I was also sad to hear that in 1982 Jane took her own life.

Peter and I tried to make things work, but the trust was gone. It took me several years to process the whole experience through my personal self-psychoanalysis, distilled in my book *An Exorcism*, a photo romance published in 1977 with a grant from Sir Roland Penrose's Elephant Trust.

The experience of Holocaust and the making of *The Other Side of the Underneath* profoundly impacted on me in deep and lasting ways. During the making of the movie, when cast and crew were gathered one night, everyone so immersed in the vision that all ego games had fallen away and each shone with the light of their higher selves, I looked around and thought, 'Yes, this is how I want to live. This is the kind of community I want, centered around manifesting something bigger than ourselves.'

We boldly went where others fear to tread. At the time, it felt it was what we had to do. Although *The Other Side of the Underneath* has its darkness, in lifting the veils you also let in light.

Penny Slinger is a visionary multi-media artist. She is the co-author/illustrator of several books, including the best selling *Sexual Secrets*, *The Alchemy of Ecstasy*. She is also known for her pioneering work in two- and three-dimensional collage. She has produced and directed several films/videos: *Visions of the Arawaks* (1994), *Dance of the Cosmos* (2000), *Goddess Juice* (2003), *Rainbow Body Awakening* (2009) and *Polynations* (2009). Her work can be seen at [www.pennyslinger.com](http://www.pennyslinger.com), [www.arawakart.com](http://www.arawakart.com) and [www.goddesschannel.com](http://www.goddesschannel.com)



## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE UNDERNEATH<sup>x</sup> a film by JANE ARDEN

'Jane Arden's film *THE OTHER SIDE OF THE UNDERNEATH* represents a major breakthrough for the British Cinema. The film juxtaposes visions of personal hell with group psycho-therapy sessions presided over by Jane Arden herself. The terrifying fantasy sequences are utterly convincing images of madness from the inside'.

'A descent into what is called 'madness' or 'schizophrenia' demands a radical break from cinematic convention and Jane Arden has achieved a major breakthrough. The movie follows the death and rebirth of a human being in terms that echo the world of R D Laing and David Cooper. At the same time it promises a rebirth of the cinema. It is a terrifying, haunting and enriching experience'. *David Will, Co-director of the Edinburgh Film Festival.*

Jane Arden takes a dazzling plunge into the mind of a schizophrenic girl. *Ken Wlaschin, Director London Film Festival.*

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