





Photos by Aenne Pallsaca Photography

They Called Her Salt

A multi-sensory opera experience for women with learning disabilities and friends

14 February 2020, 5:45pm

Applecourt Arts Theatre

Performance content devised by: Angela, Sophia, Kathleen, Theresa, Blue, Liz, Susan and many others

Stage direction and story: Florian J Seubert

Production management: Gabriele Neuditschko

Choreography: Tae Catford

Dramatherapy support: Jaqueline Francis

Pianist: Clíodna Shanahan

Illustrations: Selma Hafizovic

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Director's Note

“intense” “singing and it makes you happy” “sharing” “enjoyment” “heartfelt” “happy” “big expression” “opera feels like a holiday” “embarrassing” “friendly” “what life is about” “touches hearts” “dancing” “gathering”

What is opera? That’s what we asked the members of Powerhouse during an inclusive masterclass with opera singer Catherine Carby at Goldsmiths’ Grant Wood Theatre in November 2019. The sound bites above were their answers.

What is opera for you? A piece of music theatre that involves visual opulence, a classical spectacle that features trained voices, Italian tenors, Wagnerian Valkyries, an affected social stage? Or just simply: storytelling with music and sound? Our opera experience is a diverse response piece to these aspects. It was created in response to a canonical work: Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* (1607) by using elements from its story and music as underscoring. The *toccata* and *ritornelli* from its overture inspired some of the physical theatre routines you can witness during our performance. Opera communicates on many levels. Therefore, we expanded the forms of communication into the tactile and the physical and played with the olfactory and gustatory. And we added the character of a cherry tree to include the environment into the inclusive equation. The non-naturalistic sound aesthetic of operatic voices with their distorted vowel qualities gives heartfelt voice to the environmental wails of a cherry tree in danger of extinction. Our compositions are made of tastes, sounds and touches. You will encounter multi-sensory leitmotifs that reoccur like a classical combination of notes. Our guiding material of salt was used in almost every of our devising workshops: It materialises as the salt sculptures of our main character you see in front of you on your tables. It becomes audible as part of the ocean-shakers we crafted out of empty DVD boxes and coarse sea salt to conjure up the rough sound climate of a home by the sea, and it occurs as inspiration for aria-style lyrics and the illustrations you see as backdrop on stage.

Our opera experience communicates by engaging all the senses and thereby raises the question of what opera can be as an inclusive, accessible happening for differently-abled people, at the beginning of the 21st century. Your senses will be immersed in an interactive *gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art, that features a performance score of expressive choices co-created together with the women from Powerhouse and their guest artists. One of them is visual artist Selma Hafizovic who brings our fictional universe to life in form of a painted diorama that keeps boundaries between body and environment fluid. *They Called Her Salt* is about listening to different stories and different sounds in a collaborative multi-arts dialogue. Opera is a visual art form and some of the artworks we created in our nine workshop sessions between November 2019 and February 2020 ended up in Selma's visual compositions. Opera is 'sharing', opera is a 'gathering' of difference brought together under an all-encompassing artistic roof.

About the story

The story of *They Called Her Salt* also presents a new, inclusive take on the canonical subject matter, as it retells the Orpheus myth from the perspective of a differently-abled woman. I relocated the story to an abandoned village on the British coastline. Our protagonist Salt is a contemporary incarnation of Eurydice. Pepe, her friend with his special fit for playing the traverse flute, a modern version of Orfeo. The mythological mash-up recycles plot elements from two stories that focus on taking away female agency through 'punishment' with stillness and invisibility: the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and the biblical story of Lot's wife who was turned into a pillar of salt. In both stories, the female characters were punished through 'disablement' by a male authority. From today's perspective, this power dynamic demands re-examination, so does the understanding of disability. Our story recasts the act of looking back not as misbehaving in the face of an authoritative order but as effective visual communication and the gentle demand for remaining visible. In our workshops, we reflected upon the healing associations of salt and the abilities that hide in different levels of body mobility, from the still to the machine-like. Our story celebrates non-verbal, non-violent resistance and defiance as ultimate agency in the face of established behavioural scripts.

They Called Her Salt is a diverse audio-visual collage that brings the classical together with the previously unvoiced. After decades of avant-garde experimentation, opera has the potential to be open and inviting as a multimedia art form that is in a love affair with the breaking of norms as much as with keeping them. How better to celebrate an alternative Valentine's Day? By re-examining what counts as 'music' in the context of opera and by demonstrating how silence and subtle sounds are also powerful tools of storytelling, we are diversifying a classical art form and make it accessible for a new audience. We are telling our story with multi-sensory music. *They Called Her Salt* is opera. Welcome to our world and happy Valentine's Day.

Florian J Seubert, 14th of February 2020, London

Powerhouse Performers



Angela



Angelica



Blue



Kathleen



Liz



Nicola



Susan



Teresa



Sophia

...and many more

Actresses



Chioma Uma (Narrator 1)

Chioma Uma graduated from Rose Bruford College with a degree in Actor-Musicianship. She made her first professional onstage debut as 'Hattie' in *Kiss Me, Kate!* at The Watermill Theatre and had her first leading role playing 'Cinderella' in *Cinderella the Rockin' Panto!* last year. Additionally, Chioma has composed and musically directed for theatre in the past, recently co-commissioned to compose for Ockham's Razor's new touring show 'This Time'.

Chioma has perfect pitch and Chromesthesia which frequently and unapologetically contributes to her creative flair.

She was classically trained before her innate desire for jazz took over. With her extended love for minimalism, Chioma aspires to become a film and TV composer as well as pursue a career in theatre

Zeynep Kaparoglu (Narrator 2)

I am a theatre-maker, performer and a teacher based in London. After receiving my PhD from the LSE and having received extensive training on Physical Theatre & Movement in the last 11 years, I trained in Embodied Poetics as a teacher of Jacques Lecoq's pedagogy on movement, improvisation and devised work.

Previously, I trained and worked with directors and teachers inspired by the work of Grotowski including The Open Program of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards on Voice & Movement; Emma Bonnici on Polyphonic singing; and Manuela Rugierro on physical-theatre-inspired interpretations of the classical texts like 'Macbeth' and 'Six Characters in Search of an Author'.

My practice is inspired by a passion for understanding the magic of human existence with all the complexities and messiness attached to it. To this end, I am currently training as a Voice Therapist to continue exploring the power of storytelling with singing and movement in different contexts.





Pepe the flute player

Opera Support



Clíodna Shanahan (Piano)

Irish concert pianist and organist Clíodna Shanahan began her musical education in her native Limerick followed by attendance at the Yehudi Menuhin School and the Royal College of Music, London. Clíodna is much in demand as a soloist, chamber and orchestral musician across Europe and the US, performing regularly with such ensembles as the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, London Sinfonietta, and the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House. She has recorded for SOMM, LPO Live and NONESUCH, and is featured on numerous film scores. Her great passion for 20th century and contemporary music has led to her giving many UK, US and world premieres, and she enjoys collaborating with other artforms, most recently working with English National Ballet in the run-up to the Company's 70th anniversary celebrations. In addition to her performing career, Clíodna is committed to music education. She holds the position of Lecturer in Piano at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and gives masterclasses every year at the Ingenium Academy International Summer School for Music in Winchester. In her spare time, Clíodna is a member of Siswá Sukrá Javanese Gamelan, with whom she recently toured Indonesia.

Catherine Carby (Mezzo-soprano)

Australian Mezzo-soprano Catherine Carby studied at the Canberra School of Music and the Royal College of Music, London. UK performances have included **Rodrigo** *Pia de'Tolomei* and the title role in *Iphigénie en Tauride* and **Diana** *La Calisto* for English Touring Opera, **Nita** *The Mountebanks* recorded with the BBC Concert Orchestra, **Antonia's Mother** *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, Royal Opera House, **Brangäne** *Tristan und Isolde* for the Teatro Sao Carlos, Lisbon, and **Katharina Schratt Mayerling** for the Royal Ballet, London. Recent engagements include **Cornelia** in Handel's *Giulio Cesare* for ETO, **Minerva** in *The Return of Ulysses* (ROH), **Siegrune** in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* (ROH) and mezzo soloist in the Verdi Requiem (Sydney Symphony Orchestra).

2019-2020 appearances include **Penelope** in Monteverdi's *Return of Ulysses* for Pinchgut Opera, Sydney, concert engagements for the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, State Opera of South Australia, and **Emilia** in Verdi's *Otello* and **Annina** in *La Traviata* for the Royal Opera House.

Catherine sang for and with the performers from Powerhouse on the first day of the *They Called Her Salt* opera project.



Project Management

Have you ever wondered what goes on behind the scenes of an arts project? What happens when nobody is looking and how do you make sure everyone arrives at the right spot at the right time, having dutifully rehearsed their lines? The report of our project manager Gabriele can give you some useful insights about what goes on behind the scenes.

When Florian J Seubert asked me if I were interested in running an arts-council funded project with him, I did not take long to make up my mind. As an arts marketer whose speciality is making classical music and opera accessible to people from all walks of life, this was the perfect opportunity to not only learn more about how to share my enthusiasm for opera, but also to top up my reservoir of anecdotes I can finish with the words 'this clearly shows that opera is for everyone'. Also, I just love challenges and working on projects with limited time, budget, staff and any other resources you could think of presents a particular kind of challenge. Projects are like bootcamps for arts administrators. You have to know everything about everything and if you don't, you better learn it quickly. Thus, the project not only taught me how to draw up contracts, but also how to coax people into responding on time without alienating them in the process, and how to produce 70 cardboard cherries in the shortest amount of time possible.

One of the aspects I liked best about the project was that the lines between performers and arts managers were so fluid. Whereas in much of my other work I am asked to steer clear of anything that resembles a stage, I got to sing and dance, to jump and shout, in other words to express myself in a myriad of ways that I would not usually do. Working with Florian and the rest of the team was just wonderful. As the weeks passed by and everyone became more comfortable in their roles, you could feel trust between everyone grow and people's creativity began to soar. It was wonderful to see how everyone pitched in when there was a problem that needed solving, from the big ones concerning finances to the small ones concerning lack of milks for hot chocolate. Throughout the process, the women of Powerhouse inspired me to keep going and to give my best.

It fills me with a lot of pride to be able to share the result of all this hard work with you tonight. As you write your wishes on the cherries, please bear in mind that each and every one of them was lovingly crafted by hand.

Creative Team



Florian J Seubert (Project Director)

Florian J Seubert works as a director and writer for performance in London, where most of his stories are set. For his stage productions, Florian often explores music theatre-making as inclusive practice. He regularly collaborates with local artists and charities in East London such as Powerhouse for Women, Arc in the Park and ReWrite for his non-mainstream and disability theatre projects. His last inclusive storytelling project *The Fool Eater* (funded by the Arts Council England) dealt innovatively with themes of urban loneliness and mental wellbeing in form of a performance event between immersive happening and dramatherapy. Florian works as a facilitator for Opera Holland Park and teaches performance praxis and musical theatre analysis at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Gabriele Neuditschko (Production Management)

Gabriele is a London-based freelance arts marketer and arts administrator who mainly works with small organisations in the classical music sector. She firmly believes that classical music is for everyone and thus has a particular passion for audience development. Back in her native Austria, Gabriele worked in international relations before moving to London to get an MA in arts management at Goldsmiths University. She has worked in marketing and development for the London Mozart Players and the Crafts Council, and done research into cultural policy at Goldsmiths University. Much to her flatmates' delight, Gabriele loves to sing and play the violin in her free time.



Selma Hafizovich (Illustrations)

Selma Hafizovich is a London-based artist. Selma studied painting at the School of Visual Arts in New York and is a recent graduate of Goldsmiths MFA programme with gender as the focus of her work. Her practice questions whether an artist can control the response of the viewer and explores what might be considered voluntary and involuntary involvement. Her art often plays with the idea that in considering her work, you might complete the creation the artist has begun.



Tae Catford (Choreography)

Tae has been working with Powerhouse for Women since 2012, and is committed to the role of coordinator, saying that "Opportunities to make a real difference to people's lives come around so rarely in life that I have to give it my best shot". She has a certificate in Teaching in the lifelong learning sector, Level 2 qualification in Working with People with learning disabilities as well as a Diploma in Therapeutic life story work. She is currently training to be a relational therapist. Previously she worked as a freelance trumpeter and has a degree in Jazz music.

She secretly dreams of moving to a croft in the highlands of Scotland keeping sheep but knows that really she would miss everyone at Powerhouse and hate the midges.

Jacqueline Francis (Dramatherapy Support)

I worked within a local authority funded healthy lifestyle and exercise on referral programme for nine years involved in the development of behavioural change strategies. Through working with people at risk of coronary heart disease and various co-morbidities. I gained insight into the attendant and underlying psycho-social challenges that they faced, such as low self-esteem and depression. I completed an MA in Drama and Movement Therapy (Sesame) at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama University of London 2015 and work as a movement and drama therapist in both clinical and community adult mental health settings with clients with complex conditions, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and clinical depression.

I am currently completing a social psychology PhD. My research focuses on physical activity behavioural change, inter-group perception in relation to physical activity and perceived barriers to physical activity, specifically for members of the Black African and Afro Caribbean community.

Whilst working on *They Called Her Salt* I've enjoyed exploring the therapeutic and performative relationships between voice, movement and psycho-social challenges.



Ariane Nixon (Lighting Technician)

Ariane is a freelance lighting technician and programmer. She grew up in Newcastle-upon-Tyne but moved to London to study Lighting at RADA. Since graduating she has worked on projects across the UK covering a large range of performance genres, companies and venues.

About Powerhouse for Women



Powerhouse for Women is a women's only charity based in Newham, East London which aims to empower women with learning disabilities, who as a group are marginalized and disadvantaged in general society. It was originally set up in 1995 as a refuge, and in 2004 it was registered with the Charity Commission. Powerhouse provides a safe, welcoming and educational space offering 1-1 support, group activities, training and outings. These are discussed and agreed at the monthly action and ideas sessions and include art, music, theatre trips, trips into the community, learning to read and to count, sports and dance. Powerhouse currently opens two days a week and is the only organisation in Newham offering services specifically for women with learning disabilities. The objectives of the organisation are to support the women's independence and choice; to enable peer support and to empower women with learning disabilities to speak up about issues that are important to them. We are using a client-centred approach, by working with the women 1-1, regularly asking for suggestions and feedback from the group and by having more flexibility and choice in the sessions

Many of the women who attend have experienced abuse and harassment in the past and are socially isolated. This results in them being isolated and more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression, have difficulty in expressing themselves as well as not being able to access opportunities that many people take for granted, such as college. During the regular individual planning sessions, all of the women cite the support they receive as one of the main reasons they attend Powerhouse, saying they have "a lot on my mind at the moment" and need to "let off steam". The activities and outings give the women a stable environment in which to discuss discrimination, hate crime, self harm and related issues as well as have fun, to make friends and to make choices and decisions about how they want to live their lives.

The age range of the women is 18+ years old and from different cultures and backgrounds, as well as different impairments such as visual and hearing. This does provide a challenge to bring the group together, we do this through providing different activities through the session, having diversity through the volunteers, working with different organisations such as the National Citizenship Scheme, using a range of music for dance etc and involving different ways of communication such as basic Makaton and using touch.

We have built up a team of dedicated volunteers over the last year, mainly from Newham Active Volunteers but also from theatre makers, trainee therapists and local badminton players. The volunteers are vital to the success of the project and mean that there can be more flexibility in the sessions as well as offering the group a wider social network. A recent volunteer stated that "Attending Powerhouse has changed my orientation about life and this had motivated my decision to change my career pathway."

Volunteers



Olivia Spence

I am currently in my third year at Goldsmiths University studying Drama and Theatre Arts. For the past few years I have worked with many youth theatre groups, primarily Sounds Like Chaos based in South East London. From growing up having cared for my autistic brother and teaching him the right skills, my passion for working with disabled young artists has grown. I have worked with various groups of all ages including Heart n Soul, WAC ARTS and Powerhouse. I hope to excel in this field once I have graduated. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time working with the women in Powerhouse and hope to continue working with them for future projects. The amount of talent and passion for the arts they have is impeccable and I can't wait for others to be able to witness this!

Yean Zou

Yean Zou was born in China. She currently studies drama & theatre arts at Goldsmiths University. She got a degree and a diploma of music education from Nanjing Normal University in China. She worked as a lighting designer in Nanguo drama society. She was a volunteer of an organization which helps disabled people in China.



Lauren Tranter

Hi! I am a second year Drama and Theatre Arts student at Goldsmiths University. I am interested in devising and creating work with community groups, especially focusing on women's groups and experiences. I am also interested in pursuing directing after university, and how to make accessible theatre that incorporates communities at its inception, as opposed to bolting it on as an after thought. I've treasured working with all the lovely ladies at Powerhouse and getting to know each other through song and dance. I've had so much fun on this project and I hope you all share in it tonight!

Environmental Report

One of our characters is a cherry tree in danger of becoming extinct. We used this character as an impulse to discuss contemporary issues of environmental awareness, deforestation and recycling with our group. The cherries gave voice to our own worries about and wishes for the environment. Here is the report of our volunteer Olivia Spence:

"In one of our sessions, the focus was centred on environmental issues. It was important to give awareness to the women of the effects global warming is making in this crucial climate. During the session, to approach such issues, we first introduced the women to Greta Thunberg, many of whom had not heard of her before. As a symbol of a youth climate change movement, it was important for them to relate current issues with the younger generation who are striving to have their voices heard. The women found it interesting to begin exploring how their life choices can affect the planet on a large scale. Along with this, we spoke about the destruction of trees and the impact this has on our health and ecological system. To put this into a workshop, we each made our own cherries to make a wish of how we felt about the situation, and this was to be used in our production. Some of the wishes included "Please save me", "Don't destroy our homes" and "Save the planet". To accompany this, we were all given a Capri Sun to drink while we designed our cherry wishes. Not only was this nostalgic for many of them, but also added a taste-element to give a fruity flavour dimension to our multi-sensory exploration of our cherry characters. It also reminded us of an object that physicalised questions of recycling and the importance this has on our environment. On asking the women what they would do with an empty Capri Sun, Liz replied "Recycling", and this was acknowledged in agreement with the other women. With all these elements, drinking the Capri Sun, making our cherry characters and generating conversation about Greta Thunberg, we created a moment of environmental awareness through tactile engagement."



Sustainability Statement: While preparing for the final performance, it was of great importance for us to find sustainable solutions for stage design and decorations. Not only did we try to use recyclable materials, but where possible, we used items we already had at home instead of buying new ones.

Our Supporters

This project would not have been possible without the support of some very generous organisations and individuals. We would like to give a special thanks to:

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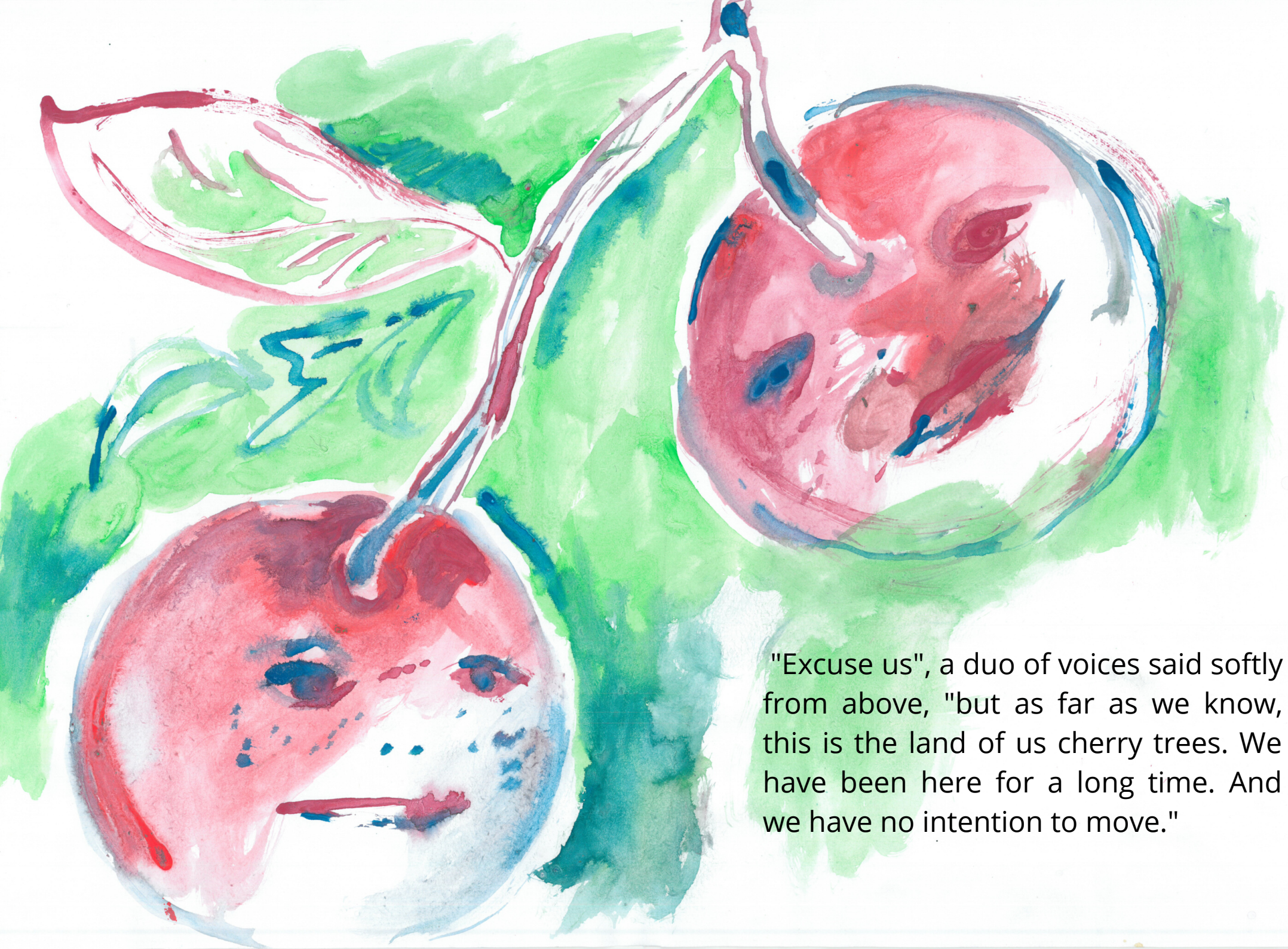
Catherine Carby

Dr Guy Stevenson



The general comes from the underground





"Excuse us", a duo of voices said softly from above, "but as far as we know, this is the land of us cherry trees. We have been here for a long time. And we have no intention to move."