# Program Notes for Mark Adamo’s *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*

# The Journey to Be Fully Human by Kayleen Asbo

Few figures in history have caused as much controversy, confusion and passionate devotion as Mary Magdalene. Though she appears in only a mere dozen references in the New Testament, Mary Magdalene holds a larger and more pivotal role than any other woman- including the Virgin Mary. The Canonical Gospels of the Bible (*Matthew, Mark, Luke* and *John*) are remarkably consistent in depicting her as simply the faithful follower of Christ and the primary witness to both the crucifixion and the Resurrection, but the portrayals of Mary Magdalene that have emerged since the New Testament was penned between 50-100 AD have strayed far from that singular vision. The images that have been constructed in her name over the centuries run an extraordinary gamut: from virgin princess to weeping whore, flagellating ascetic to emotional hysteric, charismatic celibate preacher to pulchritudinous prostitute. In each era, she has carried what Carl Jung would call the shadow of the culture, particularly in her artistic portrayals. She has represented sexuality in an era when the body was taboo, emotion during the Age of Reason, and mysticism during an age besotted with rational science. In our own time, Mary Magdalene has been re-envisioned and embraced as a mother, a wife, an initiator of Christ into Egyptian Goddess mysteries and a Tantric priestess. Is there another woman in all of literature and art who has embodied so much passion- and so much paradox?

While there were literally hundreds of accounts of the teaching and life of Jesus of Nazareth in the first few centuries, enormous debates raged over which versions of the Jesus story were considered legitimate by the orthodox church. After Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in the 4th century, a series of councils and creeds developed that attempted to unify the astonishing diversity of early Christian beliefs and practices. Eventually only four of the Jesus stories were authorized. The other texts were banned and ordered destroyed. It is copies of these texts which emerged again in Egypt- first, the *Gospel of Mary* at the end of the 19th century and then, in 1945, a collection of over fifty different manuscripts which were given the name “Gnostic Gospels” by early translators and commentators. In several of these accounts, Mary Magdalene emerges as a deeply insightful spiritual leader of Christ’s inner circle- the one who best understands Jesus ‘s teachings. In these gospels, she is called “the Woman Who Knows All’, the “Embodiment of Wisdom” and Christ’s *koinonos*, or companion who “was always with him”, the women that he loved “more than all the rest.” In *The Gospel of Mary*, she is the courageous and insightful one that the other disciples turn to as they are beset by fear and lost in grief. “Teach us the things you know, that we do not”, they implore her. What she reveals is a vision she experienced in her mind of Jesus, where she was guided to apprehend the liberation of the soul from the powers of wrath and ignorance. In many of these alternative gospels, there is an intense rivalry between Mary Magdalene and Peter. Biblical scholars such as Harvard professor Karen King, Princeton professor Elaine Pagels, Episcopalian priest Cynthia Bourgeault and theologian Ann Graham Brock have documented ongoing conflicts over the divergent interpretations of Jesus reputed to originate with Mary and Peter, with communities following Peter favoring a more literal and hierarchical point of view. Those following Mary Magdalene espoused a more egalitarian, poetic, psychological and symbolic perspective.

However, Mary Magdalene’s portrait in these heretical books is not necessarily in contradiction with the Canonical Gospels. Beyond Luke’s inference that she was a wealthy woman supporting Jesus’ s ministry out of her own means, we have no information of who Mary Magdalene was before she became a faithful follower of Jesus or what she did after the Resurrection. There is no mention anywhere in the *Gospels* of Mathew, Mark, Luke or John that Mary Magdalene was connected with promiscuity or prostitution: that was an invention that emerged only during the fourth century, when she became confused with Luke’s unnamed sinful woman and the newly sainted Mary of Egypt, who really was a reformed prostitute. Instead, what we do have in the Canonical Gospels is a moment of rare consensus by the writers: Mary Magdalene is the primary witness during Christ’s horrifying execution and mysterious resurrection. She is in fact, the only witness the gospel writers consistently agree was present at the death, as well as at the empty tomb. In the *Gospels* of Matthew, Mark and John, she is also the first witness to the Risen Christ, entrusted with the mandate to spread the good news- hence her traditional honorary title of “Apostle to the Apostles”.

The most fully developed portrayal of Mary Magdalene appears in the *Gospel of John*. In one of the most tender and intimate scenes in all of literature, she is the devoted disciple who comes alone to prepare Jesus’s body for burial. She finds the tomb empty. Weeping, she turns through her tears to ask the man nearby (whom she mistakes for the gardener) where she can find the body. "Mary", he says gently- and then she recognizes the voice of the one she has followed and loved. "Rabboni", she exclaims in astonishment- a word that means "Teacher". It is a scene which has inspired some of the most poignant works by Rembrandt, Fra Angelico, and countless others: her hand reaching out to grasp the man she reveres, and Christ’s gentle caution " Noli me tangere". This phrase is most accurately translated from the Latin as "Do not cling to me" and is rendered in Adamo’s opera as “Let me go”.

Early Christian writers saw in Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Christ in the *Gospel of John* the echoes and fulfillment of the Shulamite woman’s yearning for her King in the *Song of Songs* – a Biblical poem which culminates in a passionate embrace in a garden amongst the pomegranates and lilies. From the earliest celebrations of Mary Magdalene’s feast day in the Catholic Church, this work ascribed to King Solomon has been an integral part of her liturgies. Though intensely erotic, it has been understood by centuries of Christian monastics as a mystical allegory for the soul’s longing for union with the Divine. “Set me as a seal over thy heart, as a seal upon thy arm, for love is as strong as death” cry its culminating verses. The characters and the language of this revered love song- sensual, yearning, hopeful- permeate Mark Adamo’s libretto where love indeed has the last word.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples in the *Gospel of Matthew*, recognizing that each person will have a different relationship to him. How can each individual- and each successive generation- make meaning out of the events of 33 AD? Mark Adamo has done an extraordinary amount of historical and Biblical research -attested to by the 116 footnotes in the libretto. Ultimately, however, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is a deeply felt and radically personal imagining of the events and characters, which may speak with profound resonance to our age. The opening prologue, in which a chorus of angst ridden modern seekers long to reconcile the terrible wounds of Christianity with the undeniable power and beauty of its story may well be a mirror for our modern culture, in which the majority of people in America consider themselves “spiritual but not religious”. Adamo’s Mary Magdalene- passionate, unconventional, intellectually curious and emotionally courageous- is simultaneously a character rooted in ancient Scriptural tradition, both traditional and heretical, and (as Mary Magdalene has always been), a reflection of contemporary desires and hopes.

The first few centuries saw intense debates around the nature of Christ. Was he fully divine or fully human? Or somehow both? For many early Christians, Christ was the figure who revealed our full humanity and called us to embrace it ourselves. In many of the so-called Gnostic texts, particularly the Gospel of Thomas, the word anthropos, meaning “fully human, is used to describe the highest level of spiritual development where we shine forth in the most complete image of what we were created to be: not cherubim or seraphim, but human. In *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, Mark Adamo has given us a set of characters who are complex, nuanced, wounded and striving- each one (including Jesus himself) wrestling with the question of what it means to be fully human.

Some modern Biblical scholars have traced the Greco-Roman roots of the concept of a "virgin" to mean simply an unmarried woman, not necessarily someone who has never experienced physical intimacy. Adamo draws on some of the earliest historical sources to infer that Jesus’ s mother, here called Miriam, was the victim of an ill fated affair with a Roman soldier. Taking the concept of a perceived illegitimate birth seriously, the opera develops the psychological tensions between Jesus and his mother, which are hinted at in the Canonical Gospels. In a radical departure from the traditional depiction of a virgin meek and mild, Adamo gives us Jesus’s mother as a strong, powerful and compassionate heroine- very much in alignment with the prophetic call of the Magnificat, Mary’s great speech in the *Gospel of Luke*. The dialogue and duets between Miriam and Mary Magdalene are Adamo’s own invention, but he sets us imagining: what was the relationship like between these two pivotal women?

Peter’s stubbornness and irascibility is derived from the descriptions from the *Gospel of Mary,* where Levi says of him, “You have a constant inclination to anger and are always ready to give way to it”. His anti-female stance is attested to in the *Gospel of Thomas*, where he is reputed to have said, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of the life”. Yet his character in this opera is also one of deep feeling, a man driven by a quest for a just world.

There is much to challenge and much to ponder in this opera. In the tradition of Classical Greece, drama was not intended to be merely entertainment. It was a religious ritual that was supposed to startle, surprise and move, ultimately bringing a sense of profound catharsis and healing to the audience. The province of great art is not to make us comfortable, but to move us beyond our ordinary and habitual modes of perception to apprehend a bigger, deeper, broader picture of more numinous possibilities. Mark Adamo’s *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* will hopefully leave you with many more questions than answers. Questions such as: What is the relationship between spirituality and romantic love? Are the two opposed to one another or can they provide a bridge between worlds? What do we hold fast? How do we let go? Where is the surest connection to the divine to be found? What is our part in the tapestry of life? How do we find the strength to go on in the face of unbearable loss and grief? These are universal themes that are relevant to any age and any religion. *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* cannot answer the question definitively about who Mary Magdalene and Jesus were, or who they might have been to one another. No book or work of art can. The celebrated mythologist Joseph Campbell was once asked about a myth, “Is it true?” He is reputed to have responded, “Of course it is true. And some of it might have even happened”. What this opera invites you to do to is to encounter a story you may have thought you knew from a different perspective- and along the way, to find a new and deeper truth in your own heart about what it might mean to become truly human- in the fullest, richest, and most profound sense of the word.