The Descent of Inanna
A Performance of a 4,000 year old
Sumerian Myth

Adapted from the Descent of Inanna, translated by Samuel Kramer from Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth, Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer
‘And she goes out, white-sparked, radiant in the dark vault of evening’s sky

Star-steps in the street through the Gate of Wonder’

From the Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna
Participants

Narrator – John Chacksfield

Inanna – Suzanne Corbie

Ereshkigal – Karen Smith

Neti, the Gatekeeper – Phillippe Sibaud

Ninshubar – Rosemary

The Kurgarra and the Galatur – Ashleigh and Jill Pickering

Enki/ Enlil – Duncan/ Caitrona

the Anunna, the Judges of the Underworld – the Audience

My grateful thanks to all those who gave their time and support by participating
The Descent of Inanna

The story of Inanna’s descent begins with hearing of the call to the ‘Great Below’. Inanna arms herself with various attributes of power and identity and before making the journey to her sister Ereshkigal in the Underworld, she advises her sukkal, or Advisor, Ninshubur, that if she does not return within three days, to call upon the three grandfather gods to come to her aid.

She begins her journey and is stopped at the gate by Neti, the gatekeeper, who is ordered by Ereskhigal to take everything away from Inanna until she enters the Underworld, naked and bowed. Ereskhigal fastens upon her the ‘eye of death’, Inanna is struck dead and her body hung on a meat hook.

Ninshubur dutifully calls to the grandfather gods when her queen does not return and whilst two of them feel she deserves her fate for travelling there in the first place, Enki, the god of wisdom, is distraught and creates two creatures, the galatur and the kurgarra, who descend into the underworld, sympathise with Ereshkigal and are able to retrieve Inanna’s body, give her the water and food of life and restore her to life so that she can make her return.

Inanna arises and reclaims her position as Queen of Heaven and Lady of the Largest Heart.
Inanna, Lady of the Largest Heart

From the poems of Enheduanna, a Sumerian High Priestess, over 4,000 years ago, Inanna represents the ‘divine in matter’, a vivifying force that flows through life and all its processes.

A goddess of opposites, she is both benevolent and destructive, cruel and gentle, tender and violent, ruling war and destruction, as well as love and sexuality. As a goddess of boundaries, she rules the liminal spaces of dawn and twilight in her role as the morning and evening star of Venus and she mirrors what Jung commented as;

*The abysmal contradictions of human nature* (Jung, 1953).

Inanna is never depicted in the stable position of mother and wife, but embodies a full and powerful expression of owning her own feminine self. She appears to me in marked contradiction to the sanitised virgin mother of the modern Christian era and in claiming her sexuality, she is not bound by being female in a world where rules and traditions were still being created for the first time and chaos and war were a heartbeat away, Betty Meador suggests that Inanna is;
the attempt of the Sumerian psyche to contain and to organise their apprehension of the chaotic, indecipherable, ineffable mystery of the known and the unknown universe. She is their version of a personification of the whole of reality (Enheduanna, Meador and Grahn, 2002, p.12).

For me, Inanna personifies a very real human experience of contradiction and a powerful image of wholeness. In trying to be the perfect wives, mothers and daughters of the patriarchy, women have become divorced, isolated and confused about who they should be, separated from their Ereshkigal and unable to acknowledge their dark side, where their true nature lies repressed and unheard. Uncertain and unable to claim their own autonomy for fear of being seen as wild and disrespectful daughters, dreadful mothers, loose women, witches or mad containers of unbridled lust, women are now beginning to reclaim sovereignty over themselves. As I write this in 2017, gender and sexuality is being redefined; religion and autonomy, identity and privacy, male and female roles in both career, government and the home are being questioned and changed. Inanna’s return from exile hasn’t come a moment too so
She gathered together the seven me
She took them into her hands
With the me in her possession, she prepared herself.
She placed the Shugurra, the crown of the steppe on her head
She arranged the dark locks of hair across her forehead
She tied the small lapis beads around her neck
Let the double strand of beads fall to her breast
And wrapped the royal robe around her body.
She daubed her eyes with ointment called, “Let him come,
Let him come,”
Bound the breastplate called “Come, man, come!”
around her chest
Slipped the gold ring over her wrist
And took the lapis measuring rod and line in her hand

Inanna set out for the Underworld...
FROM THE GREAT ABOVE TO THE GREAT BELOW

FROM THE GREAT ABOVE SHE OPENED HER EAR TO THE GREAT BELOW

FROM THE GREAT ABOVE THE GODDESS OPENED HER EAR TO THE GREAT BELOW

FROM THE GREAT ABOVE INANNA OPENED HER EAR TO THE GREAT BELOW