Cultural Daily

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Poetry + Murder, Part 2: My Dance with the Manson Women

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, February 4th, 2015

From 1981 – 1984, as a young and emerging choreographer/director, Sarah Elgart taught dance and created choreography with a small group of maximum-security inmates at California Institution for Women, the state prison. Initially unbeknownst to Elgart, two of the inmates in her class included Patricia Krenwinkel and Susan Atkins of the Manson Family. When each independently elected to participate in the ten-month creation of a movement theater work, the two women had not spoke for ten years. ***Poetry + Murder*** *recalls the class's confrontations, obstacles, and epiphanies in creating "Marrying the Hangman", an award winning work based on the poem by Margaret Atwood, before it went on to be performed via Elgart's company in the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival.*

This is the second installment of ***Poetry + Murder.*** *You can read Part 1 here. Subsequent installments will be featured bi-monthly. Except for Susan Atkins and Patricia Krenwinkel (aka Krenny), the names of the inmates have been changed to protect their identities.*

Photos by Jaeger Smith

I was living in downtown LA. At the time, my boyfriend of five years and I were amongst the first to take an empty storefront loft and create a live/work space. He was intelligent, outgoing and gregarious, a type A personality. He was a guy's guy, and into numbers. He was becoming a developer, he was going to be a millionaire, *and* he had some art smarts. We had designed 3000 plus square feet of open space with enough for my dance company rehearsals. But weekends were tense; I wanted to work in the studio and he wanted to go hiking or boating. He thought I should be earning more money, I was happy with my work. I felt guilty for wanting what I wanted and while I loved him, a little voice inside me kept saying with increasing urgency, *this isn't working for me.* So ironically, going to the prison was an escape. It was coming home that was difficult.

It was a couple months into my work at CIW and the classes with all the inmates were going well. Although you could tell they had their demon days, I never felt physically threatened by the women. The C.O. who sat in his little cubicle in the auditorium was pretty laid back. He'd often wander out for a smoke. He knew the inmates both liked and were beginning to trust me. In fact, after a short time, if a C.O. so much as winked at me, my students in medium security classes would start up with a *"Hey! Don't you mess with Sarah … She's ours."* After all, I was warm, accessible, and non-judgmental; I offered physical activity that made them feel better; and I knew nothing about them.

According to Bill Cleveland, there is a tacit agreement between a prison's correctional officers and inmates *not* to go crazy: *"Any time inmates want to, they can take over, because there are too many of them. But nobody wants to because it's awful, and whenever that occurs everyone loses."* Yet the prison itself seemed sometimes to have an almost palpable mood. "Lockdown" could happen at any time without apparent reason, and you might know nothing about why or what caused it.

I distinctly recall one dreary, rainy day when I was waiting outside the gym and, for some reason, the doors were locked. No one was there, outside or in, not even a C.O. By and by the inmate Suzie came. We said "Hi" and sat waiting together for someone to open the doors so we could begin. We had never talked one on one, and as we waited, the silence felt awkward so we started chatting. While her manner was quiet and introspective, she seemed approachable and genuine. Somehow the conversation took a turn and I decided to ask her why she was inside. I remember she hesitated and looked far into the gray sky before she answered with a kind of tired slowness to her speaking: *"You know… I had an old man. He used to mess me up pretty bad. For years, he'd hurt me physically and mentally and I just never knew how he was going to be one minute to the next. One day, I couldn't take it anymore. I just snapped. I took a gun and I shot him. "*

Moments later a guard came. *"Lockdown. Get back inside!"* he said to Suzie. I was told to *"wait in administration till it's over."* I said goodbye, watched her turn and walk slowly back to her cell, then headed towards the cafeteria where my day ended before it ever began.

Unidentified inmate in Elgart's class at CIW

In rehearsal for "Hangman," Krenny had come up with the central staging idea for the piece, and I thought it was brilliant. The man and the woman character's adjoining cells would be depicted by a wall of inmates dividing them — a living, breathing wall that embodied, with slow and deliberate gestures, all the anguish, anger, and frustration of those whom it had housed. Still ignorant as to their identities, I had given the role of "the woman" to Susan Atkins, who had more than enthusiastically volunteered for it. "The man" was to be played by the tall blonde. I would be at once director and Narrator, reading the poem as they moved to it, and the remaining women – Kiara, Janice, Suzie, and Krenny – would become the wall between them, echoing lines of the poem with gesture and sometimes words, almost like a Greek chorus.

One day during rehearsal, I had an idea: The piece should begin with the character of the woman being thrown into her cell by a jailor. As Krenny was the most upstage inmate in the "wall" and because the wall was her idea, I asked her to begin as the jailor and throw a struggling Susan Atkins into her cell, before joining the breathing, anguishing wall herself. The first rehearsals proved awkward. I showed Susan how to struggle against Krenny as her jailor, and Krenny how to grip Susan by the arms and throw her forcibly onto the ground of her cell. The two were clearly reluctant about that much physical contact, but I thought it was just normal discomfort.

We worked at it for a bit, but pretty soon it was time for a break.

We all sat down and began talking about the poem's central character of the woman. What had she done, and what was she getting herself out into? As per the poem, in pursuing marriage with the Hangman, *"She had left one locked room for another."* She had stolen an article of clothing from the wife of her employer and for this she was imprisoned and sentenced to hang. How did everyone feel about this woman, and about her sentence?

The inmates started weighing in. *"She's a survivor,"* said Susan. *"Seducing the man, getting him to marry her… She's doing what she has to do to get by."* Kiara and the tall blonde agreed. I'm not sure what Suzie thought. But Krenny and her friend Janice most certainly didn't agree. Janice stood up, steaming. She was a short, compact, American Indian dynamo doing twenty-five to life. *"The woman made her own bed, now she should sleep in it. Alone. She's a coward for getting the man involved, for seducing him into marrying her!"* As far as Janice and Krenny were concerned, the woman should have taken what was coming her way, no questions asked. *"She fucked up, not him."* The temperature was rising and I wasn't sure why, but I knew what was happening was out of my control. The characters we were talking about from the poem were suddenly erased. Janice and Krenny were talking and acting as if Susan was directly responsible for the actions of the poem's main character. The anger escalated. The three of them were standing now, pointing at each other… Janice was yelling. Suddenly, a chair went flying. I think Janice threw it. *Trouble.* The class scattered… they were out the door fast. This could mean write-ups, character demerits, lockdown.

After Susan had returned and told me who she and Krenny were, I was stunned. I cleaned up the gym and walked quickly out of the prison security gate. In the parking lot I ran to my car. I remember it was raining. I blasted the radio and drove as fast as my little Mazda GLC could take me.

I had been a young girl growing up in West Los Angeles, a stone's throw from Beverly Hills where the murders occurred in August 1969. The Manson Murders were almost archetypal in their power and historical scope. Along with Kent State they heralded a wounding within the US, and an end to America's adolescence. They slaughtered the images the 1960's conjured of a playful hippie era: carefree parents with happy babies, tie-dye rainbows, flowers in hair, dancing in Central Park, and all that had been initiated by the Summer of Love in 1967, when hippie counter culture became a definitively recognized movement. Together, the Manson Murders and Kent State signaled the disenfranchisement of the Love Generation.

I had to take some time off to process all this. For at least a week, I lay around reading Vincent Bugliosi's damning book, *Helter Skelter*. I couldn't go back until I came to terms with all this new information. The reality as presented was staggering. Susan Atkins, known as "Sadie," and Patricia Krenwinkel, known as "Kate," but whom I knew as "Krenny," along with Charles Manson, Leslie Van Houten and several other members of "the Family," as it was known, had wantonly and mercilessly murdered seven innocent people over a period of two nights. Several other murders were later attributed to them, including that of a seemingly gentle musician named Larry Hinman. Amongst others their victims included Sharon Tate, wife of auteur film director Roman Polanski, celebrity hairdresser Jay Sebring, Abigail Folger, heiress to the coffee dynasty, and two super market owners, Rosemary and Leno LaBianca. The autopsy report for Sharon Tate, then 8 ½ months pregnant, concluded as follows: *"Cause of death: Multiple stab wounds of the chest and back, penetrating the heart, lungs, and liver, causing massive hemorrhage. Victim was stabbed sixteen times, five of which wounds were in and of themselves fatal."* Sharon Tate was the last in the house to die, witnessing the deaths of all her friends before her. She begged for her life, and that of her unborn child. But Susan, who initially admitted to the murder, said she had *"no mercy,"* telling Tate she was going to die and that she *"better get used to it."*

For months after the killings, bad communication and unshared clues between law enforcement divisions kept the dots disconnected and the murders unsolved. Following the raids on the Family's Spahn and Barker ranch hang outs — initially on charges of auto-theft — most of the Manson

followers were thrown in jail. Soon after this, Susan Atkins was implicated in the murder of Gary Hinman. In jail, Susan "ratted" boastfully to her cellmate, Virginia Graham, who later recounted it to the police: *"And she said, 'You know who did it, don't you?' And I said, 'No, I don't.' And she said, 'Well, you are looking at her.'"* Susan's confession led to the subsequent indictment of Krenny, Leslie Van Houten and Charles Manson himself.

"Helter Skelter," a song from The Beatles' *White Album,* became Charles Manson's adopted term for an apocalyptic race war that he predicted would take place between blacks and whites. His use of the term was meant to conjure up a jumble of social and political anarchy as well as anti-war and pro-ecology sentiments, and was confused by his own frustrated musical ambition and maniacal rage. Manson was determined to kick Helter Skelter into high gear with the murders, using his self proclaimed Christ like prowess to lure in a bevy of wanderers — lost men and young girls, like Krenny and Susan, to do his bidding.

In Bugliosi's *Helter Skelter*, the writer refers to a memo he wrote as Deputy D.A. to D.A. Evelle Younger regarding Susan Atkins and the status of the Tate & LaBianca murder cases*: "Without Susan Atkins' testimony on the Tate case, the evidence against two out of the five defendants (Manson and Kasabian) is rather anemic. Without her testimony on the LaBianca case, the evidence against five out of the six defendants (everyone except Van Houten) is non-existent. 'That was it. Without Sadie, we still didn't have a case.'"*

After reading this book I began to understand what had happened.

The poem had become a catalyst, a trigger. Between Susan's forcibly cheerful demeanor, the history of her ratting, the fact that she was playing "the woman" in our adaptation of "Marrying the Hangman" and Krenny's role as her jailor in the piece, everyone had lost it. And when we began to discuss the motives of the woman's character within the poem, rational thinking had given way to pent up rage and pure projection. Having spoken little to none in ten or more years, the blow up in rehearsal was about Krenny and Susan coming to terms with each other and their histories. Linked by an unforgettable and infamous crime, each was going through various stages of despondence, denial, anger and remorse.

My first hurdle was forgiving myself for helping these women in any way: How could I be touching or holding the hands of these murderers, helping them develop their aesthetic sensibilities and grand plies? How long and to what extent should punishment continue, and what part should I play in it, if any? My second hurdle was learning to balance the horror I felt with my compassion for these women, who were now real human beings to me. How could I rationalize the fact that I cared for them at all… These women who would never again see snow falling, stand on the shore of the beach, or tuck a child into bed? On the one hand, I felt badly for them, and on the other, they unquestionably deserved punishment. I didn't know how to juxtapose these warring emotions within me, and these were questions that I never expected to have to consider.

Finally, I gave up. I had no answers and I was just going to have to live with any discomfort the situation generated. When I returned to CIW, it was as an initiate. Although I'm certain Susan and Krenny and, in fact, all the inmates knew that I had had misgivings, we didn't speak of it. Class and rehearsals resumed, I recommitted, and we all dove in. But there had been a change. I could feel it and so could the women. It was as if a façade had been removed and they could be themselves. They knew I knew who they were and what they had done. Not just Susan and Krenny, but all of the women. On some level it must have been a tremendous relief for them all. I knew,

and I still came.

And so we went forward.

Continue the story: Read Part 3.

Top photo: Sarah Elgart (r) with an unidentified inmate during rehearsal.

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