Cultural Daily

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Poetry + Murder, Part 3: My Dance with the Manson Women

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, February 18th, 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 third installment of ***Poetry + Murder.*** *Subsequent installments will be featured bi-monthly. Read Part 1 and Part 2. 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

With some small discretionary funds that were part of my residency grant from the California Arts Council, I was able to book a few local dance companies for performances at the prison. Having already booked one or two from Northern California, I decided my company would give the next performance. As we progressed with our rehearsals at CIW, I suggested to the women that following my company's performance for the general population, we reverse roles and have the company dancers become the audience while they performed "Hangman." When a dance or theater piece is created it doesn't come to full maturity until it is performed in front of a live audience. *"That's when you set it free,"* I told them. Then and only then does the work walk on its own legs, and only then can you gauge its power. Somewhat reluctantly, they agreed. We set a date, revved up rehearsals, and started the process.

At CIW the red tape for incoming visitors is extensive. The time needed to allow for clearance can be up to six weeks. And in this case it was no normal visit as I was coming in with a company of 6 dancers, music, equipment, costumes and props. We began posting homemade fliers about my company's upcoming performance, which would itself be open for the general population. But still shy, the inmates decided they wanted only a select group of personally invited inmates present for their performance of "Hangman." Suddenly, there was a sense of excitement, fear and urgency all at once. Rehearsals were intensely focused and taken very seriously. Unlike previous days, no one

was absent.

One day, however, we got into the gym and Susan was AWOL. No one knew where she was. We waited a while then started rehearsal without her. Everyone was upset, but Krenny and Janice clearly had an *"it figures"* attitude.

It was daylight savings time, around 5:00 pm and already dark. We had only an hour of rehearsal left and were just a couple of weeks out from the performance. Finally, Susan walked in looking genuinely distraught. *"I screwed up,"* she said. I think it was the only time, besides when she told me who she was, that I saw her with any noticeable semblance of remorse. She explained she had been caught accepting contraband – meaning anything from a gift to drugs – during a visit. As punishment she had been assigned lockdown for two weekends in a row and one of them fell right on the Saturday of our performance.

This was no small obstacle and going to the authorities to commute Susan's punishment wasn't even in the offing. We were going to have to go back to the drawing board, find a date that worked both for CIW and all the dancers in my company, re-schedule the performance, and go through the entire clearance process again. The women sat there sulking in contemplation for a bit. I remember being touched by the extent of their apparent disappointment. After a little while, with barely tempered tolerance, Janice spoke: *"Okay, Susan… I'll take care of this for you. But next time you've got to clean up your own messes."* No one knew what she was talking about or when this mysterious interference might take place, but I remember an unusually quiet and repentant Susan nodding in capitulation.

Janice instructed us all to sit in a circle. The C.O. who usually sat in the small, corner cubicle must have been absent or asleep because Janice asked me to turn off all the gym lights and no one stopped us. Absent of windows and with the doors closed, it was pretty much pitch black in the gym. Somehow, per Janice's instructions, someone produced a lit a candle – it must have been found amidst a pile of props in back of the gym's stage – and placed it in the center of the circle. Janice then joined the circle and instructed us to hold hands. She then began chanting in a kind of otherworldly monotone, I think some kind of traditional Native American Indian chant. For about thirty minutes we all just sat there, holding hands, and staring at the lit candle while she chanted. It occurred to me that maybe I should be afraid, but I was elated. That these women so fully owned the work we had created and came together in support of it despite their division, despite their crimes, despite their shared histories and their barely concealed judgment of one another, was in and of itself miraculous to me. I knew I would never forget this moment.

The inmate named "Janice" reflects in rehearsal.

Susan appeared at our next rehearsal, her old immensely upbeat self again, and announced that her sentence had been moved to a later weekend. While it could have been because she or someone else begged in her behalf, at the time we all felt definitively as if the chanting and communal power of the group had worked.

The last rehearsals leading up to the performance continued with great excitement and nervousness. Sometimes, I would lead the women through relaxation exercises—seated on chairs, I would instruct them to close their eyes and let their limbs grow heavy. Then in the stillness I weaved through them reciting words like *ocean, window, snow, mother*. This exercise was powerful in the way it got everyone into a kind of relaxed and vulnerable state. Other times we all

just sat on the floor and talked in a casual and familiar way, like women coming together for a book group or a quilting bee. As an isolated snapshot I'm sure it would have looked nothing like a group of inmates in a dance rehearsal at a maximum-security women's prison.

On the day of the performance, the women were beside themselves. With my company in attendance, they were both excited and worried about not being professional enough. But I knew they brought a quality to the work that no dancer could ever hope to duplicate. Following my company's performance of about three works from our repertoire, the general population left. My company dancers took their seats along with the forty or so invited inmates and guests. I prepped the audience by letting them know how long and hard the women had worked, and how much they had informed and infused their lives into the piece. They began. Out came Krenny, with a struggling, resistant Susan, who she threw forcefully into her "cell." I intoned the poem to the audience: *"She has been condemned to death by hanging…"* The "wall" of women undulated with moving gesture, embodying the angst and pain of all their years spent in prison.

Bill Cleveland, from Arts in Corrections at the California Department of Corrections, was responsible for my grant being matched and had championed me from the beginning. He had flown down from Sacramento to be at the performance. When I asked him recently what he recalled from that day, he told me: *"I remember I was thinking — this is a hard poem, this is a hard story. The actual speaking of the words of this poem in the context of the prison was scary, because it pulled off all the denial that goes on in prison. It pulled the curtain off the state, off the C.O.'s, off the facilitators, off the administration."* The combination of *that* particular poem, in *that* arena, with *those* particular inmates performing, was innately confrontational. Janice, who herself was doing twenty-five to life said, *"It was like stepping out of character to step into character."*

I remember the faces of my company members along with people from admin, watching in awe of the inmates as they performed. It looked like the audience was literally holding their collective breath. The close of the piece involved the women breaking the structure of the "wall," and marching towards the audience as the poem's last lines were read: *"He said: foot, boot order, city, fist, roads, time, knife. She said: water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, shroud, open, blood. They both kept their promises."* As "Hangman" ended, there was a moment of silence, and then the audience was on their feet in an instant, hooting and hollering. And as the women took their bows and the power of their performance gradually dawned on them, they owned it fully. Grinning from ear to ear, they were high from their sense of pride and completion, and from having so clearly and successfully moved the audience with their work. For that day at least their lives had purpose, and no one was thinking about what anyone's back story was. It was an unbelievable moment of triumph.

Driving home with several of my company members it was clear that they too were blown away. They suggested, then pretty much demanded, that "Marrying the Hangman" be set on them and performed "on the outside." So entrenched had I been in the world of the prison as its own separate reality, this idea had never occurred to me. But I agreed immediately. And within the next year, after several performances at various venues throughout Los Angeles with the inmates always credited, the work won the Vanguard Award for Choreographic Innovation and was invited into the 1984 International Olympic Arts Festival in LA. Needless to say, this was yet another triumph for the inmates. And although they could not be there themselves, their work had outreached to the streets, and to an international platform at that.

While I continued to work as an artist in residence teaching dance and creating movement-theater at CIW through 1984, this piece, this group of women, and this experience remained unparalleled.

Cut to the summer of 2008. I was in an idyllic outdoor café in a small town in the South of France on a beautiful summer evening, dining with my family and our hostess, Rochelle. I was telling her about the prison and my tour of duty there, when Rochelle mentioned that she had heard that Susan Atkins was dying of cancer. Embarrassingly, I spontaneously began to weep. In a knee jerk reaction, my body reacted before I really had a chance to think. Although I did think it sad, my tears were not so much for Susan as for the passage of time, for what we had gone through as a group and what we had all created together. In that moment, I realized that this had been a seminal, and defining period in my life, and now with Susan's impending death, a door was closing.

All these years I had been living with this story, with my memories of each one of these women, and suddenly it was clear that I had to write about it. I didn't want the story to live on only in the archives of my personal mythology, told occasionally over the dinner table to a group of enthralled guests. It was time to revisit this part of my history. I decided to begin writing.

But I wondered how much of my memory of what had taken place at CIW had been gilded by time. I had to demystify the experiences and confer with someone else who had been there.

Finally, in early summer of 2010 I wrote to Krenny and asked if I could visit. In August I heard back from her.

Continue the story: read Part 4.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, February 18th, 2015 at 6:40 pm and is filed under Dance, Fiction, Poetry, Visual Art
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