Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poetry + Murder, Part 5: My Dance with the Manson Women

Sarah Elgart · Tuesday, March 24th, 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. To catch up with the story, read Part 1, Part 2, Part 3 and Part 4.*

My friends, who are both women, tell me their stories,

which cannot be believed and which are true. They

are horror stories and they have not happened to me,

they have not yet happened to me, they have

happened to me but we are detached, we watch our

unbelief with horror. Such things cannot happen to

us, it is afternoon and these things do not happen in

the afternoon. The trouble was, she said, I didn't

have time to put my glasses on and without them I'm

blind as a bat, I couldn't even see who it was. These

things happen and we sit at a table and tell stories

about them so we can finally believe. This is not

fantasy, it is history…

– Margaret Atwood, “Marrying the Hangman”

After seeing Krenny all these years later, I was more inspired and curious than ever to learn what had happened to the other women who had worked with me in the class to create “Marrying the Hangman.” The changes within CIW – especially the absolute abandonment of prison arts programming by the state – reinforced a feeling of closed doors and the unstoppable passage of time.

When I finally got through via phone to Suzee, much to my surprise, she recognized my name immediately. I told her how I had gotten her number and why I was calling, and I thought it amazing that after so much time she was so open to speaking with me.

Although she had been quiet in rehearsals, Suzee began telling me the incredible story of her life both before we met and since the last time I had seen her, none of which I knew. She was arrested in 1980 and convicted of second-degree murder in 1981, just a year or so before I began teaching at CIW. She was sentenced to fifteen years to life for killing her abusive boyfriend, who was 34 years old when she met him at the impressionable age of 18. In prison, a naturally quiet Suzee kept mostly to herself, spending large amounts of time in her cell. But in 1989 a group of women calling themselves Convicted Women Against Abuse (CWAA) coalesced at CIW. Started by a then inmate named Brenda Clubine (whose story is featured in the documentary *Sin by Silence* and at http://www.brendaclubine.com/about/), CWAA is the first inmate initiated and led group in the California prison system. Its first members were all serving life sentences for killing their abusers. They came together to share stories, provide emotional support for one another in the face of the lingering effects of abuse. They also kept up on current events, advising each other regarding court rulings and other legal information that could affect their eventual release. Suzee became a member.

Within a short time, CWAA became an advocacy group for ritually abused women. In 1992, in part because of their work, Battered Women’s Syndrome had finally become a legal definition, usable in court to recognize “the psychological condition that describes someone who has been the victim of consistent and/or severe domestic violence.” It was finally able to be used to give weight in the cases of battered women who killed their abusers, and to help explain to a jury some of the circumstances that might provoke a crime of this magnitude. The sad fact, however, was that the majority of women of CWAA had been convicted prior to its availability. The background of ritual and systematic abuse they had suffered had been inadmissible in their initial defense. And battered women who killed were receiving, on average, a minimum six to eight year sentence of involuntary manslaughter regardless of how abused they were. But the women of CWAA took a stand, urging politicians and lawmakers to consider this evidence as part of what might have been these abused women’s improper convictions. Suddenly, people on the outside were inspired to rally for their sisters, mothers, wives and daughters inside to finally have this evidence introduced in their defense.

Unidentified inmate in class.

In 2001, Senators Betty Karnette and John Burton visited CIW and heard from the women of CWAA. Eight women told their stories — Suzee was one of them. After hearing her story, that day as she was leaving CIW, Senator Karnette turned to Suzee and said to her, “*I will take care of this.*”

Suzee had finished high school in prison and four months after telling her story to Senator Karnette, with a diploma, a GE, and lit classes under her belt, she wrote and filed her own writ of Habeas Corpus to see if she could get her day back in court. She hoped to finally have the chance to show evidence that she had been abused. *"I bought a typewriter for $118."* It took her three months to save the money to buy it. Five months later she received a legal "show cause." In other words, the court had received her writ and thought there were circumstances applicable for consideration in her case under the new legislation passed by Senator Karnette. *"After 23 years of seeing everyone else get out, I knew it was my law, I knew it was my time, and I knew it was going to set me free."*

In her original trial, Suzee, like so many other women, was not allowed to present evidence of being abused. But this time things would be different. Although Suzee went into court handcuffed and shackled, this time, after presenting evidence of protracted abuse, the judge ordered her immediate release. *"All I remember was a lot of talking and then I heard the judge say to me, 'I'm ordering immediate release.…'"* Suzee didn't just walk free right out of the courtroom, she walked out with no parole, and with a sentence reduced in arrears to manslaughter. A sentence for which, according to the court, she should have only served eight years. She had served **twenty-three.**

In prison, Krenny had been somewhat of a mentor to Suzee. *"Krenny got me involved… she got me interested in doing things, and she got me motivated."* According to Suzee, Krenny had taught her how to lift herself up inside, how to take advantage of what was offered in the form of classes and workshops, and use her time in prison wisely. *"Krenny kind of pulled me out of my cell. I was very reclusive and inside of myself."* It was Krenny who convinced Suzee to come to my class.

Suzee's memories of our time together in class were mostly sensory. She recounted a specific move, she remembered liking to watch me dance, my black tights and short hair… Mostly, she remembered how it felt to be there: *"It was like a beginning of stepping out of myself to interact with other people. There was a bond. There was a bond between us all. It really kind of took me out of the reality I was in. I felt like I was someplace else rather than being in a prison".*

When we talked about the circumstances of the blow up within the class, of the tremendous tension between Krenny and Susan, about how Terri threw the chair and how that action seemed to be illogically in defense of Krenny, there was no lapse of memory. Her response was immediate: *"They were saying 'Susan, you're a rat, you should just shut your mouth.' Susan was the one who started blabbing and it got everyone busted. What it was is they were having a little battle through the story of the hangman. They were saying that Susan* (not the character she played from within the poem) *was the one who was just trying to survive."* That was it. Krenny and her best friend/defender Janice could not forget that Susan's ratting early on had implicated her and everyone else in the Manson Family. This was the first time my assumptions about the dynamics behind this event had been confirmed.

The longer we talked, the less distant that time seemed. I told Suzee that, in looking back, I felt that Krenny had been in mourning during the time of our work together. Suzee's observations about her were at once remarkably level headed and insightful. *"She knows she just ruined her life that one night. She knew it was like committing suicide. It just took a long time before she could really face it. And it was so awful."*

When I moved to California Institution for Women after my initial introduction to teaching in a corrections began at California Rehabilitation Center, a largely minimum/medium security, "drug

number" facility with a high of recidivism, the first thing I noticed was the gravitas of the maximum security inmates in my class. Most of the women that I had worked with who had done long sentences had very deep and astute observations. They had dealt with serious time and had come face to face with themselves. Suzee was no exception.

For a long time after getting out of prison, Suzee came back into CIW every week to visit Krenny. But staying in LA was too scary. *"I don't want to live in California. The Three Strikes Law…"* She was terrified something horrible could happen. *"I could be with someone and they could do something. You just don't know."* So she moved out of state to care for her mother and began a new life with a new profession. In Suzee's new life, no one knows anything about her 23 years in prison for murder. All her closest friends are still in California. *"Every year I get a background check and by the grace of God, nothing comes up."* But she laughed recalling the irony of the time she won an award for her work: *"They gave me a plaque and I had to hold it up under my chin and take a photograph. It felt just like a mug shot."*

Suzee and I talked about seeing each other next time she came out to California, but so far that has not yet come to pass, and all of the numbers I have for her no longer work.

Before I signed off with her, Suzee gave me Kiara's number in LA. After visiting Krenny and speaking with Suzee, I suddenly had access to two more of the inmates in my class. I felt like an investigative reporter, uncovering the mysteries, motives, and facts of events that had been part of my own life. Certain she might provide a lot of missing links, I was most anxious to speak with Janice. I kept trying to call, but she never picked up, and I didn't leave a message as Krenny had suggested I should surprise her.

When I rang Kiara, she picked up immediately…

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