Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poetry + Murder, Part 7: My Dance with the Manson Women

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2015

The final chapter of Poetry + Murder.

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. All names of the inmates (except Susan Atkins and Patricia Krenwinkel have been changed.*

To catch up with the Poety + Murder, read Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5 and Part 6.

Like Krenny, Janice had lived all these years as a powerful character in my memories, although some small part of me still thought that what I had experienced at CIW was all a trick of time, a kind of mirage of youth and memory. In my recollections, the women at CIW were all so surprising that they had attained a kind of mythological status for me. And all the events surrounding the class and the making of "Marrying the Hangman" were still so astonishing that I often felt like I was duping myself. Of course, since I had been in communication with so many of the inmates it was all becoming much more believable… I had confirmed that the women and our shared experiences had been real and happened as I recalled, and I had learned that most of them emerged changed from CIW and gone on with their lives. But because I remembered Janice as the "voice" of the then silent and ominous Krenny, because she had instigated the little uprising and thrown the chair in my class, she occupied a singular presence in my memory.

Krenny had really wanted me to surprise Janice, so I would call, and when there was no answer I would hang up without leaving a message. I subsequently learned from speaking to Suzee that I should just start talking, and if there, Janice would hear me and pick up the phone. So I called and introduced myself, and she finally picked up. *"Oh, hi Sarah! How are you?"* I was once again astonished that after so many years, my name was recognized and I was so readily received.

In every first conversation with each of the women, I began by informing them that I was revisiting the time we had all spent together creating "Hangman," and felt compelled to write about it and why. I had never spoken directly to Janice about her time in prison, and had only heard

peripherally why and for what she had done time. Now I was astonished to learn from Janice that just previous to her involvement in my class, she had spent *"a year in the hole"* at CIW. Apparently, she had successfully escaped, lived a year on the lam, only to be found again, re-booked, and thrown into solitary. Of course, I had no idea at the time we were working together at CIW that she had been through any of this. Looking back now, I can only imagine that after emerging from a year of solitude, a dance class in a huge gymnasium must have felt like its own relative promise of freedom.

Sarah sits with inmates from her class, including Janice (right) and Krenny (in red)

I remembered Janice as a small powerhouse of a woman, at once tough and spiritual, svelte and compact, with baggy sweatpants, fitted shirt and socks, and beautifully arched feet. I recalled that she was focused and direct in her communications, and that didn't mince words. *"That period of time for me personally… that was magic. I had the body, the perfect foot, the balance, but no confidence."*

Janice's memories were at once broad stroked and very clear. She alluded to the class and the process of creating "Marrying the Hangman" as *"a transformative experience. There was a catharsis and an epiphany going on in that class… The raw emotions that all of us came with, each of us with our individual agendas to do the best we could and make that piece happen… But* (at first) *we were still very much in the space of distrusting each other."*

Janice confirmed that it was she who had thrown the chair – up to that point I had not been completely sure – and also why: *"Susan was going to whitewash it, and I wasn't going to let that happen."* By "it" she was referring both to Susan's ratting and subsequent implication of the rest of the Family, as well as to the incidents themselves surrounding the murders. I understood that she didn't want Susan, with her forced optimism and dominant, Chatty Kathy personality, to deceive the rest of the class, and most especially me, into believing she was without culpability.

Janice hated the subterfuge that Susan had set up for herself by inhabiting the character of the woman, and she was protective of Krenny, who, at the time, was still mute with her own remorse. *"Krenny's stand was never to cause waves. They hadn't spoken for years, and who would have thought that this was going to happen,"* she said, referring to the fact that despite the silence and animosity between them, they both independently showed up in the dance class and chose to continue regardless. Janice's impression was that Krenny was being gracious and tolerant, just basically accepting Susan's presence in the class. *"Krenny was going to stay quiet and let Susan spin it* (the poem's story) *the way she needed it to look for herself."* Janice told me she threw the chair because she couldn't let that happen.

The whole situation was about the meeting of two realities, and the blurring between them. One reality was that of the 200-year-old story within the poem – of a woman sentenced to death for stealing an article of clothing and being saved by marrying her would be executioner, and the other was that of the then 12-year-old Manson murders. And for Janice with regards to the latter, as was the case with nearly every other inmate participant with whom I had spoken, the core of the entire dilemma was Susan's snitching. *"What we on the yard knew of the story was that had it not been for Susan Atkins they never would have solved that case. Back in those days the convict code was 'you don't run your mouth.'"*

Like most of the other inmates with whom I had spoken, in looking back, Janice seemed to harbor little resentment about her own situation. Although the details of her back-story are largely unclear to me, I learned that she had been convicted of aggravated assault and kidnapping and given a 15-year sentence with little to no evidence. She had electively been in and out of therapy since her release, driven by a tremendous desire to improve her situation, and because she felt she could not waste one more minute of her life being bitter and angry at "*the injustice of how* (she) *was railroaded*"**.**

Janice had taken up writing at CIW when she began taking Lee Brandon's English 101 as part of the Laverne Associate of Arts Program. She soon realized she had a talent. *"I would never have found out who I was if I had not had that opportunity. The potential was there and I was blessed enough to realize that instead of sitting around and telling war stories, I had the opportunity to find out who I really was."* Since then, everything she has ever submitted has been published, and some of her work has even been translated into brail. It was Krenny who had encouraged her to take the class in the first place.

I learned that soon after we had performed "Marrying the Hangman" at CIW, Janice was transferred to Arizona State Prison Complex at Perryville. It was a brand new prison at the time. When she arrived there were no trees or landscaping of any kind, and there were absolutely no creative programs for inmates. Slowly, Janice won some trust and started submitting ideas. Realizing that her calling was to spend the *"rest of my life being an advocate for unrepresented populations,"* she helped organize support programs for domestic violence victims and American Indians, as well as workshops for poetry and creative writing**.** Janice was so blown away by the poetry the inmates at Perryville were writing that, inspired by "Hangman," she introduced the idea of integrating movement with the poems, and organized a performance. *"It was the only time in any Arizona prison that the Director (of the Arizona Prison System) Stan Lewis ever came to an event by the inmates."* According to Janice, the women were allowed to invite their families, many of which were hearing their incarcerated relatives express their emotions for the first time. When the women performed their pieces, Lewis "*was so blown away by the creativity, the sensitivity and the women's stories… he realized the importance of these type of classes."* By the time Janice left Perryville a free woman, the prison had a very progressive set of creative programs.

Janice has been out for well over twenty years now. She feels that the fifteen years she spent in prison profoundly shaped who she has become today in the most positive of ways. *"You can say 'why me?' Or you can say 'why not me?'"* Forty-eight hours after Janice walked out of prison, she was the keynote speaker for the Association of Women in Psychology, a national organization of professional women with a feminist perspective. She has continued to work for many different marginalized persons, including homeless women and children, native communities, recovering alcoholics and women from the Hopi nation who were unable to hold down jobs. *"I just walked with them… and gave them a lot of encouragement. So much of that is from CIW, from the arts program. It was so powerful in my life."*

In the 1994 film *Il Postino,* a shy, simple postman named Mario meets the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who has been exiled from Chile to the tiny Italian island where they both live. So taken is Mario by Neruda, the two begin an informal friendship. Neruda unwittingly becomes a mentor to Mario, unlocking his unrealized creative impulses. Although Neruda eventually leaves, Mario changes his life, also becoming a poet and an activist. Years later, upon returning to the island, Neruda learns that Mario died readying himself to read a poem he had written for a communist demonstration that was violently disbanded, and discovers that Mario's only son, Pablito, was

named after him. Only then does Neruda realize the extent of his influence, and is faced with the reality that he had helped shape Mario's life, and perhaps his death too.

After seeing *Il Postino*, I remember being upset. I am no Neruda; however, I related to the responsibility of influencing people's lives definitively. It felt big, and I was afraid of it. But more importantly, I saw clearly that when an artist is a free agent in an un-free situation, it isn't just the power of that individual person, it's the power of the ideas that are presented and made possible, and the kindling of latent or unrealized creativity that has profound and radical effects.

Learning that I had been a part of influencing Janice to continue similar programming at Perryville was huge. I felt like I had helped pay it forward. In my wildest dreams, I never would have imagined such a scenario, not because I didn't believe in most of these women and their potential, but perhaps because at the time I couldn't see how similar I was to them in many ways.

When she relayed all this to me, I was so astonished and moved I had to hang up because I was weeping.

The insightful and amazing Bill Cleveland characterizes prisons as *"places where we put the ultimate outliers."* So when an artist walks in the door and makes creative acts, they are essentially mirroring the same impulses as the inmates: quirky takes on the world, questioning authority, doubting the system, a rebellious spirit, etc. *"Often inmates and artists are like twins, separated at birth."*

In reading *Just Kids,* Patti Smith's moving memoir, I was struck by how a series of moments in time, of relationships and events that might seem inconsequential while being lived day to day, seem to come together to define, shape, and give meaning to life when looked at in retrospect. With Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, specifically, the moments they lived and the relationships they formed in the midst of a burgeoning NY arts scene defined their growth from obscurity to becoming lauded artists who affected the sway of popular culture. I realized that even inside a place as marginalized and disconnected from the "real world" as a prison, and with people as disreputable as murderers, moments can come together to create significant change and impact can be made. What Janice told me about the evolution of her life confirms that for me. The accumulated moments and experiences she lived behind bars had resonated beyond the security doors and barbed wire of a maximum-security facility. She had helped shape lives.

Looking back now after revisiting all this, I think maybe I was expecting a conclusion. Instead, the story of the inmates is continuing, picked up where it was left off all these years later. Except for Susan Atkins, they are all very much alive, and very real. I've been in touch with most of them and the chapters to our joint stories are perhaps still being written. But looking back at everything now, I have the same questions as I did in 1981: How long should punishment continue? How much should the guilty suffer? What constitutes rehabilitation? How is it measured? How do you determine when someone should be free? How much forgiveness should be meted out to those guilty of a heinous and unimaginably brutal crime?

So now, thinking back about what was going on that day of the incident, I recall that I asked the women two simple questions: *How did they feel about the man in the poem? And how did they feel about the woman marrying the man to escape the scaffold?* Answering these questions amongst the group, Susan and Krenny were ultimately just talking to each other. Looking back now I see two women wrestling with guilt and regret, facing each other for the first time since their horrible

crimes. They are screaming at each other and screaming at themselves saying: *"You Martha, Marcy, May, Marlene… You Susan, Sadie, Krenny, Katey… You brought me down. I'm here in this place because of you, because of him, because of us, because of me, but I can barely face my own guilt and remorse so let me hate you."* They were asking themselves and each other *"What have we done? We murdered people for that 'awful little man'… we killed mercilessly for him… we spread our legs for him… we've destroyed our lives for him and for what? For what?"*

I don't know about absolution for crimes from the standpoint of a victim or their family — I hope I never do. What I do know is that when given compassion and creativity, most human beings are capable of magnificent transformation. And regardless of circumstances, I believe people should be given that opportunity. Not as a matter of forgiveness, but as a matter of human decency. And as Kiara put it: *"If you don't show someone who they are, help them be a better person, they'll just go back to criminal behavior."*

In prison, all the rules are different. If you are in Hollywood, or part of an arts scene or some other community, there is often a certain structure or expected conduct to adhere to, a set of rules that are vague and unspoken. Inside the prison, no one cares whether what you are doing is cutting edge or plebeian. As an artist at CIW I was completely free, maybe freer than I've ever been since.

What I finally understand about myself is that I often felt as marginalized as these women – within a prison of my own making. During my time at CIW – just like Therese in Atwood's poem – I had left *"one locked room for another."* Only at CIW, the locks were not just metaphorical, they were real. And yet within this ultimate of isolated and marginalized environments, amongst grieving criminals, many of whom were not very much older than myself, I had experienced possibility and confronted issues of horror, compassion, and forgiveness. In creating this work with these women who had broken so completely from the fabric of society and were remanded to live, some of them forever on the other side, I had discovered a sanctuary. Impossibly, ironically, and against unusual odds, together, and only for a short time, we had created a place beyond malaise and beyond judgment — a place of consummate creativity, access, and freedom.

A medium security class at CIW

This entry was posted on Wednesday, April 22nd, 2015 at 5:20 pm and is filed under Theatre, Dance, Fiction, Poetry, Visual Art
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.