

Cultural Daily

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Poetry + Murder: My Dance with the Manson Women

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, January 21st, 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 spoken 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.

We originally ran this story in August, 2014. Today we share it again, and it will be followed by the complete story of Poetry + Murder, appearing in bi-monthly installments exclusively in Cultural Weekly.

*"To live in prison is to live without mirrors.
To live without mirrors is to live without the self."
~ Margaret Atwood, "Marrying the Hangman"*

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One afternoon in October of 1981 I found myself standing in a large, empty gymnasium at California Institution for Women, caught in the middle of an argument between two maximum-security women inmates and four of their respective friends. I was not there as an inmate, but rather as a young, emerging choreographer and dancer. A series of circumstances had landed me an initial offer to teach dance and create choreography with inmates under the auspices of the organization known as Artists in Prison and Other Places – later to become LA Theater Works. Now I was going to work as a twenty-hour-per-week Artist in Residence through the California Arts Council at California Institution for Women, one of the few maximum-security women's prisons in the state.

It was early in my tenure. The class was in the throes of discussing the motives of the two main characters from a poem written by Margaret Atwood entitled "Marrying the Hangman," which we were adapting into a dance theater piece. Two inmates in particular were at odds. I knew them only as "Susan" and a woman named Pat, but known as "Krenny." Krenny had a quiet and strange demeanor. She had an unsettling stare, and a vast, dark silence to her person that was augmented

by an abundance of hair on her head, face and arms. Her best friend Janice, a short, fiery woman, frequently spoke for Krenny. On this day she was both voice and advocate, fiercely defending Krenny's position, which I hardly understood at the time. Susan was a little like Gidget – manicured, flip-haired and smiley, and almost forcibly optimistic. As the argument escalated, harsh words flew, the decibel levels rose, and suddenly a chair was thrown. I watched baffled and powerless as the women in my class, now silent and alone or in pairs, walked angrily out.

What had happened?

Atwood's poem, based on real events, tells the story of Francoise Laurent, a woman who in 1751 had been sentenced to death by hanging for theft, and a young soldier, Jean Corolere, who had been imprisoned for dueling. At that time a little-known law existed allowing that, aside from an official pardon, the only way a man could escape the scaffold was to take up the ostracized and reviled post of hangman. The only option for an imprisoned woman to be released was to marry the hangman. And while I knew some of the inmates in my class had been on death row and that some had committed murder, I had not allowed myself to inquire about who had done what, or the details of their crimes. Nor had I any idea who any of them were. I had been blissfully ignorant.

Fifteen minutes or so after everyone had walked out I stood righting chairs amidst the ruins of the class and Susan walked back in. I remember that she looked at me almost sympathetically, aware that my world was about to change irrevocably. *"You don't know who we are, do you?"* she asked. No, I didn't, I told her. *"I'm Susan Atkins and Krenny is Patricia Krenwinkel. We're both from the Manson Family. And we haven't talked in about ten years."*

It had all started when I was offered a job substitute-teaching dance once weekly at California Rehabilitation Center. At the time CRC was a "civil addict" facility that had begun housing felons in Norco, Corona. It was populated largely by gum-chewing, slack-jawed, inmates who had lost all relationships with their bodies. Most women there had followed a guy into some drug heist and came and went from the place like it was summer camp. The recidivism rate was huge. When the woman I was subbing for decided to stay on the road singing for Lou Rawls, I was invited to make it a permanent gig. The pay was decent, teaching in a women's prison was more than a little scary, so I was in. Now it was expanding to twenty hours weekly at California Institution for Women.

The drive to the prisons was depressing and long. Due east on the 60 Freeway, past towns where the main destinations were strip malls and before emission standards had improved, one drove into ungodly and palpable yellow smog. Although CIW was ten miles closer to Los Angeles than CRC, it was surrounded by fields that were thick with grazing livestock. An occasional dead cow in a state of rigor mortis would be visible on the roadside, and the stagnant, smoggy air mixed with the heat made the smell of cow dung staggering. You had to make a mental effort to forget about it.

At first glance CIW looked like any institution: a parking lot converging on drab, beige-gray boxy buildings. However a rim of barbed wire fencing interrupted by watch towers, and an unusually long line of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, and friends belied that appearance. They were all sizes, shapes, colors and ages, most of them down on their luck and frazzled looking. Inside I was asked for my I.D., walked through a metal detector and given a "no hostage agreement" to sign. It read: *"All visitors should also be aware that CDCR is prohibited from recognizing hostages for bargaining to affect an escape by inmates or for any other reason(s)."* In other words, CIW would not negotiate for my release should I to be taken hostage by its inmates.

My first day there I was given a tour of the “campus.” as it was euphemistically called, by a female correctional officer or C.O. Next to the drab brick buildings were manicured lawns and picnic tables, and the sound score was composed of the constant crackling of announcements made by a male voice on the loud speaker. At that time there were very few female C.O.’s. Instead there were lots of men supervising lots of women. Corruption was rampant. I was briefed about the three populations I would be teaching: the minimum & medium security inmates – largely drug related crimes, PTU or Psychiatric Treatment Unit, somewhat self-explanatory, and closed custody – the maximum-security inmates. PTU was like a prison within the prison. Its inmates were housed there either because they were psychologically disturbed, or for their own protection “*because the nature of their crimes made them potential victims of the general population*”. This was usually code for inmates who had committed crimes against children. Prisoners, I soon learned, have a very high code of honor, ethics, and morals of their own.

That afternoon at the end of the tour, I had to pitch my classes to the general population. There were no requirements for inmates to attend, but without inmates I’d have no classes. I walked into the gym where there were about 50 or 60 women milling around, smoking and talking or sitting on folding chairs. Being skinny with extremely short hair, I definitely stood out. The majority of the inmates looked disheveled, and overweight. I was introduced to a few catcalls but ignored them, and started talking about my dance classes as an opportunity to be creative, have fun and loose weight. I thought this might be the most accessible approach. But the majority of inmates ignored me – some laughed, many lit up or continued talking while others walked brazenly out. I realized I was going to have to work a lot harder to get their ear so I pulled up a chair, stood on it, and began moving slowly and reading a poem at the top of my lungs. As a performer if there was one thing I knew it was how to grab attention and the power of the poem was not to be underestimated either. While I read the last lines, many women who gathered to listen were rapt:

“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.”

When I finished, a dozen or so inmates walked up to me. “Wow”, *one of them said. “I could identify. That poem was really cool.”*

I had been given “Marrying the Hangman” by a woman named Regina Mocey, an aspiring actress who worked in the office for Artists in Prison and Other Places. She suggested there might be potential to do something with it. I had no idea at the time what that might be, or that this poem would come to affect my life so significantly.

The very next week I began teaching formal classes at CIW. On day one, about 7 or 8 maximum-security inmates shuffled into my class. I recognized some of them from my first tour of the gym. Amongst them were Susan Atkins, Krenny, Krenny’s friend Janice, a tall, large boned Asian woman named Kiara, who I later learned was a master forger, a tall blonde woman whose name I can’t remember, and another woman named Suzie.*

Right away I noticed the demeanor of these inmates, especially as it compared to the plucky party attitude of the minimum security “drug numbers” from CRC. These women were much more serious, and many had done time “in the rack” – prison slang for solitary confinement. Sobered by long sentences, they seemed to walk with a much more weighted step. They were looking at some

serious time.



Sarah rehearses with Krenny (on right)

At the top of every class I led the inmates through a warm up. It was fairly physically, unapologetic, and I often incorporated improvisation exercises, weaving in gesture and scenarios to create theatrical vignettes. It challenged them, and although many complained, they also really liked it. After a rigorous warm up on the third class, I handed out copies of the poem. I wanted to talk about it, about how it spoke to them. I read it again, this time quieter, and much more intimately. With all of us exhausted and sprawled out on the floor, they really listened. The conversation veered toward the loneliness of the poem's subject Therese, her sense of despair as she waited being sent to the gallows and the imminent appointment of a new hangman. Susan spoke up first, "*Before they changed the dress code, we had to wear burlap dresses on death row.*" Krenny nodded, slowly. *Whoa.* You could hear a pin drop. It was clear these two were elders – having been where many others had not. We all sat there, imagining death row and the discomfort of the fabric, a stark contrast to how they now passed the days in jeans or sweats. In that vulnerable, receptive moment I pitched the idea of creating a movement theater piece based on the poem. They all agreed and from then on we embarked.

Susan and Krenny always sat on opposite sides of the room from each other in class, Janice always taking a seat nearby Krenny. In retrospect, the tension between Krenny and Susan was obvious. Still, not knowing who they were as individuals, or who they were with respect to each other, I had no reason to pay attention to that specific. And there was just so much else to be aware of that I didn't initially notice.

I did notice how quiet Krenny was – it would have been hard not to. For the first couple of months, entire classes seemed to pass in which Krenny said little or nothing. With guarded eyes staring from behind a mane of long, wavy, light brown hair, and a posture folded inward, her physical presence was powerful. An endocrine disorder had led to an excess of hair on her arms as well as an unusual amount of blonde facial hair. She moved little and slowly, and for quite some time she didn't smile. Her silence coupled with her overall demeanor was ominous. She had no pretense whatsoever. I felt a little frightened of her, and very respectful of her separateness. Over the first several months she remained guarded, her face betraying no emotion. She was like an owl, perched apart and watching. Still, both Krenny's presence and her intelligence were undeniable.

Susan was Krenny's polar opposite – light and chatty with the other inmates and anyone else she could engage. She was the Alpha girl – cute, preternaturally smiley, and almost forcibly cheerful, socializing chirpily with me or the other inmates who would receive her. She almost had the carriage of a popular girl at high school, except that there was something inarticulately off about her. Her demeanor lacked seriousness and I could tell she lacked a sense of boundaries, not to mention she seemed to be in denial of where and what she was. Looking back now I sometimes think that Susan was subconsciously hoping her optimistic behavior might somehow erase the horror and memory of what she had done. I was wary of her. What was scary about Susan was her mercurial quality. With Krenny it was her gravity, her unnerving 'there-ness' that was so frightening.



Susan Atkins

Little did I know that the very poem we were working with would act as a catalyst, a trigger, between these two women. Linked by an unforgettable and infamous crime, Susan and Krenny were each going through various stages of despondence, denial, anger, and regret.

Over the next seven months we worked intensely. Each hour-plus car ride home I recited the poem out loud. I played music I had found on the car's cassette deck while visualizing and imagining the scenes we were creating. Everything else in my life fell away or became secondary – my gigs, my rehearsals with my dance company, my relationship... I was consumed.

Continue the story: Read Part 2.

Sarah Elgart is a choreographer, director and writer. This excerpt is adapted from a longer essay of the same title. First performed with the inmates at California Institution for Women, the movement theater piece created to “Marrying the Hangman” went on to be performed at the Olympic Arts Festival by Sarah Elgart & Company and won The Vanguard Award for Choreographic Innovation. The inmates were co-credited with its creation.

**These names have been changed to protect the identity of former inmates.*

Top image: Photo of Patricia Krenwinkel. All photos by Jaeger Smith.

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