

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poetry + Murder, Part 6: My Dance with the Manson Women

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, April 8th, 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](#), [Part 4](#) and [Part 5](#).

Of course the first thing I learned was a little about Kiara's life since she got out of California Institution for Women. For some years she had been working as a paralegal — somewhat surprising given that she had done time for master forgery. She had married a man who also had a criminal record, but they were both clean and determined to stay that way. Sadly and somewhat ironically, he came home briefly one day to pick something up for work, walked in, botched a robbery attempt at their apartment, and was shot at point blank range. Kiara relayed all this information with a very matter of fact tone of voice.

When I asked Kiara what she remembered about the dance class, she said that my class and the other arts classes at CIW "*made people feel like they were still part of the human race.*" According to Kiara, everyone at CIW felt like an outcast. The great thing about the Arts in Corrections program was that the artists came in without judgment. Dance, writing, and visual arts reaffirmed an inmates' identity and built up their self-esteem. "*Everyone makes mistakes, some greater than others, but there is always a redeeming quality about people. That you stayed, and were accepting of our mistakes... that was a lot for people.*"

Kiara saw prison as a place that was emblematic of a certain lifestyle in which most of the inmates at CIW had been raised: poor, largely uneducated, and culturally deprived with limited options and resources. "*Prison is just part of their life. They go back to that environment because everyone else there is like them and so they feel comfortable. It's just the natural culmination of everything after being in and out of juvey and jail all their lives.*" Even while condoning punishment and prison for criminal activity, she chafed at how the system now offered little to nothing in the way of the arts or other rehabilitative activities. "*If you punish someone for the rest of their lives because of a*

moment of weakness, but don't show someone who they can be, and help them be a better person, they'll just go back to their criminal behavior."



Kiara's observations about prison seemed to be of varied, and sometimes conflicting points of view. From one moment to the next she was either distinguishing herself from her former fellow inmates and disparaging the lifestyle of which she spoke, or aligning herself with it. But like most inmates, even Kiara's acceptance of "mistakes" had its' limitations. This became clearer as we spoke of Krenny and Susan Atkins.

At CIW, the inmates' housing units, or cells, are referred to as *cottages*, conjuring up images of quaint little country homes with white picket fences. Each cottage has a name, and an A and B side to it. For example there's Wilson, Miller, Emmons, Lathem and Barneburg to name a few. Kiara lived with Susie and Krenny in Lathem B while Susan Atkins, lived in Barneburg A.

Kiara got along with Susan Atkins but wasn't friends with her. The two had first met in Sybil Brand in 1975-76, where they were both considered "high power" inmates, "*meaning your bail was set really high and you were in cells with double guards all the time.*" Susan struck her as somewhat phony and manipulative — on the one hand going out of her way to boast about who she was, on the other denying many of the accusations against her. Kiara mimicked Susan with a high whiney voice: "*Everybody blames me... I'm not the bad person everybody thinks I am. I was there but I didn't do all those things they said I did.*" According to Kiara, Susan didn't stop denying her involvement with some of the Manson crimes until she wrote her book, "Child of Satan, Child of God" in 1977. But Kiara was put off by the lack of responsibility Susan seemed to feel relative to implicating the other Family members, specifically Leslie Van Houten and Krenny, with whom she had formed a much greater affinity. Kiara felt the sting of Susan's betrayal in their behalf. "*When you're in that kind of life you take responsibility for what you've done. You own it, and you pay up. What you don't do is snitch on every one else.*"

Several months after our initial conversation and because Kiara lives in L.A., we finally decided to

meet in person for lunch. She had ridden a bus down to Santa Monica from Hollywood and I picked her up on a street corner. We recognized each other immediately and she jumped into my car, all hugs. A large woman, tall and big boned, she seemed to be in all ways much as I remembered her. Although certainly older, she was without even a hint of gray and still spunky and optimistic, with a pinch more resignation. It seemed amazing to be meeting outside the prison walls.

We found a restaurant, sat down and ordered lunch. I had brought some photographs of our class, as well as a Christmas card I had saved that Kiara herself had drawn for me back in the day; a caricature of me with short hair in a leotard surrounded by ribbons and floating Christmas gifts that everyone had signed: Susan, Suzee, Janice, Krenny... She looked at the signatures with obvious nostalgia.

Kiara spoke with a sharper edge and a more gravelly voice than I recalled her having in prison, and she had much to say. She referred to people on the outside as “*square people*”, and to those involved in illegal activities as people who were “*in the game*”. She talked about being on the outside, and about doing five plus years in prison on her first offense, and then later another three and a half for something she didn’t go through with. Here she weighed in heavily on the topic of snitching.

Kiara told the story of how she had gotten arrested a second time after backing out of a forgery deal that she had been recruited for. She didn’t trust the people. They talked too much. So she pulled out before anything was done. It was no small crime either, they were in it for major dollars: *“I wasn’t the kind that would go into a Speedy Mart and write a check for fifty dollars, that’s not the kind of forgery I did. But you know... When you’re doing wrong, you don’t talk about it. You don’t tell every body what you’re doing... You just don’t. Why? The more people you tell, the more people there are to tell on you.”* According to Kiara, she ended up being tagged by the very people who’d gone forward with the crime without her. And although it could have helped her when she’d been arrested, she went down naming no names. Kiara used herself as a model of respectable behavior for people “*in the game*”.

She then segued into more memories of Susan Atkins.



A 1970 photo of Susan Atkins watching Manson leave the courtroom

Above all she saw Susan as someone who had been self-consumed and yearning to be in the limelight. Someone who would do almost anything, including snitching or ratting to stay there. And if this wasn't enough, Kiara saw her as someone who "flip-flopped". She identified Krenny and Leslie Van Houten, quite differently. According to Kiara, they steadily, and remorsefully, owned what they had done. *"Susan was always going from denial to acceptance... 'Oh I didn't do all those things... Well, I did... but I've found God now'. The thing I always respected about them (Krenny and Leslie) was they never denied their participation. Susan would blame it on Charlie, she'd blame it on drugs, she'd blame it on the environment... They'd never blame it on anybody, they were like you know... 'We made the choice. It was a horribly wrong choice, but nobody forced us into this. Nobody forced us to go. We did it without hesitation.'"*

Still, Kiara had learned from Leslie and Krenny something of the hold Charlie had visited on the women. *"Here's a guy that offered family and freedom... nobody working, everybody doing whatever they wanted, and constant drugs. He was very Svenghali. Charlie basically prostituted these women. He wasn't any better than a pimp, just in different clothing. He kept them with drugs and intimidation."*

I noticed that Kiara seemed to cut Krenny and Leslie more slack. On the one hand she would claim that they had taken responsibility for their actions and on the other she would say *"they were not even cognizant"* of what they had done, referring to the drugs and Manson's *"Machiavelian"* influence. Clearly, there was a bit of a double standard at play. When remembering how Susan had referenced Charlie and the drugs, Kiara saw Susan as making excuses and disavowing any responsibility on her own part. But Kiara was much more forgiving in her allusions to Manson's influence with regards to Krenny and Leslie. Somehow their references to him were more acceptable as excuses because they had owned their involvement from the beginning.

And most importantly, because they weren't snitches.

All this talk was circuitous to the event of what had happened that day in rehearsal. The code of ethics related to "snitching" was at the very heart of Kiara's point of view about acceptable behavior, and most importantly to the disagreement over Susan playing the character of Therese in "Marrying the Hangman". What I call "the mixed forgiveness" issue came up again and again in my conversations with all the inmates, even this many years later. Although most recognized the absolute heinousness of the Manson Family crimes, they maintained affection and a healthy degree of forgiveness for Krenny. And they were *still* angry on her behalf over Susan's original betrayal of her. All this was accentuated by the fact that for so long Susan had apparently lacked remorse while Krenny did not. It was clear that while certainly powerful before judge and jury, remorse obviously ranks high with other inmates as well.

Amidst all my conversations with the inmates, one question kept coming up for me: If someone truly felt remorseful, why would they resent being implicated in a crime for which they owned culpability, and for which they felt they deserved punishment? In other words, why would Krenny feel angry towards Susan's ratting on her and the other family members when she herself avowedly woke up every day of her life regretting what she had done?

I never doubted Krenny's remorse. I was witness to it, and it was palpable. And at the end of the day she had forgiven Susan for everything. Still, it was all very complex, as human beings invariably are.

When Kiara first met Krenny and Leslie, they were not denying their involvement. They were actively in the process of coming to terms both what they had done, and with their fate. *“It was like, ‘It is what it is’”. The first thing I liked about Krenny is that she said ‘I know there is the possibility that I will be here for the rest of my life, but what I did was horrific and I can’t take any of it back.’”*

Kiara understood that as the Manson women grew older and glimpsed the span of years stretching out before them in prison, they mused on the events that had brought them there. *“They’d look back and remember ‘he was an ugly little man’ and wonder ‘what did they see him?’ Susan passed away and Krenny is inside... They paid for it with their lives.”*

The complexity and sadness of it all, the crime against innocent people, the betrayal of themselves. Again I found myself wondering how to navigate in the face of it all.

There was still one more link in the chain... I called Janice and this time she picked up.

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