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Susan McCully

16 January 2013

★ Peter Davis & Philip Laubner



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Susan McCully, Late Bloomer Extraordinaire

By Peter Davis and Photographer Phil Laubner

Susan McCully is a scholar of feminist theatre and a professor at UMBC. She is also a playwright and performer. She has performed her one-woman show *Cyber*

Becomes Electra, at colleges and universities across the country and abroad. In 2004, she opened the Philadelphia Gay and Lesbian Theatre Festival with her show, *Inexcusable Fantasies*, which she revised and performed recently at The Strand. I saw it and really liked the play and the production. She is smart, funny, and brave.

Susan is one of several local university professors making things happen in the Baltimore theater scene. Much of our casual getting acquainted conversation had to do with how academics and academic institutions can lend talent and resources to Baltimore's exciting young ensemble companies and the burgeoning performance scene.

Peter

What brought you to Baltimore?

Susan

My partner got a job at UMBC to Chair the music department and I was a queer spousal hire. That made us really like the place immediately. They created a 3 year position in the English department for me and then decided that I was making a contribution and gave me a permanent job.

Peter

Teaching what?

Susan

I'm in the Gender Women Studies Department and Theater. I teach playwriting and the dramatic literature course.

Peter

You like it?

Susan

I do. I love and respect my colleagues. I'm happy! And lucky, I kinda got thrust upon them.

Peter

When your partner got her job, Baltimore was kinda thrust on you. You like it here?

Susan

I do. I think the word is out that that if you want to build a career and a life you can actually do it here and grow as an artist. Find your people and learn how to do it together. Which is why I'm excited to be here and be part of it. Baltimore is starting to feel like one of those places where you actually practice your craft; you can be a playwright, make a living as a professor and still be part of a new group of artists. It feels like a place in time where you can take risks. Also, a time where you can transition to have people who were your students be part of a company with you.

Peter

Speak to that.

Susan

Single Carrot and Glass Mind are two I've been following because I see them staying together as companies, growing, and getting better, together. Liz Lerman seems to be making a difference. Someone with stature who wants to build a community around her. That's the change that I've noticed. And I would add companies that are built around professors, like Steve Satta. Iron Crow is making a difference. He started it with Joe Rich who was an MFA student there (Towson U.) and other faculty, Michele Minnick.

Peter

Generous Company has folks teaching at Towson, too.

Susan

I'm excited to see their thing at Theater Project. (*Gumbo* at the end of January). Towson has been at the forefront and I want to be part of this emerging theater scene in Baltimore.

Peter

How long have you been writing and performing?

Susan

I started in college as an actor. And soon realized an average looking woman who is a little dyke-y was probably-

Peter

-not going to get the ingénue part?



Susan

Ever! That's when I got my MFA in playwrighting. Started writing a lot and then I decided to get my doctorate in feminist theater (at Univ. of WI) to study with Jill Dolan who is the major feminist voice in academic theater. Her blog, *Feminist Spectator*, won The George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism. Check out her blog. I went to study with her.

Peter

When you started writing were your plays autobiographical and solo performance?

Susan

It's had to imagine writing without some autobiographical component. But I never wrote solo stuff until after I did my doctorate. I started looking at a number of Queer performers whose work I really liked.

Peter

Like who?

Susan

Tim Miller, Holly Hughes. Split Britches. I really like their work. It's a couple: Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw. They've been together a really long time. They perform all over the world. It also seemed to me that if I was going to be able to afford to do the theater that I wanted and to write about Queer people, especially women, chances were that it had to be sort of small. By then I wanted to perform again.

Peter

You had an eye on self producing... if it came to that?

Susan

I've come to that.

Peter

Haven't we all?

Susan

Yeah! Start a company, find your people and do your work. It's the only way you're going to get better. My work has gotten much better since I've been working with Eve (Muson, Asst Professor at UMBC, who directed *Inexcusable Fantasies* at the Strand)) who is a really good dramaturg and director. I've just had a chance to practice.

We talk about that with our students all the time. The only way they get better is to practice. So, I'm really grateful to the Strand (Theater in Station North) for offering their space where I could practice.

Peter

What sort of criterion do you use to find your people?

Susan

What matters to me is that people are smart and fearless. The students that I love, and will do anything for—I love all my students, but—the students that I love are smart and are willing to do the hard work of getting better and read plays and figure out what they need. And do the work of taking it apart and not just go on whatever instinctive talent they have. So, maybe that's just my bias.

I know I'm not the most talented person in the world, but I've worked really hard. Kept studying and challenging myself intellectually. And so, those are the people that I want to work with. One of the reasons why I really enjoy working with Eve is she's really smart and she's has a good eye. When we talk about a play we both know what the other thinks makes a good play, because we can articulate it. Part of being a really good collaborator is doing the hard work that makes you smart and be articulate. To me, I guess, being smart is being articulate. Will you do the hard work to learn how to talk about what you see and what you want in the script? And when we're in rehearsal we understand what the other one means, because we have the language to get there. So, my people are like that. I know we're willing to do the work of finding the common vocabulary.



Peter

How do you decide what's worth writing about.

Susan

Wow. Wow. Hmmm... I've been taking playwriting classes with Karen Hartman (in New York) and one of the things she says that really stuck with me is that if something is really worth writing, for you, it has to cost you something. There has to be something that you're willing to...someplace you're willing to go, in looking at yourself that makes you vulnerable. Before the Strand production, *Inexcusable Fantasies* was the Martha Stewart piece, the Harley piece, and the vibrator. It didn't have that through-line of, this is me at forty-nine feeling old, and my body isn't sexy, if it ever was, and certainly isn't ever going to be now. And I'm going blind. I wanted to be vulnerable and tell the truth about what it feels like to put myself out there to be looked at this stage of my life. And talk about sex and desire. When I sensed that people are going to look at me and go, Ewww, not that! Not only gay, but old and flat-chested, and all that stuff. That's when I decided to rework that piece now, because I felt like I wasn't just being funny about sexuality; I was being kind of honest about what it felt like to be in my body now.

The farce I'm working on now is also about insecurities. Middle-aged women being afraid they'll never be good enough. What is it that makes women in their 40's feel like time's running out, and I'm never going to be good enough?

Peter

Good question.

Susan

Those stories are compelling. The other thing I seem to write about are my people in Western Pennsylvania, growing up in a very conservative community with parents who love me to pieces but are very conservative people. A kind of understanding of growing up in a racist, homophobic, really misogynistic place! And yet, really loving those people and understanding those people, and internalizing those people, and really knowing what that's about, and feeling those things myself. And trying to have, I don't know, in some way some kind of...having myself be that place where that split comes together in my writing. I mean, I know that that sounds grand, but, those are the things that matter to me.

So telling that Harley story about growing up in Western Pennsylvania is like imagination of who I would have become if I had stayed there and turned on myself instead of fleeing.

Peter

How do you decide who to work with as a Director?

Susan

Spiritually I've come to a place in my life where I believe things happen and people enter your life for a reason. It's kind of a gift that the right person (Eve) is in my life right now when I've finally become a grown up and a person who is ready to do serious work. I believe there's some of that in the "find your people," too.

Peter

If you could wave a magic wand over Baltimore's theater scene what would change?

Susan

I feel like we need a little more brick and mortar support. People are doing incredible things in small and found spaces, but there are limitations to what you can do. I would like to see stable homes for the young companies to grow in together. I think that matters. Ideally, there would be those spaces and the support for them underneath it. Maybe the universities can play a part in it.

Peter

Wave the magic wand again. This time give us 3 writers whose work, in your opinion, Baltimore needs to experience.

Susan

Sheila Callahan's work. It's not pretty, but it's about protagonists who we don't usually see. It's about women and lust and desire that isn't this pretty hetero-normative thing. I love Naomi Wallace, she's a poet and her work is so beautiful. But it also has great women protagonists for so many great actresses who don't get to work. It would be great for small companies who are starting—and it's always young women who are doing a bunch of the work—and don't have the same opportunities, generally.

And then it's writer X who is someone that we don't know. Someone in the Baltimore community and it's not necessarily a young writer. It could be an old woman like me. But, there are a lot of writers who are really professional, skilled writers who live here, too, who haven't necessarily come out of Yale, or part of that new York thing.

Peter

What do you think is the over-arching theme of our conversation?

Susan

Emergence. I feel like I'm at a place in my life where I'm emerging. That word is usually attached to someone in their 20's. And there are all kinds of reasons why I'm emerging now, but I feel emotionally and artistically grown up now and ready to actually talk about things other than myself when I talk about my work. My work is about me, of course, but I'm grown up enough to talk about human beings. I feel like Baltimore theater is emerging. Emerging for a lot of reasons that have to do with the changes in the larger professional theaters, and with the younger groups coming here with the intention to grow together.



* * *

Yes, the theme is emergence. And it is also convergence...the convergence of people, groups, communities, ideas, worldviews, visions, and opportunities that working in harmony fuel the Baltimore Renaissance.

*

Next up—Generous Company’s *Gumbo* at Theatre Project, which opens January 31st. See you there.

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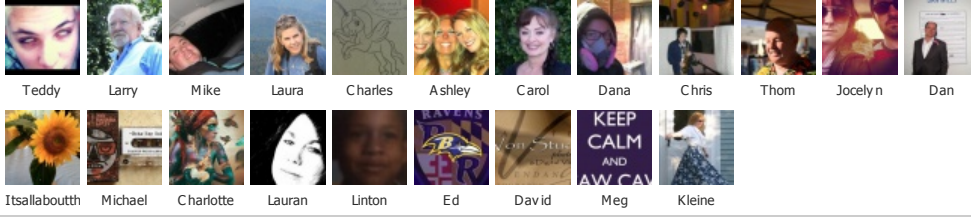
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