

WOMEN ARTISTIC DIRECTORS IN KANSAS CITY
AND THEIR PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an overview of several important women artistic directors who have helped form the recent Kansas City theatre landscape. Cynthia Levin, Jeanne Beechwood, Sidonie Garrett, Karen Paisley, and Heidi Van are pivotal artistic directors with unique perspectives. These women have opened doors to allow other women to flourish in arts leadership roles.

This document is arranged chronologically, although there are overlaps in the timelines of these five women's lives and accomplishments. The focus of my research spans from the 1960s to 2015. There are several other women who have been successful artistic directors, but I have chosen these five based on the longevity of their careers and the unique perspectives they have added to the Kansas City theatre landscape.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Women Artistic Directors in Kansas City and Their Processes” presented by Elizabeth Bettendorf Bowman, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

After the first year I spent studying theatre history at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, I was unsure of what I wanted to write my thesis about. What I did know was that I was interested in directing. During the spring semester of 2014 I had the opportunity to take a Directed Study course focusing on Directing. For my course work I attended the beginning directing class with Professor Scott Stackhouse. Together we agreed upon what my assignments would be and how they would differ from those of the undergraduate students. We decided that I would focus on observing stage direction. My assignment included going to several theatrical productions. I was to write about the choices the directors made, and how they read to an audience member. I was also assigned to be the assistant director under Dorothy Danner for a production of *Street Scene*, an American opera by Kurt Weill (composer), Langston Hughes (lyrics), and Elmer Rice (book), for the Conservatory of Dance and Music at UMKC. Ms. Danner's approach has been highly praised and I was fortunate to be able to work with her. Ms. Danner utilized my skills as a researcher as well as utilizing me as a second body to convey her vision. A responsibility that often fell to me was communicating her notes to members of the cast. I also assisted in problem solving and pin pointing the root of issues on stage. What I learned from this experience is that much of what can be learned about directing is done through observation as opposed to reading second hand accounts in books. I decided that I would continue to continue my research by observing directors in here Kansas City, thus, the following is a case study of women artistic directors in Kansas City which will help shed light on the history and prominence of women in leadership roles in Kansas City theatre.

While researching various directors, I found that a common way of writing about all of them was first-hand observations of performances and rehearsals along with personal memoirs and biographies. This format of observation and personal history is what I found worked best for writing about the artistic directors chosen here.

The following five chapters follow five women artistic directors in the Kansas City area. Although there are more female artistic directors in Kansas City, I chose the following based on the longevity of their careers and the unique mark each has made on the Kansas City theatre scene. Chapter One follows Cynthia Levin at the Unicorn Theatre where she has brought bold new plays to life for over forty years. Chapter Two records the history and philosophy of Jeanne Beechwood and the Martin City Melodrama for the past thirty years. Next is Sidonie Garrett and her work at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, which she has been a part of for over twenty years. Chapter Three tracks Karen Paisley's journey to Kansas City and the formation of the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre which has been a staple for over a decade. The final chapter focuses on Heidi Van and the Fishtank Performance Studio, where she has developed the Kansas City audience's taste for the experimental for nearly a decade.

The reason I focused on women artistic directors is not only because I am a woman myself, but because I was interested in what made Kansas City a hotbed for women in art leadership roles. As of 2008, membership of women in the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society was below 25 percent (Norman, Theatre Communications Group 2009). The U.S. Department of Labor considers any profession with less than twenty-five percent female employment to be "untraditional" for women (Norman, Theatre Communications Group 2009). Kansas City is a different story, however. Out of

the thirteen professional theatres in Kansas City, seven of the artistic directors are women, and one is a collaborative effort between a troupe of theatre artists, both men and women.

To begin my research, I collected newspaper and magazine articles mentioning the directors. The articles I found included reviews of plays directed by them and news about the companies themselves. The length of artistic directors' careers correlated with the print materials I found about the directors. Cynthia Levin had quite a few articles published about her in local magazines, while Heidi Van's biographical articles were primarily found in online journals. In fact, it was not until towards the end of my thesis writing process that there was a biographical article written in *The Kansas City Star* about Van. My next step was to meet with the artistic directors individually to ask them more about themselves and their processes as directors. I was fortunate to be allowed in the rehearsal processes of Sidonie Garret, Cynthia Levin, and Heidi Van to observe them. Karen Paisley and Jeanne Beechwood both were gracious enough to extend our interview times to give me as much information as possible.

CHAPTER 1

CYNTHIA LEVIN

Love of the Arts

The 1960s was a time of both cultural and political revolutions. The Vietnam War, the feminist movement, and civil rights activism formed the backdrop to Cynthia Levin's adolescence. She sang and marched, and pushed the envelope. She burned with creative energy. She had so much to say, but no real outlet. Then she found the theatre, and it soon became a passion. It was jealous, and took every bit of her; it wouldn't let her go.

Levin was raised to love the arts. She grew up in Washington D.C., and had parents who took their two children to every symphony, every theatre production, and every opera. They exposed their children to the arts very early in life. Levin started out as a musician and connected with the albums of musicals her father would bring home. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's 1945 musical, *Carousel*, was one such album. She also adored Stephen Sondheim's lyrics for the 1957 musical *West Side Story*. Looking back on those musicals, she can see what she loved about them. Yes, the music was beautiful, but there was more. These were shows with a social conscience. *Carousel* commented on domestic abuse in a time when it was rarely even mentioned, and *West Side Story* dealt with what the racial tensions for immigrants living in the United States were like. In the same way as Sondheim or Hammerstein, Levin used her voice through music. She grew up in the Vietnam Era and led protests with her guitar. "We felt we could change the world and make a difference" (Levin 2015).

Growing up, Levin didn't have any interest in classical music; she preferred the statements made by folk and rock artists. These artists talked about ending the war, and using drugs, and making her generation's stamp on the world.

In 1972, Levin left the east coast for college. She found Park College (now Park University) in Parkville, Missouri, a town of approximately 5,000, known for its art galleries and antique shops. It is conveniently located minutes away from Kansas City, Missouri. At Park University, Levin started as a music major, but felt the faculty was pushing her in the direction of classical music. This didn't feed her creativity, so she started taking theatre classes. The theatre program at Park was quite prolific in the 1970s. "We were doing original pieces. We were doing plays about homosexuals and prostitutes on the streets and how to survive, and homeless people, and that is what I loved. I was drawn to content" (Levin 2015). What drew her further into the program was the people; the family and the community was created in such a tight knit theatre program. This environment encouraged exploration. Exploring emotional vulnerability fascinated and excited her. She knew from there that her place was in theatre.

Levin and the Unicorn

After Levin graduated from Park College, she worked as a freelance artist, and went where the work was. For a time, she worked at the Missouri Repertory Theatre (now the Kansas City Repertory Theatre) and interned at Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage. She also composed music for the Kansas City's Coterie theatre and the theatre for which she would one day become the Artistic Director, Unicorn Theatre. While working for these different theatres, she noticed she wasn't interested in a lot of the content being produced. "It offended me. I thought it was sexist, it was racist, and so the idea of working at the

Unicorn was really cool but I wasn't running it. There was a little Shakespeare; there was a little children's theatre" (Levin 2015). During this time, the Unicorn was called the Theatre Workshop. It had been founded in 1974 by three graduates of the University of Missouri-Kansas City (Royston 2004). In 1982, the artistic director of the Theatre Workshop left her position. Levin quickly talked to the board of directors. She was hired as the Artistic Director on a temporary basis, but Levin decided to make an obvious shift in programming (Varney 2003). To make the most of her new position, she began to produce plays that she found artistically stimulating. "It's not what I set out to do" Levin admits, but it seems that she was on the path from the beginning. The main thing she saw was that there were other women artistic directors. One was Zelda Fichandler at Arena Stage, one of the firsts in the country. When Levin came to Kansas City, Patricia McIlrath was running the largest theatre in town, the Missouri Repertory Theatre. Levin told Robert Trussell in an interview, "I grew up in Washington, D.C., and I was incredibly fortunate to have as my role model Zelda Fichandler, who ran the Arena Stage, and then I come to Kansas City and there's Dr. Mac running the major theater. The two cities I've lived in have had women at the helm. And then I realized it was a fluke. But it was kind of cool that I got to watch those women" (R. Trussell, Women forge pathes to the top of KC performing arts organizations 2015). Because of these two women, Levin knew she too could be the head of a theatre.

Along with the change in programming, Levin furthered the legacy of the Unicorn by joining the Actors' Equity Association in 1984 (Royston 2004). Levin credits Actors Equity with facilitating the lasting impact of the Unicorn. "I would not stay on as the Artistic Director if (the Unicorn) were not an Equity Company" (Royston 2004). Levin

further states, “Being a member of Equity myself, I fought for the Unicorn to become an Equity house and believe very strongly in what the union stands for” (Royston 2004).

At the Unicorn, Levin produces only new plays. She looks for shows that have never been seen in the midwest and looks to produce world premieres. “This is what I love. I realized I didn’t really just love theatre so much in general. I wanted to do a certain kind of theatre so the Unicorn was an obvious home for me to be able to choose shows that said a little bit more about our lives as young adults--all of those things. We got to talk about what I loved” (Levin 2015).

Levin expanded community involvement by having post-show discussions about the issues each play brought up with its audience. Levin continues to use this platform in order to employ art as a life-changing device. “Where else do you get to do work [that] has the power to open up new doors to people?” Levin knowingly questions. She didn’t want to do plays that are constantly produced, the ones about the middle-aged, middle-class, white people, because that is the majority of the theatergoing audience. She wanted to show them new stories and tell stories that others can identify with. Levin made a commitment to produce plays by and about people whose voices were not being heard. She sought out plays by black women, which was difficult, because there were very few that were published when she started. Levin had to talk to agents and other theatres to find these stories. The idea that theatre can change opinions and inspire change is not new, but there has been a recent study that shows this effect actually happens. Susan V. Iverson, along with Alison Murphy and Ashley McKee used a pre-show and post-show quantitative survey to measure the audience’s views on homosexuality. What the 2007 study found was the audience made significant gains in

awareness and changes in attitudes towards LGBTQ persons and issues. The reasoning given for this occurrence is simply that when people are put into situations where they empathize with someone who they see as different, they begin to widen their perspectives (Iverson 2013). Decades before this article was published, Levin already knew the impact of theatre. In 1987 she produced *As Is* by Michael M. Hoffman. This marked the first play about AIDS to be produced in the midwest. “That was important to me because I didn’t know very much in 1987. Nobody knew very much” (Levin 2015).

Levin was also strident in making sure that half of all the plays produced by the Unicorn were written by women, and even further, there was an equal number of roles for women. “Nobody else was doing that because nobody cared and when it’s run by a man...they don’t make that sort [of thing] important” (Levin 2015). Levin mentions that it is much easier to find plays that are written by men and have more roles for men; most play catalogs showcase them, but she didn’t want to do that. She didn’t want to go with the status quo; she wanted to tell real stories about all people. This meant telling stories that are often covered up and forgotten. Levin never wanted to do a play about incest, then she read Paula Vogel’s 1997 play *How I Learned to Drive*, which deals with the themes of incest and pedophilia through the metaphor of learning how to drive. She knew right away she had to do it because it gave the audience a chance to understand some difficult and often unmentionable subject matter. In order to do the play justice, she needed to study the psychology of the characters. “There’s no other job in the world, except maybe a therapist, that allows you to get into the psychology of all of these people who are unlike you and understand them and feel some sort of empathy” (Levin 2015) .

It may seem that as an artistic director, Levin is strictly in the entertainment business, but in reality she does much more. She is a social servant and an activist who works with the medium of entertainment. She mentions that entertainment means different things to different people. Most people think of entertainment as a passive action, laughing and forgetting your troubles. Levin views entertainment differently; she wants to confront the Unicorn's audience with the problems of the world, and have them feel as though they need to do something about it.

Keeping the Unicorn's Doors Open

The Unicorn's doors have been open for over forty years, but that has not been an easy task. As with many other art-based enterprises, there have been many financial concerns. The easy road, according to Levin, would be to become a commercial theatre, "We never did it. So sort of holding onto those ideals and grassroots mission of the company actually made it successful" (Varney 2003). Levin also credits being fiscally frugal in the success of the Unicorn. She states, "we have never made a commitment we couldn't back up. We have never *not* had a balanced budget" (Vernon 2003). Levin says, that's how she grew up. She has never plunged into new business ideas, "all the risks are on stage, we do not take financial risks" (Bacon 2005). When asked how she survived the financially lean and difficult years, her answer is endurance, and loyalty to the company (Vernon 2003).

Choosing a Season

The programming at the Unicorn is different from that of other theatres in that Levin does not choose to produce a show based on whether it will sell seats (Vernon 2003). Levin spends much of her time looking for new plays to produce at the Unicorn.

She reads hundreds of new plays throughout the year in hopes of finding a perfect match. The Unicorn is also a founding member of the National New Play Network, which is a consortium of eleven theatres throughout the country. George White, the founder of the Eugene O'Neill Festival, chose the Unicorn for the Midwest region. White's thought was that most of the new thought-provoking theater was coming not from the big regional theatres, but from the second-tier theatres. Eleven of these second-tier theatres were selected to develop new work. The New Play Network is now larger in that there are now thirty-eight theatres that are working to develop new work. These theatres trade playwrights and plays back and forth, trying to develop and produce these new works. This means that the Unicorn will work on a script for a minimum of one year. "A lot of my time and resources are put towards new plays, world premieres and developing playwrights or developing stories" (Levin). Levin also noticed that she felt like an outsider when she reached out to work with these other theatres, "I remember when we were starting with the National New Play Network (a national consortium of theater companies), the majority of the people running theaters in that organization were men. I always felt that I just had to fight harder, and I'm sure that every person that was in any sort of minority, a female or a person of color, feels you have to prove yourself every time. And you had to speak out. You had to fight for your position" (R. Trussell, *Women forge paths to the top of KC performing arts organizations* 2015).

Levin's goal is to produce new plays first. "We will either do it before it gets to New York or we're the first production after New York... I have spent my entire career doing this on working on getting those plays that I want immediately so that people don't need to go [to New York]". Levin truly brings the best of the new works to Kansas City.

From Pulitzer Prize winners to Tony Award winners, she immerses the Unicorn's audience in the new edgy and provocative shows. Levin works on getting these shows to the Unicorn twelve months out of the year. She goes to New York several times a year to meet with publishers and agents and fosters a strong relationship. They know what type of plays she is looking for. Levin puts off publicly announcing each season until as late as she can. Often the plays she is interested in don't become available until immediately before the Unicorn will produce them.

Relationships are very important when it comes to the Unicorn's patrons, as well. "I learned from Doctor McIlrath that you hang out in the lobby. You're here before the show. You talk to your season ticket holders. You have access and people feel like they have access to you and it makes a difference. They're heard. They can tell me if they have a gripe. They take ownership in it" (Levin 2015). Levin is speaking of Dr. Patricia McIlrath, who was a Kansas City the Chair of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Theatre Department and founding artistic director of Missouri Repertory Theatre (now the Kansas City Repertory Theatre) from 1964-1985. The founding of the Missouri Rep led to the revival of professional theatre in the area. Following in the formation of the Missouri Rep, numerous other professional theatre companies were established in Kansas City since the 1970s and have found lasting success. These theatres include the Unicorn Theatre, the Coterie Theatre, the New Theatre, and the American Heartland Theatre (Trussell and Butler, Missouri Repertory Theatre founder dies 1999). In 1989, the Kansas City-based art journal Forum wrote of McIlrath's influence: "Before her arrival, there was no legitimate, locally produced, professional theatre in Kansas City. Now the city boasts 10 equity theatres in a market area of only 1.5 million people. All of those theatres are

headed by people who got their start in professional theatre under Patricia McIlrath" (Presson 1989).

Levin is also conscious of the seasons other Kansas City theaters wish to produce, "Once in a while there would be a show somebody else would want to do, but usually we are incredibly kind and respectful of each other and try not to step on each other's toes when it comes to programming" (Vernon 2003).

Levin is also very conscious of the diversity of the plays produced. "I look at the entire journey of twelve months from the first play and how you go to the second play... I don't want to do a similar play, either physically or story-wise or text or any of the style, back to back" (Levin). Once Levin has the plays narrowed down for a season, she then works on placing them in the most effective time slot. For this she relies on her artistic intuition and experience.

Levin's Directing Process

Levin always starts with plays she has a strong connection to, then she starts to visualize the play and read over it. Most of the plays she picks, she has not seen produced. This allows her to have a fresh take on them. "It's very important to me to visualize" (Levin 2015). She then needs drawings and to collectively work with the designers before she actually starts working on blocking the play. This does not mean she casts the actors quite yet. This was the case with *The Oldest Boy* by Sarah Ruhl. She did not know the people she was about to cast, so she held open auditions to choose the right actors. When Levin casts shows, she thinks it is important to employ as many local actors as possible. "There's no reason not to. I mean, it's not like there's nobody here who can do it. That's just not true. And if people are given just a little more opportunity,

then they get to learn how to do it, and they get better at it. I don't know why we can't be a part of that. I love being a part of that" (Varney 2003). To demonstrate her commitment, roughly seventy-five percent of the cast members during a season live in the Kansas City area (Bacon 2005).

When Levin first read *The Oldest Boy* there were elements that immediately drew her in. She knew the Unicorn needed to produce it, and that she would be the one to direct it. She mentions that there are certain plays and playwrights that are difficult to live with, since as a director she is constantly thinking about the work or rehearsing it with others. Levin says the process of a director is crazy, and there are so many variables that go into each individual experience. There is a set order to things to get the play ready for an audience, but sometimes it doesn't work out that way. A director must be open to people going in different directions. "It's a really strange business of having it absolutely organized and knowing exactly where you want to go and being open to go in any direction. If anyone gets off-kilter, you always have to know how to put it back together" (Levin 2015). Levin says that she often feels like the "fixer", because that is what she does with every production, she makes sure everyone stays or gets back on track. After working on over three hundred productions, she realizes that that is what happens with all shows, and now she has the experience to do it well. "What I'm really good at is doing a show at the Unicorn Theatre, where I know the space, and I know the people" (Levin 2015). For her, she feels that she does her best work when people who surround her are the ones she knows trust and support her, and that she trusts and supports them. "That just starts you off at a different level as opposed to going

somewhere and everybody's new and everything's new and the space is new. I love to create art here in this space" (Levin 2015).

Process in Motion

Levin's rehearses *The Oldest Boy* on the Jerome Stage in the Unicorn Theatre. The set is mostly complete. It is a unit set with a painted slate print. There is a drop for shadows to appear directly center behind the set and on the sides, blue painted panels. It feels Tibetan influenced. Levin sits watching the action. She drinks an iced coffee, and sits with her foot perched on a beautiful printed pillow, with the pattern of geometric shapes running throughout the sphere. Her dog Zia lies to the side. Levin perks up, and writes a note on her yellow legal pad, matching the temples of her eyeglasses.

"Let's hold," Levin sits up, steps over her dog Zia, and makes her way to the stage. "You need to kneel on your right knee, and be in prayer position." Levin says to an actor. In this scene of *The Oldest Boy*, the Mother is ceremonially becoming the student of a Lama. Levin uses her expertise in this instance. Before rehearsals started, she spent much of her time researching Tibetan Buddhist ceremony and culture. She also brought in speakers to discuss the culture. *The Oldest Boy* includes the use of a puppet, and in this case, it is the life-size Bunranku puppet of a child named Tenzin. Levin had never worked with a puppet like this, so she recruited the help of Paul Mesner, a well-known puppet master from Kansas City. The two artists work together to figure out how the puppet and puppeteers should move. They spend time finding the cleanest way to get the puppet up the stairs or how to put him to bed, whilst allowing the audience to see him. Levin asks Mesner's advice about the puppet's movement, and how the puppeteers can be placed, so the audience can see the movement.

Another time she asks for collaboration is when the Mother gives birth in the monastery. There is a clash between western and eastern medical practice. Andi Meyer, an actor and puppeteer in the show, is a mother, and has worked with a midwife. She is the only one in rehearsal who has not only given birth, but has given birth naturally, like the Mother in the play. Levin asks, how would a woman give birth on this bench, how would she lie, how would she move? Meyer knows and gives several options. Levin chooses the most realistic and visually effective position.

Further in the process, the designers for *The Oldest Boy* come to watch a run through. They sit scattered across the audience, some with their own tables, and some with just a binder to write their notes. They wait patiently throughout the run and wait until Levin is ready after giving her notes. She gives her notes calmly, quietly, and expressively. The buzz of the house lights almost drowns out her words from the back row of the intimate theatre. Levin's experience shines through while talking to the designers. The process of speaking to each designer seems to happen organically, not conducted by the stage manager. The team works together to solve problems, like the birthing scene. They discuss what the newborn baby should look like. The text says that the baby is slippery, but they ponder whether or not that is meant to be taken literally, since so many other instances in the play are figurative. Designers from each form take turns giving their ideas and input. Ultimately they choose to table the discussion; they decide to try multiple ideas for the upcoming rehearsals.

Advice to a new director

There are several pieces of advice Levin has for a new director. One is to be able to communicate with people, specifically actors and designers. Each artistic role uses

different tools, and a different form of communication. A director must be able to understand each one in order to effectively communicate. “You have to learn to communicate and it’s hard because everybody within that genre has their own things of what clicks for them and you have to know how to speak to each individual, especially actors, of what means something to them. What makes sense to them? How can they make it their own?” (Levin 2015). Levin never gives an actor a line reading; she must use her communication skills to paint a picture so that they can have that discovery themselves.

Secondly, you must have a vision and be open to other visions within that. This goes along with communication. Levin guides the actors and designers through her vision, and allows room for individual discovery. Rather than pre-blocking every single moment and directing it as such, she asks her performers to take into consideration what she describes to them. If a director pre-blocks every single moment, the director is imposing on the actor. It makes a difference if a director acts as a facilitator in bringing out what it is he or she is looking for. “If you come to the discovery yourself, then it’s organic. By being open in your vision, it takes confidence and humility. It also takes time to practice this. A director needs to be able to make a decision to try an idea or not within seconds, and that takes practice” (Levin 2015).

Next, a director has to know a bit about everything. That means a director could try everything or observe. By observing, a new director gets a chance to see how other directors talk to actors, and what works best. Also by observing, a new director sees how different rehearsals are run, and she learns more about each component of theatre.

Levin says those are the things a director can learn, but there are still some things that she can't.

“I don't know that you can learn to be talented and to have vision and to create things, but you can learn how to get along and communicate with people. You can learn exactly what a Source Four light can do and what a Fresnel light will do. Those things you can study. Math you can study, but creative art, it's a talent and I'm not sure to what degree people can necessarily have that talent. I don't know how you get that part of it, but I know how you try to discipline it and learn how to get other people to see, because we're in a collaborative art. I don't get to go home and paint a picture or write a song and perform it. I have to work with fifteen to twenty other people to create what I do” (Levin 2015).

CHAPTER 2

JEANNE BEECHWOOD

A life dedicated to theatre

Jeanne Beechwood was born and raised in the Kansas City metropolitan area and her story is very much engrained in the city around her. Beechwood's first play was performed when she was in the fourth grade. She had the leading role of "Jane" in a health play at school. It was then that she knew theatre was her calling. She also remembers being a director from a young age. She looks back on when she was in first grade and taught her neighborhood friends the "Hail Mary" prayer and directed them to march at the same time. This memory is now a bit embarrassing to Beechwood, but in retrospect this hints at her future as a director.

After graduating from Bishop Meige High School, in Roeland Park, Kansas, Beechwood moved on to St. Edward's University, a small liberal arts college in Austin, Texas. The reason she chose to attend this particular school was not because of the religious affiliation, but because the theatre department brought in well-known actors to work with the students. Beechwood observed how these actors honed their skills, as well as how they interacted with those around them. What she learned most from these stars was not how to be an artist. She learned what not to do. "One person, Jackie Coogan, a child star and Uncle Fester. He was a big jerk" Beechwood recalls (Beechwood 2015). She remembers him sitting in the lobby of the theatre talking about how Barbara Streisand will never "make it" in the entertainment business because she was not beautiful enough. "And here is this overweight, middle-aged man saying this." She instinctually thought, "no, that has nothing to do with it." Beechwood did not care for

how many of these actors treated those around them. She knew then that she would not be that type of professional. After her time there, she graduated and went over seas to study at Schiller College in France. It wasn't for her. She came back, and had sixteen hours of her graduate degree finished, so she continued her master's degree in theatre at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

After she finished her Master of Arts degree, Beechwood didn't know what she wanted to do. "My first professional acting gig after finishing my master's at UMKC was, of all things, at a melodrama theatre in California called The Great American Melodrama & Vaudeville Company," Beechwood says. "They're exactly ten years older than we are. I remember I got there, and I just thought, 'That just looks so fun.' I didn't realize what hard work it was" (Feidler 2010). At that point she never had any aspirations to start her own theatre company. After doing dinner theatre and working in the Alaska bush community teaching Eskimo and Athabaskan Indian kids how to do vaudeville, Beechwood came back home and wanted a place to hang her hat. She remembered enjoying her experience at The Great American Melodrama & Vaudeville Company. In 1987, She found an old church for rent at Holmes Road and 135th Street in the Martin City area of southern Kansas City, Missouri (Feidler 2010).

Beechwood had saved money and was able to make the relatively inexpensive rent. She also didn't need a co-signer on the lease, another obstacle many other venues put forth. After sixteen years, she found that the building was in great need of repair. "Well," Beechwood says, "one year turned into sixteen years there, and then we left there by choice. Some people think we left because we didn't pay the rent. The rent was astronomical when we left, and we left because the foundation was a problem, there were

termites, there was a broken water heater. What started off as an old building when I was twenty-seven was an even older building sixteen years later” (Feidler 2010).

There was talk of utilizing tax credits to build a new theatre for Martin City Melodrama, and the organization even owned land for the potential new location. “We went in February, and they said, ‘Sorry, none of the tax credits are going to the sixth district at this time. They’re all going to either the Starlight area or downtown.’ Well, what are you supposed to say? ‘You promised?’ You just have to go, ‘Okay. What’s gonna happen?’” (Beechwood 2015). Beechwood kept Martin City Melodrama afloat by renting a space at Rockhurst University and performing at the Farris Theatre in Richmond, Missouri. Neither of these places was to become a permanent home (Beechwood 2015).

However, the day she got the bad news about the funding, she received some good news, too. Beechwood says, “That’s when I knew it was a God thing. The same day I got home from that meeting, Wade Williams, who has the Glenwood Movie Theatre, the Rio, and the Englewood in Independence called me” (Beechwood 2015). Williams informed Beechwood that Metcalf South had plans to become an entertainment center. So, after a few calls, Martin City Melodrama had a new home. The theatre company moved to Metcalf South and continued the tradition of family entertainment on the main stage. While producing shows at their new location, they opened a new theatre company for "the young and young at heart", Martin City Junior. Touring around the KC Metropolitan area, Martin City Junior quickly became one of the highest esteemed children's theatres in the area. They have been chosen twice to perform at the International New York Fringe Festival in New York City. “We actually run three

companies. We have our main stage family shows where we do shows in the evening, we have a children's theatre, and we have touring shows" (Beechwood 2015).

At the end of their 29th Season, the Martin City Melodrama was forced to leave their second location, Metcalf South. After many months of searching, they found a new location at the Great Mall of the Great Plains, and this led to the moving of several years of costumes, props and sets throughout the summer of 2014.

Following the move, the Martin City Melodrama spent the remainder of the summer and early autumn renovating their new space, which was previously a bar that had been ransacked and abandoned by the mall. Celebrating a successful 30th Season in their new location, the Martin City Melodrama was able to produce four mainstage productions in the six months they were housed there. Towards the end of that time, the management of the new location released a press release informing the community and tenants of its future closing to take place in the fall of 2015. This news was obviously devastating to Beechwood and to the Martin City Melodrama as the small non-profit theatre company had spent thousands of dollars during the move and renovation of the new space. Quickly, they also found out that the date would be sooner than fall 2015 and they were forced to cancel their summer 2015 production.

Ever the resourceful artist, Beechwood quickly reached out to Musical Theatre Heritage, which had recently bought two small movie theatres in Crown Center. With a few conversations, Martin City Melodrama found their home for the 2015-2016 Season.

Artistic Philosophy as a Director

"We try to do G-rated family entertainment all the time," Beechwood says. "It makes us be cleverer, quite honestly. We can't go for the cheap, risqué joke. We have to

entertain ages two to ninety-two and make it entertaining for everybody in-between. And it really does take more creativity to do that” (Beechwood 2015). Beechwood is quite happy doing what she classifies as ‘entertainment theatre.’ “We were sort of feeling like we had this unique product, but like we didn’t belong in a way, because I think sometimes people judge entertainment theatre differently from serious theatre.

Entertainment theatre is just as important,” Beechwood continues, “because honestly, if we get someone to come here and have a good time and then they decide to go to KC Rep or they want to give the Unicorn a try because they had a wonderful introduction, we feel that’s important. And I also felt it’s very important to be able to escape your troubles. Come in and have a good time, and as we continue to do historical entertainment: it does keep that alive.”

Beechwood is very careful to indicate that what her theatre does is a historical style to both her actors and audience. “There’s a difference from what I would say is melodrammer, which is almost a parody of melodrama,” Beechwood says. “Sometimes people think it’s all about tying a girl to a railroad track. But it’s not that. For city melodramas like ours: you have to do so much more than that to continue to attract customers” (Beechwood 2015).

Because the Martin City Melodrama is a city melodrama, and not a tourist melodrama, Beechwood has to have ever changing material to perform. She has written vaudevilles on aging, sleep, medicine, food, and on anything she could think of. She has also started a series called the Forgotten American Musical Series for which she directed the musical *The Cocoanuts* by the Marx Brothers. This was monumental because this musical had not been performed in Kansas City since 1927. “It was different for my

audience, we scored it with sound effects rather than music, they really liked it, but it was really different” (Beechwood 2015). A reason they chose to do this play when they did was because she had a great actor who could play Groucho.

People often consider melodrama as a lower form of theatre, but Beechwood looks at it as a form of historical entertainment. She has to first find actors that understand this style of theatre. She looks for actors who are not afraid to look foolish to an audience. Because of this, she also has a hard time finding the right actors. Many actors feel that the subject matter must be serious to change the world. Beechwood feels like she’s changed the world if their performance made someone laugh and forget their troubles. She also understands that her audience often isn’t interested in the historical roots that they have in melodrama and vaudeville, but she is sure to do research and educate herself as a director.

Beechwood also sees herself as a teacher. It is up to her to teach this particular style to new actors. The Martin City Melodrama produces its shows as historically accurately as possible. They do not use microphones, so Beechwood has to be sure to hire actors who can project their voices. She finds it is getting harder and harder to find actors who can do this, because they are now learning how to act with the use of microphones. Their set is mostly drops, which is similar to many American melodramas that traveled around the country over a hundred years ago.

Beechwood is proud that Martin City is a non-Equity company that pays its actors. “We give many actors their first job,” Beechwood says, “I mean, many of the Equity actors that are working today got their start here. I love to use new actors: they don’t have any preconceived notions and they seem real open to learn.” (Feidler 2010)

Work with the Special Needs Community

A collaboration between Lakemary Center and Martin City Melodrama began in 2012, when Jeanne Beechwood was asked to teach Lakemary Center's Day Services clients comedy classes. Beechwood raised money so her students could showcase their skills in a vaudeville show. Since then, it has become an annual event. "I've seen them blossom before my eyes in the past few years and they're gaining confidence," she said. "Some of them who were so shy in the beginning are stepping out of their shell. They're not afraid to be silly, which makes the show that much more fun" (R. Trussell, Vaudeville production opens new horizons for disabled adults 2014).

Beechwood also works with the non-profit organization Inclusion Connection. Inclusion Connection uses a model of peer mentorship to include others with developmental disabilities in the community. Beechwood trains all the teens and young adults in their acting skills to work into a comedy production for the participants and their families. Because of these positive experiences giving back to the community, Beechwood plans to expand her education program to include more classes for adults and kids with special needs. "This is the best thing I've ever done in my career," she said. "It's fulfilling" (R. Trussell, Vaudeville production opens new horizons for disabled adults 2014).

Process

Jeanne starts with the title of the play she is about to write. This is for both creative and business reasons. For one, she has to put out a brochure before many of the plays are written. She also does this because at this time she is not quite sure what the season will have in store by the time that play rolls around. This allows her to work the

script around the talent and resources she has. She also feels that she works best under pressure; she seems to lose her stride if she works on a little at a time. This isn't to say she forgets about the upcoming projects, she still stewes them and looks for inspiration. She often finds inspiration through her research for shows she is writing. Sometimes she feels as if she's taking a shot in the dark when she comes up with a title and a theme before having auditions and writing the script. She has to hope she finds what she needs, but because she writes her own material, she can tailor her season to the particular talents her company has at the time.

Currently, Beechwood is in the process of writing a melodrama about early twentieth-century stunt woman, Pearl White. She came across this pivotal actress through watching video clips of melodrama masters on YouTube. What drew her to this actress and stunt woman was that even though she was playing the "damsel in distress" White was actually in control of her own stunts. "If I can find the right woman, I am determined to produce it" (Beechwood 2015).

Aside from original melodramas, Beechwood also directs Vaudeville entertainments. A unique entertainment is The Water Glass Symphony (R. Trussell, Holiday madness: New winter theater 2014). Beechwood describes this spectacular event as a holiday staple in Kansas City. During the holiday vaudeville, she is sure to include this symphony made from hundreds of different glasses that each make a different sound. The musicians are guided by colors, rather than notes, to create this signature event (Beechwood 2015).

Artistic Influences and Mentors

Beechwood recalls a specific moment when she realized the significant number of women artistic directors in Kansas City. She, along with many other local artistic directors, were invited to an event at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre. They were all asked to give a short speech, as she watched the artistic directors speak, she realized, most of the speakers were female. As each artistic director spoke, another common theme was the Kansas City Repertory Theatre's founder, Dr. Patricia McIlrath. The KC Rep even had a film about Dr. McIlrath's life and how influential she was in Kansas City. What Beechwood has since realized is that Dr. McIlrath has played a large role in her career. While Dr. McIlrath did not give Beechwood a formal mentorship, what she did do was open the door for women directors. Dr. McIlrath was always a quiet supporter of Beechwood. "She was always very kind. She would always come out to the melodrama and would boo and cheer." Beechwood says, "she opened the doors and opened the ears of the people living here. She let them know women know something, too" (Beechwood 2015).

Charles Ludlum's style is very influential to Beechwood. He does historical entertainment, as well. Beechwood admires how he does not play to the audience that he is a man in a dress. He is funny because of the characters he encapsulates. Beechwood tries to learn about and see all the work he has done. She does this to figure out how she, too, can write and direct in such a truthful manner. Ludlum has written a philosophy on melodramatic dramatic theory. Beechwood has made it a tradition to read a passage from Ludlum at the end of every rehearsal process. "A lot of things he says, apply directly to

Martin City” (Beechwood 2015). Reading from Ludlum seems to help the actors who still need the validation that what they do at Martin City Melodrama is art.

Charles Ludlam founded a theatre called the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Beechwood went to his production of *Camille*, which is based on *Lady of the Camelias* by Alexandre Dumas, fils. It had gay humor to appeal to the Ridiculous Theatre’s audience, but what they were doing stylistically was very much like what Martin City Melodrama was doing. During this time, it was her seventh year running the theatre company and Beechwood felt that she was searching for something artistically. She felt lost with what she was doing at Martin City Melodrama. There was no one doing anything similar in the Kansas City area. When she saw *Camille*, Beechwood felt a sort of validation that her theatre company was on the right track.

A Family Affair

The Martin City Melodrama is a family affair. Beechwood’s daughter has acted in several shows and Beechwood’s mother has made many of the beautiful costumes. Beechwood embraces this type of family atmosphere in both the content of her plays and the work behind the scenes. She says it’s a part of her personality. Sometimes she wishes she could be more cut and dried. Beechwood thinks at times that actors look at her as more of a mother than as a director, and that can be a difficult obstacle. At this point she knows what she is capable of and it’s a battle she has to fight. However, one can see that she is directing and running Martin City Melodrama as she wants to, and it is working. She has shown that she is fully capable of running a professional company on her own.

Advice

Beechwood is what most people would consider a “go-getter”. She takes her art into her own hands. You can see how this type of personality would recommend direct practice of one’s art. Her advice is to get as much experience as possible. She mentions this would be her advice to anyone who wants to be successful in any field. Experience can come in many shapes and forms, including acting in theatre troupes, directing, or sitting in rehearsals and observing what goes on. Experience can also come from going to classes or workshops. She also suggests doing independent research. Psychology is also an important category to study, in order to better understand how to work with a production team, and to make a character three-dimensional.

CHAPTER 3

SIDONIE GARRETT

Early Memories of Theatre

Sidonie Garrett seemed to be always telling stories. She memorized her favorite poems, and told of her favorite tales. She told stories through dance, and music, and even through standup comedy. Sidonie Garrett was born in New Mexico, but her family's roots are in Missouri. By the time she was four, she was settled in Harrisonville, Missouri, a town about forty miles from downtown Kansas City. At the last census the population counted just over 10,000 people. Among the notable natives are, Edward Capehart O'Kelly, the man who killed Robert Ford, who was the man who killed Jesse James. Garrett has since become notable for other reasons.

Garrett remembers, "My first memory of theatre is my own theatre that I created" (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015). In her Harrisonville home, Garrett created her own live entertainments. She was a baton twirler, an acrobat, a dancer, and played the piano. She started reading at the age of three and memorized stories. In her home, she would put all of these skills together to produce a show for the price of a quarter. That is, unless dinner was to be served with the show, then a viewing would cost as much as fifty cents. A favorite poem to perform was James Whitcomb Riley's "Little Orphan't Annie". The poem starts:

"Little Orphant Annie's come to our house to stay,

An' wash the cups an' saucers up, an' brush the crumbs away,

An' shoo the chickens off the porch, an' dust the hearth, an' sweep,

An' make the fire, an' bake the bread, an' earn her board-an'-keep;
An' all us other children, when the supper things is done,
We set around the kitchen fire an' has the mostest fun
A-list'nin' to the witch-tales 'at Annie tells about,
An' the Gobble-uns 'at gits you
Ef you
Don't
Watch
Out!"

It is interesting that Garrett's memory chooses to recall this particular poem. Little Orphan Annie's role is to keep the household running, and at the end of the day, she tells the best stories. This narrative parallels Garrett's role as a Producing Artistic Director. Not only does she handle the artistic direction at Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, but she oversees all aspects of mounting a production. Garrett makes sure the theatre is kept running, and tells stories to her audiences.

The Storyteller

Garrett was always reading stories, and telling stories, so it is not a leap that she became a director. Her early entrepreneurial spirit makes it clear how she would later step into her future role at Heart of America Shakespeare Festival. Garrett continued her love of storytelling and performing as an actor. As young as thirteen, she took the stage at the Coterie; soon after, she spent several seasons in the annual production of *A Christmas Carol* at the Missouri Repertory Theatre. She describes her first directing class at the University of Missouri-Kansas City like "coming home". She quickly began

working toward this new love. Her first professional directing debut was a self produced production of *The Widow's Blind Date* by Israel Horovitz. She chose for it to take place in the summer, on the back stage of the Waldo Astoria playhouse that had been abandoned in favor of a new location by The New Theatre, a dinner theatre now located in Overland Park, Kansas. The space was in a state of disrepair, and it worked well for the set needed. Garrett chose the play, hired the artistic staff and actors, and even got the Equity contract. Garrett looks back on the experience and describes it as putting herself on the high wire; no matter what happened, it was all because of her. It was a great learning experience. Everything she needed to know about being a producing artistic director she learned from that first production. The show received great reviews, and the actors received attention from the producers in town. From there, Garrett took on more projects to self-produce. The next summer she did two plays, *Sex Drugs and Rock & Roll* by Eric Bogosian, and *Serenading Louie* written by Lanford Wilson. After that, the directing work came.

A question that is often asked of people who dedicate their lives to art is, why? What drew you to it? The answer is simple for Ms. Garrett: Storytelling. The storytelling is what drew her to theatre. She had always loved to tell people stories, even as a child. She started by learning poems, like little Orphan Annie by James Whitcomb Riley. In college, she started as a journalism major, to have a sustainable career. She now looks back and chuckles because journalism careers are now declining with the access to the internet. In a way, journalism is still what she does, she examines what is going on in the world around us, and how can she bring these issues and ideas to light through her play selection. An example of a Shakespeare selection that dealt with pertinent social

issues in the Kansas City area was *The Merchant of Venice*, staged in March of 2015 at the Jewish Community Center of Overland Park's White Theatre. *The Merchant of Venice* is known to have debate over whether the role of Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, is considered anti-Semitic, or as a plea for tolerance. Garrett found it to be a plea for tolerance, only seen as anti-Semitic to some because of the culture we are often surrounded by. What makes this topic so up to date is that on April 3rd 2014, a man named Frazier Glen Miller drove from his home in Aurora Missouri, armed with a Remington model 870 shotgun, with the hopes of killing Jewish people at the Jewish Community Center and at a Village Shalom senior living facility. He shot and killed three people in this attack. Further investigation went on to show that Miller was in fact a neo-Nazi (Rizzo and Bradley 2014). This production of *Merchant of Venice* was a very purposeful event planned between Garrett and the Jewish Community Center in order to explore Shylock as a sympathetic character, and to rid the notion to the viewers that Shylock is simply a villain (R. Trussell, Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice' returns after a long hiatus 2015).

Watching the Process

When I first walked into the White Theatre at the Jewish Community Center in Overland Park Kansas, the space was quiet. Sidonie talks to her stage manager about upcoming events, before the rehearsal for *The Merchant of Venice* starts. She takes care of business, wearing both of her hats, Artistic Director and Producer. As she interacts with her team, she maintains a balance between a friend and authority figure. As the scene starts, it is apparent wheels are turning in her head, she doesn't say anything out loud yet, she listens and examines the text, flipping pages simultaneously. She decides

not to stop the actors, but lets them explore and work through the scene. The action stops, “did we change your entrance?” she asks an actor. At that point, they work the problem. Here is the point she has been waiting for, she stands up and shows what she is experiencing as the ideal audience member. The action continues, she laughs at the same lines again, encouraging the actors’ energy, and maybe even preparing them for a live audience.

Sidonie has a unique way of maintaining control in a room, she becomes a part of the action. For example, an actor makes a funny mistake, she laughs with the actors and guides the focus back to a good starting line. Being the expert of the story telling, Sidonie realizes that an actor makes a wrong cross. She holds there, “That must not feel right” . As a director, Sidonie trusts her actor’s instincts. They stop and walk through the blocking, feeling what is the most natural. The actors onstage find a new way to get from point a to point b that is different. Sidonie guides the process by asking questions, and they mark the new blocking.

Sidonie is always engaged with all of the actors, not just the ones on stage. During a transition she turns to a young man sitting and observing the scenes his character is not in, “you were just mentioned there, did you catch what they said about you?” she asks, “It wasn’t good.” She changes her approach for each actor. For the more inexperienced actors, she works mostly on technique, notes like, “less airy”, “tight”, and a reminder of the correct pronunciation of “our”. Sidonie is truly the expert on the script, she has the answers. She solves problems, gives options. She fixes future problems before they happen. How will the characters move in their period skirts? How will the spacing look when the characters are in costume?

Advice

“Know everything possible about the theatre...and appreciate the work everyone does.” People who don’t know all of the work that goes into a production think it’s all about them, and Garrett warns that it can be dangerous. No one wants to work with a director who doesn’t understand the work the rest of the team is putting in. If the production team doesn’t feel comfortable with their director, then they will not give their best work. Garrett also mentions that she had to learn that there are people who have more experience than her, but what she had was a reverence for the storytelling, a respect for the artists she was working with, and knowing that they probably knew better than her and more than her. She walked in knowing that she was going to learn more from them than they would ever learn from her in the process. She learned how to work with different types of actors, from those who want to act right away, not knowing the lines, to actors who stay in their book the whole time until their lines are memorized completely. She learned how to talk to each actor differently. Each actor responds differently.

It is important as a first time director to work with people who are just as good as you, or better. Directors can’t succeed if they’re telling an inferior story; if it’s not a good story to tell, then don’t even bother. After that, get the right people to collaborate with. You may be the most brilliant director that ever lived, but the director is not on stage performing in front of an audience. You need to work with like-minded people who will be able to portray the director’s vision effectively.

Process

Garrett starts her directing process, “always with the story” (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015). Garrett reads each story with a pair of fresh eyes, as if she has never experienced the play before. Often, reading aloud, she makes notes reading it for the first time, looking at what is important, what are some areas that seem confusing, or may become troublesome. She circles key images, and makes a note about it. Once the play is read, she asks herself, “Do I want to tell this story?” “Can I bring something to the story?” to determine if she is the best storyteller for that play. Garrett mentions that it takes a lot of time and effort for each play a director works on, even if they are not currently working on it, the ideas are still percolating. Films, articles she reads, or people on the street, all inform her about the play. Since the process is so consuming, she recommends that a director should only commit to a project if they think they can be the best teller of that story.

Auditions come next for Ms. Garrett. Garrett uses notes she has collected up until the auditions to give her an idea of what she is looking for, including details such as “do the characters need to look like they are related?” to “can this actor alter their physicality to the performance space?” Garrett is very aware of new actors, she likes to really read them and give them a chance to show a variety of different colors. She will often work with dependable actors she has directed before. She says there is a certain ease that goes with knowing what the actors are up for. Garrett mentions, in other businesses, it’s inappropriate to ask employees to kiss, or to strangle each other, but in theatre, it’s a common occurrence. If the director has worked with the actors who need to interact in an intimate way, the ease of getting to that moment is much easier. The timeframe shrinks.

When the actors have worked closely together before, there is a sense of comfort and trust between everyone involved. “There’s a lot of work that goes into building a company” (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015). Garrett has worked with a lot of people multiple times, but she is also very interested in finding new people. She hopes everyone is the right person for the company.

Once the show is cast, she moves on to the rehearsal process. “ I always have a plan” (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015). Garrett always walks into rehearsal with thoughts about the characters, about what blocking might be, or about the space itself. Sometimes the actors match what she’s thinking, validating the original choice, or the actors may do something completely different. Garrett doesn’t shy away from the different, in fact, it often makes her rethink how she was looking at it before, and evaluate if it’s the better choice. No matter if she is working organically or not, she will always have her ideas in her book.

Time is a factor. A professional director should be working to be thoroughly prepared for opening night. The schedule should be very carefully thought out. There is a date laid out for when the designers will see the work, a time for the actor’s lines to be memorized, planning for inclement weather. A director should be as ready as possible, and there should always be a plan of how that is going to happen.

Influences

“I think it all goes back to the very first play I every directed...Everything else has just grown from there” (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015). She has certainly become better at being a director and producer, but the time that went into

figuring out how to put the production together was invaluable to her today. Garrett emphasized that it was a learning process, and that she learned what not to say, “A lot of directing is just keeping your mouth shut. You don’t have enough time to say everything that comes to your head. You’re either going with it or say ‘stop please, let’s look at this’” (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015). It is important to know which one is right for the moment. “It’s mentally exhausting,” the processes a director goes through all day is to take in all of the information and sift through how to respond, or to not respond at all (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015).

Another thing Garrett learned from that first production was to keep an eye on the big picture, and not just one aspect. This includes doing research as well as problem solving in the moment. If a director ignores the problem, the problem does not go away.

Mentors

Much like Cynthia Levin, Dr. Patricia A. McIlrath’s presence as the founder and Artistic Director of the Missouri Repertory theatre had a measurable impact on Garrett, “Knowing that Dr. McIlrath existed was a big thing to me. Just knowing that a woman started [The Missouri Repertory Theatre]” (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015). Garrett remembers the day she learned of Dr. McIlrath’s work; it gave her an existing example of someone she knew that was actually doing what she wanted to do, Garrett didn’t realize it was a career until then.

Cynthia Levin, the Artistic Director of the Unicorn Theatre, was also a mentor to Garrett. “When I started working it was great for me to know that Cynthia was in the world” (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015). Levin was one of the very first

people to give Garrett an opportunity to direct. Levin is now a close friend of Garrett and Garrett often directs at the Unicorn Theatre.

The very first person to take a chance on Garrett was Jeff Church, the Artistic Director of the Coterie Theatre, a theatre that specializes in theatre for young audiences. After Garrett's professional debut as the director of *The Widow's Blind Date*, Church opened the door to direct at the Young Playwright's festival and then on to other shows at the Coterie Theatre.

At Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, Garrett had the opportunity to assist Melia Bensussen. Bensussen was hired from out of town to direct William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shew*. To Garrett, Bensussen was a turning point. Bensussen was a contemporary to Garrett; she was a young woman who was confident, self sufficient, and creative. Bensussen opened Garrett's eyes to what productions of Shakespeare could look like. "You can do anything with it" Garrett learned (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015).

The founder of the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, Marilyn Strauss was also a major influence on Garrett. She was a Tony Award winning producer who was another example of a woman starting her own theatrical endeavors and being very successful. Garrett has had many great influences, "I think what is important as a young person is you don't know everything, every person has something to teach you" (Garrett, Sidonie Garrett Thesis Interview 2015).

CHAPTER 4

KAREN PAISLEY

Early Creativity

Paisley grew up in Murfreesboro, a small rural town in North Carolina. Across the street from her childhood home were woods and a lake. This backdrop and the fact that her childhood was pre-internet and video game is what Paisley attributes to her early creativity. She loved to read, and she quickly discovered that even though she was able to read adult subject matter at a young age, it may not have been the best idea for her to read *Rosemary's Baby* by Ira Levin while in the sixth grade. Her father caught her sneaking the books and said to her mother, "should she be reading that?" her mother replied, "She's half way through" (Paisley 2015). The characters in the books she read became like real people to her.

The first time Paisley remembers seeing a play, is when she was three. Her father was playing Curley in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *Oklahoma!*. "I remember sitting in the very back row of this big auditorium, literally right next to the door so my mother could get me out. I remember the lights, and I loved it." Paisley always loved making up stories and acting them out with her brothers. In these early plays, Paisley had returning characters among which she would play the oldest sister and her brothers would play the other roles. Paisley started dancing when she was three. She would have up to three classes a week, which was unusual in the small town she grew up in. She also sang in three different choirs. "It was really an intense type of training for one to get in a town of 3,500 people" (Paisley 2015). When Paisley went to college, she thought she would be behind the other students. However, she came to find out she wasn't at all. Looking

back, she can see that it was because of the exposure to the arts her father gave her. He was the Chair of the Fine Arts Department at a local college. Paisley grew up seeing visiting artists and turning music pages for the symphony accompanists. “That’s high stress when you’re eleven” Paisley grins, “I thought I would die”. The first acting training Paisley had ever received was through the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art when she was in the sixth grade. Her instructor was working with a ballet company in Norfolk, Virginia, and on Saturdays would give her acting lessons. Paisley’s mother told her that this instructor took them aside, and told them that she had, “something special.” Of course Paisley didn’t know this about herself yet. Where she lived, there was no way for her to develop her talent early on

Although Paisley loved plays, she did not perform in one until she was a junior in college. She began her career as an opera singer. Paisley started taking theatre classes in the music conservatory she was studying in, and found that she loved it. “I didn’t think I was good at it,” Paisley admits. At the end of her sophomore year of College, Paisley was walked across campus with her best friend who asked her what classes she was going to take the next year. Paisley replied, “I don’t know, I’m not going to be here next year.” That was the moment Paisley decided that she was going to major in theatre at the University of North Carolina. Paisley’s best friend laughed and said, “You’ve never been in a play.” Paisley replied, “Yeah, but they don’t know that, do they?” (Paisley 2015). The next semester Paisley transferred in and didn’t tell anyone her secret.

Much like her first memory of the theatre, for her first audition, Paisley sat in the back row of the giant auditorium to see how a theatre auditioned worked. “I thought, okay, I think I can do this” (Paisley 2015). The next step she took was to walk three miles

to the nearest music store to pick out a song to audition with. She then walked the three miles back to the fine arts building. Walking through the halls, she heard someone playing the piano beautifully. She knocked on the door, and asked the man if he would play the song so she could listen to it. He played the tune and then offered to come to the audition with her. Paisley said to him, “They let you do that?” she had not seen anyone in the audition do that. He said, “sure they do” and they went to the audition from there. She later learned this kind and talented man she met was Allen Bailey, who was the Jazz Accompanist for the Jazz Ensemble at the University. She was cast in her first play, and the rest is history.

Formation of the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre

Paisley wrote the plan for the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre just before she finished her Master of Fine Arts degree at Sarah Laurence College in Yonkers, New York. One morning she suddenly awoke at four o’clock in the morning. Paisley started to type and didn’t stop until the 20-page document was finished. “Everything that we are doing now was in that document” says Paisley. The plan included producing new works, debuting new artists, the existence of the flagship master class series, and the Lighthouse education and community initiative. “The biggest wrestling point that I had for a long time was what to call it. What I was really writing about was about a loss of a sense of the American National Theatre, our understanding and cultural heritage as a people.” That is why when you look through the past seasons, you find plays that seem to have been lost, or plays that are required to be read in school, but are rarely produced. Once the draft was completed, she had her mentors at Sarah Laurence read it, but soon the idea for the MET was pushed to the background. Soon after, Paisley was hired by the Kansas

City Repertory Theatre and moved with her family to the area. Her impression of her job duties was similar to what she had written in her manifesto; however, she soon found this was not the case. By the second winter at the KC Rep, she began to think about leaving this position. Paisley ultimately wanted to be an artistic director and the projects she came to the Kansas City Repertory to be a part of fell through. It was then that she knew it was time to revisit her plan for the MET. “So I left the Kansas City Rep, which was a big deal to leave a good job with benefits, and start a company with one thousand dollars’ cash and no prospects” (Paisley 2015). Paisley mentions that the time since has been extremely difficult, but also rewarding.

The MET is now in their eleventh season and their third home. They are now in the process of moving to their fourth location, the historic Warwick Theatre. “We are now on the precipice of moving” Paisley states, “and I can tell you that nothing in MFA school taught me about this” (Paisley 2015). “I learned a lot going to school, but I learned a lot being a grown up” (Paisley 2015). Paisley believes that if she had tried to form the MET any time before the time she did, the theatre would not have been successful. She had started taking classes at the Midwest Center for Not for Profit Leadership prior to leaving her position at the KC Rep, which added to the time being right to start a theatre. Before she invested in making the theatre a reality, she and co-founder Bob Paisley did a SWOT analysis to pinpoint the weaknesses in their plan. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. “First you look at your strengths, your bright idea, then you need to be brave enough to look at the weaknesses, then opportunities that are out there that will make you successful, and the

threats are who else is doing what you want to do and probably doing it better than you can” (Paisley 2015).

Returning a Cultural Heritage

“I believe that every single person has a birthright to the arts and that we are inherently artistic” (Paisley 2015). However, the problem is that as a people we have forgotten this. The MET was founded on returning this to the people. Paisley believes that as people we have lost a sense of our own cultural heritage. There is especially a disconnect between what students are tested over and what they learn. She sees this when the MET offers student matinees. Paisley sees students being tested on plays throughout high school and finally being brought to one in their senior year. She recalls an interaction with a girl who attended one of these student matinees. The girl stopped Paisley and said, “I have to tell you something; this is the first play I have seen in my life. Every time we read one in class, I’d try to imagine what it would be like to see one. This is so much better than I ever imagined it could be.” This is the reason for Paisley’s mission.

Paisley also has a long track record of being a theatre educator. “I taught school for a long time. I didn’t plan to teach for a long time; it just sort of happened.” Paisley describes bringing theatre to places that had never had it before. On her first day, it was literally her and the scripts that she owned. “Not a hammer. Not a screw driver. Nothing” (Paisley). With teenagers who had never seen a play before, Paisley taught these students about Stanislavski and Meisner. “They put on some of the most amazing work I had ever seen. They had no bad habits. They only knew how to act truthfully” (Paisley 2015).

Family and Theatre

“I think you can do it all,” Paisley says about being a mother and an artist. She does mention that she doesn’t know whether one can do it all simultaneously. Paisley believes that she is a better director and leader because she is a mother. “My children taught me so much about what I do, and I am a better parent because I am an artist.” She says with the caveat, “Sometimes. My kids would say sometimes I’m selfish because I’m an artist. It’s true.” A wonderful thing about being both a director and a mother is that Paisley could raise her children in a joyful atmosphere.

A person’s primary joy in life comes from two places: satisfaction in your job and your contribution to the world. When each one nurtures the other, that is when joy is formed. One of the reasons Paisley started teaching was because she was a single mother at the time and teaching allowed her to make the schedule. Teaching allowed her to have a steady job while caring for her oldest daughter. Paisley found directing in part because it meant she was in charge of when rehearsals happened. She could schedule rehearsals when she had a baby-sitter. She was able to direct plays and have a family, she did not have to pick.

Paisley remembers a particular summer, right before her daughter turned two years old. She had been in a show where she had to be gone six nights a week. When it was all over, Paisley came home and sat with her small daughter in an upholstered rocking chair and said, “This was selfish of me. I needed it, but I won’t do this again for a long time because you need me and I need you” (Paisley 2015). It wasn’t until many years later; Paisley began performing again. Paisley’s children grew up and they became a part of the process. She was able to raise her children and still be a theatre artist.

Process and Advice

Karen starts her process as a director by spending time with the play and building a relationship with the playwright. This relationship doesn't necessarily mean contacting the playwright to talk about their work, especially since most of the plays directed by Paisley have writers who are no longer with us. As a director, Paisley believes directors are honor bound to the playwright. The director has a duty to the playwright to portray their message on stage in a truthful manner. Paisley is not a director who feels it appropriate to deconstruct a playwright's work to the point of changing the message of the play. She is adamant that if a director wants to change a script, she needs to get permission from the playwright or the playwright's estate. She does believe experimenting with the text can be done, but as a class or a lab, not as a professional production. "Just because you throw paint on the wall doesn't make it a Jackson Pollock," Paisley says.

Planning and preparation is also important. Paisley reads the play and visualizes. She is very physical in the way she directs. She paces back and forth like a basketball coach. Paisley wants what she wants when she wants it. "I want it now. I don't want to wait for something that is impacting the movement of the actor like the way this chair back is." The sooner she has the correct item, the better because it will change the way the actor acts and moves. This is a part of her process, making sure that all of the furniture is placed from the beginning. The book *Improvisation for the Theatre* by Viola Spolin has greatly impacted Paisley. This book has guided Paisley in the way she directs. She uses many of the outlined exercises during her rehearsal process and has adopted many of Spolin's theories.

Directors should also understand money. “Get informed so you can understand who you are working for, what they can do what they can’t do.” With things that cost more money, a director must question whether it is something that is really needed. A director should never skimp on costumes; “always have good costumes” Paisley says. Her reasoning is that if an actor is uncomfortable with the way he or she looks in a costume, it will impact the way that person acts on stage. A director must understand how the other components of the production work and have respect for it. “When you direct an actor to break a chair nightly, that’s a lot of chairs” says Paisley. Be respectful of how hard technicians work to make it all possible. Actors and directors often forget about the technical work that goes in to a production.

“Go to museums, read a lot of books, and heck yeah, steal from everybody that’s good” Some directors say they don’t want to watch any other version of a play they direct, Paisley says, “why not? You might learn something. You don’t have to do what they do, but those choices can inform your choices.” Paisley mentions how musicians learn a piece of music. They seek out the same piece being played by a diversity of other musicians. They listen to the different kinds of intonation, so Paisley asks, “why are we so chicken that we think we won’t have our own ideas after watching?” Paisley sees that most directors are not so weak that they will not be able to find their own voices in their productions. “I think it is smart to look at and study what other people are doing.” What is problematic is that artists are not able to go see as much theatre because they are working on their own projects and many artists cannot afford the tickets.

In order to cultivate an audience, she tries to encourage everyone who is involved in one of her plays to invite four people outside of the people who would normally come

see them, to come to the play. The idea is that they go first because of the person they know, then they keep going because they want to. If we do not grow an audience, there will not be a job for theatre artists in the future.

According to Paisley, the most powerful thing a new director can do is to say that she wants to be a director. Not only say that she wants to be a director, but to also say it publicly. She sees this as an issue for many women who wish to become directors. Her second piece of advice is to go see plays. As a director, analyze what you see. What do you like, why do you like it? What parts were effective? If something isn't working well for the production, figure out why. Paisley notes that this should not be done in a negative way. "sometime when I'm watching the play, I'm seeing the play I see, but I'm also seeing the play that could be" (Paisley 2015).

When Paisley talks to young people who say they want to start their own company, she asks them if that is really what they want. Starting a company is much more than directing plays or producing plays with friends. It is not necessary to start a company to do those things. If your goal is to direct and collaborate with like-minded people "then you hitch your wagon to their wagon train, and everybody benefits" (Paisley 2015). "We have an independent streak in our industry, we all think we invented the wheel. We didn't. There were already wheels."

Philosophy

The art you make should reflect how you feel and what you believe. Paisley acknowledges that sometimes directors have to direct plays they wouldn't normally choose in order to make a career, but the majority should tell an observer about the director. "I hope that when people look at the body of work the MET has produced, they

see that we are producing work that helps an audience find their personal north star.”

Paisley doesn't aim to answer questions, but lay out ideas that others have pondered over time. Paisley agrees with Arthur Miller when he says art is about politics. Theatre isn't necessarily partisan, but it is political because it is about a point of view. “I think that everyone who is sane wants good schools, good things for people, for people to get along, for safety. We have to figure out how to get there,” Paisley says. That is what she illustrates at Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre.

CHAPTER 5

HEIDI VAN

The Curator

As curator of the Fishtank Performance Studio, Heidi Van has helped awaken a curiosity for experimental theater. In the time Van has held residency there, she's produced shows in the building's front windows with the audience in the street, performed a play in a lingerie shop, and has facilitated countless experiments in the art of physical theatre. Van thrives in the process of creating live theatre. She has been involved in nearly every facet of the art, but rather than being engulfed by it, she emerges as the facilitator, breathing life into ideas. Although, she does direct published plays, she excels in collaborating with other artists to devise new works. She works in the vein of Jean Vilar and Ariane Mnouchkine as the head collaborator and curator of the Fishtank Performance Studio. A part of her mission is influencing young theatre artists and helping mold them into theatre entrepreneurs.

Early Life

Heidi Van was raised on the Kansas side of the Kansas City metropolitan area. It seems Van has always been around theatre. She first remembers tagging along with her mother, who was a part of the Junior League of Kansas City, Kansas, to theatre programs aimed at bringing the art to the inner city (Sutton, Spotlight on Heidi Van 2011). Often, Van was cast as a tree, or an animal in the background of the action. This experience didn't seem like anything monumental while she was growing up; in fact, she didn't act again until she was a junior in high school. When she participated in her first high school play, Van realized she had learned about the theatre process through osmosis. She felt a

new type of excitement and at home in the theater at the very same time. It wasn't until she attended the University of St. Mary in Leavenworth, Kansas, that she started to explore what it would take to make theatre a career.

What drew Van to theatre were the visceral elements. She adored the particular smell theaters have, the people, the process of creating. She just wanted to be a part of it all. She started acting in college, and eventually won an internship at Gate Theatre in London where she was a production assistant in 1998 (R. Trussell, Artist Heidi Van is a Creative Tour De Force 2015). What she learned from this experience is that if she could love working behind the scenes, moving on and off scenery and props, then theatre must be for her.

At the University of Saint Mary, Heidi Van majored in History, Political Science, and Theatre (Sutton, Spotlight on Heidi Van 2011). She was fascinated with what historical events led to the creation of different movements in the arts. She took classes in music, art, and theatre to figure out how it all happened. Once she decided she wanted to focus on the performance side of theatre, she started to research schools that would feed her growing interest in movement and new work. In 2001, she found Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre. Dell'Arte's training mission is: "to serve, train, and provoke the next generation of theatre makers; to assert that profound possibilities come into view only when confronted by the impossible; to confirm that all things change and that movement is the basis for life" (About Dell' Arte 2015). This mission has laid the basis for all of the work she has contributed to since. One formational lesson she learned in this program was to make work for herself, and not to rely on others to give her jobs. In an interview with KCUR Kansas City Public Radio, in August 2012, Van

says, "for me, as a performance artist and as a traditionally trained actress, I don't wait for someone to call me on the phone and ask me to audition to be in a play. I make my own plays." It was out of this idea that she developed the idea for the Fishtank Performance Studio that she opened in 2007.

The Fishtank and Season Selection

The Fishtank Performance Studio came into being out of a conversation Van had with another actor named Corrie Von Ausdale. They were both performing in the play *Atypical Boy*. As they sat in their dressing room the two decided to go in on a space where they could create their own work (Sutton, Spotlight on Heidi Van 2011). Van started with the artistic side, and Von Ausdale worked on the business side. When Von Ausdale left due to an illness in her family, Heidi Van decided to run the Fishtank as a Curator, rather than as a traditional artistic director. She sees herself as an outside person who selects the art pieces that work well together in a season. Van works with other theatre companies to produce their work at the Fishtank, along with her own plays and projects. "It's a gallery for people to show their work" she says. She does not edit the content of the plays unless she is brought on to the project as an advisor. "A curator doesn't go up to an artist and tell them they should paint something blue" (Van 2015).

As far as choosing a season, Van says "no" often. People will come to her with projects that don't seem completely thought out, or that do not seem to have drive behind them. She can also tell that some shows won't be a good fit for the size of the space. A draw-back to operating her space as a gallery is that she cannot control the quality of what is produced at the Fishtank. What she enjoys about her space is that she can work through the process of creating a new work. She often has new play readings that

continue to work through the Fishtank to become fully performed shows. At the end of the productions, she likes to have talk-back sessions with the audience.

Directing

When Heidi Van makes her own work, it is primarily in a nonverbal physical style accompanied by live music, influenced by dance and visual art. This different style caught the eye of Jeff Church, Artistic Director of the Coterie Theatre, a local Theatre for Young audiences. Church asked Van to direct a touring show aimed at kids in preschool and kindergarten. The show was all movement based and nonverbal. She developed her relationship with Church through acting for him and directing in this capacity. This also led to her directing *The Cat in the Hat* by Katie Mitchell from the book by Dr. Seuss for the Coterie Theatre. This production is based on an adaptation by Katie Mitchell, who also directed it for Britain's National Theatre. Mitchell's goal was to bring each page of the book to life as a distinct scene. Mitchell's vision was to utilize the imagination of the audience as well the slight-of-hand of the actors and designers. This show perfectly complements Van's style and training. Van found inventive ways to fill the stage with movement and visual jokes. Van's clown training is seen through the way she directed the actors' physicalisations. Every evening, Van scored each scene when she came home from rehearsal. She would find each individual character's through line of a scene and direct that character individually. She would then move to the next character, and so on. At the end, she put all of the characters together to make the scene come together.

Process

As a deviser, Heidi Van loves the process of play production. Van strips plays down to a base level and then builds layers on top. She starts her process by reading the

play every day. She is interested in studying all of the characters' individual stories. This stems from her experience as an actress, she says. This helps her to nurture all of the characters' stories as a director. She looks at the individual stakes at risk and how they become the building blocks for the main story. Van makes charts for each character to track their development and what happens in their individual story. She then sticks the notes on the wall to visibly see all of the layers. If the play is being devised, the notes start at the bottom of the wall and work their way up to visually show the climax of the plot, and then work their way down to find a resolution. In a way this is like diagramming a story that hasn't been written yet. Rhythm is also very important to Van. The style of the play informs the rhythm and Van studies the script for the style in which she will direct it. The sound of the play's rhythm goes back to the physical nature of her directorial style. "It's very much like I'm coaching a basketball team" (Van, Heidi Van Thesis Interview 2015).

Van regularly slips in and out of being either an actor or director. This very much informs the way she directs. As an experienced actor, she often knows what will fix an actor's problem in rehearsal; however, she knows that simply telling or showing actors what she is looking for is not the most fruitful way to help. She backs off and helps them find an answer to the issue. A director that Van sought to work with early in her career was Sidonie Garrett. Garrett is known for the attention she gives to the actor's process. Van credits Garrett's work with her as an actor in what has made her a better director. Van has also learned a lot from Cynthia Levin at the Unicorn. "People have their own processes and you get to learn a lot by working with a lot of different directors," Van points out.

Artist and Mother

Having children changed Van's art on both an artistic and a pragmatic level. She can access more emotions and feelings now that she has her two daughters. The latitude of instances she can connect to as an actor and director has grown immensely. "Before, I had to think of my dog," Van jokes. She feels that any experience makes for a better artist with a fuller understanding of the life. "It's a mind-blowing situation to experience first hand" (Van, Heidi Van Thesis Interview 2015). It helps her to more deeply understand love and fear. From a practical perspective, having children has helped her become more organized as a business person. This helps her to be disciplined in her art. Having young children has forced her to make time for her art. Van feels that she can put more of herself out there. "Now I'm less afraid of things." She remembers being really intimidated by the thought of being a mother. She works to be a strong mother and role model for them, "You can't be a wuss at being a mom and so I think why am I being a wuss in my art?" Before Van even had children she worked for Heather Nisbett-Loewenstein, of StoneLion Puppets, who is both an artistic director and a mother. What these conversations led to was Nisbett-Loewenstein's ultimate advice: you need to be who you need to be in that moment. Sometimes Van needs to be a mother, sometimes she needs to be an artist, and at times the two intersect. Van is also very excited for her children to grow up in the environment she fell in love with and can't seem to leave.

Faust with UMKC

Van and the University of Kansas City-Missouri have collaborated for several years on devising theatre pieces on a particular theme studied in classes during the previous semester. In the fall of 2015, the theme was Faust. The title of this devised

piece is *Heaven and Hell*, and it is an adaptation of the short stories, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Fisherman and His Soul*, by Oscar Wilde. This piece is a great example of Van's experimental nature. She worked to create an immersive show using different rooms in the performance studio as performance spaces for different scenes of their new play. The process that Van goes through to create this work is first meeting with the designers and dramaturg to figure out the physical environments of each location in the building. She focuses on the pivotal moments in the story, rather than retelling it. She intends for the audience to feel as though they've walked in on these moments in process.

Advice

Listen to people. When Van first began fully running the Fishtank, she went out of her way to talk to people who have run their own theatres, both for profit and not for profit. She asked them questions about running their theatre from the angles of producer and director. She learned to ask questions, listen, and really figure out what it is you want to do.

CONCLUSION

Through the interview process, observations, and research, I have recorded these five women artistic directors' perspectives and processes in hopes of better understanding how they make their art. What found is that each director has an innovative spirit. Cynthia Levin transformed the Theatre Workshop into the Unicorn Theatre, the top place to view bold new plays in Kansas City. Jeanne Beechwood formed the Martin City Melodrama that has been the only Melodrama and Vaudeville company in the Kansas City Metropolitan area for the past thirty years. Heidi Van has expanded the audience of experimental theatre by not only producing her own work, but by also providing a place to have the arts flourish. Sidonie Garrett has expanded the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival's programming by reaching out into the community to produce the bard's work. Karen Paisley left a steady job in theatre to make her vision for the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre a reality.

These women are also resilient, not only in keeping their theaters going, but in keeping their art alive. Each theater has had its hardships. Jeanne Beechwood has kept the Martin City Melodrama's doors open through four venue changes. She has gutted old bars in shopping malls to make a theatre, and with her most recent move, has had to cut her entire stage in half so she can reset it up in their new location on the top level of Crown Center. She has been kicked out of her venues with very little notice twice, but has always found a new one in very little time. Sidonie Garrett has been at the helm of the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival's financial hardship, and has made the tough decision to go from producing two shows a summer, to producing only one. Heidi Van did not go into the Fishtank thinking she would be the soul proprietor, but when Corrie

Van Ausdale resigned, Van adapted, and learned how to carry the entire studio. Karen Paisley started the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre with only a thousand dollars. It was sink or swim, and she swam. Cynthia Levin has learned to go without, if it is something she knows would be financially risky so she can keep the Unicorn Theatre going. These are the women responsible for making sure the show goes on.

All of these directors were eager to lend their advice to me. Perhaps it is because of what Sidonie Garrett said, “People in Kansas City are willing to talk with you, no matter who they are, they will take the time.” I’ve certainly found this to be true during this process. Sidonie Garrett found old articles from when she went to New York City to direct to include in my research. Jeanne Beechwood offered to buy me lunch and tickets to her theatre, even though I was the one to ask to interview her. Heidi Van offered to bring me coffee at our meeting. Cynthia Levin opened the doors to her rehearsals, not only once through the process, but for as many as I needed. And Karen Paisley met with me several times to talk not only about her work, but to discuss ideas and interests. These women freely offered so much time and effort into meeting with me, I can see that their generosity is also what makes them successful.

Through these interviews, each director mentioned Dr. Patricia A. McIlrath, the founder of the Missouri Repertory Theatre, now known as the Kansas City Repertory Theatre. Dr. Mac has been referred to as the Patron Saint of women arts leaders (R. Trussell, *Women forge pathes to the top of KC performing arts organizations* 2015). She is the one who opened the door by ushering in a thriving theatre community in Kansas City after twenty years with no professional theatres. She indiscriminately supported

those in the arts around her, both male and female. The support and legacy of Dr. McIlrath is what has made Kansas City a place for women artistic directors to flourish.

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VITA

Elizabeth Bettendorf Bowman was born on November 7, 1989, in Lincoln, Nebraska. Her family moved to Wahoo, Nebraska, in 1994. She attended St. Wenceslaus Elementary school and graduated from Bishop Neumann High School, a College Preparatory school, in 2008. During her childhood in Nebraska, Elizabeth participated in theatre in several programs, including at the Omaha Community Playhouse. After high school, Elizabeth chose to attend Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Missouri. It was there that she discovered her love for directing, theatre history, and teaching. In 2011, Elizabeth was an Education Intern at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival. In 2012, Elizabeth graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and Psychology. Once she graduated she started working as a teaching artist for the Coterie Theatre, the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, and Act One Academy of Performing Arts. She also worked as a preschool teacher and an applied behavior analysis provider.

In 2013, Elizabeth decided to further her education at the University of Missouri Kansas City. At UMKC, Elizabeth served as dramaturg and assistant director for several productions. In 2014, Elizabeth had the opportunity to direct an undergraduate production of *Private Eyes* by Stephen Dietz. During Elizabeth's time at UMKC, she also took time to direct several productions outside of the educational setting and helped develop education programs for the Kansas City Fringe Festival and the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre.