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Connotation Press
An Online Artifact

Issue VI, Volume X : July 2019

Sara Pratter - Drama



Sara Pratter wrote, directed and produced *Pharaoh's Heart*, her first short film. A multiple entry on the festival circuit, it received several awards and was also a recipient of a Panavision grant. Next, Sara staged *The Chekhov Project, an Ode to the Group Theater* starring Enrico Colantoni at The Globe Playhouse, directed promotional DVD's for *Pretty Pretty Cosmetics*, directed videos for *IKTV-Tao Music* and was consulting director on spots for *Best Buy*, *MTV* and *Sheryl Crow*. After giving birth to her son, Sara formed her film company *Autograph Pictures* and won awards for her next three shorts -- *Happy Birthday Charlie*, *Happy Hour* and *Elizabeth* -- through *Filmaka*, an international online film festival judged by film makers Paul Schrader, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders and Neil Labute, among others. She also won a Canon award at the *Dances With Films Festival* for another short, *Salesgirl*. Her first screenplay, *Human Wreckage*, was optioned and is now in development with producer Kim Winther (*Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, *Jumper*, *Fair Game*, *When in Rome*) while a staged reading of her first play *Blood Moon* was performed at Naked Angels, directed by Arye Gross. She now works writing and directing for acclaimed director Matthew Rolston.

What inspired you to write this play?

I read an article in the paper years ago about Helen Golay and Olga Rutterschmidt, two old women indicted for multiple murders and insurance fraud. It seemed so odd and sad, so I followed their story as it unfolded over time. When I found out they had planned the whole thing but that the details were still unknown, I decided to attempt to unravel the mystery myself. I was also getting separated from my husband and was filled with all sorts of fear, both rational and irrational in nature. I think the circumstances of this play were created from my worst nightmares of old age as a woman.

What about these two actual women compelled you to flesh out and imagine their desires?

The two actual women seemed cartoonish, extreme; funny in a sense but also tragic and frightening, which compelled me. I saw some video of them and it took off from there. The characters that ended up becoming Renee and Gerta are very, very different from Helen and Olga. But the seeds are similar. Also, I grew up in Los Angeles, where both the real women and these characters live, and it's a town that breeds desperation. You see it everyday, everywhere. In kids as young as five and adults in their eighties.

The play (to me) feels almost like a feminist cautionary tale- to find your power as a woman in and of yourself or you find you run the risk as an older woman that the vacuum of that power (either in relationships with men or children or careers) can corrupt you and warp your world view- is this something you actively considered- or am I politicizing your play?

I never set out to politicize or lay messages underneath anything. But I can see exactly why you might label it a feminist cautionary tale!

When you imagined Gerta as a European woman, was there a significance to that or was it based on the facts of the case?

Olga Rutterschmidt is Hungarian. But Gerta is an American pretending to be Austrian.

Did you research the women in the trial or create their stories completely?

I did some research, especially when trying to understand insurance fraud and how one would get away with it. But for the most part, I made up quite a bit. Strangely enough, as I pieced the story together, I discovered I had guessed correctly about things that actually happened. That's when you know you're on the right track.

In terms of the mother-daughter dynamic, what inspired their relationship?

I have two dear friends with real monsters as mothers. How these women abused their daughters – in fact, they still do when given a chance – blows my mind. The relationship between Shauna and Renee was inspired by my friends' stories, their feelings, their pain.

Did you find it challenging to write women older than yourself? Or inspiring and freeing?

I didn't find it particularly challenging to write women older than myself. Mostly because they weren't old fashioned or grandmotherly. They lived through the sixties and the women's movement. They had sex before they were married. They swear. They work. They're around the same age as my mother and her contemporaries who I know well. *I should mention that my mother is NOTHING like either of these two women. She's a terrific parent, a dear friend and I love her to pieces!

Did writing this play challenge your own notions of femininity, power, and aging?

Writing this play was like flushing an emotional toilet. Or playing with dolls. Nothing deeper than that.

What has been some of the more interesting feedback you've received from this play?

Feedback...well everyone seems to be affected by it -- appalled, amused, touched, broken hearted, sickened – quite a gamut, which feels good. I like to help people feel things. Even if it's uncomfortable. There's so much apathy these days. So many people are shut down. To me, that is death.

Why did you see this story as a play instead of as a film?

An acclaimed playwright I know once said in an interview that if his characters stay in one room, it's a play. But if they move outside, it's a film. Interesting but not true in this case. I also remember when I saw the play "Doubt", I noted that the set designer used suggestive pieces of scenery to denote multiple spaces. I loved that. In my writers group, which is full of incredibly gifted writers and actors who read their work, someone said in a critique that it seemed like a

film. I had only written a few scenes and for some reason that comment stopped me cold. I set the piece down for two years and went back to screenwriting. So my answer is it's a play because it's dialogue based. It could easily be a film if I wrote it more visually.

In terms of creating women who do bad things, was the creating of the villain fun or challenging?

It was really fun to create these women, but not necessarily because they did bad things. Once I found their voices the characters took on lives of their own.

Did you cull from personal experiences for the play?

Sad to say, I culled from many of my own personal experiences. It felt cleansing to share them, albeit sideways, with people. I saw a staged reading of the play recently and it made my heart sing watching the audience react to terrible things that have been said to me, or done to me, by others.

Who are your writing influences?

My influences? Do you mean writers that turn me on and why? I guess David Mamet and Harold Pinter because they pare down to essentials but still resonate, which is something I try to do. I love Shakespeare, Chekhov and Moliere because their plays can be interpreted so many ways and are so relatable globally. I honestly don't really care who writes a play, I just want to feel something. I once saw a movie called "Funny Games" written and directed by Michael Haneke. It made me sick and it scared me to death. But I appreciated it because it jarred me to the core.



In order to preserve the artistic arrangement of the writing, this piece has been created with Print2Flash Flashpaper.



Drama Editor Kathleen Dennehy is a NYU Tisch School of the Arts graduate who studied with John Guare, David Mamet, Anne Bogart. She is an essayist/performer: *Sit N' Spin*, *Book Soup*, *Hatch*, *Tongue and Groove* and her essays have been published in *Fresh Yarn*, *Note to Self* and *Weston Magazine*. Kathleen is the Creative Director of Naked Angels' Tuesdays@9 LA - a cold reading workshop for writers and she created the creative writing program at HillSides, a school for foster and at-risk children. Under contract to re-write a screenplay for Rachel Davidson, at Laura Ziskin, Sony Studios, Kathleen is a writer/editor/consultant and the curator of MNWG- a long running writers group in Los Angeles.

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