

Outside Academia Volume 3:

Martha Lavey

Interview conducted on 18 September 2014 and transcribed by Jennifer Goff, a PhD Candidate at Wayne State University.

I spoke to Martha Lavey, Artistic Director of Chicago's flagship Steppenwolf Theatre on September 18, just three weeks before she announced the surprising news that she would be stepping down, moving long time company member Anna D. Shapiro into the lead artistic role that has been held by Lavey for nearly 20 years.

Dr. Martha Lavey grew up moving around the U.S., living in Lawrence, KS; Washington, DC; Kansas City; and Detroit before moving to Chicago to pursue her undergraduate degree in acting at Northwestern University. She commented on her early days in the theatre, at Immaculata High School in Detroit: "They didn't have a robust arts program, but I could sign up for an elective and my mother said – you know, I thought she was quite prescient, but of course she's been watching me since I was a little girl create shows in the basement – said, 'you know, well why don't you sign up for theatre?' Which I did." But her mother was not her only guide, as the theatre teacher there became a wonderful mentor: "She's the one who took me to Northwestern to have a school visit my Junior year." I could hear the knowing smile in her voice as she shared this common experience with me: "you know how it is."

After her stint as an undergraduate, she stayed in Chicago for a few years, "and did all the things that actors do" – taking classes, performing, and working as a waitress. Not long after she married, she and her husband moved out to San Francisco for a couple of years, but the pull to return to graduate school brought her back to Chicago in 1985 where she joined the Performance Studies department at Northwestern. However, she admitted that a career in academia had never been in the forefront of her mind. I asked what spurred her return to graduate school: "To be honest with you, I was sick of living the marginal life of the performer," she replied. "In addition to being in plays, I was working with a group of people – musicians and writers – and we were performing in sort of unconventional theatre spaces – galleries and racquetball clubs and so forth." It was not just the "marginal existence" of an actor she experienced, but that of a performance artist as well – marginalized within the acting community. As her frustration grew with that marginalization, she assessed her next steps: "There was a combination of things happening in my own life that I thought, you know, I really want something that's identity-conferring in that way. So that's why I went back." She had taken classes in the Performance Studies department in her undergraduate years, and "very much admired it. They had a spirit of inquiry that I really felt very alive in. So I elected to go back."

Dr. Lavey was quick to outline the specific history and circumstances of Northwestern's Performance Studies department, which is part of the School of Communications, not the department of Theatre. Performance Studies was in the speech department when she attended, and before that, had been called Interpretation, which had grown out of the elocutionary school. It was a department with a winding and dynamic history, helmed by people like Robert S. Breen (who literally wrote the book on Chamber Theatre), Wallace Bacon, Frank Galati, and Dwight Conquergood, all of whom had an impact on Lavey's time at Northwestern. She made particular note of Conquergood, "whose

interest was in cultural performance and performance in everyday life, and the kind of Erving Goffman school of thought that was really looking at ethnography as performance. That became much more an influence at the school.” Despite this cultural focus, however, Lavey said that creative work and performance making was very much a part of her experience there as well.

Lavey’s primary research was guided by Dr. Leland Roloff (until his retirement in 1991), a Jungian analyst as well as a Performance Studies scholar. “He taught Literature in a Therapeutic setting, he taught Performance Art, in addition to a host of other courses.” Though there was a time when she considered not even writing her dissertation, her work with Roloff coupled with her interest in feminist theory did eventually steer her to the project she ended up creating: “I pursued this idea of the performance of psyche. I was very interested in certain women performance artists and I was also very interested in feminist theory. My dissertation ultimately was about Rachel Rosenthal, Laurie Anderson and Karen Finley, using them as kind of exemplars of this intersection of performance theory and feminism as it represented itself in the performance of the body. So I was tracing an arc through performance art specifically with attention to these female performance artists.” But it was not the topic itself that most thoroughly defined the benefits of the dissertation process for Lavey, “I used it as a self-authenticating process. To me it was just, you know, I did this. There was no faking, there could be no shining on. I got up every day and did this. And I just think that as an act of identity making is really profound.” The self-discovery that happens in the process of writing a dissertation is every bit as important – if not more so – than the research itself. Lavey related some of her favorite advice, passed down from Dr. Roloff, “He said to me, Martha, the research is the *me*-search.”

Even though she did make the decision to complete her dissertation (in 1993), officially earning that pesky doctorate, she has never held an academic appointment. I asked what had deterred her from pursuing a career in the academic realm. “You know it’s interesting because the kind of twin interests in my life have always been teaching and theatre, so you know, and sometimes, currently I’m thinking, ‘Gee, I would much rather be in a university. It’s a much better life to get old in, you know.’” But the hindsight comforts of a university job were not sufficient to drive Lavey into the classroom. As a theatre practitioner, she perceived a certain environmental disconnect: “There can be in the academic world a sense of closure around it,” she explained. She found herself much more interested in the somewhat unpredictable world of the professional theatre. “One of the things that being in theatre does very, very strongly is make one adaptable, responsive. One is always in contact with an audience, so the tendency for a conversation – and I use that in the large sense of conversation – to become hermetically sealed is a lot less possible.” Comparing the perceived constraints of academia to her earlier frustrations with the marginalization of the actor, it seems that there was a middle ground of professional stability and creative possibility that she was most interested in finding.

And find it she did, in the form of Steppenwolf. She had worked with Steppenwolf initially after her undergraduate degree, performing there and taking classes in the early- to mid-1980s. But it was her return in the early 1990s that cemented her relationship with the theatre. In 1993, on the heels of completing her dissertation, Lavey was in a production of *Ghost in the Machine* by David Gilman, at which time she was also invited to join the company. As luck would have it, it was also around this time that then Artistic Director Randall Arney decided to step down. The founders asked this newly-minted PhD and company member to step into the role on an interim basis, but, as history now shows, they had other plans for Lavey. “After a year they conferred the full status on me. And I think what they were doing was betting that the learning curve on the culture was steeper than the learning curve on being an artistic director. They wanted someone who knew the

company for a long time and whom they regarded as having leadership potential. So I was the beneficiary of that great fortune.”

I asked Dr. Lavey what skills that had been cultivated in her graduate studies she found most useful in her position as Artistic Director. “Critical thinking,” she replied, without hesitation. “Really one of the real disciplines at Northwestern in Performance Studies was to observe performance and be able to talk about it in an informed way, so that was a kind of great skill vis a vis theatre and certainly vis a vis being an artistic director: Understanding something about the expressive power of the stage.” This critical approach has proven essential to her work with the company. And though she maintains that she is not a director per se, her graduate work helped to develop in her the skills to look with a directorly eye, to ask compelling questions of a performance, such as, “What does the geography of the stage communicate? What does rhythm communicate?” And she attributes her ability to approach a performance text in this way directly to her graduate study.

When I asked her for any advice she might have for up-and-coming PhDs emerging from academia, she referred me to sources that discuss the myriad ways advanced study in the arts prepare graduates for rewarding and successful careers. While we were on the phone, she sent me a link to a report from the Institute of Museum and Library Services on 21st Century Job Skills (http://www.ims.gov/about/21st_century_skills_list.aspx), with critical thinking right at the top of the list. As a scholar of the arts, Lavey says, “just understand that you have a really valuable skill and you’ve been immersing yourself in thought and practice that is very much a 21st century job skill.” We discussed the contemporary career trajectory as being far less one-track than it has in the past, and how thoroughly theatre study in particular addresses the skills needed to adjust to change: “The basic rhythm of your life as a theatre practitioner is you create something, you do it with the highest level of expressiveness and craft, and then you go on and do the next thing. I mean there is an adaptability and a resilience that you purportedly are also inculcating along with the craft.”

She also referred me to Steven Tepper’s report for the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP - <http://snaap.indiana.edu/snaapshot/>). “He’s accumulated a tremendous amount of research on precisely what you’re talking about, which is to say, how do degrees in the arts – what does that mean for job skills. And PS,” she added, “it was cheering.” Lavey continued, “It’s very social, it’s collaborative, you know, which is a huge necessary skillset now. And to me, one of the most kind of radiant skills that we as theatre practitioners hope to have is emotional intelligence, which is profound in terms of making judgments and decisions and problem solving. And the fundamental thing is that we purportedly think creatively and work creatively with others.” She paused for a moment and added one more thought, “And that we innovate.”

Of course, it is unsurprising that we and any number of researchers might agree in the importance of these skills, but one of the difficulties is marketing one’s skills – being able to talk about experiences from advanced education in the arts in a way that effectively illustrates the benefits. I posed a conundrum to Dr. Lavey, noting that arts scholars can encounter resistance from artists who think they are too much of a scholar, and scholars who think they are too much of an artist. Lavey observed that a number of academic theatre departments require their faculty to be practitioners as well, all but demanding a world view from outside academia, even as a part of it.

As our conversation wound down, Dr. Lavey asked about my own research, and my own perceptions of graduate education. I told her about my work, adding with a chuckle that, “I’m in the dissertation stage, so I go back and forth every day between whether or not I should have been doing this.” She immediately sympathized with my frustrations, “Oh yes,

listen, you're in the thick of it right now. You're going to really be glad you did, and you know, we all know about the dissertation."

Thanking her for her time (and encouragement!), I asked Dr. Lavey for any final thoughts on pursuing a PhD in theatre or performance studies, and she responded quite simply, "I'm very glad that I went and did that for a host of reasons. Most of them personal." The 21st century job skills were, of course, of great value to her, but the personal accomplishment was something that shaped her as an artist and a person in a profound way. "I – just that, I think it's really worth it. I really think it's worth having gotten it."