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Interview with Leigh Fondakowski

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Leigh Fondakowski

INTERVIEW WITH LEIGH FONDAKOWSKI

Theatre Artist, Playwright

In addition to myriad other credits as a theatre artist, Leigh Fondakowski served as the head writer of *The Laramie Project*, a play investigating the reactions of a town and a nation to the brutal murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard in 1998. Leigh shared her expertise and experience with Cal Poly students and community members during a residency prior to the university's participation in the play's epilogue, *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, an international event for which over 150 theatres around the world revisited Laramie through a nearly simultaneous staged reading on the night of October 12, 2009. A member of Tectonic Theatre Project since 1995, Leigh is currently developing a play about nineteenth-century actress Charlotte Cushman with Tectonic Theatre Project and About Face Theatre.

Moebius: How do you measure the success of The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later? Or do you?

LF: For me, the only way I could measure success was in the individual residencies. That was the most meaningful part. Going back to Laramie was certainly meaningful, and getting together with my collaborators was certainly meaningful, and the event was amazing. But the event took on a different meaning because of the personal connections to so many of the institutions doing it. Not just in the “oh yeah, we met each other,” but we got to understand the motivation for people getting involved. In so many ways, there was a profound connection to the story and to the material. So to know that it was so alive like that, around the country... that to me was the most meaningful part of it.

Moebius: What role does theatre play in that kind of connection? How is it different from events where people read the same novel, or poem, or film? How do you define what is exceptional about theatre in the creation of a kind of community?

LF: Moisés [Moisés Kaufman, artistic director of Tectonic Theatre Project] made another comment that night, that was particularly profound for me, about the empathy of the actor. When I went around the country, I began each residency with the question, “How do you enter the play?” There wasn't a company member in any of the ensembles *anywhere* that was not coming from a place of connection to some aspect of the story. There was this level of human compassion. Not that that doesn't happen in film – because you're sitting in a theatre and with each other – but it happens in the theatre in a different kind of way because of the empathy of the actor, the performers, and their connection with the audience.

Moebius: How did you enter the play? The process?

LF: It's probably really different now than it was then. It's still fundamentally the same—what is the role of theatre in the social dialogue, right? That was the driving question that started *The Laramie Project*. It wasn't, "Let's go make a play about this." It was, "Does theatre have a role to play in current events?" I think the question that one takes into one's work with is significant. A lot of people called Tectonic to talk to us, saying we want to make plays about important social things. It was certainly a play about important things, now and then, but the driving question was about the place of theatre in society; it lent itself to a bigger conversation about what theatre could do.

Moebius: I can understand the motivation of the company; I wonder, is that what you hoped the audience would walk away with—be thinking about?

LF: Not necessarily. The audience is going to experience a relationship to the community, right? The play was discovered through the questions. We went to Laramie, we went back several times, met the people, saw them changing. That was the moment – it was like, "Oh! That's what the play is about. It's about a community going through this thing over the course of several years. The play was discovered through the question."

Moebius: As you went through this process – going back to ten years ago – did you have the product in mind? Were there any guiding principles or objectives?

LF: You always have your prejudices, you can never really be rid of your prejudices, but we tried to just go out there and talk with the community. We kept journals. We wanted to be observers and listeners: see what we could see, talk to who we could talk to.

That's how we work at Tectonic; maybe it's a different idea or way of working, but we tried to stay neutral. You have your hunches, but we try to go into the studio with the raw material and with as open a mind as possible and let the material speak. Let the theatrical form evolve. You're constantly involved with the material and the theatricality of the thing.

It wasn't clear even after we came back, after the first trip, that there was going to be a play. It was only after the Russell Henderson trial that we realized there was going to be a play.

Moebius: Can you speak a bit more about the theatricality of assembling the compiled interviews and material into a dramatic text?

LF: It goes hand in hand – the studio process, the moment work process, and the writing process – they're in a constant conversation with one another. You're working with the theatrical elements in the studio. You just gather some simple props and costumes and things that sort of represent Laramie or the iconography of the West. You have the interview material. And then you do moment work. From this single moment, the unit of theatrical time, a vocabulary begins to emerge. So the idea that the company would be the storytell-

ers and that they would play multiple parts and tell the audience, “This is who I saw, this is what I did,” this whole form that was going to be the container for the story was born out of moment work; the actors were bringing in these moments where they kept saying and doing things like that, and it was extremely theatrical and really interesting to watch them switch from one to another, to watch them create these characters in such simple ways, and also the passion of trying to convince each other – someone who hadn’t been in the room with this person – that this material was important to be heard. It’s almost like a sales pitch. The sales pitch starts to become more and more theatrically compelling because in order to get their voices heard, they had to become more convincing as the character and really try to *show* us what it was like to be in the room. How theatrical and interesting it was became the form; where if you had eight actors who said, “This is what we did and this is what we saw,” it was born out of this experience of working with the elements in conjunction with the text.

Moebius: How would you explain “moment work” to someone who doesn’t regularly go to the theatre?

LF: Moment work is a technique for writing performance. It’s different from writing a text. A text gets written by a sole author in a room, with a computer screen or a piece of paper. But moment work is attempting to write in three-dimensional form where everything gets written or illuminated in a three-dimensional space with an actor and the elements of the stage: lighting, set pieces, costumes. The idea is that it is not only text and character that can carry narrative. These other elements of the stage actually have potential to carry narrative, too, and perhaps even do it in ways that are more compelling, given the medium. It’s a different way of thinking about telling stories. It’s thinking about every single aspect of the stage, every single detail, every single component as not just there to serve the text, but to be there and become the text in and of itself. It’s the way you think about how filmmakers use visual landscapes to tell parts of their stories; it’s a similar idea, but I do think the theatre can do that work, that storytelling. Theatre does what theatre does best; this is why I love theatre – because it does THIS!

Moebius: Especially in light of your earlier questions of “what is the role of theatre?” what can theatre do in a given moment? whether we’re talking about the recent devastation in Haiti or a certain political event? Looking at The Laramie Project, what were the conversations like within Tectonic Theatre Project when Matthew Shepard first made the news? What went into that first decision to go to Laramie – that decision to pursue this particular story?

LF: Well, Moisés began with the question, “Do we as theatre artists have a role to play in this?” And then people weighed in on that, yes or no. How do you feel about it? Then there were questions about our ability to do it. Like, very practically, we’re not reporters,

can we do this? How do we do it? Should we talk to other reporters, or should we just go ourselves? There were issues of privacy. Are we invading? Are we going to be wanted or are we going to make things worse? There were all kinds of conversations from ethical to practical. Everybody who was part of the conversation went. The dialogue was good, but in the end, we all felt that whatever concerns people had, we'd treat them on a case by case basis and see what happened when we went.

Moebius: Did everyone agree that this was a situation that demanded exploration? Why one event, one issue over another?

LF: This was the first hate crime in America that got anywhere near the attention. The idea that it happens in the West where it was getting talked about, it felt like a truly American moment. I think it was the combination of that: this really, truly American place and feeling and story and the fact that the country was talking about a gay man on this level of intensity. It was pretty striking. I don't think it's happened anywhere near that since then.

Moebius: Were you ever frustrated by a lack of change? Was there ever a possibility of losing faith?

LF: There certainly was frustration going back ten years later and learning that students weren't being educated in our history, and of course the changing of their versions of the story. But I never lost faith. It would be impossible to lose faith because our connection with most of the people in Laramie is so strong and then there's our connection with high school kids, college kids, and even professional companies for whom this play has so much meaning. There's so much more encouraging input over the last twelve years that far outweighs the setbacks and the homophobia that still is out there. It's hard when you think about people who could lose their jobs, or lose their lives. It's hard when you think about that; we should be past that. But there are so many people that don't really care. So few people feel like they can do something about it; how to educate their children, how they use language. There are all kinds of ways that people wake up and change their point of view. It would be hard to lose faith after all of the positive things that have come out of productions of the play over these years.

Moebius: You've taught at Naropa University; you've had considerable experience at universities around the country. Specifically looking at higher education, what is the role of theatre on college campuses today?

LF: I just would hope that the institutions are getting people to see theatre, getting students to think that theatre is of interest to them, sort of compelling – a compelling form. For me, the way that people think about theatre and the way that theatre is taught... I mean, what other medium really can you think of that still is predominantly working in nineteenth-century forms? We laugh at that, but it's really true for theatre.

You go to MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] and you're not going to see a nineteenth-

century painting in there, but in theatre, you're still going to see nineteenth-century forms. So to me, the role of higher education, at least in theatre education, is saying, "Okay, what is theatre of today? What is the new *form* and how do we make them?" Then hopefully engaging the general student body who cares about art to be in that conversation as well, about what can theatre do that other mediums can't?

I sincerely believe—not just about theatre, but about all art forms—in particular, theatre speaks to the question of our humanity. Our society has a lot wrong with it, but I think one of the biggest things that is generally wrong is the loss of humanity, a loss of connection—human to human. And that empathy that we spoke of earlier. And so, to lose that because of *money* seems a great tragedy to me because that affects everything. Our humanity affects everything—all of the trouble in the banking industry—if people had had connection to the human toll, a real connection to the face to face human toll of their actions, maybe they would have made different choices. I think all art connects human beings to another. I don't know where civilization would go from there.

Moebius: In the broader context of your own work, including The People's Temple at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, so much of what you do seems to explore a town, a community, a nation's reaction to something, someone, some kind of pivotal cultural event – a defining event. What draws you to that kind of project?

LF: The thing drawing me into Charlotte Cushman, a piece of history, or current events, or something that has a complication to it, is a grey area to it that really needs analysis. It really needs to be dug into and understood. Or maybe never understood. But there's a way in which current events get talked about, even history gets written, that's very black or white, so that it's pretty easily digestible; that's what happened to this, that's what happened to him, that's what happened there. *The People's Temple* addresses how many misunderstandings are generally misunderstood as fact. The phrase "drink the kool-aid," which is generally understood as part of the vernacular, is just not true. There's *no proof* how many people willingly drank that kool-aid, or were actually coerced, or were injected with poison. It was made to look like everybody went along with it. It's easy to say they were cultists and "oh, they drank the kool-aid," and we kind of use that phrase and it astounded me how something so complicated and with so many more aspects to it, the back story and the political story were just not known. I wanted to get in there and pose the question of *why*?

It's similar in the case of Charlotte Cushman. There's just so much complication and mystery in the human mind, in this story, and nobody says anything about her or any of these women or any of this history. So I'm drudging it all up!

Moebius: Would you describe that project a bit more?

LF: It's a play about a famous actress from the nineteenth century, a super-mega

famous actress, an international star. When she retired, there were 14,000 people who packed Twenty-third St. [New York City] to see her on her balcony. She was a super-star. She had all these lovers throughout her life. She paraded them around like they were her wives because marriage back then was not thought to have a sexual component. When they were together, they were the *most pure*. She always had a female companion with her. She was chaste and pure and proper and had this huge career. Meanwhile, there are ten thousand letters in the library of Congress that tells what's going on between them inside the house, at a time before people even really thought that women had sexuality. I'm basically dragging out all of her dirty laundry, not only the external, but the really complicated lives of these women, and what their project was. They wanted to live independent of men and they wanted to be artists. This is how they conceived of their lives—this is how they tried to do it. To me, hundreds of years later, yes, we can be more public about it, but a lot of the dilemmas are still the same dilemmas: a woman in a man's world, trying to compete against men; women having families versus careers, gay people trying to have families and blood lines and children. It's startling to me that it's a period piece and that it feels like it could be happening right now, like in California with Prop 8 or anywhere else in the country for that matter.

Moebius: Are you incorporating the text of the letters, or are you adapting them? How is the piece beginning to come together structurally?

LF: It's part found and part invented. When it's found and directly quotable from history, there's a chorus that tells you so. When it's cautiously quoted and the rest of the time, we just let it slide. There are a lot of gaps between one thing and another. I was going to try to write a piece that had the gaps; I was just so fascinated by how things got from point A to point B that I started having fun with the conjecture component of it. How did that plan get hatched? Who was involved in that decision? Wow, what happened there? So I'm playing with history that way, trying to fill in pieces; What could have gotten them to go along with these ideas and plans of Charlotte Cushman's?

Moebius: It interrogates the very notion of what we consider history.

LF: Exactly. That's kind of the crux of it—why do we accept what we do? What else is going on in there? In a way, I'm thinking about history and historians and what their work is. They're like detectives; they find a little bit of this, a little bit of that. How do *they* piece together what happened? The piece talks about women, independence, and female desire, but it also really talks about what remains – of an actress's life and of history.

Moebius: Do you ever feel like you need to position yourself in a certain way? Define your role? Do you see yourself as a playwright? A reporter? An interpreter? Or really something else altogether? Or ultimately, does any of that even matter?

LF: I think of myself as a theatre artist. The stories that I'm drawn to, I'm drawn to

and theatre is my medium for now. I know probably there will always have some kind of critical, social, human hook because that's just what I'm drawn to. What drives me. I think of myself as a theatre artist first and foremost. I'm just really interested in what the medium can do.

Moebius: That also ties back into the very nature of moment work. The playwright as traditionally conceived, ceases to be; that's part of the collaborative environment created for moment work.

LF: The idea we have of the playwright laboring away in his/her room and then emerging with a play to be staged is turned on its head in a pretty significant way. There's still playwriting involved [*laughs*]. Obviously I'm spending years of my life writing this text, researching this, and crafting this thing, but it's with a totally different end in mind. This has been a thrilling process—getting back in the room again with people who have been doing moment work with me over the years and showing them where moment work led me and showing them how much moment work informed all of this writing. The most thrilling moment is when this moment that you made—that lighting instrument made this.

I can't wait to get back into the room with the women who are working on this with me. It's also going on a journey with a group of people. There are four women who have been steadily working with me on for all of these years. It makes a difference. The play is about a community of women and there's a community of women writing it. It's exciting; a director, and actors, and they're all sitting there asking themselves the same questions: "What am I doing with my life? No one's going to remember me. You do a performance and it's over and it's gone. All the other artists are making things that are going to last for hundreds of years and I'm doing this thing that goes away in a night." They're doing it, too!

Moebius: We all appreciate the effort and the personal investment that you put into your work with The Laramie Project and all the work you're continuing to do. Even at Cal Poly, it was great to see that theatre could make a difference. I heard from a student who shared that he'd forgotten about a lot of these issues and, after seeing the Epilogue, he stuck an LGBT ally button on his bag. He explained that this was a big deal in his frat and he spoke out. It was one moment, one little shift that he recognized because of this play. I know that there are hundreds of thousands of occurrences on that level and on higher levels. Your work makes a huge difference. Hopefully more people will go on and do similar things.

LF: It's exciting when I hear that. That's the answer to the question of whether you lose faith or not. They're small things, but there are so many of them, and how can you not believe? ☺

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