



## Interview with director Susannah Martin regarding Porchlight's 2009 production of *Three Sisters*

### Opening, Influences

J: This is Jon Burnett, core member for Porchlight Theatre Company, interviewing director Susannah Martin, who is going to be directing the 2009 summer production of *Three Sisters* at Porchlight Theatre's Outdoor Redwood Amphitheater. And before we begin talking about the project *Three Sisters*, I wanted to just kind of touch base with you Susannah about your own work, and what has influenced your work and developed your style and particular process.

S: Okay. There are several things that have developed my style, whatever that is, and my process. I think that, honestly, even though I am originally from Boston, my coming of age in the theatre happened in California, mainly in my adolescence. And I went to a really fantastic high school where I had teachers in all subjects, not just theatre, who really encouraged me to find my voice and express myself through every medium, not just theatre but writing and thinking in a way that was indicative of places that I lived and my own personal experience and how I related that back to the world. So that was (the) first big impact that I had, was really teachers in high school who taught me how to think abstractly, if that makes any sense, as opposed to think literally or think in terms of facts or figures. They taught me how to interpret what I was learning.

J: And across many mediums, it sounds like.

S: Yes, across many mediums, and how to connect in the mediums that I was doing back to any medium that I was working with, back to my own personal experience, and vice versa. And then, I went to NYU, which is where I really wanted to go, and I studied at this school of the arts, and I specifically studied at Playwright Horizons where they had at that time had a directing program, and acting program for undergraduates. The two big things that happened there were one, I studied with a man named Bob Moss and he also was good at getting me to believe in taking abstract ideas and images that I had in my head and interpret them as a director, and really began giving me the idea that themes that expressing themes through theatrical language was possible, through directors medium was possible.

And then of course the other big impact was that I studied with Ann Bogart there, and that was where I was first exposed to two tools that I use a lot in all of my directing which is viewpoints and composition. And actually I studied with composition daily practically at Playwright Horizon with a woman named Maureen Pennington. And she was also another person who encouraged me to allow my starting point for creation to not just be the text but everything else around me, so that I could find character and story and theme through an image, through a piece of music, through an inanimate object, that any of these things I compose and make theatre from those, and that was really, really a big deal.

And then obviously Ann was a big deal because she taught me not just composition in a different way, but in a viewpoint and an idea of theatrical spectacle and an idea of what makes theatre different from any other medium, which was huge at that time, but also she taught me kind of my theatrical values. You know that my value system as a human being should translate into the way I make theatre and the way I related to actors and the way I related to other artists and the way I related to my audience. And that if my values as a human being were to take good care of the world, that should be my values in how I made work and how I collaborated with other artists, and how I collaborated with the audience.

J: And was it at this time that you began working with the five senses as a whole, in the composition work?

S: That was both earlier and later, that kind of initially started with Maureen Pennington, the composition teacher I was talking about, but also she was the one that got me to go in through music and through



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image. But then in terms of the actual tactile component of it, that was kind of a leap I made after graduate school and with Porchlight. In graduate school I did more composition with Della Davidson who is the choreographer and director and creator, a really amazing and she's up at U.C. Davis which is where I did my graduate work, way back then I did a choreography class with her which for me I realized doing a choreography class which was just really doing composition. And she had us go in through finding environments and creating (radi-have) environment so that a sense of place and how a place (reforms of a screening work) and then she also had us work with images that we took like taking pictures and then taking one of those pictures and then creating movement and dance inspired by a picture.

And then I think the other thing was then in my work before I went to grad school I was a co-artistic director of a theatre company called Paducah Mining Company with Elizabeth Spreen who was an amazing playwright and artist. And with Elizabeth we had been making compositions and finding a way of working, and we had been trained in similar tools, we had both trained with the City Company and with Ann and stuff like that, and we were already working with similar tools and we were constantly trying to find ways to take those tools and adapt them to other things we were doing, so they spoke to who we were and the kind of work we wanted to make. And she and I would do this composition where we would have to take and create five pictures that tried to illustrate in the five pictures kind of your given circumstances, but beyond your given circumstances, more abstract, like who are these people and what kind of world do they live in, and what does this world feel like, smell like, sound like kind of thing. But, it'd always been kind of an abstraction, but had it been literal, and so then when I was creating a composition for the very first workshop I taught for Porchlight I thought, well why not make literal. I had done sound compositions before for sure, I absolutely done sound compositions in many composition classes that I had done, and I had done certainly tableau compositions. And I had done image compositions, but I had never done it where you went and said okay, literally bring an object that you smell or feel or taste, and that way kind of telling a story. And so that was just a leap that I made, where I said, "Why not go there?" If I'm doing it through sound, if I'm doing it through image, why not do it through smell and taste and texture. And so I made that leap. I highly doubt I'm the first person to make that leap, but that is a leap as I made it.

### Earlier Experience with Chekov

J: And did you have an opportunity to experiment with Chekhov with viewpoints work, with composition work this extensively as you were developing your style or your sense of it earlier?

S: No, the only work with Chekhov that I had done before that was actually, well two things, one was in undergrad at NYU you know we did theme study, which is what anybody does after work, right? And then in graduate school I had apprenticed, so to speak, in my first quarter with a Russian director, a woman named Irina Brown, and she came to Davis to direct a production and I was her assistant, she was actually working on Pirandello - which she directed, but then I also took a directing class with her, and we did a very thorough text analysis on *Uncle Vanya*. And so I kind of learned how to break down that script from an actual Russian, which was really great. And then I got it in my head that I want to direct *Uncle Vanya*, because I absolutely love that play, and that was as you know the first workshop I did with Porchlight was around *Uncle Vanya*. But that was really it. It wasn't until I did the first workshop with Porchlight that I went, "Oh my God, it works, it completely lends itself to Chekhov's writing!" Because he's such a sensual writer... because it's so much about human behavior and human experience, and composition is so much about behavior to me, about allowing ourselves to expressively, well to express in an expressive way human behavior, if that makes any sense. It's kind of redundant, but to allow it to be abstract.

J: It's so poetic and so ripe for exploration of all the senses...

S: Yeah! And also because what Chekhov does really well is (in the sense) of describing a state of being he expresses it. So it's not about telling, it's about showing. And it seems like they are talking about



something unrelated to what they are feeling, and often they are, but what's underneath that, you know metaphoric poetic description about a tree, is really this great expression about death, and so because it's an abstraction in his language the abstraction of composition just lines up really well. So I'm sure a lot of people knew, I didn't know, until I did it.

J: Right, and with this work you also get to make those discoveries from kind of the inside out or through the back door, you really get in there with it, bouncing around with the viewpoints, you kind of mix discoveries that maybe people have made in another direction, another route. It's an exciting blend.

S: Well I think it's interesting because a lot of people say that Chekhov performs well was when it is really lived in, and I think to some degree that's absolutely true, but I also said if it becomes too – and we shall see, maybe your audience will revolt and throw things – but I think if it becomes too realistic really it loses its theatricality of his language and his situation and it sometimes can lose the humor. I think that it lends itself to the true and tragic common experience, if you allow yourself to become slightly more abstract. That's my opinion, and I know some people may disagree with you, or me, but that's my opinion.

J: Right, I came across something I think that's about a 2005 production that said that by removing the verisimilitude of realism you create more a sense of timelessness, too, you get more into the metaphysical poetry rather than being bogged down in the specific political situation of the time, and so it's more for all time.

S: Yeah.

### **How did you find Porchlight?**

J: So now we have brought you to Porchlight. First of all, how did that happen? How did you end up getting hooked up with Porchlight?

S: You know it's a lot less interesting than you would think. I got out of Grad School, I had a list of theater companies that I was interested in working with, I sent resumes to that list of companies and artistic directors, and Molly Noble at Porchlight saw my resume and was intrigued and called me up and said you know you have a really interesting resume and I would be interested in talking to you. And you know, to this day I still don't know what it was that she found so interesting. I think she was probably interested in my training and where I studied and then the plays I had done which was a real mish-mash, I mean it's really eclectic and I think it shows I have eclectic taste which Molly has eclectic taste...

J: Right.

S: and probably our taste in plays lining up, she called me up to the amphitheater and we just talked, and found out more about plays we were both interested in, and I told her more about the way that I work, and she said "Well we are doing this series of workshops now for our core. Maybe now it's about bringing you in, you know maybe it's about bringing someone new in to see what they might have to offer." And that's how the first workshop came about. And then basically Tara called me said alright tell me more about what you do, and Tara made it clear that it was going to be a trial run, you know it was going to be like we'll do a couple of days and see what happens. And so we did that couple of days and that went really well and then we decided to do a longer workshop. This was... the first workshop was in December of 2006 and then we did the next workshop in April of 2007. And then as you know we did our most recent last fall, which was performed. But all of that led up to this production. And we always knew that it was going to be Chekhov, and that was it. And I think what we found, I mean what I found that was so interesting for me was a group of people who were very experienced and professional but at the same time were people and were living lives and were doing the Bay Area thing of trying to find the balance between "How do you live a life, and have a family and be a human being but an artist, and it really seemed to be exemplified in Porchlight, in a way that in terms of the kind of artistic family feeling, and the



feeling of people who are having families or had families or working towards hopefully having one and trying to figure out what that means. And I feel like because of that, that and the literal environment that you guys perform in, and how important that environment is, spoke a lot to my kind of theatrical values and that made sense to me.

J: Were you also attracted to the kind of plays that Porchlight chooses to do?

S: Yeah, absolutely. An interest in some of the great classics of dramatic literature, but more modern classics, I mean really you guys are doing plays more in the modern era, meaning late (classic for me) onward. So that was definitely part of it, but I think a lot of it, like I said, was this sense of theatrical values, this sense of being human beings on stage and not excluding your life experience and how that informs you as an artist, and informs you how you make work from the process. That was really key for me and the fact that the sense of love and taking care of your self was really important to me as artist and that seems very clear in the way that you guys present your work. And the literal environment and the way that that literal environment, that sense of space and place at times affects the way you guys make work, and that's really important, I mean it's going to sound really California woo-woo, environmentalism is really important value in my life. The sense of consciousness of the planet and how important, and frankly in my opinion Chekhov was an environmentalist. It just feels right to build with you guys with this group of people in this space in that amazing environment and think about how that's changing, and think about how we impact that. That field work is part of Porchlight and it feels like it's part of Chekhov.

J: It's nice to think of the concept of an ensemble of a company tying in as its own kind of environmentalism as well, it's kind of interesting.

### **Trying to State "Three Sisters" In a Nutshell**

J: So I'm always amused by when people have to boil down a plot of something rather complex into that one sentence blurb on the TV Index or in the Pink Pages of The Chronicle or something. But if you were to do that in a couple of sentences maybe about "Three Sisters", what would you say?

S: Oh, Gosh.

J: The Nutshell.

S: Three sisters wait five years for somebody to take them to Moscow. Basically, that's kind of it. It's this family wanting this momentous change, what they think will be a life-saving change to happen. And the change is represented in this dream of going to Moscow, but instead of taking the action necessary to make that happen, they wait ... and talk about it. But they don't make it happen. They don't do it. They wait for it – and that's the tragedy, right? I mean it's the comedy as well, but the tragedy is that they stay fixed, time marches on, and they stay fixed in one place, with this dream that they don't know how to make it into a reality, so they don't.

J: It's interesting to think that there is this side by side juxtaposition of this great comedy and this intense tragedy in the poetry, but it's all hanging there side-by-side, almost without any sort of judgment, and there's that line in Act One, "We can't know what will seem important to the future, and what will seem ridiculous." What is going to be so funny in the future, and what here that we are doing and experiencing right now is going to bring people to tears or seem really like an important mistake or breakthrough or flaw, you know that there it all is.

S: Was there a question in that?

J: No, I was just sort of riffing off of you.



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S: Oh, okay. I think also, it's this thing where life is about choices, and the environment wants us to make choices and it's never, ever perfect. It's almost always completely imperfect. We are surrounded by circumstances that are beyond our control. We have given circumstances, just like actors, that are usually beyond our control, and it's really about what we do with them. And then we look back, and sometimes we look back and go "Wow if that one thing hadn't of happened, I wouldn't have ended up here." And ideally we are not looking back with a lot of regret. And I think what's interesting to me about the sisters is that they have regrets, more than a few, but they also don't seem to get to a place where they are able to say, they are able to recognize fully what they did that, where they did not, you know they could say a little bit "Maybe I shouldn't have married this person", or "Maybe I shouldn't have taken that job", or "Maybe I should have taken that job", or "Maybe I should have done that." But there's a strange lack of self-awareness in the moment, because they are so either living in the future or what's going to be, if it's going to happen, or living in the past with what was. And honestly, Andrei too. And I guess I could talk about what happens, well they wait for this momentous thing to happen and then one of our other characters, you know soldiers come, soldiers go, people get older and one of our other characters decides to take definitive action, and he dies. And that's kind of about what happens.

### Comparing and Contrasting Chekov's Russia to Obama's US

J: Do you think there is a relationship between the dream of Moscow and our country's sort of elusive American Dream? Do you think there is a sort of a similar metaphorical connection there?

S: What I find so interesting about Americans, it's such a different philosophy than the Russians at that time. Because our country was built on this idea of anything is possible. And I think what the miasma of what the Russians were struggling against is that anything was not possible, they were stuck in this system where you were born into a certain caste, and that was it, your life was kind of laid out for you, and you had very few choices within that. And so Americans are criticized if we don't take action, now I would say that where it does tie up to the American Dream or the lack thereof, is that we have a much stronger caste or class system in this country than we are willing to talk about. And I think that there are a lot more people that are stuck because of their class or their caste or even their race, than we are willing to talk about. On one level we have an example of the American Dream being available to anybody when we look at our current president, absolutely, and on another level there is the majority of people who are coming from an immigrant background and being raised in a single parent home and are not necessarily white, that's not necessarily the case. Where I relate it more is, and this is just my own personal political frustration, would be the Americans having a certain amount, and I'm not talking about greatly impoverished Americans who are struggling and working three jobs just to get by and feed their kids. I'm not talking about those people. And I know it's tricky to talk about this right now when we are in a really terrifying economic recession, but I think it is more about Americans who sit and have a certain amount that is provided for them, or at least have the possibilities that if they took a certain amount of action something could change in their lives, but are still sitting back passively and are waiting for something to happen.

Now the recent election was a sign that Americans can put their minds to it and take a lot of action and change things. That was the really exciting thing about this election. And now we are at this crossroads, where it's like okay now that has happened, what are we going to do with this? Are we going to take the next right action? Are we going to keep going forward and realize "Okay, this doesn't just stop there, one election that was exciting and hopeful and very much people-made and grassroots." The movement will die if we don't keep going forward. So Masha can take action and get married, but that's not the end of her life, or Irina can get a job, or Masha can have an affair, or Olga can become headmistress, and that one thing is not enough. Andrei can get married and have kids, and that one thing is not enough. It's not enough – and then what?

J: I'm going to read you a quote from our sort of resident dramaturge, Craig, and then we can kind of respond to this. "Russia at the turn of the last century was a nation standing on the brink of something, but what? We have the luxury of retrospect. It's easy to get frustrated with the inertia we see in history,



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but when the moment is now, the inertia can all but freeze us. The United States is standing on the brink of something and the forces that would keep us rooted to a single spot are overwhelming. There are so many voices that would tell us how to move forward – which do we listen to? How do we take action? What is the role of hope? What is the role of culture? The masses? The different classes? Art? Do we have what it takes to save ourselves? Do we need saving? Chekhov offers us a meditation on these themes through his three sisters stranded far away in a little provincial town.”...that’s the end of the quote.

S: I would agree with it. I think that’s the thing is that I don’t think that I’m harsh about the sisters, because certainly they are stranded in a little provincial town, they are women, they do not have the same opportunities that women have now. And yes, there is a similarity of our country being on the brink of something but what? And it could go either way. And I think that with the sisters it is even harder because they are part of a class that was dying, the aristocracy was being totally ... and it took time in Russia being pushed out, and a different class and a different ideology was being formed. And so when you were part of that old movement, what do you do, how do you change, how do you shift and adopt something entirely new? That means that you are not needed in the same way – what does that mean to you? And I do feel like, especially now because of the recession, we have to adopt the new ideology or the country is not going to survive. And I feel that way environmentally too. I really feel like we are on the brink environmentally – we have to adopt a new way of living or we will not survive. And yet, when we are in the midst of that, how do we do that, what does that mean?

J: There’s that historic anecdote where FDR was visited by these much more left radicals than he is commonly thought to be, and they proposed all these things, and he said “Well, I agree with you, but now go out and make me do it!” That’s the thing, to really force Obama to keep all those campaign promises or to exceed them in some cases in terms of foreign policy, etcetera, sort of along the lines of what you are saying.

S: Well, the women in the play, their ability to shift with these momentously changing times is expressed through their relationships, really. The men get to talk philosophy, but the women don’t get a lot of opportunity to do that. The men aren’t necessarily taking a lot of action,

J: No

S: but they are talking a lot about what is this time we are living in and what does it mean? And what it means is expressed through these relationships, these ideas of what is my place, and what if I’m not needed in the same role anymore? And what if I am? And this sense of loss and things not being what you thought they were, then what do you do? And these expectations that you had about what your life was going to look like, and it doesn’t look like that, so then what do you do? You can say that that’s political and you can say that that’s personal and they are both expressed in the play.

### Style Choices

J: Let’s talk about how you envision expressing that. In this particular production, what is going to happen on that stage in the Redwood Amphitheater this summer. What’s the vision or the style that you see?

S: I think it’s really important to me to stay true to the play, and this is going to sound like a cop out, but it really isn’t, which is to let the environment inform us. I really feel like it’s important to be able to show on that stage as time literally passes, as the day gets dark, as we perform, how that environment changes. And who reacts to that change, how they react to that change and what they do with that change, or don’t do. So for me at this point I’m at a place where I really want the set and the environment in general to show time passing, and to show a sense of ... and everything moves onwards and decays and eventually dies, and either you are reborn and you do something with that, or you’re not and you stagnate and die as well. And so it’s really about how do we express through our environment that change happens



inevitably, that time moves forward and you can either stay stuck backwards in that or you can move forward with it.

J: Because we most likely will have on many days a lot of sunlight in Act One whereas by Act Four it could be totally dark, which will be interesting.

S: Which is interesting, of course, because this is the challenge that the last act is outside in Chekhov's play, and yet we are outside the entire time. And we go through many seasons and five years pass. And so, like I said, how do we get a real sense of each of those places and each of those environments but also that these people are aging and that the more time passes the more unfortunately limited their choices become. So not to sound too depressing but, and I would like to be able to express this as simply and as organically as possible. I have no interest in putting a big literal set on stage. And I want to show how the sisters are, as time marches on, the sisters are eventually pushed out of that environment. They are literally pushed out of that house by Natasha. So how do we show that, how do we show not just how but show that? That is a question that Steve Decker the set designer and I are asking ourselves right now and Rebecca Redmond the costume designer and I are asking ourselves, how do we show that they were part of this environment become estranged from it, become ostracized from it, become these people who are still existing in a time that has gone by, and so they have no place anymore.

J: And let's talk more about the tricky issue of the balance between the humor and the tragedy and the poetry. How do you keep from cheapening the Chekhov and keep from boring or belaboring the patron?

S: I think this is where I go back to composition and the idea of human behavior. I know that when I have been in my most dire painful life situations, the strangest things will be funny. And it's partly just because human beings are funny even when we are sad. And we are funny often in our absurd and extreme quality, so we do things when we're upset that aren't in our behavior, and in the way that we express things that are absurd or exaggerated or theatrical and those end up being funny in their extremism. And it's partly because those moments feel so important to us, but from an outsider's eye they are not as important. So it's a tricky balancing act of, I do need to get the audience invested in these characters, but at times even when they are at their saddest point they still view things or say things are bazaar, or incongruous, or idiosyncratic, and that is funny! That's just funny. Because if we can't laugh at our own ridiculous behavior at times, or our own reaction to things, we might as well all kill ourselves now. At the same time I think what makes the tragic is missed opportunity, and so we have to see those moments where if they had just said something different, or if they had just walked the other way, or if they had just not gone to the duel, or if they had just said Yes to a different thing or just said No to something else, then it wouldn't have ended up this way. But because in that moment they make the choice that they do, it's tragic. But it is tragic comedy. I always like to think about *Uncle Vanya* and the end of the Third Act, and Vanya misses when he goes to shoot the professor, and he misses twice. And that is the reason it is a tragic comedy. If he had shot him it would be a tragedy. If he had come on to shoot him with a cannon it might have been even more of a farce, but because he comes on with the real intent to shoot him but misses twice, it's a tragic comedy. And so to me it's about finding those moments in *Three Sisters* that have the same element, the same quality.

J: And I guess finally, what would you hope that people would come away with from this experience, whatever you want to speak to, either as a participant in the process or as a viewer of this particular exploration of *Three Sisters*? In your dream version of this?

S: Similar for both the audience and the actors in that I want people to feel that this version of *Three Sisters* could not have happened anywhere else at any other time. That it is of Porchlight, of who the people are in Porchlight, of how Porchlight makes work, of where they work. And that all of those things will (sync to fuse?) a very specific production, that is specific to you guys, to this company. And I want, obviously I want you guys to feel that way. You know it's like, we're not interested in creating



the cookie cutter version of Three Sisters. And I'm also not interested in creating everybody's idea of what Three Sisters is supposed to look like. That is really not interesting to me. You know I get a little upset... because I've directed other plays by other iconic playwrights, and there's always at least one... at least one if not more audience members that might come because I don't tend to do things where I'm like, "I must do this the way that everybody has done this over time!" I directed Shaw last year, and there were people who came and said, "Well, that's not the way that Shaw is supposed to be done." And there may be people who come and say, "That's not the way Chekhov is supposed to be done." I don't even know what that means!

J: Yeah! Especially with Chekhov...

S: I really don't. I need to speak to, and with the collaborators that I'm working with at this time. And I speak to the audience that I have at this time. And so that is going to form how... and like I said, it should feel like this is why I feel environmentally the set and the design and the performances should really lend themselves to the environment that we're performing in. And it's not about us trying to like, you know not to go back to the election, but not us trying to "put lipstick on a pig", it's not us trying to say this is something other than what it is. It should feel organic to the environment, and to the time that we are living in. Which is another reason that Rebecca, the costume designer, and I decided that we don't want to necessarily do it in period dress because it should feel relevant to now. That doesn't necessarily mean that we're going to put them (the characters) in absolutely contemporary costumes, but it doesn't mean that it's going to be recognizable as late 19th - early 20th century clothing. Because what are we trying to say - right now? That may be a little change of the pace for your audience, but I'm hoping... I think your audience is very sophisticated and smart. I think every audience is sophisticated and smart anywhere... and we just don't give them that credit. So, I think they'll be able to go with it.

J: Yeah... and I think the key is the word "organic" - that you're describing - with the audience member that's attracted to that space, and this work will resonate with that.

S: Yeah.

J: Well, we've talked a long time, longer than I expected, but this was great... thank you.

S: Sure, thank you.