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Susan Angelo Flourishes on Stage

Added by Libby Motika, Senior Editor on December 10, 2009.

Saved under Pali Life

Susan Angelo learned early on that to 'be the best actress I could possibly be' would be achieved for her through classical theater. And from the time she was first cast professionally, at 19, as Juliet at the Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga, she has been inhabiting Shakespeare's women, and other classical roles, ever since. She is appearing in 'Richard III' at A Noise Within through December 17. Perhaps growing up in a small town on Lake Erie, away from the TV- and film-centered coasts, insulated Angelo from the screen. While she maintains a career in these more lucrative media "Medium," 'Law & Order,' 'The Truman Show,' and a recurring role on 'Days of Our Lives' she is noted for her numerous theatrical appearances. Her approach to the craft has been to dig deep, privilege the words and build character from there. Too scared to go to New York after high school, Angelo came to CalArts, where she earned her BFA and realized just how much she had to learn. 'At that point, at that age, you're a baby,' she says. 'I remember we were studying 'Macbeth' and I was cast as Lady Macduff. I knew I was supposed to like it, but I was lost; I didn't know what to do with my hands.' She really credits Ellen Geer, artistic director at the Theatricum Botanicum, with opening up Shakespeare for her. 'There's nobody like Ellen,' Angelo says. 'She trusts her actors and gives us the freedom to create whatever we want.' Geer, the daughter of actor Will Geer, has worked continuously for 40 years in television and motion pictures. After the death of her father in 1978, she took over as artistic director of Theatrical Botanicum, whose repertory company and theater school continue to emphasize the importance of the classics. 'Right out of CalArts, this woman/girl arrived and had the most beautiful audition,' says Geer, recalling her first meeting with Angelo. 'She was like a gorgeous colt, and just sang out to me, Juliet. After the audition, she sent me a thank-you note with an apple seed inside it. This clinched it for me.' Angelo's 20-year relationship with the Theatricum is as close as it can be without being part of the extended Geer family, many of whom are members of the Theatricum's repertory company and school. 'It couldn't have worked out better,' she says of those first years with the company in the 1980s. 'I played all Melora Marshall's ing'nué parts, after Melora [Ellen's half-sister] took a leave of absence for



Susan Angelo refreshes her lines from "Richard III" on her porch, overlooking Santa Monica Bay. Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

about five years.' Angelo found Shakespeare the most freeing vehicle for her talent, once she uncovered the techniques. 'The time in which he wrote was a ballooning period of exploration in language,' she says. 'Like great music, Shakespeare's poetic language keeps ripening, and as you do it over and over you appreciate it more. 'Changes in rhythm and meter (e.g., iambic pentameter to anapest) help in clarifying meaning and clues to characters,' says Angelo, who has a firm background in rhetoric and scansion, and teaches these techniques in the Intensive Shakespeare Seminar at the Theatricum. She is also the director of education at the Theatre. A year ago, Angelo returned home to Pacific Palisades after a six-year sabbatical in Washington, D.C. and New York, where she completed an MFA at George Washington University with a concentration on Shakespeare and classical texts. 'I took a five-year break,' Angelo says. 'I wanted to be a student, not teach.' It was in the East where her belief in classical theater was confirmed. 'There is great classical theater happening in the United States, not in Los Angeles and New York.' She worked at the Signature and Workshop Theatre in New York City, the Rep in Pittsburgh, the Syracuse Stage, Indiana Rep and American Players Theatre in Wisconsin. Angelo is enjoying her association with A Noise Within, the classical repertory company in Glendale, under the co-artistic direction of Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez. She made her ANW debut last season in 'The Rehearsal,' Jean Anouilh's arch view of 18th-century sexual shenanigans and betrayals. 'Geoff is a good director,' Angelo says. 'He has a clear vision of the play, good understanding of the text, and he gives actors the freedom to explore, but he is there to guide them.' She views her role as Elizabeth in 'Richard III' as a measure of her growth as an actress. Years ago, she played Lady Anne, the young widow who hates Richard for murdering her husband and father-in-law, but falls for his charming entreaty to marriage. Angelo sees these two roles as sort of bookends to the play. Now living in her aerie in Castellammare with a view of the Pacific, Angelo is glad to be back teaching, doing TV work, and enjoying her life on the stage. Tickets: Call 818-240-0910 ext. 1; visit www.ANoiseWithin.org.

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