

Interview with LIBBY EMMONS for LI88Y INC about *The Muse Project*

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>Was there a tipping point that drove you to start the Muse project? Was there an inciting incident or was it more like a landslide?

This is a really good question. I have a long answer.

I think The Muse Project is the result of an accumulation of many, many instances; but, I remember a few years ago I was workshoping a devised piece with some really fine actresses, and it seemed to me like every day one of us would come into the space with a demoralizing audition story or a tale of a disturbing career related encounter. Like, pretty much every day. It made me sad and really angry, in part because, honestly, I knew this wasn't the experience of my male colleagues. Sure, the guys I knew occasionally had bad auditions, or they weren't always quite landing the jobs they wanted, but they weren't experiencing the same level of daily powerlessness, and they weren't having daily existential crises by any means. I really started to think about what it means to be a female actor (or a perceived female actor) in this field. I started to think about what it means to be successful, and I started to think about what it means to feel empowered. These 'incident retellings' also made me wonder about the process we were all engaged in at that time. We were creating work for ourselves in that workshop around themes we were really interested in, and that felt really good, and it was obviously a stark contrast to what we were experiencing elsewhere. I was curious about that.

Several months after that or maybe even a year later, I was taking a shower (where the little elves seem to visit & feed me ideas?...), and I distinctly remember thinking: *stage actresses in New York are astoundingly diverse, intelligent, & possess incredible range, and they are also so obviously, obscenely underutilized & underpaid. WHY? WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON? We're in the 21st Century!* And then I thought: *I am not going to solve why in the shower.* And then I thought: *I want to go to the theater and watch my girlfriends.* This, I did know. I thought: *I want to see really talented women interpreting interesting stories, & I bet (a lot of money) other people do too. Other women and men.* And then I thought: *The only way I will continue to learn, grow, & expand is if I see more women onstage with far more frequency. I am certain many other people feel the same. How can this happen?* And then it hit me. Just like that. We need to make more roles for women. The reason there aren't enough roles for women and the reason there's a dearth of stories about women and female identified persons is because we're not making them, and we're not producing them, which means we need to make them and produce them. *And what's the best way to make them?* I believe we need to ask female performers to *tell us* what they want. We need for actresses to tell us who they want to play, who they want to work with, and what stories they want to tell, and we need to facilitate a system, a paradigm, if you will, in which they can do that.

>So many actors attend university level training programs, and through Sticky I work with lots of actresses who go on to create their own work. Do you think that before the prevalence of academic acting training, actresses didn't have the tools to tell their stories or do you think that the desire to manifest one's own stories is a new development? In short, are we seeing a new kind of actress or is it simply more possible to grab hold of the means of production than it used to be?

Another good question. The simple answer: I don't really know. I think education can help instill a certain level of confidence, and I believe women are taking advantage of access to education (in general) at much higher rates now, so there might be a kind of new artistic self reliance and assuredness. That said, I also think that if you genuinely want to be a performer there's something in you that inherently feels competent (on some level) about identifying and interacting with inspiring stories and characters. But, yeah, I don't know if female stage performers are self producing with more frequency now or not. In television and in the Hollywood film industry, it might be easier to track. We do know that some of the earliest studios were [founded by female performers](#) (Mary Pickford, for example) before they were mostly overtaken by men. And right right now, I think self producing *might* have less of a stigma than it used to (women like Drew Barrymore and Reese Witherspoon self produce), and I think we're seeing more actresses, especially in comedy, take a hold of their careers in a bold and overt way. People like Lena Dunham, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Amy Schumer, Kristen Wiig all promote themselves and have created a forum for their work. And despite backlash, most of these women plow forward, create a lot of their own material, and engage with other performers, writers, and directors on terms that are clearly more their own.

>I've often said that great actors have the ability to write great plays. What are some of the key elements of creating a role that can be used in creating a story?

I like this one too! I think this is true. I think in order to write well, you have to be able to read, analyze, contextualize, and interpret well. Our best actors are great listeners and decipherers. Some do decide to transfer their skill set to playwriting, and some keep to acting...but I think, more often than not, the best performers work closely with the writer whose work they're interpreting.

I think actors can be great collaborators, and whether they are writing the role themselves or it's being written for them, I think the exchange of ideas between and intra actors, writers, and directors is the key to creating great roles. Generally, a great story follows a character's or many characters' emotional, intellectual and/or physical journey(s). The more crannies actors have the ability to seep into, through intensive analysis and investigation and closeness to the material, the more affecting the performances often are...and the more affecting the stories.

>I attended a panel several years back with Olympia Dukakis and Dianne Wiest at NYU, called Circling the Drain, about the dearth of good roles for women. The upshot was that these incredibly talented, intelligent, beautiful, strong women told the writers in the audience to write for women. I left the conversation truly inspired to do just that, and although I'd been writing plays with women leads for my entire career, the plays that came after that panel have cast breakdowns like 3 women/1 man, 6 women/3 men, or are two-handers for women. After being finalists, semi-finalists, and part of reading series, I wonder if it matters that all of us, like the little Who planet on a dustball that only Horton can hear, are crying out to tell our stories when the money doesn't follow. How do we cultivate new producing talent ready to take on this extraordinary work?

I think this is an excellent question. It's something I am very curious about. On a very basic level, I think it's about education. I think when people understand that there are a myriad of ways to tell stories and they understand that there is a deep hunger for women's stories, in particular, and that these stories are economically viable, producers emerge to make the stories happen. I think more data and more studies need to be conducted, too, to reflect the math. I think there is a frightening dearth of women's stories being produced at prestigious/moneyed levels, and it doesn't make sense because I believe women's stories are in demand and make money.

The other piece of this, though, is figuring out how and why people become producers. Who are the producers? I think there is a huge range when it comes to the types of people who actualize work. I have always been a producer because, for me, it's always been inextricably linked to acting. I often want some control over the lense through which I am interpreting and being perceived. I like to be inside and outside of the project at the same time. Producing allows me to do that. I know that producing is really not everyone's forte; but, just like there are many ways to be an actor, there are many ways to be a producer. So, I think it behooves artists, especially female artists, to think about the forum in which they want their work to be delivered. And I think when you're able to articulate even a sliver of what you imagine a project to look like, and where you fit in it, you can begin to take steps to make it happen--whether that be raising funds yourself, asking friends to help you, approaching other artists you really want to work with, or approaching investors, etc.

>Do you think there's a stigma attached to women who demand and maintain creative control, or do you think equality is gaining?

I do think there is a lot of sexism, and it's deep, and that's tough. I consider myself to be a pretty intense, confident, forward, assertive person, & yet, I still have a lot of anxiety when it comes to asking for what I need and want. Imposter syndrome sets in all the time, and I fear being disliked for being a demanding woman. It's also very challenging, right, when you see women working 2, 3, 100 times harder than their male counterparts, and you also see them not having the same public respect or monetary recognition. That's discouraging.

All said, I do think step by step, women are gaining a lot more creative control within various facets of the theater/entertainment communities. I feel like I'm seeing women just take control, too, which is exciting.

>In creating a new way for work to be developed, will Muse take on the other piece and work towards a new model of funding, production, and presentation?

Yes, I think so. I think this is already happening; and it's raising some very interesting questions. It's raising questions about development versus production. It's raising questions about how we honor a performer's contributions, particularly a female performer's contributions, at various instances along the journey of a project. It's clear to me that, in American theater, we're not an actor-centric culture in the sense that we seem to have pretty clear cut ideas about what it means to be generative versus interpretive. We still tend to see actors as valuable, but not critical to a story making process. For female performers, there is also definitely the combination of direct and latent sexism, and The Muse Project is digging deep and curiously into examining, propelling, and acknowledging the importance of the female actor.