

the woman in the wings

*a life-time of being a theatre gypsy ended
when Susan Cox took the helm of the
Vancouver Playhouse in 1993 and was
forced to adopt the duality required of an
artist working as an administrator*

— by Gloria Loree

When Susan Cox took the position as Artistic Director at the Vancouver Playhouse it was her first full-time, permanent job.

"I didn't want to be an artistic director. It seemed a contradiction in terms... I've now started to really enjoy it. I've accepted it. I'm not running from it, trying to create a separate paradise."

Cox knows her home in Lion's Bay is enough of a paradise for her to find the inspiration to meet the corporate and artistic demands placed on her. "I live in one of the most beautiful places in the world. If I start each day in spiritual gratitude then I'm starting in the right place."

Cox says she can then get in her car and figure what her strategy ("a word that used to make me throw up") will be for the day. "I'm fed by the mountains and the sky. If I'm listening to the ocean, and the wind, and the sky, then I'll have something to give. If I have nothing, I can't get it away. I have to fill my own coffers. Which is why I live in Lion's Bay. I do it consciously."

Cox has been in the theatre for over 30 years, performing major roles in dozens of productions in England, the US and Canada and directing more than 40 plays. She explains

becoming a full-time staff person was scary because she had to relate to administrators, sponsors and board members, as well as the actors and audiences. The change taught her a lot.

"I've learned I have to be as generous toward people who don't speak my language as to those who do. That's the lesson: the wise woman in



me says to constantly help and invigorate the corporate element. You just have to reach out your hand and say would you like to play? Not many people will say 'No.'"

All her years of experience in the theatre still did not make Cox comfortable with her role as artistic

director, but she explains, "I'm truly myself when I'm playing a role on stage. It's the closest I can come to being me. I can rage – if the role calls for it – rage in a way I darn't in my regular life. The only place I feel truly safe is when I'm on stage. It can be a dangerous and hostile environment, like nature. But like the people who work in the outdoors and come to feel safe there, I feel safe on stage. I feel frightened in real life."

For Cox, this lesson has become part of the *raison d'être* for her workshops. She says the workshops are designed for people to explore more of themselves. To stimulate the passion and poetry in their lives and learn to honour life's everyday problems.

"In the workshops we are trying to look for the truth ... you can fully reenact your life and therefore honour it." Cox encourages people to act out their problems and make them just as real, just as important, as the problems of a top executive or a famous person in history. Cox wants people to think of these exercises as spiritual aerobics and to use them in stressful situations.

"So when you're sitting in a meeting and the stress is coming down, you can say to yourself this is just like Henry IV and I'm just a foot soldier, and then you're immediately connected to someone. You're not left alone in your problems."

For Cox, these connections are what makes the theatre so important. "You can watch a play and see your own story and just laugh and immediately you are connected."

Cox says the theatre, in its essence, is connected to spirituality. An important distinction for her, is connection to spirituality, not religion. "That's what The Crucible is all about. It is a masterwork that is so

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Photo: David Cooper