



**PROFILE: Adrienne Sweeney(June 2016)**

BY BETH FORKNER MOE

**A**drienne Sweeney always thought she would live in large cities, growing up in Philadelphia and attending college at Loyola University in Baltimore. Working in marketing, advertising and magazine design, she moved to Minneapolis in 1993, where she began acting.

She hired an acting coach, who told her, “You have the talent, but not the technique.” As Sweeney explained, it’s important to have technique in order to keep things consistent during the run of a show, often 20 or more appearances in a row. She then attended graduate school at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she earned a Master’s of Fine Arts (MFA) degree.

She kept auditioning and getting parts, mostly with community theater groups, while also working in marketing.

And then she discovered the Commonweal Theatre, located in Lanesboro, Minnesota. “I realized I was not meant to be a big city girl anymore,” she said.

She has not looked back since.

### How did you get involved with the Commonweal?

I worked for the Commonweal in marketing, design and editing. In 2001, I got a part in an Ibsen show, plus parts in two of the summer shows. I loved it, the town and the community. Most importantly, I loved and continue to love the concept of the Commonweal, being part of a company of with a repertory ensemble cast.

I didn't want to give up my original work with the theater, but I also wanted to act. When they asked me to craft my perfect job, they created it for me. So in 2002, I was hired full-time to promote the Ibsen Festival. Now, in addition to acting full-time during the season, I am the Associate Artist Director, Director of External Communications, and the Ibsen Festival Coordinator.

### Explain what a theater ensemble is.

Fourteen of us work at the Commonweal. We all live in Lanesboro, Peterson and the surrounding area. It's considered an artist/administrative model; in other words, we all do a bit of everything. On any given night, I might work concessions. The next night, I may be on stage. Another night, you won't see me because I'll be doing props backstage. I may be tearing tickets on yet another night. It makes our art more accessible; we build relationships with the community and our patrons. You can talk to any of us at intermission. This is an intentional model that helps de-mystify the art.

It's like working in a family business, such as a hardware store. None of us get to say, "That's not my job." We all pitch in and do whatever needs to be done.

This is a tragically rare model in the United States, especially for a company our size (we have about an \$800,000 annual budget); it's more common in smaller theaters.

### What makes this such a good model?

It's all about ownership and accountability. We all look at the budget. We all know what's happening. We've been together a long time; some of us have been here 16, 18, even 25 years. We know each other; we're like family. We know each other's habits, talents and tricks. The trust is there; we don't have to build it each season. We can challenge and encourage each other, safely.

There is very little "reporting to" anyone. Hal (Cropp, the Executive Director) oversees everything, but we have five people in leadership roles. Each manages an arm of the company, but we all act in collaboration with each other. We are all considered equal and part of the consulting body.

### What do you like best about acting?

There is something magic about acting on stage. Regardless of the story – a tear-jerker, musical or drama – we are in a dark room together, sharing a one-time experience, including the audience. The audience doesn't know how much a part of it they are, but they make up part of the experience. Everyone is right there. Every time is different. This particular experience will never be replicated.

### What do you like least about acting?

I love rehearsals and the performances. But I don't love "tech week." Everything happens at once – lights, costumes, tech. This is when the insecurities come out. "Am I going to be able to do this? No, I'm going to fail." But the insecurity is part of the process. It's like throwing a party and wondering if anyone is going to come. The older you get, though, the more you learn. You just have to remember to find yourself during this process.

### What are your favorite and least favorite genres of theater?

I love comedies. It's such a good feeling to be on stage and hearing people laugh. I love to give people reasons to laugh. I also value and respect drama. If it's good, smart communication with heart, I would do it every day of the year. On the other hand, I'm terrible with verse (like Shakespeare), and I am not good with farce, which is different from comedy.

### Have you written any plays yourself?

No, I haven't. I have stories I would like to tell and have ideas to share. I would love to collaborate with others. My husband Hal (Cropp) and others in the company have written plays.

### OK, we have to ask – how do you and your husband manage to work together, be part of the same management team, etc.? How are you able to keep all your various roles separate?

Well, we met while both working at the Commonweal. So we got to know each other within the confines and parameters of this particular universe. We've been together for 13 years and have been married for 8. We are very careful and aware of other people in the company, to make sure we don't appear to have conflicts of interest.

### What are you working on now?

I'm in three shows this season. I play a villain in "Three Musketeers." I'm excited that I get to fight, using swords, rapiers and knives. We've been working on the choreography since January. It's fun to be able to use the whole space in the theater.

I'm also in "Christmas Carol," which I adore and would do anytime. It's a company-written script that we perform every three years. I love it; it boils down life to the basic essence of man's redemption.

And I'm most excited about being in "Pride's Crossing," our fall show. It's beautiful and not done very often.

### Tell us more about "Pride's Crossing."

It's about a fictional character, Mabel Bigelow Tiding, but based on a real person – Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel. It's an account of "Mabel's" experience, starting on the eve of her 90th birthday, and moving back and forth in time. It explores her memories and elements we as women deal with, choices we have made – or not made – who make us who we are.

It makes us think about what we remember and why. And what do we *think* we'll remember? For example, look back 20 years in your own life. What was important then, and what did you *think* would be important going forward? Life isn't just about what happened, but also about what didn't happen.

It's a gorgeous play, and very uplifting and empowering for women.

*Beth Forkner Moe is the editor of Girlfriends magazine.*