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Jeanmarie Simpson: 'Artist' for Change

By admin (http://www.copperarea.com/pages/author/admin/) | Posted April 24th, 2012 | 



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Jeanmarie Simpson

This is the final part in a series about an artist whose life was shaped by her childhood in the Ray-Kearny area.

By CJ McKinney

In November 2008, Tucson's Kore Press published a book that would have a profound effect on Simpson's work. *Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks*, from Vietnam to Iraq is a collection of essays, poems and fiction by women serving in various branches of the military. Edited by Lisa Bowden and Shannon Cain, the writings in *Powder* chronicle the sometimes blackly humorous and often brutal experiences of women soldiers in combat. When Simpson met co-editor Cain, both saw the potential for bringing the voices of *Powder* to other audiences.

"As soon as we met, we knew we wanted to work together," says Cain. The result of their collaboration: *Coming in Hot*, a new one-woman performance that brought the words of *Powder* to life onstage. Billed as "a controversial new play," *Coming in Hot*, adapted from the book by Cain, Lisa Bowden and Simpson herself, premiered in Tucson in September, 2009 and ignited immediate controversy – much of it coming, ironically, from the peace community.

Coming in Hot, like Simpson's other performance pieces, showcased unsung women in extraordinary circumstances and reflected her interest in women's experiences as a key factor in peace and social change. But it also presented those experiences with unflinching truth, which seemed to some to glorify American militarism and undermine the very principles held by the peace movement. Not only that, some critics took issue with Simpson's portrayal of 14 different characters of varied ethnic backgrounds in the show.

But Simpson remained unwayed, and *Coming in Hot* rolled on to glowing reviews, receiving endorsements by representatives of Amnesty International, the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, Gold Star Mothers for Peace, and others, who called it a "masterpiece." Billed as "The Civil Discourse Tour," *Coming in Hot* was performed in many venues in Tucson, including high schools, where, Simpson says, the show was "a very intense experience," because of the students' "wildly varied" perceptions of the military. After touring in several US cities, the show closed in 2010. True to the tour's title, a central part of the play was the discussion period following the performance, which encouraged the audience to respond to the issues it raised.

After wrapping up *Coming in Hot*, Simpson started work on a new piece, based on the life of another woman whose life is largely unknown to modern audiences: Mary Dyer, a wife and mother who became the first colonial woman to be executed, hanged in Boston in 1660 for the crime of being a Quaker. Creating the character of Mary Dyer drew on Simpson's old love of researching historical figures and finding themes in their lives that resonate today. The resulting play, *Mary's Joy* explores questions of women's identity, dedication to convictions and non-violent resistance.

Mary's Joy premiered in readings in February 2011, followed predictably by controversy. Members of audiences in venues ranging from Quaker meeting halls to small theaters accused Mary of selfishness, of committing a sort of 17th-century "suicide by cop," of abandoning her family for a vague set of principles. Simpson added those ideas to the play's text, placing them in the mouths of characters such as Mary's son. "You have to give the devil his due," Simpson says. "You have to respect the truth." And the truth of the story, in Simpson's view, contains the message she wants the audience to hear.

Although Simpson creates challenging work that invites dialogue and discussion – and sometimes harsh criticism – she's uncompromising about her vision of both the story and the message. "She's fierce, unabashed about using her art to change the world," says Shannon Cain, and Simpson agrees. For her, the story comes first, the message second: "You have to engage people, draw them in, give them something real – then slip the message in."

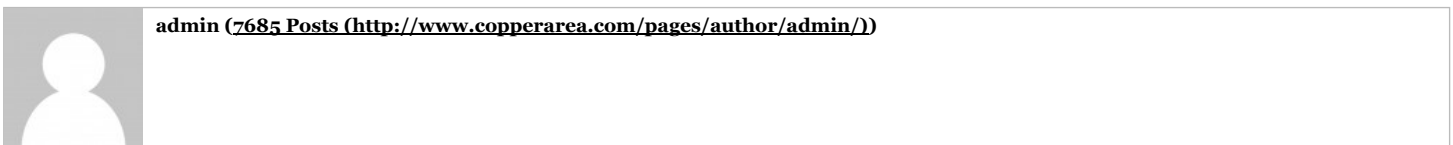
But Simpson makes sure that, although the story trumps the message in her work, the message of peace is heard. Simpson's brother, Scott, tells of a time when he arranged a performance of *Coming In Hot* at a community college in Seattle. On the night he attended, he was soundly disappointed. Although his sister was in costume, she simply stood onstage and read the text. But he learned that previous performances had been different: the discussions after the show were focused far more on the impact of Simpson's performance than on the message of the play. So, the director had Simpson tone down her performance in order to keep the story front and center. "Her craft, her exquisite art, the sickeningly difficult craft which she has so completely mastered, lost the fight inside my sister when offered as an alternative to the message of peace," says Scott. ("That's HIS version," says Simpson.)

But Scott Simpson isn't the only family member to be touched by Simpson's dedication to her "exquisite art" and changed by her activism. Having a son in military service during wartime may have had the most direct impact on her trajectory toward peace work, but the path of Simpson's commitment to peace has been shaped by other members of her family as well.

Married four times, Simpson is the mother of three and the grandmother of one. Photographs of her loved ones dot Simpson's website: sons Domenic and Donald Paul Stockton, daughter Emily Harbaugh, and Domenic's son Casey Joel, along with running updates on their lives. Although Simpson admits, "it was never easy being my child," daughter Emily says growing up with a mother in theater introduced the children to "a lot of magical times," says Emily. "She was a magical mother."

Simpson's children embrace their mother's activism; eldest son Domenic worked on the crew of her off-Broadway Culture Project performances of *A Single Woman*, and second son Donald Paul, who remains connected to the military as a Naval reservist, wrote an endorsement of her activism for the launch of her show *Coming in Hot*. "My mother is a pacifist and a peace activist," he writes, "and I wouldn't have it any other way."

These days, Simpson continues to present *Mary's Joy* in readings, while hoping to create a true video version of the play for a wider distribution than touring allows. After a stint in Colorado as co-founder of a second activist theater, she's back in Tucson, where *A Single Woman* closed and *Coming in Hot* had its premiere. For the girl from Ray, Arizona, the twin paths of art and activism have become one, aimed at making change in the world – one story at a time.



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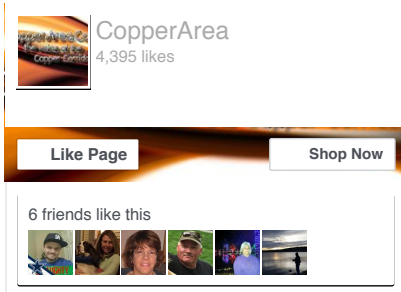
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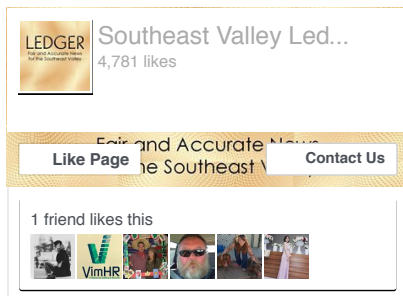
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