

INTERVIEW WITH SHERRY GRECZMIEL
Producer, Falcon Theatre – Burbank, California
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Sherry's diverse career includes working across the United States and overseas as an actress, singer, dancer and choreographer. As her career progressed she gained expertise in a variety of areas including stage and production management and designing costumes, scenery and more. She has been a producer at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank, California for a number of years and has been named Executive Director as the Falcon Theatre transitions into The Garry Marshall Theatre in honor of the late, great Garry Marshall.

Steve Taft: Where are you from originally?

Sherry Greczmiel: I'm from Omaha, Nebraska. I lived there until I moved to Springfield [Missouri] for college.

ST: Why did you select SMSU [now known as Missouri State University] to pursue your education?

SG: My first professional production was in Omaha while I was in high school (*Jesus Christ Superstar*) and I became great friends with somebody in the cast who was from Ralston, Nebraska which is outside of Omaha, and he and some of his Ralston friends were going to college at SMS and I said, "I'll go take a look." I liked that it was far enough away from home and close enough to home that you could drive home for a holiday weekend. And also I liked visiting the campus. I thought the campus was so charming and everybody was so nice and then learning more about the theatre program and discovering how good it was. I had scholarships and offers at bigger universities, but I was worried about getting experience. Some of those places you don't get on stage as a freshman. Sometimes you don't get on stage as a sophomore and I wanted to get on stage right away. I wasn't even in dance that much when I first started, but I loved the blended department of theatre and dance because that was something that interested me as well. So, I liked the campus and it was nice to know I would know somebody when I got there. None of my high school friends were going there and also it wasn't going to break the bank for my parents or for me to go there.

ST: So, graduation comes . . . what was your first foray out into the professional world?

SG: While I was there I was also in the Education Department. I got two degrees simultaneously. So, I was there five years. I started in '81 and graduated in '86. I did five years and I got a BFA in Dance and a BS in Education to teach high school Speech and Theatre. At the

time they were giving lifetime teaching certificates. My high school drama teacher had been such a big influence on me I thought I would like to do what she did, but I really enjoyed performance and I thought I'd perform as long as I could and always teach in-between or after . . . so I was ready for whatever might come my way.

So, I went to some of those regional auditions, Southeastern Theatre Conference, Mid-West Theatre Conference and those sorts of things. They use to have Straw Hat . . . but, you audition once for many different theatres and producers and you get call-backs on the same day and I got booked for a year of employment at different places. The first year I took a larger contract oddly enough at Bush Gardens in Tampa Bay. So, one of my first jobs out of college was for a theme park. I did a six-month contract and I did extend it for two months, so I did that for eight months. I had a great time and got into the best shape of my life singing and dancing in a forty-five minute show multiple-times-a-day in a big new state-of-the-art theatre with special effects and everything. It was a grander theatre (than our college) so that was fun. And then I got out into the real world of theatre and I would do theatre in different places. I did dinner theatre, I did small regional theatre, I got on the road and was a real theatre gypsy, acting and also singing and dancing in musicals and plays and I enjoyed that for as long as I could.

ST: Let me ask about your acting. What's your personal approach or methodology? How do you approach a role?

SG: I would read the script and read it again, and read it again and go to what is in the text. Start with the text and do all the research within the text and then start building from there. I like to get feedback from directors before I go too far, because you also don't want to pre-prepare in one direction and then show up at rehearsals and it's in a different direction. And I worked at a lot of theatres initially that would often have a very short rehearsal period. They'd throw together a show very quickly, whereas you'd have a long languid rehearsal period in college and in some theatres you have that luxury, so learning to work quickly and come prepared was really important.

You know, I will say that one thing I didn't miss in my college preparation though . . . I loved at SMS in particular, that you were encouraged and had to serve time in all these different departments. You got exposure in all areas. You couldn't just say, "I'm going to be an actor. I'm only going to do acting." You had to do everything. And I was also working my way through college, especially those last few years. So, I would do work study in the scene shop and I worked in the costume shop. I was costume shop foreman for a year and that sort of thing. Even just supervising and being in that kind of work environment as well, learning those crafts and having different positions on different shows . . . running props, designing sound, designing lights, doing all those different things along the way really paid off because even now when you get out into the real world, if you're not making enough money on an acting job, you could teach some dance classes on the side. I did some design work on the side, designing costumes or I would build something for somebody. So, those other skills came into play and enhanced or informed my entire experience in a show, so you'd have a better appreciation of the big picture and how you fit in.

ST: When did you decide to move to L.A.?

SG: Well, that came after a long time. I just moved out to L.A. seventeen years ago and before that I lived in a lot of different places. The last place I was living before California was Florida. At the time there had been a lot of different theatres in Florida and Florida's a state where you could drive across state for an audition and come home the same day, so you could audition in all kinds of different places if you were willing to pick up and go. So, I worked in a lot of places in Florida and was last working there before moving out here and just moved out here with a friend and just wanting to up the game and move to a bigger pond kind of thing . . .

ST: It is a big pond.

SG: It is a big pond. One thing I wanted to say is I love that I got all that experience (in college), but at that time way back in the eighties, in the early half of the eighties in college, we didn't quite prepare for the auditions. Like we didn't prepare on how to get a job . . . I know that such a big part now of training . . . working on monologue study and scene study and the business of the business. Because when I got out into the real world, yes, they said, "You have to get head shots and resumes and put them together and all that." Now it's different in the digital age, but just marketing yourself and becoming self- proactive about marketing and attending and preparing for auditions and picking appropriate material, editing appropriate material. I had the good fortune of being on the other side of the table quite a bit in that transition, so I learned a lot and I was better able to do my job. I was a choreographer, I would be an assistant director early on so I could be in the auditions and see what people were doing and do a better job of auditioning [myself]. But, that's what I did. I'd audition maybe once or twice a year and work for a whole year. And while I was in Florida I moved a little more into stage management. I saw some stage managers that were working all the time at one place rather than actors that were picking up and going different places and thought, "Wouldn't that be nice? I'm organized. I could do what they're doing." So I started doing a little stage management that led to bigger productions that led to production management. So, when I moved out to L.A. I had already been a production manager and I moved out and actually stage managed at some of the large musical theatre venues in the area like McCoy Rigby productions and Reprise and Hollywood Bowl (which most people may have heard of that don't live out here), but I stage managed some of the larger contracts in town for the first year I was out here and then I landed a job at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank which was just a couple of blocks from where I lived. So, I was happy not to be driving all over greater L.A.

ST: So, you come to the Falcon Theatre. How did that opportunity arise and how did you convince them to give you the job and now, you're one of the producers. You've worn so many hats throughout your career. You're the perfect person to chat with and share your thoughts with students.

SG: I love to give advice to younger people to try everything because you don't know that you may fall in love with some other aspect of it and other aspects of theatre, aside from

performing were scratching my creative itch too. I've directed, choreographed, done sets, lights, props, costumes all of those different elements, I've produced. So, there are lots of different opportunities and now running the theatre, there's marketing and other jobs that may not directly show up on stage but are still very vital to the success of a production.

Now, another reason I say to try everything is you'll meet a lot of people and it's the people that get you jobs. I auditioned for those bigger things and I would get jobs and one job leads to another and leads to another, so there were several years where I never had to audition and one job would lead to another or I would get a job somewhere else based on them seeing me in a show. Same thing with management. So, what happened was I performed in *Will Roger Follies* in Indianapolis, Indiana, in this great show with this great cast and the roper who was hired especially for the show was great fun and when I moved out to L.A. I came out first just to take a look at the place and see where I might want to live when I move out here and I asked him, "Can I sleep on your sofa?" And after I moved here I met his roommate and his roommate got me hired at the Falcon Theatre and I said, "That's funny, that Falcon is just a couple of blocks from where I live. Wouldn't that be nice? I'm driving all over town for these jobs I have." And he mentioned that to his roommate and his roommate said, "Oh my gosh, I think I could use Sherry at the Falcon." He knew me and he knew of me and knew my work and so he brought me in for an interview with a position in mind and I was very happy to do it. And I interviewed and I met the owner, Garry Marshall and interviewed with him and he gave the thumbs up and before you knew it I was hired. I'd only been out in L.A. for just over a year and I was hired at the Falcon as Production Manager and the person, the Managing Director who brought me in, had just been here a month or two himself and he moved on after a few years. We had another person in his place and I moved up and I moved into the Producer position.

ST: They say when the door is cracked open and you step in whether or not you stay depends on your personality and the capabilities to do the job and obviously you have the qualities that Garry Marshall was looking for. What was that like? Garry Marshall is a legend.

SG: He's an icon.

ST: You don't get any bigger than Garry Marshall. From the outside I think the impression people have always had is that he was this wonderfully generous human being and giving of himself and his humor and he likes to make people laugh and enjoy life.

SG: That's perfect. That's a perfect description of him. It's a little family run business. He built the theatre with his daughter Kathleen. She oversaw the building of the theatre in 1997 and they were doing rentals and things like that and after I came on board and the managing director came on board a season and a schedule was suggested to build a season subscription and your patrons could buy five plays at a discounted rate and we could produce plays year round. So, we put that into play less than a year after I started here. We had our first subscription season and now we're finishing our 15th season. It's been very successful. But the great thing about meeting Garry is he is who he appears to be. He's very generous. He's very loyal and believes in hiring friends and family and he rewards people and moves them up and

that's a great way of fostering very loyal workers. Everybody works really hard to please him because he's fun to work for. He has a great appreciation for all the arts, not just theatre. He directed an opera while I was here to open the season for the L.A. Opera. He's directed films (I got to have a couple of bit parts and got to do a voice-over for one of his films), he's done television and not only produced but guest starred in so many television shows. Even just the film sets, they would have a day when they would do a whole parade and we'd all be invited from the theatre to come to the set and do this fun nonsensical parade with all of the cast and crew. So, he was very generous in that way.

It's just a small mom and pop business where commercial theatre, which is really unusual most theatres that are small are typically non-profit so you can take donations and get grants and have beneficiaries, but Garry didn't want to ask people for money. He just wanted them to buy a ticket if they wanted to see the play. He just wanted to make stuff for them to come and see. So, he built the building and hired the staff and we produced plays where people would leave smiling, and that was his goal. He was successful at that and we were able to sell tickets to pay for the productions and so on, so I would consider that a success to still be around.

ST: I would think the Falcon Theatre has built a pretty loyal subscription base over the years and you've talked about transitioning to a non-profit organization. I would think that as far as fundraising, given where you are and the history behind the theatre, I would think people would want to continue supporting the theatre in terms of preserving Garry's legacy.

SG: Yes, especially the inaugural season. As you know our founder Garry Marshall passed away last July [2016] and left a big hole. He was 81, but he was so busy. His calendar was busier than mine. He had his hands in lots of projects so a lot was left behind. But one of the things he said, was "A year after I pass away you can name the theatre after me." So we said, "Of course." So we're going to dedicate the theatre and rename it The Garry Marshall Theatre and we're building a non-profit so the theatre can continue without Garry's help with the overhead. He owned the building and everything and so his family owns the building and we're forming a board, changing over to a non-profit at the close of this seasons show. So, that is a lot. It's a lot to take on with this transition. We've brought on a couple of Artistic Directors and I'll be the Executive Director helping them with their vision. We're in lots of meetings right now and starting out making budgets and plans and trying to select a season and a board and the fundraising. At Garry's memorial, which I have to say was the most amazing memorial I've ever been at, his son was the MC and he was channeling Garry I think. It was so wonderfully done. It was a celebration and the speakers, you just wouldn't imagine all the celebrities that got up and spoke about Garry. His family has a history at Northwestern University with buildings named after them and the memorial ended with the Northwestern Marching Band so that was really fun. Here's Bette Midler singing a song from *Beaches* which just had everybody weeping and then they end with the band. (*Laughter*) The Marching Band left with everyone's toes tapping and it was such a great celebration and that's when they made the announcement, to those people first, that they will be renaming the theatre The Garry Marshall Theatre and we'd be turning into a non-profit and we'll be doing that next summer or fall. All of those people have kind of been on hold and saying "How can I help?" So, we're going to try and tap into all of

those people and inviting them to be part of the legacy of Garry Marshall and this inaugural season.

ST: I imagine the theatre could build an impressive endowment.

SG: We sure hope so. We'd love to do some cosmetic things, but we can't bite off more than we can choose either. We need to be sure that we've set ourselves up for success. So, I'm hoping we can achieve our goals both short-term and long-term. So, there's lots and lots of planning happening right now and it will all happen very soon.

What I noticed with Garry's passing was that everybody had a personal story of Garry. Like Garry would come up to you and talk to you in the lobby. He made everybody feel special whenever he was talking with them. We have a memorial book in the lobby that people are signing. Everybody has a personal story about something they shared with Garry.

ST: Being an idealist it's my hope students will discover that there is something so rewarding about being a good person. One question I've been asking is in regards to the personal qualities that someone looks for whether it's at an audition or becoming an employee of an organization.

SG: I think the best advice I can give to anybody is to be nice to work with. My boss, the late, great Garry Marshall always said, "I like nice." That was one of his sayings. He would rather work with somebody that was nice and fun to work with rather with someone that might be great, but might have an ego, is not compatible, doesn't work well with others, doesn't play nice. I think that carries over into every aspect of life from the job. I actually carry it beyond that. I think you are so much more successful if you can demonstrate that you can work well with others, give your best, work your hardest and get along. The working atmosphere in a room is just as important as the work done. That may not be true in all professions, but in the theatre especially, everyone works so closely together. In the performing arts as a whole and Garry in his films and TV and in dance, all of those arts, you're working intimately together so it's even more important. As a producer where we hire the cast, crew, designers and directors for every production, we think about the makeup of those individuals. How is this director going to get along with these designers? How are these actors going to interact with each other? How are the actors going to interact with the stage manager? Management is so important. How is the box office? How are they treating our patrons? How are they treating their co-workers? So, it really is about consideration for others every step of the way.

I love the background of being from the mid-west. Mid-west people have a certain value they bring to the table automatically. I can tell sometimes when somebody comes in from the mid-west, perhaps because I'm from the mid-west and they're not an east-coaster or west-coaster, not that there's anything wrong with them, (*laughter*) but there already is a hard-working, honest value to that that is helpful in any work situation. Getting along with others is something to aspire to.

ST: What haven't I asked of you or about you that you think is important for people (students in particular) to know?

SG: In the real world you need to be ready to check your ego at the door. You need to be ready to do a variety of different things. You may have an expectation that you're going to be an actor and you're going to do this and you're just going to be on an actor track. But the actors I know that succeed have other irons in the fire as well. So, it's great to get have training or have experience . . . or at least try something different because you may not know what you like. I know so many actors and dancers that are massage therapists on the side and there's a certain reward from that. Or people that design on the sign or are photographers and shoot headshots and they have a sideline business. You need to be able to supplement your income because most of the jobs in the arts are temporary jobs and you're moving from job to job. You need to know how to market yourself and you have to know how to cover your down time. There truly are down times when you're applying for unemployment between gigs. It's not that you're poor and you can't work at McDonalds, but you have to have time to show up at auditions and apply for jobs. So, when you're between jobs its best if you have something you can self-support . . . you can teach a dance class, you can teach a workshop. You can help out with a light hang at a local theatre, you can help out building a set and when they have crew call. All those things will help you to network and meeting other people is what will lead you to new jobs and new opportunities. There's just a bigger, brighter world out there. So, don't close yourself off and specialize and make yourself available only to one track. Make sure you're willing to spread out. It will make you a better actor, it will make you a better director or designer and it will make you a better person.

ST: You mentioned Indianapolis earlier. Was that at Beef and Boards Dinner Theatre?

SG: Yes.

ST: Guess who's there now? David Schmittou, he's doing *My Fair Lady*.

SG: Yes, I know, with Doug King, a great friend. Doug King and I seemed to be dance partners in every show and we're all such great friends. I knew him before and Eddie Curry who started there as an actor and moved into management and now he's running the place. That's so funny. For awhile Beef and Boards Dinner Theatre was like my second home. I would go and do a few shows and then go away and come back. I use to be called the cruise director because I would organize all of the social activities for the cast and crew. It was one of those places where a lot people would come in from out of town. One of things I found out coming out here is that everyone goes home, you're doing a play but most people live here so they all go home. But when you're from out of town, you're doing summer stock or a regional play, something like that and everyone's coming in . . .

ST: They have company housing.

SG: Yeah, there's company housing and you're part of the social group and you're looking to go out together. So, we'd have bowling nights and we'd have pizza nights. We'd plan road rallies (now there's a whole television show . . . *The Amazing Race*), we'd have all kinds of fun activities that we'd do there every production.

ST: Where did you get this interest or inner drive to learn all of these different things that you've done throughout your career? Is it just part of your personal characteristics, personality or upbringing?

SG: Well . . . I would say . . . you know, I was in my first play in 3rd grade and was writing plays in 4th grade and I wrote plays in 5th grade that my teachers let me cast. In 5th grade we were studying explorers, so I wrote a plays about each explorer and with each play I had to eventually use everybody in the class in one way or another and so we put on all these plays and I was always doing things like that in the neighborhood or what have you and just one thing led to another. I had a lot of creative friends and I did girl scouts . . . I did all the extra-curricular activities . . . I was a cheerleader . . . but things like girl scouts would take you away from home and you're camping or you're backpacking or you're doing things that challenge you and that make you think outside-the-box and see the bigger picture. So, having teachers and parents and friends encouraging you to try new things, I was just fortunate to have that.

In high school I use to think I'd like to run a theatre. I was thinking more about just having a theatre and now I am running a theatre, so you don't know in what ways your dreams can come true. It doesn't have to be Broadway. Even when I was performing as an actress in the professional world and I was performing alongside people that had been on Broadway, it was never my aspiration to move to New York City. I didn't want to live in New York City. Nice place to visit don't get me wrong, but I didn't want to live there and I didn't want to do the things you need to do to be on Broadway. I wouldn't have turned it down if it had fallen in my lap of course, but that just wasn't my goal and it doesn't have to be everyone's goal to do feature film or to be on Broadway. You don't have to be the pinnacle to make a good living or to have a good life style. For awhile I enjoyed that my work was letting me travel. I went to Japan, Taiwan, Hawaii and Alaska with shows. I traveled to other places and all around the country doing shows or tours and that was such a great opportunity. I would take advantage and be a professional tourist and sightsee in every city I went to because you never knew when you'd be back. I've been to 48 states now and I think it's such a great opportunity and I got that through work. That's wonderful to do, but there came a point when I said, "I just want to have a home. I just want to be able to sit down at night and go home and have the same job." That's when I started to move into stage management and production management. It's nice to have that home life. I did know people on the road that have really solid marriages or had kids and would take them on the road. It's not impossible. But there are compromises and challenges. I actually married someone right out of college, Mark Santillano. We were married 7 years and we were both on the road. We started out doing a lot of the same jobs and we got to perform together so many times and it was wonderful. But then we started being in different states and different places and pretty soon we're seeing each other one weekend a month or he would have to give up a job to be with me or I would have to give up a job to go on tour with him. It wasn't about

egos or about the jobs it was really “Where are we going?” So, in the end it’s OK to say, “I want to have as many work opportunities as I can get.” There’s nothing wrong with that and we both took the freedom to do that. But I do think there’s also that flip side. It’s OK to be a homebody and work in smaller theatres and regional theatre and have steadier jobs. They are out there in the performing arts.

ST: Tell me a bit about your husband, Mark Greczmiel.

SG: My husband does television. He was in Sacramento for a long time at the NBC affiliate as the Entertainment reporter. So he would do junkets and interview. He interviewed Garry Marshall and we had lots of connections by the time we met (we’ve been married 7 years). He did television news and television documentaries. He did *E-True Hollywood Stories* for the E Network and he’s worked for TV Guide and different networks. He’s now an Independent Contractor and you have to know how to sell yourself. He was in between jobs and he took the time to do his own documentary, a passion project about the California Seals, a hockey team which was an expansion team in the NHL. So, he went around the country and Canada interviewing all these great guys and he did it all himself. Now he’s going to a film festival, he won an award and it’s for sale on I-Tunes.

ST: You mentioned your second degree is in Education and it’s not unusual for all of us to have had mentors. Did you have any specific mentors at Missouri State and if so what was it about that person’s personality or interaction with you that made it special?

SG: Oh my gosh! There were many. It wasn’t just one. Howard Orms, such a great man. He was the grandfather figure or father figure when it came to acting. I loved Linda Park-Fuller. We did a production that we took to Chicago and it was great to have it shown at a festival in Chicago and go up there with her, and (Bob) Bradley was our Department Head at the time and was always great for a good conversation. Byrne Blackwood (design professor), and it was so great in the tech department. And Dan (Warrick), we lost Dan shortly thereafter. Dan was really a mentor because I had worked in the scene shop for three years and he was closer to students in age as other faculty were quite mature. But, above all I think Chyrel Miller because she was “Mom” to so many people starting out. She took more kids under her wing and helped foster them beyond class work. It wasn’t just about the curriculum. She helped a lot of people navigate as they became adults in college and one day living with their parents and then living on their own and not messing up too much.
