

Marjorie Gast Interview – October 2020

Marjorie Gast is an actor, singer, and harpist, newly based in Chicago. She has performed with several theatres around the country from the Mississippi Bend Players in Rock Island, Illinois all the way to the B Street Theatre in Sacramento, California. She is a Theatre Performance graduate from the University of Northern Iowa.



ST - First of all, how are you doing?

MG - That's kind of a loaded question, just because life is so unpredictable right now, not only as a human but also as an artist. But something I've been learning is that feeling of I don't have an exact plan or path, but we've kind of always have been in that, this kind of uncertainty, but this feels a lot more prevalent and apparent right now and that's a little bit eye-opening, a little bit daunting, and a little bit comforting at the same time.

ST - Obviously the pandemic has affected not only your career, but thousands of actors in the U.S. and around the world since theatres shut down. What have you done to continue staying sharp regarding your many talents and staying positive?

MG - For the first month or so I was living in California as I was completing my internship (at the B Street Theatre in Sacramento) and I was kind of devastated because I didn't quite know how to proceed doing art or doing things that would allow me to think about my future because it was like, "What is the future? I don't know." But, after that point I just started reading plays. I was reading a play-a-week which was really great, because who shouldn't want to read a play-a-week and I was finding monologues not only for me, but for friends. I moved back to Cedar Falls and in with my parents once again and I was also doing a lot researching and going through all my notebooks and notes from UNI. I was going over stuff I had written as a freshman, sophomore, junior and senior and I just kind of discovered how I've matured and the way I approach roles. So, it's been less me working on material and me working on my acting and more me settling into "Wow, I've grown, this is the way I've shifted and I didn't even know I shifted."

ST - It's my understanding that you've been developing an expertise in yoga and teaching it online. How might such an experience be a valuable undertaking for an actor during this time?

MG - I think it's valuable not only for artists but human beings in general and to have resources to cope. I'm currently a 200hr Certified Yoga Instructor with a specialization in Trauma. During this downtime I've been able to pursue further training because of Yoga Alliance. It's kind of like the Actor's Equity of yoga. Fortunately, they are allowing online virtual training and because of the pandemic the Alliance is allowing online contact hours. That's allowing me to complete my training very soon. I will have completed my 500 hours over the last nearly three years. It's like

getting a Master's Degree in teaching yoga. I've taken a ton of classes starting last April which I wouldn't have been able to do if things had been different.

But, back to your question. People don't breathe and too often don't breathe on stage and one of the most important things (as Stanislavsky says) is concentration and relaxation, and yoga promotes those two things over anything else. So, if you can be concentrated and relaxed why not do yoga to bolster that? And as an actor, as an artist why wouldn't you?

ST - And of course if the actor is focused and relaxed there's a good chance they'll also be listening.

MG - Yes, it's stimulating that parasympathetic nervous system, that place where you can be restful and where all of your body functions don't have to think about doing their job. So, if the actor can get to that place where they are relaxed and everything is working in harmony with each other then you are able to say, "This person is standing in front of me, what are they giving to me as an actor and how am I going to respond to that?" There's so much more openness and empathy I think.

ST - Setting the pandemic aside, taking that big step to pursue an acting career is sometimes a big challenge for a new graduate. How did you prepare to take that step while in college and what has been your process to building a career?

MG - My senior year my big focus was to look at the tools I had gained over the first three years of my training and continue to refine those tools during my senior year. But now that I have those foundational tools how do they apply not only to where I am at as an actor, but also as a person and what tools work for me specifically? It was definitely figuring out at that moment what I wanted to have in my tool belt.

And another huge thing was creating a giant spread sheet, physically making a spreadsheet on my wall, I had it all the way down my door actually. Over the course of three or four different months I wrote down all the auditions I wanted to go too, all the big cattle calls. I wasn't able to attend all of them because I was still in school, but I made that list (in a journal as well) of all the requirements for each audition and down to how do you slate at each specifically. I would google image the place I was going to audition and what the auditorium would look like because it's going to be different if I'm singing this little intimate song in this giant huge theatre. Maybe that's not the song I should sing for this audition. So, I got to personalize my actor package. I don't know why I did all this stuff, probably because I'm a bit of "Type A" personality, but also, I believe that if you are fully prepared you can face whatever unexpected stuff comes your way with more grace and less stress.

ST - Now, you auditioned for summer stock pretty much from the beginning, right?

MG - Yes. I started my freshman year and continued through my senior year. Each one I learned something more. My first one I was like, "I have my monologue, I have my song memorized, I know what outfit I'm wearing. I'm feeling good." And it was a very different experience. It was like, "Oh, I learned that you need to rehearse how you talk to your pianist." You learn all these little things. You basically have to do it once and then go and do it the next

year and then take that information and do it the next year, because by the last year I didn't even have to think about it. "This is who I am, this is my package. I don't really care if you like me or not because I feel strong in what I'm doing." So, that changed and it was really empowering.

ST - Do you have specific auditions you would recommend to students?

MG - They were all very different. I think TCUTA's in the Twin Cities is a little different because they've been including a group improv session. That audition seems to be very relaxed, but still very professional. Just less cutthroat than SETC. Perhaps that's because there's less people, it's more intimate and less busy. It's a good one for the heart.

ST - That's the audition we often recommend for the student just starting out in regards to auditioning for summer opportunities.

MG - I would agree. It was a welcoming environment. Midwest (MATC) is kind of like the big brother of the Twin Cities Auditions. It's run kind of the same way. Except the dance auditions are like, "you want to be a dancer". Now, if you're an actor that moves well and can learn dance moves don't feel bad about that. At that point it's like, "I know I can hit these six marks in the song. I know I can stay focused and I know I can tell a story with my body". As long as they can see that they will think, "OK, this person tries. Maybe they won't be our lead dancer, but maybe they'll be our lead singer or maybe they can play a non-singing role", whatever. I would recommend having an open mind in regards to dance auditions at Midwest.

They are also very, very specific on time, so you will get cut off. I was never cut-off, but I was always under time. Always. I don't think people were cut off at Twin Cities, but Midwest, SETC and UPTA's, definitely. SETC and UPTA's are basically the same. A huge number of actors. It's really exhilarating when you feel you did a good job. You have to wait in line for what feels like an eternity for your 90 seconds. You drive 9 hours to get there, you're so tired and are thinking, "I have an exam in 48 hours." But, you pull out your strong suit and do it. Fortunately, I got 14 callbacks in my last round at SETC and I'm not kidding you, I was sweating running from room to room to room in combination of the convention center and the hotel. You have your five minutes and it's on to the next one. Just be prepared because it's going to feel crazy, but there's not one person there that doesn't feel crazy.

ST - Has there ever been a time when another actor in your group did a monologue you had selected?

MG - I personally had not had a repeat monologue or song. A big thing I try to do is to pick things that are not going to be done. I don't want to be that person where another follows up and does it slightly different and someone else says, "I like that better." Not that they were better, but in that moment that person thought it was more interesting the way the other person did it. But, the amount of time people do the "Tuna Fish" monologue (from *Laughing Wild*), people need to stop doing it. Or *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Just stop it, because you want to be fresh and unique as you only have around 90 seconds to make an impression.

ST - And of course the way young actors can avoid such duplication is to read plays, become familiar with the history of American musical theatre and the wonderful array of music that is available.

MG - Yes. Over the past three months I've been working with three different high school students over Zoom. I directed them while I was in college so I've seen them develop over the years and now they're ready to go to college. So, I've been working with them and first of all you learn so much by just speaking out loud a process of acting. In my heart I knew all these things and I've shared them with some people and when I've directed I've shared them, but when you're one-on-one with a student for the first time you're getting to explain what "actions" are and what the "given circumstances" of a play are, it makes me feel special and honored to be in that moment. I remember my first experience and being like, "actions" it makes so much sense. So, my big thing is read plays. I keep giving them plays each week. Read plays you don't know. Read plays that have characters you can't be cast in. Don't read plays just because you think you can find a monologue for yourself. It's like reading a book or a novel, but so much shorter and easier. I also tell them to read the play all the way through in one sitting so they can begin forming thoughts on how they think it might end. When we watch a play, it's Act 1 and Act 2 and then it's done. We don't watch Act 1 and then a day later it's Act 2. Know what you like. At B Street Theatre I got to play characters that I couldn't relate to, but I'm a professional and that's my job. But, when you're 18, 19 and auditioning, you primarily need choose material that you like so you can do a strong audition.

ST - Speaking of material, how many monologues and/or songs do you have in your audition repertoire?

MG - (*Laughter as Marjorie holds up a three-ring binder full of material*). This contains all of the monologues that I always bring with me. It's all the ones I've found myself and all the ones I've done in shows. Now, most of these I can pull out of thin air and be ready to go, some I may have to rework. But, if I look one over for ten minutes I can pretty much do it. And when you have a lot of callbacks, you want this (binder) because every one of those callbacks may want something different. Some companies may hold an interview. Some may want to see a comedic monologue. Some want to hear you "belt". Some may want to hear how high you can sing. So, you have to have a little bit of everything. Luckily when you sign-up for your callback time there may be a note that says specifically what they want to see (a contemporary monologue for example). Having a contrasting piece is important as well as a classical piece, most likely Shakespeare because that's what they mostly ask for if they're going to be doing a classical show.

ST - As you read the many plays that you do, do you come across a character in which you say to yourself, "I perhaps won't play this character today, but in ten or fifteen years I'll be perfect." And do you save that for the future?

MG - More often than not, yes. And as tell my students, going back from high school to senior year in college, I have acting journals and I can look back and see a monologue I did for a class or for a show or if it's improv, you can recall such things if you have a journal. So, I have a journal right over there that may say, "I'm not 35 or 40, but one day I will be someday." Like

Mary Page Marlowe by Tracy Letts. I want to do that show so bad, but I'm not the age of her right now.

ST – I imagine you discover favorite playwrights as well.

MG - One of the playwrights I love right now is Sarah Treem. She's very cool and Julia Specht. Julia wrote this play called, *Overpass* and I can't get over how amazing it is. I've read it through four times. I have both character monologues in my back pocket and I love her plays. It's on New Play Exchange.

ST - You've been recording some video monologues. Are they for a specific audition or theatre?

MG - Chicago Shakespeare Theater was recently accepting monologue auditions for whenever they open again. It was really interesting because I've been doing a lot of research (because what else can we do, but research), on what kind of auditions theatres are asking for these days. I by-pass all the Zoom plays/theaters for now and go straight to live theatre. And it's like, "When we open up we're going to be doing these plays so we're taking these virtual submissions now." They seem to be a lot less strict it seems. It's really interesting.

ST - As we wrap up, what advice do you have for students while they're here at UNI?

MG - Soak in as much as you can. Don't put so much pressure on yourself. It was a time for me to discover who I was because you can't really dive into another person, another human being, another character if you don't address how you exist in the world. That doesn't mean you have to go really deep into your past, it's just "How do I need to breathe?" "What's my system of memorization?" "Who's teaching do I relate to the most? Is it like, Meisner or Chekov?" Or maybe it doesn't have to do anything with theatre? Maybe it's a yoga instructor, whatever it is. Find that thing that makes you feel really grounded and who you are so that you have empathy and are open to another person you are portraying.

ST - Thank you for spending time with me today and sharing your experiences and advice for those students pursuing similar dreams and aspirations.
