



Artist As Leader: Lisa Wolpe

Lisa Wolpe is not only one of this country's finest Shakespearean actors, specializing in playing the Bard's male characters. The founder of the Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company and its artistic director for 23 years until she decided to fold it in 2016, she has also become an internationally renowned Shakespeare scholar and now teaches in universities all over the world while also touring her one-woman show, "Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender."

She spoke with Rob Kramer and Pier Carlo Talenti from her home in Santa Monica. She had returned only two weeks earlier from North Carolina, where she'd been playing Cassius in a production of "Julius Caesar" at Playmakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill until the production was cut short due to the spread of Covid-19.

In this interview she discusses the passion for truth and justice that has steered her through her career as an actor, director and producer. She also imagines the kind of arts leadership and creative spirit that will guide artists and their audiences to a changed artistic landscape on the other side of the pandemic.

Rob Kramer: Tell us how you became the artist leader you are today.

Lisa Wolpe: I've been leading groups of people ever since I was a kid. I guess when I finally got into high school with California kid culture and I stared at it quietly for my freshman year, I then decided to just get involved in everything. I had been in Europe for a few years, and I wasn't really understanding American culture. I just observed it from the outside. Then I started to look at what was happening. The opportunities were going to people who stepped forward. So I ended up volunteering for everything. I was editor of the paper for four years. I played volleyball. I was chief justice of the student court. And I got into theater.

We had pep rallies for the sports teams, which my brother was playing on, and nobody could think of anything to do for the pep rallies. So I started to write skits and put together rehearsals and put on shows, even when I was 15 in high school.

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That whole growth toward being a leader, being an editor of the paper, related directly to being artistic director of a company: bringing groups of people together, creating a situation where people are eloquent about their opinions and what they were put on this earth to do — the kind of upliftment that comes with having relationships with other like-minded people, the happiness I feel when I find someone that I can talk with and students that I can educate and teachers that I can learn from and artists that can design with me. I've found I'm a very strong-minded woman, and I don't have a problem seeing things in full-vision form, but certainly in order to effect anything as an artist in the theater, you have to be more than one person.

So my whole life has sort of led me toward a depth of inquiry and then building a model to reach other people, the audience or the readership or the colleagues.

Rob: Can you identify moments in your artistic experience or your training when things started to really come together and you said, “Oh, OK. I really see myself as an artist leader here, and I see how I’m applying my skillset in a holistic way.” Was there a light-bulb moment for you at any point, or was it a continual evolution?

Lisa: It’s certainly been an evolution. I think about four years ago, there was a seismic shift in my understanding of where I was positioned. I started working a lot in Europe and in London — I taught at five different universities as a guest artist — and I kept finding that all of the M.A. students were writing on gender and Shakespeare and they were mostly writing about me and my work, whereas when I was working for 20 years in LA, before we had the internet, I felt that I was working alone. The idea that in the last four years my work on gender and Shakespeare and cross-gender performance and diverse inclusivity and casting parity has come into a worldwide trend which did not exist when I was a kid My idea of being the Sisyphus who would push this rock up and maybe get crushed by it as it rolled back down has now shifted because now I’m actually hanging out with Michelle Terry at the Globe and talking about projects.

It’s not like I’m super famous or have a bunch of money, but at least I have access to all of the coolest Shakespeare people in the hugely interconnected international world of Shakespeare lovers. At a certain point, after 40 years, you end up knowing a bunch of people, knowing a lot more about the text and how to play it and direct it and knowing a lot more about how to be a leader, and it’s not so intimidating anymore.

As a person who ended up being a Shakespeare geek who’s a queer woman, I’ve pretty much spent an entire lifetime being positioned against any idea that there’s any opportunity for me in the field. And I’ve absolutely created a fabulous, interesting, passionate life around Shakespeare that sustains me every single day of my life. I’m not

bored with it, and it's been over 40 years. I have more work to do than I've ever had because of this international trend in casting consciousness and letting women direct and act.

When I left college, even though I was a standout director, I literally was told not to direct because I was woman by my mentor, Alan Schneider, who said, "You are a fantastic actress. Women don't direct. I know I just put you in all of my graduate classes because you're an undergraduate who's super talented, but don't think you can actually use these skills." It was an amazing argument between us, because I'm uppity. The minute he said that, I spent the rest of my life trying to direct. [She laughs.]

And then after Alan, I had these female mentors like Tina Packer and Kristin Linklater, Merry Conway and Natsuko Ohama, really amazing-bandwidth women who had completely different techniques than Alan, in terms of leadership. They worked collaboratively. They worked on the "yes, and" principle, whereas Alan would literally throw a chair across a theater and fire a student from a production, because he was on a path for excellence that demanded patriarchal leadership.

Learning to be an associative collaborator came more from Shakespeare & Company and the female mentors that I had. But the bar was set early on for leadership, that you had to know where excellence was. I've never been more nice than I am in search in brilliance.

Pier Carlo Talenti: That's a great quote! I think a lot of other actors or directors coming up would have folded if they'd faced that kind of atmosphere. Can you talk about how you found your own individual passion and made it a reality?

Lisa: Well, part of it is knocking on doors and not getting in when I was clearly a straight-A student and why should it be so difficult? Then you really meet the business world of the theater, which was very homophobic when I was a kid coming up in the early '80s. And I wanted truth. That's what we'd studied on the rehearsal floor. I just think there are certain things I was prevented from doing, and so I had

to find my own road because people weren't casting strong, intelligent, androgynous women at all.

But more than that, it's what I do love. I'm passionate about politics. I think diversity and integration are really important. I speak several languages. I travel a lot. My family is Jewish and Christian, black and white. My family's also very accomplished and has been for hundreds and hundreds of years.

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I mean, I literally knew zero gay people until I was 23. I just didn't know, because I lived in sheltered places on dairy farms. Not until I moved to New York City did I begin to understand how many different kinds of people were in the world. And now that I travel the whole world, I'm basically thinking of myself as an activist for empathy. That's what theater teaches, and obviously that's been my biggest learning curve as a leader.

It's so hard raising money for a theater company as an artistic director that after 23 years I got bitter because I couldn't make it easier. I didn't know how to make it easier. I didn't know how to pay all these women a living wage. So eventually, in 2016, I stopped being an artistic director. I closed the company, and I'm now much more interested in pay equity than gender equity because I think the gender equity ball is now rolling down the other side of the hill. I think actors of color are being featured in a fabulous way compared to when I was a kid, but women and people of color are still not being paid anywhere near what men are being paid. So that's become my new flag to wave.

It's not enough just to be a great actor coming out of college. It's also that that person should get a living wage. They pick girls out of college to play Desdemona for \$300 a week on a non-Equity contract, but they'll give an older white man an Equity contract to play Brabantio. Even though Desdemona and Emilia and Bianca are harder roles than Brabantio, they tend to be underpaid and overworked young women taking those roles. So those things interest me just in terms of survivability, longevity.

Pier Carlo: Given your unique experience of as a woman having played so many of the male leaders in Shakespeare's plays, without resorting to stereotypes, is there a fundamental way you see women and men leading differently?

Lisa: There definitely is. I don't know how not to reduce it to stereotypes, but I would say mostly men blame other people. Male characters blame other people, and mostly women blame themselves. Now, even if it's not their fault, a woman will say, "How am I part and parcel of me being attacked in my home by my husband?" or "What did I do to alienate my child?" and "What have I done that I only earn 79 cents on the dollar?" Usually women will take their own inventory first, and usually men will take an attacking pose so it's somebody else's fault, whatever it is. Not a lot of monologues in Shakespeare about, "What did I do wrong?" for the men. It's usually about, "How will I revenge this and reassert my honor?"

Rob: Can you describe how you go about gaining willing followership?

Lisa: Gaining followers has to do with finding that Venn diagram of, "What are we all passionate about?" In terms of like-mindedness, people follow me because they need what I need. They want to express their thoughts and their feelings. They want to change the world. They want to be onstage with others who can get in the way of their joy so they can decimate them and score some points. They want to be in the game. They want to trash-talk. They want to push. Or not.

Most women I know would love to play Hamlet. Hamlet has 1,500 lines, and Gertrude and Ophelia together have 350 lines. Of course I have a following! If you have the skills to play Hamlet, you should play Hamlet, and a whole bunch of my mentees now have played Hamlet or anything they want to play. And the men are doing really cool things like directing reverse-gender productions or playing female roles. Or people are going trans and going, "I'll play anything I want, but let's just look at performative gesture today. What am I selling, and what can I use for this character?"

Finding followers means that you are a service industry, and people need what you have. Because I've spent 40 years studying Shakespeare, there's always going to be something I can offer you if you're interested in Shakespeare. If you're working on something, we can find some common ground almost immediately. I love my Shakespeare tribe. They're all over the world in every language doing Shakespeare, and it takes 10 seconds to start a conversation with a fellow Shakespeare nut. Then we just assume that we are humanists and we have everything on the table together. Pretty much, we have a shared tribe. I just know thousands of people who do Shakespeare, and we all love it.

The following exists because we're following the ancient god of eloquence. We're starving in the texting world, because people are texting and tweeting and we're like, "This is shallow!" Facebook is fine, but I would actually read more than the headline. Where's the deeper version? So for all the dreamers and the deeper-version people and the close-readers and the people who care about language, boy, it's still useful to have Shakespeare in the world.

Pier Carlo: Can you describe yourself as a mentor?

Lisa: I am a mentor to so many people, formally and informally, and I have so many mentors. What the women are saying to each other — white women, people of color — all the women are saying, "We were trained in previous decades to backstab and say there's not enough pie for everybody, so we'll just talk about each other behind our backs. Because that's the only way we get any kind of power." Like a faculty

at a small college, just backstabbing because there's just no territory to really gain.

Once you get through the door, you hold that door open. This is the job. Make a love-line. Make a lifeline. Make a group. Help a sister, help a friend, help a stranger.

But now the women are running for president and running ... Nataki Garrett is running Oregon Shakespeare Festival. The glass ceilings have been shattered. Now they're saying, "Our job is to hold the door open for our sisters." Once you get through the door, you hold that door open. This is the job. Make a love-line. Make a lifeline. Make a group. Help a sister, help a friend, help a stranger. Random acts of kindness, acts of gratitude, acts of generosity.

You see it right now with the pandemic crisis. People are trying to give up their hearts to one another in a really beautiful way. There's a real crisis, and people are responding with empathy and kindness, which is, I think, what theater basically teaches: Step back, look at the world, and see what happens if you behave selfishly and see what happens if you behave with agape love.

Rob: Would you have advice in the midst of this public health crisis? What advice would you have for how artists could step up and lead right now?

Lisa: I think the way that you can listen to your internal witness is enhanced by the slowdown. I think the best place for inspiration and original work is to go inside yourself. And also we have time now to sit under a tree with a notebook and write. Some of the great new stories are going to come out of this time. And, I think, helping one another.

There's so much free learning right now. I'm building a free Shakespeare training site that's going to go out for free in the next two weeks and help people learn monologues from scratch so that they can use this downtime to do the thing that they never do, which is

learn two contrasting monologues and put them on tape. It's the perfect time for me to help anybody who wants to go online and learn Shakespeare monologues, so I'm going to put teaching tools for all of it online.

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I think it's time for the giveaway principle, when you take the thing that's most precious to you and you open your heart and you proffer it on the horizon for anybody who's hungry or in need. That's what people are doing right now. Wednesday, I spent an hour listening to Lauren Gunderson, who's teaching about playwriting for free for an hour streaming on Wednesdays. Our most produced playwright, and she's so excited about telling all of us what she knows that I just can't wait for my next class! I've always loved school, and there's free streaming night and day.

I spent this last week redoing my website, which I haven't looked at for three years. In combing through it, I was able to think about my artist statement, my mission, what I want to do in the next few years, how I have neglected those basic business tools. I redid all three of my resumes, my acting, directing, and my CV. Then I went, "Oh, I should put my producing resume up here too because the next two years, there may not be very much work." We're all going to be staggering from the impact of the pandemic. So maybe I'll do some more producing, which I also do and I can do for video and film and corporate stuff. I've got to keep working.

Another thing that we can all do is rededicate ourselves to writing. I've got a screenplay about my father's life that I'm writing and an original play about Charlotte Cushman, who was the most famous actress in the world 150 years ago. She was a lesbian who played Hamlet and Romeo and everything else better than any human on the planet. The highest-paid actor in the world, and everybody's forgotten her. So I

have these two projects to write and then these teaching pods which I want to do.

Also here's what I love about what happened today. I won't say names and specifics because the word isn't out on the street. I lost \$31,000 of work in the last two weeks. So when an artistic director calls and goes, "Actually, you're still hired. We're just going to do it next summer, same deal, and we're going to pay you a third extra for your trouble," my body feels joy. If everybody who booked me this year just went, "It's cool, Wolpe. We'll do it next year," then I could say to myself, "I have all year to write my dream projects, and next year's already booked." Because this whole year was booked, and now it just got unbooked. But if it's pushed, then I can say, "Wow, I don't have to look for work!" What a sense of resting and abundance and gratitude that is, to have a year to float into the dreamland and make original work that will be my legacy. Whatever I actually write that's original and whatever I actually put on film, after I'm dead, will still exist.

Then next year, I can go and do all these live workshops and solo performances and acting and directing jobs that I was going to do this year. But I can already feel myself coming back to them with a deeper level of readiness like, "Boy, I have another year to look at that project. What can I do with that that I hadn't thought of because I thought I only had six weeks until we went into rehearsal?"

Pier Carlo: This openheartedness you're experiencing, this new type of empathy you were talking about, do you think that's going to maintain once this is over?

Lisa: I think so.

Pier Carlo: Is there going to be a shift?

Lisa: I hope so. I think so. I think we're going to have a different president. I think we're going to have a different art-scape. I think we're going to have a different understanding about loss and mortality. We're going to have a different understanding about what socialism is,

what health care is, why we need it. We're going to have a lot of different understandings.

We're going to have a tremendous amount of new work. We're going to have a tremendous amount of thoughtful, well-crafted new work because people are going to have time to do that. And we're going to have, I hope, a sense of gratitude and urgency about the stories we have to tell.

In the last two weeks, people have binged out on Netflix. Now they're looking to the free opera-streaming, the free Shakespeare-streaming. The classes on Udemy and everything are free. You can learn anything now for free. It's kind of exciting, and there's this encouragement to actually stimulate yourself so that despair doesn't set in. You are obligated to find 25 things that you like to do and do two of them every day, or you will get really sad because of the news.

The delving in the ground for the gardening, the healing that you experience when you get your hands in the earth, that's what artists feel when they get their hands into their heart stories. Honestly, this is such a crisis that people are being reduced to essential humanity, and I hope and pray that there's a resurgence of empathy.

It was so funny, last month, when Kobe Bryant died and all the men were bursting into tears? Something just shifted inside of me. It was like, "Why is this the first time I've seen a man have an emotion in the last few years?" I'm so tired of the emotion being Brett Kavanaugh or Trump shouting. Where are the human men? Of course, my theater friends are not all like that, but to see normal men crying over Kobe, I think that's the kind of thing we're looking at now.

Everybody understands what it is to have a parent in a nursing home and for those people to be trapped. You can't visit them. They're stuck there. If one gets sick, they'll all die. Think about our institutions. How many people have friends in prison, family members? How many people have actually got their kids in their house every day, every minute now? And they're learning how to be a family, maybe for the first time, because they're stuck at home. And students who were

saying, “Yes, your senior year and your prom,” or, “Yes, that was your actor showcase; you were going to New York and L.A.,” are being forced to think more deeply about, “Why did you choose this career, and how are you of service in a time of woe?”

That’s why the artists that I love right now are coming out with beautiful narratives on Facebook and lists of resources of uplifting and interesting or self-deepening resources, stuff that you just don’t see every day. Right now, at least on my feed, because I have 3,500 artist friends ... almost every one of them has had their economic opportunities wiped out, and they’ve responded by posting poetry or gifts of inspiration or volunteering to help their neighbors get groceries.

Wherever there’s an artist, there’s someone who’s willing to hear your story, and it’s very healing.

I think that’s a kind of leadership in which the artists make a difference. They may not make any money, but they make a difference. Wherever there’s an artist, there’s someone who’s willing to hear your story, and it’s very healing. We even know, with memory loss, that older people who have got Alzheimer’s can sing songs and have joy from old memories of old songs.

That’s what plays and musicals are. They have this contagious joy encoded in them. We make memories, and we come back to them, and it’s very, very important. That’s how Shakespeare is for me. It’s like a song from my childhood, and there’s something innately important about it that, for me, has always been my tuning fork, my North Star.

Pier Carlo: How is theater going to change?

Lisa: I think theater is going to be much more interactive and multimedia-based. I think there’ll be a lot more online work and a lot more sophistication in terms of platforms that share globally. I think you’re going to have a lot more concern for, what is the experience of the community entering the space? What is the club/pub after a show? Where is the mix of community? As opposed to just paying a high

ticket price and sitting in a chair and watching white people cavort about their lives, do you know? I think you're going to see the community onstage and the community in the mix. How do you make it less pretentious to want to tell stories?

All of my colleagues are working with new forms that are less off-putting, so that you're not walking into a cathedral but worshipping in a sacred grove. There has to be one common loving, welcomed ritual, and we're all working on that. I'm working on it profoundly.

I'm the idea coordinator for the Shakespeare Theatre Association, and I have been the chair of that committee for some years. That's inclusivity, diversity, equity and access. We're doing a deep think tank, because the Shakespeare world is predominantly white-male-dominated, although it's changing. So we have to look at all of the ways in which we enable change. When you change the board and the staff and the actors and the teachers and the guards and the ushers, then you change the composition of your welcoming mat. And if people come in and see themselves on stage, they will come back.

Epilogue

During this unprecedented global public health crisis, Lisa Wolpe reminds us again of the primal, sacred, unwavering importance of the arts as a sense-maker for humanity. Ideas we can take from our conversation with Lisa include:

- **Focus relentlessly on the goal.** The leader becomes the leader when she sets a direction that others want to support. Being self-led is at the core. Know your vision and why you are pursuing it.
- **Find the right supports.** Societies may say things have to happen a certain way, but artist leaders discover their own path. An important component is to surround yourself with people who support both your ideas and your successes.
- **Know your why.** Artist leaders make an impact bigger than themselves. Doing the work is one thing, but you must also realize the greater good for your work.

- **Be a servant leader.** Building something that is successful and sustainable requires working through others. Treat people with the utmost respect and appreciation to get the best from them.
- **Framing is critical.** During this unusual time, make a choice on how you view the situation. Stay focused on possibility. Be reflective, restorative, generative and creative.



Lisa Wolpe

ACTOR, DIRECTOR, WRITER, PRODUCER

Lisa Wolpe is a critically acclaimed actor, director, writer and producer. Her work has been seen at PlayMakers Rep, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Utah Shakespeare Festival, Orlando Shakespeare Theater, Colorado Shakespeare Festival, Berkeley Repertory Company, Cal Shakes and more. She founded the all-female multicultural Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company in 1993, where for 23 years she produced, directed and performed many iconic roles including Hamlet, Richard III, Angelo, Leontes, Romeo, Shylock and Iago. She has been a leader in the movement for gender parity in the areas of Shakespeare and gender for several decades. Her hit solo show "Shakespeare & the Alchemy of Gender," directed by Laurie Woolery, has toured universities and Shakespeare festivals around the U.S., and has played internationally at Prague Shakespeare Company; Bremen Shakespeare Company; in London at The Rose Theatre, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and King's College; at Shakespeare's Birthplace in Stratford, U.K.; Warwick University, U.K.; Vancouver, B.C.; and Stratford, Ontario.