



Artist as Leader: Emily Simoness

Emily Simoness had no idea when she was a struggling actress ten years ago that a spur-of-the-moment decision to visit distant cousins on an old family farm would transform her life—and that of countless other theater artists.

Since its founding in 2010, SPACE on Ryder Farm has welcomed 150 artists a year to its bucolic upstate New York setting with what Emily, now its Executive Director, describes as “radical hospitality.”

In this interview, Corey Madden and Rob Kramer ask Emily how she transformed her own life and learn how she, by listening closely to artists’ stated needs, led the field through the creation of a startlingly innovative, responsive and nurturing community and art-making space.

Corey Madden: Would you begin by talking about how your upbringing and your background may have informed your leadership style?

Emily Simoness: I was raised by a strong mom and dad. My mom is really strong. I feel super lucky and privileged that as a woman I didn't really think of myself as being at a disadvantage when I was growing up. That is not the narrative that I think most women were a part of or felt. My mom was a career woman—a bruiser to some extent (the good kind)! She made me feel like being a woman was not anything to be ashamed of; it wasn't even thought of as an obstacle.

I was a really creative kid. And I was a very programmed child in the way that I was scheduled. I had ballet and piano and math club and speech and debate. My calendar still reflects the rigor of my youth. I am from a suburb of Minneapolis-Saint Paul, and early on I got involved with the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis, which is a flagship institution. I feel lucky to have plugged in there in my middle-school years. I went to a public high school that was strong in the arts, but CTC was a particularly great opportunity.

Apple Valley High School also had a hugely successful speech and debate team, and I ended up doing that rigorously. The skills that I developed in oration are skills that I use a lot today. Back in high school, it was more of a hobby, and the theater was front and center, but if I look at my life now, I'm probably applying more of those speech and debate skills than I am my acting skills.

I got my bachelor of fine arts at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. When I was at school, I was very much on an acting track. When Hurricane Katrina happened I, along with a few classmates, produced a fundraiser for the hurricane relief. In a lot of ways, I was starting to flex a 'producorial' muscle – though I wasn't calling it that at the time. I felt the need to be making something that was different from my discipline.

Then, in our fourth year, there was a showcase in New York City for actors to get agents and casting director attention, and I thought it was a missed opportunity that UNCASA didn't also have a Los Angeles showcase. I thought if we were going to be competitive with the other conservatories, we should have a foot there. I approached the forever-lovable Robert Beseda at the time, and he was like, "Ms. Simoness, we don't have enough money to do that." I said, "Well, how much is that going to cost?" He said it would be like \$25,000. I said, "What if we can raise it?" So that is what my classmates and I did. We raised the money and instituted the first LA showcase. The school still does it today! So, I was starting to do that kind of work, stretching the limits of what the degree I was getting was actually in.

Rob Kramer: Looking back, what was the attraction of that entrepreneurial spirit that you were tapping into?

ES: I'm a potential junkie and an opportunity junkie. There's a leading edge to that, which is that I spearheaded raising money for the LA showcase. And there's a trailing edge to that, which is nothing's ever reaching its potential, so I'm disappointed a lot in my life. But I will say that when I am able to identify a need or an opportunity that is not met and I feel like it is within my power and the power of those around me to meet it, that is really exciting to me. That for me is where my entrepreneurial muscle gets activated.

RK: Future possibility?

ES: Yes, totally. That's also one of the challenges in my job right now. I like the beginnings. I'm so excited about visioning, and then when I get into the maintenance part, it's tough for me to stay excited.

CM: One of the things I notice about being an artist is that it's very project-oriented and that one of the ways in which it satisfies entrepreneurial drive is that it's always renewing itself. You always start at the beginning and then you complete, and you get to move on. Besides this idea of starting over or having a new project, are there other things about your drama training that influence how you work as a leader?

ES: Communication. I think so much of leadership is effective communication, not only with your team but with donors, with audiences, with artists.

I did a TEDxBroadway three years ago and have been involved with TEDxBroadway since then. Director Tina Landau did a speech in 2017, and I was on the stage for it. She was talking about how when she is doing a show on Broadway, she vets the external look and feel of the theater. She wants to know what the actual façade of a theater looks and feels like because the experience starts before people even open the door. I think about that a lot with SPACE. You're asking a bunch of strangers who have maybe never been to upstate New York to get on a train and get off in a weird place. I like to think about how, from the minute they get off that train, the experience starts.

I think the idea that you are creating a three-dimensional experience for people and taking care of them inside of that—that entire experience is curated and orchestrated. I think my context of theater has really informed how I think about the integrity of people's time at the farm. Theater training taught me to get super specific—to think about tiny things. You know, if you're in a play, on the first day of rehearsal, they'll give you a mug that has your name on it. With the farm, I was like, “We should do that!” That little thing of printing out somebody's name with a label maker and putting it on a mug makes people feel so taken care of and seen and thought of in this way.

RK: What I'm hearing you talk about is given circumstances and context and setting the environment, all components of the theatrical world that translate to how you approach leading.

ES: I don't even know if I'm connecting those dots until this moment, but absolutely. Of course, because that's my context, that's what I would be doing. But what we're trying to do at the farm is create an optimal environment for creativity. Creativity for you, Rob, is different from Corey, is different from me. So it's this interesting challenge because you're trying to tailor an experience, an environment, a place to suit the needs of different humans with different needs.

A lot of that is about really listening, which is a huge theatrical thing, and understanding what it is that makes one thrive. When we are at our best at Ryder Farm, we call it radical hospitality, which is really listening and really looking at the person in front of you and understanding what it is that they need. I think the best actors and the best theater makers are really good listeners.

RK: Sounds like a value and a philosophy.

ES: Absolutely it is.

CM: It sounds to me that the entire enterprise is an artistic leadership enterprise, meaning it really is about how to lead the arts itself and how to have the arts also connect more with a community or a place, this farm, instead of just the venues of New York.

ES: Right.

CM: Can you talk more about that? Could you tell the story of founding SPACE and then what the key attributes are that you got from the place itself and how that's part of the vision?

ES: The long and short is, I am part of an extended family that I'd never met but I'd heard tell of, folklore of the Ryder family and this farm that had been in the family. My mother, who is the Ryder family member, had never visited the farm. I went down to North Carolina for college and still had never visited, but the notion of the place was lodged somewhere in my consciousness.

I moved to Brooklyn in 2007, and then two years later on a lark I called my fourth cousin once-removed, Betsy Ryder, and I said, "Hi, I'm Emily. I'm related to you. I'd love to come check out the farm." I was an actress pounding the pavement, and I was somewhat idle at the time. This impulse that I talked about earlier, which is about maximizing opportunity and potential—acting was a horrible fit for me because of that.

RK: Good that you noticed that.

ES: Yeah, if your entire life is about maximizing opportunities and potential, and you aren't in the driver's seat as an actor, it is a nightmare. It was safe to say I was not having a great time. Anyway, I thought I was going to go up, see this farm, call my mom, tell her I saw it, come back and that would be that. That's not what happened.

I made three discoveries that day. First of all, I thought upstate New York meant seven hours away. Some people think it's ridiculous that I call Putnam County upstate New York. It's like 60 miles north of New York City. That was the first aha moment. The second was that I thought it was going to be a 12-acre vegetable plot, which would've been impressive, but it was a 130-acre expanse that had about 12 acres in active cultivation. It was a massive piece of property, woodland and pasture and a half mile of lake frontage and this wild and woolly landscape. Then the third realization, and probably the most important, was that there were structures that were not inhabited that were from 1795 that needed a lot of TLC.

I left that day, and in the days and the weeks and the months that followed, I couldn't stop thinking about this place. As someone who loves maximizing potential, it was insane to me that there was this place—this magical, wonderful place that was in my family—that was this close to the city that seemed to need some love and tenderness. My fourth cousin was living there, and she was running her farming operation, but we came in March, which is a time when it's very fallow. Anyway, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

The other thing that I couldn't stop thinking about was that I was in a community of playwrights and theater artists that didn't have time and space to work on their stuff. New York City is

incredibly expensive. Everyone was working seven jobs and putting on shows in places that didn't even have a Certificate of Occupancy and, you know...

RK: New York City.

ES: Yeah. Both of those needs (the farm's and my artist friends') were independently rattling around in my brain, and then they collided. I don't even know when that moment was, but I was like, "Oh, I should bring my scrappy artist friends up to the farm. We should spackle and paint and bring these buildings back to life and I'm sure my cousins will be excited about letting us do that. In exchange, we'll get to work on our art." I pitched this idea to my cousins that I had just met.

CM: Because you are an orator, you're going to win any debate.

ES: To their *great credit*, this was something that they entertained because my mother's maiden name was Ryder. Particularly my cousin Betsey was like, "Sure, we'll try this."

CM: How many years ago is that now?

ES: We visited for the first time in March of 2009. Then I went up two or three times that summer of 2009 to continue to understand the place. I think it was that fall that I asked Betsey if we could try my idea. Then by 2010, we put together what we called the Artists on the Farm Collective, AOTF. Myself and my co-founder, we promised each other that we would each write down the names of 20 people we thought might be interested in our great idea that would become SPACE and we made a pact on a napkin that we would send each other those names by a certain date, and so we did that. I still have the napkin.

We invited all these people up to the farm to witness the potential of our great idea and, of course half of them showed up. Of the half that showed up, half of them thought we were crazy and half were like, 'Sure.'

We invited all these people up to the farm to witness the potential of our great idea and, of course half of them showed up. Of the half that showed up, half of them thought we were crazy and half were like, "Sure." The half that said sure then became halved again when they ...

CM: Saw how much work it was?

ES: Exactly. They were like, "Uh, we'll see you in the city."

It's so funny to think about. Then this scrappy group of people for the summer of 2010 rehabilitated one structure in particular, and at that same time I started to file for a 501(c)(3) nonprofit status because I never just try something. Go for the ...

CM: Your gold.

ES: But at that point it was a hobby. I was still pursuing acting. I was an actor that had this farm thing on the side, and I think that that allowed it to breathe in this way that my acting wasn't breathing. I felt like with acting, I had to work and I needed to succeed. It wasn't going the way I wanted it to go, and so this other thing, this very creative farm-colony-residency thing, had no pressure on it. For me, in hindsight, that was very useful.

RK: Do you feel like you get your creative needs met through this work?

ES: I do when I'm starting something new within it. I don't when I'm looking at audit materials or all the things that at this point I have to do because our staff hasn't grown to meet the needs of the organization. It's grown really fast.

CM: Besides your family, what are the other things that the farm offered that were inspiring, and how are you using that in the art making?

ES: It is so much about place. In the 1795 homestead, there's this dining room that is frozen in time. A big part of the residency is that residents have to gather for three communal meals daily. At the beginning of SPACE we gathered for meals not because it was a mandate. It was like, "Well, it's going to be the cheapest for us all to eat together, and it's going to be the most economical in terms of time." As we started serving everyone who came to the farm, they were like, "Those meals are lightning in a bottle."

In some ways the place starts to inform you. You just have to listen to how people are interacting with the place. There's something about that dining-room table — it's not a fluorescent-lighted rehearsal room, it's not a mess hall on a college campus. It's a family dinner table, and we all have families. We have different contexts of what that word means, and it may be different associations, positive or negative, but we understand in its highest sense what family *could* mean. I think in some ways people are disarmed on the farm because they're not in a typical work environment. How many rehearsal rooms have we been in where there's a certain mode that you have to be in?

RK: Put armor on when you go into the theater space.

ES: Exactly. There's something about this being a home. The two structures that we house residents in are homes. They're not dorms, and I think that's super informative in terms of the way in which people feel safe, feel taken care of, feel free. I think that informs the work. They're not in conventional workspaces. Also the land itself is not incredibly manicured, but if the land's not perfect, then the notion is that "I don't have to be perfect." There aren't hedges that were perfectly trimmed this morning, but rather there's this sort of bramble, there's still a path.

We've gotten the feedback a lot that there's something distinctly different about SPACE on Ryder Farm because it's on a farm, but more than that, it is a family farm that up until 2009 has never been used "commercially." There's something about that that feels really sacred, and people take it to heart, I think, in a different way than an institution with a capital I. As we grow, we're going to have to figure out how to hold on to that idea.

CM: It sounds to me like, as an artist, you've wandered into art as life as opposed to art as just a production. Why do you think artists today are abandoning institutional structures and are maybe crossing lines that didn't used to get crossed and are making a different kind of art than they were making? Why are you making that kind of art right now?

ES: Well, I feel really called. I didn't feel like I had a choice with this in a lot of ways, you know what I mean? It felt like this was obvious. For a lot of my family members, it was not obvious to breathe new life into the buildings on the farm. It was anything but obvious. But for me personally, it felt like, "Oh my gosh, here's an opportunity; oh my gosh, it's this close to the City; oh my gosh, all these artists and change-makers don't have this opportunity, they need this." It turns out I was right. It turns out that the number of people who want to come to SPACE far outweighs the number of people we can accommodate. So a need was met, which is awesome.

My brother, who's in the tech world, often says, "You realize you did what everybody out here [in Silicon Valley] is trying to do? We're all trying to find the need and then fill it." For me, I didn't do a lot of scrutinizing of my initial idea. I just went with my gut, and in some ways I feel like it's a one-hit wonder. I feel like if I ever tried to do something like this again, I wouldn't know what I was doing.

RK: In the business world you can spend thousands of dollars taking innovation classes to figure out how you do something like what you just did. As an artist, the moment was there, you trusted your instincts, and it evolved out of your creative process.

CM: I think that it does connect to this question of what's happening in America right now. I think America is hungry for these kinds of social experiments, which is of course how America was formed to begin with. You're both growing something new and also everybody who's coming there. You're basically facilitating American experimentation and art, and those two things are really, really important. It seems to me that's one key part of how you lead other artists. You create this place and you invite them, so that this kind of invitation is a form of leadership. What other ways do you think of yourself as leading other artists?

ES: I am super-interested in people being able to be themselves and in people meeting other people and that informing their work. I think that that is a way that I lead. Yes, I'm super-interested in your output, but I'm actually more interested in *you*, and I'm more interested in you feeling settled and at peace, in you feeling fulfilled, in you maybe not feeling those things and have the time and the space to excavate why. We give people time and space. We don't ask that they, at the end of the day, deliver something.

We have a writers' group called The Working Farm. The group convenes for five non-successive weeks over the course of the season and they work on a play. The residency culminates in an eight-course meal at eight locations on the farm alongside eight excerpts of the plays. Following their residency, the writers have a reading of that play, if they choose, at Playwrights Horizons, which is an Off-Broadway theater in New York City.

The batting average of those plays is nuts. So many of those plays have gone on to production. Granted, it's not like the only place that they're being developed is at SPACE, but there is

something, I think, that happens where.... This model takes into account the fact that a lot of these artists—many are still emerging, they have jobs, they might have families—might not be able to leave for five weeks all together. We want to support those realities in the way we structure our opportunities.

CM: What I also hear is that you're leading innovation in process in the arts and that part of what you figured out is that there's something about the bramble that goes into the art that sometimes New York wrings out of it. Having been in the theater for a long time, when you're in it, you do feel that there's a kind of demand for stuff to be perfect, for a certain kind of achievement at all times. But what we all recognize is that that's not actually where the great work starts. Most work starts in the bramble.

ES: That's right.

CM: So what you're saying is you're giving people both. You're saying, “Come on out and wander around, and then you have to go back to your life.” Maybe that's good for people and that's a new way of thinking about new play development, which has gotten so problematic.

ES: Absolutely. I think one of my strengths is that I don't feel bound by the conventions of Institutions with a capital I. For example, we had two different writers early on who were like, "Can my kids come?" I was like, "Yeah, we should totally be able to figure that out." Because we were young and nimble and because I called the insurance company and figured out the two or three things that we had to do and because my board wasn't huge and didn't have tremendous amounts of bureaucracy and still doesn't, we could say yes to those things.

Then I ran into Philip Himberg, who runs the Sundance Institute Theatre Program, and I was telling him about my idea. He mentioned the Lilly Awards Foundation founded by Marsha Norman and Theresa Rebeck and Julia Jordan. Its mission centers on parity, on women writers and theater artists having equal representation on stages. They independently had wanted to figure out how to have kids invited into the artist colony world. Essentially the data shows that female playwrights during childbearing age are not being produced very much. One of the contributing factors is that they don't have access to these residencies where people are writing their plays. They were trying to figure out how to get this resolved. Phillip was like, “You should talk to them.”

I set up a meeting with Julia, and I was like, “Well, let's do a family residency. Let's bring the kids and their moms (or the dad if he's the primary parent) to the farm.” She was like, “You could do that this summer?!” It was seven months prior to the start of SPACE's season, and I was like, “I don't see why not. It feels like that's an obvious thing that we should be doing. If there is an obvious issue where women can't take part in these opportunities because of their kids, then let's create a situation where that is amended.” After that meeting, Julia, Pia Scala-Zankel (an artist and advocate) and I made the Family Residency happen.

During the Family Residency, the parents work on their craft, the kids have a camp setting, and everyone comes together for meals. At this point we've expanded that program to two different weeks with two separate cohorts because it's been so overwhelmingly positive.

CM: One of the things I also hear is that innovation is key to what makes you happy.

RK: And saying yes.

CM: Right, exactly. One of the things we have to look at in the fields—and I think that the nonprofits tend not to look at it, whereas businesses do—is that these are institutions that have created these Bethlehem Steel-style structures that don't function anymore and so they can't say yes. They're like, [putting on a low-register, bombastic tone] “Well, no, we can't bring children into the theater! That's not the kind of thing we do.” We see that all the time. I think the Institute has similar kinds of qualities. I don't want to create so much existing programming that we can't keep innovating, because the Institute exists to help people innovate.

ES: Right.

RK: What are the biggest challenges or barriers to leading people, to leading this organization, to being able to say yes?

ES: As SPACE gets bigger, there's more pressure. As we've turned the corner from that first five years—it's a legitimate organization, there are 17 people on the board, we have a legitimate budget—my question is, how do you keep that same sort of nimble, almost wily spirit when you have a lot more stakeholders? I find myself using words like stakeholders—[laughing] that's really embarrassing! How do you continue to listen? How do you continue to be able to flex?

RK: That growth is challenging you?

ES: In some instances. I see that if this keeps going, it's going to be challenging. I think that I'm at my best when I'm going with my gut and my intuition. As this thing becomes more real, I want to make certain that there is still a place for that impulse within me. As you start to have a welcome packet and an employee handbook and all of the HR things, how do you infuse the same spontaneity and culture? I'm talking about culture really. How can you still be responsive and real?

I think a lot of what people respond to at the farm is that it's a real place. They're eating real food that is growing out of the ground. There are real people here whose sole aspiration isn't to get produced at X regional theater. I mean, they are striving for that, but that's not the mode that they're in at this moment. In this moment, they are germinating, they are developing, and they really are in concert with the other people in residence.

I also feel a tremendous amount of responsibility to the family to carry on the legacy of the place. I never want it to feel not like that place, if that makes sense. I still want it to feel like a family farm.

How do you keep that sense as the organization grows, as we start to talk about building new buildings? How do you build buildings that feel texturally like what's existing there? I also feel a tremendous amount of responsibility to the family to carry on the legacy of the place. I never want it to feel not like that place, if that makes sense. I still want it to feel like a family farm.

CM: Do you ever think about the end game? You're just at the beginning, but ultimately do you think about the fact that you like to move on to new things? Maybe you're not there yet, but do you see yourself sometimes thinking, "What happens if I'm not involved?"

ES: Definitely. I really don't think that I'm somebody who wants to be here for 30 years. There's so many of these founders that are just there forever, and I don't think that's a good idea for the institution. I think the health of the organization is dependent on new blood.

I'm very interested in seeing if this concept works in other places. I'm interested in seeing how artists and activists can revive structures and animate structures and how that animation can influence community.

CM: I'm interested to know about you as an artist as compared to a leader. Do you think of yourself as still in transition between those two things? Do you have other times where you think, "I should write a play or I should do a movie or I should ...?"

ES: It's funny. A bunch of the people who started SPACE were actors. My co-founder went to Carnegie Mellon and our very good friends went to Boston University. One of them went on to get her master's in social work. I started SPACE. One just got her master's in palliative care at Harvard. It was this formative time.

I don't think of myself as an actor at all. I do miss singing, and I do miss dancing. Those were actually things that I did prior to acting. My friend in palliative care, she has gotten into ceramics, and that's how she's scratching her artistic itch. The social worker is now a painter and a drawer.

I am not a great hobby person. I like to go full-on into something, and so part of what I'm meditating on right now is how to scratch that itch and know that it's not going to be a career, that it's just going to be something that I'm doing for myself. I don't know what it's going to be. Although I will say part of what I have discovered on the farm is I really like weeding and I like gardening, so I wouldn't be surprised if something happened there.

It does feel really strange that my entire adolescence and early twenties was this very specific practice and that I just don't do it. The lifestyle was not for me.

I do think there's this craving of artists to feel more entrepreneurial.... It feels like with every new group that graduates that is a stronger impulse, I think, because the world is going that way.

Part of what we do is bring three or four of the rising third- and fourth-year UNCSA drama students—and this year a film student—to the farm as interns. I've watched all of them now. They're all in their early twenties, and I've seen now four classes of them move to New York and try to do it to varying degrees of "success." I do think there's this craving of artists to feel more entrepreneurial. I see them all either wanting that or doing that. It feels like with every new group that graduates that is a stronger impulse, I think, because the world is going that way.

CM:What needs to change to encourage more artists to step up and lead—and not just inside the sector but beyond that? What's happening to the field, and how are you an exemplar of that? You're not just doing art; you're doing art and social practice, you're doing art and ecology, you're doing art and land banking. You're connecting art-making to the wider context in all these different ways. How do you get more people to step up and want to do that?

ES:I think about this all the time, and I think about it particularly in my context, which is that I went to an undergraduate program. We talked earlier about how I was doing a lot of this leadership/producer stuff in my teens and early twenties but I wasn't calling it that. I don't know, if someone had said to me when I was 19, "You're actually not going to do this. You're going to do this other thing over there," I probably would've punched them. You know what I mean?

Part of me is like, "If there is that rigidity, if you are going into a conservatory and if the idea is that you are going to be an actor or a dancer or a musician, how can we start to soften the lines around that definition and how can we also be training a citizen? When we say a citizen, what does that mean?"

Do I wish that I would've plugged way more into my liberal arts classes? Yes. Do I wish that I could've gotten a minor in sociology or something? Absolutely. Listen, there's no way for me to have known when I was 18 that acting wasn't going to work out and that something else was going to work out, but I do wish that my lens would've been longer and taller, if that makes sense. I think that's about offerings.

RK: Access to diverse offerings.

ES: Yeah, and understanding that you're going to want to know about that stuff. The amount of questions I get from kids who are 24 and are just now turning that corner of "Oh, I've got to produce, I have to sell, I have to raise money, I've got to build a budget." Now they want to see my fundraising letters and how I do a donor solicitation. It's like, how do we inspire that earlier?

RK: Along those lines, what advice would you pass along to the younger generation about getting into artist leadership?

ES: That it's not a failure. You didn't fail. I think there's so much shame around that. I'm only talking about my experience right now, but I think there's this idea that if you studied a certain thing and then that's not your identity, that somehow you didn't make it. Are you kidding? My friend who got her undergraduate at Boston University in acting is now in palliative care at Harvard. She made it. It may not have happened the way that she had her heart set on it, but oh my god, it happened for her!

Epilogue

Emily Simoness' boundless energy, enthusiasm and vision are powerful. She embodies the artist as social entrepreneur and as one who seizes the opportunity to lead. Inspiring lessons from our conversation with Emily include:

- **Hold the space.** Create a context that others can expand into.
- **Keep an eye out for opportunity.** Situations that may appear insignificant may in fact open up a world of new possibility—if you test the waters.
- **It’s an old cliché but... trust your gut.** Your instincts may be smarter than you think.
- **People want goodness in their lives.** Leaders gain followers by offering wanted supports, environments and community.
- **Lean on the “yes.”** Potential becomes breakthrough by saying yes more than by saying no.
- **It’s ok to transform.** Artists evolve and artist leaders find creative expression either through their work or in parallel. Allow the space to breathe and evolve for yourself.



Emily Simoness
Executive Director, SPACE on Ryder Farm

UNCSA alumna Emily Simoness (Drama, '07) is the co-founder and executive director of SPACE on Ryder Farm, a nonprofit artist residency program committed to supporting and developing artists and their work. Every June through October, SPACE hosts residencies, retreats and workshops on its 130 acres of organic farmland in Brewster, NY, less than an hour north of New York City. Designed to reinvigorate artists and creative innovators while contributing to the ongoing viability of one of the oldest organic family farms on the East Coast, SPACE has become one of the premier centers for new play development in the country.