

10x10 Festival in Pittsfield finds inspiration in art and theater

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Joan Coombs and Kelly Galvin rehearse for WAM Theatre's 10x10 event. (Enrico Spada / Courtesy of WAM Theatre)

PITTSFIELD -- Jane Burke, the director of Flying Cloud Institute, a chemist, dancer and potter, has taught young women for decades.

J. Thalia Cunningham, an E.R. doctor, travel writer and photographer, works with women in Afghanistan. What has brought them where they are?

On Saturday, as part of the 10x10 Festival, they and other women across 10 decades will think about what gets them moving -- and offer answers in words, performance and art.

Kristen van Ginhoven, co-founder of WAM Theatre, and Sara Katzoff, co-founder and artistic director of the Berkshire Fringe Festival, invited local writers to answer: "What are the 10 things that inspire you most at this decade in your life?" Alchemy Initiative and Diane Firtell have invited local artists to create 10-inch by 10-inch artworks taken from the same question.

"We looked up 'inspiration,'" van Ginhoven said. "It's 'a process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially something creative.'"

WAM was inspired by a book, she said.

"Before WAM, the enormity of women's issues felt so huge, I didn't think I could do anything," she said. Reading stories about women, seeing challenges and solutions set out one by one, encouraged her to believe that she could also take action.

In this show, she hopes the audience will feel that stimulation, that need to get up and do something. Looking for that feeling, van Ginhoven and Katzoff have gathered 60 pages of writing from 16 women, in many forms -- scripts, lists, poetry.

Katzoff has adapted these into a 35-minute performance, which she also directs, with four actors ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-60s.

"I'm excited by the way they use the space at yBar," van Ginhoven said.

The audience will sit along the walls and at a central table, so the actors perform among them and end up among the artwork. They will weave many voices together and talk to the audience.

"I'm excited to see how people will respond when they're there, having a drink and some tapas," van Ginhoven said.

"So much of the piece is about the actors' connections to the audience," Katzoff agree. "We pull them into the piece."

To create the script, WAM invited responses from a range of writers, Katzoff said; they wanted to have writers from many walks of life, many economic backgrounds and professions. They ended with voices across nine decades, she said, some from women who write professionally, and some from thoughtful women with wide experience.

Loren AliKhan, a lawyer in her 20s working in Washington, D.C., balances serious work with humor. Poet Nakeida Bethel-Smith works at the Elizabeth Freeman Center.



(Enrico Spada / Courtesy of WAM Theatre)

Eagle reporter Jenn Smith wrote essays about influences in each decade of her life, and freelance writer Nichole Dupont crafted short stories about different moments with momentum.

Katzoff has adapted and condensed their writing, blending voices into a narrative that moves through time, generally, from early years to late.

Some of the inspirations kept constant through time. Three or four appeared on most lists, van Ginhoven said: nature, family, friends. And some changed.

In younger writers, Katzoff found energy, climbing trees, a playful exploration.

As the writers grew older, she found common threads, sometimes between generations. Dupont writes about time with young farmers, active young people with college degrees, working in the sun and remembering the feel of the earth. Truus van Ginhoven, decades older, considers the importance of growing food and sustaining life.

"Everyone involved has been truthful and generous," Katzoff said. "We feel close to these writers, many of whom we have never met."

The writing is more than generous -- it is honest, she said, and bare. Inspiration does not always come from bright places. Her godmother, a gardener and professional clown, is living with stage-four cancer. She finds inspiration in a painful time.

Some writers and artists find it in daily things. Rachel Siegel praised people who clean their houses regularly. Artist, blogger and writer Suzi Banks Baum thought about what she knows how to do now -- skills as instinctive as finding eggs in a dark kitchen -- or standing with someone in grief. Faith gained influence for some mature writers.

People in their 30s and 40s talked about how fast their lives were moving, Katzoff said, how involved and distracted they became with daily activities, and how to keep that impetus along with moments of quiet. Older voices talked about a quieter rhythm and a sense of growing strength.

She quoted Linda Bidwell Delaney, who wrote: "In my seventh decade, I don't want to be inspired -- I want to be the one who inspires other people."

"One woman in her 60s said her age inspired her not to give a damn," van Ginhoven said. "Her whole life she had felt intimidated -- getting older made her louder, bolder, willing to go for it."

The project, she said, has made her think about growing older. When she read the response from mother, Truus van Ginhoven, who is in her 80s, and thought of all her mother had felt and seen, her mother's thoughts moved her to tears.