

Stories from the brainreels podcast transcript

July 6, 2016

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Introduction

CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels monthly podcast about brain injury and disability with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride.

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This month's episode was recorded for KBOO Community Radio's Bread and Roses feminist public affairs show. I'm excited to share it here too. While it doesn't have a disability focus, it's very dear to my heart. When you hear how I met my guest, Sue Perlgut, and what she's working on, you'll see why.

In local news, a shout out to some people I've been working with lately to caption their streaming videos. It's not the cheapest thing, but access is crucial for social change movements. So I'm thanking them for the opportunity to caption their work and sharing because I love their stuff! [The Invisible Disability Project](#)'s This Is Me^(TM) is a personal narrative video project. People with invisible disabilities share their perspectives on impairments, identity, stigma, and pride. They've got a great mix of people around age, race and ethnicity, type of invisible disability and gender. And [Outside the Frame](#), a media production organization serving homeless youth in Portland. The youth and young adults work toward healing from trauma by sharing their stories and learning filmmaking. And since they're writing, filming, and producing videos themselves from their own stories and topics, they're getting invaluable work and technical skills while self-advocating. Both organizations recognize the value of creative expression. It's one thing to address critical medical, work, education, or housing needs. It's another to feel like, as you work your way through the system, no one is really getting to know who you are and what's meaningful to you. That's why this new digital media and social media sharing age is so fantastic for people using it: we get to know the storytellers, and they're the experts here. Please check out Invisible Disability Project and Outside the Frame!

I'm feeling pretty excited that this is my 50th episode of this podcast. It started out as a pretty long, rambling, lo-fi streaming radio show only focused on brain injury, and it's been a great experience to get feedback from my listeners--and transcript readers--as the show has grown and progressed. Thanks for being here with me! You can subscribe to this podcast on iTunes, Stitcher Radio, and SoundCloud. More details about guests and links are at the blog at whoamitostopit.com, and screen-reader accessible podcast transcripts are there too. Don't forget some great neurodiversity pride swag at cafepress.com/whoamitostopit. All proceeds go toward the documentary "Who Am I To Stop It" about artists with traumatic brain injury. Thank you to Blue Dot Sessions for today's music.

[music break]

In 2003, I'd just finished studying in this very critical feminist theater program at The University of Texas at Austin. It took from feminism, queer studies, anthropology, storytelling, improvisation, all sorts of stuff. My thesis project was this mess of an attempt to do a feminist storytelling and performance project. And it was a mess because I didn't study feminist theater before I started the project. So I wanted to read about feminist theater to try to figure out all the things that I had done wrong during my

project. When I was doing my research, I came across the 1970s feminist theater collectives, including one with the awesomely affirmative name It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre.

A couple years later, I was at a memorial service in Ithaca, NY. This woman was sitting next to me. She politely turned and asked me who I was and what I did. And then she told me what she did. Turns out, we have the same degree but decades apart. I told her what my disastrous thesis project had been, she told me that she'd been one of the founding collective members of It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre. So that was pretty awesome because I had just written about her and didn't even realize who I was sitting next to. And I can hardly contain myself that now I get to interview her!

My guest today is the wonderful Sue Perlgut. Sue was teaching and working in theater when she went back and got a master's degree from NYU in Educational Theatre, working more than 40 years in theater as a director, performer, playwright, storyteller, puppet maker, teacher, arts administrator, and producer. In the 1970s and 80s she owned and managed Djuna Books, a feminist bookstore in New York City and Lucia a women's clothing store in Ithaca, NY.

She is one of the founding members of It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre. She currently directs the Senior Citizen Theatre Troupe of Lifelong in Ithaca, NY and also works in filmmaking with her company Close To Home Productions.

Sue has served as president of the boards of the Kitchen Theatre and the Greater Ithaca Activities Center and helped form her neighborhood association, South of the Creek Neighbors. She is the past chair of the Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Planning Board and is chair of the Board for Cinemapolis, Ithaca's local member-supported independent cinema.

For the next few days, you have the opportunity to participate in a new project Sue is doing by taking the Women's Wisdom Survey online that she created. We'll tell you all about that in the interview.

Sue Perlgut, welcome to Bread and Roses. Thank you so much for being here with me today.

SUE: Thank you, Cheryl, so much for inviting me.

Street theater and starting the feminist theater collective

CHERYL: I'd love to start by talking about the feminist theater collective movement that you were a part of in the '70s.

SUE: Before I got to feminist theater, I got to street theater. I was in street theater first. I grew up very middle class, nice Jewish girl in New Jersey. But I didn't go the route of all of my friends. I moved to New York City instead, when I was 23--I think it was--24. I kind of didn't know what the heck I was doing, but I fell into this group. I don't even remember how I got into the street theater group, but we were called Burning City Theater. So you can imagine: Burning City Theater. We did street theater 1960...it was probably late '68 I got involved, '68, '69. We did tours of Upstate New York, which is hysterical cuz now I live here. We actually did places that I live near. In February. What were we thinking? We didn't know. We were from New York City. Oh, you drive to Upstate New York in February. Oh! It's gonna be snow! Anyway, Burning City Theater, we did very political theater about [Peoples Park in Berkeley](#), anti-war things. It was a collective of men and women.

In the summer of 1970, we all moved to a camp in New Hampshire, a camp that wasn't being used, and we lived collectively for the summer. It was extremely wild, and there was so much stuff going on that I

was just oblivious too. But anyway, there we were, trying to do theater. And we were very dysfunctional. We couldn't function. So finally, somebody said, "The women were more functional than the men. So let's do some theater just women, OK?" So we pulled aside, and we started doing some workshops, just the women. We were not getting too far, and then somebody said, "Well, tell a story from your life." So one woman told a story for her life. Then somebody else told a story for her life, and we went on. We developed this amazing, gorgeous--I have the chills now--piece about our lives, different ages of our lives. That's how it went. It was phenomenal.

My piece was about when I was in 8th grade, watching American Bandstand--8th and 9th grade--not having a lot of friends. So I'd go upstairs, and I would dance with my closet door and live the whole life of American Bandstand with the kids and everything. Every once in a while, my mother would yell, "Who are you talking to?" [chuckles]. Anyway, it's a great story. And in fact, it is written down, which is unusual. It's in a book called "Guerilla Street Theater" by a man named Henry Lesnick who put together this whole book of street theater, of a lot of people. The book is out of print. I happen to own a copy. I'm so thrilled that I have a copy.

So we did this play, and one of the reasons we were doing a play is that we got invited to something called the Festival of Underground Theater in Toronto. I can't even find anything about it online. It's amazing; it's disappeared. We were there with [Bread and Puppet](#) and all these fantastic street theaters from all over the country and the world. We were given \$1000 to have a piece at this festival of underground theater. Well, the piece was this woman's piece. So we let them know we're doing a piece about women. Well, they were flipping out: "Oh my gawd! They're gonna burn their bras!" This is early woman's movement, you know? So we arrive, and they're really nervous. The scene there was so wild. I can't even tell you. There was so much drug stuff and weird stuff going on. Anyway, but we performed this piece, and it was spectacular. People loved it so much that they asked us to perform it again. Because it was about us. It wasn't man-bashing; it was about who we were as women.

Well, that was life-changing for me. I thought why am I doing anything else but this, you know? I asked the women in the troupe if they would consider just doing women, and none of them wanted to do that. So there were a lot of other things that went on, but I eventually went back to New York City. Oh, we also went to New York, performed it in New York City. We performed it a few places, and it was so well-received, I knew this was what I had to do.

So some of the women that saw it in New York, I got together with them, and we started doing workshops at a place called Alternate U, which was this Marxist university on West 14th Street in a loft. Yes, it was. So they gave us this space, and we started doing workshops for women. Somehow, just people, friends invited friends invited friends. We ended up one day--we were doing workshop after workshop, and finally one day--I looked around. I said, "This is it. Whoever is here today is in the troupe." And some people left. Some people stayed.

There were 10 of us, and I had a really good friend who had been in Bread and Puppet and another street theater troupe I'm blocking at the moment. I invited her. So there were 11 of us. We formed [It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre](#). We took the name. Those days, shamelessly, copyright meant nothing. There was a poem, who wrote, and she wrote "It's All Right To Be Woman," and we just took the name. In fact, we took her poem and used it too.

CHERYL: [laughs]

SUE: We gave her credit. We would say, "This is by her" [laughs]. So that's how It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre got formed in the fall of 1970. It came out of my being in street theater, seeing the power of women telling stories from their lives. The reason we would tell stories from our lives: television and movies at that time, and still forward, did not portray women as real women. There were not the roles of who we really were. Plus, this was the women's movement, and we were discovering that we had all kinds of thoughts and feelings that had never been acknowledged. We wanted a certain kind of--equality seems like a lame word--but we wanted to be who we were as powerfully as we could. So that's how this all came about.

The women's movement and being a feminist

CHERYL: You know, I joined Bread and Roses deliberately: oh, feminist radio collective! I'm in there. But yours wasn't so deliberate. You just oh, uh, let's just have the women do this. And then you show up at this festival, and they weren't expecting just women-oriented stuff. But it all started to come together when you didn't sort of ham-fistedly, "I have to do feminist theater!" But then it grew from there, and then you did.

SUE: And then it was clear to me that's what I had to do. I jumped into the women's movement both feet forward. I like to say I grew up in New York. I mean I really, the women's movement, I finally could be who I was, who I am. I'm a feminist. Oh my gawd! You know? And there I was, and there were all these other like-minded women. There we were, doing the same thing. The troupe was extremely successful. We would have performances in New York. We toured. We also went to Upstate New York, but we didn't go in the winter.

CHERYL: [laughs]

SUE: We toured to colleges, mostly cuz that's who would pay us, and women's centers all around. So we had these performances in New York City. What we decided to do, we said OK, Friday night would be men and women. Saturday night was women only because Saturday night was date night. We wanted to change what that looked like. Several of the women in the troupe were lesbians, and so we were changing what that would look like. Well, unbelievably--I mean, I didn't know that 500 people coming to a performance wasn't what everybody got.

So we would have these performances in New York City, and we'd have them in gyms or church halls. People would come and sit on the floor, and there'd be 300-500 people in the audience. I thought that that was normal. When I left and started doing other things, only 20 people showed up. I thought oh, what's wrong? No! That's the norm! So we would have these amazing audiences.

We had women who were having "aha" moments all over the place or women who came and went home and left their husbands [chuckles]. It's not like we were-- Our theater was about us. Some of it was about being lesbian, and some of it was not. There's one very famous scene. Well, actually, I started to make a documentary about It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre, and the funding wasn't there. So there is a 15-minute promo, which talks a lot about the theater. Which you can find at www.ItsAllRightToBeWomanTheatre.com. I had a reunion, and we did a lot of talking about things that people remembered. There's things that I didn't remember that other people did, and I things I remembered that other people didn't.

So we were together for six years. Halfway through, we had a split. It wasn't a gay-straight split. Some people remember it as those who supported the lesbians. I remembered it as a creative split: Those of us who wanted to do theater in a certain way, and those who wanted to do it in a different way. There

we were, a collective, and some of us decided who could stay and who could go. This is not a nice moment, not a good moment in the life of that theater troupe at all. But that's what happened. We finally disbanded at the end of 1976 with five members left. While I was doing it--and I'm not a person who always lives in the moment--I was living in the moment, saying to myself, "This is special. This is extremely special. Enjoy it." And I did.

CHERYL: I noticed that you never gave out your names. In all the write-ups, it was, "An actress said such and such. Another actress."

SUE: Right.

CHERYL: So you're doing this public storytelling. You're presenting your own stories, but also sometimes getting audience members to tell a story, and then you would act them out. Why was it that you remained anonymous through that?

SUE: Well, at the performances, we'd say, "This is Sue's story. This is Ellen's story. This is Lucy's story." We did. This was the late '60s, early '70s, and we made a conscious decision to deal with the media in a different way. We didn't want the hierarchy of So-so's a better actress than So-so. We didn't want that. I mean, it was true: there were people who were better than others in the troupe. So what? That's not the point of the troupe. So we didn't want that. Therefore, they didn't get our names. There's one story where the reason we have, actually, some of the video because no, none of this is written down. There are no plays written down. But we did manage to get two videos. One, Channel 13 in New York City came to us and said, "We wanna videotape a performance." This is 1972. This is amazing. So we said no [laughs]. It's like, "No!" So they came back. They were aggressive: "We wanna." "No." OK. All right. So then we decided OK, they have to pay us, it had to be an all-woman audience, and it had to be an all-woman crew. They said yes to all three. \$250. Pathetic. But that's what we got paid. All-woman audience and an all-woman TV crew.

The women on the crew were thanking us because they were having enormous trouble getting jobs in the industry. So there we were, providing all these women with jobs, and we got taped. They left some things out, and that was a big to-do. They left out the lesbian stuff. I don't remember this, but they told one of the women that their audience wasn't ready for it. This is 1972. Stonewall had already happened. Mmm. OK. So luckily, we had that tape of that performance. Then, our very last performance, which is, that tape is all 11 of us. Our very last performance was five of us. It's a very different kind of performance, and someone luckily said, "Gee, we should have this videotaped." We hired a women's crew, and they videotaped it. So that's how we have two plays.

CHERYL: That wouldn't happen nowadays cuz everyone would just pull their phones out and record it.

SUE: Yeah, or write it down.

CHERYL: Yeah.

SUE: I do senior theater troupe now. I direct a senior theater troupe. First of all, none of us are gonna admit to having a memory [chuckles]. And it's all written down. I've got it all on my computer, and I could bring it back up. It's a script. We read the script. We literally hold it in front of us and read the script.

CHERYL: So a lot of the stuff you did with It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre was improvised or partially improvised, right?

SUE: Well, yeah. What we did is we did workshops. We'd come up with an idea or a theme or a story. Someone would say, "Oh, I have this story." We would improvise. But then we set it. It became a set piece. There was no improvising, or there shouldn't have been improvising, during the performance. We did do this thing that we stole from another theater group called Dream Plays. What that was is someone would get up and tell their dream, and we would act it out on the spot. We got to be really, really, really, really good improvisational actors. So then, we even got to a place where we would even do a theme. Like, we were at a school, and we said, "OK, tell us stories about your teachers." Students would get up, and we would improvise it. So one time, we're at a school near where I grew up, at a college. In the audience are a couple of young people who I had taught in 5th grade. So one of them gets up, and she said, [laughing] "I'm gonna tell a story about my 5th grade teacher."

CHERYL: Oh my gawd.

SUE: And I looked at the troupe, and I went, "That's me! That's me!" [laughs] And she got up, and she told a hysterical story about me teaching in 5th grade. I didn't get up. I decided I didn't need to participate in this. So anyways, that was a lot of fun.

CHERYL: Oh, that's so cute. I know that it's easy for a woman to look at herself and describe herself through the lens of men and their relationship to men. Did you find that women did that or that they were able to put themselves at the center of their own stories?

SUE: There was always a theme, and it was usually about the woman's experience. We didn't do it enough that something emerged that I even looked at that. There were stories about relationships to men; however, we were the center of the story. It was about us. We were always the center of the story. You know, we wore jeans, and for a long time we went braless. Oy oy oy [chuckles]! There's a film of me and ugh.

CHERYL: [laughs]

SUE: And like little, skinny t-shirts and hairy underarms and hairy legs. Yeah, so we just decided we were who we were. Yeah. I think we didn't tell the stories through the lens of men. It was always through the lens of us. I don't remember women standing up and....If they had, we probably would've changed the scenario anyway, the way we acted it out. So we probably would've.

CHERYL: And in addition to performances, you did consciousness-raising workshops, self-defense workshops for women?

SUE: The consciousness-raising workshops would be theater workshops. So basically, we would do theater workshops using theater exercises that help women talk about themselves and those kinds of things. So that's what I would say. And the self-defense: We had a woman in the troupe, Roberta, who ran a karate school for women. So Roberta would lead those.

CHERYL: I know you had women from all different walks of life, gay women, straight women working together. Did you have women of color or women with disabilities involved?

SUE: So at that time, early woman's movement, even though several of us had come out of the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement, and when I was in college, I was very involved in racially mixed groups, we did not. Our diversity at that time was class. We had working class, middle class, and upper class. Although we never talked about that. That came out when we were at the reunion. There was class stuff, and we never said that. It's interesting. We talked about our lives all the time, and yet

that wasn't an analysis we made. Or not that I remember. Of course, this is through my lens. This is me talking about what I saw in the troupe.

So that inclusiveness of women of color, and now with seniors with disability, came later in my life. I was very involved with a group of African-American women. We were black and white women together, and we talked a lot and worked through things. But at that time, no. There was just not that. At the time we started, there wasn't a very visible, active women of color women's movement, which there was, but not very active. It became much more active later. If we had done theater later, maybe these women would've joined. On the other hand, here we were doing theater. We couldn't have full-time jobs because of the theater. So we were lucky we were able to live and have part-time work. Whether women of color could support themselves that way, maybe not. Just don't know. It just wasn't happening, and it's who we were. You know, I lived in New York City, and I paid \$150 for my fifth-floor walkup in the Village [laughs].

CHERYL: Wow [chuckles].

SUE: So I could afford not to have a full-time job.

CHERYL: Right, right. You can't even get a shelf in someone's closet for \$150 now.

SUE: That's right. Yeah.

CHERYL: Oh man. And I know people in New York live in each other's closet literally. Yeah.

SUE: Yeah, yeah.

[music break]

Arts and Social Justice

CHERYL: You mentioned being part of Civil Rights, and you've been involved in social justice your whole life. We've talked about feminism. Do you feel like being Jewish also played a role in your civic engagement?

SUE: For me, absolutely. I would say that's not true for all Jewish people, but for me, knowing the history, knowing about the Holocaust, experiencing anti-Semitism where I grew up-- Although, I had mostly Jewish friends, it still was clear certain things you could do or not do. For me, being Jewish was definitely about being an activist. That's what brought me to the Civil Rights Movement. I thought this is a no-brainer! Anti-Semitism, racism: there's a no-brainer here for me. This is how this all works together. So anti-Semitism, racism, feminism: same thing. So as a feminist, when I got more involved in working with women of color, and I would run up against feminists who didn't get it, who didn't understand about women of color and their role, I didn't get it. Because to me, it's all the same thing. Any bigotry, any racism, any sexism, it's all the same thing. It comes from the same place, and I want to work against it in the same way.

CHERYL: I would love to hear your perspective on the role of art and performance in social change movements. Cuz it's not just about marching or policy and legislation.

SUE: For me, all my art, as it turns out, all my creative work has always been in the realm of being meaningful and social change and social justice. I wouldn't have said those words, but I just knew it had to-- My art, for me, had to reflect some kind of better world or change that I wanted. So my theater, it's

All Right To Be Woman Theatre, all the women's theater I did, the courses I taught at Richmond College on State Island were all radical in some way. Working with the senior citizen theater troupe, although I would never use the word "feminist"--and just recently, we have a man in it for the first time--but they're telling stories from their lives. I'm the final editor of the piece. So I'm very careful about it is their voices. So there's some things I would never say, but I'm very careful about making sure that it's all very positive and uplifting. These are people telling stories from their past, which young people and other people are thrilled to hear. So in many ways, it's showing look, we had a past. We are still viable older people who are speaking.

My movies, all the films I make, are all wanting also to help with social change. My most recent movie-- Well, I made a movie about the hospice movement. And my most recent movie about Connie Cook. Now, it's interesting. Here's a movie about a woman who worked totally within the system. Totally. And she did powerful things. She decriminalized abortion in New York State in 1970 as a Republican, within the system. Without her, I'd still be on the streets-- Well, I may get back on the streets. But back in the '70s, one day I'm on the street protesting for abortion rights, and the next day I'm not. It's because Connie Cook got that legislation through. Yes, through the support of other people.

But it's interesting for me, who's always worked so outside the system, to make a film about a woman who worked totally within the system. So I think actually both places have a place, but not for me. I really like working, I like doing my own thing, and doing what comes from my heart, really. And from my heart is all about wanting a better life for everybody. So I think theater and film and music and dance are so powerful that it does change people's lives when they see these art. Even if it doesn't have a social justice theme, young people see something, think, "Oh, that's what I wanna do!" All the sudden, they have something else in their lives that they feel called to do. To me, that's extremely powerful. The fact that we don't have a support system in this country to support the arts and the way they are in other countries is--I'll use the Yiddish word--a shanda. It's a shame. It is. We should be ashamed.

CHERYL: Like you said, it provides a place for people who are working outside the system. And I think that's one reason that it's devalued at a higher level.

SUE: Well, there's also people working, also famous opera troupes and dance troupes and theater on Broadway, which is ridiculous expensive. They're supported, but yeah. It may be, and it may be also that those of us working outside the system have a message that the system doesn't necessarily wanna hear. So they're not gonna support it. But other people will.

CHERYL: Yeah, exactly. And also, like you were saying, art and performance is also documenting other people doing social change in different ways. And as you mentioned before, when somebody might see themselves reflected onstage, and they realize, "Wait a minute. There is a disconnect between what I see here and what's true in my heart. I need to change my life." That's so cool.

SUE: That's right. That's right. It's the same thing of young, Black boys--and hopefully girls--looking at Obama and saying, "Oh my gosh. There's a possibility here!" It's the same thing with art. They look on the stage, they see these things, they say, "Oh, there's this possibility here." There were several women's theater troupes formed after us, after It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre. So we had this legacy that went on. The thing too is I just heard a story this weekend that I had never heard that a woman I know dragged her 16 year old daughter to come see this documentary about Connie Cook and the work that Connie had done. "My daughter's like, "Ugh, ugh! I don't wanna go! Ugh!" They leave, and she goes, "Oh, it was a good movie." And then she turns to her mother, and she says, "You know, I really wanna do something that changes people's lives. I really wanna get involved. I really wanna...."

And I had never heard that story. I was like, yes! That's what I want. I want 16 year old girls to feel like they have the power to do something to change people's lives and their own lives.

CHERYL: Yeah. Not just put on makeup and find a perkier bra, yeah.

SUE: Yes.

BOTH: [chuckle]

[music break]

Women's Wisdom Play and Women's Wisdom Survey

CHERYL: So you have a new project happening right now that I just participated in. I would love to talk about--and I don't remember anything I wrote to you. I hope it was in any way useful. But I wanna talk now about the Women's Wisdom Play and the Women's Wisdom Survey. So the survey: you created the survey for this reading/play/multi-media event that you're gonna do in October, 2016 at Cinemapolis and Lifelong. You got a grant from the Community Arts Partnership of Tompkins County-- yay, grant-- and the New York State Council on the Arts to do the project. Yay, council. Do you already have an idea in mind of what the final multi-media performance event is gonna look like?

SUE: I don't.

CHERYL: Excellent.

SUE: I mean, I have a vision. I have a vision. I know in my head, I see it. Cinemapolis is a independent cinema in Ithaca. We're very lucky to have it. I happen to be President of the Board, but that's not why I'm doing it there. Anybody could do stuff. But I do. I can see the actors, and I can see the film behind them. I just don't know what the actors are gonna say or what the film is gonna look like. So I'm in the process of this survey, which is collecting data, essentially, which I'm gonna use in the reading and somehow onscreen. And I don't know how. I'm also interviewing women, some on my iPhone, which is new for me. And my film partner is here this week. I've got 10 days. He and I are working on five projects in 10 days to finish up. I'm working on a small pro-choice video, I'm working on the Women's Wisdom, and on and on. So while he's here, I am taping women talking about some of their advice and wisdom that they give. If you look on my Facebook page, you'll see two clips of this woman. She just cracked me up. So look. I put up two little clips of her talking about some advice. It's very sweet. So the survey was really to collect data and to use the data in a piece. But I'm also gonna work with five women who are actors. So I'll do some improvisation with them and not just use words from the survey but also see what comes up with them. I have no idea. I'm just doing this. I thought I wanna put film and theater together because they're my loves. I wrote this grant. They give out two of these grants in the County. I thought well, fine. I can write the grant, but great. I wrote the grant. I got the grant [chuckles]! I was like, OK! Now I gotta do this. So I'm working very slowly.

The survey will be done June 30th. I will download all the information. I'm working with a young woman at Cornell who is getting her PhD in theater. So she's gonna work with me and help me with it. For me, it's improvisation cuz improvisation's kind of how I've lived my life and how I do my theater. So I'm improv-ing this piece. I know it will happen. I know it'll be good because I'm working with fantastic women. I'm getting great answers on the surveys. Again, I just wanted to do something about women, about their wisdom, about their advice that was done multi-media. Because it's local, I'm just gonna use whatever film I feel like. This summer, after I finish a few little projects I'm doing at the moment, it is

what I'm gonna focus on for the rest of the summer. So I'll be writing, I'll be putting film clips together. I've been doing some workshops with the women I hope that I'm gonna work with. We'll see what happens. I will have it taped by our local cable access TV station. So I will have it on tape.

CHERYL: So this survey is not just local. Anybody can get online and take the survey.

SUE: I mean, the grant is supposed to be for women in Tompkins's County, but I really want it to be very broad. I want it to be a lot of different ages, and I really wanna hear what women around the country, the world. Cuz I've encouraged women to send it to their friends from around the world. What women have to say, really.

CHERYL: And this survey, it's a Survey Monkey survey. It's at surveymonkey.com/r/WomensWisdomPlay. It's open until June 30th, the survey. So I have really good timing [chuckles].

SUE: That's right. So you can look on Facebook too. It's on facebook.com/WomensWisdomPlay. So you can learn more about it there too. And for the Connie Cook documentary, it's ConnieCookFilm.com.

CHERYL: Another question about who can take the survey. What about transgender or non-binary gender people or someone who may have identified with girl or woman or female but doesn't now?

SUE: You know, there could be men taking this survey, and I would never know. So whoever takes it, takes it. I'm not asking that question. So the answers will be what they are, you know? I'm not being specific at all, for a reason.

CHERYL: I appreciate that because it's kind of part of the patriarchy for me to tell you who you are. Having it more open, I think does fit with the social justice framework that you've always had and the kind of feminism that you have that is to benefit all people.

SUE: Right, yeah. You know, I'm a second-wave feminist. I'm an old-guard feminist. I have conversations with a lot of young people about words and how people identify and the whole cisgender thing, which blew me away when I first found out about it. I was like wow! I had to look it up online. I'm like, what is this? So it's been an education for me cuz I am kind of stuck in second-wave feminism. I'm being forced out of it to look at things that I haven't looked at and do it with a feminist sensibility.

CHERYL: Do you appreciate that, or are you like, "Argh! I'm comfortable!"

SUE: You know, I'm comfortable. And I think, "Oh, I don't wanna be my mother or my parents." I do wanna be my mother in some ways. I don't wanna be of that generation that is so stuck. But I do find myself saying, "Oh, oh my gawd. How could these people do that? How do young people do that? [chuckles] I could never do that!" But I think that just happens when you age. Maybe not with everybody, but there are things that I'm comfortable with and I believe in. To see them questioned is scary, yeah. Yeah, yeah. And I wanna be open. So I do work at it. I have to work at it.

But I think I would say that in some ways, to be able to live the life I've lived and I'm living now, that it came out of, definitely, privilege. I've had some privilege. I had the sense of self to know that I could do back in New York City in the late '60s and '70s--I also owned a feminist bookstore--that I could do these things outside the system, and somehow I would be OK. Also, money never played a big part. I always just had enough to live on, and that was OK too. I wasn't amassing money, and as an artist, one does not amass money. That was OK with me. As I got older, and I understood that maybe I needed to have some money, I had to take, I mean I've had more traditional jobs. I ended my career in life as a fundraiser;

however, I did it for non-profits. So that was great, and it's a good skill to have because if you're an artist, being a fundraiser is extremely important. Extremely important, as it turns out. Otherwise, I couldn't have made any of my films or even done some of my theater work, cuz I operate a lot under grants.

So yes, there was a sense of privilege that I could do this even though where I came out of, people were like, "Oh my gawd. What is she doing?" But it didn't matter. Other people who wanna do arts or wanna do social justice, it's probably much more of a struggle, and I honor that. It doesn't seem hard to me, didn't seem hard to me. Now that I'm retired, I even have more freedom. I feel like so what? I'm making a two-minute pro-choice abortion ad, and I'm talking about my illegal abortion. OK! Go ahead. Put me in jail. You know? Right. I mean, it's like I don't care. I could just do so much more now. I think there's something about being older that can be, and it is for me, extremely freeing. So that is in my art. It's coming out in my art, and it's great. It's just I never thought I could be here. I'm having as much fun and enjoy my life as much as I did when I was doing It's All Right To Be Woman Theatre, which I thought would never happen again. Here I am, many, many years later having that same kind of creative input and thrill and doing the work I wanna be doing.

CHERYL: It doesn't surprise me because the film that you made about aging--

SUE: About retirement.

CHERYL: --about retirement, and it had that spirit to it. Like, OK, I'm retired. Let's enjoy life and not buy into the message that society gives you that now your productive time is over, so now you're not productive, and you're not valuable. You really challenge that in that movie, and you're living it.

SUE: I am. My role models are those people in their 80s and 90s. I just read this article about a woman who wrote her first novel when she was 86. I was like, "Yes!! OK, good!" And then somebody who's doing something at 92, and I'm like, oh. I needed it because I kept thinking, "Oh, am I too old? Oh, do I have--" So I see these role models. I think no, I don't have to stop. In fact, as I said to somebody, "What would I do when I stop?" And she said, "Well, you'd write your memoirs." I was like, "Uh, maybe." But I don't wanna stop. As long as my health permits it, I will go forward. I was just on a retreat this weekend, a woman's retreat as you know. Through one of the exercises, I got very in touch with my body, and this poem just came out about the aging body. You know, what we were doing when we were in our late 20s. You know, the troupe was mid-20s to late-20s. Actually, we did have one woman who was 20 years older. She was really a mentor to me, Lynn. And it's hard to believe she's 20 years older; she was so young in spirit. So that means she's still 20 years old, which means she's in her 90s! She's still perking. She just friended me on Facebook. I'm like, yeah!

BOTH: [laugh]

SUE: Lynn just friended me on Facebook! Go! So yeah, things have changed as we age.

Wrap-up

CHERYL: Remind people where they can find you online.

SUE: OK, so one place to go is CloseToHomeProductions.com, and that would link you to my movies, it would link you to Connie Cook, it would link you to the senior troupe, but it wouldn't link you to Women's Wisdom. I don't think I put that up. So Women's Wisdom, you wanna look at

facebook.com/WomensWisdomPlay. And for the survey, it's surveymonkey.com/r/WomensWisdomPlay through June 30th. And for the Connie Cook film, it's ConnieCookFilm.com.

CHERYL: So I can't thank you enough. And that time that you introduced yourself, and we discovered that I wrote about you in my thesis, but because you were anonymous, I didn't know it was you. So wonderful and exciting, and I really appreciate you taking the time to come on the show today.

SUE: I'm thrilled to have done it, really, truly.

CHERYL: Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more handy info on brain injury and disability art and culture on my disability arts blog, WhoAmItoStopIt.com.

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