

In the Act by Joan Hetherington

From a life in the theater, Margaret Rubin creates a theater of life.

All the world's a stage, Shakespeare declared, and all its men and women merely players. In Margaret Rubin's view, the opposite also holds true: The stage is the world in miniature--and the perfect place for us to play out and examine our personal dramas. "When it comes to making sense of your life," says Rubin, 61, a former actress who lives in Ashland, Oregon, "expressing yourself in a dramatic form can be deeply healing."

That idea isn't just an abstract theory; it's the motivation behind Rubin's "sacred theater" workshops, a business that grew out of her theater experiences about 10 years ago. These seminars use theater techniques to help participants (mostly women and "a few brave men," she says) creatively re-frame their way of looking at their lives. Through voice and movement exercises, writing dramatic pieces, improvisational acting, and discussions of plays they attend, her students come to see their lives as exciting works in progress, expressions of "high play."

Rubin's appreciation of the theater as a healing space is derived from personal experience. Her workshops are the latest act in a life played out largely around the theater--and they've helped her make sense of her own life, including a divorce and the death of her second husband.

Rubin made her first stage entrances as a child in Texas, acting in short plays her mother concocted for their neighbors. Her fascination with the theater led her to a degree in directing at the University of Texas in Austin, and in the late 1950's to roles in Ashland's summer Oregon Shakespeare Festival with her husband. In 1959, the couple headed east and plunges into New York's heady theater whirl.

That scene in Rubin's personal drama lasted only a couple of years; meanwhile her marriage dissolved, and wither her remarriage in her late 20's, she exited from stage life entirely for awhile. "I didn't have the stick-to-itiveness to be a real

actor," she says candidly. "My second husband was a writer, and he showed me a world of things I never knew existed." The couple moved to Los Angeles in 1962, where she shifted into doing public relations for a bank.

This placid, busy period shattered with the death of Rubin's husband in the early 1970's into what she calls "a broken time." Eventually, it was the theater that rescued her. On an impromptu tour of West Coast theaters, Rubin stopped in Ashland. "It felt like coming home," she says. A job in the Shakespeare Festival's education department soon brought her home more permanently. "It was the right time to make a change," she recalls, "and they were doing lots of new things, expanding the schedule, building an indoor theater." She also came home to acting, including what she remembers as her most challenging role, Brecht's *Mother Courage*.

The scene changed again about 10 years ago, when Rubin started working with author Jean Houston, a pioneer in the human potential movement. It was Houston who suggested doing a program on "sacred theater," and something clicked. "It was a real challenge to think about that "sacred" meant," Rubin says. And she realized that working within the art form of the theater, seeing life a a great story, was powerful way of releasing pent-up feelings and creating a coherent sense of things. In 1987, she left the Shakespeare Festival to pursue her ongoing fascination. Now, when she isn't working with Houston as a presenter of her theories, Rubin is usually conducting her own workshops in Ashland or other locations around the country.

"I still don't know quite what sacred theater is," Rubin admits. "I allow people to identify for themselves what the deep meaning or force in their lives is." Which is a big enough drama to occupy center stage for a long time.

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