

B.REAL *interview with*

Sara Sharpe

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Sara Sharpe is an award-winning actress, writer and certified Holistic Life Coach from Nashville, Tennessee. She is the creator of FESTIVE EVOLUTION: Art and Activism in the Twenty-first Century, an organization dedicated to helping artists mobilize their art and fan base for social and political change through ongoing educational programs and activities. Currently, Sara and Fest Ev host monthly meetings for female artists, in and around the Nashville area, involved in social change. Fest Ev is calling the initiative ARTEMIS: Women, Art and Change-making. Sara is the former Artistic Director and co-founder (along with singer-songwriter Steve Earle) of BroadAxe Theatre (Best New Theatre Company, 2001 Nashville Scene), Nashville's most political theatre and one which joins the long tradition of popular theatres working to unravel and express the root causes of social and political ills.

BR: Judging by your website, you've been juggling a lot of balls in the years since BroadAxe Theatre closed.

SS: Yes. It's the right brained approach to livelihood! I have fashioned a professional life the same way I decorate my house. I buy what I love—what I can't walk away from—and somehow it all seems to come together in the end. It's the same with "work." I follow my heart and launch or take on projects that I love and can't walk away from, and this is what I have ended up with so far.

BR: BroadAxe Theatre was, for all practical purposes, political theatre. Is your work as an artist still politically motivated?

SS: I always used to say that BroadAxe was political theatre with a lower case "p." Most of the work that the company produced was certainly issues-oriented. As I've gotten older, I'm less interested personally in making and producing art that's overtly political. My work is still issues-oriented, but at this point I'm more interested in simply telling stories—which is, and always has been, enough.

BR: Under the Festive Evolution umbrella, you have produced a docudrama/documentary, started a group called ARTEMIS: Women, Art and Change-making, written a book about "marrying yourself," worked with lawyers as a Communications Coach, and you've recently become a certified Holistic Life Coach. Is there any one thing that ties all of these different ventures together?

SS: Yes. More and more, all aspects of my life bear the same witness, as the Quakers say. The world needs healthy, energetic, fully realized citizens to tackle the many challenges we now face as a country and world. My book, along with the work I do as a Holistic Life Coach, address the healthy, energetic, fully realized part of the equation—all of the work I do as an artist and activist seeks to address those challenges in specific ways.

But, to be clear, of the things you mention, only ARTEMIS and the FAIRVIEW project come under the Fest Ev umbrella. Festive Evolution is an organization that supports and encourages artists who are socially and politically engaged, on some level. All Fest Ev initiatives meet at the

intersection of art and activism, with an eye on making the world a better place—planetary transformation, if you will. And then the book, as well as my work as a coach, are more about personal transformation—because, of course, we evolve collectively only to the degree to which we evolve personally. I didn't get that for a long time, but I get it now.

BR: Can you explain that?

SS: As a young person, I was very interested in saving the world. To that end, I devoted myself to social justice at the expense, often, of my health and family. I just had it all backwards. I learned the hard way that we have to, ourselves, evolve before we can evolve the planet. It's common, I think, to get the steps out of order. Because ultimately, the outer work that goes into changing the world is easier than the deep, inner work of personal transformation.

BR: You think?

SS: I do. We're all so outer-directed. I think most people will admit that it's easier to do than to be. Changing the world requires doing. Personal transformation requires being. Most of us find countless ways of distracting ourselves, all day, with pursuits that are noble or ignoble in varying degrees. But even the noble work of making the world a better place becomes a distraction if it keeps you from the sort of deep, inner work which is primary. I have friends and loved ones who know this and have always known this instinctively, but I had to learn the hard way.

BR: Meaning?

SS: Meaning that I have made mistakes that were dire—Mistakes that had severe consequences for me and for the people I love. Mistakes that were exceedingly painful, but which taught me a lot—because instead of crumbling beneath the weight of them, I got tenacious about deconstructing the dark and fearful places in my psyche that rendered me incapable of making healthy and empowered decisions. That newfound determination, along with the gift of ill health, forced me into a place of quietude for several years. For a long time, I was deeply focused on my inner work because I needed to be. But, of course, it's important not to get stuck there.

BR: So now, in your personal and professional life, you're trying to balance the two—doing and being; Changing your life, changing the world...

SS: Exactly.

BR: Festive Evolution is the new incarnation of a 501c3 formerly known as Festive Revolution with an 'R'. Can you explain the difference? And why the name change?

SS: Well, I like to say we evolved. The fundamental principle of Festive Evolution is that artists are among the greatest agents of change in the world. Festive Evolution, ultimately, is about art that moves the people and changes the world. But, Festive Revolution had a different focus.

BR: How so?

SS: I started Festive Revolution over a decade ago, just after 9/11, in response to our country's insistence on immediately beating the drums of war following the attacks on the World Trade Center. Festive Revolution was very political, and we existed to support the anti-war movement, which was vibrant, but which was the victim of a sort of media blackout. Karl Rove was telling us that there was no real anti-war movement, and that no serious politician would show his or her face at an anti-war rally. But even as the words were coming out of his mouth, there were huge demonstrations all over the world. On February 15, 2003, for instance, ten million people took to the streets, in cities all across the globe, to demonstrate against the war in Iraq. But you would have never known it in this country, because the national and international demonstrations weren't making the news. So there was no real discussion about whether or not we were going to war. It was just presented as the inevitable response, and if you questioned that, you were un-American. The only anti-war movement that was getting any attention was the celebrity one, for obvious reasons. But those brave souls—Steve Earle, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins, Sean Penn, etc., were getting crucified in public. It was an ugly time. In any case, that was what we had to work with, so Festive Revolution, at the time, was intentionally celebrity-centric, in addition to being artist-centric. We sought to support those celebrities and artists who were speaking out, and to train them so that they could speak out more effectively. Sean Penn was on our board, and we had an impressive celebrity advisory board which was helpful. But I was an inexperienced organizer at the time. I ran into some roadblocks that I hadn't foreseen—this well-known artist didn't want to be associated with that well-known artist because she was too hostile, or these grassroots artists didn't want to be associated with those celebrities because they didn't know their talking points or because they were still doing Gap ads...it was complicated. And then we ran out of time. Once the war started, the huge outpouring of support faded quickly. Everyone was exhausted and discouraged. It was a disappointment, but I learned a lot.

BR: And the name change?

SS: As for the name change, I invited Pete Seeger to a Fest Rev event, and I got a lovely, hand written declination from him, along with his Musical Autobiography and a p.s. that said, "see page 162-163." There I found his song, "If A Revolution Comes To My Country" which is about the perils of revolution. I was a Quaker Pacifist, but he had no way of knowing that. So the name was misleading. On some level, it repelled Pete Seeger, while attracting inordinate numbers of RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party) members. I was interested in a peaceful, festive Revolution; not a bloody one. And, ultimately, I'm more interested in Evolution than in Revolution. Hence the name change.

BR: And so does Festive Evolution still focus on artists and celebrities who are outspoken politically?

SS: No. Festive Evolution focuses now on art and artists. That was a specific campaign for a specific time. I still recognize that the celebrity factor can be hugely helpful in drawing attention to important issues. It's one of the most effective tools activist organizations have at their disposal. If you host a rally about child poverty, you might be lucky to get 30 people there. But if Marianne Williamson hosts that same rally, you might get 300 people to show up. And if Taylor Swift is singing at the rally, you might draw 3,000. And the more people who hear your message the better. So the celebrities are invaluable, and many nationally and internationally recognized artists are wonderfully generous with their time. They're willing to show up, knowing that they will bring out people who wouldn't otherwise come. But once you get people there, you'd better deliver more than a potential brush with some famous person or other. Celebrity doesn't move the people and

change the world, only art can do that, by telling the stories that most need to be told—with words, songs, pictures, etc. It all comes back to stories, artfully told. That's the focus of Festive Evolution now.

BR: Why stories?

SS: Because storytelling is in our DNA. Stories teach us, persuade us, define us and move us to action. They link us to our past and to our future and, most of all, they link us to each other; because stories are personal but they're also, always, universal. Storytelling is the real through line in my work—everything I do comes back to storytelling. My son laughs at this, because as good as I am at sussing out the story and writing about it, I can't tell a story to save my life. Neither can my daughter. We can't tell jokes either, for that matter—and I'm an actor! I get fuzzy on the details and chronology if I'm not writing. But in any case, Festive Evolution encourages artists to collect and tell stories via different artistic disciplines - stories that give voice to the voiceless and help us to understand the "other." FAIRVIEW: AN AMERICAN CONVERSATION—the documentary/docudrama you referred to earlier—is a collection of stories told with the express purpose of encouraging people to reach across the ideological divide to connect with folks who have very different religious and political beliefs. The work I do as a Communications Coach, with lawyers, all boils down to storytelling. I either help lawyers tell their client's story effectively or—and this is my favorite work as a coach in this arena—I help lawyers understand the importance of getting their client's story as way of bridging the cultural and sometimes socio-economic divide between them. Finally, as a Life Coach, I help my clients reinterpret the stories of their lives, past and present, and write the stories of their futures—empowering, intentional ones. We are the authors of the stories of our lives. Oh, and of course, my book is part of my own, personal story.

BR: The part about learning to love, honor and care for yourself.

SS: Yes.

BR: You wrote, *A Dress, A Ring, Promises to Self*: an unconventional wedding planner for one, nearly a decade ago and just published the book last year. Why did it take you so long to publish and distribute it?

SS: Maybe the simple answer is that self-publishing is easier now than it was when I first wrote it. The more complicated answer is I was more than a little embarrassed by the book for a long time. I gave it away to friends, over the years, but beyond that it didn't seem like anything I could or would seriously consider marketing.

BR: Embarrassed, why?

SS: Because as important as my ceremony was to me, and as much as I love this little book, it is very self-helpy, and for a long time the concept struck me as vaguely silly. Also, the story is inward as opposed to outward looking, and I judged it to be a bit frivolous – especially in light of the FAIRVIEW Project and other work of mine. When I performed my ceremony, all those years ago, I wrote and made promises to myself, which I grew into only very slowly. I planted seeds of self-care long before they bloomed and grew. The importance of this part of my story dawned on me equally as slowly. Only after I had given away my power for nearly two decades, and found myself sick and tired and incapable of being helpful to anyone, did I realize how important it was to take care of myself, first and foremost. Then the book seemed vitally important as opposed to silly.

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Eventually I gave a copy of *Dress, Ring, Promises* to a young, twenty-something friend of mine who fell absolutely in love with it and insisted that I make it available to other folks. I put a little blurb about it on Facebook in December of last year, and immediately received so many orders that I essentially took the month off to fill them. Who knew? I was building beautiful, handmade books at that point. And then I had another friend who offered to help me self-publish, and the entire thing seemed to take on a life of its own, so I went with it. I think you never know what's going to resonate with people. When I read it now, my 45-year old self shudders a bit at some of the writing I did a decade ago. Then again, I'm sort of amazed at how clearly I was writing about claiming my own power a decade before I actually did. And it's interesting and not surprising, ultimately, that once I did come into my own, the book jumped off of my personal book shelf and out into the world.

BR: With all that you've got going on, how do you find time for a coaching career?

SS: I now spend about two days a week coaching. I do have a lot of other things going on, but I believe that makes me a better coach. Coaching is extraordinarily satisfying work. Most of the people I work with are intensely creative, and all of them are relentlessly capable. They come to me because they need some help in jump-starting the process of forward momentum. I take the work very seriously. We can move mountains together when we move forward, steadily and with purpose. For folks who have stalled out, even a little and for whatever reason—low energy, self-doubt, lack of clarity—it can be life changing to work with a coach. And on my end, it's like watching flowers bloom.

BR: You talk a lot about what you call the “worldwide women's movement.” Can you tell us about that? Is it the third wave of the women's movement? And why are you so excited by it?

SS: This is my favorite conversation just now. I would drop everything to talk about the women's movement. I wouldn't call it the third wave, just because that's a construct that doesn't really work anymore. And in any case, what we're witnessing now isn't a movement so much as it is a phenomenon; one with global implications. The women of the world are moving, and not a moment too soon. It may or may not be true that we are at a choice point in history when it comes to the survival of our species. Sometimes I think that's undeniably true, and sometimes I wonder if we are indeed that powerful. But in either case, we do know that the planet is getting warmer, and that as it does, it will be the poor and vulnerable who will suffer most acutely. And so, I look to the women now. It's up to women and mothers to advocate for the world's children; all children, everywhere.

With 17,000 children dying daily of malnutrition and climate change threatening to make the problem worse, we've no time to waste. And if the fate of women and the fate of our planet are inexorably connected, as I suspect they are, then we, as women, **MUST** be about healing ourselves and our world. We must do the hard work of reclaiming our power—in our relationships, in the work place, in our communities, within our government and on the world stage. We have to bring our unique gifts to the table and we have to recognize and start talking about the fact that the Patriarchy has hurt men and women, both, and that it's time to balance the scales. This is not about replacing the Patriarchy with a Matriarchy; it's about balance—true partnerships—evolutionary imperatives. Of course, women in the west have unprecedented social, political and economic advantages and it's time, now, to use those advantages in a way that's very intentional. We have to start by taking the time to understand our history as women; our cultural origins, the Burning Times, Women's Suffrage, Second-wave Feminism etc. I'm making a concerted effort to educate myself now. Before we can take our rightful place at the table, we have to have a very clear understanding of why we were kept from and eschewed our place at the table in the first place. So we learn, together. But while we learn, we also organize. Starting now. We owe it to women who are still struggling mightily all over the world; women who are caregivers and keepers of the culture even in the midst of war and oppression and economic violence. The ARTEMIS group was born of this impulse.

BR: Last question. Tell us about ARTEMIS.

SS: ARTEMIS: Women, Art and Change-making, is group of women artists that Festive Evolution hosts monthly. We meet once a month, and every month I leave this circle of women artists with newfound hope and renewed energy. It's an especially powerful circle in that we are combining Art with the feminine instinct to fiercely protect the vulnerable and suffering. ARTEMIS women represent all different artistic disciplines and, as far as we're concerned, the term “artist” casts a wide net. We have seasoned artists as well as lawyers who are writing poetry on the side; we have musicians, actors, writers, etc., but we have also had music video producers and jewelry makers. The thing that draws the women together is a spark of creativity and a desire to do some good in the world.

BR: Sara, good luck with all that you've got going on.

SS: Thank you!

For more information about Sara and Festive Evolution and Holistic Life Coaching, please visit her website at www.sarasharpe.com.