

Synopsis

My ninth great grandmother, at the age of seventy one, was executed in the Salem Witch Trials. That is where we begin: July 19, 1692 on Gallows Hill. Susanna North-Martin was one of five women hung that day. Each crack of the rope brings us closer to her death, and in the moment before it happens we are pulled to the present where we meet our second main character “Me”. This theatricalized version of Susanna’s descendent acts as a guide or frame for this nonlinear memory play.

Susanna was accused a total of three times throughout her life. Informally through rumors at age nineteen, and then formally through the court system at ages forty seven and seventy one. This piece focuses in on those three moments in her life. The neighbors who resented her for the intelligence she refused to hide, the assault that started the rumors in the first place, and the infamous trial where her wit was not enough to save her.

In framing Susanna’s story, Susanna also provides a frame for “Me”. Interweaved are the connections she makes with her ancestor and the realization that puritan life is all too familiar to her own upbringing within the Mormon church. Coming face to face with the damage religion has done, with special focus on internalized homophobia and the threat of lost family, she must take the lessons learned from Susanna into an uneasy future.

Where we began is where we end. Gallows Hill. Susana, defiant to the end, approaches her death. All three actresses who play Susanna grasp the noose, and with the last crack of the rope it ends. In exploring: religion, community, family, trauma, and what happens to those labeled the other; we have two lives weaved together like the double helix that binds them.

Susanna
by
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CAST

*Me- High energy, quirky, nerdy, and a visibly butch lesbian.

*Young Susanna- Age 19- vibrant, sharp, strong, composed, hot headed, and full of wit.

*Middle Susanna- Age 47- " "

*Susanna North Martin- Age 71- " "

*Mary North- Age 20-sister. *Girl- Age 17- representative of all the "afflicted".

*Sarah Atkinson- Age 28/48 -neighbor.

*Ursula North- Age 30- stepmother. *Woman.

*Magistrate- a stand in for the many puritan elders. *Man 3.

*George Martin- Age 26/49-husband. *Constable- Age 40.

*Bernard Peach- 42. *Man 2.

*Lieutenant William Smith- Age 25. *Wagon driver. *Man 1- (John Pressey).

*Samuel Martin- Age 2- Susanna's youngest child.

Notes:

-All scenes take place in the town square set described in Act I Scene 1. It is the playing space. Scene changes should be implied with simple settings and props.

- A "/" indicates overlapping dialogue.

-Many of the cast can play more than one character. It is reflected in the cast list. Or you can employ more actors and divvy up the doubling.

Dedication:

For Susanna. This is her story and by telling hers, she let me tell mine. It is strange to see, 326 years later, so much has changed and yet so much hasn't.

And a special thank you to Lauren Hoover, dramaturg of Puritan culture and religion on this script.

ACT IScene 1

A town square. Buildings and a large tree all in sepia like a photograph worn by time. An A Capella puritan hymn: Psalm 100 "Shout to Jehovah all the Earth" starts. Color starts to bleed into the town like an ink stain. Deep, rich, earthy colors. The town is brought to life.

Song: "Shout to Jehovah, all the Earth.

Serve ye Jehovah with gladness.

Before Him come with singing mirth.

Know that Jehovah, he God is.

Tis He that made us, and not we.

His folk, and sheep of his feeding.

O, with confession, enter ye

His gates, His courtyards with praising.

Confess to Him, Bless ye His name.

Because Jehovah, He good is.

His mercy ever is the same.

And His faith, unto all ages."

When the song reaches the first "confession" we hear the gallows rope crack.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

And on the fifth: silence, the hymn stops, a special on an empty noose swinging from the tree branch.

The laws of motion bring the noose to a halt.

Vignette 1

A book drops onto a table and a desk lamp is turned on.

ME:

I am so sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Hi.

In a corner of the stage is a small area with a desk that holds a stack of books along with a rolled up poster, a chair, and something to put said poster on.

ME:

My brother has recently devoted time to family history and one day I got a text from him telling me that we are distant relations of Abraham Lincoln, Ginger Rogers, Bing Crosby, and Edgar Allen Poe. Which might explain why, in college, there was a raven that would follow me around. No joke, it tried to dive bomb the door to my apartment to get in. I named it Murray so that I would be less afraid. Then he said, my brother not the raven, that we are a direct descendents of a woman who was executed in the Salem Witch trails. The first play I ever read was *The Crucible*, and the trials have survived in infamy for over 300 years. So obviously my interest was piqued. I asked for her name; Susanna North-Martin.

ME puts up poster that shows a family tree.

ME:

Susanna beget Abigail, Abigail beget Joseph, Joseph beget Jonathan, Jonathan beget Stephen, Stephen beget Chastina, Chastina beget Emeline, Emeline beget Leonard, Leonard beget Fred, Fred beget Clara, Clara beget Andrea, and Andrea beget me. Ten generations.

Family history is very prominent in my life. I was raised in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or in layman's terms "Mormons". The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints will hereby afterword be referred to as The Church due to their request not to be called "Mormons", their name being incredibly long, and to separate The Church as an organization from its individual members. Now I say raised, because I am no longer a member. I left because, as my clothes and haircut rightfully imply, I am very Gay.

But in The Church, they piece together family trees dating back ten generations or more. So that they can do temple work for the deceased. Why do they do temple work for the dead? Well, for those not in the know, The Church believes that there are different levels of heaven, and that the only way you can be in the top level is if all of your temple work is done; whether it's done during your life or post mortem.

Baptisms and sealings for the dead are done by relatives either submitting the names of their late loved ones or by bringing in the names and doing it themselves. And they are baptized by proxy.

With each name some players from the past reenact the dunking in water for baptism by immersion.

Ginger Rogers baptized in 1997, George Washington baptized in 1887, Queen Elizabeth the first baptized in 1994, Alexander Hamilton, Tennessee Williams, Patsy Cline, Ben Franklin. By the time I was 16 I was the proxy for about 30 people. Members of The Church want their family to be sealed together for time and all eternity. It is a major point in The Church belief system, and if you are a member you commit time at some point helping with family history work.

Back to Susanna. I wanted to know more and I found a little bit about her here and there, but there wasn't much more than a couple paragraphs in any given book. Then I found the court documents. The University of Virginia created a digital archive of all the Salem court documents. When she was being tried, the afflicted girls fell into fits and Susanna laughed. When asked why, she said "Well I may at such folly". I mean how badass is that? I continued my research, found out as much as I could, and what started to form was a picture of her life. Early in the year of our lord 1640 Susanna and her family moved from England to Salisbury, Massachusetts.

Scene 2

Lights change to a sunny day.

Salisbury, Massachusetts 1640.

MARY:

(from off stage) Susanna! Slow down!

YOUNG SUSANNA enters laughing and running onstage past the gallows tree. Though she is active, not a hair is out of place. She is a very put together young woman.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Come, Mary. Tis only a bit further.

Enter MARY. Her hair is disheveled. She is short of breath.

MARY:

There was a whole patch of flowers back there. We should pick those and call our days work done.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Ursula wants/

MARY:

/I thought Father said we are to call her mother.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

You may call her what you will, but she is not my mother and I shall not lie. Ursula wants flowers for the table. An opportunity for exploration shall not be wasted. There are wonderful examples of God's great beauty just a bit further. Oh Mary, you look a fright. Sit down.

YOUNG SUSANNA starts to fix MARY's hair.

MARY:

Do not pull so hard.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

I will never understand how your hair never stays in place. It is as if the cap and yourself were strangers.

MARY:

Well I do not spend hours combing it.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

I do not/

MARY:

/Vanity is a sin.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

There is a difference betwixt vanity and making oneself presentable. Cleanliness is next to

Godliness. If you read more you would know that already.

MARY:

Ah, but I would miss the pleasure of you telling me, dear, wise, learned, sister. Ow!

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Apologies, sister. My learned hand has slipped.

Beat.

MARY:

Susanna?

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Yes?

MARY:

I was thinking we might take flowers for mother as well.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Tis a great idea, Mary. We can take them to her stone after Sunday Mass.

Beat. Beat.

MARY:

I miss her.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

I as well.

MARY:

Thank you Susanna.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

I will gladly braid your unruly hair/

MARY:

/No, thank you for your strength. Father has not been the same. Ursula means well. I- you are a great comfort.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

And you to me. There, finished.

MARY puts her cap back on.

YOUNG SUSANNA:
Let us go.

MARY:
Wait. Is this one of the flowers you were speaking of?

YOUNG SUSANNA:
Yes. Is it not beautiful?

MARY:
Tis a weed.

YOUNG SUSANNA:
No.

MARY:
Yes, tis called Blind Nettle. You brought us all this way for a weed. Come, there are some lilies back the way we came.

YOUNG SUSANNA:
Canst we stay to pick the nettle?

MARY:
Tis a weed Susanna.

YOUNG SUSANNA:
Once plucked, what does it matter; weed or flower? This weed will not spread once dead. Therefore the beauty carries no further harm.

MARY:
You simply want to keep walking.

YOUNG SUSANNA:
Yes.

MARY:
Very well.

YOUNG SUSANNA:
Come, this way.

MARY:
May we rest a bit longer?

YOUNG SUSANNA:
I bear no mind.

MARY flops down on the ground. YOUNG SUSANNA

sits.

MARY:

Lay down, sister. Play sky pictures with me.

YOUNG SUSANNA leans back on her elbows, not quite giving into the ground, and looks up at the sky.

MARY:

I see a horse.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

A carriage.

MARY:

A crown.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Mouse.

MARY:

Lion.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Dragon.

MARY:

Pirate ship.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

A sheep.

MARY:

Half and more of the sky be sheep, Susanna. That be their natural shape.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Very well. A stag.

MARY:

Where?

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Just there.

MARY:

A stag that is not. There be no antlers.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

The tree branches there. Look just here, the branch with the yellow bird, they be antlers for a mighty cloud deer.

MARY:

So you will not tell a lie, but to be a cheat is well within your graces?

YOUNG SUSANNA:

The game be sky pictures. When you look up are not the branches part of what your eyes see?

MARY:

Aye, but my eyes see also that it be not part of the sky. They are one from another separate.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

You speak truth, sister. You shall hence forth be known as Queen of all sky pictures.

MARY:

Thank you.

Enter WILLIAM.

WILLIAM:

May I ask what it is you are looking at?

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Sneaking upon strangers is not the best form of introduction.

WILLIAM:

Lieutenant William Smith. I am lodging with one Captain Wiggins.

MARY:

Mary North.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

When did you take up lodging there? We supped with them Sunday last and there you were not.

WILLIAM:

Tis a recent thing. I arrived Monday last. It must be my bad fortune to have missed your company. Tis a pleasure to meet you miss Mary and...

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Susanna North. Our father is Richard North, the

blacksmith.

WILLIAM:

There, we be strangers no more. Now what might you be looking at in the sky?

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Clouds.

WILLIAM:

Clouds...

MARY:

Some of the time clouds do make pictures.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

What does bring you out this way lieutenant? Tis not a common path.

WILLIAM:

I was told this was the fast way to town.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

One hundred paces west, thereabout is a large stump. Go north from there. You should come across the main road once more. If you come upon an open field you have gone too far. Adjust south east and you should not miss it. By all means do not let us keep you, sir. If you leave now, you could be there and back again by the suns setting.

WILLIAM:

Many thanks. It has been a pleasure. I do hope our paths cross once again. Good day to you both.

MARY:

Good day.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Come Mary, let us return. I am sure we are missed.

MARY:

You did say you wanted to stay longer.

YOUNG SUSANNA:

Now I say we should return. It is one thing to explore the woods, it is another to be in the company of a man we do not know.

Scene 3

As MARY and YOUNG SUSANNA exit, MIDDLE SUSANNA enters carrying a bucket of milk.

Amesbury, Massachusetts 1669.

MIDDLE SUSANNA carries the bucket into the kitchen where she is starting to prepare supper. MIDDLE SUSANNA starts to churn the milk to butter.

SAMUEL:

(from outside) Mother, mother, mother, mother!

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

(calling outside) William come bring your brother, then go help your Father. He is in the shop. Abigail do not let the chickens bully you. Make sure the small one eats.

MIDDLE SUSANNA goes offstage and gets SAMUEL.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Thank you William. Samuel would you like to help mother with the beans?

SAMUEL:

Yes.

MIDDLE SUSANNA places Samuel on a bench and walks him through prepping the green beans.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Remember, we break off the ends and put them in this bowl. Then we put the other side in this bowl. Now you do one. Wonderful. Keep on. (calling outside) Jane, stop folding a moment and help your sister, I fear the chickens will win.

MIDDLE SUSANNA keeps churning.

SAMUEL:

Tell me a story.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Is that any way to talk to your mother?

SAMUEL:

Please, story?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Which one would you like?

SAMUEL:
Bird!

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
I did tell you that one just days since.

SAMUEL:
Again.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
Very well. There once was a yellow finch. She was small and not blessed with much strength. But the good Lord did see fit to bless her with a strong voice, and fast wings that did carry her swiftly through the air. On a day such as this one the yellow finch was soaking in the bright warm sun, but unbeknownst to her deep in the grass a snake did slither closer and closer still to where the finch stood.

Off stage the sound of a horse and its rider approaches the house. The rider stops, and the sounds of far off talking filter through the window. The talking is not distinguishable.

SAMUEL:
Mother?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
What is it dear?

SAMUEL:
Story.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
Yes, the snake. The snake did come closer till it did ready to strike. The snake did dart out its tongue as snakes are wont to do and that is when the yellow finch took notice and took off in flight. The wings God did give her did save her live.

The outside conversation ends. Horse and rider leave.

SAMUEL:
Why did the snake want to hurt/

GEORGE:
/(off stage) Susanna?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
I am in the house George.

MIDDLE SUSANNA still churns.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
What is it you did ask, Samuel?

SAMUEL:
I say why do-

GEORGE enters.

SAMUEL:
Father! I am helping with beans.

GEORGE:
You are a wonderful help.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
Who was the rider?

GEORGE:
....

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
Samuel, go help Jane. She is with the chickens.

SAMUEL:
Yes, mother.

Exit SAMUEL. MIDDLE SUSANNA takes over with the green beans.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
If something is the matter, George, tis best to speak it plain.

GEORGE:
.....

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
George?

GEORGE:
The rider was deputy Bagly.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:
And?

GEORGE:

You are to go into town tomorrow to meet before the judge.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Why?

GEORGE:

He would not say. Do you know of a reason?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

I have not done a thing worthy of trial, George.

GEORGE:

Is there anyone angry with you?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

I know not.

GEORGE:

Did you let your temper get the better of you? Did you speak harsh words to anyone?

MIDDLE SUSANNA stops prepping the green beans.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Oh.

GEORGE:

Oh?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

I did not speak harshly, I spoke true.

GEORGE:

Susanna?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

You were away on delivery. Christopher Bartlett come Wednesday last to pick up his chains. I say to him one pound. He says you told him five shillings and that he will not pay penny more. Did you not say a pound?

GEORGE:

Aye.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

So I told him true. He is a liar and a thief.

GEORGE:

Susanna.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

He is both and thirdly a fool. But gave me the honest price, and was on his way. I thought nothing more to come of it. Tis certainly not an offence meant for trial.

GEORGE:

Can you think of nothing else?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

No, I can not.

GEORGE:

Well, tis likely a bout of wounded pride. Why must you do this?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

I will not be swindled, George.

GEORGE:

Aye, but must you speak so harshly?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Why is it the truth do always sound harsh to those who would not speak it?

GEORGE:

The truth will not put bread on our table when neighbors cease to do business with me. Over time your words be taken for insult; you risk retaliation. We cannot afford to anger those with station and coin enough to make truth of their own. All I ask is you hold tight to your temper and not let it be lost among the winds.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

My temper was and be still firmly in place. Would you had rather have me take what Bartlett gave and not what was owed?

GEORGE:

No. I would rather there be no problem. That Bartlett would turn to be an honest man.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Then why put his blame upon me?

GEORGE:

I put no blame on you.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

That is what it sounds to be. You ask change of me when the original wrong be another's. You would have me hold my peace for men like Bartlett to hold their lies, their pride, and their coin. I wonder at you George Martin.

GEORGE:

I do not blame you, but restraint is needed. Others will not change. We need-

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

I will not-

GEORGE:

Listen to me. Hannah would-

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

I am not Hannah. It has been five and twenty years, George. I am never going to be Hannah. She may have been a better wife than I, but I can be none other than myself. It be tiresome to try to be less than myself for anothers comfort. Please do not ask that of me George.

GEORGE:

I- I am sorry. I meant- Worry clouds my mind.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

The storm shall pass.

GEORGE:

I know not whether I may talk sense to Bartlett. You may have to offer apologies to avoid a fine.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Only if he does the same for trying his hand at cheating his neighbors out of labor spent.

GEORGE:

I doubt he will.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Then I doubt I will do more than offer it as a misunderstanding.

GEORGE:

Will the children be fine with Jane as their keeper?

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

Yes. Tis best not to take them along.

GEORGE:

I hope we are to be done with this business with haste.

MIDDLE SUSANNA:

I am sure it will. We are in the right of this. A few words spoken from you will end this folly. Will you fetch me a cabbage for dinner?

GEORGE:

Of course.

GEORGE tentatively kisses her forehead and exits.

MIDDLE SUSANNA offers up a silent prayer.

Vignette 2

ME:

In this book (holds up 'a witch in the family') it says "Susannah was singled out because she was a smart capable woman who should in her own best interest have held her tongue more than she did. She might also have made more of an effort to put others-- especially those who were not as intelligent as she-- at ease in her presence." He follows it up with " Of course, none of this is grounds for what she was forced to go through." Somehow, the after thought doesn't quite dispel the blame does it?

I wonder if Susanna ever prayed for God to change her?

I felt from a young age that I was not enough. And at the same time I was "too much". I got it from all of my teachers; I ask too many questions and I talk too loud. I even get it from my father. The thing my Dad says to me most is "I love you". Second on that list is "be quiet". I know that he doesn't mean the way it sounds, but the effects of pointed words from a loved one are powerful.

So from six years old to well into college I asked God everyday to "please help me be quiet". I knew I liked girls since I was in Kindergarten. I knew what that meant, understood what the Bible said about it, and what my parents thought about it when I was