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Meet Karla Sorenson of Merrimack Valley Playwrights in Lowell



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Today we'd like to introduce you to Karla Sorenson.

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Karla, please share your story with us. How did you get to where you are today?

As often happens with these things, I was “volunteered” to run Merrimack Valley Playwrights after the person who founded the group moved away. It was a matter of, “Hey, Karla, you’d be good in this position.” I wanted MVP to survive – essentially providing a supportive environment where playwrights have their work read and critiqued – so I’ve been leading the group since 2013. It’s been a wonderful – and often educational – experience.

As for playwriting, I also kind of fell into it. I was not a “theater kid” in high school, and my first experience with playwriting was as an elective in graduate school at Harvard. At the time, I was also working as a technical writer, and I was surprised by the similarities between the styles of writing, both necessitating concise and precise language. You have a limited amount of time and energy to engage a live audience, so you must make each word count. In my experience, technical writers are well represented among playwrights.

Around the time I took control of MVP, and after several years consulting for startup companies in the Boston area, I declared myself a refugee from the high-tech world and began to focus on playwriting. Someone recently asked me, “What kind of plays do you write?” I didn’t have a good answer at the time, but, upon

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reflection – and like many writers – a good deal of my work is autobiographical in the sense that the stories are inspired by my own experiences and interests. I don't typically write two-hander, romantic comedies, although sometimes I wish I did, because they're very popular (and economical) to produce. Instead, I focus on the people who aren't usually represented on stage. The working class. Young women. Neglected historical figures. My father – a World War II veteran and drinking companion of Jack Kerouac according to family lore – died when I was ten years old, and he's been featured quite liberally in my plays – as a fictional character, of course – my way perhaps of immortalizing the man I never knew, in addition to mining some good dramatic fodder.

The wonderful thing about being a playwright is that it gives you the opportunity to experience the thrill of applause, as you touch people or simply entertain them. It's the nature of theater itself, the catharsis of a shared laugh or tear. When people come up to you after a show and they say, "How do you know my family so well?" or "You got it just right," you know that you've hit your mark. It's not like reading a novel or even seeing a movie, where there is so much space between you and the protagonist. In the theater, you're actually in the same room as the protagonist! So you can't escape the immediacy.

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Of course, playwriting and theater are all about collaboration. That's where Merrimack Valley Playwrights comes in. The group provides the camaraderie, talent, experience, and sometimes sheer brute strength that you need to go from "page" to that elusive "stage." So many MVP members are outstanding artists across genres. Playwright, performer, and novelist Joanna Rush of Lowell, North Hampton, and NYC says of the group, "As an actor, I'm constantly exposed to exciting new writing. As a writer, I feel inspired and nurtured. As a human being, I'm grateful for the warmth, openness and brilliance of the artists of MVP."

It is also wonderful how art can beget art. I recently had a production of a play that referenced pieces of modern art – in all its wackiness – notably, a tall sculpture made entirely of "sporks" (and a lot of glue). When the curtain opened, lo and behold, there stood an actual sculpture, which had been made by the director's artist friend. After the production, the artist took it back to complete the piece. That was a first.

Has it been a smooth road?

Like any type of creative venture, being a playwright requires extraordinary perseverance and a really thick skin. In many ways, you are exposing yourself to an audience that might not appreciate what they are seeing or understand it – or maybe the work isn't your best or

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the director phoned it in or a cast member is sick. The whole enterprise is rife with so many single points of failure, it's amazing that any play is performed successfully. (I once had a director call me, 24-hours before opening night, as the ambulance was coming to take him to the hospital for a thankfully non-life-threatening condition.) It's a testament to the dedication and hard work in the theatrical world that most shows do indeed go on.

Also, you have to accept that not everything you write is going to be a hit. Groups like Merrimack Valley Playwrights are invaluable in helping you hone your work, so it's the best it can be.

There is also a lot of unappealing grunt work in being a playwright. It's not just the writing that can be difficult, it's the rewriting and the submissions and the rejection and more writing. To get readings or productions, you (and hundreds or even thousands of others) submit plays to various contests and the few theater companies that accept new work, often with esoteric rules and requirements, sometimes down to the font size. And even if you get that rare production, one often has to "self-produce" and find a director and actors. Still, you do it out of necessity, because otherwise a great play might just sit on your computer hard drive, and plays are meant to be seen.

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As Merrimack Valley Playwrights does more public readings, I've had to act as producer, a role in which you get all of the headaches and none of the accolades, as Jerry Bisantz, my friend and colleague from Image Theater, once said. But, as it turns out, the theatrical production process is eerily similar to that of producing a software or hardware product, so my high-tech experience has come in handy. You have a disparate group of people – some technical, some creative – with a single goal. There are many competing interests – and lots of interesting personalities – and the same feeling of relief and pride at a successful outcome. Also similarly, you are soon planning your next project, so there can be no respite.

I would say that the most difficult problem for any cultural group or artist is publicity for events. While the Internet is hugely valuable, most people access “silos” of information. You can reach an audience, but it tends to be the same one, over and over. Years ago, we had print (and then electronic) versions of The Boston Phoenix, The Village Voice, and other publications, places where you could go to see what was going on. I read these things religiously. Now, I often find that an interesting event was held locally, but I was not aware of it. And then of course there's the problem with getting folks to come out. You need people in the seats. Nowadays, we are all competing with iPhones and streaming media,

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but once exposed to live theater, people still become hooked, and that's a good thing.

So let's switch gears a bit and go into the Merrimack Valley Playwrights story. Tell us more about the business.

When I took over running Merrimack Valley playwrights, I wasn't exactly sure what to expect. In fact, I was surprised that people kept showing up for meetings every month. Since then, the group has expanded its membership and scope, with more public events like PopUpPlays ("theater where you least expect it"); full-length play readings at The Hearing Room, a cool performance space in Lowell; and participation in last fall's Creativity Festival. We have no permanent performance space, unfortunately, so we go where the people are.

Group members range from new playwrights and actors to very experienced people, with members coming from Boston to southern New Hampshire. Merrimack Valley Playwrights is a bit unique in terms of a writer's support group; our actors are equal to the playwrights, as befits their important role in interpreting one's work. The group meets every month, typically upstairs at The Old Court, an Irish pub in downtown Lowell. We're a good fit for the place, and the Irish owners appreciate the group's work.

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Each month, we read up to five plays, depending on length. Good criticism – objective, kind, straightforward – is extremely useful to a playwright. It’s a skill to deliver it, and also a skill to be able to accept it; at the same time, you have to maintain the courage of your artistic convictions. There is an element of trust involved – again, the writers really put themselves into their work – and it’s crucial to be able to take chances. Lots of fabulous plays have broken all the “rules.” The Beatles threw the rules of harmony, and they did pretty well.

Lowell playwright and MVP member, Jack Dacey, says, “MVP meetings are not an occasion to cut the legs out from anyone or berate them in any way. Emphasis is always placed on what works well, or what might work better – that sort of thing. You begin to get a sense of what is worth keeping and what needs to be fleshed out. Shorten this, lengthen that. All things considered, I believe MVP has made me a better playwright.”

But it’s not just about work – another MVP difference. As member Lynda Blair Vernalia of Westford says, “MVP is my Cheers. Everybody knows my name, and I’m always glad I came. My favorite day of every month.” It’s an apt metaphor. A lot of people come early, some have dinner in the pub, and some people stay late. Over the years, the group members have forged strong personal and professional bonds. Chet

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Hertz, a member from Andover, says that MVP “provides me kindred community in what is otherwise the largely solitary endeavor of playwriting.”

But it’s not a mutual admiration society. I like to think of it more like a modern “salon,” similar to what the 18th century Transcendentalists had in Concord, where they similarly supported and encouraged each other. Lowell and the surrounding areas also have an amazing number of visual artists, musicians, filmmakers, and small theater troupes, who all come out and attend each other’s events and provide the support that we need to survive.

MVP often works directly with Lowell-based Image Theater, which focuses on local playwrights and new work. It’s a symbiotic relationship, where we provide them with plays and actors and directors, and they give us the opportunity to see our work in front of a live audience, with the full attention of a director and actors. It’s another nice payoff for group members.

How do you think the industry will change over the next decade?

As playwrights, we need to maintain our audiences, and they are maturing, so it’s vital to attract new people to live theater and performance art. To do this, we must produce work that interests them and make sure audiences see themselves on stage. It’s encouraging that Merrimack Repertory Theatre, under Artistic Director

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Sean Daniels, is focused on new work, and much of it reflects a potential new audience. It would be wonderful if more theater groups shared this goal.

This season, I was honored to be selected as a Cohort at the Merrimack Repertory Theatre, which allows me to attend rehearsals for the season's plays and witness up close the work of incredibly talented people from around the country – technical people, actors, directors, and playwrights. It's really like being a kid in a candy store. I've learned a lot, especially about what's possible on stage. And again, I think that level of excitement opens up theater to more people. It's not just two talking heads; as Shakespeare proved, you can stage entire battles. It helps to have a ready audience that is receptive to new work and the risk it entails, not to mention a decent budget.

Unfortunately, in the current national political environment, funding for the arts is under attack. Still, I see the so-called Gateway Cities becoming more important, as far as nurturing a creative community. Everyone is priced out of Boston and Cambridge, and there is no doubt that the arts bring in money. But as I said before, part of the battle is just getting folks to come out, so we need a welcoming atmosphere, in addition to making people aware of what's going on in the community.

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There is so much potential in Lowell and the surrounding areas, and we are lucky to have a great group of artists, a supportive community, and progressive local government. If there is one missing element – speaking as one of the many itinerant theater groups that produce their own work – it would be an affordable and right-sized performance space, the proverbial “99 seat theater.” Seriously, I would kill for stadium seating. However, if Merrimack Valley Playwrights has to bring theater to where the people are, then that’s what we will continue to do.

Pricing:

- Group is free to join, with voluntary monetary donations to cover cost of website, etc.

Contact Info:

- **Website:** www.mvplaywrights.com
- **Email:** mvplaywrights@outlook.com
- **Facebook:** www.facebook.com/merrimackvalleyplaywrights/

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