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CITIZEN-TIMES

Tuesday, October 25, 2011

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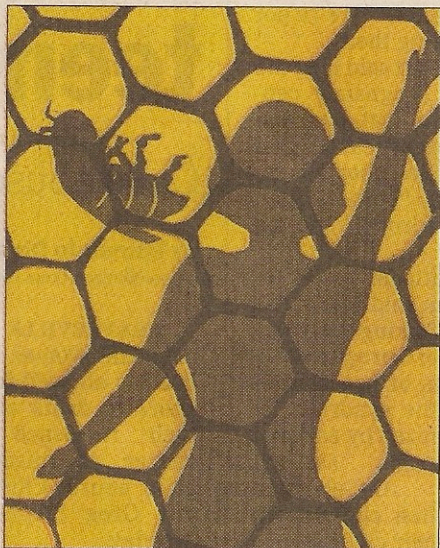
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BEES AND
BREAST
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SURVIVOR'S PUPPET SHOW LINKS
ILLNESS TO ENVIRONMENT LIVING/B4



Stung by cancer

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Puppeteer Lisa Sturz draws inspiration from bees in depicting her battle with breast cancer

SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

By Casey Blake

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ASHVILLE — There's just nothing cute about cancer, even if you work with puppets all day.

That's what Lisa Sturz, an Emmy Award-winning puppeteer who lives in Asheville, found out when she was diagnosed with breast cancer last year, the day after becoming engaged to her now-husband, Mark Blessington.

"Cancer is not middle of the road, but confrontational and edgy," Sturz said. "People assumed that because I'm surrounded by happy, artful puppets all day that I must just be filled with joy all the time and carefree, but the

cute teddy bears with the ribbons eventually got on my nerves."

So in true Lisa Sturz fashion, she created a performance to express all of the most uncute aspects of her battle with breast cancer, from raging against the radiation machine to being left without taste from chemotherapy, to the toll it took on her personal relationships.

This time, however, Sturz left the marionette strings behind in creating "Beesting," a show of animated images created with shadow puppets on overhead projectors. "Beesting" follows Sturz's personal struggle as a metaphor for the declining bee population, addressing a host of environmental issues intertwined with her own story.

"'Beesting' emphasizes the imbalance of the feminine in Western culture and how it is manifesting in the disease of our breasts and the pollution of Mother Earth," Sturz said. "The visuals explore the similarities between the shape of the breast and the traditional hive."

'Everything faded to black'

The day Sturz received the biopsy that would turn her world upside down, she was on top of the world in every part of her life. She had two happy, healthy kids, had just become engaged the day before and was on her way to Atlanta for a two-week run of "Aesop's Fables" at the Center for Puppetry Arts, a gig that she

called "the Cadillac of puppetry performances."

She squeezed in a biopsy of a lump in her right breast before leaving for Atlanta — a task that had become pretty routine since she had developed cysts fairly often all through her life.

"The following day I performed three shows and was able to block out my worries, still assuming the results would be clear," she said.

But they were not. Sturz had developed an especially aggressive form of triple positive breast cancer, a subtype that requires immediate and intensive treatment.

"The following morning as the lights came up on the puppet show, inside, everything faded to black," she said. "For the next 13 months, my

life revolved around doctor appointments, bees and naps.”

Sturz had to cancel several performances, postpone a video shoot in California and train young puppeteers to take her place, not knowing how long it would be before she could return.

“I was feeling worthless and afraid,” she said.

One of Sturz’s most profound experiences through her journey with cancer happened in one of the least poetic settings imaginable — the inside of an MRI machine.

“I’m lying here on my stomach inside this huge machine and it’s just so loud and claustrophobic — it was awful,” she said. “But as I let

myself relax, the loud hum of the machine transformed into the sweet humming of bees, and I imagined that I was invited inside the ancestral hive to take counsel with the queen.

“I was transported to a deep place of sisterhood and communal support,” she said. “I didn’t realize it yet, but the sounds and images that comforted me would evolve into a concept for the shadow play.”

Dropping the cute

After her diagnosis, Sturz sought out a nontraditional medicine woman who advised her to “learn from the cancer on a spiritual level” and that her artistic priorities needed to change.

“Trying to support a family on a puppeteer’s erratic income, I often compromised political and religious convictions to create work neutral enough to accommodate the politically correct needs of public schools,” Sturz said. “I enjoy supporting school curriculum and inspiring young audiences; but the medicine woman advised me to throw that aside and listen to what my heart was saying.”

So she did.

Through the fog of chemotherapy, Sturz started drawing storyboards and writing poetry, “faster than I could think,”

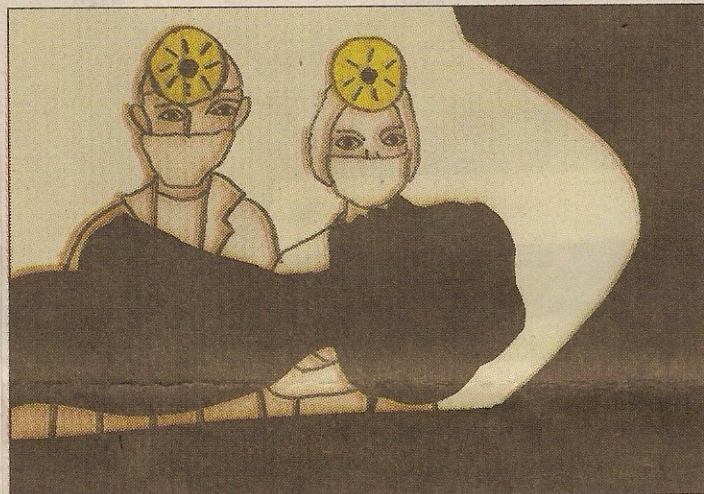
using her buzzing MRI inspiration as the backdrop.

A few days before a local puppetry slam, she decided she wanted to create a show to perform.



Diane Tower-Jones, left, and Lisa Sturz are making a film called “Beesting” about Sturz’s experience with breast cancer. The story follows the life and dreams of Sturz, a puppeteer, as she uses different forms of puppetry to express the physical, emotional and spiritual challenges of having breast cancer.

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In this scene from “Beesting,” Lisa Sturz depicts her experience in an MRI machine that inspired the film. SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

BEE: Sharing the hard part

“I knew I needed to make this happen,” she said. “I just needed to express it.”

The last-minute puppet slam routine quickly evolved into a mature shadow play, which Sturz has performed several times and won the award for “Breaking Boundaries” at the Asheville Fringe Festival this year.

She enlisted the help of close friend and filmmaker Diane Tower-Jones to film a high-quality version of the 10-minute play, and the two are now in the early stages of a full-

length documentary chronicling Lisa’s story and the making of “Beesting” through the use of puppets.

“Cancer is everyone’s worst nightmare, but puppets have a singular ability to coax meaning and healing from the shadows,” Tower-Jones said. “There is a tendency in this culture that if something is sad or frightening, you just put a pink ribbon on it and call it something else. This is an opportunity to make something very real and truthful through a medium that feels non-threatening.”

Much of the documentary will be staged scenes depicting Sturz’s dreams and fantasies through her breast cancer battle, using puppets as the scene’s actors.

In one of the scenes Sturz described, a newspaper headline reads “Beware, puppeteer loses control,” with a photo of an angry Sturz surrounded by a heap of tangled marionette controls.

A marionette of Sturz then “freaks out” and turns the radiation guns on a line up of teddy bears wearing pink ribbons that decorate many of the waiting rooms she sat through day after day.

“The reality about cancer is that you don’t always feel strong and stoic and inspired,” Sturz said. “Sometimes you’re just angry and frustrated,

and this scene shows that side truthfully.

“Breast cancer is a sisterhood, and we really are all in this together,” she said. “For me, being in it together means sharing the hard parts of our stories, and this is the way I know how to do that.”