

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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LUCY MERCER

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2017**

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INTERVIEWER: Debra Schwartz
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In this oral history, founder of the Throckmorton Theatre Lucy Mercer recounts her life and the story of the Mill Valley cultural institution she created. Born in Santa Rosa, Lucy grew up in various towns and cities throughout the Bay Area. After graduating from high school, Lucy moved to Sausalito; and then in the early 1980s, with a family of her own, she moved over to Mill Valley. Lucy recounts how she was initially drawn to the site at 142 Throckmorton Ave. as a large public gathering space in the heart of downtown that could foster new and deeper connections within the community. She describes her research into the history of the original theatre — going back to about 1912 — and the process, upon acquiring the property, of renovating the building. The Throckmorton Theatre opened its doors in 2002. Throughout her oral history, Lucy shares her vision of how art and performance provide us with emotional experiences which give us insights into the human condition and bind us together as a community.

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Oral History of Lucy Mercer
December 26th, 2017

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Lucy Mercer, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:00 Debra Schwartz: Today is December 26th, 2017 — the last [interview] of 2017. My name is Debra Schwartz. I'm sitting here on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library, and I'm sitting with longtime Mill Valley resident, mom — who from the schools I know, since our children have grown up together — and the founder and the owner of the Throckmorton Theatre. I'm with Lucy Mercer today. Lucy, thank you so much for talking with me today. I know it's a really busy season, and that you made time for our oral history collection is so much appreciated.

0:00:49 Lucy Mercer: You're so welcome.

0:00:51 Debra Schwartz: Lucy, I'm sitting in your office today surrounded by — [chuckles] I don't know — a chaos of color, and it looks like there's a little bit of everything that's ever gone on in this theatre. Is that an accurate description?

0:01:10 Lucy Mercer: Probably so, I pull it into my office and layer it in. And occasionally, then, I have to pull it all out and create order again.

0:01:21 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, well there's an odd sort of order to it all, I have to say, but that's the arts. First of all, before we get going on about the theatre — 'cause I've talked with you many times and I know you have done your own research about the Throckmorton Theatre and the building itself — I would love to get a little information about your family and what brought you to Mill Valley and when?

0:01:48 Lucy Mercer: I moved, I think, first to Sausalito. How old was I? Maybe early 20s. And from there I moved into Mill Valley to have a family, actually. We were thinking about having a family. I met my husband during the time that I was in Sausalito, and then we moved into Mill Valley together.

0:02:15 Debra Schwartz: And so — Danny I know from when our kids were in school together — then this would have been in what year approximately that you moved from Sausalito to Mill Valley?

0:02:26 Lucy Mercer: Early '80s, I believe. That would be about early '80s because we were married in '82.

0:02:39 Debra Schwartz: So you've been here for a good long lot.

0:02:40 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, for a long time.

0:02:42 Debra Schwartz: What brought you to the Bay Area, did you grow up here?

0:02:46 Lucy Mercer: I grew up in the Bay Area and in some parts of Nevada too, but I was born in Santa Rosa, California, and my father was a contractor so we moved to many of the Bay Area cities where he would build a house or work on a project, and then we would move to another city. So, I have lived in Belmont, Fremont, Oakland, Castro Valley, but never Marin County. I moved to Marin County when I left home.

0:03:25 Debra Schwartz: When you left home, what, after high school?

0:03:27 Lucy Mercer: Yes. I traveled to Europe. And then when I came back from Europe, I ended up in Mill Valley — I mean in Sausalito from the East Bay.

0:03:41 Debra Schwartz: What brought you? Had you visited Sausalito and Mill Valley? Marin County?

0:03:44 Lucy Mercer: No, a friend of mine, her parents lived out in Fairfax, and I loved the ruralness of it. I loved the outdoors. I was very drawn to that. And it felt like a lot of hippies here, that kind of atmosphere, people were very creative, homes were creative even, and I was drawn to it.

0:04:14 Debra Schwartz: Before we move away from your family origins, would you please give me the name of your parents and any siblings that you may have?

0:04:22 Lucy Mercer: My parents?

0:04:24 Debra Schwartz: Your birth parents, your father and mother.

0:04:25 Lucy Mercer: My birth parents. Jean Dorothy Anne Rasmussen was my mother's maiden name. Charles David Mercer was my father. Christine is my older sister, Tina, and then there's me, and then there is David my brother, Trish my second sister, and Bob my youngest brother.

0:04:52 Debra Schwartz: That's a big family.

0:04:53 Lucy Mercer: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

0:04:56 Debra Schwartz: So maybe you needed some space when you moved over to Marin County. [laughs]

0:05:01 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, I really enjoyed it.

0:05:04 Debra Schwartz: So, have you always had a flair for the artistic, for the arts and for performance? Have you been a performer in your life? I mean, you own this theatre.

0:05:17 Lucy Mercer: No. I would never call myself a performer. I really haven't performed. I've done nothing, and I'm not drawn to the stage for that reason at all. But I view the arts more as a way of connecting to other people, so through the arts you can do performance, there's backstage work, there's ensemble, there's all of the cultural activities that you engage in bringing various different people together. So, it's really the coming together and the activity that arises out of the arts is what I'm interested in.

0:06:05 Debra Schwartz: I've stood next to your husband at various sports events and I've heard him sing the national anthem.

0:06:11 Lucy Mercer: Yes.

0:06:13 Debra Schwartz: He has a lovely singing voice.

0:06:14 Lucy Mercer: Mm-hmm. So do my kids. And my husband loves performance. He loves being on stage.

0:06:23 Debra Schwartz: He's an actor?

0:06:24 Lucy Mercer: Yeah.

0:06:24 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:06:25 Lucy Mercer: Well, he is an actor in his heart. That's not what he does for a living, but yes.

0:06:31 Debra Schwartz: So you're living in Mill Valley, and you have your children. I remember when you remodeled your house next to Park School. The sound was [laughs] —

0:06:42 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, that was a whole project.

0:06:45 Debra Schwartz: That was, and I often thought, "Wow, they're going to be hearing the sound of children playing across the potato plants and the fence." But really, you're in the hub of a very active part of Mill Valley, yet still in this quiet neighborhood.

0:07:01 Lucy Mercer: That was a wonderful. It was a wonderful house because it was a whole adventure. The woman that I purchased the house from had lived, grown up there, and it was a historic house. When she left, they had closed down the house and left it as is, she and her husband. They would come back and protect it at times and it was very, very overgrown and hidden. And as I got to know her, Lotte, who owned the house — her husband had died — it was chock full of her memories and her possessions were still in every room you walked in. It was like walking into it from the 1920s or something. And I would walk through, because for us to do anything to the house — to be able to do floors or make it more habitable because it wasn't real habitable at that point in time — we needed to get some of these possessions out and then into her

possession. Walking through, though, she had all the memories. She had these stories, fabulous stories of what happened, because everything triggered a memory for her. So I spent six months walking through that house and listening to the memories. It was just phenomenal. It was wonderful to hear of her family that had been involved with the start of the UN and were world travelers. A very interesting, literate family. That was just — I loved that.

0:08:48 Debra Schwartz: Do you remember her last name, Lotte?

0:08:49 Lucy Mercer: Lotte Sporleder.

0:08:51 Debra Schwartz: Sporleder.

0:08:52 Lucy Mercer: Mm-hmm.

0:08:54 Debra Schwartz: Have you always been someone who's interested in knowing more than just the surface?

0:09:00 Lucy Mercer: Well, for that, yes. Because you can say from a practical point of view you have to get started on the house because you are paying a mortgage on the house. And for me, it was much more the experience, the stories, where that led and, ultimately, yes, the richness that it gave to the house, and the underpinnings of the house, and the value of the house, and where it sat, the land it sat on, all the built up stories. Who had built it and why they were there and what happened within the house. And she had small films of different things, too. She had film of some of our landmarks around here that were at the very beginning. I find all of that fascinating because it is our roots and we build upon that.

0:09:56 Debra Schwartz: Really interesting. So now, you finally remodel the house and this is in the 90s, correct?

0:10:05 Lucy Mercer: Yes. That would be true because, let's see —

0:10:10 Debra Schwartz: Our sons were —

0:10:10 Lucy Mercer: Zack, yeah. That's true.

0:10:11 Debra Schwartz: We both have sons, and they were both in Park School.

0:10:13 Lucy Mercer: Yeah. And they started at Park School because we moved into that house.

0:10:20 Debra Schwartz: So this is '96-ish, '97, '98 — right around there, right?

0:10:25 Lucy Mercer: Yeah. It would've been a little bit earlier maybe because Gabrielle was born in '92, which would put — and she was about three. Yeah. That'd be about right. Yeah.

0:10:41 Debra Schwartz: So this is a good time to mention your children.

0:10:43 Lucy Mercer: Mm-hmm.

0:10:45 Debra Schwartz: Their names.

0:10:45 Lucy Mercer: Oh. Gabrielle is my youngest, and Remy, and Zack.

0:10:50 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:10:52 Lucy Mercer: And then we have Sika, and Cristelle, and Ryan, who joined us at other various different times too.

0:11:00 Debra Schwartz: You're showing me a photograph. Oh, my gosh. I hadn't realized you'd picked up so many.

0:11:07 Lucy Mercer: That's our whole family.

0:11:08 Debra Schwartz: I'd love to include this in your history.

0:11:11 Lucy Mercer: Oh, sure.

0:11:12 Debra Schwartz: This is a really big family filled with beautiful smiles. Oh, my. This is lovely. Congratulations on your lovely family. That house, at least, can take them. It's a big one. So you finished the house. That had to be a project. And as I recall the sequence — correct me if I'm wrong — you went from working on the house, which was quite a project, and then not too long after —

0:11:38 Lucy Mercer: It was nearly concurrent from what I can recall. It was like '98, '99, both of those time periods. I acquired the theatre too. But prior to that, I had acquired some other real estate. I purchased some apartment buildings up in Santa Rosa that were low income and organized to get rid of drug dealers, because there was a very strong community. But one building was at the end of a cul-de-sac, and all the drug deals would be in the parking lot. So I organized around getting rid of the drug dealers and then went to the museum up there and asked for some computers for the kids to use in the laundry room — which was a larger laundry room — so that some of the younger Hispanic families, the kids, could go in and start to do school work and things like that. And again, I was interested in the community, I was interested in what you could do in a community and with the changes that you could bring in. Because I backed in to doing real estate, to some degree, but I found that it was impactful. It's impactful because real estate is where you live, where you create homes, where you create community.

0:13:11: And when I found this building [the Throckmorton Theatre], it was very deferred. It was out of the public eye, because it had been purchased by the Odd Fellows in the late '50s, and they did a lot of their own ceremonies and social gatherings there. But over time, the Odd Fellows didn't have a good method for bringing in younger members. So, as they aged up, they found that they had real estate that they weren't doing as many ceremonies in, and they were beginning at that time, I think, to invest more in retirement homes. This building was very deferred, and had been dormant pretty much for some years. They were renting it out at a very, very low amount to a few gatherings, but the rug inside and everything was — it had had animals, and it was just very deferred. But it was a large public space. It was a gathering space. The theatre was built just at the cusp between vaudeville and live cinema.

0:14:33 Debra Schwartz: What year was that?

0:14:37 Lucy Mercer: 1912, I think, is when they dug out the back here.

0:14:42 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:14:42 Lucy Mercer: There's different time periods that they say.

0:14:45 Debra Schwartz: We don't have to be precise.

0:14:47 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, approximately then. The thrust on the stage was deeper than if you were building for a cinema. Some of the buildings around in the county also that were built for cinema have a very narrow, really nothing as a stage. This had a scooch larger because it was built for vaudeville and had an old place where there had been an organ in here, too, which I think was given to the church up the street. But it was dormant; it was not being used. It was a big hall, and the Oddfellows had over time put up a restaurant or something like that, I think, for themselves upstairs in the mezzanine. But they just had old sliding glass doors, and there was not a desired use for it as a public gathering space any longer that people understood, because it was so deferred. If people ever came into it — and there was a couple of meetings that were held here — they thought it was so bad.

0:15:56: When you first came into the front door, they had created storage lockers with all these goods, because they had rummage sales over many, many years and whatever didn't sell went into these storage lockers. So the front entry narrowed down into this tiny little hallway path that would dump into this big room. And you had no sense of it. I just thought at that point in time, it's the only real community, larger community gathering space, downtown. The drug store was going out of business. That was on the corner.

0:16:35 Debra Schwartz: Lockwood's?

0:16:35 Lucy Mercer: Yeah.

0:16:36 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:16:37 Lucy Mercer: Or changing. And then there was the hardware store. Things were changing. The dynamic of downtown was changing. But that's the heart of a community, to have activity, to have a gathering place, to have a place that people can come to, and then retreat back to their homes. And so I thought maybe I could revitalize it as a theatre, and have various different activities that would draw people together, and that would encourage people to come down to their heart and then return back, and recognize themselves as a community, recognize their neighbors. That was my initial impetus for purchasing, or trying to purchase, the building. There were some other people that wanted to do other things with it, but —

0:17:40 Debra Schwartz: At the time, remind me of the shops that were out front? There was a knitting shop, I recall?

0:17:45 Lucy Mercer: There wasn't when I purchased. There was what had been the barber shop on this side.

0:17:53 Debra Schwartz: On the west side?

0:17:55 Lucy Mercer: Is that the west there?

0:17:56 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

0:17:58 Lucy Mercer: I call it the crescendo now.

0:18:00 Debra Schwartz: The crescendo [chuckles]

0:18:00 Lucy Mercer: And Monica — I can't remember her last name — had a hair salon in there when I purchased. And then there was Akaika, Rebecca, who moved to Hawaii later on, who did Hawaiian flower shows, and I believe some Hawaiian music occasionally. She had her business, which was wholesale, I believe, on the lower floor there. And then she had part of the upper floor. There had been a tailor that had been up in the upper floors here, and then the knitting store. I think it was in the upper, or maybe upper and lower too. I'm not sure, about the knitting.

0:18:40 Debra Schwartz: I think both, maybe. I remember taking knitting classes. And I remember coming here in the '70s and actually having a movie theatre here.

0:18:48 Lucy Mercer: Yes. There were Saturday night movies, which was Mark Fishkin, he started that, I think. They did one down the street a little bit further. But then yes, they came in here, which was again, a large space, and set up a portable screen and did some of the beginning Saturday night movies here. So that's why it was technically started here, and then grew.

0:19:19 Debra Schwartz: We spoke a couple years ago, and you were telling me about the research that you did, investigating. Tell me a little bit about that process. What compelled you, what you discovered, and why you needed to do it? The whole thing.

0:19:32 Lucy Mercer: Again, it's roots. We all end up some place. The more that you understand the place and what took place — we're all like the seeds that grow on top of each other. [chuckles] You take nourishment from what you understand of where you are. And so I'm always curious about what happened. How was this building built here, or how did it come to be? What was its history and background and the people that had their own dreams and aspirations and passed through the doors in the middle of the night? I'm always wondering about that because I think more understanding not only helps us understand the human condition but helps us understand our own stories. And those all come together in some ways when you look at the history. Was it the first building built upon the land? What was underneath the land? And for us, around here of course, we have these beautiful springs that have been covered in many cases. We have the wildness that was here that we've concreted over to a certain degree when we've added our planning and our streets, and we add them to get the fastest way from one place to another. So all the curves and the grace that went before is what I find interesting.

0:21:26: I find interesting. It allows us to see more of what is possible and to see our own connections. So this building had been the first built on the lot. It's actually two buildings. The back was dug out by horse and buggy prior to there being the streets that were formed. People accessed it and came down into town from the mountainside. We had pathways, we had steps that were built to get from one place to another, because there are a lot of mountains, or a lot of hills, in this area. People would come down from their homes and gather together to watch the latest Charlie Chaplin film or vaudeville. There were some very funny mentions about the vaudeville taking place in here. And it was the definition of our town to come together and then to retreat back.

0:22:44 Debra Schwartz: Charlie Chaplin? He performed here, correct?

0:22:48 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, he performed here. When I was going through the history books, those microfiche that everything was on, there was an announcement for his performances a few different times. Apparently, he worked out of Newark, I think it was or something, there was a cinema company that he worked with. And there was a lot of different actors and actresses. I'm not sure how they set up, because a lot of it was done outdoors. The shooting was done outdoors. These big huge cameras. It was the newest and latest. And the movies themselves, I think, were very, very short, really. But it was the idea. It was the magic of what they brought to you, the drama. I remember they were very tiny, short reels. Here, there's a projection room which is a tinny room, then, because it was very flammable, and the projectionist always had a toilet right outside because you couldn't really leave there for very long. And we found some of the old those little strips of film up in there. That was really wonderful.

0:24:12 Debra Schwartz: Do you ever wish you could travel back in time and see this theatre as it was at another time?

0:24:20 Lucy Mercer: I think we do to a certain degree. I mean it feels like it anyway, because you can see all the different shades. It's like you do. You hear it and you feel it in the bones. Any building has its own spirit. And you touch it, and you help, and you heal parts of it — the wood that's decaying. Or there are certain things like water, which is very insidious and can cause great damage. And then you try and heal and bring the building back to its own sense. Often, with the older buildings, they were built with really beautiful wood. So that wood stands through so much, and has so much to give. Anyway, I love all the old bones. [chuckles]

0:25:30 Debra Schwartz: You love the old bones?

0:25:30 Lucy Mercer: I do.

0:25:31 Debra Schwartz: It's another way of putting it. So you buy the building.

0:25:35 Lucy Mercer: I bought the building. My father was a civil engineer, and I would always follow him around. So I know something about structure. I'm certainly not a civil engineer. I would invite him often, because he would tell me everything that was wrong — all the structural pieces that you would need to address. It was really wonderful. But this building really exceeded even some of the deferment. The love that it needed was significant, and I just found that I would take one board at a time. Eventually, you're beyond the 50 percent mark. And eventually you get there. Even though it doesn't look like it. In the beginning you go, "Oh my god, I can't do this." And so I just started it one board at a time, and kept at it.

0:26:47 Debra Schwartz: How long did it take for you to bring this building back to its best self?

0:26:53 Lucy Mercer: Well, I don't know, it's still in process.

0:26:57 Debra Schwartz: So how long after you purchased did you open it, the building?

0:27:00 Lucy Mercer: Well, the very first shows that I backed into, I think, were in 2002. I believe it was 2002 that we started. Because part of it is testing it. Part of it is going, "Does it work?" Especially in a community space, in the beginning I would sit on the sides of the room, and I didn't feel a relationship to the stage. It was more like a box, a rectangular box. That was what I listened to in the beginning. Actually, I had somebody come in that does sound in Europe, in various different venues, but what he does is he sits, and he listens. And he comes back, and he listens. He listens to the sound in all kinds of various different parts of the room. Because the way, apparently, you can do sound is you can computerize.

0:28:04: You go, "Okay, great. With this distance and that, and everything, you should do this over here, and do that over there." I loved what he did, because he was very slow,

thoughtful. He sat and listened. There's something about you actually being in the space and listening. I think that makes a difference. You can observe, you could have done the theatre in the same way, and the subtle difference of not feeling as engaged to the stage that I was feeling, most people would find it so subtle that they wouldn't necessarily respond to that. But that I think is what happens to us kinesthetically. Those subtle things that are off, you don't know exactly why when you leave it. It was great, but there's that little other thing that could've made you feel included. And what does that mean? How do you take that? How do you make that inclusion? How do you look at a backstage, which is like a ship, because everything happens in a constrained space in the dark? So you're trying to create a space that that works to the optimum. Everything has its place, because it's all orchestrated back there with a lot of people.

0:29:49 Debra Schwartz: Do you remember the gentleman's name? The sound —

0:29:51 Lucy Mercer: No, I would have to go back, because I keep the name —
[laughs]

0:29:56 Debra Schwartz: I'm not going to ask you to. [chuckles] No worries.

0:30:01 Lucy Mercer: I can see him in my head.

0:30:01 Debra Schwartz: You can see him?

0:30:05 Lucy Mercer: Yeah. Where did we find him? It was like these people that we found who just felt things. I mean, he'd done these ancient places over in Europe he said, "No, you just sit and you listen." And to me that was just the beauty of listening and checking in. To me was just wonderful.

0:30:32 Debra Schwartz: Well, interesting you should use that as a way for me to imagine. You seem like a special visionary to me. [chuckles] It appears, listening to you, that you have a way of being in the world that involves more than just observation. You seem to really feel the world around you. I mean, had you ever at any time in your life had any experience whatsoever on what it meant to stage, to help create, co-create, and to embrace performances?

0:31:24 Lucy Mercer: It wasn't that I thought so much of performances. I thought of an activity that would challenge us or help us to frame a question, that would encourage us to frame a question. It would be also something that you could enter into and imagine yourself in, open up your imagination into yourself. So that, for a moment, you could exit who you were and be in a situation with other people and open yourself up to ways of thinking. Because I thought about the kids. If the kids go to school, we're going to school. And as our schools have increased the sizes of their classes and there's so many kids.

0:32:42: Now there's all these tests and everything. Part of what happens is we're no longer looking at learning through the inspiration of learning. It really is managing kids

in a classroom. “You stay in your seat, and here is the lesson.” The teacher is constrained by what they need to turn in, reports and things like that. And so, any question-asking, any deviation from your subject and getting to the end goal of achieving most of the kids passing, you don’t have the luxury or the time for that. The kids don’t develop questions and they don’t develop a facility for asking a question and staying with it too.

0:33:45: Why has that happened to, “What is this?” or even dreaming of it from another point of view. There is a need for a respect for those questions, too, not just, “Well, this is the answer because that’s what the whole thing is pointed towards.” So, I thought of it in terms of that, of being able to come in a space where you could ask questions, where you could dream something different, where you could change the possibility of what you believe the answer is supposed to be. Maybe you could look at it from a different point of view. Because people approach it different ways. It could be just some visual that opens your mind for a moment. It could be a word.

0:34:46: It could be a performance that pulls you in and has you crying, or laughing, or whatever. Because all of those things become more contained in our world. More, “This is an acceptable time to do this. This is what you should see or you shouldn’t see.” Or “This is what success even is.” And so, the connections and stories, one of the very valuable things that any of this is, is stories that people share. We don’t have the same ability to hear each other’s stories. You can hear them, just be the observer, and think about it, and how it affects or doesn’t affect you. But we don’t have those passed down stories in the same way that helps us to understand ourselves as human beings and value ourselves or any aspect that we contribute. Because our value scales are different, quite often.

0:36:06: And I don’t know that people try, but I know that the media wants us to dumb down our feelings. You can see that with movies. I went to this movie with my kids. And the people in the front of the car were laughing and doing something. And then they turned around and they shot the head off of the person behind them. I was so overwhelmed by that laughing, and then they were laughing still or something, and I was so appalled. And I know one of the kids said, “Mom, it’s just a movie.” Well, two things. I can’t imagine not feeling. If I turned off those feelings and said, “Oh yeah, It’s just a movie,” and then removed myself from them — but the feelings are what you are. They’re so rich and that’s what you are. To fall in love. Yes, there’s the pain. But if you don’t embrace it all, then you don’t have that fabulous feeling too. And to dumb it all back down so that I’m not going to get hurt, or I’m not going to feel anything, or I’m not going to, just is so — it distances us.

0:37:40: And that would be what performance does, is it puts it in front of you. It’s fragile, and you feel the pain. You feel the emotion. You can see that if you can open yourself up to that. I don’t want to say a “safe space” really, but a space that allows you to do that. You walk in and you’re allowed to do it in some kind of a way, to open up to those things. That builds us as a community. It builds us as an understanding of who we are. So, I say it’s through the arts — I think everybody’s really an artist in some way or another. They may not identify, because a lot of times people say, “I can’t draw. It’s a

stick figure.” But I think it’s because they have a comparison of what an artist is. And that is a title that they can’t apply to themselves. In reality, art is so many different forms. It’s how we approach things. You can be visual, you can use words. Well, in any case, there’s just so many different forms and they are the connectors. They connect you to yourself, they connect you to each other, and they connect you to the earth.

0:39:15 Debra Schwartz: I hear you talking and I think you have a sight inside — I mean, if I can be so bold as to say this — where you see this safe place. People can watch movies now, and you have to guard yourself against the atrocious. But you’ve got a third place here. It’s not a civic building, and it’s not church. But it’s still a protected space with possibility. Correct me if I’m wrong, but this is how you view an essential aspect of any community, having that protected freedom of expression and experience.

0:39:54 Lucy Mercer: I guess what I would say is that they can experience that not just in this place, but you can start to build an understanding. Because it’s like a third voice that says that there isn’t a voice that you can always put to it. You can feel it. But the more that you experience it, and the more that you understand that you’re part of it too, and that you can create it, and that there is a way of being in this world that includes that — part of that is the magic. Part of it is that people walk in and they feel a magic, or they feel a connection, or they feel something. But they don’t feel that it’s emanating from them too. They come and have an experience and they could build upon that. But that magic does exist. Sometimes I’d liken it to cleaning your doorstep. You may feel that you’re cleaning your front stoop or something, and it makes you feel good and you just do it. You tidy it up and it represents you. And somebody else could look at it or walk by and say, “Why do you take so much time doing that? It’s gonna get dirty again. And tomorrow you’re gonna have to do the same thing.”

0:41:34: And they don’t necessarily see the value on a practical sense. But the more that they walk by, they will start to feel what that feels like, just because of the time and attention, not because of cleanliness or anything else. It’s the time and attention and the care that you put into that spot. So gradually, that does wear off on people. That does tell people, “Oh, well you know that’s interesting.” And it starts to engage people too, and starts to draw you in. You can’t say it’s because, “I clean every day,” because it really is a deeper thing. It’s really a caring. It’s caring and investment in something that, yes, will change. Theatre, when you do theatre too, you’re constantly taking something. You’re putting it all together. And then you’re taking it back apart. You build sets, and costumes, and in this case we have hats and beautiful things. And then you take it back apart. And people say, “Well if you’re an artist and you take it back apart, what’s the value of that then? Because maybe there’s a picture or something. But what’s the value?” You see, the value is in the process of the creation. Creating it. And that’s an enormous. That process is of enormous of value.

0:43:07: You also take it apart and then this piece that was the little corner of the house that you are building becomes part of the sidewalk or something in another theatre piece later on. Because you’re always re-imagining those pieces in another piece. You turn it upside down. And now it looks different. Now it becomes another aspect of what you

might be doing. That to me is very similar to our land and to the hills too. Because if you step on a piece of grass and it withers and dies, it still is accepted back into the ground and becomes part of many other pieces of grass and comes back. Again, there's a constant rejuvenation of where we live and an appreciation for that. And that's what the whole process is. The whole process engages people.

0:44:22: I refer to it more as the ensemble. But you value everybody at the table in an ensemble. You are building things. You are creating. Across the board. It's not just the performer on stage. Sometimes people tend to go, "Oh it's the performer." No, it is the process. Nothing works without the other parties involved. When Zio did the mural on the side of the building —

0:44:49 Debra Schwartz: The Zio Ziegler Mural on the side of the building.

0:44:51 Lucy Mercer: Yeah. I had a different one. I had him paint one on this side of the building. And downtown they thought it should have landed under the "what colors you can paint buildings." So we went back and forth about artistic freedom and things like that.

0:45:13 Debra Schwartz: What year was this? Do you remember?

0:45:15 Lucy Mercer: No, I can't remember now.

0:45:16 Debra Schwartz: It's been there for a while.

0:45:18 Lucy Mercer: Yeah. But at that point the city, said that they were going to fine me for having it, as we were going back and forth. They said that there were some people that didn't like it. I don't know who these people were. So at one point in time I said, "Well, I never intended to have it as static in any case. Because static would be a decoration, really, in my mind." I'd love to do other ones and change it. And so, in the midst of that, I asked Zio to do another one. I said, "Well, they don't like this." So we took it off the side of the building and he did this other one that is on there right now. Now I have found, over some period of time, people are very attached to it.

0:46:20: They go, "Oh, that's what it is." And in the back of my mind I still go, "Well we need to change it out." Because to me, it's the relooking, the revisiting it, the seeing something new. That is where you are creating. You're constantly looking and relooking. And you are understanding things from a very different perspective when you do that. You might always be looking at something from one point of view and when you turn it on its head, you see it from another point of view and it reminds you of something very different. Like a book. If you read it when you were ten, and then you revisit the book when you're 45 or whatever, you have a very different perspective on the book, and you may get something totally different or understand it from a very different level. It's the process, and the engagement, and the journey along the way that creates the sense of who we are as human beings. All of this is our life journey. There's ups and downs. You do things and you may wish — or if you approach them today, you would perhaps approach

them very differently. Although I do think you have to, to some degree, look at yourself and understand that you do your best approach at any given point in time and you may have other opportunities to do something again later on and you may approach it very differently, but that doesn't negate how you approached it at one point in time.

0:48:12 Debra Schwartz: So, in this ensemble approach, how you see the performance and the community, you have collaborated with many people to do many different things. I'd love to hear, not just now, but in a little bit, the many kinds of programs you offer here. You collaborate with the community, and with performers and locals, and you've created a place here. Some people are professional performers who now have their own backyard theatre, which they can practice and perform in. Many people that may be used to very large venues find this intimate theatre setting to be something special. And so maybe you'd like to talk about some of the people who have been part of your ensemble at this theatre, 'cause it's also nice to talk about other community members.

0:49:15 Lucy Mercer: I see the theatre as a little bit along the lines of — in Italy, you'll find a theatre on every street corner. And they can be beautiful, ornate, or not as much, but it's a place of engagement, a place of various different activities. And a stage is a natural component of those. I think this area has been fertile with creativity for a long time, trying something new, a different approach or whatever. And yes, we have many creative people that live in the area that are very talented. So we've had a lot of talent. What I found, because we're a relatively small house, I think we can, if we pushed maximum, have about 260, 280 people seated here. But even when you're very talented and you command very large houses, if you are creative, quite often you don't have the ability to create because you're underwritten with what you've already produced.

0:50:47: Produce that again, produce that again. It sells tickets. You go into these houses and your success is dictated, but it's also constrained by it because if you are creative, you wanna try things, you wanna try something different, or a different approach, or musically you might be inclined to do a crossover that isn't what you're known for or something. I feel that we're framed around the reach, the creative aspiration, the why not. And so, I try to build an understanding in the audience of what that means, that the audience is part of the entire creative process, that they understand more about the creative process and they appreciate it, that they're not just the critics coming in for a show at the end and looking at it from the critics' point of view. It gives them more ability to create a relationship with the performer, and more understanding of what the performer's going through.

0:52:14 Debra Schwartz: They understand that they're part of the creative process, not just in their attendance, but in their response and their willingness to hear something new.

0:52:22 Lucy Mercer: Yes, exactly, to hear something new, to follow and to understand that it's not just the end product on stage. That there's been all of those builds, all of those attempts, all of those tries that get up to the point where something maybe delivered nationally then, too. And that process is very invigorating, very exciting, because you are creating. It's a creation anew. One of the things early on that I always

said was I wanted the performers then, too, to be audience members. The audience members, of course, become performers too because there's a build, always, of learning in all of the different creative fields. But there is a respect, then, that you get. You're not just a performer, but you're actually sitting in the audience and supporting the work of others that are maybe coming up. Maybe you're incredibly talented, but they're filled with huge respect of having you in the audience. But vice versa, that you understand it holistically then, a 100 percent of what it takes. Because being a performer, it takes an audience. Being an audience, it takes a performer. So, everything is necessary. Again, everybody has a necessary spot at the table.

0:53:53 Debra Schwartz: So, my question for you, then, is with performers does this dynamic come forth organically or have you encouraged it? When you have performers here, have you had a conversation with them and say, "Will you please try new things?" or "Will you come sit in the audience?" Is this something that you nurture specifically?

0:54:19 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, because my background wasn't in theatre.

0:54:24 Debra Schwartz: What is your background in?

0:54:26 Lucy Mercer: I don't know.

0:54:27 Debra Schwartz: Did you do to college?

0:54:28 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, well I have a BA, but it was a write-away college, or whatever.

0:54:36 Debra Schwartz: Oh, okay. [laughs]

0:54:38 Lucy Mercer: Antioch was the —

0:54:42 Debra Schwartz: So you're self-driven with your own particular vision. You've got the space and you're inviting the performers and the audience alike to come into your world.

0:54:51 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, because that's the creation. That's where the richness happens. That's where the conversation happens. And what I've always set for myself is that every performer gets paid something out of a point of respect, that they perceive themselves as a performer, that they hold a respect for themselves as that too. And that comes in so many different ways. Sometimes the up-and-coming performers, they have a friend and I'll film them for free. And then they'll have this film and I say "Yeah, but do you have the rights to it then?" I mean, do they own it? Do you own it? There's all this nebulousness about that because they're so eager to get something. There's a way in which you start to respect yourself when you have a certain way that you are respected too.

0:56:04: So in a silly little way, we have a green room downstairs, which is where all the performers are. And the performers will come out and mix with the audience depending on their comfort levels. I know many of our audience members. But when the green room door is closed, I say “No, you don’t just go in there. Yes, you say you know them, but that’s their space to be, where they can get ready and they get to be protected in that way.” And when they’re protected in that way, they feel a certain thing: “Oh, I’m a performer back here.” The audience: “Oh, okay, great. I’m respecting them.” Even though it would be very simple for them to do that.

0:56:58 Debra Schwartz: Well, it’s one door.

0:57:00 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, exactly.

0:57:00 Debra Schwartz: Really, the membrane is one door.

0:57:01 Lucy Mercer: And then when the performer chooses, he can come out to the audience. It’s a way of holding respect amongst everybody in a small space, but I think people appreciate each other then, too, that there is an appreciation that’s engendered when you have small formalities like that.

0:57:27 Debra Schwartz: And well, you’ve got a small space, so the green room is not a big green room. I’ve been in it myself. And so, this is sort of like something large, though very small. It’s pristine in its own way. How about the times when a performer, Robin Williams, who’d performed here so many times, tries something new and tanks?

0:57:52 Lucy Mercer: Oh well, that’s wonderful, because he was able to do that. He could live through being on stage. He could say, “Oh, well, that didn’t work.” He would bring notes at times. But he was human first here. So that was him being able to try something and to feel that he wasn’t in front of an audience where he had to succeed because he was getting paid the bucks to be onstage.

0:58:31 Debra Schwartz: He was paid to take a chance.

0:58:34 Lucy Mercer: Yeah.

0:58:34 Debra Schwartz: He actually knew what he was going into, that he was being paid to be reckless. Well, of course that guy was reckless anyway at times, ready for anything, but isn’t that an awesome idea that somebody is paid with respect to performance and then encouraged to just go for it?

0:58:54: For Robin, I think there was always an investment. When you get to be big enough, I think, in who you are, people invest in who you are. You are spontaneous, or you’re this, or you’re that. You’re gonna deliver this or that, but there’s also a pressure with that too because now you have this definition. And it’s not that being serious or being anything else that doesn’t fit into that mold is not something that they’re selling. You end up with managers and their kids who are going to college and everything.

0:59:42 Debra Schwartz: Career in a straightjacket. [chuckles]

0:59:46 Lucy Mercer: You end up, yeah, needing to perform and needing to deliver for a lot of different reasons. I think he was just a wonderful, wonderful, incredible guy. And he was a guy that was trying things out, and funny, and was of one of the most generous guys. Emotionally just generous to a fault for himself. He never turned down any request or anything from people who would always wanna come up, no matter how he was feeling. He was just wonderful.

1:00:29 Debra Schwartz: I've heard some of my interviewees talk about this theatre before. Marty Balin says this is one of his favorite places. There's a lot of heart in your theatre. I get the feeling from their performance.

1:00:43 Lucy Mercer: It's funny because you look at a lot of performers — and I didn't know the industry — but they come with this tech riders, and they have this whole list of things. And really, a bunch of those came about because they were arriving at places and they wouldn't have things set up. Somebody wouldn't think, "Well, they just traveled here and they need to get on stage pretty quickly but they haven't eaten or whatever." It was because they were focused on the performance. We don't have all the things that these tech riders have, but we do, I think, treat people like — I consider us a home for them. We're welcoming them in. And so, have they eaten? It really just becomes people to people. How are you treating each other? Hopefully we succeed in that all the time.

1:01:55 Debra Schwartz: How about your programs that you're running here? I know once we spoke and you told me about how important it was for you to have programs that bring the youth back to this community.

1:02:09 Lucy Mercer: I think it's programs that help us as a community see who our full community really is, and who represents our full community. For a long time the youth were not really downtown because there wasn't anything that was much downtown. It would be our youth, it would be our seniors, it would be the full diversity that we don't see. Although, we are marketed back to ourselves as being white, middle class, wealthy — that is what we hear in the marketed world — that's not my experience. Through theatre, you have a broad range of people that come in. You see far more about who really lives in our community and is attending various different things because we have such a broad array of programs. I really feel strongly about being accessible. Creativity: there's no special way that you can buy it. It is richer for understanding it from all the various different points of view. So we offer many free programs to encourage participation by all members. And we work hard at making certain that people can get here and attend.

1:04:11 Debra Schwartz: Give me an example of one such program.

1:04:18 Lucy Mercer: Well, we have an arts access program. We reach out to other nonprofit organizations and offer tickets. But we don't just offer tickets. We give them tickets and we work with them to make certain that they can get to the theatre too. We look at ways to reach out because we don't feel that just bringing people here to this theatre is always the best way to engage initially and to educate. We have classes, and some of our classes we do outside of here, specifically to get into those communities. We chose as one of our plays this year *In the Heights*, which was Lin-Manuel Miranda's first one that he did. And part of the thinking behind that was that if we were going to do that, we wanted to really make certain that we are reaching into our Latino communities and see if we can get people that want to audition. And we did end up with about 90 auditioners. It will be a primarily Latino cast of young people.

1:05:41: That's just important because that's who we are too. On an audition basis, we were really wanting to reach into Latino community, but of course we're auditioning for talent at the same time, and we got some phenomenal talent. So we're very excited about that. We're gonna go into rehearsals.

1:06:09 Debra Schwartz: Who's we when you say "we"?

1:06:13 Lucy Mercer: Oh, well, I have Amy Marie Haven who is the young Director of Theatre and Youth Programs, and Reba Gilbert who is Educational Manager now. There's a lot of crossover in the programs that we do. So if we're doing a theatre piece, well, in this case we're bringing in choreographers, we're bringing in music directors. It's a collaboration from around the Bay Area right now of different people. And in this case, *In the Heights* is about the Puerto Rican community. It's not just the Latino community. We're already talking about how do we educate or open up the understanding of the immigration experience — the understanding of the Puerto Rican community as a smaller community within the Latino community. Who can we have come and talk to the cast? Who is our choreographer? We've got a fabulous choreographer from the East Bay.

1:07:35: Are we true to that? Because what you should be able to do is to walk out from an experience of these kids, the ones that are going to be involved, and to understand more deeply themselves and understand more deeply the Puerto Rican community. We're talking about doing food, having some food, meals together, which inculcate a little bit more what's the real experience. Because food is a very deep, big experience, the smells and everything. Of course, the ties to Puerto Rico now, which has great need, a community in great need currently. We take everything, so and that's what sometimes is the layers. You take a vehicle like that, we can do *In the Heights*, we can do it incredibly well, but it's a vehicle, also. It's a vehicle for conversation. It's a vehicle for a better understanding. It's a vehicle to reach out to other communities. It's a vehicle to broaden understanding of Puerto Rico, for our entire community. Who knows anything about it, other than some of the more obvious things? And why is it important? Why is it valuable? Who are the people? Do we have community members? So again, it's using the vehicle to give back as many layered experiences as we can. That's walking away with that richness.

1:09:30 Lucy Mercer: It would be wonderful to go and do one of the shows in Puerto Rico, but that probably won't be on the spectrum, just because of the cost of it. But that kind of thing resonates. If they're learning a song, if we had any connection there and could combine kids from there learning the same song or something, you start to tie people together in ways that are not, "I'm helping you." Human ways.

1:10:03 Debra Schwartz: You're a nonprofit here?

1:10:05 Lucy Mercer: Yes.

1:10:06 Debra Schwartz: The theatre's nonprofit?

1:10:07 Lucy Mercer: Yeah.

1:10:08 Debra Schwartz: So do you write grants? How is that for you, being a nonprofit?

1:10:14 Lucy Mercer: We are so tiny we haven't written grants yet. I tend to do things only if I understand them. Grant writing takes time and attention, and right now I'm spread thin with what I'm doing. I think we would fit along the lines of many grants, and I'm hoping to be able to bring on board somebody who understands much more about that and be able to write. Because it seems like they would be a natural for many of the things that we do.

1:10:50 Debra Schwartz: So, you're self-sustaining nonprofit?

1:10:52 Lucy Mercer: No, we seek support.

1:10:55 Debra Schwartz: So fund raising events and so on. I noticed there's some events that you host here where there's no charge whatsoever.

1:11:04 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, because they aren't for —

1:11:05 Debra Schwartz: Donations, I guess, only.

1:11:07 Lucy Mercer: Yeah. People could donate. We should have more of a sponsorship. We don't have a development director currently. We've been growing, but we're at the point where we need somebody that understands some of that. Because that's not my background, not my natural background. [chuckles]

1:11:26 Debra Schwartz: So, you're here in the center of our community, here in town basically, right? You're at the very core of downtown Mill Valley, and you're reaching out in your way. You're not only a place where people can come to, you're at the same time reaching out. And you definitely have a significant presence here. How can Mill Valley help you? I mean, maybe the town would like to reach in in other ways. This is an opportunity for you to speak to —

1:12:01 Lucy Mercer: I'm big picture or detail. I typically take things on and try and solve a problem and move in those directions. I'm not an asker. And I don't think that there would be a dearth of desire or anything if there were a good ask or a way of doing that. I think we've grown to the point where the next step is to organize that more. We're right on the cusp of that. I don't know what exactly that means [chuckles] but maybe it will get more organized. Because I think people want to be connected too. I think people want to be involved in various different ways. But you need to be able to offer them something and to honor their involvement then too.

1:13:14 Debra Schwartz: I think the absence of this theatre would be sorely felt.

1:13:19 Lucy Mercer: It's so hard for me though to see because I'm always just doing the next thing. I always see the next thing, or I'm trying to put together a show. And quite often I'm thinking about the individuals in the show and, "Oh, so and so, and their mother just died." Because there is that detail of who all these people are and it doesn't mean that they're well known or anything else, it just means that they're people. You get to know those people and their quirks and needs.

1:14:00 Debra Schwartz: Do you ever have the vision of looking forward five years and imagining how you see this theatre or your experience with the theatre going forward? Or are you more in the moment?

1:14:13 Lucy Mercer: I tend to see it as the music, and the sounds, and the vibrancy, because it's always slightly changing. At times too, I go, "Oh god, do I have to do this?" There's something that needs to be fixed or something like that.

1:14:32 Debra Schwartz: You're here a lot. This is a lot of energy on your part, this theatre.

1:14:37 Lucy Mercer: Yeah. I like the music and the sounds and the connection when it's a very vital. I love those intersections. I think of getting older, and without somebody creating that music — I think of musicians as just this wonderful thing that you always want to have as part of your family [chuckles] because they bring in something that's so additive. It's so rich and so wonderful just being able to play an instrument. Or a voice.

1:15:18 Debra Schwartz: You've got the songwriters circle going here during summer. Has there ever been a moment in your experience with this theatre just that stands out? That's particularly punctuated? That you had a sense, at that moment, "Ahh, this is exactly how I saw it, and here it is" — that kind of moment? Or any moment that you've been in your theatre and maybe a performance or something was happening?

1:15:53 Lucy Mercer: I'm like the fly on the wall. I prefer that position. But you can see those moments happen on stage. You see those moments as people are coming in the door. People come here in all kinds of ways. They could have just had a death in their family, or they could have had a marriage in their family. They come with wherever they

are in that moment, and they come all together. Every audience is new. Every audience, and the performance as it is that evening, is always new. There will never be anything like that again. It's always this mix, and you can feel what the audience is feeling. You can feel what they're feeling onstage and backstage and what's working.

1:16:47: There are the performers hanging out in the green room and then talking about what's working or not working or meeting each other for the first time. They've never met each other before. Or the crossovers backstage, because of course we have this tiny, little green room and so you have the musicians coming in and you have the comedians exiting and they find that they're related or something. [chuckles] So it's all of that, and for me it's also the sound of the music coming through the floorboards. The choruses in one room and the orchestras in the other. It's all the stories that add up to the vitality of it, and it's not something that you can put your finger on, but when you're in it, it's very, very exciting.

1:17:47 Debra Schwartz: You have described it so perfectly and vividly. I mean I can feel, as your describing it, the experience of it.

1:17:52 Lucy Mercer: Yeah.

1:17:53 Debra Schwartz: You're not exactly a "fly on the wall" 'cause you built the wall. [laughs]

1:17:58 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, but I do find that I just soak it in. I am the observer soaking it in. I can feel when something's not quite right. And I am the one that's gonna change the chair two inches on this because it's a little bit better, or whatever. [chuckles] And also because I can touch the chair — that touch, I think, lends itself to something too, touching and connecting.

1:18:35 Debra Schwartz: This is such a tactile, sensual, evocative experience, to be in a space like this that you've created — which is really amazing for you to have done — and listening to you talk about how it is to have this vision, and all that surrounds the vision, with all your sensory apparatus — whether it's within your head or experiencing the external world — and then to somehow articulate that into an actual space that exists — with all that comes with the taxes, and the purchasing, and the plumbers, and the people, and this whole cacophony of everything — to actually segue from the vision and the experience to the actual appearance and then the action, is something. You've done a very good job. [laughs]

1:19:30 Lucy Mercer: Well, I don't know. [chuckles] But I will say that Steve Coleman, when I met him in the very beginning, he poked his head in when I was going, "Oh my god, how do I not make a mistake? How do I get this to work back here?" There's some way in which he just confirms that it's not all just a business or whatever, that it's okay to dream. He's just wonderful at that.

1:20:22 Debra Schwartz: Well this is part A of this theatre interview, because I'll be interviewing Steve soon.

1:20:28 Lucy Mercer: Oh good.

1:20:29 Debra Schwartz: And I think that could be very, hopefully, complementary. And Mort Sahl hopefully soon, too.

1:20:38 Lucy Mercer: Yeah, that's right.

1:20:39 Debra Schwartz: Another collaborator.

1:20:39 Lucy Mercer: It's all people. It all becomes just people. And we're all looking for those connections. So you expand those connections and the value that you receive from them, if you're open. Dreaming is the biggest thing that we put away. We dream into in being what we want to be.

1:21:27 Debra Schwartz: Lucy, this has been a wonderful discussion. Thank you so much —

1:21:32 Lucy Mercer: Thank you.

1:21:33 Debra Schwartz: For providing us this place for people in our community. Because at the heart, it seems, of everything you talk about is community and connection. And I know that in this day and age where people are separated by technology, we have the comfort of our homes where we don't have to go out as much as we used to, just as important and perhaps even more important than ever is to have a place like this in the community, the heart of a community, where people can be together, and dream, and experience, and share, and collaborate.

1:22:09 Lucy Mercer: Mm-hmm. That's true.

1:22:11 Debra Schwartz: So, I thank you very much for your contribution to all of us, and to our town, and to everywhere beyond as far as you can dream to reach. Let us know if the Historical Society can ever be of assistance to you. I look forward to collaborating with future projects, as we have in the past, in various ways. And I will see you in the theatre.

1:22:38 Lucy Mercer: Thank you.

1:22:39 Debra Schwartz: This is Debra Schwartz, closing the interview with Lucy Mercer, and on behalf of the Historical Society and the Public Library, thank you very much.