

Blairstown artist driven to bring her words to life on the stage

By Star-Ledger Staff

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STEVE HOCKSTEIN Kean University professor and poet Susanna Rich at her home in Blairstown.

By Tracy Ann Politowicz/Star-Ledger Staff

"Do I need more honking?" the curly-haired woman asks with a straight face, leaning forward slightly.

The man sitting opposite her, one of a few other people in the room, replies, "Yes, you should add that." She continues speaking to a larger make-believe audience: "And I want all of you to help me get through this. Can you do a honk? Can you just turn into an audience full of geese?"

Adopting the tone of a TV preacher, Susanna Rich begins reciting her poem about drivers who adhere to the speed limit so strictly, they seem to be hugging it: "May the red wand on my speedometer align, number for number... "

"Honk, honk," the man interjects periodically.

Rich can't help herself; she laughs in the middle of the poem, then resumes reading.

"... see how they pile up behind me ..."

Another person, a student, adds a more drawn-out "Hooooonnnnk," such as an 18-wheeler might bellow.

"... the angry, the impatient, the greedy, the envious — praising the road with their voices, their headlights, their trumpets..."

After she's finished the recitation, Rich admits, "I lost some of the lines, but you didn't know that, right?" She laughs again. "But I had a good time."

During this preliminary rehearsal for "The Drive Home," Rich's second one-woman, audience-interactive poetry performance, she runs through the show, poem by poem, while Ernest Wiggins, her director and a colleague at Kean University in Union, and Amanda Levie, a junior who is the assistant director, offer suggestions on everything from transitions and delivery to music and staging.

Rich embraces their input - collaborative is one of her favorite words - while laughing often, something she wasn't able to do much for many years.

Early Lessons

"I was so lonely at home," Rich says of her un-Brady Bunch-like childhood. Her Hungarian immigrant parents, Nicholas and Susanna — also her mother's name — Lippóczy, both of whom Rich describes as "narcissistic," had separated by the time she was 5 months old. They divorced a few years later.

Rich's mother was too busy working as a secretary, and later as a librarian's assistant, or working to snag a new husband to spend much time at home, Rich recalls. Her maternal grandparents had lived with them in Clifton since before she was born, but her grandmother — whom Rich called "Mamcsi" — then became a "soul mother" to her.

When Rich discusses her grandmother, she lowers her voice, but the emotion can still be heard. "She was the one who really loved me, paid attention to me and delighted in me."

Mamcsi taught her young granddaughter about her home country, including how to speak its language — before she even learned English. One of Rich's earliest memories is of Mamcsi starting a newsletter: Szorakoztato (Entertainer) for the local Hungarian community. Forget the Crayolas and coloring books; at age 5, Rich hand-shaded every one of the covers for its 50 monthly copies.

But her grandmother, who cleaned office buildings to earn money for their poor family, was often working, too, leaving Rich alone much of the time, especially after her grandfather left the household when she was 10.

She was also feeling "unsettled" because the family moved 21 times.

Wiggins says that discussions with Rich about her first show, "Television Daddy," led him to understand that TV had been a constant companion for the young girl while her grandmother wasn't home.

Rich is more specific: "The television became a substitute for my daddy."

Broken ties

After her parents separated, Rich's father sent letters to her mother, begging her to take him back. She stubbornly refused.

He remarried when Rich was 9; the first poem she wrote was a gift for him the following year. It was called "St. Patrick," dated March 21, 1961, a school assignment.

Rich would finally get the familial companionship she craved when her stepmother gave birth to two daughters, one in 1961 and the other the following year. "I adored them and they adored me," says Rich. "They would jockey for position beside me at the table" when she visited them.

But after a family quarrel when Rich was around 20 years old, her stepmother successfully waged a campaign to ensure she had no further contact with her half-sisters. "I totally understand that they had to be loyal to their mother," says Rich. "But I still yearn for contact with them."

The stepmother also made it difficult for Lippóczy to spend time with his daughter. Rich recalls that the visits themselves had always been difficult because he — the adult — leaned too heavily on Rich — the child — for emotional support, especially at a time when she needed to be the one receiving support.

"He had a squelching effect on me," Rich says.

Life-altering events

It was two experiences that Rich had away from home that would shape her future.

The first was when, at age 12, she served as an assistant counselor at Camp Ocawasin in Butler, the camp of the former Passaic Boys' Club, which permitted girls to attend for one month of the summer. "I became a very young counselor, and the only time they ever gave an award for 'outstanding counselor,' I won it. I knew back then I'd be a teacher." She laughs at the memory — a liberating, live-in-the-moment laugh.

Her next life-altering event occurred while she was a sophomore at what was then known as Montclair State College in the spring of 1971. During an exercise on a "human relations weekend," the participants — students and staff members — were told to form two close concentric circles, with those on the inside looking at those forming the outside one. They were instructed to look deeply into the eyes of the person in front of them.

When Susanna gazed into the eyes of Morton D. Rich, "I felt like I was thrown against the back wall. One look did it," she says. "We bonded immediately."

Morton, an English professor at the school, was similarly smitten. "I didn't really look at anyone else" after that, he says. "The other young women there were typical non-academic undergraduates. She was a deep soul, who didn't fit in with the other people there."

Because Morton was married with two sons, they maintained a platonic friendship. As an English education major, Rich took one of his classes. But after Morton and his wife separated

seven years later, the two began dating; they married in 1980. Rich maintains a close relationship with Morton's adult children, Evan and Ben.

Learning and teaching

As slowly as a masterpiece is unveiled on a canvas by its painter's brush strokes, Rich's life began improving. Morton provided her with "somebody I could trust, an anchor." She also had begun therapy when she was in her 20s: "I highly recommend it," she says, "to find somebody who can help you with your soul and not make it about him or her, but you." And, in 2000, she eliminated gluten from her diet, which she believes was contributing to severe mood swings and depression.

She completed her education, receiving a doctorate in communications, specializing in the teaching of writing, from New York University in 1987 and became an English professor at Kean the following year.

"The way I teach is very different from the way other people teach because I don't look to find the students wrong," says Rich. "When I come into class, I say, 'Okay you read this and what was your experience? Did you like it or not?' And they know they can be open with me and I'm not going to come in with some set thing that they must know the way I know it, and then when I ask a question, it's to guess what I'm thinking. I make sure the classroom is collaborative, it's student-centered."

Kristin Bapst, of Winfield Park, had four classes with Rich before earning a bachelor of arts degree, with a major in English, in 2008.

"I was shocked that a professor had such an honest, down-to-earth teaching style," Bapst says of her friend and "really creative mentor."

"My challenge as a teacher really is to treat the student as a whole person, not just as somebody with merely a mind," says Rich, "...I always take a great deal of care to see exactly how students are reacting, honestly, to material that we are doing and I change things during the semester to follow that so I am very much in the moment."

"For me, the challenge and the joy are to be very genuine myself because I know that students learn how we are. They don't learn what we say so much; they learn how we are," she says. "So if I'm passionate about writing, if I'm a writer who goes back and revises a million times — that's not perfectionism, by the way; it's a commitment to excellence — if I am honest, if I am creative, if I take risks, that's what they are going to learn."

What inspires her

"If I'm going to suffer through something, I might as well get a poem out of it," Rich is fond of saying.

In that regard, her family and childhood have provided her with myriad raw materials to craft her poetic jewelry over the years. She writes about anything and everything. Nothing is off-limits, she says.

"Pain is a sufficient condition for me to write a poem, but certainly not a necessary condition. I write things out of naughtiness, I write poems out of mischief, I write poems of joy, of ecstasy. I write a lot of poems that are conversational with somebody; in my modest way I

like to do what Emily Dickinson says was her business: circumference. I like being able to write things that I am not an expert about so that I can learn about it. And fun. Fun is a big reason to write a poem."

Rich estimates she has written about 1,500 poems: Some, such as "Making Up in the Car," she has written within a week; others have taken as long as 20 years, such as "Grandmother Sausages."

Before 2004, the productive poet had only about 35 poems published in literary magazines and anthologies. That year, her father died. Since then, she has had hundreds of poems published. "When my father died, all of a sudden, I was able to wake up to myself and do all this creative work.

"It's been six years now, and I have two chapbooks. I have two very unique poetry shows — nobody's doing that. I have nine gigs in April — that's a lot. Some poets don't have that in a year," she says, matter-of-factly. But with a smile.

From page to Stage

Rich's performances always blossom from a bud of written words: "My poetry is poetry on the page first and foremost."

After she began getting published more frequently, the next logical step was traditional readings — reciting from a piece of paper. She did so, but remembered hearing another poet do his reading by memorization.

"I was so taken with it," says Rich. "There's a connection to the audience that is so profound when you read by heart."

However, fearing that she was "one-upping" her colleagues by doing that, Rich decided to make hers a one-woman show. She recruited Wiggins from Kean's theater department — "He's a brilliant director" — and students to perform most of the other functions associated with opening a staged production.

Rich says literary critic Northrup "Frye said that poetry is something that happens with an imaginative response, and that's the audience. So poetry really doesn't happen either without someone reading it or someone hearing it.

"I do some really hard poems and when I see somebody tearing up, it goes right into me, and the poem becomes more of a poem. A lot of people who come to my shows said they never realized poetry could be so alive."

The home stretch

A one-lane road seems confused as it wanders through the woods, veering left and then suddenly right, up and down — and watch out for that tree! — on the way to the Riches' Blairstown home. With its galleries of photos taken by Susanna and Mort, eclectic collections of knickknacks and books, and nooks and crannies — "It took me a long time to figure out which direction I was going," Rich says of the house's layout — it is exactly what you would expect the home of a couple of artists to look like.

But things aren't always as they appear.

When Sue Vitovic moved into the neighborhood eight years ago, Rich was introduced to her as a professor, so Vitovic assumed she was a "brainiac."

The women became friends, and get together to bike, eat out, shop, and, according to Rich, go "pillaging and marauding" at local yard sales.

Vitovic had her initial impression of Rich as being intelligent confirmed, but adds: "She's full of life and fun. She loves learning new things and meeting new people."

The Riches bought the home in quiet Warren County in 1995 to serve as a writers' retreat and to take advantage of the fresh air for Mort's asthma. Susanna's subsequent 60-plus-mile commute to work is her "denotative reason" for the title of her new show, "The Drive Home."

But if you check under the hood: "The car represents freedom, power and home to Americans," says Rich. "And poetry is freedom, power and home to me, and the word home represents coming home to who you are, coming home to love; for some people it represents going to heaven — not for me — and that expression really embodied the subject that's going through this show."

"Each poem is talking not only about getting home in the car, but getting home to something — a different definition of home each time," she says.

Epilogue

The drive home to Rich's now "joyful" life was not without its speed bumps. She suffered a severe case of carpal tunnel syndrome in 1989 that caused her to lose the use of both hands for two years. Mort had to perform seemingly simple but painful tasks for her, such as combing her hair. And her beloved Mamcsi died in 1991 at the age of 89.

Her mother is married to her third husband; they live in Ellenville, N.Y. Rich says while they have never had a "normal mother and daughter relationship," she believes "my mother did what she could." Her daughter now reciprocates: "I do what I can for them."

Rich's husband is retired, professor emeritus at Montclair State. They enjoy playing Upwords, a three-dimensional Scrabble game, and he dabbles in writing poetry and has done some readings with Susanna. He calls her "a highly developed artist who hasn't reached her potential."

She says she briefly attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York when she was 12, but didn't pursue that avenue because of the turmoil of her childhood.

"I was really afraid of losing myself," Rich explains. "I don't know if I would have been talented enough or lucky enough, but I would have been a Marilyn Monroe; people would have taken advantage of me."

"I was able to embrace my love of theater early on and come back to it now," says Rich. "It's my poetry, I'm writing it. I'm a one-woman performance, so I am able to realize those things but with wholeness, with roundedness, a career."

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Maybe next time: After reading Susanna Rich's "Squeeze Play" in a magazine, filmmaker Craig Lindvahl commissioned her to write and voice over poetry for his documentary "Cobb Field" A Day at the Ballpark." They were nominated for a 2009 Mid-America Emmy Award for their work. "I was so happy, and as far as I know, I'm the only person ever nominated for writing poetry. And it was good for poetry in general." For the gala in St. Louis, Mo., Rich splurged on an "Emmy gown," jewelry and "three or different pairs of shoes. How often do you go to your first Emmy nomination?"

On superstitions: "I was raised with a lot of superstitions. For example, you can't sit at the corner of a table or you'll never get married. Or knocking on wood ... it's a very elaborate process. My grandmother told me it can't be on a door or window jam. It has to be upward; it has to be three times. If you say something that's good, then you have to knock it. I still do it."

On stage fright: "When I get out on the stage and I'm having fun, everything's fine, but right before the program, I am pacing and peeing, and scared and rehearsing." She laughs, of course.

The Drive Home

Where: University Center Little Theater, Kean University, 1000 Morris Ave., Union

When: April 12 and 14 at 7:30 p.m.

How much: Free. Visit SusannaRich.com.