

Emily Frankel: Seattle Exposure

by Peter Stekel

Emily Frankel has enjoyed a multifaceted career. She directed, choreographed, and danced in *Kings* on Broadway. She has been presented as choreographer and dancer at Lincoln Center's Tully Hall and Avery Fisher Hall, at the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds, Jacob's Pillow, and the American Dance Festival in New London. She has appeared in off-Broadway productions and at her own theatre, Studio 17, in New York City.



Photo by Randy Kepple

When not performing, Frankel has also pursued the life of a playwright. *Footsteps in the Rain* was selected by the WPA in New York for its Phase One series. She has adapted *King Lear*, modernizing the language while retaining the original meter. Her adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac* was presented at Syracuse Stage, Atlanta Theatre Alliance, and subsequently toured the U.S. and Canada. Frankel is also a novelist. *Splintered Heart* was published by Bantam Books, and *The Woman* by Putnam and Berkley. She is now at work on a third novel.

We recently found Emily Frankel at AHA! Theatre while finishing up rehearsals for her play *Shattering Panes*, directed by her husband, *Northern Exposure's* John Cullum.

Northwest On Stage: What brought you to write *Shattering Panes*?

Emily Frankel: The idea for the play came from when John and I were visiting a friend in the Hancock Building in Chicago. It's some 104 stories, the tallest apartment structure in America. We went up to the 50th floor for an errand, and the 90th floor

for a swimming pool. The "world within a world" terrified feeling I had from being inside that building was very powerful.

When we came home that night I decided I wanted to write a play about that feeling; about a man and his wife and their cat and dog. The cat and dog were as important as the man and wife.

[It] started off as a skit. At first it was ten pages. Then, I became playwright-in-residence at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In between waiting for my rehearsals I'd plug my little computer into one of their offices and the play developed from 10 to 30 pages. This was in 1985. Since then I've expanded and done many versions of it, but always with a very powerful connection to what happens to a man and a woman and a dog and a cat who live in a high-rise when their window panes begin to shatter.

NWOS: Have you written your other plays in such a manner?

Frankel: No. Six weeks; three months. Sit down and do it. This one was different because, at first, John thought it was a skit. And my good friend [playwright and folk singer] Will Holt thought it was a skit. I had a passion for this idea, about the mom and dad, and their pets, who serve as a Greek chorus to comment on the human beings. The play is a gentle parable which is about an ordinary couple, and their pets, who seem to be shirking their responsibilities in terms of preserving our way of life in our world.

NWOS: So, the symbol of shattering panes is a metaphor for this couple who live in a modern high-rise that is a world within a world?

Frankel: It's about a man and a woman who are not dealing with the fact of aging. And the fact that they, like their apartment, are deteriorating. The husband is doggedly cheerful and avoids anything that might upset his routines. The wife is compulsively busy, always looking for whatever will bring meaning and direction to her life.

NWOS: How did the script grow from the original 10 page skit into a full-fledged play?

Frankel: What happened in the course of the play's development is that two ideas have come together. The first is of a couple, and a marriage and a relationship. The second is personal concerns about growing old and what is the purpose of life. Together they are joined in the metaphor of a building with panes of shattering glass. Aging; what does one do with one's life when one

doesn't feel needed and important and necessary?

Remember how, when you were younger, what you decided to do was terribly important? And as you get older, the one thing that changes for people who are ambitious is that the importance of you knowing what you're going to do becomes less important than knowing what your children are going to do, or what other people are going to do.

NWOS: How does this play fit into the context of everything else you've written?

Frankel: [It's] totally different. All my plays have been done under a pseudonym because I never felt they were particularly feminine or feminist. I preferred to masquerade as a man because the style and personality, terse and laconic, didn't belong to Emily Frankel the dancer, but to another person. So, my first play was "written" by Harold Schaeffer, who later became H. Gene Schaeffer.

NWOS: But the theme of what is going to happen to the world seems to run through all your work?

Frankel: Yes. My play *People in Show Business Make Long Good-byes* is about a woman who was an accomplished pianist being discarded, being no longer useful. My first play, *One Fine Morning in the Middle of the Night* is about the end of the world.

NWOS: Do you find it difficult, as a creative person, to wear so many hats: producer, choreographer, director, dancer?

Frankel: Yes, but that's been me forever... I don't think I'm happy unless I do.

NWOS: How did you get started in theatre?

Frankel: I wanted to be a dancer ever since I was 5 years old. I swore I would be a dancer until death do me part. And I did that. When I was a little girl, and dreamed those dreams, if I had known I would achieve what I achieved, I would have been proud. When I was achieving it, I wasn't proud, I was struggling.

My mental ability has never fit the restrictions of being a perfect athlete. I have a wild mind and I'm iconoclastic. If there's a rule I've got to break it. If there's a way things should be done, I don't want to do it that way but find a different way to do it. That didn't work very well with my needs to be a performer.

So I shaped a dance career for myself very early. When I was sixteen I figured no one was going to hire me because I didn't

have chorus girl proportions. I created my first solo. So, I never had a job; I made my own dance company around my powerful, arrogant, blind sense of "I'm going to learn everything there is to know," so I can be a model dancer and hold the stage.

A dancer is usually a person who wants to be perfection, to get applause, in a kind of sparkle-diamond tu-tu, with shafts of light...it's a romantic concept. I wanted people to be moved, to be touched. I wanted to reach the audience. And that doesn't quite fit into what a classical dancer is.

As a ballet-trained modern dancer I was able to form a company called the Dance-Drama Company. But it was still a company that didn't fit in with what it should have been. It wasn't a ballet company and it wasn't a modern dance company. We did dramatic work. So, my desire to be a performer has always been in conflict with my desire to create.

NWOS: Have you ever experienced any difficulty in the business with people thinking of you as either one thing or another?

Frankel: No, because I don't look for jobs. When I have a play to do, I put all my energy behind it and get it done. I don't put myself in a position where somebody else decides "should this happen or should it not happen?" I have had plays done by other people but it has been because John knew somebody, or I did, and that's how we got it going. Then it was a mutual thing of everybody pitching in.

That's why I'm so much at home at AHA! These are people who take the floor themselves to pay for productions out of their own pocket. I don't want to spend my energy on hunting for grants. I can't do it; it makes me angry. Whatever my time is worth, I'm spending it all on answering questions to fit into the mold. I'd rather earn the money wherever I can and pay for my own artistic endeavors.

NWOS: Future plans?

Frankel: I want to finish my latest novel. I feel safer when I'm working on a novel. And I have another play that I'd like to do at AHA!

NWOS: Do you find this to be a tremendously creative environment for theatre?

Frankel: People come to the theatre here and admissions aren't out of proportion either. You're not paying \$25 for a workshop [production]...in New York, you're paying \$45 to see something in some crummy theatre.

Shattering Panes runs through December 19 at AHA! Theatre, 2222 2nd Avenue in Belltown, downtown Seattle. Call (206) 728-1375 for more information.

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