

# PRECIOUS MEMORIES: BRINGING SARAH OGAN GUNNING TO LIFE ON STAGE

By Art Menius

**I**t starts on September 4, 1960, the day Aunt Molly Jackson, after dying at age 80, was buried in Sacramento, California. Sarah Ogan Gunning, her half-sister, younger by 30 years, reflects on their tumultuous relationship from the loneliness of her Detroit apartment. Both are far from their Kentucky mountain homes, and they ended up in these far-away cities via New York City and the pre-World War II urban folk revival, closely tied to left-wing support of labor causes.

Thus opens songwriter, playwright, and activist Si Kahn's new one-woman play, *Precious Memories*, starring Sue Massek. Massek has been a banjo player for almost 40 years with Louisville's pioneering feminist old-time band the Reel World String Band. Massek's Sarah tells the stories of both remarkable mountain singers and her brother Jim Garland, while bringing her songs and stories to life on stage and on a new album of the same name. Kahn set *Precious Memories* just before Gunning's musical career was restored during the third and best-known 20<sup>th</sup>-century folk revival. She had also participated in the first revival, that of Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and the close ties to left wing politics and the labor movement. The second revival, between World War II and the McCarthy persecution, featured folk as pop music with the Weavers topping the charts. Sarah describes both her indelible ties to Jackson and the conflict born of mutual jealousy and resentment. The elder woman inherited the unwanted job of raising her half-sister. She had little fondness for Sarah's youth and better looks and voice. Gunning resented Jackson's dominant personality, gift for self-promotion, and her Dylan-like penchant for reinventing and rewriting her biography into mythology or, more accurately, pure myth.

Following an advance workshop performance in March 2013 at Northern California's Main Stage West, Massek has taken *Precious Memories* on the road. Her Sarah Ogan Gunning has taken the stage at festivals (Northern Appalachian Folk Festival, Appalshop's Seedtime on the Cumberland, the SongFarmers Gathering), colleges and universities (Universi-

ty of Kentucky, Frostburg State, Radford), conferences (Southeast Regional Folk Alliance), theaters, and churches. She even performed an excerpt on the public radio and television show *Woodsongs*.

What a propitious time 1960 was for Gunning. Massek says, "It seems to me that partially because of Molly passing and partially because of the times, with the third and biggest folk revival going on—and Sarah participated in all of them, but that [one] really took off right after Molly died—it feels like she really blossomed once Molly wasn't there to try and over-shine her."

Kahn explains how *Precious Memories* came to be set on that day. It began with his efforts as playwright to create a dramatic arc to the story. That process moved the presentation from Massek singing, playing, and telling stories to a fully realized musical play. To start, he interviewed Massek about Gunning. He asked her to start playing and singing Gunning's songs in the front room of her Willisburg, Kentucky, home.

*She was sitting there and playing and it came to me how to start the show and I said, "Don't stop playing, I'll be right back." This is the great challenge in all theater and it's a challenge when you're dealing with someone's life. How do you get into it? How do you get out of it? How do you make it dramatic without dramatizing it or over-dramatizing it, and how do you get started in a way that helps the audience understand what's happening?*

*I went into the kitchen. I took out a yellow pad and I wrote down, "Well Molly, I guess that's the last of you." That became the beginning of the show, and in*

*that moment I realized, "It takes place on the date of Molly's funeral." That's when we set it, because that creates the drama and it creates the appropriate moment for Sue and Sarah, but really for Sarah to be re-thinking this relationship, to be re-experiencing all the emotions she went through in the 50 years that she and Molly were both alive. She starts by saying, "Well Molly, I guess that's the last of you," and she pauses and she says, "I'm sorry to say that, but it is," and then she says, "You and I never did get along very well, did we?"*

*I wrote down those lines. Sue was still playing the banjo, still singing Sarah Ogan Gunning, so as I went back, I said, "Finish the song, put down the banjo. Read this to me and see how it feels." She put down the banjo and she read, "Well Molly, I guess that's the last of you," and that was really how we got started.*

*These are the devices by which you create dramatic tension within the one-person musical, and I think the choice of Molly was a good one because I feel such a sensitivity and responsibility to history. There are other shows about people like this, they romanticize it, invent facts. I have kept as close to the facts as I can in *Precious Memories*.*

Getting the always-busy Kahn on board proved a bit of a challenge. The two did a concert together in Lexington. Afterwards they caught up on each other's lives over falafel. Massek mentioned that she wanted to make a living through her music starting with a one-woman play.

As Kahn tells the story, she said, "It's got to be about somebody from the past that people need to know about," and I said, "Do you have a thought as to who that might be?" She said, "Sarah Ogan Gunning," and it was like I froze because I thought, "That is so right"—because I've known Sarah Ogan Gunning's music since I heard it on a Pete Seeger record when I was 15 years old."

*At three in the morning here I wrote this really carefully phrased and guarded email that said, "Sue, I just wanted to repeat in writing my offer to help you write this show yourself, as I'd be happy to do it, proud to do it. We've been friends a long time, but should you at some point in the future ever decide that you want an outside writer to do*



this for you and with you, I would be honored." She said to me later, "I ran down the stairs screaming, 'He's going to do it. He's going to do it.'" That was how it [happened]. But Sue should get full credit for the idea. It was her idea to create it.

Jackson, whose story is told in Shelly Romalis' excellent biography *Pistol Packin' Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folksong*, changed the lives of both women and their brother when she learned that a commission of New York intellectuals had come to southeastern Kentucky to study conditions in the coalfields. In November 1931, Jackson astonished the commission, which included John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, and Theodore Dreiser, when she sang one of her songs, "Ragged, Hungry Blues," as her testimony.

Ingratiating herself with the commissioners, especially Dreiser, by early December she had landed in New York City, where she made her first recordings on December 10, 1931. Her new connections booked her for numerous events to raise money for the southeastern Kentucky coal miners and union organizers. "They took a look at this astounding singer and eloquent person," Kahn says, "someone clearly identifiably from eastern Kentucky. They hired her to travel the country to raise money for the strikes and to sing about it. She actually went to 38 different states until she was in a really awful bus wreck and got injured."

Jackson soon became a figure considered to represent Appalachian authenticity in the burgeoning New York City folk scene. Her circles came to include Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie (who would become Gunning's biggest fan), Pete Seeger, Earl Robinson, and Will Geer.

By 1935, Gunning and Garland had joined Jackson in New York City and begun making recordings for the Library of Congress. Guthrie's glowing portrait of Gunning in a 1940 issue of the Communist newspaper *The Daily Worker*, which Massek quotes in *Precious Memories*, increased the animosity between the two half-sisters. After World War II started Gunning moved to Washington State and eventually landed in Detroit.

In developing *Precious Memories*, the pair had to confront Gunning's own kind of prevarication. While not self-aggrandizing like Jackson, she remained silent while others, particularly Guthrie, invented stories about her. "We know that Woody was something of a rounder

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when it came to women," Kahn explains. "From the way he wrote about her, he sure had a crush on her. She was a stunningly beautiful woman, and she would have been about 30."

In one of the play's most gripping moments, the peak of the dramatic arc, one can easily forget Massek is an actor and not Gunning herself. She reflects on how brutally hard her life has been, while establishing her own personhood and admitting her shortcomings. Massek walks across the stage, sits, and pulls Guthrie's article from a drawer. She begins to read, "Sarah, Sarah, standing in a hail of bullets from the Deputy's guns singing bravely into the face of the bullets flying by and singing the truth." She then speaks to Jackson:

*I know you were jealous when you saw what Woody Guthrie wrote about me, and I know it did you a world of good knowing that not a word of it was true. I never wrote a single one of my songs in Kentucky. I wrote every last one of them after I got to New York. I never told people in New York that I wrote them on the Lower East Side, but I never said I didn't, and I let them believe when they complimented me for what was it like standing there singing your songs in that hail of bullets. I never did that, not in Bell County, not in Harlan County, not any place else.... I never put anything on the line other than the clothes I washed every day to try to get the coal dust out of them.*

Massek feels that the incisive political and economic analysis Gunning, who wrote "I Hate the Capitalist System," made of the injustices in the coalfields provides the most important single thing she wants to convey to audiences. "I think there is a real direct connection between the corporate control of our world today and coal operator control of the world that she grew up in."

*I think instinctively, she knew that they were being victimized by injustice, but came to really understand how big the powers were that they were fighting. It wasn't just that coal operator in front of her that was doing it, making life difficult. She said that she did some research, and I can remember her saying at Highlander [Center in New Market, Tennessee] that, "People kept telling me I couldn't say 'the capitalist system.' Well, I did some research and I found out it was all the company bosses and owners all over the world that were*

*sticking together and doing all those terrible things." Once she did that research and made that connection, then she understood it as a world economic problem rather than just the one at home.*

Massek believes that Gunning's time in New York City developed her anti-capitalist analysis of coal mining issues and built her self-confidence:

*I also think that it gave her validation for her music in a way that she had never really gotten back home. Having Woody Guthrie write about her, and singing with the Almanac Singers, and getting to know Pete Seeger, or nurturing Pete Seeger alone—she was his mentor for a while and I think it was really good for her self-esteem—I think when you suffer the kinds of poverty she did, losing babies, it would have to be hard on your self-esteem until you really figured out it wasn't your fault. I think she really got a grasp that it wasn't her fault. It was a huge thing that everybody was trying to fight.*

Massek had the advantage of having known Gunning when she earned a new career in the 1960s, appearing at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival and the Chicago Folk Festival the next year. The event that led to her desire to portray Gunning's story on stage happened before they met. "I met her at the Highlander Center," Massek says. "It was a meeting that Guy and Candie Carawan put together to discuss the issues in the coalfields at the time. Sarah was there. It thrilled me because I'd seen her on stage at the Smithsonian [Festival of American Folklife]."

*I went to the Smithsonian Festival and came upon that one panel where she was singing, the labor panel. One evening of the festival, a group of people who were trying to have marijuana legalized were protesting. They swarmed the stage and dropped two pounds of marijuana over the audience and caused a riot. Horses were running through, and it was pretty scary, but Utah Phillips went backstage, grabbed Sarah, put her out in front of a microphone, and she sang, "I Hate the Capitalist System." When that popped out of her mouth, it stunned everybody and they just stopped. She stopped the riot. The image of this tiny woman up on a big huge stage, singing, "I hate the Capitalist System"—I was like, "I need to know that woman."*

*There's some sort of commonality I felt with Sarah immediately, and after I got to know her, then I just knew it was*

*something I wanted to do. Archie Green [and I] were talking about Sarah and he said, "You write a book about Sarah someday." Since I'm not much of a book writer, this play is perfect. It gives me a vehicle to let the world know about Sarah. It feels easier than portraying someone I didn't know because I knew her well enough to have some mannerisms and stuff that I could draw upon from watching her.... At first I felt a little self-conscious about it and also somehow wanted to feel permission from her to do this. Even though she's gone, it took quite a few times of sitting in the dressing room, having conversations with her before I could go out. Now, I just have to think of that big, wide smile of hers, and I feel okay.*

As is the case with theatre, crafting *Precious Memories* became a collaborative process. Even with Massek serving as both music-maker and musical director, the team grew to include a director, lighting designer, set designer, and costume designer. Kahn says, "I was responsible for the script, and Sue fine-tuned it...I was with the mine workers in eastern Kentucky during the early '70s, working on the Brookside Strike in Harlan County... so I have some sense of the accent, the ebb and flow of the language's rhythm, the words that you use and don't use, but nothing as finely tuned as Sue."

Massek describes them working together to create a book that rang true to Gunning's voice. "My memory of Sarah has faded, I'm sure, but it feels true to Sarah, to my memory of Sarah, and that's the best you can ever do. We did a lot of research ourselves to try to find out exactly what she said. I watched the Appalshop film *Dreadful Memories* [by Mimi Pickering and available to stream on folkstreams.net] over and over again, trying to remind myself of her gestures and the way she spoke."

The process of crafting *Precious Memories* also required compromises, as Kahn explains:

*Sue had the intonations, and then at a certain point she would say, "I don't believe Sarah would have done that," and we had to settle some of those with our verbal fists. There was what is described in the play as a poem where Sarah says, "I'm half sorry I wrote that poem about you, Molly, but mad as I was, I couldn't help myself." She goes on to trash Molly in no uncertain terms, and when I presented that as part of the draft, Sue said,*



"I don't know. She was too sweet. She never would have done something like that." I said, "Sue, she not only wrote this poem, she recorded it. It's a song. It's on an LP the Tennessee Folklore Society put out, and what we have in the play is mild compared to some of the rest of it." The accusations she levels against her half-sister are scurrilous and extreme, so finally we agreed that we would do about half of it and do it as a poem, but even there she said it. She wrote it. She did it.

When Kahn was in Lexington for a two-week residency, the pair tried to take full advantage of that time, especially for research. According to Kahn,

There's not a lot out there. Sue and I, in that first week, went ... [to] the wonderful archives at the University of Kentucky, and they've got a lot of the stuff about the coal fields and the strikes, and we're looking at these, we're looking at the fliers for the meetings during this great strike that Sarah talks about, and we're looking at the newspapers that say, "Communists wrecking Bell County." There's so much there. It's old yellow stuff, folio after folio after folio, but no one has written extensively about Sarah Ogan Gunning.

Kahn says that one chapter in Romalis' book, Gunning's granddaughter's memories, and Archie Green's liner notes to Gunning's Folk Legacy album *Girl of Constant Sorrow* comprised all the biographical information available to them. "There is not the kind of detailed information that you want when you're doing a historical drama where you care about accuracy, where it's both a dramatic piece and an educational tool."

Now, it is true that I don't know what Sarah did on the day of Molly's funeral, but there was a day of Molly's funeral, it is the day the musical takes place, and I can speculate from my experience what she would feel, what she would do. That's the process of creation. But the hard work of creation really is Sue Massek's. It would be the imagining of it and then the learning of it and the embodying of it...We were bringing together photos for the slideshow that goes in the back [of the stage set] and Sue sent me a photo without any label on it...I emailed back, "You look so beautiful in that picture. It's one of the best photos of you I've ever seen."

She emailed back, "That's not me, that's Sarah." Really, it's extraordinary, the resemblance, and I have such admiration for Sue who had never acted



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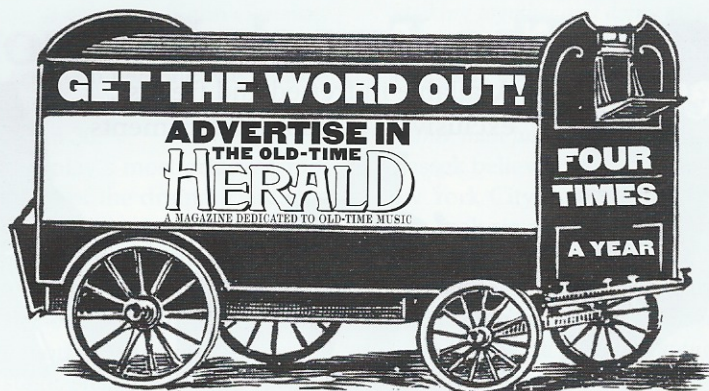


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a day in her life. After the performance at SERFA [Southeast Regional Folk Alliance Conference in Montreat, North Carolina, in mid-May 2015], I heard somebody saying to Sue, "How many musicals have you starred in?" Sue said, "This is the first one." She said, "What other acting experience did you have?" Sue said, "I've never acted in my life before this."

Kahn says that one of "absolute joys of the partnership that Sue Massek and I have" came from seeking out Gunning's descendants. They knew she had two children who died young, one from starvation during a strike and the other of tuberculosis. They had no idea about the two that lived to adulthood.

Sue found out that Sarah had a granddaughter living in Hart, Michigan, about an hour from Grand Rapids, and she made contact with her. Her name is Rosie Ogan Hickman, and she's a photographer. Rosie was just so excited and she said, "You know, I've written a memoir about my grandmother." We were like, "What?" She said, "Oh, I've got all this information." We accidentally stumbled on a major Sarah Ogan Gunning archive. She says, "Oh yeah, I got letters, I got pictures, I got pictures of our family. I've got a banjo."

Massek expresses a deep appreciation for folklorist Archie Green's research and his interest in helping Gunning find a new audience. "I think he understood how overshadowed Sarah had been by Molly and how fictional so much of what people were hearing about Molly was." Green, who had interviewed Jackson not long before her death, finally found Gunning in Detroit in October 1963. Green's attention proved transformational for Gunning, for whom the two decades prior to her 1983 death at 73 were her most comfortable times.

He was able to help get her up out of the extreme poverty she was living in. Even in New York, she was in terrible, terrible poverty. Detroit was better, but it still...was very, very poor. Now, her granddaughter has a wonderful memories of the Detroit house and said that all over the house was candy and food. Just stacks and stacks of food in every closet. Her granddaughter said it was just because she was so hungry for so long as a young person, that food was a security for her, to have plenty of food in the house.

As the play continued its development, a conflict that now seems funny



occurred due to Massek's inexperience as an actor. Kahn seemed to take especial joy in relating this as we talked at the 2015 SERFA conference.

Sue said, "I need you to make me one promise. I just don't move.... I don't move on stage and even when I'm playing in the band. You need to promise me that I will not have to move on stage. I said, "Sue, I'm going to put you in a rocking chair and you're going to stay there for 90 minutes." She said, "Okay then, that's a deal." I said, "It's a deal." That's how I wrote the musical. There's no stage directions that says she gets up and moves.

That hurdle crossed, Kahn recruited Elizabeth Craven to direct *Precious Memories*. Craven spent some twenty years in Knoxville, Tennessee, with the University of Tennessee's drama department and an experimental theater group that met in the basement of the Laurel Theater called The Playgroup. Craven had since relocated to Main Stage West in Sebastopol, California, less than 100 miles west of Jackson's final resting place in Sacramento. Kahn considers Craven, who had already directed three of his previous plays, a "genius at theater." Kahn's *Mother Jones in Heaven* has been part of Main Stage West's last two seasons. He and Massek flew to California to work with Craven. Kahn picks up the story there:

Sue is sitting there in her rocking chair, really happy, anxious, nervous, but playing her banjo and just rocking back and forth. Beth said, "All right, let's get started. Sue, on your feet." Sue said very calmly, "Beth, you don't understand. Si promised me that I wouldn't have to leave my rocking chair for the 90 minutes of the show, and so I'm just going to keep rocking here." Beth said, "You know, Sue, you're new to musical theater and to theater, but in theater once we begin rehearsals, the writer is not in charge. The director is in charge and in fact, if Si has anything he wants to say, he has to say it to me. He's not to talk to you. These are the rules with theater." She said, "Sue, you'd better get on your feet."

The other night here at SERFA, she was striding back and forth across the stage and putting her fists in the air, talking about her father, saying, "Join the union, fight for better working conditions," and she'll cross the stage and become very, very dynamic. I think it's just such a tribute to her courage. I have no intention of memo-

rizing 90 minutes of scripted songs and going out in front, and try to remember where am I supposed to be in this moment, so when Sue talked about co-creation, of course it is. It's a wonderful act of co-creation, and theater is just unbelievably collaborative.

Massek earned her courage through sustained effort. At the first performance after five months she needed someone on side stage to feed her lines. "That took a lot of practice, a lot of going over and over and over and over the lines. The songs, because I had sung several of them ahead of time and heard her singing, were pretty easy and that will give me a mental break. It took me a long time to learn the lines, and hard work, five hours a day."

*Precious Memories* is, of course, a musical with Massek singing and accompanying herself on banjo, an instrument that Gunning played at home, according to her granddaughter, but not on stage. The play, supported by an Indiegogo campaign that has so far raised more than \$7,500, includes 11 songs plus brief parts of a couple of traditional gospel songs. Kahn explains the selections:

I didn't write any of the songs. There's seven songs by Sarah Ogan Gunning, one song by... Aunt Molly Jackson. There's two traditional ballads from her family's historical collection. Her family contributed hundreds of songs to the Library of Congress. Archie Green recorded them, Alan Lomax recorded them. We'd do "Loving Nancy," which seems to have been unique to that family... and we did "I Am a Traveling Creature" which both Sue and I had learned from the singing of the great West Virginia miner, Nimrod Workman, who actually worked with Mother Jones in the mines during the mine wars, but we then discovered that Sarah had recorded a version, and that's the version we used.

The music appears on the Strictly Country compact disc entitled *Precious Memories: Sue Massek as Sarah Ogan Gunning Sings the Songs from Precious Memories, An Original Play by Si Kahn*. The album, released on May 1, 2015, contains 16 songs, since they perform an additional five cuts coming from Jackson and Garland. That makes it the largest compilation of songs associated with their family. Kahn and Alice Gerrard join Massek on several songs. The recording reached as high as #2 on the FolkDJ chart, behind John McCutcheon's *Joe Hill's*


*Last Will*, which accompanied another one-actor play written by Kahn.

Massek has 38 years' experience providing folk music in public schools. Thus it is no surprise that she has created curricula for *Precious Memories*, so that the play can be used as an educational resource in high schools and colleges, as well as community groups. "I believe it's deeply important to keep alive the memories of those hard times—and of how people worked together to make a difference, and to make a change," she says. "One of my goals is to bring awareness of this rich history of fighting back and standing up for ourselves to the next generations of young adults. But I also I want to remind folks in my generation, who might have forgotten, about why this history is so important to our democracy."

Both Kahn and Massek, who believes that by the 1970s, unlike in 1960, Gunning knew her songs would outlive her, offer lofty goals for *Precious Memories*. Kahn says he hopes that people say that Gunning "was someone just like me, and look what she did! If she could do that, I could do that...Sarah really didn't have a lot of education or have a lot of privilege and yet she became an extraordinary influential force. Sue Massek is just one of the young artists, primarily young women, that Sarah created possibilities for."

Massek, who expresses her deep appreciation for Kahn's work with her, also hopes her play will inspire people:

The ultimate goal, the altruistic goal or the goal that's beyond me, is that it can be something that will be a tool for people who are working for social justice and they will help people with analysis, especially working people...If they could understand her very down-to-earth analysis of...where the evil is coming from, I think it could begin a change in people. It just is another tool for that; it's certainly not going to do it by itself, but if we can get enough people out there doing that kind of work, then things can change. You can't just preach to people. You've got to give them concrete examples of how you can go from here to there.

In the meantime, Massek will be "traveling the country performing the musical, trying to give people a sense of what life was like in the eastern Kentucky coal camps during the early 1930s—and how, despite those hard times, people found ways to make life better for themselves and others." 



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