

Voices from the Valley: Patrick Scott-Wilson

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | May 27, 2018



Ed Kemmick/Last Best News

Patrick Scott-Wilson, co-founder of Sacrifice Cliff Theatre.

Patrick Scott-Wilson is currently passionate about three things: how stories told through theater create culture, discovering how to be an ally to those facing injustice, and how these support each other. He started Sacrifice Cliff Theatre with his husband, Shad Scott-Wilson, six years ago. They are currently assessing what it means to be a theater company in Billings in the 21st century.

Sherri: Patrick, would you explain your use of the term “fire signal” in relation to theater?

Patrick: Yes. It’s when you are throwing out a story that needs to be shared. The mirror neurons, in someone seeing and hearing that story, start to fire and create empathy and altruism. They see someone in pain, recognize that in themselves, and their minds want to figure out how to alleviate it. Through play making, Shad and I are trying, in some way, to experience and share those kinds of stories. But, we are asking ourselves important questions that are currently shaping art-making in our country: “Who should unpack and tell particular stories?” and “How do we or should we tell stories that are not ours?”

Sherri: In a past Voices from the Valley conversation, **Fitzgerald Clark** talked about how questioning and challenging our own actions and reactions may be uncomfortable, but necessary.

Patrick: Discomfort ... that is where the best art and philosophy happen. We become stagnant and stale anytime we get locked down and codify ourselves in dogma. We need to have the courage to question even things we hold dear, to confront what is inside ourselves, in order to grow as individuals and as a society.

Sherri: I recently wrote an exhibition essay titled “Anosognosia and the Asymptote.” Unless others point out what we do not know that we do not know (anosognosia), in other words, place a mirror in front of us, and we are *open* to that new information and to *acting* upon it, we don’t progress in our understanding. Of course, if we *do* know we don’t know something, we can seek out answers. But as you have said, even if we could crawl up inside another’s skin, it’s not enough to *really* know them. It would still be through our perception. That’s my analogy with an asymptote — a line moving toward, but never quite reaching, a curve. Despite our best intentions and efforts, we can never fully understand the experience of another person.

Patrick: It is a challenge. Though I am happy if anyone wants to pull me aside and tell me I am wrong, we can’t belabor our friends who are people of color. It’s not their job to teach us; they have their own work.

Sherri: And, inspiring work is being done. Creating awareness and transformation in our culture seems to be most effective where it is led by those most experiencing the injustice. The question, for me, is how best to be an ally, how to de-center my perspectives and transformations and use the resources I have to support that transformation.

Patrick: I am just learning to be an ally and I am crashing, burning and stumbling as I look at my contribution, rather through silence or active participation, in maintaining the dominant culture. As a white male, at any moment I can disengage from the conversation and be largely unaffected.

But, I’m learning that my feelings aren’t as important as the lives and bodies of the people who are at risk. We now have more people actually saying, “Hey, you are stepping on my foot when you do this.” We need to stop being so fragile when they point this out, with being challenged. Everything may seem like its being pulled out of whack — like its personal and that we are being blamed. Our defense mechanisms may kick in to avoid looking at the uncomfortable knowledge that because of our skin color and our history we have benefited more than other persons have. That’s just part of the process. But, learning to recognize it in our selves is where it starts.

Sherri: And realizing that these are difficult conversations, with lots of history and emotion. We will make mistakes, but we need to be willing to confront those mistakes so that we can move forward.

Patrick: We also need to learn when to speak up, when to be silent and when to hold the space. That’s where theater is a great model. As an audience, you sit, are most often silent, and bear witness. Later, you discuss your reactions. My discomfort with any of this learning is a small price to pay if someone else’s life could be better.



With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett’s passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she

contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993.

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Here are the previous installments of Voices from the Valley:

- ◆ April 22, **Claudia Stevens.**
- ◆ April 30, **Fitzgerald Clark.**
- ◆ May 6, **Gwen Kircher.**
- ◆ May 14, **Marci McLean.**
- ◆ May 20, **Tyson Middle.**

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