

Letting go, enjoying the show

Key to the Door Weekly

July 11, 2012

By Katie Dahl

For better or worse, I've always loved being in charge. When I was five, I spent my entire ballet recital trying to get the girl next to me to dance correctly--I hardly danced at all. In middle school group projects, I tried to do all the work myself, out of fear that someone else would screw it up. More recently, in my biggest power grab yet, I've become a solo singer-songwriter.

I've long believed that solo singer-songwriters are some of the biggest control lovers around. Unfettered by the democracy of a band, we are free to autocratically make all the decisions: what the next CD will be called, who will sing the next song (the inevitable answer: me!), what we will have for lunch. Accustomed as I have long been to this level of control, imagine my surprise when I set about co-writing a musical (called *Victory Farm*; playing now through August 25) for American Folklore Theatre—one of the most collaborative processes one could imagine.

First of all, I wrote the play with two collaborators, Emilie Coulson (who co-wrote the book and lyrics with me) and James Valcq (who wrote the music). It turns out that in a professional theatrical collaboration, you cannot—and should not—wrest power from your collaborators as easily as you did in your sixth grade group presentation on dolphins. I quickly learned that when you have insightful, intelligent, capable collaborators who are equally invested in your project's outcome, hogging all the work is inefficient—not to mention less fun.

But the collaboration inherent in the writing process was nothing compared to the collaboration that happened when *Victory Farm*—which had theretofore existed solely in our minds, and therefore looked and sounded however we wanted it to—went into rehearsals. Suddenly there was an army of people scurrying around the rehearsal hall like a hill of ants, whose job it was to turn our imaginary world into an

onstage reality. In addition to our director, music director, set designer, lighting designer, props designer, costume designer, stage management, and other production staff, there were actors, set loose on the stage and capable of doing anything at any minute! At first glance, it seemed like a control lover's nightmare.

But you know what? It was wonderful. In part, it was wonderful because it's exhausting to be in charge all the time. I'm no good at staging a scene, sewing a costume, building a fake cherry tree, or performing a German folk dance. So I get to let other people do those jobs.

More importantly, the aforementioned "other people" are brilliant at their jobs. The crew AFT assembled to work on *Victory Farm* is absolutely first-rate. As rehearsals went on, I came to trust the *Victory Farm* team intimately, and Emilie, James, and I had the privilege of watching the show blossom from an oxygen-starved figment of our imaginations to a vibrant onstage world.

Incidentally, the process of letting go, of inviting unexpected contributions in rather than pushing them away, is not unlike the story of *Victory Farm*, which is based on the real-life history of German prisoners of war who came to pick cherries in Door County during World War II. Though the play's Americans are initially afraid of allowing Germans onto their farms and into their lives, concerned about the way in which a new presence will change their world, they decide to accept the Germans' help because they must. And with that decision, they initiate a fruitful and life-changing collaboration.

Now that *Victory Farm* is open, when I go see the show at the theater, I'm not allowed to do anything but sit and listen to the words I co-wrote. It's thrilling, in an out-of-control sort of way. If only I had had this revelation as a five-year-old, who knows what sort of choreographic brilliance would have flourished at that fateful kindergarten ballet recital.



Katie Dahl co-wrote the book and lyrics for American Folklore Theatre's "Victory Farm" with Emilie Coulson.