



EILEEN VORBACH, BETSEY MEANS

PHOTO: DOROTHY PERRY

In Performance: WomanLore saves lost lives

them,” said director Eileen Vorbach, who teaches drama at the Actors Workshop. “It is absolutely exciting to try to bring these women to life.”

Means and Vorbach have also brought back the old-fashioned art of domestic theater, presenting Kingsley as she was in life—as a traveling lecturer. Means takes her into people’s homes as part of a soiree, hiding in an upstairs bedroom—becoming Kingsley—while the sponsors of the party feed their guests wine and snacks. When the guests gather in the sitting room, Kingsley arrives, dressed in a severe black gown, to talk about her travels, showing the audience maps, an African native fetish, and illustrations of her specimens. After the lecture, she takes questions.

In directing the show, Vorbach says she was wary of the stiffness that usually characterizes historical reenactments of the sort tourists see in Colonial Williamsburg. “You open the curtain and there’s Betsy Ross—it’s interesting, but it’s not theatrical,” Vorbach explained. “We wanted to make this a full experience. There has to be a reason for you to be sitting there. The audience has to be a part of it. You’re coming to see her lecture.”

Means and Vorbach like that WomanLore shows allow them to introduce audiences to women who were able to transcend their own environments to be truly themselves—something they believe women still need to learn despite the advances of feminism. Sometimes a woman’s life has to be metaphorically destroyed before she can figure out who she is, Means says.

Kingsley lived most of her life in a house with bricked-up windows, caring for a slightly crazed mother who took to her bed for years as a protest against her husband’s frequent travels. She educated herself by reading all the books in her father’s library. When she was 30, her parents died within six weeks of each other. Kingsley used her inheritance to go to the most disease-ridden part of Africa—and found happiness for the first time.

“When her parents died, she had to make a conscious decision—how do I get into life?” Means says. After 17 months of travel, Kingsley was considered an expert on Africa “because she looked at what was instead of trying to change it like the missionaries did,” Means says. “She thought African culture was wonderful, and was to be celebrated. This was so radical in the 1890s—to think that African culture was OK as it was.” Kingsley died of typhoid fever at age 38, while nursing Boer prisoners of war in South Africa.

WomanLore has put on about ten home performances, and has also presented the show at museums. The pair hopes to bring Kingsley and future shows to colleges and libraries—Means is currently working on a new script on union organizer Mother Jones, while Vorbach is writing something on abolitionist Fanny Kemble.

Means says that learning about women like these can give balance to people’s experience of human history. “Jung said that in order to be well fathered, you have to read the great literature of history. I say that in order to be well mothered, we have to go back and read women’s histories. We’ve been deeply fathered—let’s get deeply mothered.”

Means will perform *Fish and Fetish: A Visit With Victorian Explorer Mary Kingsley* this weekend: Friday, March 2, at 4 PM at the Women’s Exchange, 725 Pine in Winnetka (847-441-3406), and Saturday, March 3, at 7 PM in the historic main living hall of the Glessner House Museum, 1800 S. Prairie. Tickets for the Winnetka show are \$10; the Glessner House show is \$40 and includes a wine and cheese reception; call 312-326-1480 for reservations. WomanLore can be reached at 773-866-9847.

—MARY WISNIEWSKI

Explorer Mary Henrietta Kingsley fit into late-19th-century British society about as comfortably as Tarzan. While other Victorian ladies were practicing needlework and having babies, Kingsley was wading through the malarial swamps of West Africa, climbing Mount Cameroon, studying the Fang people, a tribe with a reputation for cannibalism, and collecting fish and beetle specimens for the British Museum.

Something about Kingsley—kooky and brilliant—appealed to Chicago actress Betsy Means, who was casting about for a subject for a one-woman show. It wasn’t meant to be a big deal—just a \$100 performance for a local women’s club.

But what started as a one-off has evolved into a two-woman theater company, WomanLore, which specializes in shows about unconventional women in history.

“There are so many women who did these incredibly cool things and nobody has heard of

