

Ute Lemper on the responsibility that comes with being an artist



February 26, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1903 words.

Tags: [Theater](#), [Acting](#), [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#), [Production](#), [Success](#).

You've done a little bit of everything over the course of your career—film, theater, cabaret, recordings—and now you're preparing a solo show based on [Marlene Dietrich](#). What is that process like?

This show has been brewing for a while. It's based on something I experienced. I was living at the time in Paris, in 1988. I had just finished a year-long run of the musical *Cabaret*. Marlene was still alive. She was 88 years old. I was 24. After receiving the French Tony award, the Molière Award, the press kept saying things about me like "She's the new Marlene Dietrich." I thought this was ridiculous. How can they compare me to this wonderful, incredible legend?

I felt embarrassed about it, honestly. I knew she was a recluse and didn't go out, but I knew she read the newspapers. I wrote her a letter to apologize for those comparisons, but also to express my gratitude for all the inspiration she had given to a generation of women. I thanked her for being a charming movie star and singer, but even more for all of her political engagement, for her clarity of thought during the war—for joining the American army and staying away from the Nazis despite the fact that the Germans asked her to come back and perform for them. She was always on the right side, morally. I expressed this all in a letter, expecting nothing to happen.

To my surprise, she called me back. We had a three-hour phone conversation that went all over the place about politics, about Germany, about her heritage, about her daughter, about her men, about her life in Hollywood, about the Berlin of the Weimar times, about her affinity for French literature and music. A lot of different things. Her affinity for the poet [Rainer Maria Rilke](#), that she then recited to me over the phone. It was a very rich conversation, very personal, too. Yet, at the time, I didn't know quite where to put it into my luggage of life because I was still so young. I guess it took me a few decades to digest it properly, contemplate it in a personal way, and figure out how to make something from it.

Last year I got a lot of offers to play Marlene Dietrich, both in a movie and in several plays. I'm an older lady now, having toured the world, having had an international career, with lots of wonderful memories and a mosaic of cultures inside of me. I felt a kind of kinship with her, myself being kind of de-rooted as she was, being an expatriate, having my own complicated relationship with Germany, having fallen in love with many other countries, including America and France. I thought I was ready to put this conversation into an artistic form and make a play—a one-woman show—about it. It was a chance to confront both people, both Marlene and myself, and let them talk to each other.

For someone who's worked in a number of different areas of entertainment, is there one realm where you feel the most at home?

It's been an evolution over 35 years. My first professional production was when I was 20, so it's really been a long time. I was in rock bands and amateur performances, but not yet as a professional actor, then I went to drama school and college in Vienna. It was a long road. It always was clear to me that big stage productions—musicals like *Chicago* or *Cabaret* or *Peter Pan* or *The Blue Angel*—were a slightly sad experience. It was not what I loved the most.

I felt too controlled by the production and the direction and having to fit into something in which I could not express all the cultural influences that I carried inside of me, things that were broader than the plays could project. It was hard to convey emotional depth sometimes, especially in musical comedies. I always lived inside those productions with a lot of doubt and some sort of frustration. When I did movies, I missed music. Whenever I played a straight part, it was like a detox from my experience in musicals.

Over the years I found myself most comfortable doing my own concerts and one-woman shows. Whether it's dedicated to Charles Bukowski or Kurt Weill or Berlin Cabaret Songs or songs from the Holocaust, I always created roles in my own vision and direction. I feel most comfortable bringing my life story into a broader style of historical storytelling.

My ticket was always my own imagination and my own creativity. Even though in the beginning I was a dancer and I did dancing in comedies or in a ballet company, I am not really a dancer. That was not my universe. It really is storytelling through music that captivates me the most. That's where I feel the most fulfilled and complete. I also had a recording career and worked with people like Elvis Costello and Tom Waits, but that still wasn't my chosen path. I love performing on my own, which always has a more historical, theatrical approach to it.

What things do you consider essential for a long career as an entertainer? As an artist?

I always followed my heart and I definitely never lost my enthusiasm. There's the one quote from Churchill that I always think about, something like "success is what happens after an incredible accumulation of failures." Even if you have one failure after the other you still can't lose a speck of your enthusiasm. I really feel that way. Sometimes it feels that I'm just doing my thing and I'm not sure who is hearing it, because maybe the records are not necessarily selling, you don't always know what's happening. It's certainly often not a huge commercial success. I'm just always drawn towards the personal side of creativity, which leads you into what feels like true art-creating projects that deal with universal suffering, universal joy, and universal hope. I always want my shows to say something about society, the human condition, about suffering, about this journey we're all on but can barely explain.

I believe that when you can do something positive and amazing on a stage, it enables you to take people into this shared zone of understanding, which I always refer to as the third room. It's not my room, it's not the audience's room, but a third room—a beautiful shared space. It's a place where you can really explore and examine loss and solitude and love and imagination and hope and everything that brings us together. My favorite place is that third room, that's where I always want to be.

This part of the process for you—before a show opens, when you are still rehearsing something, fleshing out your ideas, adding new things, taking things out—must be exciting.

It's super exciting. It's fascinating. When you are really creating something, you don't want to spend time or waste a minute of the day on things like television or small talk or on anything else because your mind is captivated by the idea of developing something new. I keep improvising with myself and the puzzle that is the show keeps changing. It's a constant process of improvising more with my imagination and then also, of course, doing research.

For this new show it helps that I'm truly fascinated by Marlene Dietrich and the way she was able to live her life. She created a very masculine kind of femininity at a time when women were really not yet allowed to be bossy, self-assured, or masculine at all in their work. Billy Wilder said about her, "She was like a man." She knew exactly what she wanted. She told the lighting designer where to put the lights. She didn't have this romantic small-talk girly thing about how she was supposed to be. She would never sell her heart. She knew very much what she wanted and she was able to get it because she didn't fake anything. Marlene is kind of a beacon of creativity because she presented a very progressive image of what a woman could be, especially during those times. She spoke her mind. She was provocative and demanding and she didn't play games. She was loved by both men and women for that, for her boldness and her courage. She was into dirty jokes and smoking and drinking. She loved life. That's how I have always wanted to be.

She was completely an independent woman, but maybe lonely at the end of the day. I don't know. She said, "I really got used to solitude. I can't reconcile it. I just got used to it." I don't know whether she chose it, but she always protected herself inside her power position as a woman. She didn't let people break her or hurt her too much. So yes, I find her fascinating and I feel it is my responsibility also to tell her story. As an artist, I think you have a responsibility to be honest, to try and tell the truth about things as best you can.

You are also known as an interpreter of songs and have done a lot of work to keep certain songs and certain songwriters—Kurt Weill, for example—alive in the popular consciousness. Do you feel like performers have a kind of moral obligation to not only understand their own history, but also to pay service to it in some way?

Yes, but it's difficult to keep that running because in the commercial world that we are constantly confronting, everything has to fit into a format. Music is an institution now rather than an art form. It's furniture. Something that is produced based on these clear boundaries and recipes to be released as a digital thing to please and entertain for a very short window of time.

My older children are now in their early 20s. Despite my influence, they would never want to go and see an opera or a classical concert. They are a part of the modern, contemporary world of pop music. It makes me wonder sometimes whether classical music will still be alive in 50 years because there is nowhere for it to be heard. There is no radio station to play it. You don't hear it played in supermarkets or elevators or gyms, places where people randomly come into contact with music that is not of their own choosing. We are no longer given the sensitivity as children to understand or listen to this kind of music, so once the ear no longer has a knowledge or affinity for it, it just shuts itself off to it. That's a whole generation

now that is shut off to it. How will it survive? I don't know the answer to that, but I do my part to keep these things alive, to remind people that there is art and music out there that can express things for you, that can explain things that can't always be put into words.

Essential Ute Lemper:

"La Vie En Rose" & "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" (1992 live)

"Lili Marleen" (Live - October 2013)

Illusions

Punishing Kiss

Songs for Eternity

Name

Ute Lemper

Vocation

Singer, Actress

