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# Meet the desperate characters of Mercer County

Jenna Ann MacGillis seeks to shed light on her family history and make performance more intimate in the process

by Justin Hudnall

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In this age of disconnection and alienation, Jenna Ann MacGillis offers an opportunity for a select few to share in a little intimacy.

The 15 or so lucky patrons who RSVP to MacGillis' show in time will be brought into her studio apartment, where she'll reveal the skeletons and unanswered questions of her family's past through sculptural manipulation, dance, storytelling and a live Americana house band. The band members' legs will dangle down from the lofted bed area where MacGillis sleeps, and the audience will sit in chairs that she's perched up behind windows or on hay bales, watching as 200 years of her family's story unfolds at just an arm's length away.

The Desperate Characters of Mercer County is a surreal and abstract endeavor to be sure, but no more surreal than the story of how the show came together.

For most of her adult life, MacGillis, a San Diego native, didn't know much about her family's history, other than the stories told by a grandmother she'd visit from time to time in New York. Her grandma's wistful recollections of the family's origins in a small Missouri farming town formed the basis for the imagined memories that MacGillis used to fill gaps. The narrative

"exists sort of in a dreamscape," she says.  
"It's not quite reality, not quite a memory—  
it's somewhere in between."

The dark details of MacGillis' past may have stayed there, had it not been for a scholarship she received that brought her to Trenton, Mo.—the same town where her great-grandmother had lived. Through a recommendation from the San Diego Guild of Puppetry, she was able to attend PuppetFest MidWest, an annual festival held there. When she first arrived in Kansas City, MacGillis drove a rental car to Cainsville, where family, dating back to 1812, is buried. MacGillis also made arrangements to visit historians at Trenton's library.

It was there that she discovered the title for her show. A historian handed MacGillis a book from the 1800s and invited her to look up her surname, on the off-chance that it might shed some light on the family's cloudy origins. Her first discovery was her great-great-great-grandfather, Benjamin Smothers, and his dubious honor as the town's very first murderer.

"The first line [in the book] describes him as a desperate character.' He had been drinking in the dram shop and killed his friend over a quarrel," MacGillis says

through a big smile. "The exact quote was, 'They were good friends nevertheless.' The historian was like, 'No, no, it's OK; everyone has one of those in their family,' but I was so excited. It was like a goldmine for me. It was that slice of old America that you think doesn't really exist in your family, that isn't real, that seems so fabricated, but that was it right there."

Finally, MacGillis found concrete evidence of her roots. From there, she set out to research, linking together generation after generation until she reached the 1950s and her grandmother—the impetus for her journey in the first place.

MacGillis' determination to tell such a sweeping and personal story right ended up affecting her real-estate decisions. For *Desperate Characters*, she wasn't planning to invite an audience into just any old apartment or house; she chose her current residence in the Space 4 Art studio complex because it suited the needs of her show.

"It goes back to the tradition of puppet theater, where the venues are so intimate, you can do very small details and have them carry," MacGillis says. "The intimacy of this story goes really well with the intimacy of

the space. I don't know that I would feel comfortable in a bigger venue."

Bigger being better isn't a foreign doctrine to the arts world. How artists plan to make a living is the traditional first question asked of them for a reason—most don't. The emphasis on remaining solvent through ticket sales and season subscriptions and membership drives is what Patrick Eugene Stewart, the director of *Desperate Characters*, says motivates most contemporary theater.

"What we generally do is to see how many people can we get in the auditorium," Stewart says. "We try to sell so many tickets, we try to shout from the rooftops, but what Jenna Ann has created is an opportunity for a small group of people to subjectively experience a work of art the same way if you were looking at it hanging on the wall. That's not something that we do as performing artists."

Stewart formerly was the artistic director of the now-defunct Sushi Performance and Visual Arts and currently is the executive director of Words Alive. He became involved with MacGillis' project out of an interest in creating more immersive, nontraditional theatrical experiences.

"Not only is it this personal experience she's creating between herself and an audience; it's her house," he emphasizes. "That's a rip-the-Band Aid-off moment she's willing to do that a lot of us aren't. That's a very special kind of voyeurism. It almost blurs the line between theater and autobiography."

To be one of the 15 people who get in to each performance in the 10-day run, you have to be as quick on the draw as Benjamin Smothers was. RSVP at [desperatecharacters.us](http://desperatecharacters.us). For those who do make it through the door, MacGillis promises that the scarcity of the experience makes it all the more powerful.

"It's only that moment," she says, "and then it's gone."

Write to [editor@sdcitybeat.com](mailto:editor@sdcitybeat.com).

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