

# Child's Play Touring Theatre

## Our Co-Founder - June Podagrosi



**June Podagrosi** is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Child's Play Touring Theatre. She is magna cum laude graduate of Brooklyn College and received a master's degree in dance at the University of Illinois, where she was a featured soloist with the Beverly Blossom Dance Company. She founded the Downtown Performing Arts Center in Champaign and served as its Executive Director for three years. Since 2012 she currently serves on the Jeff committee A/T Artistic/Technical team.

An advocate for children's theatre, June served on the Board of the Illinois Theatre Association as Children's Theatre Chairperson. She has sat on many arts-in-education panels for various conferences, including chairing the panel for the Midwest Arts Conference in Minneapolis. June has served as a Peer Review Panelist for both the National Endowment for the Arts Professional Theatre Program and the Illinois Arts Council's Arts-in-Education Program. She has also developed several strategic alliances on behalf of Child's Play, including: "Kids For President" with the League of Women Voters; "Do the Write Thing!", a violence prevention program with the Cook County State's Attorney's Office; and "Writing Our World!" (WOW!), a partnership with PovertyFighters.com that connected children around the world and benefitted micro lending in developing nations.

### My Story

My Son Michael insisted I write my story. He is right, there is a lot to tell, so please indulge my nostalgic trip down memory lane. I believe it is in each of our individual rich histories that we can find the roots of who we are and who we are to become. Like the Lion King I feel like I am living "the Circle of life". It is clear to me now how important a good foundation is to build a life that has meaning and purpose so we can share what we learned.

Before I begin, I want to express my gratitude to Michael Podagrosi who is the best friend a mother could ever dream of he has been my inspiration since he came into this world. He has to tell his story next.

OK...here goes:

### Roots Born and Bred in Brooklyn

I was born and bred in Brooklyn, New York. My loving parents thought I was going to be a boy because I was so active even before I was born. I was always moving. Sports came easy and I loved to sing and dance. My Mama Jean (my mother's mother) seeing my joy as I would spin to her records and my ability to carry a tune, got me my first role on stage when I was barely out of diapers. I sang and danced for her magical musicals in a Senior Citizens Center on Kings Highway. She was wonderful. A real leader, everyone including me adored her. She made everyone feel special. I carry her in my heart as I follow in her footsteps. Dancing became my



## June Podagrosi (continued)

passion, and I was so fortunate to have the best teachers in the country right in the neighborhood. My first studio was run by a former Rockette Blanche Kurtis who not only taught great jazz steps she would exclaim "smile girls so the people in the last row of Radio City can see you". Her ballet teacher was from France and taught us well. My first performance as a "dancer" out of the studio was in the Senior Center - shortly after my Mama Jean passed. Our intergenerational programs at Child's Play had their seeds sown during that time.

My first Broadway show I can remember was Fiddler on the Roof...I sang every song on the album over and over again. Going to shows on Broadway was something we did occasionally and was a very special experience. We did see ballet and Opera in Lincoln Center and I would dream about performing like that. I would imagine what it was like to be a Russian Ballerina. I always wrote - first it was in a diary writing about boys. As I got older, I journaled about my dreams, visions, struggles and hopes. I would play with writing too and dabbled in writing poems. It has been a great gift to be able to look back and read my life at various stages. It has helped me become the person I am today.



My interest in dance transcended all forms and styles as I studied African/Haitian dance in the basement of BAM with Fred Benjamin to the study of Labanotation (a musical scale turned vertical with a complex system to record movement). I started teaching and choreographing early on and had one of the best experiences one summer in the Brooklyn Museum of Art's summer program for children. We used every exhibit as an inspiration for learning different cultures starting in the Classical Statues from Greece and Rome, through the exhibits of India and China to the modern wing of abstract

painting over the eight weeks the children created art works and their own performance which ended in the African exhibit. That early experience is one of the inspirations for WOW!

With NYC as my campus, I was so fortunate to be a CUNYBA student where I studied so many modern techniques at the studios of legends...including, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Jose Limon and at Alvin Ailey's studio - Horton. It was when I discovered Hanya Holm when I felt at home. She was a living legend who would inspire amazing creativity from all around her. She got you to work...don't try it she would say....do it! She was teaching at Murray Lewis / Alwin Nikolais studio...a place that REALLY made magic happen with their experimentation with fabric, light, spectacle. I loved every moment there. I was invited to apprentice with the Multi gravitational Aero dance group. We danced in sculptures and never touched the ground. It was ingenious.

During my college days I spent 2 summers in Colorado Springs to study closely with Hanya Holm. It was an honor to be in her dances. She taught Pilates as her warmup and had the compete studio for instruction in Colorado. It was there that I met Oliver Kostock, who invited to audition for U of I in Urbana, Illinois. received a scholarship to get my master's degree and decided to go for it. I did spend one last semester in NYC living in Midtown while working as a receptionist at Ford Modeling agency. It was probably the most exciting job I ever had making friends with the models and going to parties for Leonard Bernstein and others where I met so many celebrities.

## June Podagrosi (continued)

### Champaign /Urbana

It was quite a shock moving to the Heartland. I loved it after I realized that there were only cornfields for miles and miles. It was a great time to focus and develop as an artist. I happily worked on many dance pieces and taught dance and creative dramatics at the park district and found the Mahomet Olde Town Gallery....Charlotte Brady was my inspiration as we talked by the potbellied stove there was something I never appreciated before - a simple yet very full life.



It was in Mahomet, Il where I had the freedom to create what I wanted to teach. It was liberating to find my own way of teaching people of all ages. In the morning I had the littlest ones, too young to go to school and too cute. It was fun to teach after school programs there including a High School class. At night I had older folks lined up for disco dance moves. It was a blast. That program was the model for when I set up the Downtown Performing Arts Center in Champaign. That was a time when working with the community was a natural as can be. The Chamber of Commerce in Champaign welcomed my idea to create a downtown arts festival complete with walking maps of the participating art galleries, stores and restaurants. It was a wonderful program. We had the Russian Orchestra and Jazz bands outside on Neil St. While upstairs movement fundamentals, Tai Chi, mime, mandolin music and of course a Child's Play performance entertained and inspired all our guests. In the evening we had live music for a dance.

Victor and I worked on another theatre during that time Contour Theatre....conceptual theatre. We performed Three faces of Farce - 3 short one acts and other works. My favorite was the hysterical El Grande de Coca cola, a piece I long to produce again.

Our time in Champaign was one where we realized many dreams, made some valuable friendships and where I became, we.

### Chicago and Beyond

Our move to Chicago was obvious at the time. We were doing Child's Play full time; our tours were getting longer and longer...as long as ten weeks. It was an exhilarating feeling to experience something you created take off. Victor and I had a synergy that was unique. Child's Play had a Michigan Avenue agent for a while who got us into some amazing venues. We performed in Ravinia, Wolf Traps International Festival; we were regulars at the Detroit Institute of Arts. With my family in NY, I was motivated to develop a market out there to visit them. We did perform at BAM where I was inspired as a young adult. That was where we premiered The Lion and the Cloud, a repertory piece in Animal Tales and Dino Scales. We were in the first international children's festival in NYC. There were a lot of firsts. There still are a lot of firsts. We were fearless about our work. There was a sense of rightness to it. It is hard to explain except to say that we felt like this work was and still is our calling.



## June Podagrosi (continued)

Of course, bringing Michael into the world was our greatest achievement far beyond anything we created at Child's Play. Michael made us a family. Being a mother and father were roles we were honored to play. Michael made everything real. He brought us joy every day and he was a tough audience.

There was never any doubt that we needed to do what we did. That is of course before Victor passed.

After Victor's passing a whirlwind of emotions swept me up and like a force of nature what I experienced seemed out of my control. I held on tight as I remembered his words: "Don't be afraid" It became my mantra - One of the pieces he had just finished rehearsing had a song about letting go of fear- You have to let it go. His legacy was his courage -he was the Man of Action, I the woman of emotion. Now I had to be a woman of Action, I had to be courageous and brave. I had to do. To do what needed to be done. We had a plan for the year he passed, and we followed it. We had grown quite a bit those first 17 years and we were planning our best year ever. We didn't cancel a show we, didn't skip a beat we did everything we set out to do in the same way we had before...striving for excellence. Company members and friends and family made it clear that Child's Play was meant to be and that they wanted to keep it going. The show of support was not to be taken lightly. Going forward was all we could do.



For 6 years we grew every year...new programs, initiatives, multi-year partnerships, Emmy awards we had three troupes going full time. It was almost too much to handle. The Goodman Theatre had embraced us and then then 911 happened and things really changed. We had a troupe out east that fall and like a domino game we lost almost all of that tour and that year was the beginning of a new way of working. We are still learning that new way of working, and it is our hope that telling our story - sharing our story will be exactly the tipping point.

We are looking forward to developing innovated ways to communicate and work with our stakeholders. We want to find every young author who had their story honored with a certificate of creativity - you know who you are.... we want all the young authors whose story or poem was performed to reach out to us and tell us what it meant to them. We want all the campers and young actors that performed with us to act now and join our circle...our circle of life. It is time.... join us. We want to hear from you.... you are the reason we are still here. It is you. It is Your story that will be the new way of working for Child's Play Touring Theatre! You are the future!!



**Thank you for reading.**