

# Sara Porkalob: ‘Dragon Lady’ Diversifies in One-Woman Show

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Traveling back and forth through 40 years of faulty memories, Sara Porkalob embodies the women of her family to weave a tale about their past that seems too grandiose to be true. 3 generations, 6 women, 1 Dragon Lady. • **Courtesy Photo**

Sara Porkalob wears many hats: performer, writer, activist, and devoted granddaughter. And she'll be presenting those many hats at this year's **Bumbershoot** festival at the Seattle Center.

Porkalob will be performing the latest version of her solo work, *Dragon Lady, A One Woman Show*, which was inspired by her grandmother's life. "Dragon Lady is about the relationships between history, memory, and storytelling in my family," Porkalob said. "Because those three things inevitably change over time—history is written every day, memories fade, and stories are reinterpreted—developing this piece over time just makes sense."

Family history is important to Porkalob, and she views her grandmother as the foundation of that history. "I chose her because she's the matriarch—the one from which we all stem," she said. "We can only trace our family history as far back as her because she keeps secrets about the past."

What secrets? Porkalob claims that one of her favorite memories of her grandmother occurred when she was five years old. “I tried to wake her from a nap for dinner,” she said, “and before I knew it, was pinned face down on the rug with her knobby-ass knee in the middle of my back because I had, in her words, ‘snuck up on her and didn’t I know she was part ninja?’”

Other surprises await revelation during the show, and some are unknown even to Porkalob in advance. “Each performance is different because I improv about 15 percent of it each night,” she said. “It really depends on the type of audience—if they’re rowdier or quiet, older or younger. There are parts of the show that I change specifically for them.”

And she has also made improvisational changes for her grandmother, as well, on nights when her grandmother is attending her performance. And when Porkalob quotes a line that her grandmother had spoken earlier that same day, her grandmother can’t help but react while sitting in the audience. “As soon as I say that line, she leans over to my mother and says, ‘Ai-yah! I said that! I said that when you picked me up!!!’” Porkalob said.

This started a chain reaction in the auditorium. “Everyone in the audience hears her of course—she doesn’t know how to whisper—and they start cracking up,” Porkalob said. “Talk about layered realities happening, a magical moment of connection between audience and performer.”

With these kinds of moments, Porkalob describes her typical audience reaction as one of wonder. “Incredulous audience members approach me after the show and ask me, ‘Is that true? Did that really happen?!’” And I always answer, ‘What do you think?’”

Through these stories, Porkalob presents her grandmother as a strong personality. “My Grandmother is brazenly outspoken, and as a result, all of the women in my family are,” she said.

Porkalob is aiming for familial authenticity more than seeking to relay specific facts. “In *Dragon Lady*, my objectives are not to make my audience believe anything or to make them feel any particular way,” Porkalob said. “My show is an invitation to the audience to have them join me in an experience, to partake in a story that is deeply integral to who I am—‘true’ or not.”

She hopes to share these stories with a broader audience at Bumbershoot, and was encouraged to apply by Shane Regan, Program Manager at Theatre Puget Sound. “The performer lineup was largely white males and they sought to diversify

the program,” Porkalob said. “My goal is to get the people who would go out to see a solo-show written by a white male to come see my show as well.”

Porkalob’s role as an activist comes into play here. “Lack of diversity on Seattle stages has been a hot topic,” she said. “As an arts activist, I push for social change within the arts.”

Always re-working and developing this show, Porkalob entices newcomers and veterans alike by saying, “I also have about ten minutes of new material that I’ve never shown an audience.”

*‘Dragon Lady, A One Woman Show’ runs from September 5 to 7, at Bumbershoot, at Seattle Center, 305 Harrison Seattle.*