

Episode 10: “Stories Beget Stories”

Mary Swander

The Art of Climate Dialogue

Vivian M. Cook:

Welcome to The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa, produced by myself, Vivian M. Cook and The EcoTheatre Lab. And welcome to today's conversation with poet playwright and executive director of AgArts, Mary Swander.

Mary Swander:

The day the levee broke, the day the mighty Mississippi washed Maggie and Pearl, mother and daughter, up on top of their catfish dive. The river rushed through our tiny town of Pompeii with a whoosh, crack, bam, boom, a power so Herculean that with one swift slap of its hand, the water knocked out all the windows and tore the door right off the hinges of crazy Eddie's cafe. The very gates of hell opened and the great flood of the 20th century came crashing, dashing through.

Vivian M. Cook:

Addressing climate change is urgent, but in order to move toward action, we first have to find ways to talk about climate change with one another. The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa is a podcast series featuring 13 conversations with artists, farmers, community engaged researchers and community organizers and activists who have all used arts and storytelling strategies to talk about climate change and agriculture. Through this podcast, they generously share these strategies so that listeners can implement them in their own communities. I'm Vivian and I invite you to explore The Art of Climate dialogue with me.

As we enter into these conversations around climate action, sustainable agriculture and community engaged arts in Iowa, The EcoTheatre Lab and I want to first recognize that Indigenous nations have been leaders in such conversations for centuries and continue to be today.

Iowa now occupies the homelands of Native American nations to whom we owe our commitment and dedication. Iowa is now situated on the homelands and trading routes of the loway, Meskwaki and Sauk, Otoe, Omaha, Ianktonwan, and Santee. And because history is complex and time goes far back beyond memory, we also acknowledge the ancient connections of many other Indigenous peoples here. The history of broken treaties and forced removal that dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their homelands was and is an act of colonization and genocide that we cannot erase. And as a result, Indigenous ecosystems within Iowa have suffered from extraction, degradation, and unsustainable agricultural practices contributing to the ongoing climate crisis. Understanding and addressing these injustices is critical as we work toward climate dialogue, action, and justice in our communities. My thanks to podcast interviewees Shelley Buffalo, enrolled member of the Meskwaki Tribe, Lance Foster, enrolled member and tribal historian of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, and Sikowis Nobiss, Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation for their collaboration in developing this acknowledgement.

Mary Swander is an Iowa Women's Hall of Fame 2022 Honoree and artistic director of Swander Women Productions, a theater troop that performs dramas about food, farming and the wider rural environment. Mary tours her dramas from coast to coast and gives solo performances of her own work playing the banjo, the harmonica, and the spoons. She's also the executive director of AgArts, a nonprofit designed to imagine and promote healthy food systems through the arts. The former Poet Laureate of Iowa, Mary is an award-winning author and taught creative writing for 30 years at Iowa State University. She now gives workshops on poetry, non-fiction and playwrighting, as well as farmland transition for other colleges and universities and nonprofit organizations. Through AgArts, Mary not only tours theater productions, but also hosts the podcast AgArts from Horse and Buggy Land and

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coordinates Farm-to-Art Residencies. Mary lives in an old Amish one-room schoolhouse, raises goats and has a large organic garden where she grows most of her own food. At the beginning of this episode, we heard Mary reading an excerpt from her book of poetry, *The Girls on the Roof*, which is where we'll start our conversation today.

Welcome Mary, and thank you for sharing poetry from your book, *The Girls on the Roof*. You've described this book, which takes place during the 1993 Midwestern floods as a climate parable. What is a climate parable and how does *The Girls on the Roof* function as one?

Mary Swander:

It's a story that has a lesson for the rest of us, and the lesson is about just how the world might unravel in the midst of . . . We think of climate change and we see videos, we see people and Bangladesh waiting through the water. We even see photos of Florida here in the United States and we say, "Oh, that's horrible," but we don't really think of it destroying a family configuration or a whole community or town's interactions.

Vivian M. Cook:

Right. Can you talk more about why you decided to, I know you did journalistic work during the 1993 floods and why you decided to transform that journalistic work into this story that, like you said, is about a family configuration and romance and a mother-daughter relationship. Why did you decide to talk about climate change and climate impacts through this very kind of personal, intimate story of this community?

Mary Swander:

Well, basically because I was frustrated with the journalism part of it. I've lived in this state most of my life, like 80% of my life, and I lived on the Mississippi River growing up, and we had floods every year, but nothing like the '93 flood. And I was just like, "This has got to be climate change." So I called various experts on that issue. "Oh, no, no, no, no." They said, "No, no. You can't say this is climate change. Oh, no, don't say that. Don't say that. Oh, no, no, no." And I'm like, "Okay. This is interesting. We even have scientists denying that it's climate change." So I was left with that taste in my mouth, so I wrote several articles without any mention of climate change, and then I had all this debris floating around in my head.

I did a tour of the whole Midwest and went to some of the worst places, and I mean basically people living in caves of mud, and you couldn't get that. It was too grungy to put in the journalism too. They didn't want that. They wanted people boating down the slew that was eight feet too high and riding into the sunset. So I thought, "Okay. I'm going to write my own story that's got all the real stuff in it." And notice I did not say climate change in any of the book, but I was like, "Okay..." You get the picture mean. First of all, the characters in this book would not say climate change because at that point, especially '93, we were still in complete total denial. And it wasn't discussed much, wasn't discussed by the media, it wasn't discussed by anybody much. They didn't discuss it in academia much.

And so I'm like, "Okay. You're just going to have to infer that part." Then I realized I was going to have to make up a story with some real characters, and I took bits and pieces, as I said, a lot of debris from my travels through the whole thing. I was in boats. I was in planes up above. I was in huge tractors that we could get through the water because they had such high tires. And then I read the newspaper, small town newspapers are really the best ever. Faulkner got most of his material out of his Oxford Mississippi newspaper. And we had a little incident here, and it was a mother and daughter having an affair with the same man. I get my best ideas in the shower, and I was like, "Ah. I could take that story and put

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them in the flood. There we go." So I changed everything up and about, and nobody recognizes that at all. It worked. It fit. That's that way writers work.

Vivian M. Cook:

And you published this book a little over a decade ago?

Mary Swander:

Mm-hm.

Vivian M. Cook:

And then you and Monica Leo also created a puppetry music show for The Girls on the Roof. Have both the book and the show inspired conversations about climate change, and if so, what have those looked like?

Mary Swander:

I was thinking about that, and people now can look back in '93 and go, "Oh, that was the beginning of climate change." And so it's sort of interesting because the topic is out now, but even when the book was published a decade ago, there was still, nobody talked about it. Nobody. This morning, I was thinking, "There's just nothing, nothing that's too big to deny. Nothing. COVID that's not big enough to deny. The winning of a major election the United States? Oh, yeah. We can deny that. And climate change, we can deny that." And if it affects you personally, then you deny it all the more.

And so it didn't elicit, I would say direct conversations. People would say, "Oh, now we need to do something to cut our own emissions, and how are we going to do it?" It didn't do that. It was more like a Midwestern, "Oh, yeah. Right. That was the beginning of it." And then there would fall into silence because what that's begging, the question is what's to come? And what came after in the '93 flood was the 2008 flood, the 2012 flood, the 2014 flood, and it just kept coming and then alternating with droughts. And we're in a big drought now, so people don't want to think about it.

Vivian M. Cook:

And so you said people don't want to think about it, which I completely understand too. I mean, it's depressing to think about.

Mary Swander:

The question that everybody always asks in the media or in lots of interviews that I have or other pundits have, they always say, "Well, where's the hope?" And I like Christopher Hedges. He's like, "There is none. There is no hope." We've demolished the entire environment with this stupid species that's called human beings, and it's coming folks. That is so depressing. But I kind of like that because I'm like, "Oh, good." Because other people, they go, "Well, we could shoot the carbon underground and we can do this. We could..." I'm like, "Oh, man. You better do it tomorrow or there really is no hope we got to wake up to this."

Vivian M. Cook:

Do you think personal stories, the one that you wrote in The Girls on the Roof, that a very small community and family, something like that, you said people would read the book or watch the show and

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then there'd be silence. Does that introduce a space for reflection? Do you feel like that's what happening?

Mary Swander:

That was what happening. There definitely was reflection, and I think the only way that we can get a concept like climate change across is through stories. That's the only way to do it. That's the thing that hooks people in. You can get up on a soapbox and preach to people. You can write op-eds and letters and everything, and that can be effective, but never as effective as when you're pulled into a story by your emotions and the imagery of poetry. And I tried to make the book fun and funny too. That's when people will get involved and they'll say, "All right. Okay." And story is where it's at. That narrative is so powerful with dealing with any issue, but it's really interesting that we're now using it to deal with a scientific issue.

Vivian M. Cook:

And what opportunities, specifically in agricultural communities in the Midwest, in Iowa, what opportunities do you think there are for using arts and storytelling to talk about climate change and hopefully to climate action and policy?

Mary Swander:

Yeah. Right. I think there's a huge opportunities. I mean, I've been touring plays around the Midwest since some of the biggest and the smallest venues available. And what I've found is the small venues are better, even for discussion, because people don't feel so intimidated. If they're sitting in a big 350 seat gorgeously restored venue, they're like, "Ooh. I don't want to say anything." But if they're in somebody's farmer's barn and there's chicken chickens flying overhead and pigeons and stuff, people feel comfortable and they open up. And the other thing is the size of the venue is important, but also when we tour for plays, we have talkbacks afterwards that are often more dramatic than the play itself.

Vivian M. Cook:

Right.

Mary Swander:

Yeah. I was often tempted to video those talkbacks, but then I thought, no, people won't open up if they see a camera there. And then I'd have to get all these permissions and I'd probably be videoing the one that wasn't interesting. So I ditched that idea. But there's also these little conversations that spin off the talkback. I listen to people when they're leaving the venue and they're talking to each other. And that's really interesting. I hear them say, "Oh, yeah. Right. Oh, I guess we really do own a farm. We're 65 years old. I guess we better get going on this." And see, I'm like, "Okay. They didn't even have the consciousness when they came into this show that they actually are landowners." I don't know how that's possible, but that's what happens.

And it was like the first time they thought, "We need a transition plan." I'm like, "Okay. This is a success if I even get one couple to sit down and address this issue." So those little spinoff conversations are really, really key because we are in the Midwest and people, they're afraid to speak up. They're afraid to be politically different from their neighbor. There's just a lot of pressure to just keep your mouth shut. But the spinoff conversations, those are people that, and it's usually their family people that they know and they trust. And so the buzz starts there.

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Vivian M. Cook:

And that's, I think, helpful to use that language of the buzz starting. Because I think also in arts and storytelling work, when you're trying to do that in a community engaged way to start conversations, to maybe hopefully push towards action that supports social and environmental sustainability and justice, that can be hard work because you can't really see what the results are.

Mary Swander:

No, you can't see. A lot of times you can't see.

Vivian M. Cook:

Its ripple effects.

Mary Swander:

No, no. And when I was teaching at Iowa State, that just frustrated, those administrators like crazy, they were like, "We don't know how to analyze your data." And I'm like, "Well, I don't either." Or we just send out a survey. I'm like, "I don't know who came to the show. What do you mean you don't know who came to the show?" I'm like, "It's an art event. You don't have a sign-in sheet." It just frustrated those people to death. And that's the thing about the arts. You just have to trust the process, that it's a creative process and that it's going to evolve. Now on my own podcast, this is really fun because I encourage a lot of audience involvement. I see it. It's my mail that brings it into me.

And people are sending me books to review and suggestions of people to interview. And people are contacting me saying, "I got a story that you need to use." And I'm always encouraging them. I'm like, "Okay, good. We'll record you." "And my friend's got a really good story too." And I'm like, "Okay, let's hear it." And usually they are really good stories. "I got a story about ice fishing." This is in July. I said, "Well, we can't really put that on in July, but we'll record you in January." "Okay. The ice is getting really thin out there." And I'm like, "Good. We're going on with you in January." So people want to be involved. They're just quieter about it in this demographic.

Vivian M. Cook:

And I know you and your team who have worked on, I guess this is my next question about your Verbatim plays where you're really integrating community interviews and community storytelling into your work. I know you and your team have talked about how the most wonderful part of that process is that stories beget stories. That is, people might be kind of quiet. They're not sure how to talk about these really challenging and yes, sometimes depressing problems, but when you share stories, that opens up the public for more stories.

Mary Swander:

With the Vang show, the Verbatim show especially, well also with Farmscape.

Vivian M. Cook:

Can you tell us about Farmscape and Vang?

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Mary Swander:

Yeah, I'll tell you about each of those. Farmscape is to blame for my whole touring career. I was just bored. You teach for 30 years, you get like, "I can't teach the same thing the same way again." And so I came into my class and I said, "Okay. You know what we're going to do? We're going to write a Verbatim play together." And they just went, "Uh..." I can't remember what they signed up for, but I had totally thrown that out the window, and they were like, "Play?" And I said, "Yeah. It's going to be really cool." And, "Verbatim play. What's that?" And I thought, "Well, this is good though. Really, because they're starting fresh." And so I said, "It's going to be an environmental issue, and we don't have any money, so don't tell me we're going to go to the rainforest and interview people about that. It's got to be local."

So they came up with the idea, the changing Farmscape, and they fanned out all over the state of Iowa. And they interviewed people, big ag farmers, small sustainable farmers, Monsanto seed dealers, bed and breakfast owners, all these people that are experiencing the pressures of the Farmscape at the same time. And it was also 2008 when everything was crashing. And I remember the publicity director for Iowa State came to visit the class because he wrote a really nice article about it. And I had everything on a file, which I would project on the screen. And we worked like that as a collaborative effort. And I pulled up my file and the New York Times was my homepage. And in those days, they had the stock market on the top right corner. And I remember Dave going, "Does that say that the stock market just fell another 500 points?" And I said, "Ah, yeah. I am sorry to say that is correct."

And so we were experiencing that crash in the middle of my class. And then what came out of all the people we interviewed was the farm crisis, because that was the last crash, big crash. And also the scars of that were still there. So we each took a character and wrote up an interview, and then we spliced and diced the interviews together and wove them together to create a play. And it was a lot of work. And I was like, "What was I thinking, to try to do this? This is crazy. To do this in a semester." And so at the end of the semester, we had one performance scheduled, and I was just like sweating bullets. I was just like, "I don't know, man. This thing could just go belly up at the last minute."

And I had all these shy Lake Wobegon students in the class. And at the beginning of the class, they were like, "Oh. We don't have to take the parts. We don't have to act in this thing, do we?" I said, "Ah, no." I took one look at them. I was like, "Ah, no. I'll be going over it. Don't you worry about that. Don't you fret about that? I'll be going over to the theater department. I'll get some real actors." And then by the end of the semester, they're like, "Oh. We get to take the parts, don't we?" And I thought, "Um. Okay."

And they just stuck it. They just did a great, great job. And then I thought, "Oh, shoot. Done with that." And then I literally came back to my office and the phone rang. It was Fred Kirschenmann from the Leopold Center, and he is like, "Mary, we got to get that show on the road." And I'm like, "What? On the road?" And he said, "Yeah, yeah. No, no. I want you touring all over with this." And I'm like, "Oh, no. No. No." But in essence, he bought me out of a semester of teaching. And I got out there and the thing toured for a good five years.

Vivian M. Cook:

That's incredible.

Mary Swander:

Yeah. And steadily. And it became a community show. The students were long gone. Then it became a community show. We went to schools, we went to little small towns, we went to bigger venues. We'd have a contact person and he or she would line up actors because it was like a reader's theater event

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and then we'd have a talkback after. We had people stand up and burst into tears. I mean, the wounding of the farm crisis is just really... People have no idea how deep that is. I have a friend who's in western Iowa when he owns newspaper over there, and he is the fourth generation in his family to run that newspaper. And he said when the farm crisis was going on, he was like, "Oh, get off of it. Just sell the farm and move to Omaha and get a job. What are you whining about?" And he said, "Now it's happening to me because newspapers are going under."

Vivian M. Cook:

Oh gosh.

Mary Swander:

And he got severely depressed about it. And it's the same thing. It's like you're letting down your family, it's your job. You've done it all your life. You don't know what you do next. The expectations that you had and your neighbors had of you, and all those things are all reconfigured. And it's just really major. And then it pulls the rug out from under you financially.

Vivian M. Cook:

And it seems like all of... I mean, when we're talking about climate change and climate conversations, then climate change is an economic crisis, it's a social crisis.

Mary Swander:

Oh, no. It's a total disruptor. I mean, total complete disruptor. And then I did another one, Vang play, that was about immigrant farmers. We have this phenomenon, it's going on now, it was going on then when I wrote that play of climate change refugees or immigrants migration with climate change. They were from all over the country, but the character from Sudan was directly involved in that. On the surface, often with a refugee, the problem is war. But underneath it, there was a problem because of climate change in a lush oasis kind of area along the Nile that used to be able to support a large population had begun to dry up and dry up and that caused people to fight over the land that was left.

And the people in the Netherlands had kind of a similar situation where they were essentially farming on an island and there was no way to expand. And what was implied was their land also would be shrinking, and there was nowhere to expand to set up their kids as farmers. And so they decided to immigrate. So what I'm saying is underneath everybody's story, there's another story now of climate change.

Vivian M. Cook:

So as we talked about earlier, these Verbatim plays in particular, and when you toured them in all these different communities, and you have potentially, I guess with Farmscape, different actors from the community coming in and actually performing the plays and engaging directly with other people's stories, with all of that process of bringing in community, what conversations came up about climate change or how did those talkbacks feel? What you talked about was more dramatic than the plays themselves. What's it like to be in that room?

Mary Swander:

Well, with the immigrants, again, it was like the subplot. And one of the most dramatic things was... Oh, there were so many, but I remember this one in particular, and we were performing at community

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colleges were really, really amazing place to perform that show because they're full of immigrants. And so we did the show and this woman stood up and she said, "I was one of the boat people, one of the last people to leave Vietnam." And she raised her arm like this, and she said, "See. There's my elbow". And it was shot off as we were leaving."

Vivian M. Cook:

Oh my goodness.

Mary Swander:

There is another woman who said, "I'm Mung. And we were trying to escape the Vietnam War across the Mekong River, just as it's talked about it in your play. And I was one of the little babies that they had to dope with opium so that I wouldn't cry." So most of those dramatic things were war stories. But then you have to think, what were we really fighting about? Ask yourself that underneath. Again, underneath these war stories, and ask yourself how the terrain of their country either has reshaped itself now or is going to. And so again, it is not on the surface, it's what's underneath. And you were going to hear it in those little offshoot conversations. Rural areas, until the last couple of years, they didn't even acknowledge climate change.

"That's not happening. That's crazy. That's a bunch of liberal talk." Da da da, da, da. Now they still don't acknowledge it. They call it weird weather, though. Definitely, they can see that there's weird weather out there. So it's almost impossible to come in and say, "Let's have a discussion about climate change. What do you say, guys?" But it's not going to happen. Even in this little town, it's been underwater. Oh, three times in, four times in 20 years. But they just say, "Oh, we're having another flood." This is what they say, "Climate changes is all the time."

Vivian M. Cook:

Which I guess is true.

Mary Swander:

"We've always had floods. We've always had floods, Mary."

Vivian M. Cook:

But it seems like you're, the way that you've engaged in storytelling that brings in so many people's different stories and talking about floods that happened in 1993 and recognizing, yes, it floods all the time. Part of that's related to climate, but why did we have just as drastic of floods only a couple of decades later, it opens up a conversation about that, and maybe with all of those stories allows us to look at those layers.

Mary Swander:

Yeah. Well, and you got to understand that there was a blackout in the media again, until a couple of years ago. Just about every morning I get up and listen to the news on BBC and then NPR, and even those kinds of media outlets, they didn't talk about climate change until we started getting these huge hurricanes in the United States. They kept really quiet about it. Lots of times my friends think I'm the voice of doom because I don't have that, "Let's deny it" attitude. I'm more like, "Would you look what's

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going on. What can we do about this?" I would say that, and people would say, "Just shut up. You are just full of gloom and doom stories."

I used to say, "You can't vote for that candidate. They're not going to do one thing about climate change, and we're all going to die." And I guess that wasn't exactly the most diplomatic way, to put it perfectly. But it's happening. This month there is a map out that showed by 2050 areas of intense heat in the United States, and Iowa's in it, included in it. We're talking about 120 degrees in Iowa. And further south you go, it's going to be uninhabitable. You're going to just fry your brains out. But still, people want me to shut up. So, okay. And I'm not going to. I'll put it all in the plays and then they can...

Vivian M. Cook:

And in the plays though, I think that's something that can be really beneficial about stories and artwork is that for the most part, I think people recognize that artwork is subjective. That's part of what makes it art. And so there's room to say, "We're going to tell a lot of different perspectives. We're going to tell a lot of different personal stories, and we can respect those without it just being undiplomatic because we're disagreeing or even arguing loudly or being gloom and doom about it. And that it touches us in different ways." With Farmscape and Vang, what I hear you talking about, and when I've read and seen those plays, there are ways that sharing multiple stories in a space where people can share stories back lets us realize the connection points, like the economic connection points, that experiences of the farm crisis experiences of mass flooding, all of that is not so separate from each other. Climate justice is an integral part of the conversation and we all are experiencing it.

Mary Swander:

Farmscape talks about the consolidation of farming with big Ag, and that has been one of the worst offenders to climate change. And again, it's not spelled out in there because we're using Verbatim text, but if anybody has a brain in their head, they can go, "Oh. Connect the dots here."

Vivian M. Cook:

And in Vang, you have a story talking about the meat packing industry and the complicated reasons that people are a part of that industry but are also harmed from it. The environment is harmed from it, and that's really complex.

Mary Swander:

And then it's those climate refugees that are working in the plant and refugees from NAFTA. The climate thing dovetails with globalization. It is really complex. There's all these layers to it.

Vivian M. Cook:

So now speaking of all of these different plays that you've done and how you're trying to incorporate all these complex stories, you now do most of that work under the umbrella of your nonprofit AgArts. So I wanted to make sure we talked a little bit more about what is the mission of AgArts and how does it connect to climate, dialogue and action?

Mary Swander:

The mission is to imagine and promote healthy food systems through the arts. And that imagine is really important because that's the art that they actually have a role to provide a vision for us to move

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forward. And one of the main things we do is put artists on farms in Residencies. And it's basically to educate the artists about agriculture and the issues in agriculture today. Most artists are two, three, four generations removed from the farm, if ever. And my experience is they just buy their food at the grocery store without any consciousness or awareness of what they're buying, where it's come from. Even the people that eat real healthfully, "What? Eat in season? Well, what's the sense of that? I like strawberries in January and I can get them." Without any thought of the farms in Mexico that then are supplying those and all the issues that might be involved there. So we put artists on farms, not to just hole up and go in a little room and write their fantasy book about something else, but to actually...

Vivian M. Cook:

There are some artists are want to do.

Mary Swander:

Right, and that's fine, but just not on an AgArts Residency.

Vivian M. Cook:

Right, exactly.

Mary Swander:

Yeah. I want them to go and get to know the farmers and interact with them and to really truly understand what we're wrestling with. I had an artist writer from Des Moines who went to a farm in Nebraska this summer, and she was just a real urban person. And she was like, "I had no idea this world was out there. No idea." She stayed on their farm, which was a model of conservation, but they took her to a CAFO, they took her to a sustainable farm, they took her to the farm of a couple of women who were doing really women based farming endeavors that were really interesting. She was just blown away. She was just completely blown away.

And then she wrote a great piece that we just published in the Blazing Star Journal. We have an online journal, this part of AgArts. And she got an education, then she wrote this piece that's educating other people, and then she's trying to write a magazine article that would feature the Residency. So it's all starting to billow out. It's really good. And the farmers like it because it provides stimulation, it provides music, fun, literature for them too. And so I've got farms. I got farms all over the Iowa. I got farm in New York. I got a farm in Nebraska. What I got farms and I got artists. What I need is money. So if you want to get what you want to get on our website and donate a few bucks, that would be a pleasure.

Vivian M. Cook:

I'm curious for you to talk about why you think it's particularly important for artists to better understand what's happening in the agricultural community?

Mary Swander:

This is it. They communicate to huge numbers of people. I mean, I really, really got it when I started that touring with Farmscape. I was like, "Okay." Well, we did a show in Marshfield, Wisconsin, and it was really, really a good show. We had a professional director come in for that one. And then the talkback, in the audience, we had big ag people, we had sustainable people, we had everything in between. We had a Monsanto executive. I was like, "Okay. Whoa, whoa, whoa. I better put some body armor on here."

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And everybody came in and it was completely cordial. I mean, there were people that just radically disagreed with each other, but in the context of this talkback, they were great. And we had a really, really constructive conversation.

Vivian M. Cook:

Why do you think that was? Why do you think they were able to have a conversation like that even though perhaps in other circumstances they wouldn't?

Mary Swander:

Well, we were in a theater, again, not a bar. So nobody was drinking and it's the tone that you established. And with a play, you just expect people to respond with decent human emotions and not get carried away. And so that was a big part of it. But that's when I got the idea for AgArts to put these artists on farms, because I thought, "I can't be the only one that's doing this." I toured all of the United States, just bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. I had a troupe of eight actors. It was just nonstop. And you'd get on a plane and people would say, "Oh, what do you do for a living?" And I said, "Well, I write agricultural dramas." And they're like, "What?"

And even theater friends, they were just like, "What are you doing? And You're performing in barns and stuff? Come out here to New York. You need to get out of those po-dunk-ville places. I said, "No, no, no. Nobody would come in New York if we put these shows on. The best responses have been in those barns. People are really engaged in there." Lots of times, people in rural areas, some of them never been to a play before. And so you're also doing art education at the same time. You're educating about the themes of the plays themselves.

Vivian M. Cook:

So you organize all of these Residencies and touring plays and all of that that bring artists and farmers together. You also are still doing some of that creative work yourself. And I know somewhat recently you were paired with Red Fern Farm to write poetry about their sustainable agriculture efforts.

Mary Swander:

Yes. Yeah, that was fun. The pandemic stopped my frenetic touring. I had all those plays touring around at once. I still remember that week in March, and I had to cancel \$20,000 worth of shows.

Vivian M. Cook:

Yikes.

Mary Swander:

Yeah. It was a big hit. Then my actors all went back to school or got other jobs. So the whole thing kind of unraveled. And in my mind, it's still not safe to be in indoor venues and send my actors out there like that. And so we've done some shows outside, or we've done some shows with the actors I have left, in big, huge auditoriums, but doing other things though. And so Red Fern Farm is a wonderful farm by Wapello, Iowa. It's an agroforestry farm. It was a corn and bean conventional farm. And then these two visionaries took it over, Kathy Dice and Tom Wahl, and they planted perennials. It's in a land trust now called SILT, Sustainable Iowa Land Trust. The stipulation of the trust is you can only plant perennials on it.

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So they have nut trees and fruit trees and kiwi vines winding up the nut trees and they have a garden, but it's horse radish and asparagus. You can't kill the soil there. And it's only about a couple of miles from the Mississippi River. So it's interesting soil and you want to hold onto it. It would be erodible if you were farming conventionally. It's just beautiful now that the trees are grown big and people come down down and say, you pick for chestnut and paw paws, and they have cornelian cherries and blueberries. No, no. They're not blueberries. That's not native. So they had aronia berries and honeyberries.

So they got a lot going on there. And then they have sheep, so they graze the sheep under the trees that keeps the weeds down. I had this little assignment, it was a project called Writing the Land, and they matched poets with land trusts. And then you were to go and visit the Land Trust and then write poetry about it. And I'd been to Red Fern Farm. I went there and bought trees and shrubs for my own place for years. And so I was like, "Oh, I love that place. I'll take them. I'll take them. That'll be my pick."

Vivian M. Cook:

So you not only wrote a poem, but also release podcast episodes about your partnership with Red Fern Farm which was great.

Mary Swander:

Two podcasts and then a Substack page.

Vivian M. Cook:

And people should listen to the podcast, the episodes that's...

Mary Swander:

They should listen to the podcast, get on the Substack, you can get a free subscription or cough up a few bucks and support the endeavor. Yeah. No, I had a great time doing that.

Vivian M. Cook:

So based on that experience and obviously many other experiences you've had like it, what role do you think you play as an artist in amplifying the climate action that many farmers are already doing?

Mary Swander:

Yeah. Well, I'm trying to facilitate on my end. Basically artists learning from farmers to prod the artists into action. And then it's a symbiotic relationship. And then the farmers really learn from the artists too. So the next Substack post I'm making that'll come out on Thursday is about the Alan and Nancy Meyer farm near Cedar Bluff, Nebraska. That is based on the visit that Karen Downing from Des Moines made to them. And then we published her piece on Blazing Star. And as I said, Karen learned a tremendous amount about agriculture through that. But Nancy also got highlighted there, and it was on social media and all of these neighbors and people around her and friends looked at that. "Oh, so that's what you're doing. How cool is that? Somebody finally discovered..." So it's a boost for them.

Vivian M. Cook:

Yes, definitely.

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Mary Swander:

Yeah.

Vivian M. Cook:

Wonderful. I also wanted to touch on, you hosted a workshop again somewhat recently with farmers who wrote about how they envision their farms in the future. Can you talk a little bit about what that workshop was and how it helped facilitate conversation about climate change?

Mary Swander:

Yeah, that was really cool. That was the most direct thing that I've done with farmers. That was for Practical Farmers of Iowa. And they asked me to run a workshop. I did a couple of those. It was on riding your farm. It was sci-fi for farmers. What your future farm was going to look like in the middle of climate change and how you were going to set it up now to address that issue and how family was going to adapt and cope. It really set those farmers out of themselves and into another stratosphere.

Vivian M. Cook:

How did they respond?

Mary Swander:

Oh, they were incredible. They were so great. And they were all like, "Yeah. Well Mary, where are we going to get the money for this?" But we had to imagine that you had some government help. It's interesting because it's actually playing out now. They had solar systems, they had their land all in cover crops. They had grazing rotational systems. They had farm houses built out of natural materials. They just thought of everything. They had three generations living on the same farm. They had electric cars. They plugged into the solar. At the time we wrote that, a few years ago, that was just like, "Wow, that would be weird." Now we're doing it.

Vivian M. Cook:

Right. And it seems like...

Mary Swander:

Yeah. It was fantastic. It really stretched them and it was fun. We had a good time doing it too.

Vivian M. Cook:

And it seems like going back to our earlier conversation about how this kind of work can spur conversation that leads to climate action and policy. Seems like this activity that you did, this prompt got people thinking about, "Okay. What would I need to do now to create this space on my farm that I want it to be in multiple years? And what kind of support do I need?" And how does that relate to, "Okay. We need money and what can we push for in the present as farmers, as artists, as community members to get support from...?"

Mary Swander:

Oh, yeah. And there are all these farm subsidies for corn and beans, and meanwhile, these small vegetable farmers get nothing. I mean, they just have to exactly butt up against the weather. And I've

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seen them go under. I've seen quite a few small farmers just go under. Oh my gosh. I mean, some got wiped out in the derecho, derecho one, derecho two. Now I got a podcast about we should name these derechos.

Vivian M. Cook:

Yes.

Mary Swander:

We're having so many of them that we can't just go 1, 2, 3 anymore. We got to call them something. So I think we have our priorities a little bit skewed in terms of subsidies and that we should be supporting our climate change adaptations or reducing our emissions. Farming's responsible for something like 20%, 25% of all emissions. And we could address that, right? In fact, we can sequester carbon right into the soil, but we don't need all these pipelines and everything. There's things we can do as farmers that we should get on with and get some help for that. Instead, we're just... Today's voting day, we're all just out there voting for people who are going to support more emissions.

Vivian M. Cook:

And we need to have space to talk about it. I mean, that's another question I had. You've created spaces that look different and have different purposes through the residencies, through the verbatim plays. And I know you have a series called Farm-to-Fork Tales. You have these workshops. All of these create spaces for community dialogue about sometimes challenging topics. So what do you think creates a successful space for community dialogue?

Mary Swander:

Oh, well, number one, tell a good story. Number two, make it a non-threatening environment. Don't make it an environment that people don't take seriously. We did do Vang once in Nebraska in a bar, and that was a disaster. It was just a disaster. It's got to be a neutral, welcoming place that everybody feels that they could go to. And then three, you got to have a good contact person. That's huge.

Vivian M. Cook:

That's important.

Mary Swander:

I call them my whirling dervishes. I swear to God. They are out there spinning around doing all this groundwork, and I'm so grateful to them, really, really. Lining up actors and doing every...

Vivian M. Cook:

So this is a contact person in the community that you might be visiting to make sure there's already someone there who's on board, who is maybe trusted by the community members.

Mary Swander:

That that's huge. It's just huge. And they know what people to tap and all that stuff. And then four, is you got to get publicity out. You got to get people there. You got to get an audience.

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Vivian M. Cook:

That's incredibly helpful, I think, for me to hear what you recommend for this and I think for our listeners too, about what can we do to create these spaces in our own communities while recognizing that it's often those spaces that are welcoming and invite people, are created through local relationships and conversations.

Mary Swander:

And then I would not announce we're going to have a discussion about climate change. I would not announce it that way at all, because nobody would come in rural areas. So you need to come through the back door, have it a bit or play or whatever it is. It was some kind of event. And then it's the undercurrent of that event.

Vivian M. Cook:

And it seems like also recognizing that there's a lot of different ways to talk about it that isn't just saying, "We're talking about this one issue." Just recognizing that it encompasses a lot that connects with people and means things to people. And that if you frame it that way, people are more likely to come into the conversation. So we've talked about a lot of the work you've done and you have so much experience working at the intersection of arts, agriculture, and climate change. So as we near the end of our conversation today, what are the three key ideas that you want people to understand about the work you do?

Mary Swander:

One, that it's walking into the mouth of the lion. As I said, I'm not trying to avoid anything. You got to hit, walk into it without tinted glasses on. And you've got to be able to acknowledge it and confront it yourself in your own psyche, or else you're just going to dodge it in your artwork. And two, it's a community involvement commitment. You've got to acknowledge that and enjoy that. I look for actors who enjoy the interaction with the audience. And then the third thing is, it's a lot of fun. I mean, any artistic endeavor is interesting and fun and expands your mind and your social network and the whole thing is a reason to get up in the morning.

Vivian M. Cook:

And what is the biggest recommendation you have for others who might want to use arts and storytelling to talk about climate change in their own agricultural communities?

Mary Swander:

I'd say my biggest recommendation is to do an AgArts Residency on a farm. No, really. I mean, you'll learn more doing that than probably anything else. And not even with the thought of, "What am I going to get out of this?" But just go for the experience and see what happens. Get out there, understand what makes them tick, what makes them think, why they have the jobs they do, and what they can do in them, and how they farm, and what they want to do with their land. And most farmers are interested in being good stewards of the land, but our system is set up so they can't be. We got to deal with that. And when you're in that system, you got to make a living, and it's all set up to create climate change, not to address it. And so what do we do? We're caught in that.

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Vivian M. Cook:

I loved what you said about one of the key ideas to know about your work is it's a reason to get up in the morning and that it's fun. And I know we've talked about this before, that there's this side of talking about climate change that is all gloom and doom, but that art and storytelling, sharing stories with each other and listening to stories from our neighbors is a way to maybe counteract that gloom and doom and move toward doing something about it. How can people connect with you and your work?

Mary Swander:

Oh, well. I've got two websites, AgArts.org. And then I have another one, MarySwander.com, and you can get on there and get on my mailing list. I've got two Substack pages, Mary Swander's Buggy Land, and Mary Swander's Emerging Voices. So you can get on there and leave comments and connect like that. I've got a podcast called AgArts from Horse and Buggy Land. There's all sorts of audience participation in there, and you can email me and the email address is on the website's. So welcome any of those things, involvement in any of those things. And then I have a little office in downtown Kolona, so I'm here.

Vivian M. Cook:

So there is a plethora of ways to stay up to date with your work.

Mary Swander:

Many, many ways.

Vivian M. Cook:

I encourage everyone to check out all of those websites and Substack pages and podcasts and everything to see more about the wonderful work that you're doing. And thank you so much for sharing about all of this work.

Mary Swander:

Thanks for the interview. Oh, yeah. It was really fun.

Vivian M. Cook:

Thank you.

Thank you for listening to The Art of Climate Dialogue, and we hope you'll listen to the rest of the series. More information about podcast interviewees is available at ecotheatrelab.com. We invite you to engage in conversation with us by leaving a comment, responding to the short feedback forum in our show notes and checking out the EcoTheatre Lab's website. We want to thank all of the organizations and individuals who made this series possible. This project is funded by both a North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program Graduate Student Grant, which is supported by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and a Johnson Center for Land Stewardship Policy Emerging Leader Award. Our podcast consultant is Mary Swander. Our podcast musician is Omar de Kok-Mercado, and our podcast artist is Moselle Nita Singh. Our podcast Land Acknowledgement is adapted from text developed by Lance Foster and Sikowis Nobiss, and from conversations with Shelley Buffalo. Rosie Marcu-Rowe is our podcast editor. And I'm Vivian M. Cook, community Engagement Director for the EcoTheatre Lab and The Art of Climate Dialogue podcast producer and host. Take care.