

'Loss World Monologues': Life without her soul mate

By Steven Brown

CORRESPONDENT

JUNE 02, 2015 02:21 PM,

UPDATED JUNE 02, 2015 08:07 PM



"The Loss World Monologues" author Mary London Szpara, seated front right, rehearses with Hannah Taylor, Mandy Smith, Susan Tobelman, Nancy Brennan, Brianna Daniels, Robin Weaver, and Brittany Bass. Nine actresses from their 20s through their 50s create interlocking stories of loss and survival. DIEDRA LAIRD DLAIRD@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM

The hot line rang during Mary London's DJ shift on a Richmond, Va., radio station. Uh-oh, she thought. The boss is about to get on my case.

The voice on the line actually belonged to a listener who was going a little crazy. Part of a song kept running through his head, and he couldn't identify it. After he sang a little, London rescued him: The mystery song was Bonnie Tyler's "It's a Heartache."

Something clicked, she says.

A year to the day after that 1978 phone call, London and Michael Szpara wed. Their 25-year marriage, and the healing she achieved after his death, inspired [“The Loss World Monologues.”](#) a drama that premieres Friday in UNC Charlotte’s McKnight Hall.

Radio listeners on 99.7 The Fox and other Charlotte-area stations knew her as Mary London after she and Michael moved to North Carolina in 1985. But “Loss World Monologues” carries her full name, Mary London Szpara.

The play grew from the journal she began when Michael died in 2004, after eight years of battling hepatitis C and its side effects. Szpara and director Glenda Kale enlisted nine actresses from their 20s through their 50s, then blended their experiences with Szpara’s to create interlocking stories of loss and survival.

“None of us gets out of this life without losing someone we love. None of us,” Mary Szpara says. “This (play) is a place that offers therapy and healing and joy and laughter. But most of all, it offers hope.”

Szpara began studying music as a girl in Wisconsin, she says, and she loved it. When a high school theater class required students to try a guest shot on a local radio station, she saw where her love of music could lead. She DJ’d part-time in college, then launched what became a 20-year career.

“I loved being able to turn other people on to music,” Szpara says. She was the queen of trivia, reveling in sharing the music’s backstories with her listeners.

“I think music is a great unifier in the world,” she says. “I was too young to be part of hippie nation, but I’m old enough that I understand and embrace all that it entailed. ... Imagine what the world could be like if we actually unified it with music. I always felt that was kind of my calling in life.”



Michael & Mary Szpara,
photo from Mary London
Szpara



Brianna Daniels, front, in action in a scene rehearsal from the Friday May 29, 2015 rehearsal of The Loss World Monologues at the Cube NoDa. DIEDRA LAIRD DLAIIRD@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM



Hannah Taylor in action in a scene rehearsal from the Friday May 29, 2015 rehearsal of The Loss World Monologues at the Cube NoDa. "With these rings we are still wed," she says, wearing her deceased husband's ring alongside hers. DIEDRA LAIRD DLAIIRD@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM

Music certainly unified her with Michael Szpara. Though he worked in advertising when they met, he had owned a Richmond music store and promoted concerts. Michael was as hooked on music as she was.

The couple spent evenings with friends playing air guitar with the music cranked up full blast, she says. They sometimes spent evenings exploring the hundreds of promotional albums they had accumulated through their jobs.

“They were great albums that nobody knew about – unless you were a freak like we were,” Szpara says.

Sensing that radio was moving away from the kind of conversational, personalized shows she enjoyed, Szpara left in 1995. She went into voiceovers and other behind-the-scenes work, eventually starting her own production company.

In the midst of her career change, the couple learned that Michael had hepatitis C. “We considered it the most horrible blessing we could ever have gotten,” Szpara says. “It made us draw together. We had to fight for his life.”

The battles ranged from making insurers pay for treatment Michael needed – including a liver transplant – to coping with medications’ side effects. While awaiting the transplant, the two met another couple awaiting a transplant: Walter Kale, a cancer patient, and his wife, Glenda, then East Mecklenburg High’s drama teacher. The couples pulled together, and Glenda observed the qualities that would later enable Mary Szpara to turn her experiences into a play.

“She’s so open,” says Kale, now retired. “She’s probably the most giving person I’ve met in my life. ... It’s just second nature to her to reach out.”

At the beginning of 2004, Michael and Mary’s 25th-anniversary year, the couple decided to have a yearlong celebration. They vacationed in Hawaii; visiting Texas’ Space Center Houston let them imagine going aloft themselves. A few weeks before the anniversary, Michael died of a heart attack.

Mary’s soulmate was gone, and she turned to a journal to help her sort out her feelings.

She turned sections of the journal into a 2013 book, “The Loss World.” Kale, whose husband died a few weeks after Michael, thought the book’s meditations on heartache and recovery could make powerful monologues. The two have spent a year crafting the stage version.

The play, Szpara says, shows that turmoil can give way to a happy ending, as it does when she thinks of Michael today.

“Really, I never lost him,” Szpara says. “He’s still a huge part of who I am, and I carry him with me wherever I go.”

This story was produced as part of the Charlotte Arts Journalism Alliance.

‘The Loss World Monologues’

Mary London Szpara’s play looks at turmoil and healing after the loss of a loved one.

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Where: McKnight Hall, Cone Center, UNC Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd.

Tickets: \$17 advance, \$22 day of show.

Details: 704-372-1000, carolinatix.org.