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**LIFE**

**FACING  
HER  
FEAR**



**Theater director balances chemotherapy with work on new production**

**Jim Higgins**

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Before she became artistic director of Renaissance Theaterworks, with a predilection for choosing edgy plays, Suzan Fete was a cardiovascular intensive care nurse for years. She can look at scary and difficult situations without flinching.

- “But I was always afraid of cancer,” she said. In nursing school she did only the minimum necessary with cancer to pass her boards.
- Fete’s general health was good this past May when she went for her annual mammogram. But the mammogram showed something that led to an ultrasound, followed by a biopsy. The tissue was malignant. She had breast cancer.
- “It was really freaky for me to get this diagnosis ... I was just frightened, and ignorant,” she said, even though she knows a lot about how medicine works, and her best friend had breast cancer five years ago.
- But she quickly learned that treatment was “vastly different” than what she saw in nursing school in the ‘80s. She was also told early on by her medical team that her prognosis was “very, very good.”
- So Fete has turned from someone who avoided the C-word to a person who talks openly about her cancer experience. If anyone reading this article is afraid like she was, Fete would “love to be able to say to them, it’s OK, it’s not so scary.”

While receiving treatment, Fete is also directing Renaissance’s season-opening production of Jen Silverman’s “The Moors,” which will be performed Oct. 18-Nov. 10.

A close-knit company founded and led by women, Renaissance has worked out a plan to support Fete personally and artistically while also ensuring backup for contingencies.

“This story of this company run by women, that’s what we do,” said Marketing Director Sarah Kriger Hwang. “We solve problems like nobody else.”

**If you go**

Renaissance Theaterworks performs “The Moors” Oct. 18-Nov. 10 at 255 S. Water St. For tickets, visit [rtwmke.org](http://rtwmke.org) or call (414) 278-0765.

**Getting support from so many directions**

Before it began, Fete said she was “so afraid of chemo(therapy).” She has since completed her first 12-week course of medication, and is in

the middle of a concluding nine-week course. “It’s not how I’d like to spend the day,” she said. But the steroids and anti-nausea medication she is given right before infusion help her tolerate the chemo. She considers herself lucky: She’s had no nausea and no peripheral neuropathy (numbness and tingling) due to the chemo agents.

Fete also is doing “cold cap” therapy, wearing a scalp-cooling cap that vasoconstricts blood

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**TOP: Suzan Fete is artistic director of Renaissance Theaterworks.** PROVIDED BY RENAISSANCE THEATERWORKS

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LIFE

Fete

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vessels in her head, making it harder for chemo agents to get to her scalp and cause hair loss.

Referring back to her nursing experience, Fete said she probably had worked in 30 different hospitals but never experienced the kind of care she is receiving at UW Health Cancer Center at ProHealth Care in Waukesha. “I suggest that I might be more comfortable if I had a different ointment for my rash, and it appears,” she said. “They’re always trying to make things go smoother, you know.”

An ultrasound prior to beginning her second round of chemotherapy showed her tumor had been reduced by 85%, according to Fete. “I feel so blessed,” she said.

Once she got over her initial reserve and began talking about her cancer, Fete received support from many directions, including from donors and board members. Some of them shared their own breast cancer stories. Even the woman who conducted Fete’s recent echocardiogram is a breast cancer survivor who shared her story.

She also has strong support at home from her husband, Jeff, a recently retired radiologist.

Getting a buddy to help with directing

After receiving her diagnosis, Fete thought Renaissance should find another director for “The Moors.” That would have made her sad — she’s emotionally invested in this production, and she helped recruit “Homeland” actor Sarah Sokolovic back to Milwaukee to perform in it.

She brought the question up to her medical team, explaining how directing and the rehearsal process works. To her surprise, they told her she should be able to do it, but to get a buddy to work with her.

She called her friend, theater director Mallory Metoxen, a former Renaissance staff member and ally of the company.



Renaissance Theaterworks artists Bailey Wegner, left, Jayne Regan Pink and Suzan Fete pose with Suzan’s husband Jeff.



Mallory Metoxen, Lisa Rasmussen and Suzan Fete pose for a photo. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY RENAISSANCE THEATERWORKS

Fete remembered raising the question: “How can we blanket this problem with as many safeguards and backup plans” as needed?

“We’re women, we plan,” Kriger Hwang interjected. “We don’t come to the table without alternative plans.”

At Fete’s request, Metoxen is now the production’s “swing director,” ready to step in if and when the production needs her.

Fete prepared as fully as possible, planning a rehearsal schedule that in-

cludes an extra day off each week for herself. During the rehearsal period, Fete is working five days a week, rather than the typical six-day week a director works. This play has music in it, so on a day Fete is not there, music director Jill Anna Ponasik can work with the cast, she said. Metoxen is prepared to handle some rehearsals to reinforce the show and, if Fete goes through a rough patch with her health, “(Metoxen) can come in and take over,” Fete said. To date, Metoxen has not had to direct any rehearsals, but attends them and speaks regularly with Fete to keep the artistic vision consistent. Fete explained the plan in detail to the actors months ago, giving them an opportunity to leave the production if they wanted (none did).

“It’s really never going to be a change of director. It might be a change of executor,” said Kriger Hwang. If Metoxen steps in as director, “she will be moving forward Suzan’s vision and Suzan’s direction of the play,” Kriger Hwang said.

In a follow-up email, Fete admitted she is very tired. “The fatigue gets a little worse with each subsequent treatment, but so far so good,” she wrote.

“Rehearsal is fantastic and exciting. It’s also a wonderful diversion. I find myself forgetting I have cancer for several hours and that’s wonderful!”

She also noted that rehearsal is the *only* thing she is doing. “The rest of the RTW team has absorbed all my other duties. They are rockstars, and I could not do this without them,” she wrote.

“I get up and go to rehearsal, I come home and my husband feeds me, then I go to bed.”

Thinking about succession plan

Fete is 66. Her age, combined with her health situation, make it reasonable to ask if she and Renaissance have done any succession planning around her role as artistic director. She is the lone company founder still on the leadership team.

“I love Renaissance. I want it to continue well past all of us,” she said. “I would love if my grandchildren did go someday when, you know, I’m a memory.”

She does not intend to retire because of her cancer. At the same time, she said, “I think theater is a young person’s game, in a lot of ways.” She’d like to have some fun and go on vacations with her husband.

“I will leave Renaissance in great hands when I go, and that’s going to be a process,” she said.

Don’t be afraid of mammograms, she says

Fete’s breast cancer was discovered through her routine annual mammogram. When she hears about people who don’t want to get a mammogram because they’re afraid of what it will show, or afraid of possible treatment, she wants to speak to them.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” she said.

People will get sick because it’s a human thing to get sick, she said. “It’s OK because there are wonderful places that will treat you and be there for you.”

Getting a mammogram is “how you avoid the scary,” Kriger Hwang said. “When you catch these things early, your prognosis is like what Suzan’s is. When you don’t take care of it and you let it go too long, is when you end up in a

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## LIFE

# Albert

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### Albert the Alley Cat causes trouble

As with so many celebrities, Albert sometimes got himself, and his employer, in hot water.

After rival WTMJ-TV (Channel 4) hired a trained meteorologist, Paul Joseph, Channel 6 in 1975 hired Tom Skilling, who also had the seal of approval from the American Meteorological Society. Skilling was to do its 10 p.m. weather forecast, with Allen relegated to the noon and 6 p.m. newscasts. Albert worked with both of them.

The AMS told Skilling he would lose the group's seal of approval if he continued to work with, well, a cat puppet. Station management stood with Albert; Skilling lost the seal.

(Skilling left Channel 6 three years later — not because of Albert or the seal of approval, but in a dispute over how much time weather forecasts received on the station's newscasts. Not long after, Skilling was hired by WGN-TV in Chicago, where he was a weather-forecasting fixture for the next 45 years; he retired this year.)

When word got out that Channel 6 might drop Albert, the station received more than 10,000 letters from viewers backing the weather cat.

The same year Skilling left Channel 6, Albert — actually, DuBlon — got in trouble for meddling in Wisconsin politics.

In 1978, Lee Dreyfus, then chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, was running for governor as a Republican against acting Gov. Martin Schreiber; the symbol of Dreyfus' campaign was the red vest he wore on campus. DuBlon reportedly reached out to the campaign and offered to give Dreyfus a boost — by dressing Albert in a red vest for his stunts on camera on Channel 6.

Albert donned the red vest on just two newscasts before Jill Geisler, Chan-



Ward Allen and Albert the Alley Cat pose at the weather map at WITI-TV (Channel 6) in this 1971 photo. PROVIDED BY WITI-TV (CHANNEL 6)

nel 6's news director, told DuBlon the vest had to go. DuBlon protested, but, after both he and Albert boycotted one broadcast, they both returned the next day — minus the red vest.

### Albert the Alley Cat signs off

In mid-1981, Channel 6 bowed to years of reports from consultants saying a cat puppet doing the weather hurt the station's credibility and shifted Albert to sports, where he bantered with longtime sportscaster Earl Gillespie. But by the end of that year, Albert was off the newscasts for good. He remained on Channel 6's Saturday morning kids show, "Albert and Friends," and continued to do promotional segments and events for the station.

But the viewers didn't forget the cat puppet who did the weather.

To mark Albert's 25th "birthday," in

August 1985 the station held a party at the Milwaukee County Zoo, where people stood in line in the rain to wish the cat puppet well. That fall, DuBlon and Albert received the Semi-Sacred Cat Award from the Milwaukee Press Club (the Press Club's mascot is a mummified cat).

DuBlon left Channel 6 at the end of 1985, returning to his hometown of San Angelo, Texas. He died in 1988 of pancreatic and liver cancer; he was 58.

### So, where did Albert the Alley Cat go?

In that 1982 interview with The Journal, DuBlon said the then-current Albert the Alley Cat puppet was actually the eighth one. "Throughout the years, I had to get new ones made because the puppet wore out," DuBlon said. "All the other puppets that wore out I usually



Jack DuBlon poses with Albert the Alley Cat. He provided Albert's voice, and his jokes, during the weather segment on the 6 and 10 p.m. news on WITI-TV (Channel 6).

threw out, but I just couldn't do that to Albert — he's that special. I always thought Albert had nine lives; I guess he is on his last one."

But when DuBlon went back to Texas, he took all of his puppets with him, including Albert, seemingly never to be seen again.

Until 2017, when Channel 6 reporter Brad Hicks set out to "find" the missing Albert. He tracked down one of DuBlon's daughters, Michelle DuBlon, in Prescott, Arizona. She not only had Albert; he was sitting on her couch. Hicks and photojournalist Jeff Frings put together a segment about Albert's "retirement" days, including FaceTime-ing with Ward Allen. (Allen died in 2022 at age 87.)

You can find the segment, along with archival clips of some of Albert's "performances," at [fox6now.com](http://fox6now.com).

Sources: *Journal Sentinel* archives; "Milwaukee Television History: The Analog Years" by Dick Golembiewski (Marquette University Press); [fox6now.com](http://fox6now.com).

# Ghost stories

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"In my version of the story, I highlight the unpleasantness of Kilbourn — he lived in Chicago at one point, so of course he's the worst," Lardinois said. She also noted that City Hall's 22,500-pound bell is named after Juneau, which she imagines the famously prickly Kilbourn would be offended by, even as a ghost.

"There are stories of sounds of tremendous crashing and lots of activity in the basement of City Hall when no one is there," Lardinois said. "I imagine that that's just Byron Kilbourn crashing around because he's still mad that City Hall was built in East Town, not Westown."

### Here's why Milwaukee has 'the best ghosts'

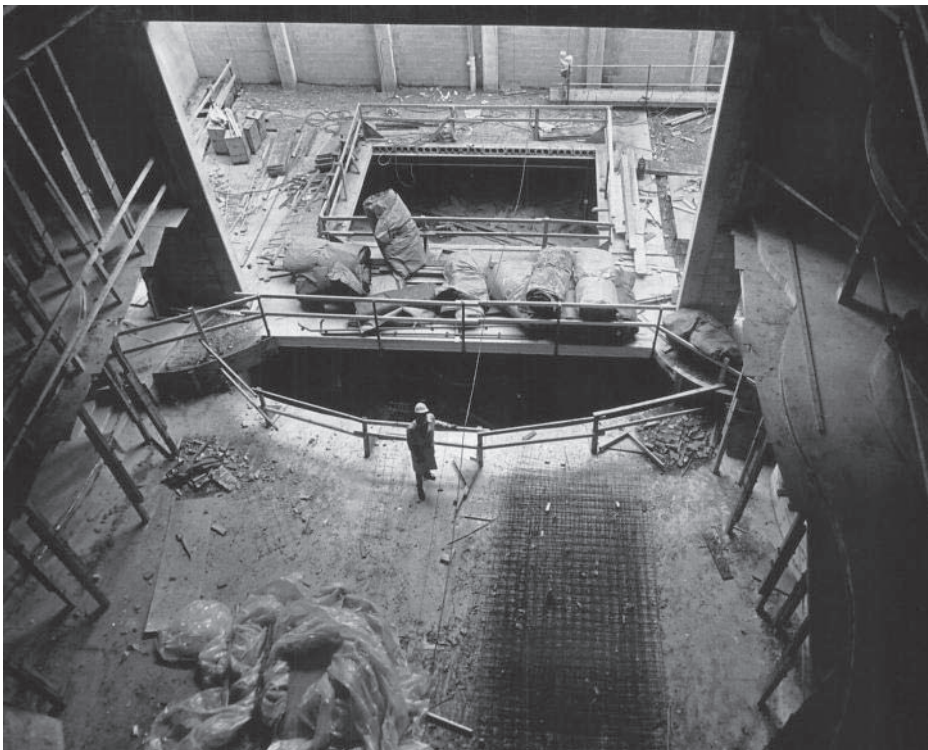
Throughout her career as a ghost storyteller, Lardinois has learned stories from dozens of cities. But when asked if Milwaukee has the best ghosts, she answered, "Oh, of course."

"What I love about Milwaukee ghosts is how really hardworking they are," Lardinois said. "There are so many Milwaukeeans that return to their place of work when they become ghosts."

In addition to Charles Pfister, Lardinois shares several other favorite stories of Milwaukee's "hardworking" ghosts in her book "Milwaukee Ghosts and Legends."

There's the story of the former director of the Milwaukee Public Museum, Stephan Francis de Borhegyi, who died in 1969 in a car accident a few blocks away from the museum. According to Lardinois' book, many museum staff members believe the director still hangs out on the third floor of the museum, where "many have reported catching glimpses of a man in a cape out of the corner of their eye..." and "...hearing the sounds of hearty laughter and smelling the familiar scent of pipe tobacco as they move through his beloved collections."

In her book, Lardinois also tells the story of the young Miller Brewery worker who, decades ago, would meet his girlfriend in the historic Miller caves. Tragically, the worker fell and hit his head on a staircase in the caves one day; he died several days later. A few months afterward, the young woman also died, and "while the doctors diagnosed her with a lung ailment, many of



Colin Cabot inspects the main theater and orchestra pit in 1992, at the new home of the Skylight Opera Theatre in the Third Ward. According to theater lore, co-founder director Clair Richardson, who died in 1980, still haunts the venue. CARL HOYT / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

the young man's former coworkers were convinced that she died of a broken heart." The couple seems to haunt the man's former workplace, where employees would claim to catch glimpses of the two of them and hear "bits of conversation and laughter."

Another brewery-related story involves beer baron Valentin Blatz, who died in 1894 and is believed to haunt his old office in a building that is now the alumni center at the Milwaukee School of Engineering. In her book, Lardinois says that the smell of Blatz's unique tobacco and a sense of his presence made employees believe "that his spirit returned to the office and remained, carefully watching the progress of his brewery."

Finally, one of the stories "tending toward the delightful" type that Lardinois favors is recounted in her book when she writes about Clair Richardson, who co-founded the Skylight Opera Theatre. Although he died in 1980, the belief persists that he haunts the Cabot Theatre in the Historic Third Ward. The belief is reinforced by his ashes, which, by his request, are kept in an urn below the stage, "so (as he explained) future decisions 'would be made over his dead body,'" Lardinois writes.

"All these hardworking Milwaukee



In this 1962 photo, Milwaukee Public Museum director Stephan F. Borhegyi holds a cherry wood pipe made in Hungary in 1930. According to the museum's website, Borhegyi was born in 1921 in Budapest, Hungary. He became director of the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1959. Tragically, he died in a car accident in 1969. Museum lore says Borhegyi haunts the museum's third floor. MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL STAFF PHOTO

ghosts," Lardinois noted, "they're not going to let death stop them from productivity."



Renaissance Theaterworks leaders Lisa Rasmussen and Suzan Fete enforce a strict no-fun policy at work. PROVIDED BY RENAISSANCE THEATERWORKS

# Fete

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more difficult situation."

The current U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendation is that women who are 40 to 74 years old and are at average risk for breast cancer get a mammogram every two years. Note the nuance in that recommendation of "average risk." The Yale Cancer Center has a detailed discussion of the new mammogram guidelines. Women in higher-risk categories, including ones who carry genetic mutations that increase cancer risk, "should continue to follow their doctor's advice on screening age and frequency."

In conjunction with this production and with October being Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Fete and Renaissance will be collaborating with ABCD: After Breast Cancer Diagnosis, a nonprofit that provides emotional support to anyone affected by breast cancer. They will team up on some awareness activities, including ABCD Night for "The Moors" on Nov. 7.