

Margery Lowe recently spoke by phone about the upcoming readings of *The People Downstairs*, discussing virtual performances, her preparation for the role of Miep Gies, and her thoughts on the woman who put her own life at risk by helping hide the Frank family and others. Excerpts of that interview follow.

**Q: What are your thoughts about performing online via Zoom?**

A: “It’s definitely productive for Michael and Bill [playwright Michael McKeever and director William Hayes], because they get to hear where the script is as of now. As an actor it’s tough, because you can only connect so far. We can’t see each other’s eyes. We can’t feel each other’s energy – and I don’t just mean the other actors’ energy. I also mean the audience. I’m always surprised when we do talkbacks that people are surprised to hear how much of a character they are in every play we do. That’s the beauty of live theatre. Even in a quiet house that energy is a tangible thing. What the audience gives affects us. If there’s a laugh, we might wait longer. We respond differently, and it can change the whole tone of a scene.



“From peeking into many play readings on Zoom, I found that the most interesting experience is just to listen, like my grandmother would describe listening to radio. I mentioned that to Bill, and he said maybe we can go with that. I’ll reveal a secret: our script is on the top half of the computer. The other actors are in tiny boxes on the bottom half, so we don’t see the screen the same way that people do at home. And I’m really not looking at the actors because I have to look at the camera. So, I don’t even get the opportunity to see how they react and respond like I would in a theatre. But I can hear. So, I’m truly approaching it as if it’s a radio play, and not just from the audience perspective of listening. I think for the actors, too, it’s about going with the flow of words.”

**Q: You’re known for doing an enormous amount of research in preparation for a role. What have you done so far in preparation for playing Miep?**

A: “I’ve seen interviews with her online, and I read *Anne Frank Remembered*, which Miep co-authored. I also watched a very powerful documentary of the same name, which won the Oscar for Best Documentary, and it’s devastating. I was a puddle, of course, by the end. But when we’re in rehearsal, there’s a point where none of that matters because you’re in the moment. You have to put aside everything you’ve learned.”

**Q: Does watching Miep on video inform you in anyway?**

A: “Yes and no. Her thoughts inform me. Bill and Michael decided they didn’t want the actors doing accents. The idea is that the audience is speaking the same language. It’s understood that we’re speaking in Dutch. So, I wasn’t listening for her dialect. And because people don’t know her mannerisms – it’s not like an actor playing Richard Nixon in *Frost/Nixon* – it would be immaterial to the audience if I tried to create her mannerisms. But I certainly want to create the person I feel she says she was at the time: how she thought, what her beliefs were, why she did the things that she did, the choices she made. In interviews, she was very careful. She didn’t want too much attention on herself. As an actor, you get to dig underneath the surface, which is part of the fun.

“She was so brave. Before the Nazis left, they told her to stay put and not move. She never would have said, ‘I was so brave and I went up the stairs.’ That’s not the way she talked. But you, as an actor, can interpret the strength it would take in this life-or-death situation to get up from your chair and go up those stairs in defiance. That’s an acting clue right there. It’s an inward strength. It’s simply who she was.

“When she found the diary, she held onto it. She didn’t even give it to Mr. Frank after he returned home. It was her secret. She said – and it’s a great line for me as an actress – she held onto the diary because she really believed that, ‘One day I would give it to Anne, and I would see her smile. And she would look at me and say, “Oh, Miep, thank you for saving it.”’ It was only when Mr. Frank got the news definitively that Anne didn’t survive that Miep went into the office, got the diary, and said, ‘Here’s your daughter’s legacy.’ And she’d never read the diary. Even after it was first published, Mr. Frank begged her to read it and she said no. ‘It’s too many memories. I’m not ready.’ But he finally convinced her. It was emotional, but because of the power of Anne’s writing, she said it felt as if they were alive again. She could hear them laughing. She could hear the jokes or the arguments. That was when she had the revelation that if people wanted her to tell the stories, or speak in schools, she should do it. She didn’t want the limelight. But in the end, she really was extraordinary. All those people who helped were extraordinary.”