

Spotlight on Inspiration – Craig Smith, Executive Director & Elise Stone, Artistic Director, Phoenix Festival



Editor's Note: I hope you are enjoying this series as much as I am! Please let me know your thoughts or feel free to recommend someone to be profiled by sending an email to me at risa@gmgpr.com. -- Risa Hoag

Craig Smith, Executive Director & Elise Stone, Artistic Director

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How did you get to be in the job you have now?

CRAIG: We founded our theatre Phoenix Theatre Ensemble in NYC in 2004 and in 2018 we started producing in Nyack. We produce in both places.

ELISE: I was an original founding member of Phoenix Theatre Ensemble in 2004.

What career did you think you would have when you were in high school?

CRAIG: Sports Announcer

ELISE: Actor - Theatre Maker

What was the best advice you ever received?

CRAIG: When I was growing up on a farm in Northern Minnesota, and I would take the tractor and plow to start on a very large field 60+ acres, it was daunting and several days of work, my mother would tell me 'Don't look only at how much you have left to do, look back and see what you have already accomplished.'

ELISE: Leave the world a better place than you found it

What piece of advice would you give to college seniors?

CRAIG: Don't conform. Find your own voice, your own you. What makes you, you. Then go with it.

ELISE: Follow your passion. Live with kindness and authenticity, there is no one better qualified to be you. Let your light shine.

Do you have a particular charity you support? And why?

CRAIG: Sandy Hook Parents, because we must find a way to gun reform. Firearms are the leading cause of death of our youth.

ELISE: The American Cancer Society. I have lost too many people to cancer, including my sister, my father, my stepmother and dear friend and fellow artist who was the best man at our wedding.

Do you have a personal goal for 2023?

CRAIG: Produce a spectacular Phoenix Festival.

ELISE: Spend more time in the rehearsal room and on stage performing.

Do you feel you have a good work/life balance?

CRAIG: I work too much. But I am blessed with my life.

ELISE: Hmm... that is a hard question. I work most all the time, so maybe not a completely great work/life balance. But I am working on it :)

When you feel stuck, how do you recharge yourself or get inspired?

CRAIG: I don't freak out. Getting stuck is an ongoing challenge, it will pass. Sometimes I give myself over to it - wallow in the stuckness... invariably something new and useful comes out of it.

ELISE: Walking in nature - being with my family - looking at art, attending theatre, dance, music

Do you have a hobby? If so, what is it and how did you get into it?

CRAIG: Smoking a cigar, having a Jamison on the back porch while listening to country music and contemplate the idea of having a truck.

ELISE: I really enjoy cooking and baking. My grandmother and mother both enjoyed cooking and baking and I helped in the kitchen for as long as I can remember. I find it creative, often meditative and hopefully my friends and loved ones have enjoyed the results :)

Do you have a habit you wish you could break?

CRAIG: I am a terrible reader. I don't read emails or documents carefully.

ELISE: Looking at work emails during non-working hours.

Name one thing you are working towards in 2023?

CRAIG: I am obsessed with making the Phoenix Festival a success. I want it to become a destination for artists and audiences alike and an economic and artistic boon to the community.

ELISE: Making the 2nd annual Phoenix Festival even better than the first.

What one thing would you try (or do) if you weren't afraid?

CRAIG: Make a movie of Tartuffe

ELISE: Hang gliding

If money wasn't a concern, what would you be doing right now?

CRAIG: Employing all my artist friends.

ELISE: Exactly what I am doing now - only without having to worry about money. Making theatre takes a lot of money :)

Name one or two of your favorite movies.

CRAIG: That movie about Jesse James with Brad Pitt. Navalny.

ELISE: It's A Wonderful Life

Name one or two of your favorite books? And why.

CRAIG: The Old Man and the Sea, it was important to me as a student - an intro to artistry. The Twyla Tharp book on creativity, The Creative Habit - I go back to it every so often, reminds me I'm not crazy. I think I need to look at it again.

ELISE: Circe by Madeline Miller. It is no secret that I love the Greeks - I produce and perform them whenever I am able. I love Madeline Miller's telling of Circe's story from her perspective. It is a wonderfully fun read and I would love to do a stage adaptation of it one day.

What do you want your legacy to be? Or how do you want to be remembered?

CRAIG: A person who loved his wife, his family and the Arts.

ELISE: I would like to leave the world a bit better for having walked here. To be remembered as a good mother, wife, daughter, sister, friend, mentor. And I hope to leave behind a body of work as an actor and director both personally and via my theatre company that continues to bring joy, meaning and resonant experiences to our artists and audiences alike.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your work or interests?

CRAIG: Process is the most rewarding. Putting it altogether -- the rehearsal room or the strategy meeting. The achievement of success is somewhat secondary.

ELISE: I believe that sharing stories in community is as old as the human race. The beauty of language, the breadth of our imaginations, the ability to see ourselves in others, to empathize with fictional and historical characters.

Through theatre, dance, music, and painting, we are reminded that we are all connected and a part of the larger human community. And I hope that this remembering will help us to live together in a world of peace and plenty.