

## Paula J Riley Bio

By Steve J. Hill



With Leona and Larry



With sister Amy at summer camp



Larry Best, comediane



Iza Itkin



Paula at The Chamber Theatre

Paula was eleven years old in 1954 and spending the summer at Esther's Chicken Farm—a camp in upstate New York—when she discovered her higher self. She often wondered away from the camp activities and was walking down a winding dirt road. There was this great feeling about being surrounded by nature and listening to the wind in the trees, the sound of a babbling brook and the scraping of shoes on the dirt road. She was alone, but not alone. She felt a true sense of self and discovery. There was awareness and a liking of you she was. This was the beginning of a feeling that would manifest throughout her acting and teaching career.

Paula Jane Wexler was born in the proverbial theatrical trunk. Her parents were comedian Larry Best and singer Susan Brewster, who worked the Borscht Belt circuit after meeting on the *Major Bowes Radio Show*.

Paula being only six years old at the time would watch from the wings. Sometimes they would bring her on stage and incorporate her into their act. The laughter and applause was intoxicating. From that point on she knew that performing in front of people was her destiny. Paula honors her late Father Larry for her DNA and her lifelong commitment to “telling a story.”

Larry Best was a more entertainment-friendly name chosen by her father whose real name was Harry Wexler. Susan Brewster, likewise, was the stage name for Leona Lichtenstein. When her parents divorced in 1957—in a show of solidarity for her father—Paula adopted the name Best. So until she got married in 1980 she was Paula Jane Best.

She also discovered directing at a young age. She was always telling friends and family where to go and what to do. She would direct scenarios and scenes for the dolls in her doll house. In high school she was in every school play. Nellie Forbush from South Pacific being her favorite.

An early boyfriend, Leslie Sanford Ziering introduced her in 1965 to his acting teacher, Iza Itkin. She was the daughter of David Itkin, director of the famed *Goodman Theatre* in Chicago. Iza had started her own chamber theatre with a small group of repertory actors. She also utilized a unique movable modular stage designed for her by the architect Martin Bloom.

Iza's theatre troupe was a rather insular tight-knit group. The actors would pay her a monthly fee that she would apply to therapy sessions for the actors. Iza followed the teaching of Sigmund Freud and saw herself as a lay psychologist. Having the kind of information that could only be obtained from therapy would then be applied to the students in their acting lessons. A highly unorthodox method, if not unethical. But this was the 60s after all, a period of great experimentation.

Actors came and went, but Paula saw in Iza a true mentor and became a charter member of *The Chamber Theater*. She studied with Iza for the next six years. Paula kept afloat by working hundreds of restaurant, lounge and nightclub gigs. She eventually became Iza's roommate. She moved into her large 57th street apartment where the stage was located. The acting classes and play rehearsals were long and intense. They studied dozens of plays but only put a handful up for public viewing.

They also studied the art of improvisation, which led to a deeper understanding of self as well as the intricacies of acting. Working with a closely-knit group of actors for an extended period of time gave Paula great insight into the acting group dynamic. This would have a lasting and profound influence upon how Paula would later teach.

As insightful and nurturing as Iza was, she had a dark side that was exacerbated later in life by alcohol and prescription medicine. When it was time to leave, Paula did not walk ... she ran.

Paula saw Iza many years later. They had dinner and reminisced. Iza was struggling to keep her theatre alive in difficult times. When she died in 1984, the stage was destroyed. She wrote this poem for Iza's memorial. >>

## DEDICATION TO A STAGE

The Inception, once there in the heart of the dreamer  
Transported by words, to the mind of the listener  
Soon bloomed into life, by the hands of the builder  
Then sprang into use, by the breath of the player  
The Conception, a stage made of simple material  
Which traveled through life, on the faith of the dreamer  
Yet remains in the minds and the hearts of the chosen  
Well might again rise, as so oft spoke the dreamer  
Like a phoenix, from ashes, to continue the spiral  
As was first its intention, for the dreamers and players  
This Spiral of wood and of flesh, that's eternal.



The Chamber Theatre stage

The idea of resurrecting the stage started to grow in Paula

After Paula left Isa's company she drifted for a period of time. But In 1978 she put together a cabaret act and had a passionate but short-lived singing career.



From the cabaret years

She met a gentleman named Jack Riley. He was an ex-Chicago cop and on the surface could not be more different from Paula. What they did have in common though, was Jack working as a bartender and Paula working most of her young life in bars and cafes. Staying up late and sleeping late was a schedule they were both well acquainted. Jack had seen her cabaret act many times and was quite smitten. They eventually fell in love and got married in 1980. Jack adored Paula and through his generosity helped Paula further her singing career. She took voice lessons and put together a more professional act with charts and arrangements by her pianist, Allen Hill.



Singing at their wedding with Jack

She played many venues across the city and in the village. She built a dedicated following. For Paula it was another creative learning experience, another form of expression which added more life lessons that could be tucked away and used later.

She began to take writing courses at the *New School* and art classes at *Parsons* thinking she would like interior design. Math was not a strong suite so she dropped the interior design ambitions and concentrated on the writing. She began to write short stories, one act plays and set about to write a larger work called *Amaz'n Grace*.



Starting over at 55

Jack and Paula divorced in 1991. Her cabaret crowds started to wane and she found herself looking to other avenues with the need to pay bills.

Paula rented out her bedroom for extended stay for mothers and their daughters coming to NYC in search of modeling and acting assignments. She called this rental *Models and Moms*. Paula developed many life-long friends as she helped mentor the aspiring models and actors and showed them how to navigate the rough waters of the city.

This income allowed Paula to get back into theatre. With a resume that showed little acting experience since 1980 Paula took any job she could. A series of stage managing gigs got her feet back on the boards. Her first directorial assignment came in 1993. It was August Strindberg's *The Stronger* for the *Madison Avenue Theatre*. She worked on many theatre projects for the next six years and finally finished her *Amaz'n Grace* play and begin shopping it around.

Again the need for income led her to sideline acting and directing for a spell. A lot of her actor friends were earning money through part-time sales in real estate. Paula took the courses and got her license. She worked for a few agencies and basically hatted every minute of it. The stress gave her diverticulitis ... so she quit.

It was around this time she met Steve J. Hill, an art director/graphic designer. Steve became her partner in life and theatre for the rest of her days. When Steve met Paula she was working the reception desk at an advertising agency. Paula again got ill and had to go into the hospital for an operation. She made a pact that if she got through the procedure she would return to theatre and never look back.

A month later she was walking down 13th street and walked into the long-standing *13th Street Repertory Theater*. They cast her as the witch in their Saturday's children's production— it was a start. With Steve's help Paula was on her way with a determination that she hadn't felt in years. Within a two-year span she acted in numerous plays, independent films, movie backgrounds, less-than-five line television appearances, student films, commercials and voice-overs. She began directing again in 2007 and in short order directed 12 plays, 15 end-of-workshop play scenes and four staged readings.



In *The Chairs* with Barry Ford

She joined the unions and hooked up with organizations like *Theatre Recourses Unlimited*, *The Players Club*, *League of Professional Theatre Women* and others to continue networking. Writers sought her out to direct their plays that appeared in various venues and festivals.

But her true passion was realized when she put out a shingle to become an acting coach. Her first class in 2006 held three students. But with determination her private classes grew, as well as seminars, scene study and monologue classes.



Starting coaching in 2006

She started a company *New Heights Productions* in order to produce and direct a new play by Fred Timm called *The Fiascoes* at the Baruch College theater in 2008.

Her biggest achievement was to finalize her dream to rebirth Iza Itkin's movable stage, which she now called *The Spiral Theatre Studio*. Paul Michael from *The Network* allowed Paula to turn his largest rental studio into an intimate fully carpeted, acoustically enhanced gray-box studio. Paula had the stage modules built and shipped to New York in time for the first Spiral production *Stories My Grandmother Told Me* by Ted Swindly. With the help of Steve, Jaz Dorsy, Connie Koepfinger and many kindly actors and volunteers the next eight months was a whirlwind of activity as Paula produced and directed five full equity showcase stage productions, six readings and three fundraisers.



With Troupier 2010

She embraced a concept and a series of plays she called *Salt & Pepper* which focused on the stories of characters grappling with issues related to growing older in a culture sometimes disrespectful of aging. The series promoted greater awareness of issues about the grace and grit of "seasoned" citizens.

Paula knew that the new theatre would take time to jell and it was operating in the red. World of mouth was mounting and audiences were growing when *The Network* unexpectedly closed its doors.

Without a contingency plan the stage had to go into storage. Paula took on other directing assignments while she looked for a suitable venue to house the stage. Paula's search came to a screeching halt when she found out in 2016 that she had 4th stage lung cancer. She started chemotherapy, radiation and then by her request was put on a promising clinical drug trial



Last headshot 2014

Once again creative pursuits had to be put on hold while she valiantly fought the disease. When she was strong enough she accepted a few directorial and coaching assignments— the last being a teaching program for older adults through the Queens Theatre.

In 2017 a chance meeting with an actor performing at street fair in Manhattan led her to the *Thrown Stone Theatre* in Connecticut. Paula felt they were "like-minds" and they saw a future for the stage. So Paula donated the Spiral stage, lights, chairs and sound equipment.



After radiation and steroids 2016

Tragically Paula fell and broke her pelvis in August of 2017 and it was down hill from there. The clinical trial had to be discontinued while her bones healed and pain kept under control. She was never able to walk again. Later she lost the ability to talk.

She spent her final months in a nursing home with Steve constantly at her side. She had visits from many actor friends and students—most notably by *Spiral Theatre Studio* actor and dear friend, Stuart Aion.

Paula died peacefully on July 1, 2018