

# Sometimes I laugh like my sister

## Rebecca Peyton

Actor

Rebecca Peyton's sister Kate, a BBC senior producer, was shot and killed while working in Somalia. Here Rebecca describes why she wanted to create a play about her sister's death, and its impact on audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland last summer.

I am sitting in Martin's favourite restaurant in Lugano, Switzerland. It is our first night party. Tonight has been the culmination of two years' work on our show about my sister's murder, and it has gone down really well with the 25-or-so people in the audience.

What have we done tonight? What have I done? What was I thinking? How am I feeling? I can't speak for Martin (my director and co-writer, whose first forays into producing were organising of the funerals of four of his friends, who all died from AIDS; who has multiple health problems of his own; who had a heart valve replaced even while we were creating the show). Actually, I am so caught up in a maelstrom of emotions that I can barely speak for myself.

### Two deaths

On 9 February 2005 Kate Peyton – my sister – a BBC senior producer with responsibility for Southern Africa, was shot in the back in Mogadishu, Somalia. She was taken to a hospital very nearby. Her blood type was rare and, although it is not part of Somali culture, many people gave blood to try to save her. She was operated on, her spleen removed, but she later died of blood loss without recovering consciousness.

On 25 May 1978 EMI area sales manager Leslie Peyton – my father – was knocked off his pushbike in the Suffolk village where we lived. He was taken to the West Suffolk Hospital in Bury St Edmunds, then to Addenbrooke's Hospital and on to Papworth Hospital, both in Cambridge. His most serious injuries were a punctured heart and lungs; he had no brain injury. Over the days that followed he had several operations and finally died three weeks later, never having regained consciousness from the artificial coma he had been put into.

These are the end-of-life stories of my sister and my father and they, together, maybe explain why I have ended up co-writing and performing a show about my reaction to my sister's murder. Trauma wounds are very unpredictable and hard to heal, but if the medics didn't talk about how they deal with them, no one with these injuries would stand a chance. I feel the same way about emotional trauma: it needs to be talked about.

I was six, my brother 10 and my sister 12 when Dad was



Rebecca Peyton

killed. Mum was 38 – which seemed ancient to me then. Mum made some decisions – the right ones for her – they just came from her gut instinct. One was that she would dedicate at least the next 10 years of her life to her children. Another was that we would talk everything through. There were no holds barred in our household – death, politics, pain. And we would joke about them too.

As kids my brother and sister loathed me. I was talkative, a show-off, shameless and enormously appealing. Kate left home when she was 19 and I was 13. When I was 14 I went to stay with her at Manchester University, where she was studying civil engineering. The trip was the beginning of a love affair. My brother and sister had always had this closeness but suddenly I started to have the love – and respect – of my awesome sister. And she was awesome – a traveller by nature, incredibly competitive, attractive to men, self-contained – so very many qualities I admired and lacked, and she was choosing me as one of her closest friends. Of course, she was also human and could reduce me to spitting frustration.



Kate Peyton in Mozambique

In our time we travelled lots together, always enjoying the company of whichever of our boyfriends were with us; we ran a business; we lived together for a year in a flat that we bought together. We moved heaven and earth to have time together. Her 10 years or so in Africa brought us closer in many ways – intense texting, phoning and (sometimes) emailing, gave us a precious intimacy.

When she died I was dumbstruck. Braced as I was from the age of six for my mother's death, I just wasn't expecting Kate to die. Just as I had longed to follow my father, the yearning to get off this planet was enormous. I was jealous of her for getting out first. Really, it's yet to subside even now. In that instant everything that I hadn't realised I considered to be my future was gone. At the same time I knew that, because my future was gone, if I continue to live, it would have to be for something, and something audacious because, well, who cared?

And so, within days of my sister's murder, I was pretty sure her death would be good for my acting career. There was an element – a very small element – of exhilaration there.

### 101 uses for murdered sister

The first show's working title was *101 Uses for a Murdered Sister*. During the months after Kate died I was working for a

light entertainment agency. I'd previously worked there before becoming an actor. I kept trying to get a plumber to meet me at a property in east London – an hour's journey from my home and three quarters of an hour from work. I had been there to meet him twice and he'd not shown up. So, in earshot of my colleagues, I left him a message that went roughly like this: 'Hi, it's Rebecca. I waited half an hour for you again this morning. The thing is, it's okay if you don't want the work, but I'd be really grateful if you'd tell me if that's the case as my sister was murdered recently and I just don't have the time to keep travelling all over London for you not to show up. Thanks so much. Talk later.' I put the phone down and felt the astonished gaze of the whole office upon me. I shrugged – '101 uses for a murdered sister,' I said.

It worked. He called back within half an hour. Others might say this was a cruel or manipulative thing to do; I say it was honest.

The show started as *The Intransigence of Gas Engineers: a Comedy about My Sister's Murder*, but Martin was never happy with that title, so it became *Sometimes I Laugh Like My Sister* – because sometimes I do, and it sounds odd when I hear it. Together Martin and I made our show about trauma, loss, taboos and how my sister's murder had affected me. Our hope was that, by dealing with the specific detail of my experience, others might

identify, be able to talk about death, would not feel so alone and so helpless in the face of their and others' trauma – nothing too ambitious, then.

So here we are at our first night party: Martin with a pizza, me a salad, and a glass of wine each. We have rehearsals tomorrow morning; we have a second show. It's a pretty quiet affair, this party.

And suddenly it's upon me. All this time, I have been thinking that Rebecca (32) wanted to tell her story to share her experiences. Of course, I did. But all of a sudden I see clearly that it is six-year-old Rebecca who wants to be heard, to be taken seriously.

I'm six years old. I'm in the sitting room at home. It's full of men in dark jackets. The bottoms of their jackets and the pockets are all around me. It's a dense, fabric forest of eye-level jacket hems, with no space for me. That's what I remember of Dad's funeral. That's the only thing I remember – the feelings of incomprehension at this strangest of gatherings stood solid in my house.

I tell Martin this. And we marvel that it could it have been so hidden.

### Edinburgh and after

We did 25 shows in Edinburgh last year. We always said to each other that any reaction would be acceptable. Some days there were gales of laughter. On one day in particular, there was a deathly silence. I like to make people laugh, so it took a great deal of willpower as a writer/performer not to let that silence rattle me. The quietest audiences would often contain the highest proportion of people who, after the show, would come up to me and ardently shake my hand. I'd thank them, and they would disappear back into the Fringe. It was astonishing to me: we had touched them in a way that made them want to let me know.

After nearly every show we would head off for tea, beer or somesuch with members of our audience. We would talk about loss, grief and use the word 'dead' without worrying that we should be using one of the euphemisms so popular among, well, everyone but us. Some folk cried all the way through the show – BBC journalists, people over 60, my recently bereaved 25-year-old flat mate. Others laughed like drains – a 24-year-old friend whose mother had died four weeks previously, my mother, Martin. One day the front-of-house staff approached me before the show to say that a woman in the queue was concerned that she might cry and that this would disturb the performance. I went

out to find her, to explain that any reaction – including leaving the theatre – was utterly acceptable to us.

I meant it. We could not control and nor did we want to, the reactions of all these people. After the show we'd hear story after story, hug, share tears and reflect. I found it all utterly exhausting, but in a great way. One woman thanked me, saying that some of what we had written had helped her grieve for her father. I said what a wonderful thing that was, that Martin and I had dreamed of such a reaction. She then told me her father had died 50 years ago.

And I thought, what a compliment to our show, that this can happen – but how terrible that, for 50 years, this woman had no one close who could say to her the commonplace things our show says about death, and no one to whom she could say what she needed to say. How easy it is to stay isolated, unable to communicate with others about the most important things in life.

## To leave the world a little less lonely than you found it seems to be some kind of achievement

Has it been cathartic? Yes, evidently for very many of the people who saw the show, but not for me. I was giving a structured, crafted performance. It was all about acting, about control. It's the same control I use to stop myself crying on the bus when I see a woman with Kate's haircut or in a meeting when I can't get my point across and I need her help. So, no – no catharsis for me, but six-year-old Rebecca is delighted that so many people found her words of some use. I find it far more exposing not to be able to contain my tears in a supermarket queue than to describe the clothes in which my sister was shot to a group of people who have chosen to listen.

Dad and Kate will always be dead. I will always be six when Dad died. I expect Kate will always be the best friend I've ever had. But rather than the seductive, tempting self-destruction towards which their loss invites me, I have made something to make my mother proud. And something that has forwarded my acting career.

The well of grief runs so deep: at no point did Martin and I think we could cure anything. But to leave the world a little less lonely than you found it seems to be some kind of achievement. ■

*Sometimes I Laugh Like My Sister* is currently touring the UK. For information about forthcoming performances or to contact Rebecca Peyton, visit [www.vitaldigression.org/sometimes.html](http://www.vitaldigression.org/sometimes.html)