WHAT LARA PARKER MEANT TO ME

In memory of Lara, I’d like to take a few minutes to share with all of you what she meant to me as a woman. I was 9 years old when I first saw Lara as Angelique on Dark Shadows. When I saw her for the first time, she took my breath away by her beauty. As David Selby once said she was ‘stunningly beautiful’. That day, I don’t know which came first: being stunned or having my breath taken away or both at the same time. I just knew she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. And, after more than 50 years later, she still is.

I began watching Dark Shadows in 1969 during the 1897 Flashback. In hindsight, I was glad that I had started watching the show during this storyline rather than from the beginning. By this time, Lara had been on the show for a while and had made the character of Angelique more her own. The complex nature of Angelique’s personality had become very apparent and multi-faceted. I immediately connected with her. I saw her as a woman that represented something I not seen and had dared to dream I could be like. A connection was formed.

Over the years, I have met with SO many other girls and women that she touched in much the same way through her portrayal of Angelique. They, too, saw her as a role model in much the same way as well. I believe this is one of the key reasons why Lara’s portrayal of Angelique became such a compelling main character that transcended all expectations and has endured to this day.

Growing up in the 1960s, the women’s liberation movement was in full swing, and women were just beginning to imagine the potential for themselves, with women demanding their right to vote, to be treated as equals, wanting to be valued contributing members of our society. Thoughts of a new kind of fulfillment was on the horizon.

Until then, women trapped in the societal expectations the world had for us. We were expected to be “homemakers”. Getting up at dawn to prepare her husband to go off to work, the kids to school, and expected to perform all the domestic chores each day, taking care of everyone’s needs. Mostly, working women were relegated to mundane jobs with low wages and esteem. At the end of the day, women *really* wanted, to reach their full potential.

This is how I saw my mother and every other woman in my orbit. As I looked around the world, I was frankly scared and dreaded the thought that this would all be my fate as well.

But Angelique changed all that. She represented something else. She was not only beautiful, intelligent, resourceful, but a woman driven by her desire to have what she wanted most-love. She had the power to protect herself and seek retribution against those that hurt her or stood in her way. Her strength and fierce independence combined with her utter femininity and a touch of vulnerability captured my admiration. Taboo on TV at the time, Angelique exuded a sense of sexuality that was missing from Dark Shadows AND taught me that was OK. It really was OK.

I wanted to look like her and be like her in so many ways. And, yes, admittedly I even kind of wanted to have the immense power this character had over people. SHE was my role model. Enthralled, I wondered who was the actress that played Angelique and what SHE was like. Could Lara Parker, in playing this role, be reflecting any of herself that captured many of the characteristics and qualities of Angelique? Needing to know, I searched to find any information or interviews I could get my hands to find out more about this truly intriguing woman. As it turned out, In Lara, I wasn’t disappointed.

Meanwhile, during this time in Lara’s life, she longed to be a professional actress. For a long time, she lived the ritual that most women lived as I have described. Married, two young children at a young age, trying to grab whatever fulfillment and satisfaction she could from any acting work she could do in the remaining time she had each day. However, she knew her full potential, ultimate personal fulfillment, her dreams and desires for more-- eluded her.

Enduring no longer, all of that changed when Lara decided to take a chance to go to NYC in a last-ditch effort to try and make her dreams a reality. So, Lara set off to NYC on a tight budget and a limited amount of time to make it h0appen. Fortunately, for all of us, within two weeks of her arrival in NY, she landed the part of Angelique on Dark Shadows. Jonathan Frid described Lara as a ‘perfectionist’. How true that was. And she was everything that I admired and hoped she’d be.

In Lara Parker, I found that she was so much more than Angelique. Suddenly, my young mind opened up to the possibilities set by her example and philosophy. Could this 9-year-old girl dare hope that she would be able to reach for her own goals and dreams too? I could begin to see the image of what we now refer to as a “glass ceiling” forming at the top of my little world that I’ve carried with me since. Could it get ANY better?

To paraphrase Lara in 1970: *‘I believe that it is unfair for a woman not to be able to choose the kind of life she wants. My career is an extension of my life.’ ‘I don’t believe that I’ve been selfish in pursuing a career, I believe that my family is better off for it’*

After Dark Shadows, I continued to follow Lara in everything she did. I was finally able to meet her for the first time in the late 1970s. By then, I was just out of high school and wanted to become an actress just like her.

A few years later when I saw her again, I related to her how much she inspired me career -wise. She said: “But how could I have inspired you? You didn’t become an actress”. I replied that she was the one person who inspired a girl that was shy, introverted and afraid to even raise my hand in a classroom to answer a question I knew the answer to. It was because of her that I had the courage to join the drama club, to audition and win parts in school plays.

Because of her, I was able to actually get up in front of an audience to speak in order to succeed in the career paths I had chosen in politics and in the financial services industry. If it hadn’t been for the inspiration I gathered from her, I would have never gotten there.

By the late 1990’s I found that Lara reinvented herself as a woman with the publication of her first book, “Angelique’s Descent”. To think that there was a book that was not only about my favorite fictional character, but to be written by the actress that played her was bliss.

But my thoughts focused on the courage it must have taken her pursue a to a new career focus and passion, brought back to me, how special she was and how she, once again, inspired me when I changed careers in my own life.

During one conversation in 2010, Lara was so encouraging when I told her I had been accepted into law school but had fallen in love and gotten married instead, she told me how she had gone back to school to earn a Master’s Degree in Creative Writing when she was in her 60’s and that it was never too late to do the same. If, and when I decide to pursue law, it will be because of HER words, HER encouragement and HER example.

Finally, in July of 2023, just 3 short months before she was to leave our world, we talked we discussed how women had been treated in the workplace over the years and the “Me too” movement and how it had affected us in our own experiences in dealing with sexual harassment and discrimination.

She then shared with me her intent to write a new book, that would NOT be about Dark Shadows, but about what it was like to work in the entertainment field as a woman. The stories within would be real but told as fiction. I told her it was the EXACT book I had hoped she would someday write and to have her experiences, would be such a valuable insight for other women. I was elated.

She told me she had already picked out a photo for the cover. To illustrate, she drew a picture for me to show what she had in mind. It was clear that she had plotted out her strategy for writing the book, having calculated approximately how many pages each story needed to be, given the anticipated length of such a book.

I will never forget this conversation and that fact that she chose to discuss this with me. The promise of such a book written by her gave me hope that it would someday become a reality. However, time was short for her, and she had much to do…

In summary, going back to the days of her time on Dark Shadows. Though she was indeed what we all referred to as a “women’s libber” she wasn’t a spokesperson or out in the streets advocating for women’s rights, though the passion was certainly inside of her.

She had just arrived in NYC to fulfill her desire to become a professional actress and she did. Lara had no idea that any of her choices, actions, motivations or ideals were influencing anyone.

She didn’t get up in the morning on her way to the studio where Dark Shadows was filmed to intentionally inspire girls, women, or anyone. She didn’t think about how having this one pivotal role in her life would inspire anyone. She was caught up in learning her lines, blocking her marks so we would be on camera, running lines with fellow actors, hair, makeup and a final dress rehearsal before going on air and hoping against hope that all would go successfully. Then, at the end of the day, she rushed home to her family or to yet another rehearsal for another ongoing project she was working on. She was just living her life.

You see, she had no idea that her portrayal of Angelique or in who she was as Lara Parker, would be of any deep meaning to others. There was no intentional motivation. The lasting IMPACT she had on so many simply came from Lara just being Lara.