

Annie People



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ANNIE - THEATREFEST AT NEW JERSEY'S MONTCLAIR STATE COLLEGE

by Tricia Trozzi

When I heard that Theatrefest, the professional Equity Theater in residence at Montclair State College (my alma mater!) would be doing Annie for two weeks from June 25th through July 7th, I approached them with the offer to display part of my collection of memorabilia in the lobby. They accepted, and I set up over 100 of my 850-or-so items in three large glass cases. I was very happy to do this, because half the fun of having a collection like this is sharing it with other people! My display was a "hit" with the audiences too; little kids pressed their noses to the glass to get a better look at the dolls and toys, and older folks reminisced at seeing the theme music to the 1930s radio show and the antique comic strips ("Look, honey, the Daily News was only 5 cents in 1926!"). I had fun watching people enjoy my display--seeing what items would attract someone's attention, and how some people would give it a disinterested glance while others would be studying every item.

I was pleased to be associated with this production in this way, especially when it turned out to be the finest Annie I had seen in literally years! If I see a performance that makes the lines and the jokes seem as if I've never heard them before and makes me forget I've seen the show so many times--THAT is a good show! Half the cast were members of Equity (the professional actors' union) and the rest Equity candidates. Since this was such an outstanding production, I saw all 16 performances of the run! (This brought my grand total up to 86.) What I liked about seeing the show every night was seeing the variations in the performances: the audiences, for example--how some laughed a lot, some not so much, some matinees were almost 50% kids; and the different line readings of the actors, for example, some nights Rooster would say "This ain't exactly Buckingham Palace" with so much velocity on the "P" right in Miss Hannigan's face that she would do a bit of wiping her face clean. Or Warbucks' "After New York, every place else is Bridgeport/Hackensack/Secaucus/Jersey City." He said Jersey City the most, which got a big laugh, but to me it was not the best choice as it then killed the laugh in the next scene when Lily St. Regis says she is from Jersey City. I also got to see the occasional mistakes that happen such as a

(plastic) champagne glass falling apart at the toast to Annie Mudge. Mistakes like these don't make a bad production; it just shows that it's live theater and anything can happen. Once the phone on Warbucks' desk rang for Bernard Baruch's call, sounding not like the normal telephone ring but coming out as "The big red letters stand for the Jell-O family" (the next sound cue for Miss Hannigan's radio). Then one night the Cabinet got the "A New..." lines crossed up (only

noticeable to somebody who has the play memorized), and the final night Annie entered without the note in her pocket and so had no paper to pull out when Molly asked, "Read me your note." (On a more personal note, I found that seeing the show every night got me so attuned to the lines that I couldn't hear any words in "real life" during the day that were even remotely similar to a line in Annie without my mind cueing up the next line!). Seeing sixteen performances allowed me to study every element of the production in more detail.

Director and choreographer Steven Minning showed a good understanding and respect for the material in an honest, realistic, Broadway-style presentation. The pacing was great and the staging and choreography appropriate. And he used "funny papers" instead of "next thing you know she'll be in the movies" and replaced Grace's "cheese" references (community theaters have absolutely no idea what that's about although we do; see AP #23, page 6) with the "champagne/I get to call the bootlegger" variation I'd heard before.



6 foot floor cases at TheatreFest

One of the interesting things that happens when you become so familiar with the show is that you can see things with a more critical eye than that of a newspaper reviewer, who is primarily concerned with whether or not it's good theater. We fans can get much more specific in defining what's right for this particular musical. For example, one newspaper review implied something about "rudimentary choreography." But as Annie fans we can see that a number like "It's The Hard-Knock Life" works better when it's kept small but intense. Adding things that may have worked in the movie version, like gymnastics and extra dancing, generally don't enhance the effectiveness of the number on the stage. "We'd Like To Thank You" is also a lyric number, and a bunch of fancy steps and kick lines would be inappropriate for it. This song works best with minimal motion, and the movements that are done are kept sharp and small with everyone perfectly in sync--as when the Hooverville-ites point all over on "for really showing us the way." I hadn't seen a Hooverville this good in a very long time. In "NYC"--what I think must be the hardest number in the show to choreograph--Mr. Minning kept the various New Yorkers busy but not distracting, so that in sixteen times I could notice somebody else's actions.

The orchestra used trumpet, violin, percussion, three synthesizers, and piano. The synthesizers could cover all the parts effectively, but never sound quite the same to me as having all "real" instruments (which is almost unheard of in community theater anyway). The sets, costumes, and props were acquired as a package from the Candlewood Playhouse in Connecticut, which had recently done the show. Props were all appropriate (the Wacky dummy had a huge cowlick like Alfalfa in "The Little Rascals" and the guy playing Fred McCracken did his hair

to match!). The costumes were the Theoni V. Aldredge designs for the most part, so they must have been rented from the sets of costumes used for Broadway and the National Tours. One variation was instead of "Why, Grace, that's a very pretty dress" being black with a wide white collar, an elegant purple dress was used.

The sets were criticized in one newspaper review and praised in another. I found most of them effective except for the Warbucks Art Gallery ("Something Was Missing") drop, of which the classic painting reproductions were slightly cartoony. The Orphanage was appropriately dreary, and Hooverville had an excellent 59th Street Bridge which gave a real feeling of depth. "NYC" used an accordion-like row of buildings wheeling slowly across the stage. "Flying" drops and set pieces made the set changes take less time than the underscoring music allows. I hadn't seen that in a long time! (The way Annie was designed on Broadway, flying set pieces are absolutely necessary to keep the set changes from slowing down the pace of the show; however, the treadmills use on Broadway I've never seen duplicated anywhere.) The lighting was very good, notably in NYC, and in general, I thought the lighting made up for any shortcomings the sets may have had. Unfortunately the sound system was the weakest element of the production. The unpredictability of body mikes caused occasional feedbacks and pops, which were brought under control by the second week. It was too bad that errors with the sound were so obvious to the audience. But, that's live theater.

If all the technical aspects were taken away, the performances could have been on a bare stage by worklights and this still would have been a noteworthy show! Erin Torpey was cute-as-a-button as Annie. Her long blonde hair was stuffed under one of the very few good-looking straight-red-hair wigs I've ever seen. Her body language was also appealing and appropriate, as in one bit I don't think I have ever seen before. At the very end of "Something Was Missing" Annie stepped away from Warbucks, looking out and fingering her locket. Erin

showed Annie's emotional decision of her giving up the search for her parents and accepting Warbucks at the last notes of the song. A strong singer, she hit the D flat that begins the Cabinet "Tomorrow" perfectly almost every night (this is an extremely difficult thing to do--to pull a note out of the air and start singing a cappella before the orchestra comes in). If there's one time



Wall case display

when an Annie is going to break into tears for real, it's when performing the "Maybe" reprise in Act II on closing night. Erin was crying so hard she could barely sing, making this moment extremely moving. But, a real professional, she pulled herself together to complete the scene. Her line delivery was also right on target throughout the show.

The Orphans, Missy Goldberg as Molly, Rose Adesso as Pepper, La Shonda Hunt as Duffy, Jennifer Ravalli as July, Tera-Lee Pollin as Tessie, and Karen Klein as Kate, were very talented and all had a chance to shine. "Fully Dressed" was a near-showstopper and "Hard-Knock Life" was suitably tough.

As Miss Hannigan, Carolyn Marlow impressed the newspaper reviewers as being

too laid-back. I think the reviewers are too accustomed to Miss Hannigans who are "fresh hams"! I found Miss Marlow to be thoroughly real, a quality I don't often find in community theater Miss Hannigans. You could see where her emotions were coming from, and it's much more difficult to play her this way, and I think it was done well. She also did some different reading on certain lines that I liked very much, and sang "Little Girls" with zeal.

Bill Berloni's Beau, who had played Sandy in Annie 2: Miss Hannigan's Revenge in Washington, D.C. with Danielle Findley has been doing Sandy throughout the country and was handled here by Lane Haverly. Beau's best bit is his first entrance, as he lied down in front of Annie, rolls over on his back and rolls back to her as the audience goes "a-awww!" He was a scene stealer, all right.

Grace Farrell was played by Danette Cuming, who was one of the best Graces I have ever seen. She caught every nuance in her lines and brought a real joy and elegance to the role. The subplot of Grace's affection for Warbucks was carefully delineated, and her relationship with Annie showed warmth. In the scene where Grace brings Miss Hannigan the news that Warbucks wants to adopt Annie, there was excellent comedic timing between Miss Cuming and Miss Marlow. I was very impressed with Miss Cuming's performance, which included some super soprano high Bs and Cs (you don't hear these every day either).

To play our favorite billionaire, William Solo shaved his head for the two-week run. The reviewers in the papers noted how much depth he gave to his characterization. He gave excellent inflections to his lines--some that I had never even considered before--and his facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice added to his exceptional portrayal. Mr. Solo clearly demonstrated the softening of the Warbucks heart, as in the end of Act I ("What a thing to occur...") which I found very moving. His singing of "Something Was Missing" was uncommonly fine, and "I Don't Need Anything But You" was a joyous moment.

Robert Fitch is THE Rooster Hannigan, and that's all there is to it. You can't know what the character of Rooster is really like unless you've seen the man who created the role back at Annie's beginning. He has no equal in appearing positively rubber-limbed in "Easy Street," and no one else uses sleight-of-hand to make a coin and a switchblade disappear. The Ralph Mudge characterization is carefully drawn, so we can see the break when he bumps into Grace again when leaving the Mansion. Ruth Gottschall was a match for Mr. Fitch as Lily St. Regis, dancing with great enthusiasm and having a lot of fun with the role. Her Shirley Mudge also was played very straight and effectively.

In the supporting roles, Leonard Drum was a suitably reserved Drake, and Ryan Hilliard looked very much like FDR. His Cabinet "Tomorrow" was sung with great gusto. The entire Ensemble all performed well and had their moments to shine as individuals. Bert Healy did something interesting: whatever day it actually was, was the day he used for the Oxydent Hour Of Smiles. At first I thought it was a cute idea, but then I realized that it can't be any other night but Thursday, since the meeting at the White House with President Roosevelt is on Friday, and the President mentions it was "last night" when Annie was on the radio. Oh, well! I bet no one else in the audience noticed the discrepancy except me! There were some very nice harmonies and dance work done by the Ensemble throughout the show.

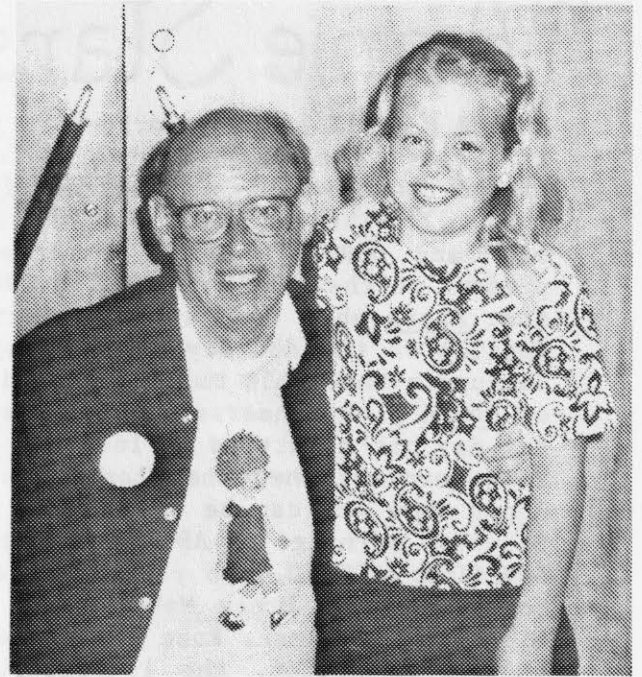
It was great to see this production give Annie the first-class professional treatment it deserves, so bravo to the cast, crew, and the staff of Theatrefest for doing such a great job and making a very memorable Annie.



By Leonard Stein © Tribune Media Services, Inc.



(above) Cynthia Moser with Robert Fitch (Rooster)



Jon with Erin Torpey (out of costume)

Photo by Cynthia Moser



(left) Tricia with Danette Cuming (Grace Farrell)

Tricia with Erin Torpey (in costume as Annie)

(below) 1. to r., Tera-Lee Pollin (Tessie), La Shonda Hunt (Duffy), Missy Goldberg (Molly), Erin Torpey (Annie), Rose Adesso (Pepper), Jennifer Ravalli (July), Karen Klein (Kate)



Photo by Mrs. Sue Torpey

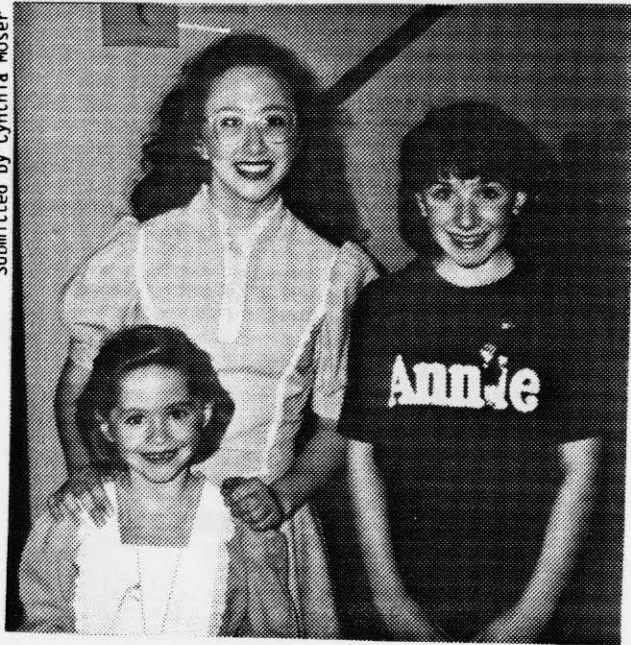


Photo by Mrs. Sue Torpey

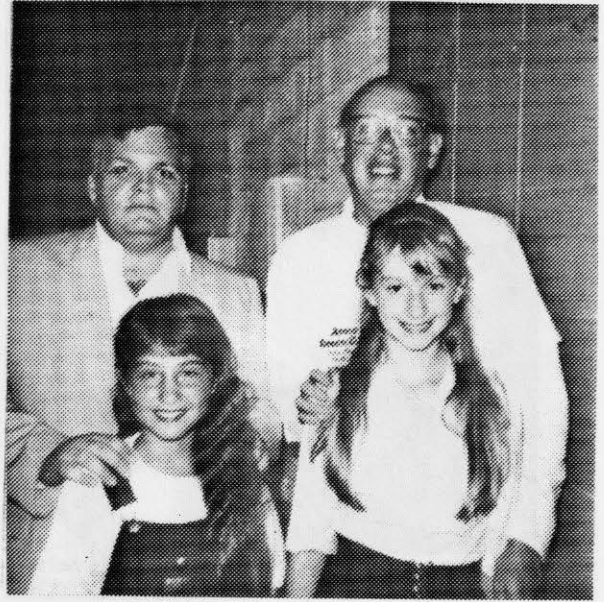
★ Annie Stars Since Annie... ★

ANDREA McARDLE sang "Tomorrow" in Give My Regards To Broadway, a gala salute to 125 years of musical theater at Carnegie Hall on June 17th. "...Andrea McArdle slayed the crowd with 'Tomorrow' (someone must find this young woman a Broadway show...)"--Theater Week, July 8, 1991. LAURIE BEECHMAN sang "Look To The Rainbow" and DOROTHY LOUDON performed her Ballroom Eleven O'Clock number. Also present at the gala were MARTIN CHARNIN and CHARLES STROUSE....From the Theatre-fest Annie show (see article beginning on page 1): ERIN TORPEY can be seen as Jessica on the ABC daytime soap opera One Life To Live. We who saw Annie were fortunate that this multi-talented 10-year-old was able to squeeze in two weeks of Annie plus rehearsals in between soap opera taping. Erin had to use her Monday day off to attend on-location filming in New York state and even had taping some mornings when she played Annie at night. Another young actress from that Annie show who can be seen on nationwide TV is MISSY GOLDBERG, who can be seen Saturday mornings on ABC-TV in the "AM Posse" clips which air between cartoons. And ROSE ADDESSO, who played Pepper, went right from Annie to Atlantic City to participate in Dream Makers '91, a large revue featuring singing and dancing kids from the area. Rose was in several numbers in the revue, and, judging from audience reaction, the 11-year-old's singing of "Fame" with the entire cast dancing behind her, was the hit of the show. Singing and dancing talent runs in the Addesso family; her sisters Carmela, 8, and Priscilla, 5 (the youngest in the show), each sang a Connie Francis oldie in the show and thrilled us in the audience as well....JULIE STEVENS recently graduated from New York University (NYU) and former Annie friends ALYSON KIRK and THERESA DIANE were on hand to help celebrate the occasion....LAUREN GAFFNEY was superb in her show The Good Times Are Killing Me in New York, and she was praised by numerous reviewers for her feeling for comedy. The show has been so successful that it has been extended a couple of times so far and the producers are looking around for a bigger theater. Also in the show was former Grace Farrell RUTH WILLIAMSON.... LAURIE BEECHMAN has released an album called Listen To My Heart on the Excelsior, Ltd. label....HILARY HERNANDEZ starred as Scout in To Kill A Mockingbird for Pontiac Theatre IV in Pontiac, Michigan. Annie fan and PT IV's Anne Of Green Gables director JOHN TONNER made his acting debut as the Judge, and Atticus was played by DENNIS MARTELL, who played Oliver Warbucks opposite KELLEY CRAYCRAFT a few years ago at Mt. Clemens, MI. Two former members of PT IV's Annie back in 1988, DON DeLAIRE (FDR) and DENNIS BARBERI (Drake), were in Mockingbird as well....LAUREN MITCHELL is now playing Alaura in the Los Angeles production of City Of Angels....CAROL-ANN PLANTÉ is on hiatus from Harry And The Hendersons this summer but continues to do benefits around Los Angeles with other young TV stars. She will begin taping again in September, and about October 7th an episode of Harry will air centered around Carol-Ann's character, Sarah. She taped it at the beginning of the summer, and the best part is she will sing on it.... DOROTHY LOUDON is starring in Thornton Wilder's The Matchmaker playing a limited run Off-Broadway in NYC in August....BARBARA SIMON, wife of CHARLES STROUSE, choreographed Annie at Candlewood Playhouse in New Fairfield, CT in May and June....DEBBIE GIBSON is touring around the East Coast this summer with a stop in Toronto. She played the Sands in Atlantic City for three performances in late July. It is hard to believe with all that Debbie has done over the last few years she is not yet 21; she will reach that landmark age on August 31st.... MARTHA BYRNE starred in the movie Pink Lightning on the Fox network in July.... Birthdays: LARA BERK, 19 on July 12; TARA CARNES, 21 on July 16; DANIELLE FINDLEY, 13 on July 18; LAURA BAKER, 19 on July 22; SARAH BETHANY REYNOLDS, 18 on July 27; PATRICIA ANN PATTS, 24 on July 31; KIA GOODWIN, 18 on August 2; KIMBERLEE DAVIS, 19 on August 7; KIMBERLY STERN, 17 on August 12; THOMAS MEEHAN, 62 on August 14; KRISTEN SCHMITZ, 21 on August 15; ROBIN IGNICO, 21 on August 19, JENNIFER BLAIRE, 21 on August 20; ALLISON HARVEY, 18 on August 30.

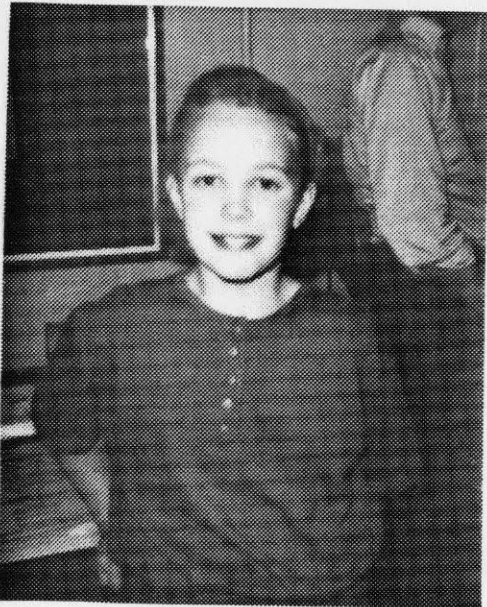
Submitted by Cynthia Moser



Katie Newman, Laura Farkas, Julie Flynn
Cheaper By The Dozen
Salem, OH



Jon and Melissa DeLaire congratulate Hilary Hernandez
(left) and John Tonner at To Kill A Mockingbird
Pontiac, Michigan, June 1991



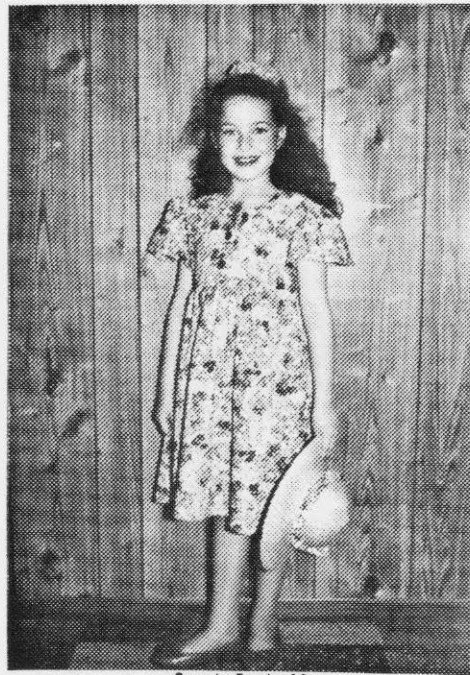
Lauren Gaffney
The Good Times Are Killing Me
New York City, June 1991



Jackie Severns
The Wizard Of Oz
Alliance, OH



Rebecca Bahling, Melissa DeLaire, and Holly Smith came to see Pontiac Theatre IV's To Kill A Mockingbird in Pontiac, Michigan in June. Melissa and Holly were Orphans opposite Rebecca's title role in Annie for PT IV three years ago. (so was Sarah, to the right)——>



Sarah Barkoff
Currently in Les Miserables
3rd National Tour

Jon Merrill
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