

Upstaged by Love

For these theater folks,
"A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Altar"

By JOEL SAMBERG

When Dan Pavone auditioned for the part of Captain von Trapp in "The Sound of Music" at the Windham Theatre Guild in Willimantic, there was only one thing on his mind. Not love, not marriage, not a brand-new baby carriage. What mattered was getting the part.

As an audition exercise, the director asked him to say whatever came to mind. Affecting the persona of a stern naval officer, he turned to the actress beside him and loudly bellowed, "Who are you?!"

The actress, Annette LaCasse, who had already been cast as Maria, was shocked by his ad-libbed snarl.

Three years later, they were married.

It happens more times than we may think. Many couples in Connecticut start out on one stage and end up on quite another. While there are no official statistics, they're not hard to find. What's more, it seems as if Connecticut's stage spouses really seem to have the clues to marital success.

"Know that your first responsibility is to your family," offers Annette, underscoring the first of two common denominators mentioned by almost all of these theater couples. The other is to learn how to communicate well. "Also, do as much as you can together," she adds, "but don't be afraid to take a step back from time to time and let your spouse be the star."

Annette, an accounting manager at UConn, and Dan, who owns an awards and engraving business, live in Mansfield and still look for opportunities to perform together. But with three children now in the mix, it's not always as easy as it was during their von Trapp days. "Everyone knew there was chemistry when we did that show," Annette recalls. "It was obvious when we kissed on stage."

Ah, chemistry. That's what inevitably kicks it off—though sometimes, like a good play, it develops slowly, with one dramatic scene building on another. Take the case of Kate and Jim Buffone.

Kate (née Samberg) was a recent college graduate in Avon who had to decide what her next move would be. She sought a pleasurable diversion before making that choice

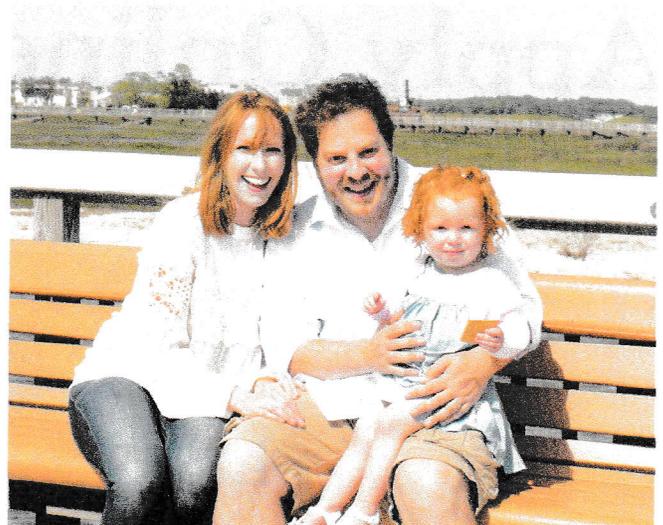
and settled on auditioning for community theatre. A skilled improv performer who had already acted in many plays, Kate won the part of a secretive nun in "Drinking Habits" at the Phoenix Stage Company in Naugatuck (which has since moved to Oakville). Jim, an IT manager who had performed on several Connecticut stages, stopped by the theater one night to drop off something he had borrowed.

"Kate was on stage, in her street clothes, wearing a nun's habit. That seemed a little bizarre," Jim admits. Despite that, he was unable to stop watching her rehearse from the wings. "I guess that meant either there was something about Kate that was appealing, or I had a secret attraction to nuns."

A few months later, Jim and Kate auditioned for "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play" at the Phoenix. Kate won the role of the floozy Violet, and Jim was cast as George Bailey. They began to hang out together after rehearsals.

"He made me laugh," Kate says. "Sometimes he said things that were a little inappropriate in a funny way, which I found refreshing. And even though he was the lead, he never acted pretentious or obnoxious, like some people I've known in the past."

She started to come to rehearsals early just to have more



Kate and Jim Buffone with their daughter Ella.



Amy and Ray Michaud

time to be with him.

As for Jim, he was not actively looking for a relationship, mostly because he was ending one that had been something of a challenge.

“One night backstage,” he shares, “when Kate was at the far side of the room, I wearily mumbled how I’d love to find someone really special. An older woman in the cast leaned over to me and whispered, ‘No need. You’ve got one right over there.’ I looked at her and smiled.”

Kate and Jim are now married and living in Milford. They have two daughters, a two-year-old and a two-month-old. They, too, attribute the strength of their marriage to putting their love of family above their love of theater. But soon they’ll be ready to get back on stage – maybe this time to play a married couple.

That doesn’t always happen, of course. The first time



Roxie and John Quinn

Roxie Floyd and John Quinn acted together, she played a would-be stripper and he played her would-be stepfather. The show was “Gypsy,” at the Thomaston Opera House. Roxie, now a project manager for Aetna, was only 21 at the time. John, a machinist, was 36. Now married for more than a decade, they recently did another “Gypsy” at the Warner Theater in Torrington, with John once again as Herbie, but this time with Roxie as the inimitable Mama Rose.

“The first time I saw John, at the audition, I didn’t know him at all since he wasn’t part of my circle of theater friends,” Roxie recalls. “But I was impressed because he showed up with his two children. That seemed really sweet. Then he auditioned and I was impressed again because he was so good.”

He was there with his kids because it was his daughter

who wanted to audition – not him. “In fact,” John admits, “in my previous marriage I practically wasn’t even allowed to do theater!” Something compelled him to hop on stage and give it his best shot. “My daughter was shocked. She never even knew I could sing.”

Rehearsals progressed. Love blossomed.

“I was a little more reticent than him at first,” Roxie says. “After all, he was older and had children, and I wasn’t sure if it was just a showmance, or the real thing.”

Showmance is one of those terms that every theater couple knows. If two performers are sad to be apart when a show is over, then it’s not a showmance.

For Roxie and John, it wasn’t a showmance - it was true love.

What’s more, they found value in their romance beyond the fun they had on stage. John, who admits to being obstinate at times, learned to tamp down the obstinacy thanks to Roxie’s influence. He’s thankful for that. And Roxie is grateful for John’s candor. When they first met, for example, she wasn’t confident enough to make some important life decisions. “He actually yelled at me – politely – to stand up for myself and be strong,” Roxie says. “That was a good lesson.”

Speaking of lessons, after a patent paralegal named Cathy Wilcox sang a song called “Learn Your Lessons Well” at the Act 2 Theater in New Haven, she discovered that love

can bloom on stage. The show was “Godspell,” and Cathy thought the man playing Judas was a warm, sweet and affectionate guy. That was Kevin Sturmer, now a creative director for a market research firm. He thought she was just as sweet.

“She was very nice,” Kevin says. “She even gave back rubs to all the cast members.” (Cathy has a degree in physical therapy.)

A year later, in a production of “Man of La Mancha” in which Cathy played, among other roles, a Spanish prisoner and Kevin a mule driver, the lead actor stopped the curtain calls and asked the audience to halt their applause. Kevin walked over to Cathy, took a ring out of his pocket, and proposed. As he recalls, “A woman in the front row leaned over to her friend and said, ‘Is this for real?’”

It certainly was.

Before that happened, neither was entirely certain that a relationship was a great idea. Though rehearsals went well, Kevin didn’t want to do anything that might change the cast dynamic before the show opened. But it was an impossible dream the two of them made possible with common sense and mutual sensibility.

They’ve done about 20 shows together since then. Now they have a special-needs child, which naturally has taken theater out of their family spotlight because of the enormous amount of time it takes to care for him. But here, too, a

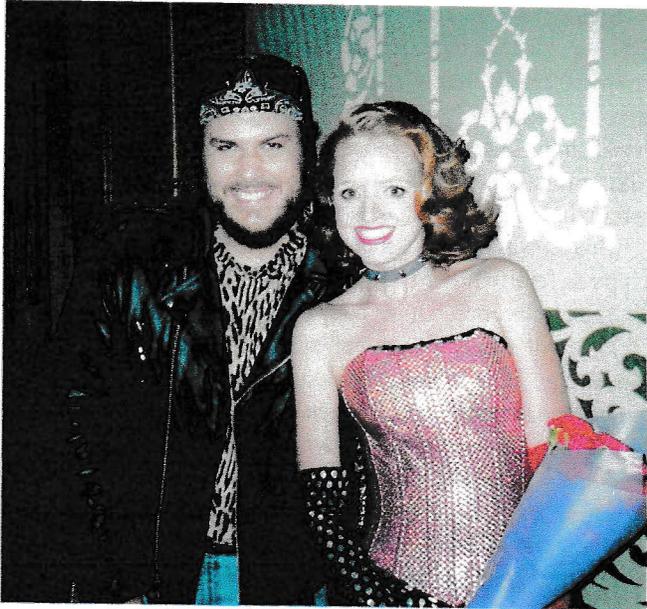


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Cathy and Kevin Sturmer



Jim and Kate Buffone

theatrical intuition and musical background come in handy for Cathy and Kevin from time to time, if only for their ability to put on little extemporaneous shows that elicit a few extra smiles and laughs from their child.

“Life is short,” Cathy says. “If you find someone you have a connection with, go for it.” From the day they became engaged (while covered in stage mud), that’s just what they’ve been doing.

But it’s not always acting that brings couples together. Robin Frome and Stacy-Lee Erickson met doing a series of short plays collectively called “Almost, Maine” at TheatreWorks New Milford, half of which Robin directed and in which Stacy performed. At one point he gave her a direction that involved running up a narrow stairway behind the stage. “Not a chance!” she shouted in no uncertain

terms. That’s when he fell in love.

Robin, the artistic director for the Sherman Playhouse, and Stacy, a customer service representative for a technology firm, confirm they have a lot of common interests outside of theater, which they feel is what makes their marriage work.

Neither Sharon nor Stephen Houk are actors, but they still could win an award for the most theatrical performance by a theater couple about to get married.

Sharon is the production manager for the Warner Theater in Torrington. Stephen is a manager at nearby Taylor Rentals. After a production of “A View from the Bridge,” Sharon (then Wilcox) needed as much help as she could get because the set was enormous and had to be taken apart quickly. Stephen volunteered – and that was the beginning





Sharon and Steve Houk

of a beautiful friendship. Certainly Sharon was attracted to him, but also readily admits that his competence with tools was the dealmaker!

She says she's consumed by theater. For her, art doesn't imitate life; they are one and the same. So when she saw that Stephen seemed not just to understand, but also to truly respect and appreciate that passion, she knew she had found a life partner.

But the partnership came about only because Stephen did something sneaky behind her back.

The Warner was doing a festival of short plays. Stephen privately wrote one of his own, borrowing and modifying a few lines and situations from a play on which he and Sharon had worked the year before. He had it cast and directed without her knowledge. Then, on one of the performance nights, he slipped the play into the night's agenda.

Stephen and Sharon watched from the lighting booth at the back of the theater. There were several clues in the story that made Sharon realize the characters on stage were actually stand-ins for the two of them. When the actor got down on his knees to propose to the actress, he stopped talking for a moment to allow Stephen a chance to do it for real up in the booth. Then the characters finished the scene.

Sharon was stunned, mesmerized, thrilled – and perfectly happy to let life imitate art.

Today, the couple lives happily in Goshen.

Amy Allen doesn't act, either, but that didn't stop her and Raymond Michaud from taking on the real-life role of husband and wife. The Darien Arts Center was doing "Getting Away with Murder," where Amy was on the production management team. (She's now its executive director.) The lead dropped out suddenly and the producer recommended Raymond, a member of the Actors Equity Association. Amy knew that the theater didn't have the budget for a professional and was reluctant to cast him. But she did anyway. A few chance meetings later, they realized they belonged together.

Raymond, who mixes theater with his work in the financial services sector, met Amy later in life, and both felt more secure in who they were than many other couples in similar situations. For one thing, they knew the value of allocating enough time to truly understand one another. "Like it is for good acting, listening is what's really important for a good marriage," Raymond says.

With that rule firmly in play, all of these stage partners have gotten to know each other so well that nobody has ever had to say, "Who are you?" 

