

Moraga Woman Always in the Wings

By Cathy Dausman



Kathy Ferber looks over a scrapbook from the early 1950s. Ferber travelled with her mother for three years during her mother's performances as Adelaide in *Guys & Dolls*. Photo Cathy Dausman

Kathy Ferber remembers always being "in the wings," immersed in a whole family of theater people. "Theaters were my playground," she said. They still are. Ferber has acted in Walnut Creek productions of Contra Costa Music Theater, Diablo Light Opera Company, Crossroads and Festival Opera, and she was nominated for a Shellie for her role as Mrs. Fezziwig in the Lafayette Town Hall production of "Scrooge."

By day, the Moraga resident works at California State, East Bay. By night, she could be Mrs. Henry Higgins, Mrs. Fezziwig, the "Our Town" stage manager, the minister's wife in "Footloose," Aunt March in "Little Women," or in "The Sound of Music" as Sister Berthe, singing "How Do You Solve a Problem like Maria?"

Just days ago, Ferber relinquished Sister Berthe's habit. This performance, like so many before, was a loving tribute to her talented family, especially her mother, actress Pamela Britton.

Ferber's stage heritage began in earnest when her grandmother Ethel Owen became a radio soap opera actress in shows including "Ma Perkins," "Helen Trent" and "Suspense!" A WW I widow with an elocution degree from Northwestern University, Owen sought the work to support her three children. "She was so versatile!" Ferber said.

Owen strongly discouraged Ferber's mother from becoming an actress; yet she made her way to New York City in 1943 and found voice work as Jackie Gleason's mother-in-law on "The Honeymooners" radio show.

Ferber's mother chose Pamela Britton as her stage name. Britton au-

ditioned for a role in the original theater production of "Oklahoma!" and became an understudy for Celeste Holm's Ado Annie character, later assuming the role.

MGM Studios discovered Britton and brought her to Hollywood as a contract player, where she performed in movies opposite Frank Sinatra, Gene Kelly and Kathryn Grayson in "Anchors Aweigh" and Edmond O'Brien in "DOA." Britton was back on Broadway in 1947, playing Meg in "Brigadoon."

About that time the married Britton found she was expecting her only child. When Ferber was 5, her mother was cast as Adelaide in a national travelling production of "Guys & Dolls." Britton brought Ferber along and the pair crisscrossed the U.S. while mother performed for three years. The show ran for six months at San Francisco's Curran Theater and mother and daughter lived at the Clift Hotel. Ferber remembers dashing up and down the alley connecting the Curran and Geary Theaters to watch performances at one or the other.

Ferber learned the "Guys & Dolls" script so well watching from the wings she could chide actors for missing lines or cues. When Ferber became a student at UC Berkeley, she took some theater classes. Still she decided not to become a full-time performer for the sake of her children.

"I'm not going to make [acting] a career," she said. "I just like doing it." But once her sons went off to college she began auditioning for roles in regional theater.

Early on, Ferber was in the chorus of "Brigadoon." "It was a tribute to my Mom," she said. After that, the die was cast: Ferber was addicted.

She auditioned every year for one or two shows, dedicating six to eight weeks for rehearsals and four or five weeks for performances per show. She credits her "understanding and kind" husband Stan Ferber for allowing her to indulge in her love of theater. She still relishes being behind the scenes.

"Nothing is more fascinating than to watch a show come together technically," Ferber said, "watching sound, light, set, orchestra and costume crews weave their magic and turn the show into a beautiful piece of art. Every [live] show is different and the audience energizes the actors."

The Ferber showbiz legacy continues with sons Mark and Alan, professional musicians who've played for Broadway shows. "Alan has even been [in theaters] where his grandma played," Ferber said excitedly. She also loves "talking shop" with son Michael and watching her granddaughter, the upcoming fifth generation of Ferber theater people, perform.

"We could become the von Trapp family!" Ferber exclaimed.

The show, indeed, must go on...



Kathy Ferber (right) joins fellow actress Krissy Dorn of Orinda in costume for *The Sound of Music*. Photo courtesy Kathy Ferber

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