

Staten Island Advance
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Less \$\$ + extra work = More joy
By Michael J. Fressola

STATEN ISLAND, NY — Not so long ago, Susan Fenley was running a lucrative public relations operation near Washington D.C. There was freelance work as an acting/public speaking coach and regular calls for acting jobs. Sounds like a nice life.

Somehow it wasn't enough, so she made some changes. She headed for New York in 1999, eventually settling in New Brighton. Today, she runs Sundog Theatre, the professional St. George-based company that stages shows, commissions new plays and runs an in-school arts program.

She has more work, bigger headaches and less income than she had years ago in DC. "I should have my head examined," she said last week. But she's happy.

Sundog will begin its 10th season in the fall, a remarkable achievement considering the expiration dates on most new performing arts companies.

It's grown. New shows are in the works. "The World in My Hands: The Inspiring Helen Keller Story," an original musical by Louane Davis and Susan Mondzak, will open Feb. 13 in the Music Hall at Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden.

A new play about noted early photographer and lifelong Islander Alice Austen (1866-1952) will debut in the fall. An annual project, "Scenes From the Staten Island Ferry," an evening of short new plays that the company commissions and presents every year, returns in April. The company produces an expanding multi-disciplinary in-school arts education (music, visual art theater and dance) program in 12 to 15 local schools..

Little of this world— administrating, fund-raising, teaching, grants-writing — is exactly what Ms. Fenley had in mind as a small girl in front of a TV set, drawn to the clowns like Abbot and Costello, Martha Raye, The Three Stooges. She's not complaining.

ACTING BUG BITES

Ms. Fenley is a Westerner, born in Arizona, raised in Las Vegas and schooled in California. A happy tomboy as a small girl, she slipped later on into a prolonged shy phase. Her mom nudged her into an acting class that pulled her out of her shell and (arguably) determined the rest of her life.

She graduated from the U.S. University School of Performing Arts (San Diego) with a bachelors' degree in musical theater.

Afterwards there was no restaurant apprenticeship. She got work in Los Angeles, joined SAG and AFTRA. She married, had a son (now a junior at UCLA) She toured in shows, got small screen and big screen exposure, and helped run a theater.

After a while, she “got sick of L.A.” Simultaneously, her first marriage was ending. She had friends in Washington and moved there “during a horrendous snow storm.” She learned about software and launched a successful public relations business, which was time-consuming but profitable,

But she missed the theater and that’s what chased her to New York. Success has now gotten in the way of her first love, acting. Sundog’s growth in the past few years — in has had its own office on St. Mark’s Place for some time — has all but pushed her off the stage.

Memorably, she played the Mime in “The FANTASTICKS,” in 2003 when Sundog and the Wagner College Theater collaborated on a well-loved production at Stage One on campus.

“That was a great opportunity, and such a hit,” she recalled. “I bet we could have run that show for weeks.”

She would be missing the stage these days except she’s too busy to brood about it. “I’ve gone from loving the attention of the stage to understanding the healing power of theater.”

Until she became an arts educator, she probably underestimated the power of such exposure. “People who think of the arts as an educational extra do the world a huge disservice,” she says. “Kids are transformed when you show them music or visual art or theater. All of them respond. It’s incredible. And it only takes weeks.”

Sundog’s efforts have earned significant encouragement. It won a Carnegie Corporation grant in 2009 and more recently, a two-year \$65,000 grant from Open Society, administrator of Soros Foundation grants.

The award catapults the company’s institutional profile. Fellow 2010 recipients, including the Abrons Arts Center/Henry Street Settlement, Atlantic Theater Company, Classic Stage Company, MCC Theater, New York Theater Workshop, Primary Stages, Repertorio Espanol, , TADA! Youth Theater, The Kitchen, Vineyard Theatre and the Wooster Group, represent the premier non-commercial companies in the city).

ISLAND LIFE

Ms. Fenley thinks there are good, as yet undramatized local stories, like that of Alice Austen, just lying around, waiting to be scripted. “I hope we can do some new Island-centric things in the near future.

She’s counting on more growth. The theater has an office, but it has no home theater, having used Veterans Hall (at Snug Harbor) and Wagner College’s Stage One in the past.

As a settled, 11-year resident (she and her husband bought a big house on Benziger Avenue a decade ago) she's amazed to hear any criticism about the Island whatsoever. This from someone who has lived in Arizona and Nevada, San Diego, Los Angeles and the Washington D.C.

"The Island is one of the most beautiful places there is," she said last week. "And Manhattan is 45 minutes away. It's the ideal place to live."

She's an implacable rooster: "I want to say to people: Have you seen the Greenbelt? Wolf's Pond? Have you taken the ferry on a perfect summer night?"

Sundog Theatre Co. -- A professional troupe based at 370 St. Mark's Pl. in St. George.

Upcoming shows:

'The World in My Hands: The Inspiring Story of Helen Keller' by Luane Davis and Susan Mondzak. Feb. 13, 2 p.m., Music Hall, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 1000 Richmond Terr., Livingston

'Scenes from the Staten Island Ferry 2011.' Six short new plays. April 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, New Dorp Moravian Church Theater, 2205 Richmond Rd., New Dorp

More info: call 718-816-5453 or visit SundogTheatre.org