

Jessalyn Kincaid shape-shifts through her roles — onstage and off

By **Deborah Hirsch**

January 13, 2015



Photo by **Sabrina Staires**

Like many — if not most — local actors, Jessalyn Kincaid supplements her theater roles with steadier work. And like many — if not most — she doesn't consider her stage work a sideline. The actress, singer and self-proclaimed introvert has been active on local stages for more than a decade. "Acting allows me to be all the things I'm not in real life," she says. From Late Night Theatre to the Kansas City Rep to the New

Theatre Restaurant — and just about every other KC venue — she has transformed into a range of supporting and leading roles. More recently, we caught her in *Clybourne Park* and *Hands on a Hardbody* at the Unicorn, and *Jacques Brel: The Life and Music of a Legend* at Musical Theater Heritage. "I enjoy entertaining people," she says, "allowing them to step outside themselves for a few hours." She allowed us to briefly step inside her world to ask the following questions by e-mail.

The Pitch: *What are your theater occupations?*

Kincaid: An actor who occasionally moonlights as a stage manager.

What about day jobs?

I work for an event-management company and I also wait tables.

Where's home?

Kansas City

What has kept you here?

I've never really considered leaving KC a viable option. It's actually a perfect community for someone who wants to stay active in the arts but also desires a relatively normal home life. I don't think it's a secret that KC has a pretty large arts scene for the size of town that we are. Plus, I can still have a house with a yard for my pooch!

What originally lit the theater spark?

There was never an *aha* moment for me. It's just something that always seemed such a natural part of me.

When did you decide on a life in theater, and how did that come about?

I was a double major in college: theater and secondary education, and I remember someone told me that if I continued with the education degree, it would be too easy to make it my fallback plan. So I dropped it the next day. I don't think it was particularly good advice, but it did force my hand to give everything I had to making a life in the theater.

Where did you train?

Drury University, in Springfield, Missouri

What drew you specifically into acting? into singing?

I sang long before I acted. My parents were both professional musicians, so music was a prominent part of my childhood. Unfortunately, I was excruciatingly shy as a young person — to the point that for a time, I stopped speaking to all but my close family. I eventually came out of that, but I'm still a very private, introverted person. Acting allows me to be all the things I'm not in real life. It's exhilarating.

What are the best parts about what you do?

One of my very favorite things in the whole world is a perfectly placed punch line — when you have the audience in your hand and you just "plop" it in at the exact right time. It's incredibly fulfilling. To that end, I enjoy entertaining people — allowing them to step outside themselves for a few hours. It's really a lovely gift to be able to give someone.

What are the hardest parts?

Well, it's still work. Most of it is very unglamorous. It's long hours, sometimes little pay. It can destroy relationships by making itself more important than the people around you. And sometimes you go through all of that, and it still adds up to a crappy show.

How do you prepare for a performance?

I don't have a set "preparation," but I do prefer to get to the theater early so I can take my time getting ready, especially if I enjoy my cast! I swear by Yogi Throat Comfort tea and Halls Fruit Breezers.

How are you affected by the audience?

The audience is the other member of the cast. Their reactions and energy from night to night change the dynamic of the show. As an actor, you sometimes have to make little adjustments depending on how things are landing or how vocal a crowd is.

What's the best thing that has happened during a performance?

I met a couple immediately following a show at the American Heartland Theatre. It was a silly, lighthearted piece, but as I rounded the corner, I saw this woman in tears next to her husband who was wheelchair-bound. She told me that several months earlier, this once-vital man had suffered a massive stroke that took away his movement and speech. She said that during the performance, she heard him laugh for the first time since the stroke. They came to every show they could after that, and I saw him make incredible progress. It was staggering to think that even a silly little comedy piece could make such an impact on someone. We're still friends.

In your experience, what's an example of something in a production going awry?

I was in a show and was sitting next to the lead actress in the dressing room, which was located a ways from the actual stage. We were chatting and changing for Act 2, and she was down to her undies and had just finished putting her hair in rollers. And then over the monitor, we heard the cue line for her to go onstage. She had forgotten to do the final number of Act 1. Things got frantic for a while.

What's your favorite theater genre, and why?

I like it all. I like the act of acting when it's done well and for the right reasons.

Who's your inspiration, and why?

The older I get, the more I admire performers — both famous and local — who achieve a balance between their personal and private lives. It's an incredibly hard thing to manage well.

What's the hardest thing you've worked on?

One time, I was offered a role and I asked the director if he would consider me for a different role in the show instead, one that I considered to be more "meaty." We went back and forth, and he finally gave in. A week into rehearsals, I realized that he was absolutely right about the original casting. I was in over my head in a role I didn't really understand. To his credit, he never said, "I told you so."

Did I recently see you in a local TV commercial?

I think I have three running right now — for Bayer Expert Care, Price Chopper and a series for Wayside Waifs. And a few with just voice-over — for Learning Quest and a series for Westwood College.

When will we see you next?

Next summer in *A Year With Frog and Toad* at the Coterie Theatre. I also perform the role of waitress every weekend at Jalapeno's in Brookside.