

Triple threat a first-rate teacher

BY BILL MCLEAN
ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BLITT

A chorus member named Stacey first meets a chorus member named Liz in the dressing room at Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire. It's 1997. Each gets ready to perform in Kismet, a musical set in a fictional Baghdad.

It's 2018, late fall. Former *Kismet* chorus member Stacey Flaster chats about former *Kismet* chorus member Liz Fauntleroy from a booth seat at Country Kitchen in Highland Park. Five years ago Flaster, a private acting coach, approached Fauntleroy, a private voice coach, with a business proposal.

"I said, 'Let's start a school,'" the 47-year-old Flaster recalls. "We'd been friends for so many years. She loves the performing arts, and so do I. She always knows what I'm thinking; I always know what she's thinking. Liz is warm and kind and fun and funny."

"She makes me laugh."

Both got serious and launched The Performer's School (TPS) in 2013. Students (ages 8-18) continue to grow as performers in a room at the Don Skrinar Recreation Center in Highwood. The TPS mission is to become the North Shore's premier performance studio for young people, specializing in improving their self-confidence, self-awareness, skills and creativity as they embark on their performing journeys.

The school produces at least two shows and offers 12 workshops each year. Yossi Chaikin, co-dance captain and swing in the Chicago company of the Broadway play *Hamilton: An American Musical*, taught a TPS *Hamilton* Dance Workshop in November.

More than 100 budding and established performers receive invaluable instruction from award-winning teachers, directors and choreographers.

That Flaster-Fauntleroy meeting, 20-plus years ago, during the *Kismet* run at Marriott Theatre?

Must have been ... kismet.

Flaster lives in Highland Park; Fauntleroy resides in Lincolnshire.

"I love kids, immensely. I love working with kids," says Flaster, the mother of Jackson, 12, and Melanie, 9. "It's incredibly rewarding, what I get to see from our students at the school. The school allows me opportunities to create emotional and intellectual connections with my students. I encourage our performers to take risks, to trust their instincts. I'm big on constructive criticism, but I also believe in the importance of showing love, support and kindness. You'd be amazed at what performing well in front of an audience does for a young person's self-esteem."

"One of my strengths is bringing out the strengths in people."



Stacey Flaster

Flaster, who grew up in Glencoe, said hello to acting with her portrayal of the sad girl in *Bye Bye Birdie* in a Central School (grade 5-8) production. She later attended the musical *42nd Street* in Chicago, and that did it — hooked her. On musicals. For good. Flaster earned the lead role of Miss Adelaide in the musical *Guys and Dolls* in her senior year at New Trier High School. Darrelyn Marx, an NTHS choral and theater teacher at the time, brought out the best in Flaster.

The date of Flaster's Graduation Day at NTHS was June 7, 1989. But she prefers to verbalize the date differently.

"I graduated on 6/7/89,"

Flaster says, her excitement level reaching that of a youngster who had just seen the "100" at the top of her very first math test.

"You can't forget a date like that."

Flaster stuck with the arts at the University of Illinois, whirling her way to a BFA in dance. She played Anita in *West Side Story* at Station Theatre in Urbana.

"After college," she says, "I played Jet and Shark girls in the musical. I've played every female role there is in *West Side Story* ... but not at the same time."

Flaster evolved into a veritable triple threat (actress, singer, dancer) in the professional arenas of performing arts. The busy, highly successful daughter of proud parents Sandy and Nancy also stood out as a director of musicals (30 and counting) and choreographer, including her Jeff Award-winning production of *A Class Act* for Porchlight Music Theatre in Chicago. She served as choreography consultant for the Ron Howard-directed film *The Dilemma* (2011), starring Vince Vaughn and Kevin James, and completed a similar stint for a Lunchables television commercial.

Flaster has directed and choreographed for shows presented at Marriott Theatre, Drury Lane Oakbrook Theatre at the Center, Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Music Theater Works (formerly Light Opera Works) and Noble Fool Theatricals, among other venues.

A student who takes private lessons from Flaster auditioned for a role in the Broadway musical

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Frozen. Another student, applying to college theater programs, needed Flaster's counsel and encouragement while preparing to audition for the coveted spots; each theater program accepted her. The winner of the 2017 Illinois High School Music Theater award for Best Actress is a polished TPS product. Other TPS students landed roles in Trix cereal and Belk department store TV commercials.

"This career of mine, the wonderful experiences I continue to have through the arts, would not have been possible without the support of my amazing, never-judgmental parents," says Flaster, who had ordered coffee with cream, grilled pita triangles, wheat toast ("Burn it," she insisted) and an omelet packed with mozzarella broccoli, green peppers, mushrooms, spinach and onions.

"Perfect," she adds. "My parents are perfect."

Her workout regimen the previous week, a mix of CrossFit sessions and Shri Yoga Center classes in Highland Park?

Not perfect.

"I missed a workout, and it's still bothering me," Flaster, scowling and smiling at the same time, says.

Flaster then loses the scowl. Dwelling on the past is counterproductive in her energetic world. She has kids at home to raise, students on stages to teach and inspire, kettleballs to swing, thoughts of returning to her roles as a professional choreographer and director of musicals to ponder. Busy. Stacey Flaster is still busy.

And loving every manic minute.

"Don't look back," Flaster says. "You're not going that way."

Please visit theperformersschool.com and stacey-flaster.com for more information.