

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons 644-1100



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Mary Frances McCatty likes the challenge of the dances in "Jesus Christ Superstar."

Dancer is back for 'Superstar'

By Cathie Bredendach
special writer

Mary Frances McCatty, who grew up in Troy, is in town to dance and sing in "Jesus Christ Superstar," the rock opera playing at the Birmingham Theatre.

"Dance may not be a sport, but dancers are athletes," she says. McCatty, explains both dancers and athletes require flexibility, precision timing, strength and a high level of fitness. She sees the overlap between dance and sports because she came to dancing by way of gymnastics.

McCatty also comes from a family immersed in sports and involved in music. Her sister, Peggy Hursley, is coordinator for the Birmingham Ice Arena and teaches ice skating there. Brother Steve played for the Oakland A's and brother Don plays banjo and guitar as a hobby. Her parents still live in Troy where McCatty was staying through Sunday, June 17, during the run of "Superstar."

When she was young, McCatty remembers being "that girl for my dad when he coached Class A basketball in Pontiac." Her mother danced "tap and point" as a girl, and McCatty boasts that her mother "was doing cartwheels in the living room until she was in her late 50s." On opening night, 11 enthusiastic relatives came to see McCatty perform her multiple, high-energy dances in "Superstar."

ANYONE INCLINED to dismiss chorus dancing as non-demanding

should see the show-stopper routines McCatty does in "Superstar." McCatty admits to getting weary of the undemanding, look-petty routines often relegated to women dancers in some shows. Not in "Superstar."

Director/choreographer Victor Valentine has included not only more dancing but more challenging dancing in the update of the Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice musical about the last days of Christ. The challenging dancing is one reason McCatty is delighted to work the show, plus the fact that she gets to sing while dancing. "But dancing's my first love. I love the physicalness of it," she says.

Her dance as a "tormentor" in the Birmingham Theatre production is decidedly demanding and reminiscent of the style of the late Bob Fosse. In the Tormentor dance, she wears a suit and "dances with the boys in the androgynous number." Before they even get on stage, the group must "worm fast underneath the raked (lifted toward the audience) stage" to emerge from a trap door amid furling smoke.

"We can't see a thing," she says of the danger of leaping smoke-blind through the trap door. Add to that the difficulty of dancing on the raked stage. "You feel like you're going to roll right down it," she says, adding they have changed some of the choreography to minimize the danger. McCatty points to the tormentor number as the kind

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'Jesus Christ Superstar' was a role that beckoned

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

HAPPY TO HAVE his first day off in three weeks, Adrian Zmed was relaxed and ebullient as he talked about his starring role in "Jesus Christ Superstar."

Interviewed in the lobby of the Birmingham Theatre, he sprawled on a row of the high-backed chairs there. "It's tough for me to do a show where all you do is sing. It's my first show doing an opera, where I don't speak," he said.

The darkly handsome young performer said he was a kid in 1969 when the rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar" first came out as a London album — before the Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice musical was ever staged. "I always wanted to do 'J.C.' I flipped over the music as a kid."

"Playing Christ is a scary thing," he declared. "You have to be up on cross, getting flogged (in Act II, but I got past that. He's a human being, who got to live on this earth.)"

During the flogging, "I'm five feet from the front row," he said, explaining how he has to make the physical suffering seem real. "It's very physically and emotionally draining for me." After the show is over, "I don't even want to come out for the curtain call."

The second act is in sharp contrast to the Act I. "The first half is a blast. I'm on top of the world and everyone loves me," he said. In the updated version of the show, Jesus Christ is presented in a rock star image.

ZMED, WHO WAS raised in Chicago, got his Broadway break starring as Danny Zuko in the smash hit "Grease." He had traveled with the second national tour of the show for a year, and played Detroit, before taking over the role in the New York production.

Son of a Romanian Orthodox minister, Zmed got his theatrical training at the Goodman School of Drama in Chicago. "I just naturally sing and dance very well," he said of his abilities to perform in musical theater and movies. He said he did not study singing or dancing formally but learned to how to sing and do folk dancing in the church. "It was like a little Romania."

At the Goodman Theatre, "They have a wonderful children's theater," Zmed said. Appearing in "The Emperor's New Clothes" and other shows for youngsters, "I was the king of song and dance."

Back in high school, he had wanted to be a football player but got injured during football practice. He was in a body cast for four months and after the cast was removed, when he was still walking with a cane, wandered into a play rehearsal

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— Adrian Zmed



at school. His English teacher cast him in a student production of "Guys and Dolls," and he was on his way to a new career.

"I wanted to go to professional acting school and work in regional theater," he said. Instead, he found himself on Broadway, then in television and the movies. As a TV star, he played Officer Vince Romano for five years on "T.J. Hooker." In a change of pace, he took over as host of "Dance Fever" for the last two years of the show that ran 10 years.

He was attracted to "Dance Fever," because, "How often do you get to sing and dance in Hollywood?" The problem was that after "Dance Fever," everyone forgot about his acting skills. "The only offers I got were to be hosts of TV variety shows," Zmed said.

THERE WAS a lull. "I got a chance to get reacquainted with my children," he said. (Zmed and his wife, Barbara, met in Chicago and were married there by his minister father. The couple lives in Los Angeles with their sons, ages 7 and 3.)

In his last year at Goodman, Zmed had struggled unsuccessfully to get his Actors Equity Card. He was already enrolled in college to switch to architecture when the chance came up to go with the national tour of "Grease." "It's one of the greatest parts a guy can do if you can act, sing and dance," he said.

Later, he got to do his form of Danny Zucco, as Johnny in "Grease 2," an original movie musical and sequel to the blockbuster film "Grease." The plot was about the T-Birds and the Pink Ladies, new kids at the high school two years later. Although the sequel wasn't the sensation that the original was, "We did \$75-80 million in business. It was not a flop," Zmed said that "Grease 2" outdistances "Grease" 10 to 1 in VCR rentals.

Zmed also appeared in the movies in the offbeat comedy "Bachelor Party," with Tom Hanks, and slasher film "The Final Terror," with Daryl Hannah and Rachel Ward. He said, "There's talk of doing a "Bachelor Party II," where I get married and Tom throws a party for me."

The actor's latest film is "Eyewitness to Murder," which is about to be released. He and co-star Andrew Stevens play policemen. Zmed recently

completed a self-filmed thriller, cast as a detective. His next movie project is "Mad Bear Anderson," to be filmed in Germany, with him as an American Indian in the military.

THEN, HE WILL go back to the theater, playing Seymour in "The Little Shop of Horrors" at the Muny Opera House in St. Louis. The role of Seymour seems an unlikely one for Zmed, but he has played it before, at the Santa Barbara Theater Festival, and claims, "I can be a nerd with the best of them."

Last fall he appeared off-Broadway as the title character in "Eating Raoul," a movie turned into a musical. "It's a combination of 'The Little Shop of Horrors' and 'The Rocky Horror Show,'" he said. Paul Bartel did the original screenplay and the book for the show. "It was workshopped off-Broadway, and we hope to bring it to Broadway this fall," Zmed said.

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