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theater

Inch by Inch

For actress Julianna Jaffe, there's power in the process

by Timothy Krause

She's known for playing intense characters onstage, but out of costume and makeup, Julianna Jaffe is warm, effusive and an open book, even when it comes to the difficult year she's had and the lessons she's learned about letting go.

After back-to-back performances last summer in Triangle Productions' *The Rocky Horror Show* and Insight Out Theatre Collective's *One: The Musical*, the 27-year-old underwent major back surgery that kept her out of the spotlight. Finally able to return to the stage, Jaffe is signed on to reprise her character of Yitzhak in Triangle's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, which marks her fifth time playing the role opposite Wade McCollum's Hedwig.

But late last spring, Jaffe received word that her Samoan grandmother passed away, leaving the actress scrambling to make plans to travel back to her family's island homeland. And days before her departure, Jaffe's path changed course once again when she and her long-term partner decided to end their relationship.

Like the characters she portrays, Jaffe draws her strength from the journey. And like Hedwig, Yitzhak and many other characters she's portrayed, Jaffe finds renewal and reward in sharing the story.

Timothy Krause: Will this trip back to Samoa offer you time for reflection?

Julianna Jaffe: It's going to be great to go there and meditate on the island, to take some things from it and also give back to it. It's so deep in the South Pacific that I know it's going to help clear my mind.... When we celebrate funerals, we have a period of mourning, and then we have these huge festivities. We're really earthy, rooted people, and when our sorrow comes, our sorrow comes. We feel it together, and we honor it together. Then the celebration comes, and we honor that together. It's releasing a lot.

TK: What are five ways you'd finish the sentence "I am a...?"

JJ: I am a storyteller more than I am an actress. I like to say I'm a warrior. I am innocence. I like to think of myself as fierce. And I am scared.

TK: What's the importance of storytelling?

JJ: Well, for instance, I've missed out on a lot on that island for 15 years, and the way I'm going to experience all of it is through storytelling. People will act out my grandmother and her attitude. The way my grandmother was a bigot at times. How she was the most lovable creature. They're going to tell me these stories, and it's going to help me understand. I'm going to learn so much more about my lineage and my heritage. And that's the same thing theater does when it's done well by people who actually want to tell stories. It's all about starting a conversation. And that's why I love storytelling: It's the start of a process.

TK: And warrior?

JJ: During really hard times, I'm able to take it and walk with it and then run with it. I can process it, but I don't let it hold me back. I know that evolution

is always present and that we are always changing. I just let that help me through my path.... There's a lot of silence out there because we're too scared to speak up for what we believe. I have many friends that don't want to speak up, that don't want to say anything because they're scared. I'm scared of many things, but you have the right to say what you want to say. It all comes from we're told to "be quiet," you know? "Shhh, don't say anything." Why? I think the most beautiful thing is little kids and their subconscious—watching them walk and talk and speak the truth because there is no editing going on.

TK: What do you think is the next big thing for Portland theater?

JJ: Theater that talks about race and ethnicity. We have Miracle Theatre—yes, yes, awesome, thank God they're here. But what if we had an all-black theater? All-Russian? All-Polynesian? Where are they?

One of the things that Insight Out tries to focus on is telling stories that we don't usually hear in life as much. In the mainstream. In Portland. We try to bring different stories for people to hear, but we're also trying to make it more of a process. That is the next thing we're working on: opening up dialogue before and after the show, because a lot of people need a process.

There's also something else that happens here in Portland theater: Nobody wants to work with each other. I find that a lot here. "Oh, you're *that* theater; we're *this* theater." I was taught that we're all artists. We're all telling stories. How can we inspire each

other? And for some reason that doesn't happen here. So another big thing would be to get theaters talking and working with each other and understanding each other because everyone has such a different process.

TK: Tell me about this production of *Hedwig*. Is it a revival?

JJ: Two new band members means a whole new chemistry, which gets really bold and bright and beautiful and is going to be amazing. New set design. New costumes. There are some things that we want to keep that Dennis [Bigelow, director]



Julianna Jaffe co-stars with Wade McCollum in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

helped us with, but Greg Tamblyn [*The Full Monty*] is going to come in and help us be the outside eye and shape us up.... The first thing I did was call Wade and say we need to talk about the show. How much have we changed? What have you and I gone through as friends in 10 to 15 years? As we keep changing, our characters will change, and so there's definitely going to be something different.

TK: What appeals to you about playing this guy?

JJ: That trap that you keep on yourself. Letting other people control things about you. But then saying, "Hey, I can do this." It's an amazing journey to go through all that sorrow and all that death that's happening inside of Yitzhak.

TK: So it's about empowerment?

JJ: I can't tell you how many people over the years say: "My biggest lesson is that I can be who I am. Be whatever I want to be. And the possibilities are endless. I can be anything, and I am like no other creature here." That is amazing. 10

Triangle Productions presents HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH through Aug. 12 at Artists Repertory Theatre, 1516 S.W. Alder St. Tickets are \$38 at the door or \$35-\$38 in advance from www.tripro.org; \$20 student rush offered 15 minutes before each show.

When not applauding local theater, TIMOTHY KRAUSE is communications coordinator for City Club of Portland.



DANIELLE JOHNS