

# The theatre

BY ANN DUDLEY

I was a shy child, almost painfully so. But when I was 10, my mother came into my room one Saturday morning and announced that she thought it would be a good idea if I took some acting classes at the Portland Civic Theatre.

The first class started in half an hour, so I'd better get hopping if I was going to do it. I had to factor in the travel time, the getting there a few minutes early time, and so on. That meant there were only a few minutes left for me to throw on some clothes and get in the car.

But before I jumped into high gear, I had a flashback of the last time I was in a show at the Firehouse Theater. I was 4, perhaps 5. I don't remember the play, but I do recall wanting to play the fairy. That role went to the pretty girl with long blonde hair. I, with the pixie cut, got the role of alligator and had to crawl around on my belly. I hated it.

I had a feeling that I didn't really have a choice about this offer. I'm not sure now whether it was my mom was trying to get me out of my shell or assuaging her love of acting, theater and movies.

But that was the start of eight years of acting lessons. Oh, and there was also ballet, tap and singing lessons too. Turns out, while I may not have been very good at it (I was horrible at learning lines), a part of me really loved it. I made a lifelong friend and am still friends with a few of my fellow childhood thespians and one of our acting coaches.

There are a few priceless moments from that era of my life that always come to mind when reminiscing about it.

In one production, I played a chorus girl in a western show. The costume didn't allow me to wear a bra, which I needed. During a change of costume from townsperson to chorus girl, my bra that I had worn as Townsperson Number One got caught up in the chorus girl dress for Chorus Girl Number Five.

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**I LEARNED SO MUCH FROM THOSE EIGHT YEARS. MOST IMPORTANTLY, I LEARNED ABOUT (AND ACCEPTED WITHOUT QUESTION) DIFFERENT LIFESTYLES, PERSONALITIES, FRIENDSHIP AND CAMARADERIE. THANK YOU, MOM, FOR GIVING ME THE NUDGE I SO DESPERATELY NEEDED.**

While I was doing the can-can on stage, I looked down and saw my bra flapping along with me. I danced off stage, yanked the offending appendage off, and rejoined the line-up, red faced with embarrassment and my friend and fellow chorus girl laughing her head off.

I always hated wearing coats as a child, and I still am prone to not wearing them. In late grammar school, there was one that I particularly loathed. It was blue and made of a material that produced the sensation of being steamed alive.

When horsing around with some friends after school, one of the boys got a hold of my sleeve and there was a loud ripping sound. The sleeve was torn largely from its socket. For some reason, my mother decided to repair it using black electrical tape. On the outside.

So now, not only was I wearing a coat I hated, but a coat ungracefully patched. Along the way, the coat disappeared. I had no idea what had happened to it. Five years later, I am in the audience for a production of "The Glass Menagerie." The girl playing Laura entered the stage. (A girl none of us particularly cared for. Perhaps we were jealous she got the coveted role or maybe because she was a snotty snob.)

I sank lower in my seat. "It couldn't be," I thought. But as Laura turned, I saw the electrical tape patch job. My quiet humiliation and the thought that the girl who was playing Laura must never find out that that had once been my coat. The family in that play were supposed to be poor. From the wrong side of the tracks. The situation also played out in my head as to how it had come into the costumer's hands. I had most likely left it behind long ago during a class or rehearsal. I never claimed it. The costumer tucked it away, only to be brought out, perfect for the role it was in.

And yet, the most poignant and most significant of my memories is also one of pain and personal triumph. To set the scene as it were, I had gotten a bit mouthy to my dad. This was in the late 1970s.

My father was old fashioned. Once my father sat down at the table, he wasn't getting up until he was through. That meant that my mom and I were getting up when he deemed he wanted salt, seconds, a napkin and so on.

One night I'd had enough, and most likely said he "could get up and get it too, you know" or he could "do more, like help with the dishes." The next night, he came home from work and announced that I would no longer be taking acting classes because my mom needed help around the house. My punishment for speaking up was to have the thing I loved taken away. I spent the next year after school and on weekends ironing. Ironing sheets, dish towels, his shirts and boxers, along with my own clothes. This was in addition to having always helped with the dishes and other housework as needed from a young age.

That is, until I got the call. It was the theater. The director of the children's production was calling. Someone in the cast had broken their arm and couldn't perform that afternoon. Could I replace her? I would need to go to the theater that morning, learn the lines and blocking and perform two shows that afternoon.

My fate was in my dad's hands. My dad relented and let me perform, but I knew, though, that the only reason why I was permitted to fill in was because someone who was an authority, the director and the head of the acting school, thought I was good enough to do it.

So it was that I returned to the theater after a year's hiatus. I took pride in the fact that I had been thought of, out of the blue, to step into a role, and then complete the run of the show.

I learned so much from those eight years. Most importantly, I learned about (and accepted without question) different lifestyles, personalities, friendship and camaraderie. Thank you, mom, for giving me the nudge I so desperately needed.

*This essay was produced through a class taught by Tom Hallman Jr., a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter at The Oregonian.*

## Catch up on preventative care.

Early on in the pandemic, many people put off in-person doctor visits. It's time to catch up on any preventative health services you missed. These can include:

- Mammograms and pap smears
- Screenings for diseases and cancer
- Childhood vaccines and annual visits
- Flu and pneumonia shots
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