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### Television: Growing up in showbiz family got Tessa Grady ready to perform



Tessa Grady is playing the lead role, Peggy Sawyer, in a dazzling choreographic production of '42nd Street' at the Bucks County Playhouse.

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The hearth at Tessa Grady's childhood home resembled a stage.

So she used it as such.

Being young, Grady didn't know stock bits from television shows or the popular song of the day.

She would simply announce "Show time," usually when her extended family was gathered, and dance, sing, and do scenes that would come into her head.

"Dancing and singing was always a part of my being," Grady said by telephone from New Hope, where she is playing the lead role, Peggy Sawyer, in a dazzling choreographic production of "42nd Street" at the Bucks County Playhouse.

"I'd just go to the hearth and perform."

Given Grady's family, her performances were more than child play.

The setting was Thousand Oaks, Calif., about a dozen miles from Hollywood, and Tessa's talent was noticed by her grandmother, Mary Grady, a famous spotter and agent for child stars, by her father, Don Grady, famous for playing Robbie Douglas for 12 years on "My Three Sons," and her aunt, Lani O'Grady, was among the children on the series, "Eight is Enough."

This was a show biz family, and Tessa seemed the next to carry the torch.

Mary Grady advocated for that, Tessa was willing and possibly eager, but Don, a child star who acted into adulthood while making a simultaneous name as a composer, was not as enthusiastic.

Don Grady began performing as a Mouseketeer when his age was just hitting double digits. He moved on to play the middle child, Robbie, opposite Fred MacMurray, William Frawley, William Demarest, and fellow Disney star Tim Considine, in "My Three Sons," and was alone with MacMurray and Stanley Livingston in playing the entire run.

He wanted something different for his daughter. He recognized her ability and her love for performance, but he drew back on his own experience and wanted his daughter to have the childhood that he was denied by having a career.

"Dad wasn't regretful, disappointed, or bitter," Tessa says. "He just thought I should see more sides of life and be free of some of the pressure that was part of his life. He told me I can always choose to perform when I'm an adult and can make a choice from a number of experiences.

"At 16, I decided I wanted to be in the theater, more even than in movies and television, which offered a lot of work in L.A. By 19, I was on my way to my first job in New York, on Broadway. But, like my Dad, I have no regrets. His advice was good. I was able to have a childhood. I was able to explore a lot. Having time to grow up and not concentrate on learning lines or being at a studio to work gave me interests I might not

have had. I developed a love for nature, for health food, and for books. I still sang, danced, took lessons, and made that hearth my personal stage, but I got to do more.

“The love of nature comes from family outings and hikes. It’s become a real passion. I’m just exploring New Hope. I found a great book store (Farley’s), and I hear there are trails in various directions to enjoy the river and nature. We’re here until August, so I’m going to take the time to see the area and enjoy what it has.”

“Joy” and “passion” are two words Tessa uses frequently. You can see her energy and contentment on the Bucks County stage. She is not only a star of “42nd Street.” She stands out for her complete performance — acting and singing as well as dancing up more than one storm — and for her way of drawing the audience to her, just as her character, Peggy Sawyer, is advised to do. She agrees her father, a veteran of the Bucks County Playhouse, was right in insisting she wait before venturing into theater, but she knew, even as she was reading, learning about nutrition, and enjoying the outdoors, the stage would be her destiny.

One more tidbit: Tessa’s mother is a performer too. She worked in shows under the name of Ginny Ames.

“Singing and dancing came to me naturally,” Tessa said. “I didn’t discover them or learn about them. I just did them, everywhere, with no prompting or provocation, from ever since I can remember.

“By age 16, I wanted to do more than shows I made up by our hearth. Dad agreed I was of an age to make a choice, so I began auditioning at local theaters. When I say “local,” I’m talking about professional theaters all around the L.A. area. I had to travel to auditions and performances, but I was cast right away and got representation.

“I took what I was doing seriously. I studied dance for most of my life. I began taking lessons to develop my voice and my acting skills. Meanwhile, I was being cast in major roles. I even played Peggy Sawyer when I was a teen. The experience was great and instructive.

“The important thing is I was happy. One of Dad’s concerns was whether being a professional performer would make me happy. He wanted to be sure I was doing what I wanted and not just going into the Grady family business.

“I was happy. I am happy. The great thing I learned by waiting is a career is not your whole life. It’s a part of it, an important part, but there are other things that bring you joy and passion.

“Performing remains one of them. I’m 24 now, have been in several shows, and I continue to love what I do and find time to take my walks and read by books.

“I thank my childhood for that. My brother, Joey, and I were home schooled. Dad or Mom would ask ‘What are you thinking about today?’ or ‘What questions do you have?’ and that would form the framework for a day’s lesson to go with the prescribed curriculum. We would have outings with other home-schooled children, for the socialization and to see what other families were doing. I think it gave a core that allows me to enjoy a lot, including what I do to make a living.”

Tessa worked constantly in the L.A. area and pondered the idea of going to New York. She was about to take an exploratory journey when fate brought a surprise.

“After doing a lot of work and building my vocal and acting ranges, I ventured into auditions for major shows, including Broadway tours. One of the auditions was for ‘Wicked.’ I didn’t get a part, but as happens in this business, the casting directors remembered me. I had just booked a trip to New York to test the waters there. I was going to go to every audition I could get into. About two weeks before I was scheduled to leave, my agents called to say the ‘Wicked’ casting team also booked the talent for the Broadway revival of ‘Annie.’ They were looking for a replacement for ‘The Star to Be’ (the newcomer to New York who sings major bridge in NYC). I moved up my trip, was put right into the auditions for principals, and booked my first Broadway show.

“I’ve worked constantly since then. Now I am auditioning more for regional theaters. I like New York and Broadway, but I can get meatier roles in the regions, such as Peggy here at Bucks County. It’s a good direction for what I hope happens next.”

Tessa says she maintains a trait she is sure helped her win the role of “Star to Be” and that she brings to Peggy Sawyer.

“It’s naivety,” she said. “With all my experience, growing up around show business, working in L.A., and living in New York, I still have a sense of the new and can be wide-eyed. At one audition in New York, the casting director had to call my name a few times because I was fascinated by the skyscrapers I saw through the window. From L.A., I’d rarely been on a 10th floor. In this show, I was late for a call because I mixed up the curtain time and was browsing in Farley’s instead of getting dressed for ‘places.’ How Peggy Sawyer is that? I feel akin to that girl from Allentown who just gets to New York and finds herself replacing a veteran Broadway star in a new musical that means the livelihood of dozens of people.

‘I see a lot of myself in Peggy. Not only the naivety, but the ambition. They’re mixed. Like Peggy, I prepared by doing what came naturally and learning what I needed to be professional. Working with (director) Hunter Foster here was an education. He is amazingly understanding, clear, and helpful.”

By performing at Bucks County Playhouse, Tessa works on a stage her father trod when he played Joe Hardy in “Damn Yankees” there in 1984. It’s a tradition other children and relatives of stars share.

“I’ve seen pictures and programs,” Tessa said. “They add to the excitement of being here and playing this role.”

Don Grady passed away in 2012, before Tessa made her Broadway debut, but she is happy he got to see her in her L.A. days and that he helped her to be the complete person she is.