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Duo savors daughter's star turn in Theatre Aspen's 'Annie'

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ASPEN — If there was any doubt that Ed and Julia Foran were cut from the same cloth, their reaction to the news that 13-year-old Julia was being cast as Annie in this summer's Theatre Aspen production — and that she might need to dye her hair red — proves the point.

“I thought to myself, she'd shave her head if she had to,” said Julia's father, Ed, a longtime Aspenite.

“I said, ‘I’ll shave my head if I have to,’” Julia, a soon-to-be eighth grader at Aspen Middle School, said with a laugh.

The younger Foran did not have to shave her head, nor has she dyed her hair (she wears a wig in the show), but she has made plenty of sacrifices: Beginning with six weeks of full-day rehearsals, and now deep in a production schedule that includes four shows a week through Aug. 20, Julia admits that her summer vacation hasn’t been like that of her friends.

“I definitely have a different schedule; I really haven’t seen my friends all summer and we’re not going on vacation,” said Julia, who is soft-spoken in person but on stage steals the show with her amazing voice. “But I don’t mind at all, because I love what I am doing.”

In fact, Ed believes the intense work of a professional production like “Annie” has helped his daughter blossom.

“After a couple of days, I could see she was thriving,” he said, admitting that he was worried at first whether Julia had the stamina to get the job done. “It’s been a marvelous process; not only has Julia grown as a singer and actress, but she’s matured as a young woman. I think a lot of the credit goes to her fellow cast members, especially David and Joan Hess and way they have mentored, nurtured and supported Julia.”

This is particularly important for Ed, as the bond with his daughter is especially strong – and strongly based in the theater. Ed, a local real estate agent, is well-known in local theater, having been in numerous Aspen Community Theater and Hudson Reed Ensemble productions, as well as Theatre Aspen’s “Defying Gravity” last summer. But Ed wasn’t always an actor; he said he fell into acting “by accident” when his older daughter was in an Aspen Santa Fe Ballet production of “Romeo and Juliet.”

“I was picking my older daughter, Katie, after a rehearsal when [the directors] said they needed a Prince Escalus,” explained Ed. “I didn’t do theater in high school because I was always doing sports, but it was always in the back of my mind.

“So when this opportunity fell into my lap, I took it. And I loved it.”

Thus, the first Foran father-daughter acting duo was born, with Ed and Katie starring together in such shows as “The Sound of Music.” Now, more than a decade later, the second father-daughter duo has taken the stage.

“Julia has pretty much been around the stage since she was born,” said Ed, adding that Julia has always loved to hang out backstage and has helped him memorize his lines. “It was natural for her to get involved with the theater, and it’s such a joy to share that with her.”

For her part, Julia said she loves being on stage with her father – and, just being on stage.

“I love the lights. I love the stage. I love working with other people. And I like the sounds of applause,” she said with a grin. “I think this is what I am supposed to be doing.”

It doesn’t surprise Ed one bit. He tells a story of when Julia was just 3 or 4 years old and out of nowhere began belting out “Castle on a Cloud” from “Les Miserables.”

“She had perfect pitch. Just perfect,” he recalled.

From then on, it was evident that Julia is talented. But the Forans didn’t necessarily push their daughter into the theater: “Being well-rounded, that’s what’s important. And there are so many opportunities to do it all in this community ... acting, skiing, school,” Ed said.

Still, Julia embraced the arts. She plays violin and is in her school orchestra, and she has participated in plays at Aspen Elementary and Aspen Middle Schools. More recently, she has joined her dad on stage with Aspen Community Theater – even taking the lead role of Amaryllis in “The Music Man.” With Theatre Aspen, Julia has been part of “Aspen’s Got Young Talent” among other productions. So when the chance to audition for “Annie” came up, Julia jumped in with two feet.

“She wanted to go for it, but we made it clear there was a lot of competition,” said Ed, noting that with national auditions planned for the show, he thought Julia’s chances of landing a role, let alone the lead, were slim.

“I didn’t expect to get the part,” added Julia. “I just wanted to try out. I just wanted that experience. I was shocked when I got the role.”

Now, halfway through this summer’s run of “Annie,” Julia has some clarity on where she’d like to take her acting.

“I realize I’d like to make a living doing theater. I’d like to be on Broadway,” she said. “I am just so happy when I am on the stage.”

Ed also sees his Julia continuing to shine on the stage. But he’s not quite ready to break up the father-daughter duo quite yet. “We’ll sit down at the end of the summer and talk about what Julia wants; we feel so lucky that she has so many opportunities right here, that we don’t have to send her off to some performing arts school.”

Julia agreed: “There are so many great resources right here in Aspen; I am so lucky,” she said. “And my dad is so great to work with. He gives me advice and is just so supportive.”

It’s not hard to imagine that. Talking to Ed, it’s clear his fatherly instinct is much stronger than his acting desires.

“Just watching Julia in ‘Annie’ brings us such much joy. She is just so happy,” he said. “It’s like a dream come true for a parent to see that.”

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