

Stage Memories

Beloved actress and singer Liz Callaway, of Croton-on-Hudson, sometimes prefers just being a wife, mother, sister...and travel agent.

The next time you're stopped at a traffic light, check out the driver in the next car. If she has short, blond hair and crystal-blue eyes, and appears to be belting out a melody, you might be witnessing Liz Callaway practicing for her newest production.

But while the car is one of her favorite places to rehearse, as an actress and singer for more than 30 years, Callaway has performed on stages and in concert halls throughout the world. On Broadway, she debuted at age 20 in Stephen Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along*, and, two years later, she played Lizzie in *Baby*, for which she was nominated for a Tony Award. She was Constance in *The Three Musketeers*, Ellen in *Miss Saigon*, and Liz in *The Look of Love*; for five years she sang the haunting "Memory" as Grizabella in *Cats*. Off Broadway, she earned a Drama

Desk nomination for her portrayal of Shelby in *The Spitfire Grill* and spent a week last July as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. In the movies, she's the singing voice for Jasmine in Disney's two *Aladdin* sequels, a shop girl in *Beauty and the Beast*, and the title character in *Anastasia*, performing the Oscar-nominated "Journey to the Past." She's appeared at the White House, with symphony orchestras, and in intimate clubs. Sometimes she's solo; sometimes she performs as a duo with her older sister, Ann Hampton Callaway, and sometimes alongside luminaries like Dionne Warwick and Stevie Wonder.

Yet the roles that are closest to her heart are those of Liz Foster: wife of Dan Foster, co-founder of the Briarcliff Manor-based Hudson Stage Company; mother of Nicholas, now a senior at Kenyon College in Ohio; member of multiple tennis teams—4.0 women's and 8.0 mixed doubles—throughout Westchester; and diehard Mets, Jets, and Knicks fan.

For these roles, she says, "I don't wear a speck of makeup and I'm just a regular person. I love my work, but one of the reasons I've stayed sane is that when I'm not Liz Callaway, I have a very normal life as Liz Foster."

I gained some insight into these interwoven identities during a recent conversation at the Fosters' 19th-century, three-bedroom Colonial in Croton-on-Hudson, where they've lived since 1995. "Just looking around, I'll bet you wouldn't know what I do for a living," Callaway says, as she takes me through her home.

Perhaps. The rooms are adorned with folk art purchased on their travels: a hat mold from Estonia and a pair of antique skates from Amsterdam by the window, colorful spools of yarn from a shop in Connecticut filling a wall, a painted merry-go-round horse from... "I can't remember where we got that," she says, chuckling.

In the living room, though, I catch sight of Al Hirschfeld's portrait of a curly-haired Callaway in *Baby*—an original, she tells me, a surprise gift from Dan. And the hair? "I had a really bad perm."

There are lots of books: biographies and travel in the sunroom ("I like reading essays by people who've moved to other countries"), theater books and novels in the dining room. In the sun-filled kitchen, a bookshelf full of cookbooks (lately she's been partial to *The Tuscan Sun Cookbook*, a gift from Dan, and Rick Bayless's *Mexican Everyday*) testifies to another of her passions. "I make dinner every night," she says.

Back in the dining room, we sit at the table where Callaway—tall and slender, wearing jeans and a black sweater—shares her stories. Turns out Callaway, 51, wasn't always so comfortable in front of an audience. As a child growing up in Winnetka, Illinois, she'd croon show



PHOTO BY BILL WESTMORELAND

tunes into her hairbrush—but only when no one was around. At family gatherings, when her mother, a voice teacher, insisted Liz sing, she'd demand that guests face away from her before she began. "I was incredibly shy," she says.


Her passion for theater didn't sprout until she was a sophomore in high school, and, even then, it wasn't the limelight she craved but the sense of community engendered by performing with a group. "I was in the chorus of a show, and my parents split up," Callaway says. "The people I was working with took me under their wing, and that's when I fell in love with theater. It wasn't, 'Oh, I can't wait to sing for you.' It was the friendships, the collaboration, the family feeling of performing together."

Since then, much of her life has orbited around that intersection of family and performance. At age 18, after just a couple of months in college, she dropped out and landed in New York City with her sister, Ann, where she enrolled in acting, dancing, and singing classes. Several years later, her husband-to-be, then an actor himself, spotted her onstage.

"He came to the first preview of *Baby*, and he liked what he saw," she says with a grin.

At first, she was resistant: "As a product of divorce, the idea of getting married was scary to me." Nevertheless, they married in 1985, when she was 24 and Dan was 28. "We're a success story for theater couples," she says.

As for Nicholas, he was essentially raised backstage. Callaway was pregnant when she auditioned for *Miss Saigon*, and Nicholas was born during rehearsals. "I had a two-week maternity leave after a C-section. Not what I'd recommend!" Her first day back at work was her first day at the theater—with Nicholas in tow. "My role was important, but I didn't have huge stage time," she says. "I'd nurse him until I heard my cue, then it'd be, 'Pop! Gotta go!' and I'd run onstage." Her *Cats* stint followed directly, from 1993 to 1998, and again, Nicholas accompanied her to the theater. "Because I was able to bring him with me, I never had working-mom guilt. I was unbelievably exhausted, but it was a great time."

During this period, Callaway added concert appearances to her repertoire, beginning with a show called "Sibling Revelry" that she created and performed with Ann, a singer/songwriter whose career parallels Liz's and whose deeper, huskier voice serves as counterpoint to Liz's cascading soprano. At first, the kind of audience interaction required for this work reawakened Callaway's shyness. "It was terrifying to have to sing and talk directly to the audience," she says. "It's very different from playing a character who's not me." 

spired by the artists she profiles.

High Note

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But, clearly, that shyness has passed. At her Caramoor debut last May, she owned the stage in the Rosen House Music Room. Wearing a slinky black dress, she delivered Irving Berlin's "I Got the Sun in the Morning" perched on the piano; later, she alarmed and then wowed the audience when she appeared to forget her lines, only to launch into a breakneck parody of "Another Hundred People" from Sondheim's *Company*. Donning white go-go boots, she and Ann have been touring the country with their latest show, "Boom!" a medley of pop songs from the '60s and '70s. Coming up in November, Callaway will be performing solo at 54 Below, a nightclub and restaurant that opened in June downstairs from the former Studio 54. Which is probably why she's been singing of late in

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the car. "It's where I like to learn my music."

In a life defined by roles, there are a couple of others worth mentioning. One involves the seemingly endless tasks she handles to secure and organize her various projects. "It's like I'm CEO of Liz Callaway, Inc.—with no staff." The second role focuses on one of those many tasks: the coordination of airline and hotel reservations. As a frequent traveler (she estimates she's away about a quarter of the year) and a confessed control freak ("especially about my flights"), Callaway books all of her own itineraries. "I'm a really good travel agent," she declares.

Occasionally, that offers a sort of comfort, especially prior to a performance. "Before I go out onstage, I get nervous, and I'll think, 'Why do I put myself through this? Why didn't I just become a travel agent?' Then I take a deep breath and out I go. And by the middle of the first song, I'm fine. I'm **W** calm and relaxed. And I love it."

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