

COURTNEY RAINS LOO

Courtney Rains Loo was on Broadway in an upward spiraling career when a faithful decision changed the direction of her life and eventually brought her to Bucks County / BY MARGO ARAMIAN RAGAN



Photo: Paul Wesley

Imagine going from a major Broadway production to the sets of some of the more successful television and movie productions, but finding your greatest satisfaction and happiness in the tiny borough of Morrisville. That's the journey of twists and turns that Courtney Rains Loo embarked upon, ending now with her intimate relationship with God.

My 12-year-old granddaughter Emma and I recently spent a fascinating afternoon with Courtney. We had been told that she is petite, but that does not describe the force of boundless energy she radiates, the strength of her personality. She could have been six feet tall by the way she knows instinctively how to connect with people, and command their presence.

"I'm a Philadelphia native who always loved to sing and dance," she said. "At age ten I knew all the lyrics of the Broadway show *Annie*, and when Mt. St. Joseph School was preparing to produce *The Sound of Music*, I auditioned and won the role of Brigitta, since I could sing the loudest of all who auditioned."

Being on stage gave Courtney the opportunity to assume a different persona, especially since life at home was a little difficult.

The acting bug bit. She auditioned for roles with the Cheltenham Playhouse and the Riverfront Theater, and spent time

with the La Salle University Summer Music Theater. “I did odd jobs such as sweeping the stage, getting drinks for the actors, grateful for the opportunity to watch them perform, observing their techniques, interactions with one another and the audience. It was a wonderful education,” she said.

Then there came the smash Broadway musical *Cats*. The help wanted advertisement in the show business newspaper *Variety* could have read like this: Wanted—actor with the physical grace of a cat, the agility of an acrobat, the personality of an impudent and cheeky kid, and of course, an excellent voice that can reach the rafters of a Broadway stage. A perfect description of Courtney!

The musical is based on poetry written by British poet T.S. Eliot, whose own words set the parameter of what the cats should be: “Knockout clowns quick change comedians Tight rope walkers and acrobats, They had an extensive reputation.”

Courtney was cast in the role of Rumpleteazer, a lovable mischievous orange and black tabby or calico cat, who created hassles for the other cats. A string of pearls was a distinctive part of her costume. Because the estate of T.S. Eliot insisted that there be no script or deviation from the poet's words, there is essentially no spoken dialogue between each song. Therefore, the performers have to use their bodies as an instrument for communication between them and the audience, a technique that Courtney was perfectly able to do.

“I always knew how to connect with an audience,” Courtney said. “My love of dancing and singing helped me own my presence on stage.”

For three years Courtney performed Rumpleteazer in a traveling *Cats* production, which took her to 161 cities in the United States and Canada. Despite the success and adventure associated with traveling with such a major musical show, Courtney admitted that she was personally dissatisfied with her life. “When you are an actor, you can hide the person you really

are within the role,” she said. “You are playing in a fantasy world, you can hide from your inner thoughts and insecurities, never truly facing them. It is a world of make believe that was not satisfying to me. Fame and money only led to a false sense of fulfillment.”

Her depression was obvious to her sister Deborah Watson, who travelled with her. Deborah took Courtney aside, and began talking with her about finding peace and resolution with God. “That is when I became a Christian,” said Courtney, “Once I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior, my life has changed forever for the better.”

It is also when she decided to switch gears in her career. Courtney left the troupe, stayed in California, deciding to become a stunt person in the movies and television. “I have always been athletic, tumbling and falling is why I excelled in *Cats*, and my size was perfect for standing in for younger actors,” she said. “Depending upon the role, I could be a boy or a girl.”

More importantly working as a stunt person was a step she felt into the real world where you had to concentrate, focus entirely on the moment, and be in charge of your own character.

The first call from Central Casting came rather quickly. McCauley Culkin was starring in a fantasy/adventure film called *The Pagemaster*, and someone was needed as a stand-in for him while lights and staging were being adjusted. The family liked Courtney personally, subsequently using her for other films that he made.

She also worked in *August Rush*, a movie starring Freddie Highmore. She acted as Freddie's double, and her assignment was to walk into New York traffic, get hit by a car and land on her backside safely. This particular stunt was dangerous (aren't they all?) because during rehearsals numerous stunt cars were coming by her at different times in different directions, throwing off her timing. What made matters worse is that she did not film until 6 p.m., when the sun went down on an already freezing day. “I thank God that I

only got hit by the one car and gently at that,” she said.

Courtney's size, physical agility, and ability to play both young boys and girls kept her busy as a stunt person. She conceded that it takes a certain mind set as well as physical ability to play a child. “If you are a double for the role of an hyperactive child, you have to engage your body to reflect that hyperactivity as well as your mind, otherwise the audience can sense that you are an adult.”

She was as serious about her work as a stunt person as she was about her acting. Courtney spent time keeping herself physically fit, honing her gymnastic skills, learning how to fake fight without getting hurt. Other stunt persons were generous with their time and knowledge, and Courtney was a willing student.

“I had the privilege of working with Robin Williams in the film *Jack*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola,” she said. Despite the fact that both men were stars in their own right, they were courteous and friendly to her.

Emma wanted to know what was the scariest stunt she was ever asked to perform. Courtney immediately knew the answer, “That is when I was set on fire,” she said.

The production was one which starred Corbin Bensen, who created the sleazy but likeable character of Arnie Becker in *LA Law*, a program popular in the early 90's. Courtney was doubling for a little girl who was supposed to be making pancakes, but the sleeve of her pajamas was too close to the stove and caught on fire.

“The stunt crew dunked all my clothing in a fireproof gel,” Courtney explained. “Once I had that on, they slathered that gel on every inch of my body so that I was completely protected.” Nonetheless, she admits when the director called for action, she was petrified.

“There is a disconnect that happens between the brain and the reality of what was happening,” Courtney said. “I had complete confidence in the safety measures which the crew had taken, but my

brain flipped immediately to absolute and total terror.”

That stunt did not hurt her at all, but jumping through a window was a different story. The window was rigged to shatter at the exact moment when she jumped through, but the landing and the act itself was the most painful she endured in her career. Courtney graciously talked with Emma how judicious editing could make the scene seem more dangerous than what it actually was.

She also showed Emma a framed photograph of the cast from *Full House*, an immensely popular television program from 1987 to 1995 starring John Stamos, Bob Saget and the Olsen twins. The production crew numbered close to 100 people, but there in the second or third row with a huge smile on her face is Courtney, who worked on that show for many years.

An important takeaway that Courtney took from her experiences in Hollywood is that no matter how big a star may be, he or she is first and foremost, a human being with typical frailties, experiencing common problems in life that we all share. “I made no secret on set that I am a Christian,” she said. “Even the biggest names on the marquee would ask that I pray with them as they were undergoing life’s struggles. My faith became a bond among us, and out of respect for those individuals, I want to keep their names private.”

Courtney’s faith is what brought her to Morrisville, to start a new life and to repair her relationship with members in her old life. “Before I became a Christian, I did not have the best relationship with my mother,” she said. “I now understood how important that bond really is, and God helped direct me back to a healthy relationship with her.”

She formed two musical groups, Courtney Carolers and a Christian rock band, Right To Be. Courtney Carolers are singers who sing a cappella Christmas carols and hymns during the Christmas season, for groups such as the Doylestown Country Club, Yardley Christmas Parade, and Newtown Business Association. To

add to their charm, each member is attired in formal period gowns and bonnets.

The Right To Become is a collaborative effort between Courtney the lead vocalist, the Secor brothers including Dan, Kevin and Ryan, and Jeremy Sowers. The band derives its name from the English Standard Version of the *Bible*, John 1:12, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

“As a Christian rock band, we seek to spread the Gospel, believing our message is more than just the music we joyfully perform. We want to change lives, to give you

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hope,” she explained. “We are reaching out for people who are seeking the peace that only God can give to them.”

Courtney gave both Emma and me two CD's performed by Right To Become, which we slipped into the disc player in my car when we returned from the interview. One intensely personal original piece, *I Call To You*, eloquently describes Courtney's journey and faith. “And You answered me from the whirlwind /In the wreckage of my life/ With earthly hand You covered me/ Never left, stayed by my side/ In the splendor of Your creation/ You showered peace that all can see/ When I call to you You answer me.” Courtney has found inner peace and happiness with her God.

For more information, call 215-820-0947, visit www.RightToBecome.com or write Secor Rock LLC, P.O. Box 1093, Morrisville PA.

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