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Spotlight on **Jennifer**
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Spotlight on Jennifer Mays

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Jennifer Mays specializes in playing strawberry blonde ingénues at the New Theatre Restaurant, American Heartland Theatre, and Kansas City Repertory Theatre. I got a chance to chat with her before a performance of *Over the River and Through the Woods*, which she is doing at the New Theatre Restaurant.

BC: I'm curious about your life before college at UMKC.

JM: I grew up in Carl Junction, which is a tiny town just outside of Joplin. I had dance lessons when I was five, and as soon as there was choir I did choir, and as soon as there was theatre in school I did theatre. It helped that my mom's a music teacher and my dad, although he is a computer professor at the college in Joplin, was really active in theatre in college and high school. When I was growing up he was doing shows with the college still. I was around that kind of stuff all the time.

BC: There was nothing else for you?

JM: I always knew I could fall back on something else if I needed to, but I haven't had to yet.

BC: How's theater in Carl Junction?

JM: There is no theatre in Carl Junction. The population is about 2,000, but it's a suburb of Joplin. There's no theatre in Joplin, either. They have a community theatre, but I never did anything there. I just always did high school shows. I look at the kids now that get to go in and do shows at the Kansas City Rep and the Coterie and

all these programs - the Young Playwrights Series - and all these things they get to do here, and I'm so incredibly jealous because I never got any of that. My drama coach in high school was just the Spanish teacher who had a spare hour or two and she wanted to be the drama coach. She didn't really know anything at all about drama. It was very frustrating, and we just did anything we wanted to do. We did some really bad shows.

BC: Let's go in the other direction and talk about your future. What are your ambitions? What would you like to do?

JM: I'm doing it. I have consistent stage work and camera work that comes and goes; lately more goes, but that's the market in this city right now. It would be good to be in a bigger city where there are more on-camera options, but I don't know if I would have as consistent regular theatre work. I went to New York for a couple of years. I loved the city and I had a good time. For the amount of time I was there, I did pretty good. I didn't get anything huge, but I was actually working. I had a temp job that was mostly paying the bills, but I did some bit player stuff on a soap opera and some stand-in work on a movie.

I came back to Kansas City to visit and got a show, and another show, and then 9/11 happened. I talked to my friends in New York and not only were there no acting jobs, but they

couldn't even do their day jobs anymore because we were all temping and there were so many people in office buildings that were out of work that they were doing all the temp work. So it got really hard for people doing what I was doing, and I got steady work here, so why go and kill myself when I've got it pretty good.

I have a few little side things that I do, but most of them are theatre related. I teach sometimes for the Rep or the Shakespeare Festival, and I do the standardized patient thing where we pretend to be sick for student doctors.

BC: How did you end up in Roanoke, Virginia doing *The Laramie Project*?

JM: Doug Zschiegner played Petruccio in the first production of *Taming of the Shrew* at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, and he was the artistic director of the theatre that did *Laramie Project*. He just called me up out of the blue. That was the show I was doing during 9/11. It was hard because we were still in rehearsals, and most of the cast was from New York. They were doing *Laramie Project* here too at the Unicorn. We had similar experiences of trying to deal with a show that has so much emotional power.

BC: What did you think of the undergrad program at UMKC?

JM: I thought I was going in to get a dual major with the music and theatre program. I looked

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and thought the Conservatory and Missouri Rep theatre in the same building—what could be better? I also had a big scholarship if I went to a Missouri state school, so I thought that would be perfect. I can't really complain, but the conservatory only did opera, and the theatre department only did straight theatre, and undergrads only did spear carrier roles.

I got really lucky that every year I was there one first year grad student would leave. They would need three women, and one would be gone, so I managed to get almost every one of those third spots, so I actually got some experience.

The classes were fine, and working with the teachers was great, but getting a chance to have that experience on stage was the one thing that made it completely worthwhile for me. I know a lot of people went through that program and never got to do anything worthwhile.

BC: Things have changed since then.

JM: They do an undergrad show. They do musical theatre. They have an association with Molly Jessup and Linda Ade Brand, and that really helps a lot.

BC: You never went to graduate school?

JM: Every place I was interested in that was interested in me said I looked younger than an undergrad. There weren't any mature roles they could give me with the grad students. So if I wanted to go back in a couple of years

they might have something, but six months later I was working full time, so fine by me. Most grad programs only pick two or three women anyway, and none of them play ingénues. They're grooming their leading ladies. Maybe someday I'll grow up and be a leading lady.

BC: What are some things you're excited about locally?

JM: There's a lot going on right now with the Unicorn getting a second stage, the Rep getting a second stage, and Kansas City Actors Theatre. There's an opportunity for Kansas City to become really big. One show I enjoyed doing was Princess Squid's *Miss Julie*. I wish more people got a chance to see that. It was down in a little space that not many people knew. They were kind of in a transitional time with marketing, but I think it was a really good show, and an opportunity to do something I hadn't done before.

BC: You've been very successful in working rather steadily at the New Theatre.

JM: The relationships I have with the guys at the New Theatre and the work that I've been able to continue to do with them - that's something that I'm really thankful for. I don't know how much I can attribute to luck and how much to talent and how much to being available and working out for them. I think a lot of it does have to do with not so much working hard as working hard not to be the problem. Sometimes you work with peo-

ple and you see them monopolize rehearsal time, create drama where there is no drama, or just be hard to work with and you just want to take them off to the side and say, "You know, if you were easier to work with, you would work a lot more."

I think that has a lot to do with it - to be someone that they can count on to not cause trouble, to do the job every night, and do it the same way every night. When you're doing a show that has 80-115 performances, you have to have someone that you know isn't going to start messing with it.

BC: You seem to have had a fairly easy time of it as an actor.

JM: I have been very lucky. I know that, and I am very thankful for that. I think the luck that I've had is also luck that I could have screwed up. The door opened with a little bit of luck, but it stayed open because of hard work and respect for the job. If you have respect for the job and respect for the fact that someone is paying you to come and play this role every single night of the week, then you're gonna do it.

BC: What about film work?

JM: I wish there were more film work in Kansas City. There used to be, then the film commissions disappeared. A lot of it had to do with the Screen Actors Guild strike and the mass exodus to Canada. We had so much film work in Kansas City because it was a cheap,

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convenient place to go, but then Canada became even cheaper and even more convenient, so we lost a lot of it. It's going to take the industry and the government finding a way to make it worth their while.

BC: And independent film?

JM: A lot of independent filmmakers don't want the hassle of having to deal with union talent, but the ones that bite the bullet realize it's not that hard. It doesn't cost them much more. The unions know that it's important to allow the opportunities for the actors and the filmmakers. Our biggest problem here is trying to keep producers doing smaller films—training films, commercials. It used to be huge, and it used to be all union. There used to be a respect factor. It used to be when a producer was making a training film or commercial they wanted it to be union. They wanted to tell their clients they were doing it professionally, and now they just want to save a lot. You have to

remind them why professional union talent is worth it, and that takes commitment from everybody involved.

BC: Tell me about being the spokesperson for Chux Trux.

JM: I would wear tight jeans and a tank top but I had a little more attitude than your typical trucker bimbo. It was a really fun campaign. I was their spokesperson for a whole year.

BC: The New Theatre is one of the most profitable theatres in the country. What's it like working in that environment?

JM: The biggest part of theatre is trying to get people in the seats. It's hard to cast and rehearse and get the money for production and all of that, but the biggest thing is to market it and get everybody here. How many places do you know that every time you do a show, there are 600 people guaranteed every night, eight shows a week, for ten weeks? They do it right. The food is really good, and every time you go there the service

is amazing. They know their business. There shouldn't be a difference in your performance when it's a third of the house or a full house, but it makes a difference when you've got every one of those seats filled. It's fun to go out there and know that if we all do our job, by the time we get to the end of this segment, they're going to be laughing hysterically. And they do.

BC: Casting television celebrities helps.

JM: It takes you out of the show for a second when it's a star doing it. It's a novelty. Luckily they've been able to find stars that have some talent. It would be very easy to bring in a name for the sake of a name, and sacrifice some of the art. A lot of them are fabulous.

BC: Do they go see any shows when they're here?

JM: They can't. They're working too much. That's one of the things that can be so frustrating when I'm working so much. I know it's a horrible thing to say and everyone would hate me for saying it—complaining about working. But I don't get a chance to see much theatre. I can never see a Unicorn show.

BC: Unless you do one.

JM: Which I haven't yet.

BC: How come?

JM: I don't know. It just hasn't worked out.

BC: They never need ingénues?

JM: Ingénues are boring. Ingénues aren't on the edge. We need to write a play called *Ingénues on the Edge*. ▣

