

IN CONVERSATION WITH HEIDI BLICKENSTAFF

SKYLER GRAY, THE ALLEY'S LITERARY MANAGER, SPOKE TO HEIDI BLICKENSTAFF, STAR OF DISNEY'S **FREAKY FRIDAY**.



SKYLER GRAY:
HEID!!

HEIDI BLICKENSTAFF:
SKYLER!



SG: We're so excited to have you join us in Houston soon!

HB: I'm so excited! I have not been to Texas in at least twenty-five years. I spent a summer in Fort Worth, doing summer stock at the Hip Pocket Theatre. We were doing a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a million years ago.

SG: That's great. I hadn't been until I interviewed for this job a year and a half ago.

HB: So you're new to Houston!

SG: I went from Fresno to Orange County to New York to Houston.

HB: Oh my gosh. How has that transition been?

SG: I feel like, and you can probably attest to this as well, but growing up in Fresno, California was like living in a big town with a small town vibe. Houston has a similar feel to it. It is a big, fantastic city with the charm and hospitality of a small town.

HB: And it's, just like, hot as heck there, right?

SG: [Laughs] Oh, yes. Plus it can get pretty humid, so your skin is going to look amazing.

HB: Yeah, it's going to be supple. I'm gonna look like a dewy 18-year-old. That's what we all strive for once we are over 35.

SG: So let's jump in. We both grew up in Fresno, CA and performed at the same dinner theatre: Good Company Players (GCP). Can you talk about how you got into theatre?

HB: Well first of all, I was obsessed with movie musicals as a kid. I was harmonizing with Barbra Streisand records by three—my mom was obsessed with Barbra—and she knew I was a weirdo. So she started showing me movie musicals, like the old, great ones: *Singin' in the Rain*, *Oklahoma!* and *Hello, Dolly!* And my uncle had a video store—and we're talking the early 80's. Not many people were obsessed with movie musicals like I was and there was a whole section that no one rented, so he would send all of those movie musical videos to us. It was magical as far as I was concerned. And then my mom took me to go see a production of *Oklahoma!* at GCP when I was six, and there was a little girl in the show whose name was Lori Blue. I remember seeing her and going, "Hold it. Wait a minute. This is a live thing, like this happens live, and there's a kid in it?" And my world was utterly changed. My focus became completely singular on getting to where Lori Blue was. And so I begged my mom to audition. However, we were more of a sports family. Lots of baseball, lots of soccer—

SG: Oh, so was the Gray family. All four boys.

HB: You know, my dad and uncle coached, like it was major for us. Of course I played all the sports, and I was pretty good at it. But once I knew that there was theatre, I was like, "No, that's all over." So I auditioned. I

think I sang "Maybe" [from *Annie*] at my very first audition on that stage at GCP and I was terrified. I had never done that, other than singing into a hairbrush. I had never had a voice teacher because my family just wasn't geared toward that. So I went up there and I was awful. But Dan Pessano [the artistic director], who saw this nervous seven-year-old, went up to my mom afterwards and said, "Give her a year, and maybe put her in a dance class, and give her experience performing in some way, and come back." So a year later I went back after being in dance class and doing what Dan said. I sang "Maybe" again and I booked it, *Skyler*. I became a part of their Junior Company, which is a group of kids between the ages of seven to sixteen, who do a twenty-minute cabaret. It was essentially a warm up for the audience to get ready for the big show, and also to look at a bunch of cute kids—

SG: With their names on their shirts like the Mickey Mouse Club.

HB: You would have thought I booked a Broadway musical I was so excited. And I did that on and off until I was sixteen. I was ten when I did *Annie*, my first mainstage production at GCP. I won that title role sort of miraculously—I like to say I beat out Audra McDonald* for that part, which is totally and completely true. Audra and I grew up in Fresno together, we carpooled together, we were friends, and...I think even at one point she went steady with my brother. There was definitely something in Fresno's water at that moment. There were a lot of really talented kids that went through that training program who would later go on to New York careers. So that's how I got my start. Dan and Laurie Pessano, Biz Fiester and Nancy Miller—



Heidi and Dan Pessano in *Annie* at GCP.



Heidi (front) and Audra McDonald (second row) in GCP's Junior Company.

SG: Biz was my high school drama teacher and Nancy directed me in *Shakespeare in Hollywood* at GCP forever ago!

HB: All those really wonderful people in Fresno gave me this major performing arts education that I take with me even now. And there are some of the skills I learned as an eight-year-old that I'm still practicing now in my mid-forties. And not just the flap-ball-change part but also the work-ethic part. Even though it was a small town dinner theatre, it set something in motion for me that has lasted my entire career and will be with me until I'm dead in the grave. I would say my training at GCP was the most important training of my entire life.

SG: This is taking me back. For my first audition at GCP, I sang "If I Only Had a Brain." I was so nervous that I forgot the words.

HB: That's good stuff right there. What did you audition for?

*Audra McDonald is an actress and singer who has won six Tony Awards, more than any other actor in history. She can currently be seen in *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* as Madame Garderobe.

SG: That was for *The Sound of Music* which I booked. It was me, my brother, and Chris Colfer of *Glee* fame alternating as the Von Trapp boys.

HB: Amazing.

SG: So what was your journey from Fresno to New York?

HB: Well, after going to Roosevelt School of the Arts, I decided I needed a little bit of a break from theatre. My father is an attorney—

left turn and was like, “I’m going to be a lawyer and I’ll get into Duke University.” And I did get into Duke. Within a semester at Duke I thought, “What am I doing? I don’t want to be a lawyer.” I’m a Type A Capricorn who never quits anything, so I decided to stick it out there and become a drama major. It was an interesting four years—going from California to North Carolina was definitely a culture shock—but it was really good for me. I graduated from Duke in 1994 with my Drama major in hand, and I literally packed up a U-Haul and drove to New York City. I moved in with a Fresno friend of mine who was modeling at the time. I moved into some little corner of her apartment that she shared with seventeen other models. I started immediately waiting tables. My parents, God bless them, had no idea how to help me other than being supportive on the phone and sending me checks when I couldn’t afford ramen anymore. But within six months I booked my first national tour, which was *The Who’s Tommy*.

SG: The best!

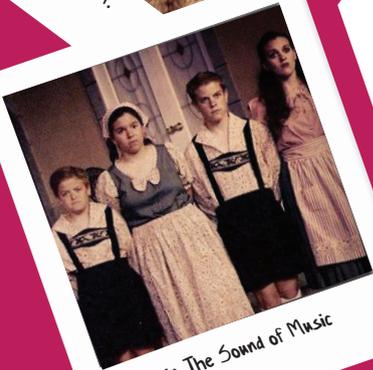
HB: Yeah, the best, ever. I couldn’t believe that within six months of moving to New York I had booked my dream musical. Then went on the road and did that show for like a year and a half. Then I did six other national tours.

SG: And you did them back to back?

HB: Pretty much. I toured from the time I got to New York until I was in my early thirties. I loved it, and I grew up out there. I saw the country and parts of the world that I don’t know that I’ll ever get back to. I’m so grateful for that experience. I had this crazy life while being on the road. Then I was doing the national tour of *The Full Monty*, and we were sent home because of September 11th. Then the Broadway company of *The Full Monty* called me to join the Broadway production. I remember I celebrated my thirtieth birthday in that show. I ended up going back out on the road when they remounted the tour. When I finally got off the road for good, I realized that I needed to take more control of my career, and my life in general. I was very proud of what I had accomplished, but I was like, “I have to restructure.” That’s when [title of show] happened and changed everything.



Heidi in *Annie* at GCP.



Skylar in *The Sound of Music* at GCP.

Photos courtesy of GCP.

he used to be the District Attorney of Fresno—and my mother’s a teacher. I was thinking for a hot second that I might be a lawyer. Thank God I have supportive parents who just surfed the wave that is Hurricane Heidi because after I had convinced them that I was going to be an actor and I wanted to be on Broadway, I took this crazy hard



Heidi and Jeff Bowen in [title of show]

Photo by Carol Rosegg



Heidi in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*.

Photo by Jenny Anderson

I was in my early thirties and my friends and I basically collaborated on this crazy musical where we played ourselves. It was a musical about writing the musical you're watching, and how these four friends end up taking this wonderful ride together. It was when we did that show that everything started to change. And that's when I stopped being just like this workhorse actor and I started being more of a creative person that was interested in making my own work and my mark in the city. It was a crazy, wild ride. Even though it was not a commercial success, [title of show] was a critical success and people knew who we were. That's when the opportunities really started coming my way and things started changing. That is not to say that suddenly everything was easy. I'm in my mid-forties and I'm still hustling. I don't think the hustle ever ends for an actor.

SG: This isn't your first time working with Disney, correct?

HB: I've had this amazing relationship with Disney that started out with *The Little Mermaid*. I was so grateful to have my first Disney experience because I'd been a fan of everything Disney for as long as I have been a fan of movie musicals and Barbra Streisand—so forever. It's such a great company to work for, and I'm so grateful.

SG: And you understudied the role of Ursula which you eventually took over. What was it like to play such an iconic character?

HB: Terrifying, and eventually super liberating and fun. Before *The Little Mermaid* I had only been in the ensemble of *The Full Monty* on Broadway, so playing Ursula was magnificent. Suddenly I am being wheeled onstage in this huge apparatus—I looked like a float in the Electrical Light Parade—that opens up and has all these tentacles. I was there in this gazillion dollar costume with this wig that is practically as tall as I am, and these swimming eels at my side, and I was suddenly holding down a Broadway stage. I thought I was going to die. She's so delicious and everything about her in the movie was perfection. So to translate that into a musical is always really hard because everybody has these expectations. I didn't really have my Broadway legs yet, but Disney trusted me to do this because they knew I had it in me. They could see that there was definitely an Ursula inside me waiting to get out, and they nurtured it.

SG: Switching gears to **Freaky Friday**. When did you first get involved with the project?

HB: About six years ago when they were first trying some stuff out. Mary Rodgers, the author of the novel, was still alive and they just wanted to hear some things. I was only there for a very short period of time, but I met Mary, Bridget Carpenter (book writer) and Chris Ashley (director). Whenever Disney calls I always say yes. And so we did that workshop for a week, and I remember thinking at the end of that week, "I'm right for this part." I knew it because one of my pet peeves is watching adults play kids. I am sort of allergic to it—there's not much I want to do less than spend an evening watching adults play children. But for some crazy reason, and I don't know why, I felt like I could do

it. Bridget Carpenter, our book writer, is a genius. She is responsible for the television versions of *Parenthood* and *Friday Night Lights*. Nobody writes better dialogue than Bridget Carpenter, and you could tell that **Freaky Friday** was going to be special. And also meeting Mary Rodgers was totally amazing— she was this tough old bird who shot straight from the hip, and who was just endlessly entertaining. And so the week passed, and they stuck a pin in the project as they tried to figure out what they wanted to do with it. I then kept my finger on the project because I always knew that I was right for this. Then I heard that they had added Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey to the author roster, and of course, Tom and Brian are the Pulitzer Prize-winning authors of *Next to Normal*.**

SG: Which you did!

HB: Which I did a regional production of in Vermont at the Weston Playhouse. So I had fallen in love with the Kitt/Yorkey aesthetic. So this role that I feel like I'm very drawn to, naturally, is being written by this incomparable writer, and now we're bringing in the composer/lyricist team who I feel like if I spent the rest of my career only doing their musicals, I would be satisfied! I felt like they were such a good match, so I went after it. Which I had never done before in my career. I felt like I was at a point in my career where it was ok for me to write to Tom Kitt. We had done a workshop of something—so I wrote him an email. I knew at the time they were working with another actress. I wrote to Tom, "If for some crazy reason she gets another job, let me sing for you." And I didn't hear from him for a month. I was positive I had overstepped my bounds and was not ready to have taken such a risk in my career. Tom did write me back and he was like, "Sorry, life is crazy"— he's got three kids and was writing *If/Then*. He was like, "We love you, we've been talking about you for this project from the very beginning, but we are committed to this other actress and if anything changes I'll give you a call." And I was like, "Great, great." I felt good about it. I felt like I hadn't overstepped after all, and we would just let the universe decide our fates. And I let it go. And then about two weeks later I got an email from the Signature Theatre in DC [which premiered **Freaky Friday**] saying, "Do you wanna do it?" What happened was that the other actress got a television show, and so they were like, "Go to Heidi." And because I've been doing this for twenty-five years—and being the girl that always said yes and was brave enough to do



Emma Hurnton and Heidi in Disney's *Freaky Friday*.



Heidi in Disney's *Freaky Friday*.

Photos by Jim Carmody.

****Next to Normal...**

is the Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning musical about a mother dealing with bipolar disorder. The Broadway production ran from 2009-2011.

Freaky Friday is a co-production between the Alley Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse and Cleveland Play House. This production premiered at Signature Theatre in Washington, DC earlier this season.

something even if I wasn't quite ready to do it—I got that magical phone call offering me a role without having to audition. That literally never happens. I knew, psychically, that this was exactly the right thing for me. Even though we didn't know what the future was going to be for this project, I knew working with this team was right. It's really a dream project, and I'm endlessly lucky that I get to do it night after night right now.

SG: Do you continue to learn things about the show and your character?

HB: We do continue to refine it, for sure. A piece of theatre is a living, breathing thing that morphs over time in good ways and in some less than good ways, it just happens naturally. Ultimately it's a universal message. You know it's zany and very fun, which is what people are expecting, I think. But then because our authors are so exceptional and like to take a deeper dive, there's also this emotional wallop that is layered in—you don't invite the writers of *Next to Normal* to write the book to a musical unless you really want them to leave an emotional impact. And they certainly have done that. Our **Freaky Friday** is definitely giving you what you want with the mother/daughter swap, and it's certainly funny, and it's got a lot of physical humor, and it's crazy and fun and delightful, but I think audiences walk out of the theatre holding each other a little tighter. It's such a beautiful show and we are continuing to find all of the deeper little pockets because there's so much beautiful stuff to mine. Ultimately, this is about a mother and daughter who have lost each other, and in this crazy day end up finding each other again and reigniting their love for one another and their respect and their compassion. Katherine, the woman I play, has lost her husband, who is Ellie's father, four or five years prior. They are still mourning the loss of him, but in very different ways. Instead of coming together over that

loss, they have grieved separately. So this is about them reconnecting. I think people can relate to having conflict with a family member or a loss of some sort—

SG: Especially with the country, and families, being so divided right now. It can be hard to find that common ground.

HB: That's one of the things that all of us have taken such care of in this sweet musical that we are sharing with these cities, is that, it definitely seems like we live in a world right now that is divided. Our show starts that way, yet these two women end up coming back together. Though it is a microcosm of something much larger that is happening in the world, I do think that people leave feeling more connected, not less. I am so proud of that. We can send people out with a more loving feeling. Don't we all need that right now?

SG: Oh, yes!

HB: When the world changed in November, we were doing **Freaky Friday** in DC and there were a lot of really scared, very upset people in my company. I think actors in general—and I don't speak for everyone—but I know a lot of people were feeling like being a performer right now felt insignificant. The initial kneejerk feeling was that I should be doing something more. And then slowly but surely, we all started realizing what we do as artists is profound and we actually have so much power to give people a two and a half hour break from the chaos. That's at the very least. You know, we have the power to let people escape. But with a show like this, if people take the ride, we also have the power to inspire people to hold each other just a little bit tighter. This country and this world is in such need of that right now. And you know, Disney is very special, in that it has this pervasive impact. The stories that Disney manages to tell are these really beautiful stories of family coming together and overcoming really incredible odds. I'm so proud to be a part of this.