

NO BROADWAY BABY

by Barbara Suter



Barbara Suter,
author of
Dorothy on the Rocks

EDITOR'S NOTE: Many passionate readers of fiction tend to believe that reality is way overrated. We suspect that's the case also for actors who make a career out of not being themselves. Cer-

Whenever Mary Martin's *Peter Pan* played on television, as it did every year around Easter,

I would put on my green tights and green T-shirt and sing along and then fly off the couch to Never Never Land, "second star to the right and straight on till morning."

I memorized the complete scores of all the Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musicals from the show albums my parents bought. I would stand in front of the mirror with my hairbrush and sing along with Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza in *South Pacific*.

In high school I tried out for chorus but was informed by Miss Boytim, the music teacher, that I had a problem with pitch and wouldn't be needed for the spring concert. I was devastated, but, fortunately, had just auditioned for

tainly it's true for Maggie, the eternally struggling actress heroine of Barbara Suter's novel, and as the author tells you here, she, too, has been known to surrender occasionally to flights of fancy.

the school play and was cast as one of the leads, so I became an actress instead.

During college I spent my summers apprenticing in summer stock theaters, sewing costumes, painting scenery, and cleaning toilets. During the musicals, I would stand backstage with my hair twisted on top of my head, wearing paint-stained overalls, and sing along, sotto voce, as I ran the ancient light board by the side of the stage and cued the singers for their entrances.

When I moved to New York, my first job was working for a children's theater. I started out stage managing but was soon playing witches and ugly stepsisters and ingenues, including Wendy in *Peter Pan*. I wore a curly blond wig and eagerly followed Peter, played by a chain-smoking fifty-year-old actor just back from a bus and truck of *Camelot*, to Never Never Land.

DOROTHY ON THE ROCKS
by Barbara Suter
ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-471-4
Trade Paper Original
Publication: June 2008

Right before my fortieth birthday I read the book *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers and decided it was time to try to sing again, to see if maybe I could find my voice and recapture my dream of being in a Broadway musical.

I signed up for a class called *Singing for Actors*. It was taught by a short blond woman named Cassie, who claimed to have understudied Patti LuPone in *Evita* on Broadway. She wore cowboy boots, bright red lipstick, and short leather skirts. The accompanist at the piano had long blond hair, pink nail polish, and

read *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez when not playing. He also wore short leather skirts and bright red lipstick when performing as Miss Magnolia Monroe in the West Village cabaret clubs.

When it got to my turn in the class, the understudy in cowboy boots asked me why I had signed up. I told her that I wanted to stand center stage in a spotlight in a Broadway musical and sing with a big brassy voice. In short, I wanted to be a star.

Nobody said a word, then the accompanist, Jeffrey Roy, aka Miss Magnolia Monroe, suggested we start with something a little simpler, like scales.

I eventually dropped the class and studied with Jeffrey privately. We worked on phrasing, rhythm, and my personal nemesis, pitch. I brought in the sheet music of all my favorite Broadway songs. Jeffrey played and I stood by the piano and sang my versions

of Nellie Forbush and Maria Von Trapp and then moved on to Sondheim; Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, Sally in *Follies*, the witch from *Into the Woods*. I brought in wigs and costumes and acted out the songs.

I loved my sessions at Jeffrey's studio on West Fiftieth Street and Jeffrey loved my wigs and costume jewelry and stiletto heels. I started playing the tambourine to give the songs more flash and to help with the tempo, but mainly I wanted to distract my imagined audience from the fact that I still had trouble staying on pitch.

"I don't understand it," Jeffrey would say, shaking his head. "You've got all the ingredients, but it just doesn't cook up right."

Finally, out of frustration, I decided to write a monologue for a character that was a bad lounge singer but a lovable gal who just sang because she loved to and didn't care what people thought. I called her Bette Lou Delp.

Decked out in a big red wig and fishnet stockings, I read the monologue for Jeffrey at our next session. He sat at the piano while I performed. When I finished, Jeffrey grinned.

"There's your voice," he said. "You're not a singer, you're a writer."

"Really?" I said, and somehow I knew it was true. I knew that what I would never be able to express as a singer, I would be able to as a writer.

"So get to it," he said. And I did. ■

"I wanted to stand center stage in a spotlight in a Broadway musical and sing with a big brassy voice. In short, I wanted to be a star."

—BARBARA SUTER