

Presenting
Sooner Theatre,
Starring
Jennifer Heavner Baker



Robert Taylor

She searched for stardom coast to coast,
only to find her true place in the theatre
back where it all began.

continues

New York City's famed Broadway and 42nd Street may be the best-known location for the magic that is musical theater, but Norman's Main and Jones Street is fast getting in on the act.

Under the guidance of Executive Director Jennifer Heavner Baker, the city's Sooner Theatre is exciting people of all ages about musical theater, nurturing a troupe of young actors and providing quality theatrical experiences for the Norman community. The woman now directing started her career both singing

and acting when she received a scholarship to major in music at the University of Oklahoma. The bachelor's degree in musical theater she really wanted to pursue was not offered until 2001, although the schools of drama and music in what is now the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts had long collaborated on productions.

"I stayed for five years, doing show after show," she says. "But you wouldn't have found me in class much. I would meet Greg Kunish (Regent's Professor and chair emeritus of the Weitzenhoffer Department of Musical Theatre) in the hallway, and he would say, 'Aren't you supposed to be in . . . ' and I'd say, 'I just have to look at a costume' or 'I'm just

checking on a prop.' "

For several years after leaving a few hours short of her degree, Baker sang and danced her way around the country and worked as a choreographer for shows at Six Flags theme parks. She moved to Los Angeles to audition for a soap opera, but when that did not work out, she lived and worked in New York. When the desire to play the role of wife and mother in real life hit, Baker returned to Norman. She married and had two daughters. In 1999, she added bachelor of fine arts with an emphasis in musical theater to her credits.

"It bothered me not to have finished, so when I came home, I just faced the demon," she says, laughing. "After all those years of fighting it, I said, 'I've got to do it.' I grew up. I would have been a much better student had I just gone as an adult instead of as an 18-year-old. Once I got going, I set the curve in the classes."

When Baker was asked to become a board member of Sooner Theatre, she jumped at the chance. At the time, the restored 1929 Spanish Gothic style building served as not much more than the site of a concert series and a rental facility. When she became executive director in 2002, Baker continued to set the curve, colleagues say, as the leader of what has become a true theater for the community.

"She is what I call an ACE theater person," says Jerry Hargis, who served as the leader of the facility's renovation and the program's re-envisioning in 2002-2003. "She has ability, commitment and energy. All three are necessary in the theater environment. When I spoke conceptually in terms of vision and intent for the Sooner and of a cause we were serving and the effect that cause successfully rendered could have on the community, Jennifer was so deeply invested with the ideas that she would break down and cry."

The cause, as Hargis makes the distinction, is theater for the community rather than just community theater. The

Baker poses with fellow OU student Ben Williams during the 1987 production of *Kismet*. The actress admits she spent more time onstage than in class, but she returned to OU and graduated in 1999.

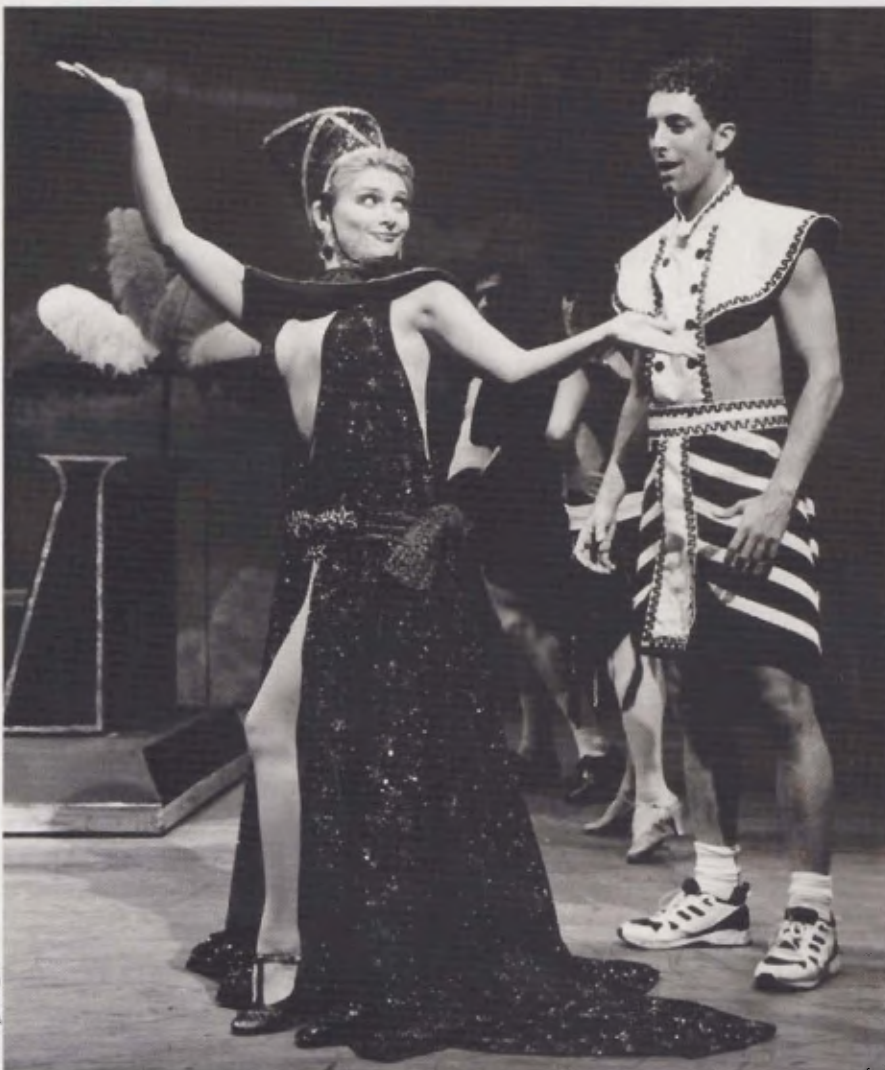


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former has a high standard of professionalism in performance and a philosophical obligation to contribute to the culture, he says, while the latter more often has a "truly appropriate and understandable social function."

Baker now oversees the Main Event Concert Series featuring artists like Rockapella and the Glenn Miller Orchestra, adult theatrical presentations like 2007's "Little Shop of Horrors" and "Scrooge!"; annual events like the New Year's Eve Gala and the Murder Mystery fundraiser; and extravaganzas like the September "Centennial Follies" at Lloyd Noble Center at which more than 6,000 people enjoyed a variety show starring country singer Larry Gatlin and a cavalcade of other talent.

These events draw crowds, but the continually evolving educational programs Baker has helped create and oversees draw ovations.

Summer 2003, Baker's first as executive director, saw the beginnings of Camp

ABOVE: Fortunately for theater-goers, Baker occasionally returns to the stage, here as Nancy in *Oliver!*.

LEFT: Baker dances for an appreciative audience in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* for Mill Mountain Theatre in Roanoke, Virginia.

Broadway, then a four-week experience for children ages 8 to 18, from which came the cast for a one-hour version of "Bye-Bye, Birdie." To fill the camp, Baker, her small staff and some volunteers held a phone-a-thon to round up 30 participants. Each year since, summer vacation has become summer avocation for, at this point, hundreds of young actor/singer/dancers whose role model is not Britney or Lindsay or Paris, but Kristen Chenoweth, Oklahoma's Tony Award-winning star of the musical stage.

In 2004, Baker tossed out the kiddie-theater concept and mounted the full-length version of "Good News" with her young cast. In 2005, she divided the experience into Camp Broadway for those 8 to 13 and The Young Producers for those 13 to 18. Each put on a show. In summer 2007, the former presented "L'il Abner," and the latter "Damn Yankees." More than 80 auditioned for the camps, Baker says, and she had to turn away more than she could accept.

Caitlin Royse had a small role in 2003's "Bye-Bye, Birdie" and has been in a show each summer since.

"I wanted to be on Broadway as soon as I had that little taste," says the poised, articulate 14-year-old Norman High freshman. "I love doing something that makes other people happy and watching them get excited about our shows. Just the fact that people come to see you is a great feeling. And I love working with Jennifer. On those bad days, when you don't want to go into rehearsal, you always leave feeling glad you went anyway. There's a lot of time spent, not just in rehearsals, but at home when you do your homework and work on the songs. Jennifer always starts on a good note and ends on a good note and puts the

ABOVE: After years of performing, Baker has found her true calling in nurturing young actors and inspiring them to bring out their best.

RIGHT: Baker's star shone at Discoveryland, where she played the role of Laurey in Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!" for six seasons.



Robert Taylor



Photo provided

constructive stuff in the middle. You start and end feeling good about what you've done."

Sooner Theatre board President Meg Newville became involved to support her son, Wade, 13. She calls Baker a "great mentor and talent" and one who "instills her own enthusiasm in the children." Her son agrees with that four-star review. Wade had the starring role in "Li'l Abner" and, as he makes the age transition, also a small part in "Damn Yankees."

"I think it might be something I pursue as a career," the Whittier Middle School student says, speaking wisdom beyond his years. "I've heard there's a one in 10,000 chance of making it, but Jennifer has taught me that if I don't make it to the big leagues, it still gives me some good qualities to carry on into other aspects of life. It's taught me good social skills and to be an outgoing person. It's taught me confidence and to be proud of myself."

Most of my friends are athletes, and they think it's cool to have a friend who's in the theater."

Norman's own Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney may be young, but their assessments match those of the more mature set. Russell Mathis, professor emeritus of music who worked with Baker when she was an undergraduate, says she is perfectly cast.

"She is one of the most innately talented people I've ever worked with," he says. "When she was an undergraduate, whenever we named a musical, she would go through that score and script from stem to stern on her own. She would know the whole show. She auditioned for the program in spring of her senior year. I thought, 'That's kind of an amazing talent.' When I went into the hall to take a break, she came up to me and said, 'I understand that you're the best one around here. Can I work with you?' She's

the only student I've ever had do anything like that. She was a senior in high school."

Hargis says that in what is a supporting role at Sooner Theatre, Baker is truly a leading lady. The board, he says, laid out a plan in 2002 calling for benchmarks for programmatic, educational and public/community service levels of achievement. It set forth budgetary needs and staff requirements. The Sooner, he says, has achieved all the benchmarks except for, as was to be expected, financial backing. It has made remarkable strides even in that, he says.

In addition to the two show-producing camps, Sooner also offers each summer Welcome to the Theater for 5-to-7-year-olds and Welcome Back to the Theater for repeaters in the same age group. This fall, Baker began offering classes for children, off-site year-round: Introduction to Musical Theatre, Auditioning for Film and Camera, Me and My Shadow (for children and parents), Broadway Babies, Acting One, Acting Two and Improv are on the schedule. Teachers include professional actors, among them a former Broadway performer, and successful pros from other entertainment areas. Even big kids get a shot: Theatre 55, a camp for those whose age is the speed limit or above, meets in September.

Baker has not given up the stage completely. She performed Nancy in the 2006 production of "Oliver!" and the board has asked her to take a role in this year's "Lucky Stiff."

"Sometimes, it's a little hard for me, but it's really just as exciting to sit out here and watch *them* get the standing ovations," she says. "I've loved every bit of my career. I didn't go off and become a star, but I practiced my craft doing commercials and choreography. I wasn't a name, but I made a living doing all the stuff I wanted to try. Except soap opera, of course, but who knows? In a few years I may try again. They always need old ladies."

Freelance writer Kathryn Jenson White is an assistant professor of journalism in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication.



Baker leads The Young Producers through warm-up exercises before launching into more rigorous demands of theater performance. One student says Heaven always begins and ends class "on a good note," saving the tougher stuff for "the middle."