

BROKEN ARROW, OKLAHOMA, have that
made her **A BROADWAY STAR**?
MORE THAN just a big voice

(((listening)))

YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE A LOT OF THINGS GO right for you to make it on Broadway. Not just the obvious, like a strong voice and the ability to bring a character to life. You also have to find the right characters to play. And you need a thick skin because this is a competitive business. Great roles, I've been fortunate to have. But I'm still struggling to develop that thick skin.

I've always been sensitive. Too sensitive, my mom might argue. I can't help taking to heart what people say about me. Back home in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, that wasn't a problem. I

AN ACTOR PREPARES *Backstage with constant companion Maddie, named after another actress with a big voice, Madeline Kahn*



sometimes is one critical remark to cut me to the bone. Like the comment I heard—well, *overheard*—in the ladies' room of a Broadway theater one day after auditioning for a new show. Two women came in.

"I mean, she can sing—I'll give her that," I heard one of the women say. I recognized her voice right away, an established Broadway star. "But funny? Come on! How hard is it to play a cartoon character? I don't get all the hoopla!"

*They're talking about me, I realized. I'd just won a Tony Award for my role as Sally Brown in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Sure, the part was based on a comic strip character, but I'd put all of myself into playing it.*

One of the biggest names in the business, and she thinks I'm overrated. What if she's right? I wondered. What if all the hoopla really is for nothing?

That's when a little voice inside me said, *You're better than that, Kristin. Don't doubt yourself.* The voice I'd listened to—listened for—ever since my very first performance.

the stage. A vine.

Someone must have dropped it, I thought. You're not supposed to have anything on the floor during a ballet. Someone might trip on it.

The Sugar Plum Fairy was staring at the vine too. How could we get it off the stage without stopping the show?

Go, Kristin, said a voice deep inside me. Hop to it. So I did. I hopped over to the vine, put it in my mouth and hopped back to my spot. The audience erupted. I was one proud rabbit.

When the curtain went down, the artistic director exclaimed, "What a smart little bunny you are! How did you know

to do that?"

I shrugged. I didn't know then whose voice it was. But in the years to come I would hear it and depend on it time and again.

In 1993, for example. I'd just completed a master's degree in opera performance at Oklahoma City University and won a scholarship to The Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. The Lord was laying out a pretty clear path



HIP HOP Kristin, age five. "I was a spiritual kid."



RIGHT CALL Kristin won the Tony Award for her portrayal of Sally in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

for me, I thought. Then I came to New York City to help my best friend move into his apartment.

On a whim I flipped through the audition listings in *Back Stage*. One jumped out at me. "The Marx Brothers' musical *Animal Crackers*, singers and dancers needed."

I want you to try. What have you got to lose? There was that voice again. The voice that had never failed me.

That's why I walked into the Paper Mill Playhouse for the audition. All the other girls had headshots, résumés, an air of confidence. And I had no idea what I was doing! The only thing that kept me from walking out

was that inner voice. *Just have fun with it, Kristin. Show them what you've got.*

I sang and I danced. I read the scene they gave me. I was in my element, enjoying the moment. I never expected one of the producers to ask, "Who's your agent?"

"Agent? I was just doing this for fun," I tried to explain. "My dad, I

guess. I mean—I don't really have an agent."

Right then and there they offered me a part. A lead. Arabella. I told them I'd have to think about it.

I called home as soon as I got back to my friend's apartment.

"Mom, you'll never guess what happened," I said excitedly. "I got a part, a real part in a musical!"

"But what about your scholarship?" Mom said. "The academy only takes five people a year. Are you sure you want to walk away from that?"

"Mom, I'm supposed to be Arabella. I just know it," I said. "I was sent to that audition for a reason."

(((the play was about **BEING HAPPY**
WITH WHO YOU ARE—something
I'd always believed in. Deeply.)))



WISH GRANTED *Kristin, as Glinda the Good Witch, in the hit musical Wicked*

Mom and Dad gave me their blessing. After all, they had raised me to trust that guiding voice. Faith and church were at the center of our family, and we always sought God's blessing on whatever we undertook.

I called the academy director and explained my situation. "I'm sorry, but I'm giving up my spot."

She didn't say a word at first. Then she let me have it.

"You are making the biggest mistake of your life," she said. "Once you wake up and realize what you've done, the door is going to be shut. Don't even think about trying to come back here."

She slammed down the receiver. I

felt sick, listening to the loud, empty dial tone. Her words really hurt.

I'm glad I trusted my inner voice, though, and took the role of Arabella. It led to other parts. Two jobs came up at once; a lead in *Annie Get Your Gun* and a minor role in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

The director of *Charlie Brown* called me. "Kristin, I want to expand a role just for you," he said. "I can't tell you about it until I get Charles Schulz's approval, but please take it on faith, it's perfect for you."

Take it on faith. For a month I prayed about the decision, listened for that voice. Everyone from my friends

