

Stage

The Daily Breeze/News-Pilot, Fri., August 21, 1987

Now she's climbing ladder of success

By Sandra Kreiswirth
THEATER CRITIC

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That school turned out to be Juilliard, smack in the middle of Manhattan, with math, science and mountains giving way to the stage.

"I always had large ideas," said Pelikan, who is in rehearsals for the West Coast premiere of Caroline Kava's "The Early Girl," opening Saturday at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys.

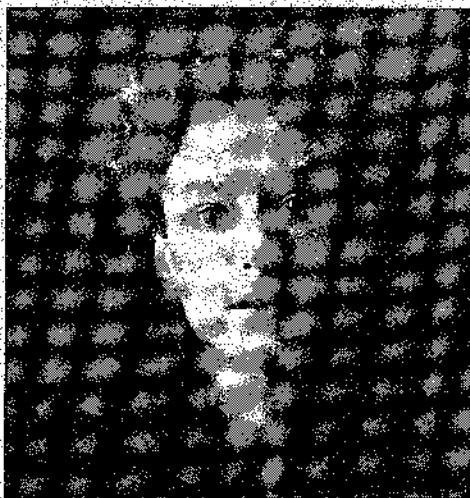
"And, so far, I've had quite a life."

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When her father was reassigned to Washington, D.C., during Pelikan's high school years, however, she realized how exciting that moving around really was.

In those days, her only thoughts of performing were as a dancer. Then, the summer before Pelikan's senior year in high school, a tumor was discovered in the bone marrow of her left leg. It proved to be benign, but an operation kept her in bed for most of the year. And that's when thoughts of theater bloomed.

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That's all Pelikan needed. She applied immediately, and after auditioning with two comic monologues and an improvisation, she received word she was not only in, but in on a scholarship. "I decided to try it for a year," she said. "And it changed my life."

Her parents were less excited about the prospect of their daughter pursuing an acting career in New York. Eventually they gave in, asking Pelikan to make them two promises: to be allowed to approve her housing, since there were no dorms at Juilliard, and that she read the 100 great books. She did both.

Her first professional acting job came between her first and second years at school, but it was on television, not stage. She got a small part, along with John Lithgow, in the Hallmark Hall of Fame production of "The Country Girl" starring Jason Robards, George Grizzard and Elizabeth Taylor.

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Her film credits include "Ghoulies," "Swing Shift," "The House of God," "L'Homme en Colere" and "Jennifer."

"Early Girl." Kava describes Jean as "a woman who gave up her college courses but kept the vocabulary." Actually, she's one of seven "working girls" in a Midwestern house of prostitution. The play, first produced by Circle Rep in New York last fall, is Kava's first and emerged while she was researching her acting role as a 19th century prostitute in Wyoming in the 1981 film, "Heaven's Gate."

Last year Pelikan added the role of wife to her already full life with her marriage to actor Bruce Davison.

What's it like being married to another performer? "I don't know know about being married to an actor," she said, "but it's wonderful being married to Bruce. He's very supportive and giving."

They met on the opening night of Davison's run in "The Normal Heart" in Hollywood. The next night he was waiting for her backstage when she finished "Blue Window."

So far the two have worked together only once, in Joel Gross' "Mesmer" at a special festival for new playwrights at the Old Globe in San Diego. "It was great working with Bruce," Pelikan said with obvious enthusiasm. "I loved it. The only thing, next time I think we'll take two individual apartments."

Putting in a plug for her husband, she adds, "And he's got his miniseries, 'Poor Little Rich Girl,' with Farrah Fawcett Nov. 16. I think he's going to be great in that."

Although Pelikan says she has no complaints personally or professionally, there is one avenue careerwise she wishes she could pursue more — comedy.

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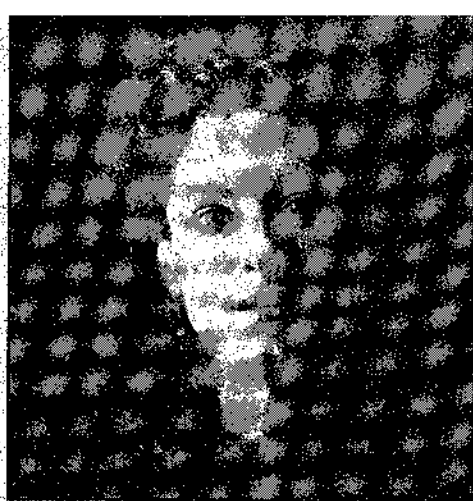
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Her parents had a friend who knew George White, president of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. So, complete with cast and crutches, she made the short trip to the Big Apple to seek advice. Look over some of the schools in New York, she was told.

"It was Christmas, so some of them were closed," recalled Pelikan. The Neighborhood Playhouse said she was too young. And the woman in charge at Juilliard asked why she was there. "I told her, 'To learn about the school.' So she handed me a newspaper clipping. I said, 'That's very nice, but tell me something more about your school.' Then she



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said, 'What makes you think you can get into our school?'"

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"The experience was horrific," she said, one which made her realize she had no idea what she was doing. "It made me determined to go back to school and really study and learn, but it did open the door."

Her first play was "Spring Awakening" at Circle Rep in New York, where she is now a member, and her first film role was as the young Julia in "Julia" with Jane Fonda.

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Her film credits include "Ghoulies," "Swing Shift," "The House of God," "L'Homme en Colere" and "Jennifer," which brought her the best actress award at the International Science Fiction and Horror Film Festival.

In 1985, Pelikan was honored by the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle for her performance in South Coast Repertory's production of Craig Lucas' "Blue Window."

In it she played Libby, an insecure young woman who, moments before her dinner guests arrive, breaks her front tooth trying to open a jar of caviar.

She plays someone quite different in

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Although Pelikan says she has no complaints personally or professionally, there is one avenue careerwise she wishes she could pursue more — comedy.

"That's something we'd both like to do. It's my favorite, but people don't see that for either of us. I have this serious persona. I tend to think a lot and figure things out, so I don't come into an audition being funny." She draws out the word and laughs. "But the things I have gotten to do where I have been funny have been some of my most joyous experiences. And Bruce is outrageously funny. He would be a great comedic leading man," she said, with an emphasis on the word great.

"Like," she paused trying to think of a name, "like an early Robert Redford."