

> Jennifer Simard

'Forbidden' Fruits

"I will always be an Off-Broadway girl in my heart," asserts Jennifer Simard. But she's thrilled to have landed her first gig on the Great White Way, playing the hostess, Rona Lisa Peretti, in the William Finn-Rachel Sheinkin musical *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Technically, she made her Broadway debut last year, when she was a vacation cover for the same musical, but this is the real thing. And besides, she says, "there's a significant difference to say you're on Broadway. And it means a great deal to my parents."

Simard's Broadway job comes after nearly 15 years of working steadily in New York City, originating Off-Broadway roles in *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* and *The Thing About Men*, landing a stint in *Forbidden Broadway: Special Victims Unit*, and garnering three Drama Desk nominations and a Drama League honor along the way. "I had a lot of experience, but for some reason I just couldn't crack the nut," she says. "I had a string of about three auditions where I was always second choice. But that's gonna happen. You have to be the right flavor on the right day."

After graduating from the Boston Conservatory, Simard spent her early career in Boston and throughout New England performing in a wide range of material: Shakespeare, Mamet, popular musicals (*My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*), and Gilbert and Sullivan. "I was actually trained operatically, but I don't think everyone knows that about me," she says. While she was appearing in a Boston production of *Nunsense*, a friend suggested she come to New York and audition for the long-running *Forbidden Broadway*.

"Someone said, 'Why don't you see if you can do voices?'" she recalls. "All of a sudden I was trying to evoke these people—Bernadette Peters, who I always loved, and Madeline Kahn. It just sort of came out." She secured a role in a Stamford, Conn., production of the satirical revue by Gerard Alessandrini, and with it she got her Equity card and her first agent. "The challenge is to always make sure that there are many layers going on; otherwise it just looks like a caricature," she says. "My favorite character in the last installment of *SVU* was playing Bernadette Peters as Mama Rose doing 'Rose's Turn.'"

When she moved to New York in 1993, the toughest thing was money, Simard recalls. "My parents did everything as best they could to help and support me. But surviving in the city—trying to make a living so you could get those jobs, as opposed to going away out of town—was always difficult. I had a good network of girlfriends and we



Jen Simard

helped each other out. We worked at this bridal salon on Saturday, and a friend got me into babysitting."

And there was growing up for Simard to do as well: "Trying to achieve your dreams in your 20s, you realize all these things about yourself personally that you should probably work on, which will help you grow as a person. One of the best pieces of advice that I got is that this business is about relationships. I learned how important it is to focus outside of yourself. I learned very quickly how to treat stagehands, for example. They are very often overworked in our business." It was during the run of *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* that Simard met her husband, Brad Robertson, an electrician on the show. They started dating after he moved on to another job.

Just prior to taking over the role of Rona in *Spelling Bee*, Simard played the part in the first national tour, which launched in August. "I had never toured before. It was such a great growing experience," she reports. "It was so exciting to rise to the different challenge of sizing up a different theatre and having an opening night in front of press every single week. I really cherished it. The only hard part was, of course, being away from my husband, so it's really nice to be back home."

Robertson is currently the head electrician on the Broadway revival of *Talk Radio*, which puts him just two blocks away from Simard in *Spelling Bee*. "This is a dream come true," she says. "I pinch myself every day that I'm here." She is also coming full circle: In her early days in Boston in *Nunsense*, she used to listen to Finn's *Falsettoland* in her car during the hourlong drive to and from the theatre. "That was my routine. And when I think now that my Broadway debut is in a William Finn show, it seems like I'm being smiled upon. It couldn't be better than this." <



Simard in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*

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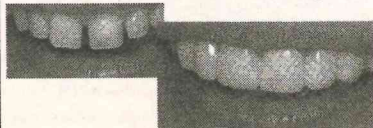
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