

THEATER & ARTS NOVEMBER 27, 2015

A big break in '42nd Street'

HIGHLIGHTS

For Caitlin Ehlinger, many parallels with character of Peggy Sawyer

Actress went from high school to a national tour

Lots of training went into this moment



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Small-town girl falls in love with musical theater, moves to New York City, auditions for a show, demonstrates she's an amazing tapper, ends up with the leading role.

In the happy world of the Broadway musical "42nd Street," that's a perfect character description for Peggy Sawyer.

It's also remarkably close to the story of 19-year-old Caitlin Ehlinger, who went from an ordinary high schooler to the star of an upcoming national tour smack in the middle of her senior year.

She was at her best friend's house in Houston earlier this year when her mom called and told her the news: "You got the part! You got Peggy!"

Ehlinger, who travels to Saroyan Theatre for a two-night run of the show beginning Tuesday, Dec. 1, had gone through a 10-day audition process in New York that attracted as many as 500 women.

The timing worked out perfectly: Because the tour didn't start until summer, she was able to finish her senior year at Houston's Stratford High School. (OK, so she isn't really from a small town like Peggy, but Ehlinger still considers herself more from a suburb than a big city.)

She didn't dive into the extremely competitive waters of musical theater unprepared, of course. Ehlinger has taken dancing lessons since elementary school and, as she got older, she had the chance to take master classes from some prominent names, including Randy Skinner, choreographer of the "42nd Street" tour. Seeing Skinner's name associated with the auditions made her want to go to New York that much more.

"I didn't think I was going to make it, but I just wanted to get in front of him so he could see me," Ehlinger says in a telephone interview.

She'd also been in her high school's musicals, including a starring role as Roxie Hart in "Chicago."

In the classic "42nd Street," Peggy arrives by bus in New York and, after some amazing luck, winds up cast in the chorus of a new musical helmed by dictatorial director Julian Marsh. From there, will she wind up a star?

Ehlinger remembers the moment she knew she wanted to do theater professionally. It was her sophomore year, and she was playing Patsy in “Crazy for You.”

“There was a moment in one of the dance numbers, I remember it vividly, when my body took over and kept dancing, but mentally I was thinking, ‘I don’t think there’s anything else in the world I’d rather be doing right now. This makes me so happy.’ ”

Peggy might be able to thank Lady Luck for her success in “42nd Street,” but Ehlinger knows it takes more than that to make a career on Broadway. She’s already got an important thing down: thanking the people who helped her get this far.

For her, that’s dance teacher Suzanne Semans, who skipped classes to travel to Salt Lake City in September for opening night.

“You always have a very special relationship with your dance teacher,” Ehlinger says. “I would not be here without her. She’s my rock.”

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42ND STREET

Theater preview

- 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 1, and Wednesday, Dec. 2
- Saroyan Theatre, 700 M St.
- www.broadwayinfresno.com, 800-745-3000
- \$33-\$60.50



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