

TURNING PASSION INTO A CAREER

The saying goes that if you do what you love, you will never have to work a day in your life. If that is true, Kathleen Burns has yet to find a 'job'.

WORDS **Julie McCloy**



KATHLEEN BURNS IS A TALENTED local actor, comedian, singer, writer and director. She says she had always been drawn to acting, and whilst she can't imagine doing anything else with her life now, she was once on a very different path. As a 'good, smart academic girl', she went to university to study psychology and gender studies. Six months shy of finishing she broke the news to her parents that she was dropping out to become an actor. 'I just had an overwhelming feeling that

I could not go one more step in the wrong direction,' she says. The right direction, it turned out, was towards the stage.

The first steps towards her new career began with school Theatresports, where she could 'give it a go, do some rubbish stuff, then get better. It snowballed from there.' For Kathleen, that snowball was an audition to become an apprentice with The Court Jesters, Australasia's longest-running improv crew, based in The Court

Theatre, Christchurch. Kathleen credits both Theatresports and The Court Jesters for the opportunities that enabled her – and many well-known Aotearoa New Zealand performers – to learn their craft. 'The Court Jesters are the most underrated Petri dish for breeding talent all over New Zealand and the world. There are ex-Jesters all over our TV and comedy shows,' she points out.

At 18 she became a fully-fledged Jester and it was then that she heard

RIGHT A memorable career moment – acting with George Henare in *Educating Rita*, photo The Court Theatre, 2016.

of NASDA – the National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art – based in Christchurch; it changed her life. ‘I wanted nothing more than to be an actor,’ she says, and so she abandoned psychology and embarked on a new degree in Performing Arts. She laughs, recalling that ‘on the first day of NASDA we were asked what our dreams were. Some people’s were to be on *Shortland Street*, some were to be on Broadway. Mine was just to make a living acting, so I am literally living the dream – I wish I’d dreamed bigger!’

Unlike many of her peers, Kathleen never had to supplement her studies with bar work thanks to weekly improv performances and corporate gigs. Perhaps that was just as well, as in an appropriately comedic episode, her one foray into hospo saw her accidentally lock all the staff out of the bar. She also recalls the Jesters’ gig where she had to dress as a Mexican luchador (masked wrestler) ‘and wrestle another improviser in jelly for some guy’s birthday party in the middle of rural Canterbury. That gig paid my rent that week – I was so grateful!’

Since performing in her first ‘show for grown-ups’ in 2009, Kathleen has ‘always had something on the go and, if not, I make something’. One such successful ‘something’ is the monthly improv comedy show *Perfuct Storm*, which she created with two Jester alumni for local theatre Little Andromeda.

She has garnered memorable moments such as acting with George Henare in *Educating Rita* (‘every day



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was a masterclass not just in acting but in how to “be an actor” – how to treat people, how to behave’) and meeting Sir Ashley Bloomfield at a panto featuring the character Prince Ashley of the Blooming Fields. Also a singer, Kathleen admits that ‘whenever I do [a musical], I think this is ridiculous – why have they let a naughty Court Jester in here? Sometimes it feels like I’m getting away with the impossible!’

Having tackled directing for children’s shows before, Kathleen stepped up to direct her first mainstage show in 2022, the very successful *Flagons and Foxtrots* (The Court

Theatre), adding a new string to her burgeoning bow. ‘Directing is hard – you are managing so many different facets of the project, but I love it and because I am an actor, I understand the actors’ needs. I want to create space for actors to bring offers (as to how they see the character) – that means people are connecting to the work.’

One thing Kathleen is often asked is what advice she’d give to others considering a career in acting. ‘That’s easy. I’d say, “Don’t.” If I can’t convince you out of it, then do it. But examine why you want to do it. If it’s for money, be a dentist. If it’s for fame, go on

RIGHT Kathleen as mischievous Emilie in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, photo The Court Theatre, 2019.

BOTTOM LEFT Back onstage as Siobhan in 2019 for *The Pink Hammer*, photo The Court Theatre, 2019.

BOTTOM RIGHT Choreographing the magic moves as Glenda, *Ladies Night*, photo The Court Theatre, 2021.

Married at First Sight. All of that is fine, but being a theatre actress is not the way to do any of that. There is no stability – none at all. No financial security, no job security and you make yourself very vulnerable.

‘There are times when I don’t know what I’m doing two months from now, but you can’t live in that place of anxiety. You do get better at dealing with that instability, but you have to have a really strong sense of self. I’ve learned to trust myself – I made this work last month, last year, last decade. What scares me most is that the audience won’t like the show, or me. Your art is your product and it’s who you are, so you’ve got to play a strong mental game.’ Daily yoga and a strong support network are essential, she says. ‘Actors are incredibly good at creating a family. They are the coolest people on the planet – they will have nothing and still give you anything.’

Given the challenges of her chosen career, why does she do it at all? ‘I don’t want to say, “It chose me,” but I feel that the way that I am, there is no other option for me. I feel the most like myself when doing this stuff – that I’m doing what I’m supposed to do and contributing in the best way I can.’

So, what’s next? Kathleen would love to do more screen work, but for now, she is booked to mid-January. You can



find her onstage in Christchurch doing improv before heading to Circa Theatre in Wellington for panto over summer.

Having forged a successful career in an already under-resourced and ‘non-essential’ industry through a period disrupted by earthquakes, terrorist shootings and a pandemic, Kathleen is proof that nothing is impossible if you want it enough, and you are willing to back yourself. ‘Performing gives me a real sense of satisfaction (unlike when I look at my back account!) and honestly, I feel really lucky. All I want to do until I die is make theatre with my mates.’ ●

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