

The *Lure* of the Stage

ACLOA's dedicated performers don't get a paycheck, but they're handsomely compensated in other ways

By Aaron Emmel

Acting on Albuquerque's stages is not an easy job. Nor is it a paying one. La Compañía de Teatro de Albuquerque pays their actors' expenses, but nothing that can be called a salary, and the rest of the city's theater companies don't pay anything. So what drives Albuquerque's actors, many of whom are at least as talented as their paid counterparts in larger communities, to give up four hours on an average night for up to three months in a row for rehearsals and performances?

Celeste Griffith, an ACLOA actor, gives a spiritual reason for her activities: "I think I was given a gift, and I think if you're not using the gift, then you're not a good steward of the thing that you've been given."

Marina Gelpe, another ACLOA performer, points out that to be able to meet the demands of the theater requires having no family life, or a very supportive family. She's able to spend so much time in the theater because of the support of her teenage daughter, Frances.

"You really have to schedule your life," Gelpe says. "This week I'm going to do something with my children, and this other week I'm going to do the paperwork I have to do to get my job done. You have to schedule way ahead."

Most of Albuquerque's actors know each other. They trade the roles of acting, directing and being crew members at different companies, all showing up at the same parties and rehearsals and watching each other's progress. One of the things that draws them to the acting life is being able to express their creativity with other people who appreciate and share that same need. Gelpe is the model of what might be called the "acting for fellowship" category: She went so far as to marry ACLOA's resident music director, Joel Gelpe.

Marina Gelpe adds, "You miss a lot of things. It becomes your life when you're involved with the show. And everybody in your house makes sacrifices for you to do that—children, spouses—but you do it, I think, because it brings you so much personal reward. You say to yourself, 'I did that! Maybe I wasn't perfect, maybe I wasn't the best, but it was the best I could give. I felt so alive.'"

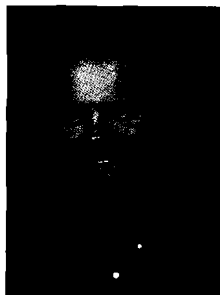
"You miss a lot of things, it becomes your life when you're involved with the show."

Marina Gelpe

Why They Do It

Eleven ACLOA performers describe what motivates them to devote so much time to entertaining us.

GREG TOBIAS is an attorney and plays in a local band. He's been acting for a year and a half, and most recently performed the lead role in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.



doing productions. It's a creative outlet that I don't have as an attorney. So much of what I do is dictated by legal requirements, there isn't a lot of room for creativity. It's an opportunity for me to express myself and to commune with other people that share the same love for theater. The truth is that if somebody ever paid me to do it, I would love to make a living out of it."

RON BRONITSKY, a pulmonary-care physician, was a musician and took voice lessons before finally audi-



tioning for, and getting, his first acting role nine years ago. So far he has stuck to musicals, but intends at some point to try out for a non-musical play.

"Acting is a wonderful escape and release from some of the craziness and depressing scenery in the intensive care units and taking care of critically

ill patients. It's just a lot of fun to perform and know that you've been able to do it and do it well. It's really a great feeling to be able to push yourself to a level you didn't know you had in you. If you make it, then it feels great."



MARINA GELPE is a school-teacher who has been acting since her high school drama class. In addition to acting, she's spent years performing as a singer.

"There have been many people in my life who have said, 'That's silly. Stick to your job. Don't do those kinds of things. You don't have time, you're tired, you should be home with your children.' And all those things are true! Except the silly part. That's not true. It's very rewarding work. I do it because I have to feel creative. Part of me is a big ham, and I just like to get up there and see how I can stretch the limits of my performance. I guess living out those dreams you have when you're a kid and you're watching those musicals on TV and thinking, 'I want to do that! How do I do that?' and then finding out that there is a way."



ROBB SISNEROS, who most recently played Simon Zealot in Jesus Christ Superstar, is a New Mexico native with a BFA in musical theater. With

16 ACLOA performances behind him, he has also tried his hand at directing for the Adobe Theater.

"I have enjoyed making people, more than anything, laugh, but overall, I enjoy making people react to what I do on-stage. I'm partial to comedy roles, but I'm not attached to that. I have enjoyed watching my friends grow as artists over the years, and I

think that's why I'm starting to really push working from a director's standpoint."



SHAWNA TESSMER, 25, starred in her first ACLOA show at the age of 12. She played the title role in Annie, which she found out about at the dance studio

where she practiced. Dancing is still an important part of her life.

"I think it just fills a void in my life, that can be filled by nothing other than my ego. I just love being on stage, and having a great time with all the actors, and meeting many new people, and continuing friendships — because that's what we do, we all do shows and that's how we socialize, through rehearsal. The great part about ACLOA, or just community theater in general, is that everyone does so many different things during the daytime, but then we all come together and let our egos work together at night, and we bring so many personalities, and different life experiences, and that makes it fun and interesting."



WENDY LEVERENZ has been performing since she was 9, moving from dance classes to school choirs and finally graduating to ACLOA shows when she

was 17. She has a job making scientific testing equipment, but hopes to make acting her professional life.

"Acting is what I'd really like to be doing. It's kind of the real me. I have fun, I feel comfortable in that atmosphere, I love the people that I meet. My best friends are in theater, and they're the most open, accepting people that I know. The theater is where I feel that I can really express myself, even if it's just in a social setting, not

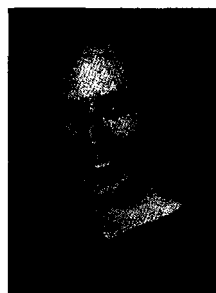
even in a performance situation."



CELESTE GRIFFITH, who has a vocal performance minor from Oklahoma Baptist University, has been singing since she was 13. She started acting in Hoffmantown

Church's drama ministry, which led her to ACLOA. She is the executive assistant to Hoffmantown Church's senior pastor and motivational speaker, Dr. Charles Lowery.

"The people that perform with you in a show become a small family, so to speak. So there's a lot of relationships that go on that I treasure. Also, there's a beginning and there's an end, so you're not committed for months and months, you're just committed for about nine weeks and then you can quit, or you can start again. But probably my favorite part is the people, of course, and the joy of performing."



ZANE BARKER, a research assistant at a company owned by his parents, which makes scientific testing equipment, is also pursuing a physics degree at

UNM and directing a show at the Vortex. He's married to Wendy Leverenz.

"It's a big release. I think it's a good thing to stretch your brain in a lot of different directions at the same time. Acting is totally creative; what I do for a living is not creative at all, it's very technical. There's some creative thought that goes into it, but it's very different from acting. I think a society without art would be much more bleak. I've never looked at it this way before, but taking part in the theater is kind of my help for society."



BRUCE SQUIRE is a partner in an accounting firm and has been acting since high school. He also has a long list of other pursuits, including fly fishing, playing the

guitar, and serving as the president of the Shrine Pipe Band, with which he is scheduled to play 34 shows this year.

"I like the process of putting a show together. I like the exercise: it's a mental exercise, it's a physical challenge. I like the people. It's something that's very different from what I do on a professional basis. I look at it as a growth experience. I'm hoping it will keep me young."

JACK LOVELL, who most recently played a priest in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, met his wife, Kathy, at a show in college at Fresno State. After moving to

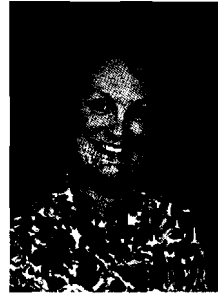


Albuquerque, they spent several years watching plays before realizing they would rather be back on the stage than in the audience. Apparently that's a family-wide

sentiment, because his 9-year-old granddaughter has already performed in two ACLOA shows.

"I take a great deal of pride in being involved with such high-quality productions. It's a great thrill to perform in front of two thousand people who respond with a such enthusiasm to our performances. At times my schedule is very busy, but it's such a satisfying avocation that it's not difficult to find the time to do it."

KATHY LOVELL has been performing, in one way or another, since she sang for her church when she was 5.



She's an independent travel agent, which gives her leeway in arranging her schedule, which also includes sewing and low-fat gourmet cooking.

"It's a great love; I love to perform. I've sung my entire life. That was the major thing, the singing. I spent many years at training, and was an international scholarship winner, and chose a different career path, and after raising two children got back on the stage, and it's just fulfilled that love of performance. It's always been there. I think people are born with that. The greatest high in the world is applause. To us this is a great hobby, to both my husband and me. We have no children at home, it beats sitting on the couch and watching TV, but it's just something in both of us, we just love being onstage."

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