SELF STARTER

BY SIMI HORWITZ

> Julie Stevens

'Annie' Orphans

Documentary filmmaker Julie Stevens uses the word "bittersweet" to sum up the experiences of *Annie* "orphans." She is referring to the hundreds of child performers who participated in the original Broadway show, served as replacements, or performed in one or more of its national tours from 1977 to 1983. Stevens would surely know something about the topic, not simply as the co-director and co-producer of the disturbing documentary *Life After Tomorrow* but also as one of those "orphans." "Between sixth and ninth grade I was involved with the show," recalls the 36-year-old Philadelphia native. "It was my childhood. I did one year on tour and one year on Broadway. For most of us it was amazing and wonderful and in many ways the most important event of our childhoods, but it also led to many unexpected difficulties."


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Slated to run on Showtime on Christmas Eve at 8 p.m., with an encore presentation Christmas Day at noon, *Life After Tomorrow* is indeed a testimonial to the ambivalence surrounding the lives of child performers. Featuring 40 "orphans," now grown and looking back—the best-known in the film being Sarah Jessica Parker—*Tomorrow* explores such emotionally charged issues as what happens to a family when one sibling is on Broadway or on tour and what it means for a youngster when the curtain comes down and the gigs dry up. The movie also considers the turbulent life behind the scenes: the proverbial jealousies and resentments among the girls—and their mothers, who would develop close bonds but abruptly turn adversarial. "Some mothers told their daughters to trip another girl onstage," says Stevens, one of the few *Annie* performers still in the business today.

Indeed, she considers herself an actor and hopes to act again. Not one to sit around waiting for the next audition, she has turned her talents to filmmaking, transforming her own mixed-bag experiences into an unexpectedly interesting film. "When I left *Annie*, all the kids teased me a lot; the girls at school were especially nasty and competitive," Stevens recalls. "It took me many years to have a girlfriend, to trust another woman. I did not grow up. I did not go on a date until I went to college. If you are a kid in showbiz, it's made very clear you have to remain young; the longer you hold off puberty, the better. That does a real head trip on you. So does constantly being told to be who you're not: 'Change your hair color. Change your name. Do whatever you have to do to keep on working. You are only as good as your last job.' And the further I got away from *Annie*, the more I was called upon to reinvent myself. After *Annie*, it was starting all over from scratch.

"The film is a cautionary tale about the lives of child actors," she continues. "It's one thing for a parent to encourage a child to have a performing hobby. It's a very different thing for a child to have a real career. And parents should consider it carefully before they get their child into the profession. There is tremendous pressure, emotionally and financially. And then there is the endless rejection. A child really has to be passionate to do it. I was. The other girls in the group, I'd say, half were and the other half were not."

Putting It Together

The years after *Annie* were no thrill for Stevens. She worked in voiceovers and commercials, but nothing quite equaled *Annie* in status or personal pleasure. Yet she continued to be identified with that show and wanted a career in theatre. After graduating from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts with a BFA in acting, Stevens promptly joined the ranks of the unemployed. She held a number of jobs, including teaching artist for such theatre companies as Manhattan Theatre Club, Roundabout, and the National Actors Theatre. She also became an on-set studio teacher for professional children working in features and commercials. Her experience as a child actor put her in good stead with these youngsters. Still, she was not acting and knew the time had come for a change. "I've come to be a strong believer in regrouping in order to find change in your life," she says. "A lot of actors are stuck, but then they're doing the same things over and over again."

She had no idea how much her life would change when she decided to relocate to Los Angeles. "I came out to L.A. because of the slower pace, the sunny weather, and the huge apartment I was able to rent here compared to the box I called home in Manhattan. I jumped right into acting classes, told no one I sang or my *Annie* history," she recalls. "I had to own the idea that 'I am an actress.' "

Although she studied broadcast journalism in college, she never thought she'd make a documentary; her leap into filmmaking came about serendipitously. "Six years ago a girl from the cast of *Annie* contacted me," Stevens recalls. "She said she was very unhappy and needed someone to talk to who shared her experiences. We got together and talked, and in the course of our conversation we wondered, 'What ever happened to this one? And what ever happened to that one?' "

Curiosity whetted, Stevens launched a website, Annieorphans.com, in an effort to reconnect with fellow cast members, known and unknown to her. To her surprise, more than 100 *Annie* "orphans" responded. Stevens hosted three reunions, in New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. "Approximately a dozen girls showed up at each reunion, and just for fun I videotaped them, asking questions pretty similar to the questions asked on the film," Stevens says. "There were common themes in our lives, including the way we'd re-enact the show each night after it was over. One girl talked about how her father, with whom she had no particular relationship, decided to accompany her on the tour of *Annie*. When they returned home, he left home without explanation and was never heard from again. I couldn't wrap my brain around that. Other girls talked about their mothers having affairs on the road while accompanying their daughters on tour. My own family was terribly disrupted. My parents were divorced when I was very young. So while my mother was on tour with me, my brother was raised by my aunt. There were a lot of problems."

A producer friend of Stevens thought the personal stories—and the larger implications—were fascinating and encouraged her to pitch the idea to the networks. So Stevens did. She recalls that there was interest, but no one would put up any money ahead of time. The project was put on the back burner. Then, quite by accident, Stevens met director-producer Gil Cates Jr. (*A Midsummer Night's Rave*, *The Mesmerist*). He was interested in the project, came on board as co-director–co-producer, and found financing for the project.

Stevens grappled with the journalistic and artistic challenges of creating the documentary, most pointedly, "encouraging the girls to participate in the film," she says. "There was a lot of fear. I had to reassure them that they only had to say what was comfortable." But the most important work in making a documentary comes during the postproduction phase, from obtaining the vintage clips—"Licensing is expensive and complicated," Stevens says—to structuring the film. What happens in the editing room defines the documentary, she explains: "One challenge was determining what my role would be. Would I be an interviewer? Would I simply be someone who was interviewed?" In the end, she is both, though her presence as interviewer is entirely off-camera: The viewer never hears anyone asking questions. Stevens is currently looking for a DVD distribution deal and is hopeful that the Showtime telecast will open those doors.

Down the road, the actor-filmmaker is eager to make another documentary. She is also writing a screenplay, which she plans to direct. "I've applied for a number of directing fellowships," she says. "I also want to direct television. I want to be a performer on a sitcom. That's why I moved to L.A. But I'm not going to wait for someone to give me a job. It just doesn't happen that way, especially if you're not blond and leggy." <

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