

# The Orphanage That Became a Sorority

In a new documentary, 'Annie' alumnae tell stories of their hard-knock lives.



Photographs by Martha Swope

By SUSAN BURTON

**W**HEN Julie Stevens was 9, she and her mother took a train to New York from their home in Philadelphia to meet with a child-modeling agent. That meeting, in 1978, lasted five minutes; the agent said it would be better if Julie were blonde. Later the pair wandered over to the Alvin Theater (since renamed the Neil Simon Theater) on West 52nd Street, where the hit musical "Annie" had been running for two and a half years.

Julie, with her mother at her heels, strode into the theater through the stage door, stood in the wings watching a rehearsal and, after being noticed by a stage manager, announced, "I want to be in 'Annie.'" Three auditions later she got a part as the orphan named Tessie.

Now Ms. Stevens has directed a documentary film, "Life After Tomorrow," about dozens of girls like her who acted in "Annie" during its original run on Broadway and on the road from 1977 through 1983. The film was shown at several festivals this spring and is currently seeking a distributor.

"I had no idea people still wanted to talk about 'Annie,'" Ms. Stevens, 36, said recently in a tele-

phone interview from her home in Los Angeles.

She learned of the enthusiasm several years ago when she and a fellow "orphan" decided to track down their peers. They made a list of 125 names and published it on a Web site, along with a contact e-mail address. They figured that people would find the site when Googling themselves. Sure enough, they did, and soon Ms. Stevens became an alumni coordinator of sorts, organizing mini-reunions in Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia.

"It's like a sorority," she said. At the events, the grown women immediately noticed that most were between 5 feet and 5 feet 2 inches, and that they could even now do the dance to "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile."

"I still know every word to every song. I still know all the choreography," Sarah Jessica Parker says in "Life After Tomorrow." Ms. Parker, who played Annie on Broadway, is among more than 40 women Ms. Stevens and her co-producer, Gil Cates Jr., interviewed for the film.

Though the movie also features such "Annie" luminaries as the director and lyricist Martin Charnin and the composer Charles Strouse, "the story I wanted to tell needed to have the voice of the girls," Ms. Stevens said. "It needed to be from a little girl's perspective, in a way."

The magic of "Annie" has always been related to the tens of thousands of girls who dreamed of being in the show, and Ms. Stevens's film is about those girls whose dreams came true.

With varying degrees of wistfulness, the women describe their experiences. Many re-

count the burdens of a show-biz youth and its aftermath (at times with a certain comic twist: "Miss Hannigan, in the show, sometimes would really hit me"). But anyone who ever loved "Annie" may come away wondering if perhaps there's a version of your life in which it's still possible for you to join the show. Though the film centers on its subjects' struggles, there is plenty of nostalgia. Ms. Stevens incorporates lots of old clips.

When collecting snapshots for her film, Ms. Stevens found that the girls' mothers often controlled access to their daughters' archives. At one home in Los Angeles "I had to sign my life away," she said. "I had to put placeholders in the album where I took them out, then run back to my house to scan them." Yet the mother wasn't satisfied with Ms. Stevens's speed. "She called me in the middle of the hour: 'Where are you?'"

Several women in the film recall particularly intense relationships with their mothers. "It's like a marriage," said Ms. Stevens, who traveled with her mother on the third national tour.

Over the last several years, as Ms. Stevens amassed Playbills, newspaper clippings and videotapes of the stage orphans' appearances on the Merry Griffin show, she became an avid curator of the "Annie" experience. Some of the collection is available for browsing on Ms. Stevens's expanded Web site, [www.annieorchans.com](http://www.annieorchans.com), which includes a discussion forum.

Ms. Stevens operates as the voice of authority, the one who can tell you whether Kristi

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From left, Julie Stevens as the orphan Tessie and a string of Annies: Mollie Hall; Louanne; Rosanne Kavanagh, left; Sarah Jessica Parker; and Allison Smith.

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Coombs (first and second national tours) has read your post, or whether Allison Smith (Broadway) appeared on the television show "Without a Trace." She joins debates — would Judy Garland have made a good Annie? — and answers questions: yes, the Annie understudy had her own red wig. Ms. Stevens is a generous moderator, playing the roles of both fan and insider. And, lately, acting coach.

When a 30th anniversary tour production of "Annie" took shape in 2005, Ms. Stevens began to get e-mail messages from a new, wired generation of mothers. Many sought advice about auditions. Ms. Stevens counsels them and their children to "think long and hard" before joining a tour.

The original "Annie" auditions were the object of as many fantasies as the show itself: Oh, to be among the girls singing bars of "Tomorrow" in a hotel ballroom in a major city. Many girls saw news reports of the lines outside a casting call before

they had seen the musical. To be chosen was to reach the apex of little girlhood.

Afterward, some of the women in the film say, they struggled for years to redefine themselves. "I was stuck in this little girl thing probably up until my 30's," says Robyn Finn-Moosey, who played Pepper on Broadway. Others recall the show as its own kind of hard-knock life: "I've been diagnosed with bipolar disorder," Ana Lovelis, a rock singer, says in the movie. "And I think that that whole 'Annie' experience for me

was a manic episode."

At least one woman has e-mailed Ms. Stevens to complain that, judging from an online trailer, the film seems too negative.

After viewing a rough cut of the documentary, Mr. Charnin, who is also directing the current national tour, had a similar response: "Selective memory crept into the piece," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Seattle. "It got very dark." He added: "There are a lot of kids she didn't interview."

Some former orphans Ms. Stevens

contacted declined to participate, including Andrea McArdle, who originated the role of Annie on Broadway, and Aileen Quinn, who starred in the 1982 movie.

Whatever their experiences, most in the film display a lasting affection for the musical. "I did the show 25 years ago, it's still on my résumé," says Martha Byrne, a two-time Emmy winner for her work on "As the World Turns." "And the one thing that people ask me the most about is 'Annie.'"

Ms. Byrne, Ms. Parker and the MSNBC anchor Dara Brown are among the most familiar faces in the film; they are joined by a radio journalist, a psychologist, a flight attendant, a Marilyn Monroe impersonator

and a financial planner. Several are now mothers themselves. (The group has a slightly higher incidence of fair skin and reddish hair than might occur in the general population.)

Ms. Stevens herself has stayed in show business; she provided one of the voices of Barbie in the animated feature "The Princess and the Pauper." She also works as an on-set schoolteacher and wants to do more directing.

In one of the sweetest moments of her documentary, Ms. Stevens asks her subjects to sing "Tomorrow." One by one, she cuts among them, and it's almost as if they're back in their childhood bedrooms, when everything was still only a day away.