

HEATHER VOGEL FREDERICK

My Sister, the Pea

by Heather Vogel Frederick

My little sister fibbed on her resume. It's right there in black and white, where she listed her first dramatic role as Angélique in Molière's "The Hypochondriac." This is a major fib.

Her career was launched much earlier, in fact. And since I was the one who cast her in that first role, the responsibility for clearing this up now, before she gets famous and completely forgets her humble beginnings, lies with me. So to set the record straight, my sister Stefanie's introduction to theater was in a home production of "The Princess and the Pea." She played the pea. My other sister, Lisa, and I hadn't planned on writing her into the script. As the eldest of three girls, I naturally took charge (they called it being bossy) of all our family dramatic productions. Lisa was my assistant (she had a different term for it: slave). The two of us had worked for weeks on this production. We raided every closet in the house for costumes, figured out a way to hide the props under the baby grand piano, wrote up programs, and rehearsed. As director, I was a shoo-in for the dual role of the Princess and her prospective mother-in-law, the Queen. Lisa, tall for her age and sporting a pixie haircut (is there a grown woman in America who can forget the loathsome pixie haircut?), played the Prince. (She was also good at playing livestock – horses in particular – but that's another story entirely.) But there was no part for Stefanie. She was too little (only 4), and we figured she couldn't be relied upon to memorize any lines. Besides – after-school rehearsals overlapped with her naptime. So we told her she could pass out programs. That was a mistake.

She may have been a preschooler, but Stefanie knew double-dealing when she saw it. She also knew that Lisa and I were pushovers. She frowned briefly, considering. Then she stuck out her lip. It trembled. Her eyes filled up and tears spilled over her chubby little cheeks. I should have recognized the talent then.

We gave in, of course. I promised her we'd think of a role. The tears dried up instantly and were replaced by an expectant smile. Desperately, I cast about for something suitable for her to do in the play. Perhaps it was her outfit – hand-me-down green polyester stretch pants and matching shirt – but suddenly I was struck with an inspiration. She could play the pea! That wasn't exactly what she had in mind. But I emphasized what an important part this was – that, although the pea didn't exactly have any lines, it was certainly pivotal to the plot. I showed her a copy of the program and pointed out that she would be sharing top billing with me, the Princess. That clinched it.

Stefanie practiced for days, rolling herself up into as tight a ball as possible and crouching under a thin cot mattress. "How do I look?" she'd ask breathlessly.

“Great,” I told her. “Just like a pea. But you can’t scratch. Peas have to be still.” We put the play on late one rainy March afternoon for my parents and a few neighbors my mother had dragged in—including Mrs. Cunningham, who was hard of hearing, and for whose benefit we had to shout the lines. It went over big. Lavish praise was heaped upon the pea. Stefanie glowed for days, reliving her moment of triumph and giving impromptu repeat performances at the slightest encouragement. I’m sure there were other events in her life that propelled my sister toward the bright lights of Broadway, but deep down, I think a star was born that rainy day. And who knows what the future holds for a former pea with no lines? After all, if an acorn can grow up to be an oak tree—well, a pea can certainly grow up to be a princess.