



# Young, *creative* & resilient

ACTOR/DANCER STEPHANIE GRAHAM  
FINDS OPPORTUNITY IN TOUGH FIELD

By Lisa Hagen

**IF IT WEREN'T FOR HER HUSBAND,**

Waterloo native Stephanie Graham wouldn't be Pepsi's make-out girl in national television commercials.

Her actor-husband, Rob Torr, was auditioning for Pepsi's Forever Young commercials. Dreading the thought of having to neck with a total stranger, he asked if he could bring his wife along as his kissing partner. The producers liked the way Graham puckered up and hired her. But they didn't think much of her husband's technique. He went home empty-handed.

Graham is not only the make-out girl, but also a respected dancer, actress, teacher, choreographer and producer in the Canadian entertainment industry. She has worked steadily since graduating from Sheridan College 10 years ago. As she puts it, "In Canada, if you make your primary income from acting, you are considered successful."

However, she's not immune to disappointment in the competitive, frenzied entertainment business. Recently, she landed a premiere position as the assistant choreographer/assistant dance captain and swing (a fill-in for ill or injured dancers)



At age 11, Stephanie Graham of Waterloo was accepted for a year's residency at Canada's National Ballet School.

File photo • Waterloo Region Record

for the world premiere of *Ha'Penny Bridge*, which was a primarily Canadian production of a musical from Ireland.

With hopes of opening at the Princess of Wales theatre in Toronto in May, then in San Francisco in June before moving to Broadway, the show was big news in the ▶



## BEHIND THE SCENES

Dance class, choral singing at Bluevale Collegiate Institute and theatrical training at Sheridan College prepared Stephanie Graham for a career on stage.

Photography • Tomasz Adamski

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► Canadian theatre scene. It attracted the finest talent in the country, including in-demand director Donna Feore.

But in the shaky world of live theatre, the show does not always go on. Unable to secure more cities for the tour, producers cancelled the show one week into workshop rehearsals. Actors and technicians who were counting on six months or more of employment were out of work, including Graham. Overnight, they shot from the exhilarating high of being part of an international production to unemployment.

This roller-coaster ride is part of the lifestyle for actors, and Graham knew that from the young age of 11 when she took her first steps into the professional dance world.

Graham credits the National Ballet School for her career. At age 11, she was one of the first dancers from Waterloo Region to be accepted by the prestigious ballet and boarding school and today, with total sincerity, she thanks the school for letting her go after a year because she had the wrong body type for ballet. The rejection forced her to learn a variety of dance styles, leading her into musical theatre where she discovered her true passion.

"Musical theatre is an incredible art form," Graham says. "Music has an instant emotional impact on an audience and you don't need to understand a specific language to understand movement. What I love about traditional musical theatre is when the emotion of the spoken word becomes too great, it must turn into song. When singing is not enough to express the emotions, you must move."

Her favourite quote from writer Richard Kislak sums it up: "Dance symbols can be as effective as language or music symbols for dramatic communication. What sets dance apart is the universality in movement and gesture which is not bound like language to nationality or culture. Dance transcends geography in a way that language cannot. Dance humanizes expression in a way that music cannot."

So how does a girl from Waterloo get to work with the likes of Donna Feore, Hilary Duff, Drew Barrymore, Colin Mochrie and Woody Harrelson? Graham learned her



**GRAHAM'S CREDITS**

▲ **Gigi.**

Courtesy of Stratford Festival

Photography • Laird Mackintosh

**Pearl Fishers** ►

Photography • Courtesy of Opera Ontario

early dance steps at the Carousel Dance Centre, studying under Laura Prada and Ruth Priddle. In high school, she attended the musically oriented Bluevale Collegiate Institute, where she sang in several choirs. The rudiments learned there made the transition to Sheridan College in Oakville quite easy and she was accepted by the college at her first audition.

She also performed with community theatre groups such as KW Musical Productions and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society. "KW is a great place to grow up," Graham says. "The performing arts community is strong."

After college, she quickly learned she had to be aggressive in seeking work. Her first job was in West Side Story at Grand Bend, followed by an internship at Livent Inc.'s creative affairs office. But like all actors, she's had her fill of waitress jobs and working at the YMCA. Even today, she teaches pilates and dance to fill in the down times.

Her big break came in Charlottetown, where she had the starring role in Johnny Belinda, directed by Kitchener native Dianne Nyland-Proctor. It was there that she met Torr through yet another Waterloo Region actor, Chris Wilson. Wilson had brought his troupe to town to perform Godspell and the two companies often got together after shows. From that cama-



▲ **My One and Only**

Courtesy of Stratford Festival.

Photography • David Hou

**Into the Woods** ►

Courtesy of Stratford Festival

Photography • Laird Mackintosh



raderie a romance developed between Graham and Torr. "It's nice to have someone who understands the industry and the sacrifices you need to make because he's making them, too," she says of their marriage.

Jobs with the Canadian Opera Company's Oedipus Rex tour, and CBC's Getting Along Famously followed, before she wound up

at Stratford Festival for several seasons. She played Leane D'Exalmans in Stratford's Gigi a few years ago, and in 2007 she played Gertie in Oklahoma! (directed by Feore) and danced in My One and Only.

Competition among young actors is fierce, and of 20 graduates from her Sheridan class, only four are still in the business. "There is no star system in Canada, so for ►



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### JUST A DREAM

A job as assistant choreographer for the world premiere of Ha'Penny Bridge, for which Stephanie Graham was training dancers when these photos were taken, ended overnight when the producers backed out.

Photography • Tomasz Adamski



► one show you may be the leading lady and the next job you are back in the ensemble," Graham explains. It is an up-and-down existence where "you are only as good as your last show."

Her recent disappointment with Ha'Penny Bridge underscores not only the precariousness of the business, but also Graham's resilience. Within a day of the cancellation, she had lined up another job choreographing a new musical about women's hockey. Called Hip Check, it is scheduled to run at Varsity Arena in Toronto July 2 - 13.

The uncertain lifestyle, no doubt, feeds the countless superstitions and rituals that actors follow. One of Graham's favourite stories involves a tour with the Canadian Opera Company to Edinburgh, where the old theatre in which they performed was rumoured to be home to a ghost. One of the opera stars declared ghosts to be total nonsense, and trashed the resident spirit all through rehearsal week.

When the curtain went up opening night, the singer stepped into the spotlight for his solo, opened his mouth and ... every light went out. The orchestra, unable to see the music, stopped playing, the ensemble on stage froze, thinking the soloist had blanked, and a gasp went up from the audience.

A full 30 seconds passed before power was

restored and the show went on.

Immediately following the bows, the singer was marched up to the attic home of the ghost and was made to apologize through a locked door. The lesson? The show must go on, even if it means kissing up to a ghost.

Which brings us back to Graham kissing a good-looking stranger in a national television ad. Two caveats were set by her husband before she left for the Pepsi shoot. First, she owed him a case of beer for getting her the job. Two, she was strongly cautioned "not to enjoy it too much."

Acting is a tough job, but someone's got to do it. 