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**THE
CREATIVITY
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CAPTURING CREATIVITY
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Cynthia
DALE
...PLAYS ON

THE HAUTE CUISINE OF
ANNE DESJARDINS

JACKIE KALLEN
& THE KING

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The melodic life of Cynthia Dale

by Alison MacAlpine
photography by Janet Bailey

"The older you get, the scarier the projects you do should be," says Cynthia Dale, who is sitting across from me in the sunny Bijou Café in Stratford, Ontario. She's on a break from her hectic rehearsal schedule. She is performing in two Stratford Festival of Canada musicals this year — *Anything Goes* and *Guys and Dolls*. "This season is really scary, and at 23, I would have been stupid enough to say 'no' to these two parts. At 43, you say 'yes.'"

Dale is best known for scheming her way through six successful seasons of the CBC television series *Street Legal* as Olivia

Novak, the often manipulative, always ambitious character audiences loved to hate. But she has in fact been acting, singing and dancing professionally since she was five years old, and has moved easily between stage, television and film work throughout her career. In the last half-decade, she has carved out a niche for herself at Stratford in a string of musicals, including *Camelot*, *Man of La Mancha*, *The Sound of Music* and *My Fair Lady*.

In person, Dale doesn't have any of Olivia's hard edges. From the moment she arrives, unwrapping her lime green coat





and scarf and slipping off her sunglasses, she is warm, gracious and engaged. She is also earnestly grateful for her success.

"I have been incredibly blessed," she says. "Still, to this day, there are rejections. I still lose parts that I wish I could get. I don't understand what it is about this business that makes people stick with it because, more than in any other profession, the rejection is constant and harrowing."

Dale takes a quick sip of camomile tea. She's trying to stave off a virus that's sweeping through the acting company on the eve of their first preview show of the season, and laughs that she thinks about changing careers "on a daily basis." But with her next breath she admits, "I can't do anything else. I guess I could if I really set my mind to it, but it's not about my mind. It's about my heart and my soul — and my heart and soul are more fulfilled doing this than they would probably be doing anything else."

Her two Stratford Festival roles are giving her plenty of room to stretch creatively and satisfy those heart-and-soul needs. She's alternating — sometimes on the same day — between innocent Sarah Brown, the blushing ingénue from Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*, and lusty Reno Sweeney in Cole Porter's *Anything Goes*. It's a gruelling schedule that runs through to November.

"Half the time it's too hard," she admits. "Half the time you're sick. Half the time you're tired. Half the time you wish you were somewhere else. But it's your job just to do it. You sign on for it, and if you don't want it somebody else will take your place." Dale relies on the strength of the script, the passion of the characters she portrays, and the energy projected by the rest of the company to keep her performances fresh night after night.

When I ask if she reads her reviews, a brief flash of Olivia shines through. "Never," she says emphatically. "There's too much energy that's put into a show for three months that can be destroyed in a 30-second read — and it's at the bottom of the birdcage the next day. Nobody ever believes anybody when they say they don't read them." Now she stresses each syllable: "Some people just don't read them."

I wonder aloud if stage work gives her more room to shape her own performances than television or film. "You have to come to the table with a lot of ideas, but it's not a democracy. The director has the final say," she replies with the tiniest frown. Immediately though, she adds, "I'm lucky enough to work with directors I respect so I want to listen to their ideas."

Whoever has the final say, her collaboration with the Stratford directors wins over audiences because Dale has tremendous charisma on stage. She sings with a smile in her voice and a twinkle in her eyes. She dances and her sheer enjoyment is infectious. And her acting reveals something attractive and vulnerable in the raunchiest characters.

Perhaps the joy she delivers reliably to crowds of fidgety schoolchildren, grey-haired tourists and everyone in between is possible because Dale is at a particularly happy place in her personal life. She and her husband, CBC's Peter Mansbridge (*The National*), recently moved from Toronto to Stratford to create a more permanent home base for their son, Will, who is four and a half. Dale glows as she describes her boy, his love of theatre and song, and his even greater passion for hockey and Toronto Maple Leafs' goalie, Eddie Belfour.

"If somebody told me that I would be moving to a small town in my 40s, I would have said, 'no way!' The fact that I'm landlocked and I don't live near the ocean — I don't know how I set my life up to do that!" She always pictured herself living in New York (and, in fact, did live there briefly before *Street Legal*) or Los Angeles.

As part of her commitment to take on challenging, scary projects, she explains that she recorded and released her first CD,

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Cynthia Dale ... to dream, two years ago. This past April, she launched a second CD, *More...*, an eclectic mix of old jazzy love songs inspired by 1940s music she heard on one of many two-hour drives to Toronto.

The recording process for *More...* left her feeling raw. "I don't know how to perform and hold back and just market," she explains. "It feels like it would be shortchanging not just an audience but my own soul. So in that sense, you just have to be prepared to go for it and let 'er rip. If that means rip your heart out, then that's what it means."

Does she see the recording work as a reinvention of herself and her career? "To me it just feels like another facet, another shade in the rainbow, another colour of what and who you are," she says.

Dale's creativity is satisfied by interpreting music composed by others. She's not tempted to take up songwriting herself. "If I was anything in my life, I'd be a writer, a novelist," she confesses. "I'm not. I love to read, and I'm not a writer. I wish I was." She adds, "And I'm not a songwriter."

Yet last year, Dale did add one new skill to her bag of tricks. She sat out the Stratford Festival season to do a concert tour that she describes as "without doubt the scariest thing I've ever done in my life." In the Stratford shows, she points out, she can hide behind a character — not to mention a dozen or so dancing guys and gals in distracting costumes. "In my concerts, that was just me standing there," she explains. "It's really vulnerable and really exposed."

Despite that — or maybe because of that — she adds that she'd love to tour with the second CD, perhaps after the Stratford plays wrap up at the end of the year. She also has a private list of about five musicals she wants to perform in the future.

"They're just little prayers," she says, arching one eyebrow. "If they're meant to be, they'll happen." ■