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Teaneck child actor hits the road in musical "Once"

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BY JOHN PETRICK

STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD

So what exactly was it about 7-year-old Sophie Knapp that won her the job of replacement player in the role of Ivanca, the young daughter in the Tony Award-winning musical "Once"? Was it her years of vocal training? The acting lessons, paying off? Her dancing skills?

"The other girl got too big and heavy," says Sophie, speaking from a hotel room in Vancouver, where the touring production of "Once" was playing for a three-night stand last week. Sophie, who lives in Teaneck, is on the two-month tour after playing the role as a replacement player on Broadway during the show's final months last year.

To hear the modest young triple threat talk about winning the role, it wasn't so much her talent as her being just the right height and size. After all, kids sprout up quickly at her age. They must go through a lot of 7-year-olds when it's a long run. "They were looking for someone small," she says. "They picked me up to see if I was light or heavy. Then they measured me." Oh yeah, and she had to dance and sing, too. Two callbacks later, she got the role.

While nothing compares to Broadway, the second-grader says, the road has its own unique rewards, too. "It's fun. We've been to Edmonton, Vancouver, Calgary. We go to Raleigh for a week, then Boston for three weeks, and then the tour is done. I actually have been to Boston before because my cousin lives there. But then he moved to Memphis. It's big!" says the 7-year-old, who has been accompanied by her grandmother on the road and is being tutored while she's out of school.

While doing her shows and being tutored doesn't leave a lot of spare time, she still does get to soak in some of the local color of the various places the tour has stopped.

"For a 7-year-old, she has had some life-changing experiences," says her mother, Chavie Knapp. "She was struck by the homeless people in San Francisco. At some point, she said, 'I really want to buy them socks.' So they bought 390 pairs of socks, and passed them around to the homeless."

While Sophie's character does not speak during her scenes, she still makes a big statement, notes Chavie, a former practicing lawyer and now stay-at-home mother of five. Her husband and Sophie's father, Stephen Knapp, is the middle school principal of Westchester Day School in Mamaroneck, N.Y.

"The role of Ivanca is pivotal. The fact that she [the main woman character] has a daughter shows what her responsibilities are. It's an important role in the overall theme of the story, even though she's only in a couple of scenes. Plus, she sings, she acts, she dances."

The musical premiered at the New York Theatre Workshop in 2011, before transferring to Broadway in 2012. The production received 11 Tony Award nominations that year, and won eight including best musical, best actor and best book. The musical also won the 2012 Drama Desk Award for outstanding musical and the 2013 Grammy Award for best musical theater album. It has since spawned a London production, with a North American tour that started in October 2013.

In the musical, the cast also serves as the orchestra. A minimalist set is used, including a bar in center stage with chairs lining stage left and right.

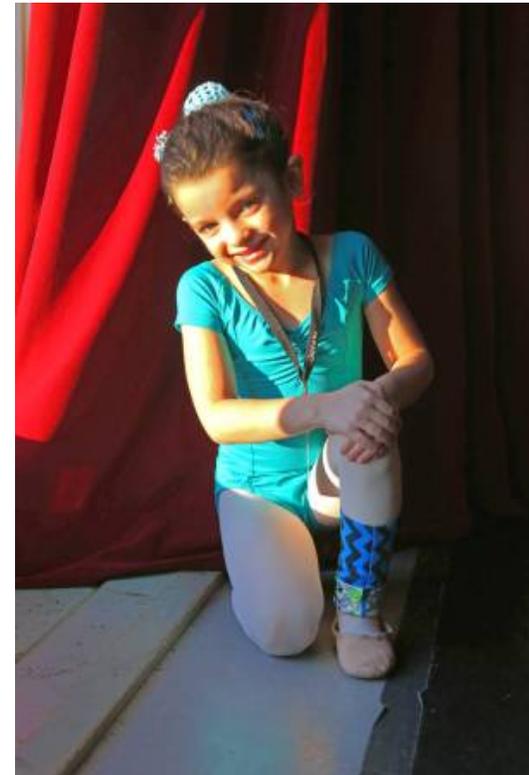
Guy, the main male character, is an Irish singer and songwriter who spends his days fixing vacuums in the Dublin shop he runs with his father, and his nights playing his music in local pubs. He is about to give up on music when a Czech immigrant, "Girl," the main female character, walks into the bar, hears him play and insists that he continue to pursue his musical dreams.

As it turns out, Girl has a broken vacuum cleaner, which Guy repairs. She pays him for the work in music on a piano she plays in a record shop. Over the course of a week, Girl and Guy scrape together money to record a demo album with a motley crew of bar friends. Their unexpected friendship and collaboration turns into a complicated love story.

"I don't think she even understood what it really meant to be on Broadway until she started," says Chavie.

"For Sophie, the bigger the stage, the bigger the audience, the more fun it is for her. She just loves to perform and always has."

Sophie has appeared off-Broadway in "A Little Princess" and "Dream Street," in area youth-theater productions of "The Little Mermaid," "Annie," "Into the Woods" and "South Pacific" as a



PHOTOS BY JIM ALCORN/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Even at age 7, Sophie Knapp of Teaneck has an extensive résumé on the stage, currently playing Ivanca in the touring production of "Once." Above inset, she practices her ballet moves at Nunnbetter Studio on Woodbine Street in Bergenfield.



featured vocalist with the Broadway Kids Cabaret at the Triad theater in Manhattan, and as a soloist at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan as part of Cabaret for a Cause, among many other performance credits on her extensive résumé.

After being home for a week for Thanksgiving break, Sophie goes back out on the road with "Once" for another month. After that, the young actor has her sights set on more auditions, such as for the Broadway shows "Les Misérables" and "Matilda," both of which offer juicy roles for child actors around her age.

She has an agent and a manager, both of whom helped get her the audition for "Once" and who plan extensive auditions for TV commercials.

Email: petrick@northjersey.com

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