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SONOMA

THE BEST OF WINE COUNTRY

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secrets

Burning down
the Wolf House

M.F.K. Fisher's
bathroom

Art

TRANSCENDENCE

under the stars

The mysterious conspiracy to save a park
and entertain — ultimately — the world



STORY DAVID BOLLING

PHOTOS ROBBY PENGELLY



Once in love with Amy, and who isn't, amazing things happen, including a transcendent dream.

universe just next door, where everyone can sing and dance, knows Broadway show tunes and John Lennon's "Imagine," and where the parks never close.

If you're not from the Sonoma Valley, the Transcendence Theatre Company will be even more of a mystery—a consummately professional, gloriously entertaining collection of Broadway and Hollywood professionals, staging a full summer season just outside the house where Jack London wrote and died, in a park that was supposed to be shuttered. If you are from around these parts, the first time you see them on stage, framed by the stone winery ruins inside Jack London State Historic Park, you'll still wonder if something mysterious, supernatural, inexplicable isn't taking place.

And you'll be right.

Because there's something otherworldly going on here, something magical, perhaps mystical, peculiar, momentous, possibly historic and definitely difficult to explain.

Perhaps the best way to start is by watching an eight-minute YouTube video called, "The Best Wedding Toast Ever—Amy's Song." Do not be misled by copycat videos—this one starts with giant flash cards before erupting into a flash mob of wedding guests serenading the bride with a brilliantly adapted and expertly choreographed version of Ray Bolger's Broadway classic, "Once in Love with Amy." It's had well over two million views.

Watch it before you read any further and you will instantly understand something fundamental about the Transcendence Theatre Company, which was born in the imagination of Amy Miller, the company's artistic director, CEO, vision master, research nerd, and miracle wonk.

Here's the story in a nutshell, although a

feature-length documentary is in the works, followed or preceded by the book and probably the Broadway musical. Really.

The dramatic elements include a 90-minute, top-secret video; the discovery of a secluded theater in a tiny, seaside Baja village; the number 14; a mysterious donation from Japan; the aforementioned wedding video; a three-month vision quest, fitness boot camp, and theater production in that Baja village; a two-month, cross-country odyssey (with two RVs and a dog) called Project Knowledge; some serious research; the innocent, off-the-cuff remark by a county planner about the absence of permit restrictions inside state parks; the search for a natural crevice of awesomeness; the simultaneous and serendipitous discovery that numerous state parks

“YOU JUST SEE THE IMMENSE POWER OF THE ARTS TO CHANGE THE WORLD.”

were about to close and one of them was seeking private partnerships; some advice from Ranger Bob; an email that arrived in the only window of time in which it could be read; and how a \$25,000, outdoor musical review could be staged in less than a month with \$83 in the bank.

Very strange stuff indeed. But then, Amy Miller is no ordinary performer.

Musical theater was Amy's dream from the age of tiny. She can't tell you precisely where the dream came from or how it found itself inside her, it was just always there.

She grew up in Cincinnati, went to college, landed in New York and before too

painfully long, found herself on Broadway—not standing there, outside the 42nd Street Theater, but inside, on stage in the eponymous musical.

Making it on the Great White Way fulfilled the dream but it triggered a bout of existential angst. Driving her musical theater passion is a powerful impulse to "touch as many lives as possible through art."

Ask her what that actually means and Amy doesn't hesitate.

"I just think the arts have a power to move people. They have the power to make people live more. Musical theater was a way that I felt the most alive, performing and communicating with people and using my talents. I saw that the arts and musical theater brought so much laughter and joy and love and made so many people happy. So, that's what I wanted to do with my life. As I've grown older and dug deeper into all of this, you just see the immense power of the arts to change the world."

So you'd think that reaching Broadway would energize every cell in her body (that is, if there were any reluctant, renegade cells hiding behind the curtain, not already vibrating like a uranium fuel rod in a nuclear



The Founding Six members of TTC: Robert Petrarca, general director; Leah Sprecher, creative coordinator; Stephan Stubbins, co-executive director; Brad Surosky, co-executive director; Amy Miller, artistic director/CEO; Randi Kaye, founding member.

PHOTO RYAN DAFFURN

power plant. Amy is nothing if not energized).

She readily admits that being on Broadway felt "amazing. It felt like you achieved a great goal. You're a part of a tradition in America. You got to use all your talents of dancing and singing and actually achieved something that is somewhat, in some people's eyes, impossible or something that they're chasing

after. It's a real high point in an artist's life. That was amazing. After that achievement, though, I realized, OK I did that. That was the ultimate."

What's next?

There was a lot, actually. Amy and husband Brad Surosky went to L.A. and mined the film and TV industry, successfully booking numerous national TV commercials

There's a temptation to believe that they've come from another planet, that, like Superman, they dropped into earth orbit from the back side of some extraterrestrial explosion, propelled through outer space and into the quiet Valley of the Moon where popular parks were scheduled to close, and that they arrived with superhuman powers to entertain, amuse, and inspire and, ultimately, to rescue us from the folly of closed parks.

Or perhaps that is an altogether too fantastic scenario, inappropriate for consideration by Wine Country sophisticates.

So maybe they merely crawled through a cosmic wormhole, stepped out of a parallel



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and dramatic parts. You've seen Amy selling Chevy's, WalMart, and Bank of America. Brad shows up in *Cold Case*, *Scrubs*, *Las Vegas*, *Veronica Mars*, *When a Stranger Calls* and several other national commercials.

But those successes didn't prevent Amy's existential angst. They somehow led her deeper into the question that began to haunt her, the old Meaning of Life question.

"After you achieve that ultimate, achieve that Broadway experience, then I was left having what was like a creative collapse of some sort. I achieved that, what do I do now? How do I give everything that's in my heart to the world? How do I make a living doing it?"

Those questions led to more questions. "How can you be of more service to the world? What would you attempt to do if you knew you couldn't fail? What's your idea of a perfect day? What job would you be doing to grow to your best self, to give to the world?"

If you get to know Amy, a little, you find it hard to believe that the next benchmark in the unfolding sequence of birthing events leading to the founding of Transcendence Theatre Company (let's just call it TTC from now on) would find her on the ground in the fetal position, crying, while trying to answer those deeper questions. "That," she insists, "is what Transcendence Theatre grew out of."

Then, if you get to know Amy a little more, you learn that being curled up on the floor was an inevitable, and essential, part of the ride that took her to Broadway. You don't get one without the other.

But unlike most of us, who dodge such questions, or pursue them obliquely, around corners and down one-way streets, Amy tackled her existential demons head on and dragged them down to the ground with her, where they didn't stand a chance.

The chronology of Amy Miller's wanderings through the existential wilder-



Melissa Giattino and Ron DeStefano, otherwise known as *Two on Tap*, perform in the wineery ruins at Jack London State Historic Park.

ness is crowded with events and a little hard to track. But during this time she began an almost feverish reading regime.

"I read 75 books. I read books from everything about the power of the mind, to great nutrition, to digging into the history of the great people of theater. I got hold of great material from a group called The Group Theatre, of the 1930s. It was led by Harold Clurman, who became my mentor. These were artists who joined together to change the world. They had this vision, and in their books they said it wasn't fulfilled, but a later generation would fulfill it. I was very intrigued by all of these things."

In the midst of her reading frenzy, and experiments on getting really healthy, and listening to inspirational tapes and wrestling with reality in every corner of her life, Amy sat down in front of a video camera for an hour and a half and made "the video."

"It was an hour and a half of me talking, explaining everything. A theater outdoors, under the stars, a place that was going to be a healthy company culture for artists, that would allow them to grow to their full potential so that they could change the world and change other people's lives. It was this whole vision, and I would get up and read these inspirational quotes, from Thoreau to Harold Clurman."

In the video, Amy extended the invitation for others to join her and Brad for a Mexican odyssey, to the village of Punta Banda where they had discovered a colony of Americans who had founded the Gertrude Pearlman Theater and had offered it for free if TTC wanted to come stage a play.

"I sent it in a top secret envelope because I was told, don't share your dream with too many people, they will say it's impossible. So I didn't even share it with my parents. I sent it to five friends."

One of those five was Stephan Stubbins, another multitalented performer and Cincinnati native (although he and Amy didn't meet until they both left), who is now co-executive director of TTC. Stubbins grew up "with this calling to sing. I had this fortunate opportunity to walk to school from the time I was in basically first grade to eighth grade. I lived between my first three schools, so I would often walk by myself back and forth from school and I would sing to the houses."

Stubbins climbed the community theater ladder, fell in love with musicals and got good enough that, when he was a high school sophomore, Frank Sinatra came to town and Stubbins was selected to open for him.

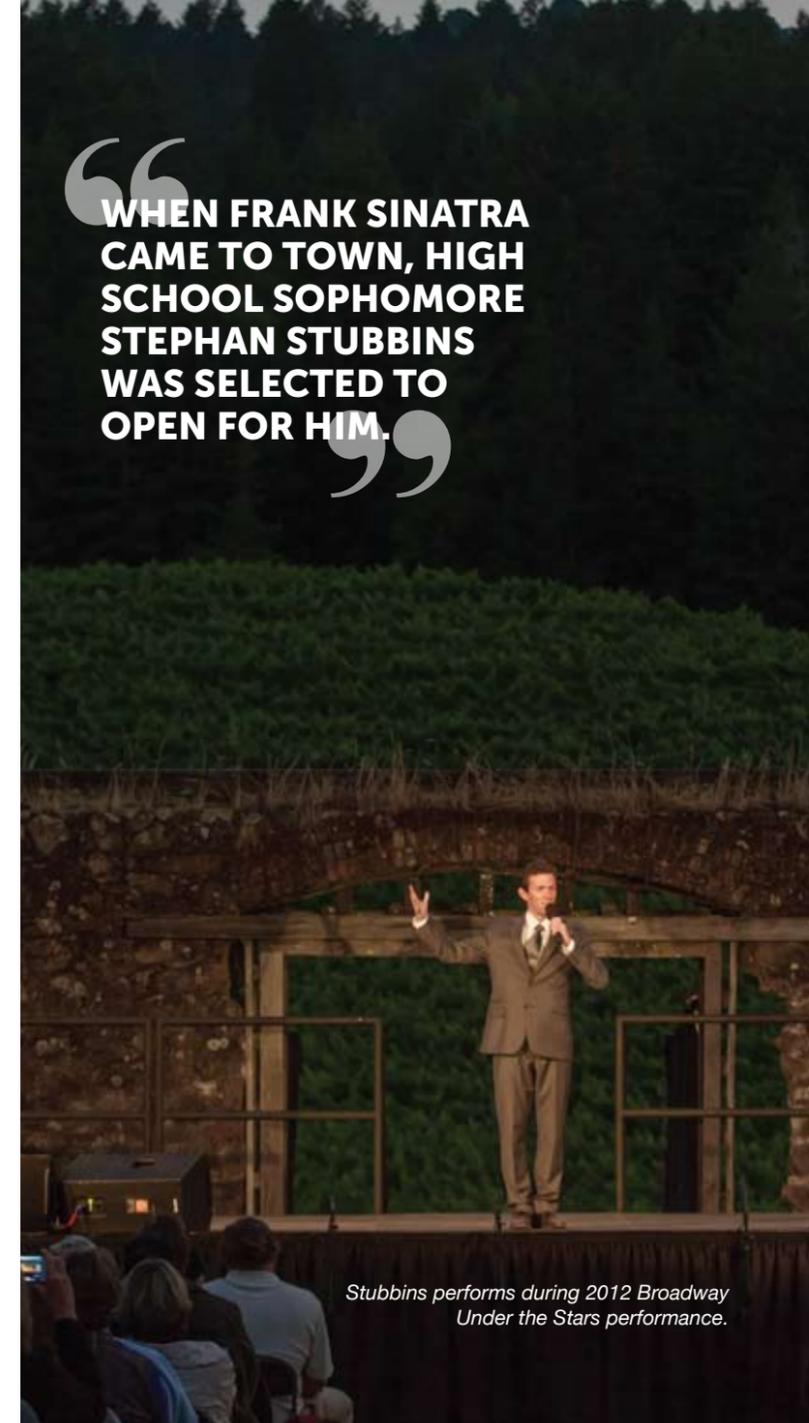
"I just remember looking at myself in the mirror backstage and being like, is this really going to happen? It was one of the moments of transcendence where your body just vibrates."

Stubbins' career path took him through summer stock, a stint as Doug in the Disney musical of that name, until he quit to go to New York, where he eventually encountered his own dark night of the soul and his own transcendent redemption. He had been offered a role in his first off-Broadway show, a play called *Silent Laughter*, in which no one spoke. Three days in, he was fired.

"It was devastating. I was like, what's my identity as an artist if I can't even do the show that I'm cast to do? I walked through Times Square feeling, I don't belong. I basically lay in bed with my eyes open, being like, how can I go on? I was 25 or 26, it was literally my ground zero."

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“WHEN FRANK SINATRA CAME TO TOWN, HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORE STEPHAN STUBBINS WAS SELECTED TO OPEN FOR HIM.”



Stubbins performs during 2012 Broadway Under the Stars performance.



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Stubbins regrouped, took a year and a half off and worked for a hedge fund, then went back to Broadway, got a role in *Mary Poppins* and started a business called the Theater Mafia, helping performers moving to New York adjust to the city.

And then Amy's video arrived.

"So this video comes from Amy sitting in L.A. saying this is what we are going to do. They're giving this theater for free. We're calling people who are like-minded. It's going to be this experiment. I immediately knew I needed to be part of this in some way. I then decided that I would probably quit my job and move to Mexico and not get paid and all that. So I go to my agent and, obviously, this is her paycheck every week that she's getting from me being in this show. I told her the idea of the story and she stopped and she took a second and she said, 'Baja is the most magical place I've ever been. Listen to this,' she said, 'my husband and I, we quit our jobs, we sold all of our belongings and we got into RVs and we toured the country for a year. We spent three months in Baja and it was the most magical three months of my life. I think you should follow your dream. You should go to Baja. My husband wrote a book about it, called *Quit Your Job and Move to Baja*.'"

Which is what Stephan Stubbins did. And because the TTC story was spreading around the world online, the company got some unexpected help, including a \$1,000 check, out of the blue, from a man in Japan.

To make a very, very long story a little shorter, Baja turned out to be even more magical than anyone expected, the troupe performed for the Punta Banda community, for kids in orphanages, put kids in shows, conducted workshops and classes on countless aspects of healing and health, fitness and philosophy, and returned inspired and on fire.

Six founding members then spent two months touring the country to talk with independent theater groups and explore the best theatrical models to learn from. They finished their sojourn by driving through Northern California Wine Country and they fell in love with Sonoma County. But they still didn't have a venue and had no idea where they could anchor the company.

In conversation with a county official, Brad learned that use permits for a season of

musical performances would be difficult to acquire. But, the man said, you don't need a county permit on state park property.

A seed was planted.

Amy went online thinking, "There must be a park in Sonoma, and then I saw, they're all set to close." Then a friend sent Amy a blog reporting that then-State Parks Director Ruth Coleman was looking for innovative ways to keep the parks open.

Two days later, Steven, Brad, and Amy left L.A. again, drove back to Sonoma County and went from park to park. At Annadel State Park, in Santa Rosa, they talked to two rangers, one of whom—named Bob—told them, "You need to go to Jack London State Park."

They got there, in the rain, 30 minutes before the park closed for the night. They ran crazily up to Jack London's lake, didn't see a workable site, and decided to come back in the morning. Once they were standing in the old winery ruins in daylight, they knew their search was over.

Late that night, Amy sent an email to the state parks superintendent explaining their plan to hold concerts at Jack London, and to contribute part of the revenue to help keep

the park open. Within two minutes he replied. He thought the theater company was a great idea. But he told them, "You need to test this out. You could do a show right now."

Amy was stunned. "I was like, What? We have to do a show? Now?"

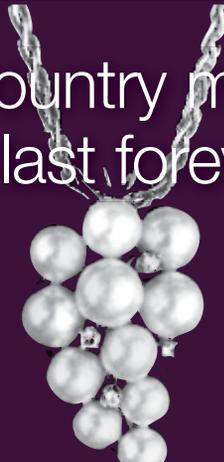
At that moment, the Transcendence Theatre Company had \$83 in the bank.

Cut to October 1, 2011. With forecasts of possible rain and warnings to expect no more than 200 people, TTC put on a rainless show to a sold-out audience of 900 and they brought the house down. It was a smashing success and they now have a contract through 2019.

Standing above the performance that first night, under a benevolent full moon, looking down on "a natural crevice of awesomeness" while watching Brian Golub sing "Imagine" to end the show, Brad Surosky saw Ranger Bob. "He was crying. Not a little cry. And I put my arm around him, and I said, 'You led us here.' It was a transcendent moment." S

For a complete schedule of Transcendence Theater Company's 2013 performances, see page 136. For more information, go to transcendencetheatre.org.

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