

Acting Like Your Mother

Barbara Krajkowski of Parsippany's Women's Theater Company and her influence on her daughter, Jane

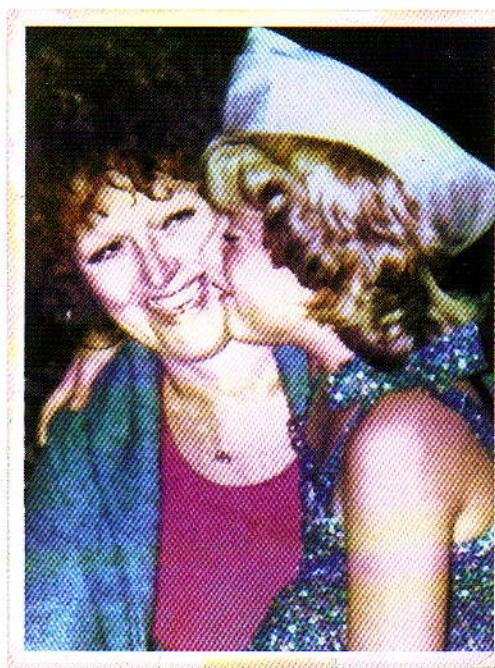
BY JOEL KELLER

Photos by Gregory Pallante

Some families like to go camping, while others like to take trips to the shore. The Krajkowskis were likely no exception. But they did something else that you might not expect from a suburban Jersey family: they worked in the theater together.

Barbara Krajkowski, currently the artistic director of the Women's Theater Company, was the spearhead; the longtime Parsippany resident has been producing, directing and acting in both community and professional theater for more than 40 years, and has been running the theater company since she helped start it in 1993.

But the entire Krajkowski family shares Barbara's love of the theater, as everyone from her husband to her grandchildren have had some degree of involvement in it. But no one took to the camaraderie of the theater more than her daughter, Jane Krakowski, who parlayed her interest into a thriving acting career, with regular roles in the hit



MOTHER MAY I Barbara Krajkowski and Jane, at age 8, at The Barn Theatre in Montville

show *Ally McBeal* and the current NBC comedy *30 Rock*.

"I really do have a tremendous enthusiasm for theater," Barbara says. "When actors come in here, they keep in touch with me forever,


because I love them. I really enjoy them."

Spend some time with Krajkowski, who puts her age in the "55 and over" category, and you'll understand why people enjoy working for her. She conjures up images of the vivacious grandmother almost everyone has or knows; she has a ball of red hair, a laugh ever at the ready and a strong but matronly voice filtered through what Jane calls a "Brooklyn-meets-New Jersey" accent. And it was that enthusiasm that Jane absorbed when her parents used to take her to The Barn Theatre in Montville, where both her mom and her father, Edward, would take part in its community-produced shows.

"It was a huge influence on me," says Jane. "It was where I saw my parents have fun and it was where their friends were and where they spent their weekends.

So I know that I've learned most of what I know about musical theater, up until I started doing it myself or going to see it myself, vicariously through them being there."

The slightly different spelling of

A color photograph of Barbara Krajkowski, an older woman with short, wavy, reddish-brown hair. She is smiling broadly, resting her chin on her right hand. She is wearing a textured, reddish-brown blazer over a dark top. She is seated in a theater with blue seats. The background is dark, and the lighting is focused on her.

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BARBARA KRAJKOWSKI



MAKING HERSTORY Krajkowski, with actresses Janice Kildea, left, and Robin Marie Thomas, rehearsing for *My Sister Underground* at the Women's Theater in Parsippany.

Jane's last name was Barbara's idea; she felt it would be mispronounced with the "j" included. She knew that there was something about her multi-talented young daughter that people were drawn to, and spent time taking her to auditions for commercials, and Broadway and off-Broadway productions. Her motivation wasn't fame; she was just doing what little Jane wanted to do, which the actress appreciates to this day. "I never felt forced or pushed to do it," says Jane about acting as a child. "I always wanted to do it, and my mom was generous to give time from her life to help me go into the city and pursue what I wanted to pursue. I think

that's a very special thing to do."

Life for Jane, 38, and her brother John, 44, was your typical suburban life, with a creative twist. "I remember in a photograph from my first birthday party, there's my mom with her hair in these incredible curls. Her hair was done to go do a show after my birthday party." Sometimes, the lines between life and the stage blurred for Jane. "Did my mom really wear her hair like that or was it for a theatrical production at the time?"

But Barbara was just having fun. She and Edward, an engineer, moved to Parsippany in 1963 after he got a job at Picatinny Arsenal. Almost immediately after coming to New

Jersey, she sought out and got a small part at the nearby Barn Theatre, and soon began helping them produce and direct their productions. She went back to college and got both a bachelor's and a master's in fine arts; she also began to act professionally in dinner theater and summer productions in upstate New York.

When Krajkowski started working in and around professional companies, however, she noticed something: the women were asked to do things around the theater that the men were never asked to do. "The men would say to us, and not to the other men, 'You know, the bathrooms are getting kind of seedy looking; do you think

Alice, the Smell of the Kill & Barbara and Jane. Courtesy of the Bickford Theatre, Warren, West Virginia



PLAY TIME Above and right: Productions from the Women's Theater, which promotes women's playwrights and encourages women's participation in all aspects of the production. Top right: Barbara and Jane on a recent visit to L.A. Far right: Barbara directed *Catch Me If You Can* at the Bickford Theatre in Morristown.



you can get in there and clean them?" or "We'd like to have an opening night buffet," she recalls.

That led her and two theater friends to start the WTC. "It was three women sitting around a kitchen, excited that we were going to start a theater company," she laughs. The company not only promotes women playwrights, but also encourages women to participate in all parts of the production, from directing to producing to set design to lighting.

The company did line readings from plays for two years at a bar in Montclair; they began full productions when they moved into the

Playwright's Theatre of Madison in 1995. The company is currently in its second year at the Parsippany Community Center, and they perform three shows annually, one of which is culled from the piles of submissions from unknown playwrights looking for a break. "I felt that if you were helping to develop women playwrights then [the number] of professional women playwrights would increase," she says.

Barbara and her daughter remain close, especially now that Jane is shooting *30 Rock* in New York, where she has lived since she was 17. Jane comes into Morris County to visit her family – John lives with his

wife and three sons in Mt. Tabor – often, and likes to go with them to local restaurants and hangouts. She also comes to performances of every WTC production and helps her mother raise money for the company, most recently via a musical revue she performed at the Bickford Theatre in Morristown last year. The two even travel together, going to far flung locales like Russia and Japan.

"I think my mom was a great mom," Jane gushes. "My mother is an optimist. She always instilled such confidence. She always believed I was good enough to be able to get the jobs, and I think that is a great thing to have." ■