

# Berkshire Eagle

## She mines her life for a play

By Jeffrey Borak

Berkshire Eagle Staff

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For her final exam in Ralph Hammann's dramatic performance class at Pittsfield High School, Kristin Ace played Marilyn Monroe in a 10-minute monodrama.

"I can still remember her, all dressed in white, singing 'Happy Birthday, Mr. President,' " Hammann said by telephone from his home in Williamstown. "She filled her 10 minutes and then some."

Twenty-five years later, the 42-year-old actress is playing a role that is just as tough, tougher, perhaps -- herself, in "Baby, Oh Baby," Ace's funny and reflective autobiographical show about the pursuits of motherhood, career and happiness. The play begins a three-weekend engagement tonight at Main Street Stage, 57 Main St.

"I am the character in this play," Ace said during a recent interview at the storefront theater in downtown North Adams. "I have to step back from myself.

"There's no place to hide on stage -- it's just a chair and me talking about my life, the way these things happened to me."

The idea for "Baby, Oh Baby" began forming when Ace's 6 1/2-year-old son, Landon, turned 1.

"My father (Taconic High School English teacher James R. Ace) had died of cancer," Ace said. "The doctors told him he had only one month to live. I began thinking, what if someone said that to me? How would I feel? There were all these voices inside me, things I wanted to accomplish but hadn't."

Actually, by that time, Ace had accomplished quite a bit -- motherhood, a successful marriage to a husband who works in finance, and a career as a professional actress that led her to leading roles Off-Off-Broadway and in regional theaters around the country.

Ace recorded the stories all those voices inside her had to tell on videotape.

"I found I had a throughline," she said. On Mother's Day 2003, she walked out on stage before a small group of friends with nothing more than an outline.

The audience response was strong, she said, so she went back, rewrote the play and reshaped it. She's been tweaking and shaping it ever since. Now, Ace says, with the exception of one or two small adjustments "the play really is at its place."

Ace says she tried working with directors but none of them, she says, "heard my voice.

"My instincts are better than a director's. I read my script a lot. I can also see and feel if an audience is going along with me and where they're not following. I also run it by my husband.

"I've learned to trust myself on this. Ultimately, if I'm true to my voice in my heart and my soul, the audience will follow."

Main Street Stage founding artistic director Spencer Trova first saw "Baby, Oh Baby" in New York in a small

theater off 43rd Street.

"It had an honesty and a freshness. I could identify with it," said Trova, an actor, director and the father of six. "I felt it would be perfect for our stage and it speaks to people. It's very refreshing."

"It's very subtle," Ace said. "It's hard to be objective about your own life. It's a very funny piece but it has its serious side. We have these sadnesses in our lives because life is life."

"There are some really bizarre things in this play. They actually happened to me in my life. Even if some of the experiences aren't shared experiences, I do think audiences can share the feelings."

Ace came to Pittsfield in ninth grade, graduated from Pittsfield High School in 1980, studied under Robert Boland at Berkshire Community College, where she got her associate's degree in 1982, and then continued her theater studies at the University of Rhode Island and in various studios and theaters in Chicago, where she lived and worked for six years.

"I was acting there, learning the ropes of professional theater, the nuts and bolts," Ace said.

A funny thing happened on her way from Chicago to New York. She detoured to Boston, and met her husband.

They now live in New Jersey with their two children -- Landon and 3 1/2-year-old Miranda.

Because she wants time with her children, Ace spends only three days a week on her craft, specifically "Baby, Oh Baby" -- marketing it, performing it.

After the run here, Ace will take "Baby, Oh Baby" to the sixth annual Women Speaks Festival in Harrisburg, Pa., where she will perform it on each of three nights on the festival's Open Stage.

She has more stories to tell, she says, other themes she would like to develop.

"I'd like this to be its own entity," she said.

Ace acknowledges that sharing her life as a mother, exposing some of the darker moments of her life to strangers, is daunting and daring. At the same time, she says, "we're missing the sense of community in our lives."

"We didn't used to be so separate. There are personal things in people's lives they feel they can't talk about."

"We look at each other on the outside. My play allows people to laugh and cry and go home and think."

*"Baby, Oh Baby" performs Friday and Saturday evenings at 8 and Sunday afternoons at 3 through June 5. There are no performances Memorial Day weekend. Ticket information is available through the Main Street Stage box office at 663-3240.*

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