

Allison's wonder year ASC character actor takes the lead

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Since childhood, Allison Glenzer has had the voice of a truck driver. Not the vocabulary, but the voice: gravelly, seasoned, booming when necessary.

That thunder is part of what has made Glenzer one of the American Shakespeare Center's most dependable character actors since she joined the resident troupe in 2007. This season, she grabs the lead in the one-woman show "The Twelve Dates of Christmas," a role she first played in 2012.

Mary, the show's heroine, has just been humiliated on national television by a cheating fiancé. "I used to love the holidays," she booms in the play's opening line. Glenzer loves every second of it.

"I love how much hope Mary has," she says. "I love how brave she is. I love that she's so relatable."

Relatable and funny and vulnerable. Mary cries. So does the audience. Mary laughs. So does the audience.

This season's "Twelve Dates" finds the actress and Mary "a little more boho, a little more relaxed," than last year, says Glenzer. "I have a high quotient of vulnerability and heart."

Glenzer has wanted the role since her friend Ginna Hoben wrote it in 2010. While acting in ASC's annual production of "A Christmas Carol," Hoben realized that the company's annual one-man holiday show ("The Santaland Diaries") was leaving out the women. And sadly, her life provided the perfect inspiration: being lovelorn in New York City, minus the glamour of "Sex and the City."

Hoben played Mary at Blackfriars in 2010 and '11 and has taken the show elsewhere. Glenzer took over the role last year.

"Alli is both a comic and an emotional powerhouse," says the show's director Jim Warren. "The material in 'Twelve Dates' is so perfect for her."

He fondly remembers first meeting Glenzer in 1998, when ASC played at Clemson University, where she was an undergrad. He saw her perform there and told her she would work for him one day.

Three years later, she did for a season with the touring troupe. Five years after that, she moved to Staunton. At ASC, she's played 100-plus roles in some 60 shows including Lady Macbeth; Jailer's Daughter in "The Two Noble Kinsman," and Frair Lawrence, Nurse and Mercutio in "Romeo and Juliet."

Glenzer's path to professional Shakespeare acting has taken more than one detour. It began in the fourth grade, when after her first-ever audition, she was surprised to land the title role in a Woodbridge community-theater production of "Alice in Wonderland."

Acting, though, took a backseat to excellence in another arena: competitive swimming at the national level, until Glenzer was forced to retire at age 15 after being hit by a car.

By then she was in Georgia, playing small roles in a high school drama department headed by "two talentless hacks" who made casting decisions based on a kid's parentage.

Though Glenzer fantasizes about getting her revenge on those teachers by winning a Tony, she also says she wants to thank them.

"I played a lot of trees and background people and really learned how to tell a story and not have it be about me," she says with a grain of disgust.

The faculty at Clemson, where she originally planned to study psychology, recognized her talent, as did professors at Louisiana State University, where she earned an M.F.A. in acting.

Glenzer plans to stay in Staunton as long as ASC will have her. Few other stages would allow her to play to her range as a character actor most of the year while casting her in the lead of a one-woman show at Christmas.

"Twelve Dates" is performed with the lights on, as are all Blackfriars Playhouse shows. Glenzer, who loves engaging with people, notices when an audience member nods in recognition at another bad-date story. She welcomes late-comers with a "come on in, you want to hear this."

Afterward, off stage, she assesses dating in the 21st century: "Guys don't call. It sucks, but it's true, the state of affairs."

"Twelve Dates" does not offer a sappy, happy ending, but there is hope, thanks in large part to a child. It is, after all, Christmas.

This season Glenzer also plays Christmas Past in "A Christmas Carol," while memorizing lines for the Renaissance Season, the annual winter actors' bonanza at ASC. "As You Like It" opens Jan. 4. Four additional plays follow in quick succession with actors taking over costuming and directing.