

Her characters have wowed thousands of local theatre-goers but Jayme Armstrong is a 'very private person' away from the stage

BY KATHRYN STORRING

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

You might know her as Roxie Hart, Mary Poppins, Sherrie Christian or Ariel. You might have seen her tap dance, deliver just the right comic flourish, or embody three quirky love interests in one evening, complete with accents. If you are a regular at Drayton Entertainment's musical productions, you most certainly have been awed by her impressive vocal range.

But when the curtain falls on these shows – “Chicago,” “Mary Poppins,” “Rock of Ages,” “The Little Mermaid,” “The 39 Steps” and many, many more – actor Jayme Armstrong leaves any theatrics at the theatre.

Offstage, she's still engaging and personable, but also insightful, easygoing and even a bit reclusive. In her comfortable Kitchener home, she looks forward to a cup of tea and downtime with her soon-to-be-huge Bernese Mountain puppy, Scarlett.

“I am actually a very private person,” she confides as Scarlett romps nearby, looking for mischief. “I have this disassociation from what I do. When I watch friends performing onstage, I am so nervous. I can't believe people watch me the way I watch them.

“But when I am up there, I don't even think about it. I just play a part. I play somebody else.”

That's probably not a surprise – Armstrong's first stage role was at the tender age of six. By age 18, she was touring the United States in a production of “Forever Swing.” Her lengthy list of credits includes

a season at Stratford Festival. In 2008, she wowed TV audiences in CBC's “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?” Through the show, Andrew Lloyd Webber auditioned prospective leading ladies for his Toronto production of “The Sound of Music.” Armstrong placed third.

Still, in a precarious arts world, Armstrong is particularly grateful for what Drayton Entertainment and artistic director Alex Mustakas have meant to her career.

“Here, I have the ability to own a home, have a car, have a dog. I get to star in plays, I get to star in musicals, and now I am directing. So it is a really unique situation that I have found with Alex and Drayton.”

Not that she ever takes success for granted. Now in her 30s and heading into a 10th season of Drayton productions, she is always pushing for the next challenge, the next skill set, the next refinement.

It's what makes her embrace characters that run counter to her girl-next-door good looks – “the more flawed the better.” It's what made her jump at the opportunity to direct productions this season and last.

“Every year I try to take on at least one opportunity onstage that scares me a little bit,” she says. “As a result, I learn something new.”

Mustakas is happy to provide those opportunities.

“There's just something about her,” he says in a separate interview. “She obviously has a great voice. She's a great actress, and she is a bit of a chameleon. She can play any kind of role – she's played a lot of leading ladies for us, but she has played some character

No Drama *on the* Home Front

Jayme Armstrong is heading into her 10th season as a Drayton Entertainment regular, playing more leading ladies and taking another turn as director. At home, she likes to take it easy.



Jayme Armstrong cherishes spending downtime with her new Bernese Mountain puppy, Scarlett.

parts as well, like Lina Lamont last year in ‘Singing in the Rain.’”

Mustakas also praises the work ethic and self-motivation that underscore her performance skills.

“She’s smart, she’s very resourceful and persuasive, and she’s highly in tune with herself as an actor and the entire process,” from the artistic collaborations of rehearsal to the audience’s experience on opening night.

Armstrong’s road to Waterloo Region was paved with deliberate choices and lots of serendipity.

The journey began in Richmond, B.C., where her parents indulged her early fascination with musicals. “My mom would let me watch the ‘Wizard of Oz’ and ‘The Sound of Music’ and ‘Mary Poppins’ on repeat – literally,” Armstrong recalls with a smile. Her mother also took her to see community theatre productions.

“But it was definitely not something (my parents) thought seriously about me pursuing. It was very foreign for my family,” Armstrong says. Her father, Jim, was a dentist; her mother, Carleen, was the receptionist in his dental office as well as being an active community volunteer; Armstrong has two siblings, Greg and Jody.

An inspiring teacher who launched a musical theatre group at her elementary school gave her that first tentative push toward the future – at age six. As Armstrong tells it: “(The teacher) saw me skipping outside and bossing my friends around and thought: Oh, that kid will be a perfect leader of the munchkins” in the “Wizard of Oz.”

This teacher’s theatre initiative was so popular that when he moved on, Carleen Armstrong was part of a group that kept the program going and helped it expand. Meanwhile, the teacher encouraged Jayme to audition for youthful roles in the broader theatre scene.

Still, acting was a sideline.

“I was a bit of a late bloomer when it comes to children’s theatre,” Armstrong says. “I wasn’t brought up in dance, I wasn’t brought up in singing or acting. I was very, very athletic and very scholastically based,

very much involved in my school in terms of leadership opportunities and things like that.”

Then, through a theatre production, she met vocal coach Simon Isherwood – “probably the biggest influence in my life.” He took her on as a student, and she joined the high-level, Glee-like choir he co-directed.

Isherwood, a high school teacher who also coached football, added something else – he encouraged Armstrong to be well-rounded. She took that to heart, offsetting theatre interests with a plethora of high school sports including track, soccer, softball, volleyball, basketball and curling.

But applying versatility to her singing styles “was the biggest gift he could have given me.”

“I was never pigeon-holed into singing just one style,” she notes. “So I could sing opera, I could sing high soprano. I can belt, I can sing rock.”

As the curtain fell on her high school days, Armstrong faced a fateful fork in the road. She was class valedictorian and could have pursued post-secondary scholarships, but she just couldn’t shake “this acting thing.” She convinced her parents she should give it one year, reasoning that “if I don’t address this, I am always going to wonder.”

She didn’t wonder for long. She landed a role in an off-Broadway production of “Forever Swing.” Based out of New York City, the show rehearsed in Baltimore before setting off on a tour of the United States.

“It was an interesting experience at 18 years of age to get on an airplane for the first time by myself, and go to Baltimore to start work,” she recalls.

“I am a very family oriented person, so it was very difficult for me to be away. I kind of wondered if this was something I was going to be able to do indefinitely because I knew being a performer meant having to be very mobile.”

But the roles kept coming, including a 2005 Hollywood production of “Ruthless! The Musical,” for which she won an LA Weekly Award for outstanding comedy performance.

Chance brought her to Stratford Festival for the 2006 season. She heard about auditions while visiting an Ontario friend. “I just thought: Oh, I am in Ontario. I should try an Ontario audition just to see if it’s very different.

“I think part of the reason I landed it was because I didn’t know to be afraid of it,” she says with a laugh. “I had never seen a show there. I didn’t know . . .”

She played in both “Oliver!” and “South Pacific” that season and her peers selected her for a festival award.

It may seem counter-intuitive to learn Armstrong is relieved she didn’t win the “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?” competition in 2008. Armstrong placed third; top honours went to another B.C. performer, Elicia MacKenzie. (Two local hopefuls also made the top 10 – Marisa McIntyre of Waterloo and Alison Jutzi of Guelph.)

Armstrong describes the show as an amazing opportunity, and her performances earned accolades despite the high stress of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s trials – while the TV cameras rolled.

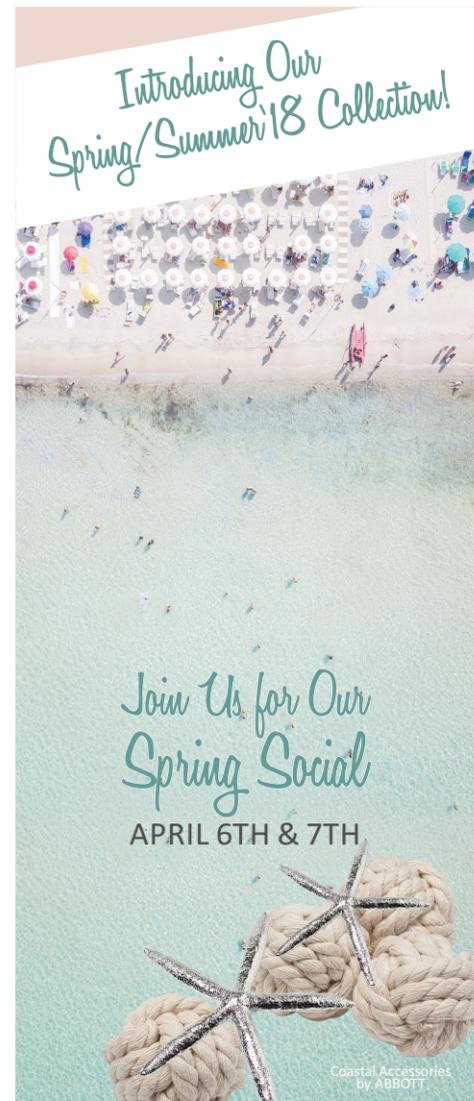
“You have no control over the song you sing, the way you sing it, the outfit that you wear, the way your hair is, the way your makeup is, the way it’s performed, the key it’s in, the choreography – you have zero say,” she recalls.

“One of my strengths is really knowing myself as a performer and how to present myself in a role, so when you are asked to do things that are the exact opposite, for me, that was quite a struggle.”

But a more profound struggle was unfolding in her personal life: her mother’s breast cancer, diagnosed in 2006, was getting worse.

When Armstrong looks back, she realizes landing the Maria role might have forced her to choose between an exciting career boost and her mother. And “I never would have traded my time with her to star in that show.”

It was during this complicated personal journey that the door quietly opened to



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Drayton Entertainment.

Mustakas chatted with Armstrong at the wrap party for the Maria TV show, praising her skills and suggesting she consider Drayton Entertainment. In a recent interview, Mustakas explains the TV show not only showcased Armstrong's impressive voice, but also that elusive "it factor" he always seeks in auditions.

But Armstrong returned to Vancouver to star in "Little Shop of Horrors" and be close to her mother.

She was still in B.C. when she learned Drayton Entertainment planned to mount "Camelot" for a North American tour. She contacted Mustakas, even though she knew she couldn't make the auditions. There was no need – he offered her the role of Guinevere.

The show launched at Drayton's Huron Country Playhouse in Grand Bend in 2009.

During a hiatus before the production headed out on a lengthy tour, Armstrong returned to B.C. and "there were a lot of conversations with my family about what was the best path for me."

"I will never forget my mom saying to me, 'This is your time and your opportunity. You have waited so long. I will be damned if I'm going to be the one that stops that...'"

As it happened, Carleen, just 51, died the week before the tour started.

Her mother remains close to Armstrong's heart and, over the years, she has honoured her memory by hosting or singing at many benefits for cancer charities.

Anyone who thinks a career built on singing, dancing and acting is a cakewalk hasn't seen the world from the inside.

As a former athlete, Armstrong sees similarities between elite sports and professional actors. For one thing, there is the adrenaline rush of the performance; for another, there is the intense behind-the-scenes training.

In musical theatre, where character development and plot depend on complex choreography and polished vocal skills, a disciplined fitness/food/rest regime is all

part of the job. For Armstrong, yoga plays an essential role in her good health.

But there's more. Because of the rigorous schedule for Drayton's seven venues, rehearsals for most plays are packed into just two and a half weeks. On many occasions, Armstrong has been finishing one run while also preparing for her next show. For the majority of roles, there are no understudies.

So, while the stage is a place of joy and satisfaction – especially on those nights when the audience is fully engaged – it can also be a place where the show must go on despite injury, illness or ill-temper. The audience awaits – and your colleagues' success depends on you. Occasionally, Armstrong has been called upon to step into a role at the last moment or sing from the wings for an actor whose voice has given out.

"To say we have each other's back is an understatement," she notes. "For what can seem like a catty, competitive industry, the people you work with every day are your lifeline. It's very, very important that you know that you are well supported and that you are supporting everyone else."

It's a world where Armstrong's professionalism and work ethic thrive, and where interactions with a diligent group of professionals are an integral part of the appeal. In fact, she particularly enjoys rehearsals.

"You try things, and they fail. Then you try something else and there's a little grain of something you take away from that. It's all about layering and making mistakes – finding the path that is right for the show."

This creative space differs from show mode when she prides herself as being "an incredibly consistent performer."

"For me, that is about executing as close to the same version of the show every day that I am capable of, given the number of variables within one's own life."

Although Armstrong does broad prep at home – perhaps running a video of choreography while she practises dance steps – the character she is playing is not part of her home life. "I need to be in the room with the other people because the director, the choreographer, the musical director and

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all of the actors around you are who help you find that character," she says.

Tackling a play that's enjoyed movie fame is a particular challenge. How do actors fulfill audience expectations while also making the larger-than-life roles their own? Armstrong might watch the movie early in the process but then moves on.

"If I do an impersonation of Julie Andrews playing Maria von Trapp or Mary Poppins, it's too many layers removed," she points out. "And it doesn't come across as authentic to the audience."

Instead, through rehearsal give and take, she looks for ways in which a character's personality or challenges echo in her own life.

"The biggest compliment I ever get is when people say, 'I didn't even recognize you. You seemed like a different person.' That is my favourite thing to hear."

Every actor has a list of dream roles and Armstrong has managed to tick off many of hers in her time at Drayton. Favourite productions include "Mary Poppins"

(which opened the Dunfield Theatre – now renamed the Hamilton Family Theatre – in Cambridge in 2008); "Chicago"; "The 39 Steps"; "Thoroughly Modern Millie"; and "White Christmas" ("like a little slice of Christmas cookie").

Being a director takes all of this to the next level. As Mustakas told her, directors don't miss performing because "you are every character," including the roles she could never play herself.

As a devoted Disney fan, she directed "Beauty and the Beast" last season; this year it's "The Little Mermaid."

Armstrong explains the vast responsibilities that come with the director's title: "It's every dance move. It's every way the song is sung. It's every way the set moves. It's the way the show is lit; the way the show sounds. . . . It's every performer, it's every choice."

Mustakas, who likes to encourage actors to test new sides of themselves, describes the transition into directing as "a natural

progression for her."

Even as a performer, "she is so in tune with the whole picture. She doesn't have blinders on that it's just about her acting moment. It's about everything."

A key variable in the success of any performance might come as a surprise – the audience.

"The audience, particularly in comedy, is like another cast member. It's like the other person in the scene," Armstrong says.

A ticket holder with an infectious laugh can light up the entire house; meanwhile, end-of-the-work-week-blues or even bad weather can dampen the mood, which the actors feel on stage.

"You are executing something at a very, very high level and the audience has a huge impact on it," Armstrong notes. "(It's a power) they don't always know that they have."

Armstrong says Mustakas is an expert at building overall relationships with Drayton audiences, including families. Youthful

patrons not only bode well for the future of theatre, but they are also a heck of a lot of fun.

One of Armstrong's favourite stage moments happened during a dramatic scene in "The Little Mermaid." She laughs as she relives it, complete with little-girl voice: "This little girl stands up in the audience, hands on hips: 'ARIEL! ARE – YOU – OK?'"

"And the whole audience just dies because of the honesty. She was like: This is unacceptable! This is my hero!"

"You love it that they are willing to respond because they so believe. It's magic."

No wonder Armstrong launched a small business called Enchanted Entertainment in 2015. Her business arranges for costumed actors to sing, lead games and host tea parties for events ranging from children's birthday parties to preschool graduations.

Sometimes, in memory of her mother, she offers visits to children who have terminal illness.

Make-believe ventures of all kinds can be a welcome respite when Armstrong turns her gaze to issues in the world at large. She is pleased to see women exert their rights in the entertainment world, but also sees the work still ahead. "And don't get me started on Donald Trump . . .," she says.

Meanwhile, society's fragmented interest in the arts challenges both actors and theatre venues. Armstrong hopes that at some point music lovers will tire of the over-sexualized, manufactured pop industry and swing back to theatre where singers put everything on the line, with no help from auto-tuning and lip-synching.

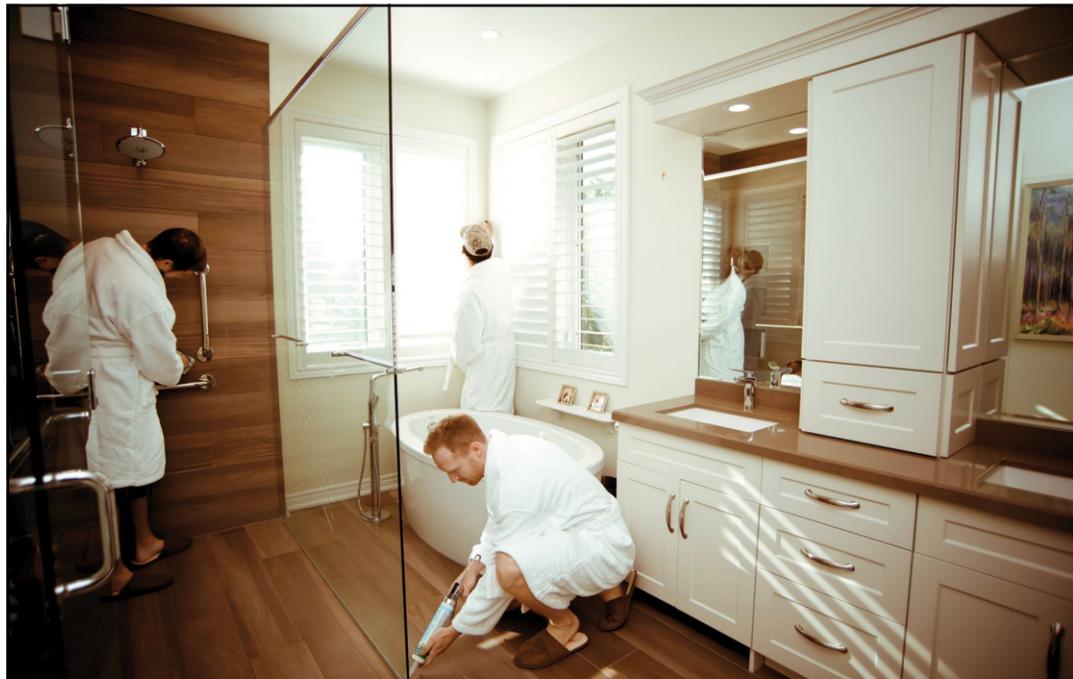
As Mustakas puts it, "in theatre you have one shot," unlike amazing scenes in movies or TV that may have been perfected over numerous takes.

"And there's nothing like the communal feel," he says. "You are sharing a moment or a laugh with 500 other people. There's nothing like it."

Still, Armstrong says live theatre faces some unusual competition. "Generally, we have so many things at our little fingertips at all times now. You can sit in your vehicle and watch a movie on your phone if you want to."

She understands the lure of tech convenience, but strives to limit the distractions of social media in favour of real interactions with friends. "Who needs to see what I eat for dinner every day?" she says with a laugh. "Let alone that I don't want to take a picture of it. Or post it. Or spend that time doing that. I would rather pet my dog for five minutes."

Indeed, a pooch is also important to her relaxation. It's what made her get Scarlett last fall, shortly after losing Amy, a beloved Bernese Mountain rescue dog, who always kept her grounded. Scarlett is still in training mode and has a few habits to overcome – a taste for electronics, for one. So far, the count stands at one TV remote, three phone chargers and three computer



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Jayme Armstrong has played many roles over the past decade for Drayton Entertainment, including Maria Rainer, top photo, in "The Sound of Music" (2012-13) and Elle Woods in "Legally Blonde" (2014).

chargers.

But the dog-human bond is unmistakable, part of the downtime Armstrong cherishes in a city that felt like home even before her first role at Drayton. While visiting a friend, she was drawn to Kitchener's "big but small" appeal and decided: "I am going to live here someday." Those roots deepened when her father, who has remarried, moved to Cambridge. In January, her brother joined them in the area.

As for the Drayton season, Armstrong opened 2018 by reviving Sherrie Christian for a remount of the popular "Rock of Ages" at Fallsview Casino Resort in Niagara Falls.

From March 28 to April 13, she plays Janet in "The Drowsy Chaperone" at St. Jacobs Country Playhouse. She will be the leading lady in "Holiday Inn," which will run at three venues starting in May. And she will direct a production of "The Little Mermaid" at two theatres starting in July.

Back in high school, a teacher advised her: "If you can see yourself doing anything else (besides theatre) and being happy, you should do it." She has passed this wise advice to other fledgling actors over the years.

Luckily for local audiences, Armstrong found her happiness on stage. 

MORE INFORMATION

Drayton Entertainment began in 1991 with one venue – Drayton Festival Theatre. Since then, artistic director Alex Mustakas has expanded his not-for-profit success story to six more venues, including St. Jacobs Country Playhouse and St. Jacobs Schoolhouse Theatre in north Waterloo; Hamilton Family Theatre Cambridge (formerly Dunfield Theatre); Huron Country Playhouse and Huron Country Playhouse II in Grand Bend; and King's Wharf Theatre in Penetanguishene.

Drayton Entertainment and its productions, which range from musicals to dramas, have received numerous awards including six Lieutenant Governor's Awards for the Arts.

For information on this season's productions, check out draytonentertainment.com

Actor Jayme Armstrong started Enchanted Entertainment in 2015, employing actors to entertain at children's parties and events.

For more information: enchantedentertainment.ca

Jayme's Drayton resumé

2018 *The Little Mermaid* (director), Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* (Linda Mason), *The Drowsy Chaperone* (Janet Van De Graaff)

2017 *Rock of Ages* (Sherrie), *Beauty and the Beast* (director), *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (Millie), *The 39 Steps* (Pamela/Annabella/Margaret), *Singing in the Rain* (Lina Lamont) **2016** *Marathon of Hope*, (Leslie Scrivener), *Unnecessary Farce* (Karen Brown), *Anything Goes* (Reno Sweeney), *Little Shop of Horrors* (Audrey/Assistant Director) **2015** *White Christmas* (Betty Haynes), *The Pirates of Penzance* (Edith), *The Music Man* (Marian Paroo), *Chicago* (Roxie Hart), *The Crazy Time* (Susan), *The Last Resort* (Jessica/Julia Youngstead) **2014** *The Little Mermaid* (Ariel), *Footloose* (Assistant Director), *Les Miserables* (Fantine), *Twist And Shout* (Featured Singer), *Legally Blonde* (Elle Woods)

2013 *White Christmas* (Betty Haynes), *Lend Me A Tenor* (Maggie), *Too Many Cooks* (Honey Bubbalowe), *The Sound of Music* (Maria Rainer), *Mary Poppins* (Mary Poppins) **2012** *The Love List* (Justine), *The Sound of Music* (Maria Rainer), *Harvey* (Ruth Kelly, RN), *9 To 5* (Judy Bernly)

2011 *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* (Rosemary Pilkington) **2010** *Peter Pan* (Tiger Lily/Mrs. Darling), *Country Legends* (Featured Singer) **2009** *Camelot* (Guinevere), *Country Legends* (Featured Singer)



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