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TOMMY ZAFERES GETS THE WIN

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SANTA CRUZ COUNTY STORIES



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Jennifer Taylor Daniels, who performs in Cabrillo Stage's 'Hairspray,' rehearses in Cabrillo College's Crocker Theater last week.

JENNIFER TAYLOR DANIELS

Local singer and educator brings her own roots to 'Hairspray'

By ANN PARKER
features@santacruzsentinel.com

Jennifer Taylor Daniels' bucket list is getting shorter.

"I always wanted to perform in 'Little Shop of Horrors' and 'Hairspray' — and now I have," Daniels says happily.

This local jazz and blues singer — and elementary school vice principal — is one of the stars in Cabrillo Stage's production of "Hairspray," running through Aug. 14. She plays Motormouth Maybelle, the exuberant host of "Negro Day," a television show allowed once monthly on a segregated station. Her two solos, "Big, Blonde and Beautiful," and "I Know Where I've Been," reflect her character's range from campy to inspirational.

"I know this woman," declares Taylor Daniel, who was raised in Nashville, Tenn. "There's a certain kind of black woman who knows everybody and loves everybody, wants people to get along but isn't afraid to stand up for herself. Maybelle has her own kind of glamour — she never met an animal print she didn't like."

Daniels' mother experienced "old-school segregation," growing up in Florida. "I heard stories of the real damage it can do. Part of the reason I treasure 'Hairspray' is its message, celebrating what we all have in common

and the power of music bringing people together."

Daniels adds, "Most of the cast members are in their 20s and didn't understand what was at stake with integration. So I gave them Mother Maybelle's Black History quizzes the first few weeks." A rich contralto voice can be heard in her honey-husky laugh.

Teaching comes naturally to her. Formerly a literacy coach and reading specialist, she taught summer school before becoming vice principal of Watsonville's MacQuiddy Elementary School last year. "Like acting, it's about being a member of a team. The best part is getting to work with and talk with families about their children."

Daniels' decade of performing locally includes singing at Kuumbwa with Lori Rivera, being a featured performer at local World AIDS Day commemorations and appearing in the musical "Hair" at the Rio Theatre. She was also assistant stage manager of the alternative fashion event "Seventh Sense." Her first Cabrillo Stage role was in 2007's "Little Shop of Horrors" as the voice of Audrey II, a monstrous alien plant. "I auditioned to be a doo-wop girl but got the plant — and great songs."

What's left on Daniels' acting/singing bucket list? "I'd love to perform with Patrick Stewart. And I wouldn't turn down playing Dot in 'Sunday in the Park with George.'"

GETTING TO KNOW

JENNIFER TAYLOR DANIELS

BORN: Jan. 21, 1971, in Hartford, Conn.

HER START IN MUSIC: "I joined the school choir in third or fourth grade and just stayed. Before that, I'd sing along with the radio."

AS A CHILD: "My second-grade report card said, 'Finishes her work first and then distracts others.'"

EDUCATION: Cabrillo College general courses; art history degree, UCSC; teaching credentials, Cal State Monterey Bay; master's in education administration, San Jose State

MARRIED: Two years to John McGowan, a math teacher at San Juan Middle School
ARRIVING IN SANTA CRUZ: "I came here in 1991 on a Greyhound bus, with a ticket as long as I am tall."

OTHER CABRILLO STAGE ROLES: In 'Swing' and 'Scrooge,' both 2010

ON 'HAIRSPRAY' HAIRDOS: "My wig is two and a half feet wide, but some are twice that big."

ABOUT 'HAIRSPRAY': "It's the happiest show ever. The cast is wonderful, every song is my favorite and Janie Scott's direction and choreography are awesome."

CABRILLO STAGE DETAILS AND TICKETS: 479-6154, www.cabrillostage.com