‘OKLAHOMA!’

Santa Cruz’s Emily Marsilia returns home with the co-lead in Cabrillo Stage’s new musical

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There’s something familiar about Emily Marsilia’s story. The young heroine leaves home, grows up on her journey, and returns to her hometown as a mature, changed woman.

Local theatergoers have high hopes for Marsilia this summer as she returns home to Crocker Stage to star as Laurey in Cabrillo Stage’s professional production of “OKLAHOMA!”

The Pacific Collegiate graduate has plenty of personal experiences to draw from to play this challenging role. Leaving home at 17 years old, she moved across the country to Westminster Choir College in New Jersey to study music and theater. A few months shy of graduation, she took an offer to work as a professional actress on board a Disney cruise ship. She sailed around the Caribbean playing well-known princesses and other characters.

Marsilia has also been dealing with the death of her father, Joseph, to pancreatic cancer in 2008.

“I’m 22 years old and I feel like I’ve been through more than some older have,” said Marsilia. “Moving to college and having him pass away during that time, it forced me to grow up faster and become independent and make sure I held up my own and didn’t throw my life away. If anything it made me work harder, and want to be successful and want to be something.”

The story of Laurey, Marsilia’s character in “OKLAHOMA!” echoes real life. “She (Laurey) is a strange character,” said director Kikau Alvaro. “She’s orphaned ... she’s been with her aunt and that happens before the show. But what we see is the strong woman who has to run their family farm, and the way we see that character grow and develop is through her relationship with Curly.”

For Alvaro, Marsilia was the clear choice for the lead because of her “triple threat” ability to sing, dance and act. Marsilia, who grew up doing ice skating and dance competitions around Santa Cruz, will be dancing in a 12-minute ballet at the end of Act One. “That role is a bizarre thing to cast,” said Alvaro. “While she’s a typical ingenue character, it requires somebody to have a lot of funk and sass and spirit and attitude and spunk. So for us there was really one choice in the sense that Emily walked in and was just it.”

The acclaimed Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, which is in its 70th-anniversary year, brings the audience on an emotional trip through Laurey’s whirlwind coming-of-age story. “That teenage love to grown up adult romance in two hours is just exhilarating,” Marsilia said. She said that the parallels to her own life have made it easier to understand the challenges of the role, and the process has been an opportunity to grow as an actress.

“If there are elements about me in this character that’s what I’m going to bring through, because that’s the heart of it,” said Marsilia. “It’s not putting on a character; it’s really finding that character.”

Cabrillo Stage’s family-friendly production follows a close reading of the script, in which Laurey is caught in a love triangle, and has to decide between Curly, a handsome cowboy, and Jud, a mysterious and dangerous farmhand. According to director Kikau Alvaro, “We’re giving it its fullest dues, with a full orchestra and an expansive, amazing set.”

The production is dedicated to the victims of the May 31 El Reno, Okla. tornado.

“The focus since the beginning has been about community,” said Alvaro. “The story tells of the young love between Laurey and Curly and all the things that get us there. But really it’s about how you’re surrounded by a community.”