



# The Many Disguises of Libby Oberlin

*There's nothing like live theater.*

Story KATE WILLIAMS

On the nondescript corner where Riverside Drive morphs into West Napa, above a dry-cleaning shop and a stone's throw from Staples, is a cavernous room painted pitch black. You'd never find it if you weren't trying to, set as it is at the top of a long stairway.

At the back of the room is a set of low risers, and stackable chairs laid out in neat rows; beyond the center stage in a pale sliver of light stands a pretty young woman, her blond hair aglow. She strides over athletically and offers her hand; the handshake is vigorous, ladylike, sure. She seems precisely as charismatic as the big room is plain, a counterpoint of color and light against the black box's abyss. This is Libby Oberlin: ingénue, entrepreneur, a big city expat with real theater chops; and this is the house Libby Oberlin has built.

The Theater School is not the kind of place where you'll learn how to do jazz hands, or serve up overwrought stagings of *Annie* each year. It's a serious school for serious people who care about theater, and it's Oberlin's brainchild, soup to nuts.

It's her religion, you see, and she truly believes. "There's *nothing* like live theater," Oberlin says, leaning forward in her chair. "I love film, I love radio, but there's nothing like live theater. No two shows are alike. When you're sitting in an audience, you're experiencing something one-of-a-kind, something unique no one will ever see again."

Her eyes brighten as she warms to the topic, and it's plain just how fundamental her faith is. She is that rare individual who was born for a purpose, discovered it early, and then stayed the course.

She'd been in New York City for years and years, earning a master's degree in Educational Theater from NYU, auditioning

everywhere, waiting tables at night. For a few years she worked at a comprehensive high school in Brooklyn, teaching street-toughened kids how to find their soft centers. "There are so many incredible benefits of doing theater, especially for a young person," Oberlin says. "Taking on roles develops empathy. You walk in someone else's shoes, you become someone else, you consider their life. That creates character. We learn so much by telling stories."

But then she got married, and the city suddenly felt sort of played out, so she and her husband came west. They figured they'd just take a little break, slow down for a minute. "But we fell in love with Sonoma," she says with an apologetic shrug. For a time, Oberlin collaborated with some local theatrical companies, great operations like Girls Leadership and We Players out of San Francisco and Marin.

Then, on an otherwise ordinary day, she had an epiphany: Why not build her very own program, and build it in her very own way?

"What we do is different from what some of these other companies do," Oberlin says. "What we do is really about social and emotional understanding. The theater I love is performed with smaller ensembles, where you use your own experiences to dive into concept and character. In ensemble theater, we're all in it together. It's not just the lead."

Take, for example, the Theater School's recent production of *Faces We Show/Faces We Hide*, an original play written and performed by Oberlin's students. Funded by a grant through Sonoma Arts Live, the piece tapped into a deep wellspring of adolescent angst: body image, sexuality, love triangles, family dysfunction. They toured it to Sonoma Valley High School and Sonoma

Charter School, and sold out five nights in the Theater School's black box. "It was a really challenging, rewarding, incredible experience to write a show with these kids about their own experiences," she says, "real issues that they wanted to tackle. That's why it resonated with student audiences."

Ask Oberlin how she gets fourteen teenagers to collectively author a serious literary work, and she shifts into a gear that feels native and true. "I have a certain way of organizing," she explains matter-of-factly. "We brainstorm and brainstorm...world issues, issues in the family, issues at school...and from the issues we create characters. What kind of scene would these characters be participating in? I have this really concise and thorough way of devising a show, but it really comes from the kids."

Somehow Oberlin makes the nearly impossible sound simple as Sunday, and this is her magic, her superpower, her gift. Young people willingly bare their hearts for this woman, because she respects them for doing so and believes that they must.

But the teacher is still and always an artist, and knows that to lead she must also follow the muse. So, in addition to the weekly workshops, the summer camps and the productions, Oberlin disappears into various characters herself. She has performed *The Odyssey* on Angel Island and *Ondine* at Sutro Heights. This year, she'll help bring *Romeo and Juliet* to life against the backdrop of the Petaluma Adobe.

She discards the containments of her workaday life and subsumes her identity into a panoply of others, because for her it is there, in that transference, that the mystery and truth and beauty of life lies. It is there, in her many disguises, that Libby Oberlin is revealed. ☾