

The Beacon

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On stage, page & behind the bar

By Michael Toscano

"I'm drowning in musical notes right now." That's how Joan Cushing described her status one recent afternoon. It's a vibrant and evocative turn of phrase. And it comes as no surprise, once one gets to know her a bit.

You may know already know her as arch political satirist Mrs. Foggybottom, a name that calls to memory swanky evenings at the old Omni-Shoreham Hotel.

Your over-21 kids may know her as the part-time, creative bartender at Kitty O'Shea's Irish Pub on Wisconsin Avenue. Your grandkids may know her as the lady who creates the musicals they see at Imagination Stage or Adventure Theatre.

Cushing is all that, and more. She's been a teacher, bar piano player, wife, mother and, more recently, a widow. At an age when many are slowing down, her career as a creator of musicals is in full bloom as she writes stories and lyrics and composes the music.

Admitting only that she has passed the age of 60, she may be finding that in this period of her life she is most fully coming into her own.

So, what's with the drowning? She means, she explained, that she is feverishly approaching a deadline for her newest show, *101 Dalmatians*, which will premiere next season at Bethesda's Imagination Stage. After a struggle to get a song featuring the slinky villain Cruella de Ville just right, she found time to talk about her work and what it means to her.

Conjuring Mrs. Foggybottom

A young Joan Cushing spent her days as a schoolteacher and her nights playing piano. There was a nine-and-a-half year gig at a bar upstairs (up the fire escape, actually, she says) from the old Café Lafayette in Old Town Alexandria.

Sometimes boisterous patrons didn't pay her much attention, and the place could get noisy. The owner instructed her to tell the unmindful clientele to shut up when she sang.

But she came up with a better idea, developing the Mrs. Foggybottom character to get their attention. Before long, Mrs. Foggybottom, with her hat and gloves and ever-present martini glass, evolved into an



Joan Cushing, center, is a woman of many talents. As a political satirist, she performed as Mrs. Foggybottom for a decade at the former Omni Shoreham Hotel's Marquee Lounge (above). She has transformed children's books into musicals, including the upcoming *101 Dalmatians* commissioned by Imagination Stage. Her adult musical about breast cancer, *Breast in Show*, is performed around the country. And for years she's been a bar piano player and, more recently, bartender.

outlet for "snotty little monologues that I wrote on politics," she recalled.

Later, Cushing moved on to musical theater classes in New York and then a 10-year run at the Omni-Shoreham as Mrs. Foggybottom. It was there where she was able to toss her barbs at an audience that might include a few of the famous folks who were her targets.

Those colorful, energy-filled evenings came to an end, however, with the sale of the venue in 1996. And Cushing's life mostly moved away from appearing onstage.

"I never really 'gave up' performing," she explained. "I stopped after the Shoreham [was sold], but I expected to start up again and just didn't.

"I was busy writing, and this way, I got to be home more at night. I was raising a kid, and I could do the creative work and then get royalty checks, and not have to go out to be in every production."

Well, she could not physically be in every show anyway, as she's now counting 487 productions of her 13 shows around the country, many of them based on popular children's books.

Two hits — her first work *Miss Nelson is Missing* and the later *Junie B. Jones*, both commissioned by Imagination Stage — account for over 300 productions between them.

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Cushing

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Confronting cancer in song

Cushing says she does not really write shows for children, but instead explores themes all ages can enjoy.

But a few of her shows are aimed at adult audiences, including *Breast in Show*, a musical about breast cancer.

Cushing wrote the songs, working with script writer Eileen Hayes. They are based on interviews with 200 breast cancer survivors conducted by Hayes and Cushing, together with producer Eileen Mitchard.

But Cushing had to take a break from work on the show when her husband, Paul Buchbinder, was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer in the fall of 2010.

The ordeal was a creative crucible for Cushing. "They held the show for me. He died in four months. And after he died, I had something to say, and I said it.

"Every note of music and every lyric has my husband in it. I experienced so many things with him that other people's stories totally resonated with me," she said, the memories spilling out in staccato bursts.

There's a surprising amount of humor in the 90-minute show, and reviews have been favorable. Productions continue around the country, including a recent performance in Annapolis.

"When somebody dies, you know that their life mattered. But I wanted his death to matter. I felt I made him matter — and people who are sick matter — by writing something with humor.

"You go into these places where people are going through absolute hell, and they laugh and they make jokes and they're brave and courageous. It's amazing," she said.

"And then when someone dies, you've been a part of this environment and part of the teams and all these people, and then the day your husband dies, it's over. You're not really connected to anyone anymore.

"If you're an artist, and something happens to you like this, you keep thinking, how can I turn this into something positive? And I feel like I did that," Cushing concluded.

Becoming a bartender

When interviewed for this story, Cushing had been working on five different songs for the Cruella de Ville character in *101 Dalmatians* before proclaiming that she finally "nailed it."

Cushing was both relieved and excited, brimming with happy memories of a recent beach vacation with her sons, and looking forward to getting behind the bar to serve drinks for a few hours that evening.

So how did this woman, who started out in bars decades ago, find herself back there? The question provokes hearty laughter before she settles into a reflective explanation about coping with life's curves.

"After Paul died," she said, still quietly chuckling, "I was, like, I need some more

money. So I went to bartender's school, and I got a license, and I make about 200 drinks, and I like it.

"It's good for me. It's good to be around people; it's actually very creative. I've started making all these craft drinks, so I'm really into it.

"When you're in a crisis or in a tough time, sometimes you can use it to turn your life around and do something really positive. Sometimes it gives you the kick in the butt to do something new. You can create your own happiness, I think," Cushing said.

"Making my own way, because I'm a writer and not so much of an entertainer anymore, I needed a way to be around people, and for me, that was bartending. And anytime I feel down, if I write something or do something creative, it pulls me out of it. It makes me feel like I have some control." (Note: she will occasionally perform a "roast" as Mrs. Foggybottom on request.)

As the conversation drew to a close,

Cushing told a story revealing her innate sense of optimism, buoyed by heartache which turned to joy.

"Years ago, when I was in college, I gave a child up for adoption," she said. "It was a hugely traumatic experience. And for years, it was hard to think that I had done such a thing.

"I didn't get married until I was older, and I then had all these miscarriages, so I kind of thought I was being punished for giving up my first child.

"But then I went and found him. He was

21 and a musician. And when I found him, I was pregnant again, and I had that child. And now that child just graduated from college in New Orleans where my first son lives, and they're good friends.

So everything, all that bad stuff, turned out in the end into something beautiful."

For information about *Breast in Show*, visit www.breastinshow.org. For more information about Joan Cushing, visit www.JoanCushing.com.

Michael Toscano is the Beacon's theater reviewer.

BEACON BITS

Feb. 8

FREE RECITAL OF CHOPIN PIANO WORKS

The Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington presents a free mini-concert by pianist Brian Ganz on Saturday, Feb. 8 from 8 to 9:30 p.m. at JCCGW, 6125 Montrose Rd., Rockville, Md. Ganz is continuing his "Extreme Chopin" quest to perform all of Chopin's work. For more information or to register, visit www.jccgw.org/arts-culture-jewish-life/concerts or email jgetz@jccgw.org.

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May 3-18 • Opera House

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New York City Ballet **SAVE UP TO 25%**

Boasting "an impressive new generation of dancers" (*The New York Times*), the renowned New York City Ballet performs Balanchine's dazzling full-length *Jewels* (April 1 & 4-6). The company also dances a mixed repertory program (April 2 & 3)—Wheelodon's *Soirée Musicale*, Peck's *Year of the Rabbit*, and Ratmansky's *Namouna, A Grand Divertissement*—with the Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra.

Apr. 1-6 • Opera House

The Kennedy Center Ballet Season is presented with the support of Elizabeth and Michael Kojanik. New York City Ballet's engagement is presented with the support of the State Plaza Hotel.



STERLING HYLTON AND GONZALO GARCIA IN RUBIES FROM JEWELS

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June 14-July 13 • Eisenhower Theater

Musical Theater at the Kennedy Center is made possible through the generosity of the Adrienne Arsh Musical Theater Fund. The Kennedy Center Theater Season is sponsored by Altria. Additional support is provided by The Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation.



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