



## In Love, as in Theatre, It's All in the Timing

By CLAUDIA FLISI

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The story of my parents' improbable off-stage romance

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Welcome to our latest **Theatre Lovers** essay, written by a TDF Stages reader just like you. Today, Claudia shares the uplifting tale of how the theatre played a leading role in bringing her parents together. If you'd like to submit your story for consideration, [email TDF Stages](#).

"On cue, Vivian came out from behind a door. No stage entrance ever had more impact."

The most outlandish Shakespearean plot could not strain credulity as dramatically as the story of how my parents got together. If it hadn't been for an incredible

coincidence in the middle of the Theatre District in 1943, I wouldn't be writing these words today.

Mom and dad first met when they were teenagers, at a summer camp in upstate New York. My dad, Joe, was smitten from the first moment he saw my mom, Vivian, at a rehearsal for a camp show. She was practicing a number called "The Windmill Wheels" and stretching her arms like a windmill—showing off her long limbs and perfect model's figure to best advantage. At 16, he was a counselor, a year older than she was. He had skipped two grades in school and was already a rising sophomore at Dartmouth. Vivian was a tall, leggy blond, adept at capturing the hearts of counselors and fellow campers alike. She was bubbly and outgoing, while my dad was intense and introverted. She liked to dance and socialize. He liked to discuss plays and read books. She was two inches taller than he was. They were not an obvious match.

Still, my father persisted. He invited mom to Winter Carnival and other college weekends. He was acting in many theatrical productions, so she got to see them, and he got to see how much she also loved the theatre. He introduced her to his parents, who thought she was pretty and "definitely had a way with men." She in turn introduced him to her mother, who proclaimed him a "nice young man with a good future."

My mom didn't think much about the future back then. She lived for the moment, as frenetically as possible. She was smart (she had also skipped a grade), but her family didn't have the money to send her, a girl, to college. So she was looking for fun and dancing partners, preferably living in Manhattan as she was, and preferably taller than she was.

Joe didn't qualify. He wanted to marry her, but he had college to finish in New Hampshire, and then three years of law school at Harvard. His parents were **not** supportive, nor was his brother; his sister was neutral. Besides, he couldn't do anything about his height or his clumsiness on the dance floor.

So, after a few years of dating, they drifted apart. Dad went on to law school and briefly thrived in that hothouse environment. Vivian's mother died and, in a moment of weakness, she married a guy whose mother she really liked.

But soon things went wrong for them both. Dad realized that making the Harvard Law Review was an empty achievement—all he wanted was to marry my mother, but she had married someone else. So, he dropped out of Harvard and got a job as a social worker in New Jersey. To appease his disappointed parents, he went to a local law school at night and graduated at the top of his class. Working all day and attending classes at night was a way to keep busy and think less about my mom.

Meanwhile, Vivian realized that she loved her mother-in-law but not her husband, so she got a divorce. She had to earn a living, so she began working as a secretary in

New York. She was a demon typist and good at her job. but she had no interest in a career. Work hard, play hard was her motto. No reflection, no regrets, lots of Broadway.

Throughout the Great Depression in the 1930s, they moved in separate circles. Near the end of the decade, mom met a dashing lawyer at a nightclub in New York (tall! charismatic! a good dancer!) and married him. When he enlisted in the United States Army and was sent to Tulsa, Oklahoma, she followed him, and my older sister was born there. Vivian quickly discovered that looks and charisma couldn't counteract drunkenness, womanizing and domestic violence. Shocked and fearful, but unwilling to divorce a second time, she returned to Manhattan with her daughter. By now World War II was raging, and she found a job as an ambulance driver.

Joe had been working his way up the chain of responsibility in New Jersey's welfare division when war was declared. He enlisted but was too old to serve in action. Instead, he became the star of [\*The Army Play-by-Play\*](#). Comprised of five pieces that won the Soldiers' One-Act Playwriting Contest, the show was produced by the Army to raise money and morale. He toured with it around the East Coast, including a command performance before FDR en route to a Broadway opening in June 1943.

In April of that year, my father's sister stopped by the Stage Door Canteen, a hangout for theatre-loving soldiers, stage actors and folks involved in the war effort. She had a date there with a soldier (whom she later married). She spotted a tall, stunning woman wearing an ambulance driver's uniform who looked familiar. Suddenly, my aunt realized who she was: the girl for whom her brother had been pining for 20 years!

My mom recognized Joe's sister, too, and they had an emotional reunion. "Was Joe married?" my mother wanted to know. "No. What about you?" "Married but living apart."

My aunt had an inspiration. "Would you like to see Joe again? I can arrange it. He's coming to New York in a play. Why don't you come by when he is visiting me? We'll set up a date, and let's keep it a surprise. I won't tell him that you will be there."

Mom agreed at once. She loved clever surprises.

And that's what happened. Joe came to visit his sister, she greeted him, and then said mischievously, "Joe, there is someone else here waiting to see you." On cue, Vivian came out from behind a door. No stage entrance ever had more impact.

My father, who never lacked for words, was stunned speechless. But not for long. He had a lot of convincing to do and he needed all the words at his command. Luck had brought mom back into his life and he was not going to let her slip away again. He persuaded her to get a divorce and marry him. He persuaded his reluctant

parents to accept a divorcée with a small child as his wife. He opened his heart to my sister and loved her as his own daughter. He abandoned the idea of going off to pursue a career in Hollywood when the war was over.

They married in 1946 and were almost inseparable for the next 53 years. At various points in their marriage, family and work responsibilities permitting, they took part in theatre productions in New Jersey and the Washington, D.C. area. Dad acted as a priest, a rabbi, a businessman and—in one of his favorite roles—the randy governor in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, while mom made costumes for a wide range of shows. When dad became so deaf that he couldn't hear his cues, he retired from the stage, though he still went to the theatre whenever he could. Mom less so as Alzheimer's took over her brain.

In the final period of their lives, his age and her illness made it impossible for him to care for her at home. With great reluctance, he placed her in a specialized facility for Alzheimer's patients. At that point, she couldn't remember how to dress, eat or turn on lights. She didn't recognize her children, didn't know she had grandchildren. But when my dad came to visit, she held out her arms and her eyes sparkled. "Joe, there you are. My prince of love."

Their luck didn't stop at the Stage Door Canteen. Luck suffused with love has a life of its own—it followed my parents every day of their lives together.

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*[Claudia Flisi](#) is a bicultural professional journalist based in Italy. Her work has appeared for decades in The International New York Times, The Economist Intelligence Unit, Newsweek and dozens of other publications worldwide. She has visited more than 100 countries, fallen off horses on six continents and trained dogs in three languages. Find out more and read her clips at [paroleanima.com](#).*

*Top image: Claudia Flisi's parents. Photo courtesy of the author.*

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