

**THEATER**

# From Bayside High To Off-Broadway

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Monday through Saturday Elizabeth Berkley bursts onto the stage at 37 Arts Theatre, with dynamic energy coursing through her veins. As Bonnie, an exotic dancer working to support her child in David Rabe's *Hurlyburly*, Berkley shows an enormous depth, unique to any that she has exhibited in front of the camera.

Most will remember Berkley as the brainy Jessie Spano on "Saved by the Bell," but since her three-year stint on the teenage hit, she made her Broadway debut in *Sly Fox*, and has also appeared on stage in London opposite Eddie Izzard in *Lenny*. Berkley has worked with some of the biggest names in Hollywood, and starred in another role as an exotic dancer in 1995's *Showgirls*. She can be seen alongside Al Pacino in *Any Given Sunday*, Goldie Hawn in *First Wives Club*, and Woody Allen in *Curse of the Jade Scorpion*. Her resume exhibits enormous range, with additional roles in *The Real Blonde*, *Rodger Dodger*, "NYPD Blue," "CSI," and "Without a Trace."

Berkley says that her current work in the Off-Broadway production of *Hurlyburly* has been "such a wild ride, it's just incredible!" Set in the cocaine-and-sex permeated Hollywood Hills of the mid-1980s, the play centers on an unsettled casting agent and his three friends, all caught in love/hate relationships with various Hollywood women. Berkley began working with the talented cast of *Hurlyburly* (which includes Ethan Hawke, Parker Posey, and Bobby Cannavale) when an original cast member abruptly left the production. With two days to learn her role, Berkley jumped in head first, and has loved every aspect of the experience. She caught up with **The Long-Islander** after a recent performance:

*Hurlyburly* is a very lively, active experience. The acting and writing seems to be a direct conversation

with its audience. Would you agree?

"Yes, you get drawn into these people's lives and it's dark at times. It's great because the audience is laughing, whether they're laughing at it because it's funny, or because it's so painful, it's human that they recognize it in themselves. That's what's interesting about this play, that it strikes people. It lands in a different way each night, which is really exciting for us as well. There's definitely a certain exchange with the audience. It's not like a musical where you're performing *for* them, in the way that the energy that comes at you definitely affects the tone and where you go with the character. The audience is almost like another character!"

How would you describe the character you play?

"Bonnie is a woman who is struggling for love in her life, and she's trying to find validation. It's tragic in a way, the way she goes about trying to get it. But she has a huge heart, and she doesn't apologize for what she does. She takes pride in her job as a dancer in a club. It's artistic, it's not that she's trying to justify what she does, but she's just really desperate for love. And I think that's kind of an interesting thing, just the desperation in general that permeates throughout. That's a theme that runs through the piece and I think the reason it resonates with audiences in general is because of the collective need and desire we all have. And even though we may not know someone like Bonnie, we can see ourselves in certain ways in some of the characters, in those desperate times we all have. No one goes unscathed in life."

When making the decision to play Bonnie, were you ever afraid of typecasting in terms of the fact that you've played more than one promiscuous character

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Photo Courtesy Carol Rosegg

Elizabeth Berkley, known for a wide variety of television and big screen roles including Jessie Spano on "Saved by the Bell" and Mandy Murphy in *Any Given Sunday*, is currently starring in David Rabe's *Hurlyburly* at 37 Arts Theater in New York City.



Photo Courtesy Carol Rosegg

Ethan Hawke and Elizabeth Berkley in *Hurlyburly*.

## Berkley sizzles on stage

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**throughout your career?**

“Not at all, because I’ve never played a role like this. This character is her own. Bonnie is her own human being. Maybe because she’s sexy there are some similarities, but she’s a whole different cat, a whole different kind of person from what I’ve played.”

**I would imagine that it’s always difficult to be physical with another actor. In *Hurlyburly* you perform intimate scenes in front of a live audience. What is that experience like?**

“It’s certainly different doing it in theaters and doing it in a movie where it’s isolated. When you’re so in it, you can’t even think about the audience or else you’ll get self-conscious, so that has to totally be put out of your mind. When you’re in that circumstance, hopefully you’re so committed to being present in that moment and not thinking about what you’re about to do but what you’re doing in the scene, that you’re not thinking about it. The real key is to work with another actor that you respect, because then you feel much safer. For example, Al Pacino and I held great respect for each other when we worked on *Any Given Sunday*. But with theater, it’s kind of a sacred place to work.”

**Many of your fans must know you from your role as Jessie Spano on “Saved by the Bell.” You’ve done so**

“First of all, so no one has any expectations, there will not be one...ever! Maybe she’d be a rocket scientist, or a neurologist. I don’t really know. I left her at Stanford, and I haven’t really thought much about her future. It’s a very important question to think about though (*laughing*)!”

**If acting were for some reason out of the picture, what would we find you doing?**

“I can’t even imagine, because I truly have known since I was a little girl growing up in Farmington Hills, Mich., that it’s what I wanted. I can’t tell you why I knew that at such a young age, especially in a place that’s as far from Hollywood or Manhattan as you can get. I feel really lucky to get to do what I do. I love it so much. It just makes me so happy, when I’m loving the job. When you love what you do, it affects your life. People have asked me that before and there’s really nothing else I would rather do, and thank God that I’m meant to be doing what I’m doing, because I find such joy in the work, and I love collaborating with other people. That’s part of what is particularly wonderful about doing theater. There’s something amazing about telling the story each night, using the same words but with a new audience.”

**Where will we see you next?**

“I just did a movie called *Moving Malcolm*, it’s a really great indie. A movie I was doing got pushed, which is why I was able to do *Hurlyburly*. It was about a

much since then, so how do you respond to continued recognition for such an old character?

"Most people either haven't watched 'Saved by the Bell,' or they're obsessed with it! All the work I've done is so all over the map, so I also get a lot of mothers who've seen *First Wives Club* a million times, or their kids who've seen 'Saved by the Bell.' So it's either the people who've grown up with me, or people who are watching it in reruns. There's a good mix there, so that's fun. It was my beginning, so I think it's fun. But most people *have* seen other things. It's nice to have your work seen as an actress, it's very flattering when people are cool about it, and respectful, so it's nice."

**If there were a 20-year reunion, what would we find Jessie doing with her life?**

able to do *Hurryburly*. It was about a mentor of mine who had passed away, his name was Roy London, and he was a mentor to a lot of amazing actors: Susan Sarandon, Michele Pfeiffer, Jeff Goldblum, Robert Downey Jr. and the list goes on and on. [*Special Thanks to Roy London*] is an amazing documentary. I don't know exactly what I'll be doing right away, I won't know for the next couple of weeks. But the best lesson to take from all of this is that you need to be so present in this moment, and that's all you know: this moment. I thought I'd be in LA right now working on this film that got pushed to the fall, and instead I'm here doing *Hurryburly*. Life holds many surprises, most of them good!

*Hurryburly runs through July 2 at 37 Arts Theatre in New York City. Visit [ticketmaster.com](http://ticketmaster.com) to purchase tickets.*