

Stephanie D'Abruzzo

Looking Back on *Avenue Q*'s Big Tony Win

By Iris Wiener

It was June 6, 2004, and hundreds of Broadway actors and fans sat in Radio City Music Hall, silent in nervous anticipation. Many expected *Wicked*, the theater district's biggest powerhouse, to take the most coveted Tony award of the night: Best Musical. But, to the happy surprise of many, a little musical with a huge heart was not only awarded Best Book of a Musical and Best Original Score, but it took home the big one for its intelligent humor, sass and creativity. One year later, *Avenue Q* is still going strong, as is its Tony-nominated star Stephanie D'Abruzzo.

"The day itself was just insane, the week, well ... the entire month, really!" says D'Abruzzo, looking back on her Tony experience as a nominee for Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical. "Let's just say this: I'm a person who likes to eat, and I lost five pounds through that experi-

ence because I didn't have time to eat. That doesn't happen with me. I've been busy before, but I don't think I've ever not had time to eat. But, the stories I've had from those days are amazing!"

The days leading up to the awards ceremony weren't always so positive. "There was some bittersweet ... the situation of me being nominated with four incredible women was wonderful (Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel of *Wicked*, Donna Murphy of *Wonderful Town* and Tonya Pinkins of *Caroline, Or Change*), but there were some people who said some very mean things about me and my being in that category. There were even some publications talking about the four nominees rather than the five, and I was able to understand why they discounted me, but at the time, I almost felt like I wasn't worthy of the nominations. So, that was a little lonesome to deal with," she says quietly. "I

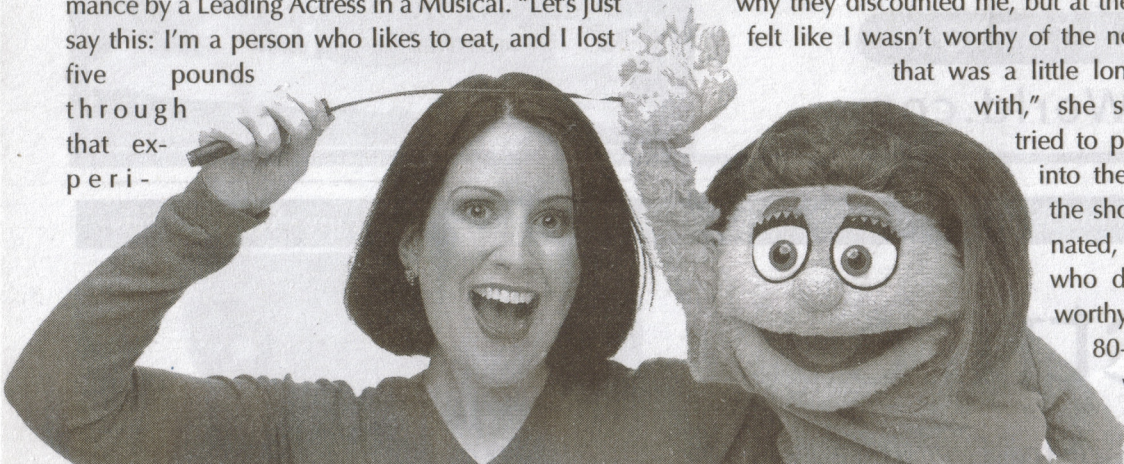
tried to put my energies into the excitement of the show being nominated, and the people who did think I was worthy. My odds were

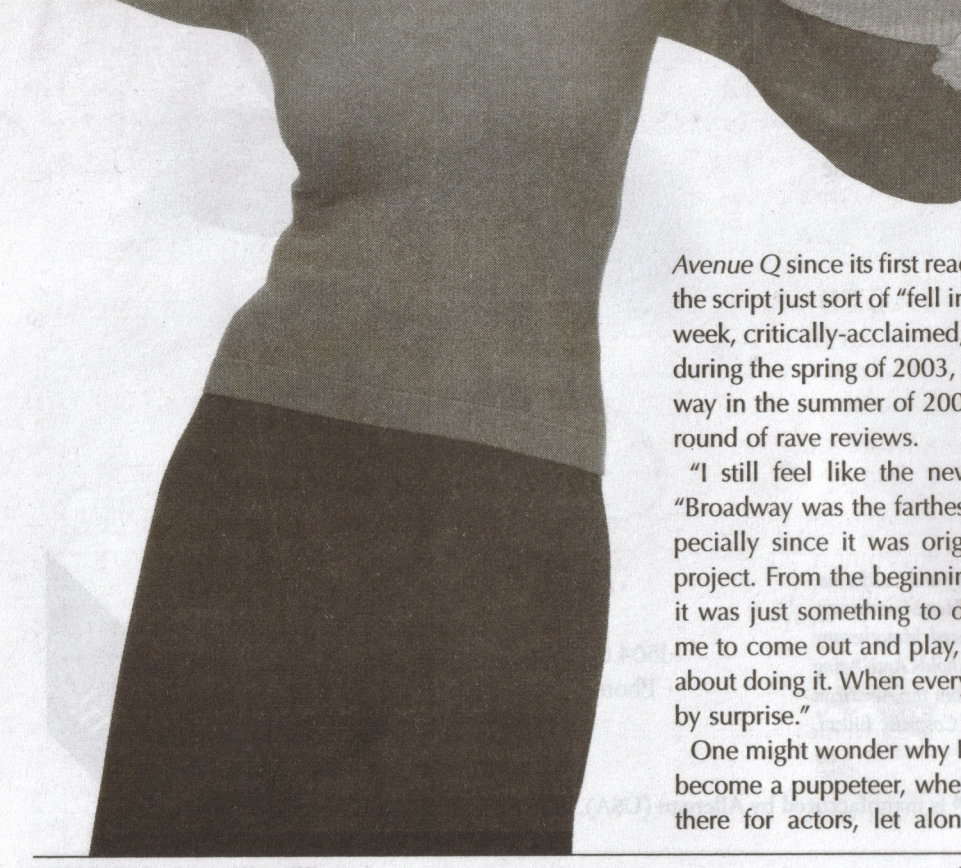
80-to-one [Menzel went on to win]. I took the opportu-

"That's the thing, I didn't want to be a puppeteer when I was 3. I loved performing from a very early age. I was very active in theater and performing in high school, but I eventually realized I couldn't wrap my 16-year-old head around method acting, so I naively thought, 'Well, if I can't get method acting, I shouldn't be an actor.'" Instead, D'Abruzzo headed to Northwestern University as a radio/TV/film major and started working with film and video production. "I enjoyed it, but it always seemed to come back to acting. I realized that I'm probably better at doing that than anything else."

Puppetry became a method in and of itself for D'Abruzzo. It allowed her to showcase her distinct vocal and performing skills, while not forcing her to worry about her less-than-Hollywood appearance. "Puppetry, particularly the Muppet style, occurred to me as a way to do the character acting that I wanted to do and play the things I wanted to play, but without it mattering what I looked like. It didn't matter that I had a bad perm, that I was overweight, that I was short ..."

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'Here, this may never happen again, they can't take it away from me now, I'm a nominee until I lose it!'"

D'Abruzzo has been with *Avenue Q* since its first reading in 2001, when she says the script just sort of "fell into my lap." Following a 14-week, critically-acclaimed, sold-out run Off-Broadway during the spring of 2003, *Avenue Q* moved to Broadway in the summer of 2003, and opened to a second round of rave reviews.

"I still feel like the new kid," D'Abruzzo laughs. "Broadway was the farthest thing from our minds. Especially since it was originally seen as a television project. From the beginning, we went into it thinking it was just something to do. No one else was asking me to come out and play, so of course, I was excited about doing it. When everything happened, it took me by surprise."

One might wonder why D'Abruzzo would choose to become a puppeteer, when there are so few roles out there for actors, let alone puppet-wielding players.

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And *Avenue Q* was the perfect show for an actress trying to find herself. A musical about trying to make it in New York with big dreams and a tiny bank account, the show is a snapshot of most everyone's life. D'Abruzzo plays Kate Monster and Lucy T. Slut, a frustrated single young woman, and a raunchy saloon gal, respectively. "I think I've brought more to Kate than to Lucy. Kate is a deeper, more multidimensional character." It's very easy for people to come to a show like this and think that the puppets are only going to be cute and funny, but I go for real first. In anything, if you go for real first, funny follows, because if you can't believe that those characters are real, then you're not going to believe in the show or the story."

With her contract up in July, D'Abruzzo is unsure of what her future with *Avenue Q* may be. "It's been a challenge finding what's next, and everybody always wants to know. Frankly, I don't know! That's up to the universe." ♦

Avenue Q is playing at the John Golden Theater, 252 West 45th Street. Visit www.avenueq.com.