A voice for the unspeakable

Jennifer Delora stars in *Apples in Winter* at New Paltz's Denizen Theatre

by Frances Marion Platt

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Jennifer Delora.

SLOWLY, GRADUALLY, LIVE theater is creeping back into our mid-Hudson stage venues, following more than a year of performances that happened outdoors, via Internet streaming or not at all. When COVID-19 started shutting down theatrical venues in the spring of 2020, New Paltz's Denizen Theatre was just coming off a high, following Terri Weagant's deliriously good solo outing in Elizabeth Heffron's *Bo-Nita*. Then everything came crashing down.

Being a small, intimate black-box theater that prefers to play by the rules laid down by Actors' Equity, it took longer than most venues for Denizen to get back to a point where it could invite audiences back into its indoor space. To compensate, and to use the downtime well, the Denizen folks commissioned a couple of brand-new plays of the sort that they like to put on: one by Heffron and another by John Pielmeier. When a planned world premiere of Neil LaBute's two-hander *If I Needed Someone* had to be canceled, the playwright switched gears and came up with a new site-specific play for voices titled *True Love Will Find You in the End*. It was presented in recorded form at Denizen in October 2020 before socially distanced audiences maxed out at eight people per show.

This past summer, Denizen also scheduled a series of staged readings, performed outdoors at the Water Street Market. One of those plays was *Dead and Buried*, written by James McLindon and directed by Nicola Saffren. It was there that Denizen discovered the multitudinous talents of deaf actor Jennifer Delora, an Ulster County native whose four-decade career has taken many surprising twists and turns before bringing her back home again. Delora will star in the one-woman show *Apples in Winter*, Denizen's first in-person indoor production since the pandemic hit, opening this Friday, October 22, and running until November 14. Written by Albany-based playwright/novelist/Skidmore English professor Jennifer Fawcett, *Apples in Winter* is directed by James P. Rees.

This production will be the play's New York premiere, and the timing couldn't be more auspicious, considering the current Oscar buzz around the performances in Fran Kranz's recently opened film *Mass*, which explores themes of accountability and forgiveness as the parents of a school shooting victim meet with the parents of the shooter. *Apples in Winter* raises remarkably similar issues, as Miriam, the mother of a murderer on Death Row, prepares a homemade apple pie in the prison's kitchen for her son's last meal on Earth while contemplating her own role in his psychological unraveling.

An actual apple pie will be prepared from scratch onstage (with apples donated by Twin Star Orchards) during the course of the performance. "I'm not a baker," Jennifer Delora admits. But that's one of the few skills that she hasn't mastered in her surprising life. Growing up on a small farm in the Rosendale neighborhood of Tillson Estates, Delora had plenty going for her: good looks, talent, drive, a genius IQ and supportive parents who didn't try to divert her from her desire to act, sing and dance. That was a lucky thing, because at the age of five – the same age that she talked her way into a part in a school Christmas pageant that was supposed to be open to fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders only – Delora suffered devastating ear infections that led inexorably to her losing most of her hearing by the age of 17.

Luckily, Delora's mother had learned to lipread from a deaf nun during her own schooldays, and she taught Jennifer the skill as soon as it became apparent that her hearing loss was going to be permanent. A deaf friend in her neighborhood began teaching Jennifer ASL when she was 11 years old. Hearing aids "gave me a headache," however, and by high school she was missing so much in class that she was assumed by her teachers to be "stupid," Delora says. It was the beginning of a lifelong crusade to champion the inclusion of people with disabilities in all professions.

Undeterred, young Delora threw herself enthusiastically into every activity imaginable, always trying to prove herself: drama club, dance, cheerleading, choir, 4-H, horseback riding, math club, debate team. She was a formidable competitive swimmer and diver and earned a black belt in judo. It was the latter skill that created the opportunity that both shaped her career and embroiled her in scandal; but theater was her first love. "I was going to be a stage actress," she says.

Performing in a Coach House Players community theater production while still attending Kingston High School, she heard about a casting call for extras in a PBS TV movie: *The Greatest Man in the World*, based on a James Thurber story. Delora went after a background part and got it, but wasn't credited because she wasn't a union actor. Nevertheless, the job helped her get her next bit part: Girl at Bar in *Soup for One*, shot at the Concord Hotel. "I wrote to the producer, in purple ink on pink paper, and told him why they should hire me," she reminisces. When Delora sets her mind to something, she goes after it, full-tilt.

After high school she stayed active in local theater, took drama classes at Ulster Community College and eventually moved to New York City to attend the Academy for Dramatic Arts. "I saw an ad in *Backstage* for a movie job that would pay $100 a day. That was a lot of money back then. The actress had to know judo." Before she knew it, Delora had found her first lead role in a movie: *Bad Girls Dormitory*, a low-budget gorefest about an uprising in a reformatory for teenage girls. "I was the lead baddie and killed everybody who looked at me funny," she says with a grin.

The part required Delora to appear nude from the waist up in a shower scene. That experience came back to haunt her when, not long afterward, she won the title of Miss Ulster County in 1986 – two years after Vanessa Williams was stripped of her Miss America title after nude photos of her appeared in *Penthouse* magazine. Although Delora had dutifully listed her role in *Bad Girls Dormitory* in her résumé submitted with her application for the contest, the pageant organizers didn't raise objections until two months after she had won the title, along with the talent and Miss Congeniality competitions. "They called me a liar," she recalls. "They said I was doing porn, which I wasn't. They called my parents and called me a whore."

This didn't sit well with those supportive parents, and with their blessing, Jennifer went after the pageant officials in court. "That was when I played PR agent for myself for the first time. I said, 'Okay, we'll play this game. It will not end well for you.' It got national press, and I ended up getting more movies." It was the beginning of a lengthy career as a B-movie scream queen, including lead roles in such titles as *Robot Holocaust*, *Frankenhooker* and *Deadly Manor* and regular casting in the Playboy Channel's soft-core *Electric Blue* series.

And so it was that Delora's ambitions to appear in legitimate live theater were sidetracked for decades. "In the 1980s, you were either a stage actress or you were in movies or you were a commercial actress," she says.

Living in LA while her horror-movie career was at its peak, she decided to go back to school, but found it extremely difficult to follow her classes due to her worsening deafness. An audiologist confirmed that she had only ten percent of her hearing left in one ear and none at all in the other. She took the unwelcome news with typical resolve to throw herself back into the fray with renewed commitment, freshening her ASL skills, getting a PhD in Psychology for the Deaf at age 34 and advocating on behalf of people with disabilities in the film industry.

She founded the LA Bridges Theatre Company of the Deaf and the Bridges Sign Choir for children at Paramount Studios, and went on to become a sought-after ASL instructor, preparing such stars as Ann-Margret, JoBeth Williams and Ellen DeGeneres for onscreen roles. She teaches classes in Deaf Culture and serves as a technical advisor on how media productions can depict the lives of deaf characters realistically. She even developed an innovative three-dimensional system for teaching ASL on video. The survivor of three spinal fusion surgeries after having been thrown off a balcony by an abusive partner during her years in LA, Delora has also become an activist against domestic violence – particularly as it pertains to deaf survivors, who she says often have difficulty advocating for themselves when interacting with law enforcement agencies that lack accessibility resources.

In 2011, Delora returned to Ulster County to care for her dying father and decided to remain in the area af-

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terwards, settling in Woodstock. Since then, she has signed for local stage productions (*https://hudsonvalleyone.com/2016/02/23/eve-enslers-a-memory-a-monologue-a-rant-and-a-prayer-to-be-performed-signed-in-rhinebeck*) and appeared in movies shot locally as the film industry has discovered the Hudson Valley, including *Driveways* and *Crypto*.

During the pandemic, she kept busy teaching Zoom classes on Conversational ASL and Deaf Culture. "I try to dispel myths," she says. "Not every deaf person can lipread. Everybody's deafness is different. I like to think I'm putting advocates out into the world. Because I have a voice, I feel that it's my responsibility."

A taped audition got her the role in *Dead and Buried*, and now she is deeply absorbed in the role of Miriam in *Apples in Winter*. "This is the most important role I've had in my life," she says. "It explores nature versus nurture. How do you as a parent contribute to how your child turns out? You can only do so much. She was a good mother, so how did this happen?" In the course of the play, the character "unpacks every single piece of luggage that she's been carrying on her shoulders" – while she bakes a pie.

Noting that she never had children herself, Delora gives much credit to the "amazing" director and the playwright for giving her a juicy role to interpret. "Everything I needed to know and feel about this woman was in the text," she says. "I can make whatever you put me in work. But this is absolutely a dream experience. I've never done a one-woman show."

If anyone can pull this off, it seems, Jennifer Delora should be able to do it. "I'm extremely proud to be working here. I can't wait for people to come and see it. In fact, I wish I could sit in the audience and see it myself, and I've never felt that way about anything I've acted in before."

Apples in Winter will be performed at 7 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and at 2 p.m. on Sundays from October 21 (preview) to November 14. Attendees are required to wear masks throughout their visit. Ticket prices are $28 general admission, $24 for seniors and $5 for students. To order, visit *www.denizentheatre.com* or call (845) 303-4136. The Denizen Theatre is located in the upper level of the Water Street Market at 10 Water Street in New Paltz.