

Romayne Bridgett reflects on career and family

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Young Romayne grew up with music—piano and clarinet but not singing lessons—one of four daughters of John and Frances Skipper of Mount Joy, a family whose tombstones in the Mount Joy cemetery date back to the 1700's. Singing came very late—after her first son was born. "Baby Sydney was fussy and demanding, and, after wanting a child so badly and looking forward to it for so long, motherhood was not quite what I thought it would be. I guess I had what would now be called a mild post-partum depression. I couldn't believe I was going to be responsible for this new life that demanded so much of my time and energy." On the advice of friends and family, she started singing lessons, "just for my own therapy," and it blossomed into a career which has bloomed for more than two decades.

And motherhood has bloomed right along with it. "My second child, daughter Ramona, and second son Jonathan," she says, "were placid, easy-to-care-for babies. I began to thoroughly enjoy combining career and parenthood—they both became fulfilling and beautiful parts of my life."

And all the Bridgetts are musical, all in different ways. Husband Sydney, a graduate of the Green Room during his days at Franklin and Marshall College, "spends his time now supporting the rest of us." Son Sydney, no longer fussy and demanding, is, as his mother puts it, "a marvelous guitar player" who plays lead guitar for a rock group. "Sydney has had formal training, both in France and in the U.S., in violin and guitar. And a lot of his training in music he's gotten just from living around here—by osmosis!"

Daughter Ramona, familiar to Fulton-goers as the Indian dancer in "Annie Get Your Gun" in repertory several years ago, studied ballet with the Pennsylvania Ballet for a year and a half and is now with Ina Theobald of Lancaster. Youngest son Jonathan has been in several productions locally and is "the maverick of the family," says his mother. "He used to say, when he was growing up, 'I can't wait to be my own self,' and he has become just that. He's made several trips to California, traveled widely. He's just started working at New Standard, so he's back home with us again."

What kind of parents did the Bridgetts turn out to be? "We're a close family," Romayne says, hands clasped in her lap, eyes shining

with pride. "We're not physical or huggy—our love shows most in the sense of humor we all have. Each of us always knows where everyone else is and we keep in touch often: Sydney is away at the moment and he calls every other day or so just to see what's new." Her eyes sparkle as she adds, "I tell him to **write, write** instead of calling, but he keeps checking in."

"My husband Sydney is the bigger worrier of the two of us, even now that everybody's grown. Our children's dating years were the worst: we'd both stand at the door late at night, watching every car that came down the street. After several years of this, I said, 'Sydney, I'm going to bed and I'm going to sleep.' And, you know, they always came in, even when we weren't watching! We've gotten a lot better about it now. We've raised them the best we possibly could; it's up to them. The influence comes from within each of them now." She beams, wrinkling her nose. "I think we did a pretty good job."

Romayne and Sydney Bridgett were married in 1950 and moved to France, where Sydney's job took him, in 1957. "I studied voice the whole time I was in Paris," Romayne says, "both in Paris and in Bourges. The most difficult thing about that was that it

Interpreting art songs must have been Romayne's highest art form, too. She entered one competition after another in France and did extremely well. "Competitions are good," says Romayne, "because they give you a chance to get more insights into yourself. Every singer has both strong and weak points; competition in art songs gives you the chance to learn how to hide the weak points and stress the strong ones."

"At one particular two-day competition for French art songs at the Conservatory of Music in Paris," Romayne recalls, "I sang three songs early in the second day and came back that evening to find out the results of the competition. I was sitting quietly, waiting, when the head of the competition opened the door at the head of the stairs and said, in French of course, 'Would Madam Bridgett please come forward.' I wondered what I had done—hoping I wouldn't have to go through the trauma of singing them all again—and followed her to an empty room. There, she told my teacher and me that I would have won, but that they considered me head and shoulders above all the rest of the competitors. I was asked to come back and compete several weeks later with a more select group. I did, and I won that one."

"Getting up" for performances is never impossible for Romayne Bridgett, even in the worst possible circumstances. A week before an important competition in France, the Bridgett's fourth child died suddenly—of crib death. "We all felt that I should go to compete if I possibly could. I went to Paris with my teacher and my doctor and his wife, and when it was my turn I stood up to sing a song called 'Sighing.' I realized, as I was singing, two things: first, that the words were saying 'I'll never see his little face again' and, second, that I had never in my life sung better. I was able to interpret and express as never before." Romayne won that competition too.

The Bridgetts returned to the United States in 1962. "The first thing I did," she remembers, "was call and find out how soon I could have a lesson!"

Coming back to the U.S. was meaningful in more ways than one. And when Romayne Bridgett talks about prejudice, she does so understatedly, quietly, and with more intelligence than emotion: "When I came back to the U.S. to visit, in 1959 or 1960, in the years of demonstrations and sit-

downs and riots, I felt, as I stepped off the plane, that I had put on a heavy, suffocating, coat. I had to again be aware of where I could eat, where I could go. When I went back to Europe after my visit, the coat came off—immediately—and I could feel free and unencumbered again." Glancing down at her outstretched fingers on her lap, she continues: "I think prejudice is a learned emotion. Black people have it too, but I think for a different reason. All our lives it has been hammered into us, this awesome pride in our African heritage. It is a very positive part of our lives. To eliminate all the negative things that have happened to us as a race, you have to add a positive." She pauses. "When it came time to test my prejudice—and I would have sworn I was liberal and totally understanding and non-prejudiced—I found that mine was very strong indeed. I've conquered it now, but I was surprised and ashamed to find that I was not quite as liberated from those feelings as I had thought I was."

"I feel almost 100% accepted in the Lancaster County arts community," she smiles, "and in the Mount Joy community I

love. There are people who have almost fought for me in the theatre—real friends. There was a period I went through when I'd call everybody in my family to the TV

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every time somebody black and prominent was on the screen. My children, who are the great levellers, finally got tired of it and let me know in no uncertain terms. Now," she laughs, "I call everybody every time anybody prominent comes on!"

Back in Mount Joy with her now-growing children and husband, Romayne jumped right into the theater. "The first thing I ever did was narrate 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' at F&M's Green Room Theatre. It was my first introduction, too, to Hugh Evans. We hit it off immediately and have been close ever since."

The list of theatre credits grew and grew... and grew. Any favorite roles? "I enjoyed playing Jenny Diver in the 'Three Penny Opera' and I loved being the Wife of Bath in the Canterbury Tales. She was a marvelous character!" She thinks for a moment, her head tilted back and her brown eyes sparkling. "In fact, I can't think of any role I didn't enjoy!"

And her credits keep growing. She's presently the vocal director with the Fulton Summer Repertory Company; she's the music director of a four-week summer program for gifted students given by the Mid-Susquehanna Council of the Arts; and she has 50 private voice students—and a waiting list. "I think that if a person has learned anything at all, it is his responsibility to pass it on. I love teaching, and I believe that every voice has the possibilities for fine singing. Maybe not the Met, but fine singing nonetheless."

Romayne is a member of the Lancaster Opera Workshop (and a former president) and the Lancaster Musical Arts Society. She reads "everything" and both she and husband Sydney love to cook gourmet



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