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Offstage couple reprise onstage role of husband, wife

Harold Phillips and Trish Egan say they won't have to act so much this time around in "You Can't Take It With You"

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VICKIE KAVANAGH

Twelve years ago while playing Paul and Penny Sycamore in the romantic comedy "You Can't Take It With You," Harold Phillips and Trish Egan fell in love.

Now the couple are reprising the roles in the Mt. Hood Repertory Theatre Company production of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, written in 1936 by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart.

Phillips and Egan agree that marriage and life experiences have helped them improve their characters.

"The comfort of a long-term relationship has helped . . . and now we don't have to act like we did 12 years ago," said Egan, who plays a wife and mother who writes romance novels and dabbles in painting.

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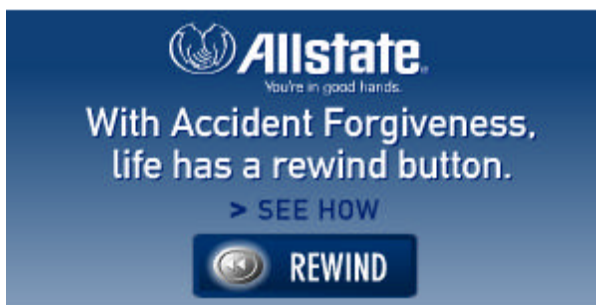
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As a mother of two sons, ages 30 and 25, Egan said she also can better identify with her character's pain as daughter Alice prepares to leave home.

Phillips said his "knowledge of what a real marriage is has made a huge difference this time around" in how he plays the role of onstage husband and father. His character is a happy-go-lucky man who is obsessed with making fireworks in the family basement.

Egan and Phillips live in the Pleasant Valley neighborhood with their dogs Baby and Buddy. The couple took turns reminiscing about their 1992 summer romance as they sipped ice tea and nibbled on sandwiches in a coffee shop last week.

Phillips struck up a conversation with Egan at a picnic for Summer Stock Program actors at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Wash. She was an established actress, and Phillips had heard good things about her.

"I think it is her immense feeling of energy and integrity . . . and she has this charisma about her that draws people toward her," Phillips said about his initial attraction.

They talked until the sun went down and came up again, and then agreed to meet for an "official date" after auditions. They saw "Far and Away," a movie featuring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, another set of actors who fell in love on set and married. Afterward, Egan said they had to have "the talk."

"I'm only going to say this once, but I'm too old for you," the 38-year-old actress from Portland told the 21-year-old drama student from Anchorage.

But Phillips just laughed it off.

"I knew right away it was going to work," he said.

"There's a magnetism about her that is irresistible. She's so full of life."

The 14-hour-a-day summer program made it difficult for the lovebirds to spend much time together, so they were thrilled to land the roles of a married couple in one of three summer plays.

"It is a play about family and how important it is to be there for each other," Phillips said. "And that when a crisis does happen, no matter what, we all rally around each other."

When the program ended, the couple joked that they were the "theatrical cliché of a summer stock relationship, a summer fling, a backstage drama." They prepared to part ways. Because Egan had ruptured a disk in her back from a fall during another play, Phillips insisted on driving her back to Portland.

"He took care of me for two weeks and then packed me up and brought me back to Portland," she said. "I had inklings of things to come."

Phillips made the 500-mile round trip almost every weekend for a year before making the big decision.

"My career was important to me," he said. "But I convinced myself that I'd be a fool to give her up."

He transferred his college credits to the University of Portland, moved in with Egan and married her four years later.

Offstage and onstage

The couple learned that they had been in Germany at the same time – Phillips as an "Army brat" and Egan as a microbiology teacher during her 14-year stint in the Army. Her other job now is teaching laboratory science classes at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland.

Egan, who holds a master's of fine arts degree in directing from the University of Portland, has 30 years of theatrical experience. She has performed in theaters nationwide and overseas, and was a national finalist in the Irene Ryan Acting Competition. She earned a Drammy Award for best supporting actress for her role as Queen Margaret in the Stark Raving Theatre production of "Richard III." The award is a 25-year-old tradition that recognizes the best Portland-area theater efforts of the previous season.

Egan also serves on the board and as associate artistic director for the Mt. Hood Repertory Theatre Company.

Her recent Portland-area acting credits include roles in the Profile Theatre Project's "Gint" and "American Dream," and as Mrs. Hudson in "Fahrenheit 451." As a director, local credits include "Inherit the Wind," "Talley's Folly," "The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine," "Five Women Wearing the Same Dress," "Driving Miss Daisy," "Trifles," "Fifth of July" and the "Actor's Nightmare."

Because of his transfer to Portland, Phillips said it took him seven years to earn his bachelor's degree in drama. To make ends meet, he also worked as a clerk in a Portland law firm. There he discovered his talent for computers and eventually started a consulting and Web design firm. He is Webmaster for www.mthoodrep.org and created www.pdxonstage.com, an online Portland theater resource. He is operations manager for Mt. Hood Repertory and is working on its student internship program.

Phillips also is a certified stage combatant and fight choreographer. He applies the training to some of his roles and helps coach others, such as in the wrestling scene between characters Anthony Kirby Sr. and Boris Kolenkhov in "You Can't Take It With You."

Local acting credits include Lorenzo in "The Gift of Speech," Terrance O'Keefe in "Breaking Legs," Kim Feston in "Search and Destroy" and the parts of Mowbray and Bishop in "King Richard II." Mt. Hood Repertory audiences know him best for his portrayal of E.K. Hornbeck in the 2002 production of "Inherit the Wind" and as a regular in the Mt. Hood Readers Theatre series.

The actors, who share a talent agent, are happy with theater life and say they would rather stay in this area than pursue TV and film roles in Hollywood.

"Portland is a great place to be an actor," Phillips said.

They often work 16- to 18-hour days, though, and often go days without seeing each other.

"We wonder how we do it sometimes," Phillips said. "But we are comfortable together. We have fun . . . I like to think of myself as Hume Cronin to her Jessica Tandy."

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