

# Ready for her close-up

From Nemo to Pee Wee

with Lexy Fridell

STORY EMILY CHARRIER-BOTTS

PHOTOS SUBMITTED

Lexy Fridell sounds like a Disney princess, her voice like the bubbles in a glass of sparkling wine. So it's no surprise that much of her theatrical success has come from voice-over work. Hers is the voice you'll hear on the audiobook version of *The Books of Elsewhere*, a series of magical children's books from Penguin. And she's traveled the country as one of the Bad Idea Bears of *Ave Q*, singing songs like "Everybody's a Little Bit Racist" and "The Internet Is for Porn."

She's swum the ocean as the quirky fish Dory in Disney's live stage show *Finding Nemo—The Musical*. Her latest success—as "Chairy", the beloved big blue chair of *The Pee Wee Herman Show*—left its recent Broadway run to spin off into an HBO special, and then a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*.

"There's a difference between someone who gets a job in New York and someone who gets a job in L.A. You get a job in L.A. and people say, 'Boy, are you lucky.' You get a job in New York, and people say, 'Boy, are you talented.'" says Fridell's father, Squire. An actor himself with some 3,250 television spots under his belt, he made his tallest pile of dosh clowning as Ronald McDonald.

"It would have been so easy for my dad to slap a pair of red shoes on me and have me dance around with the other kids," Fridell says now of those days. "But they kept me out of the professional world, I think with good reason. I got to have a childhood."

"It's such a crappy business," her father explains. "It's so hard."

But at the end of the day, for better or worse, performance is the family business;



29-year-old Lexy Fridell simply had it in the blood.

Her mother Suzy—a legendary dancer who toured with the Nikolais Dance Theatre Company—recalls watching 2-year-old Lexy when "Tomorrow," from the musical *Arnie*, came on the stereo one day. "She's singing in her diapers," she laughs, "with a bottle hanging out of her mouth." So despite their best efforts, despite buying skateboards and computers and indulging other hobbies, the acting bug proved a genetic inevitability for

Lexy as Dory in Disney's stage show, *Finding Nemo—The Musical*.

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Three-year-old Lexy with Dad as Ronald McDonald. It's an apple/tree thing.



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Squire and Suzy's only child.

Fridell remembers trying out for her first play, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, at the age of 10. Desperately coveting the part of the spoiled and sulking Veruka Salt, Fridell was cast instead as one of the grandmothers. "Both my parents told me I needed to make that grandmother the best grandmother that's ever been," Fridell recalls, adding that they gave her tips for making the part funny. "I got the most laughs of everyone—it sparked my love of comedy."

What followed was a fevered desire to pursue acting in every avenue that presented itself. By her senior year of high school, Fridell felt ready for the big leagues. She left Sonoma for Idyllwild Arts Academy, a private school

in Pine Cove, California, known for preparing performers for the grueling process of college auditions. Her parents had finally made peace with the fact that their daughter wanted the same life they had sought, and agreed to support her, as long as she completed college first.

"In three days, you audition for a bazillion colleges," Fridell says of the culminating rush weekend. "I think I auditioned for 23," she said. "It was definitely the first time I experienced that much auditioning at one time."

She was one of only 10 actors in the country that year accepted into the Carnegie Mellon University School of Drama, thriving in the rigid environment designed to develop

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every aspect of an actor's skill set. As soon as she graduated, like most stage hopefuls, it was off for the bright lights of the big city: New York. "My dream was always to be on Broadway," Fridell says.

While some of her school chums found instant success, Fridell struggled to find her place. She won critical praise in regional productions like *The Spitfire Grill*, *Little Shop of Horrors* and *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, but couldn't quite find her way onto New York's main stage. Petite, dark-haired, with a sweet youthful voice, Fridell was not the purring sex kitten many shows sought as leading lady. "I'm definitely out of left field," she says. "People don't necessarily know what to do with me. I had to forge my own path a little bit."

In the end, talent plus timing plus tenacity, and a really good audition in front of Pee Wee himself, won the day. On Sept. 26, 2010, dressed in a shimmering blue cocktail dress, Lexy Fridell stepped into Broadway's klieg lights to take her bow before the sold-out opening night crowd of *The Pee Wee Herman Show*.

When her parents saw the show, her proud, performance-wise papa said it best: "You just sort of forget it's your kid, and you say, 'Jesus, she's good.'"

As opening night theater patrons rose to their feet in a thunderous ovation, Lexy Fridell drank it all in. She savored it, this triumph, she gloried in this feat. And then, she began plotting how to do it again. **S**

**"You forget it's your kid and you say, 'Jesus, she's good!'"**

*Lexy and Lynette, following in their parents' footsteps while Keesa, the baby camel (right) is destined to follow the camel footsteps of her late aunt Kazy.*

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she was happiest teaching people about the wonders of the animal world. She also missed home, especially after Kazy, her first exotic animal love, passed away from a rare infection. Lyon hung up her bustier and found work with Classroom Safari, an organization that brings wildlife into schools. She works, too, with Leopards Leap, a nonprofit that raises exotic cats. Ultimately Lyon sees herself staying at the family ranch, continuing in the tradition her parents began. "Of four, I'm the only kid that has expressed any interest in maintaining the farm," she says, adding that she's already gathering required permits to own exotic animals on her own. "You have to apply for each animal specifically, it's a long process," she says, surveying her wild kingdom, "but it's worth it." **S**