

Md. actress found vocation (and love) bringing history to life

Md. plantation mistress at time of War of 1812 one of several characters Mary Ann Jung plays



Mary Ann Jung performs at Ellicott Mills Middle School in Ellicott City as Rosalie Stier Calvert (1778-1821), a plantation mistress at the time of the War of 1812. (Kenneth K. Lam, Baltimore Sun / February 26, 2010)

The British are coming! The British are coming!" the lady in the silk dress yells, arms flapping as she careens through the crowd. "This can't be happening! The British are coming!"

It's hard to blame Rosalie Stier Calvert for panicking. She'd only fled her war-torn native land for Maryland a few years before, after all, and now enemy troops are massing outside the gates of her new home.

It's Aug. 24, 1814, date of the Battle of Bladensburg - or so it seems to 200 or so eighth-graders at Ellicott Mills Middle School.

Their eyes go wide as Calvert - or Mary Ann Jung, the actress portraying her - kick-starts a one-woman show that will give flesh, blood and feeling to the early years of the American republic, an era they've only read about.

Every March is Women's History Month in Maryland and in the United States as a whole, and for Jung, 49, of Arnold, that means opportunity. It has been 20 years since she left a job in corporate America for a career as a living-history actress, and she's in demand.

Today she isn't Margaret Brent, the first Colonial woman to own land, or [Clara Barton](#), who founded the Red Cross. She's not [Amelia Earhart](#) or [Julia Child](#) or the other characters she portrays in as many as 200 self-written shows per year.

She's Rosalie, a blueblood born in what is now Belgium whose family fled a Europe damaged by the wars of "that devil, Napoleon," in 1794, and ended up in Maryland, where she bore nine children, wrote scads of letters home and ran two bustling plantations.

The British invaded just outside the gates of the second one, Riversdale, during the War of 1812.

"This can't be happening!" she bellows with a French accent. "I left my own country ... to escape the war, but now we're being attacked right here in [Bladensburg]. The British are coming, and you don't care!"

Is it coincidence that Jung grew up near Bladensburg, a port town on what is now called the Anacostia River in [Prince George's County](#), where the Riversdale mansion still stands?

"There's plenty of history in our [neck](#) of the woods," says Michael Goins, the principal of Ellicott Mills, as he chats with a fully costumed Jung before the show.

Goins also happens to have grown up in Bladensburg, a town where schoolchildren still hear accounts of the one-sided battle that took place just days before the Redcoats invaded Washington and set it on fire.

None of that kept Jung from growing up an Anglophile. Her parents (Dad was a [World War II](#) Navy vet, Mom a Realtor) kept the family library stocked with [biographies](#) and history books, gathered everyone around the TV for the 1971 [BBC](#) series "Elizabeth R," starring [Glenda Jackson](#) as Queen [Elizabeth I](#), and in general laid the groundwork for Jung's lifelong love of England.

Only a handful of Marylanders work full-time as living historians - one, Alice McGill, has done powerful [Sojourner Truth](#) and [Harriet Tubman](#) shows in the schools for years - and Jung had no clue her early life augured a career.

Even as she went on to major in British history at the University of Maryland, studying to be a teacher, her Anglophilia felt like a mere oddity.

Then love and fate conspired.

Jung says a friend of hers had an equally unusual hobby - falconry - not to mention a crush on her he was too shy to act on. So when organizers of the fledgling [Maryland Renaissance Festival](#) asked Michael Moreland to create a show for them, he invited her to partner with him.

Dressed in period garb and bantering in period style, she worked the crowds as Moreland worked the birds. She loved it. "I never realized what a ham I was," she says. The two never dated seriously, but they performed the show for seven years, and Jung realized what she wanted to do with her life.

It wasn't teaching - not exactly.

Apprenticeship

People who dislike history often say it's because they have to memorize dates, a dry prospect at best.

Working at the Maryland Renaissance Festival, widely respected in the industry for its period accuracy, taught Jung something basic: People do enjoy history when they can see its human imprint.

In 1989, she won the role of Lettice Knollys, a countess who flirted with Elizabeth's favorite admirer, Robert Dudley, and later married him, driving "Queen Bess" to fits of jealousy.

That year, festival organizers imported Tom Plott, an actor from Georgia, to play Dudley opposite her Knollys. As if to prove a point, the two "fell madly in love on Day 1 - which made our performances extremely believable, not to mention endless fun," Jung says. (She and Plott, still an actor, just celebrated their 15th anniversary.)

She later won the role of [Anne Boleyn](#), the young beauty for whom Henry VIII had his first marriage (to the popular Catherine of Aragon) annulled. For that part, she got to use her naturally booming voice when addressing thousands of spectators at the jousting field. In the village, guests stopped her to crack wise ("don't lose your head today!") and hurl insults ("homewrecker!").

And the year festival director Carolyn Spedden decided to end the show with royal guards marching Anne to her execution, two audience members tried to rescue her.

"That was a beautifully written scene," Jung says, "but part of me wanted to say, 'Hey, fellas, take it easy; it's only an act.' "

Before long, Jung quit her day job in corporate human resources and started tending bar at night. She got word to schools, senior centers and museums that she was free to perform as Queen Elizabeth and other characters. Eight years and several hundred shows later, she was a full-time actress.

A new voice

There's a difference between living history and re-enactment, in which [actors](#) learn their characters' histories, then act them out in unplanned fashion.

Jung spends eight months or more researching and writing a script for each of her characters, mining biographies, letters, historical novels and visits to the figures' homes for her material.

She has six in her repertoire, all of which she can perform at a moment's notice. Today, Jung and Plott are the top-ranking theatrical directors at Renaissance Festival (the gig

supplies a fourth of their income), but her main job is as proprietor and cast of the company she owns, History Alive!

She has appeared on [CNN](#) and "Good Morning America," done shows for the Smithsonian and the French ambassador, and even been ticketed for speeding in the 93-piece Elizabeth I [costume](#) that dazzles grade-schoolers (mostly the girls).

"I told the officer, 'You've just cited the Queen of the British Empire,' " she says. "He just gave me this blank look, as if to say, 'Lady, I don't know who you are, but I knew you didn't belong in Delaware.' "

The most daunting part of the process, though, is condensing full lives into 45-minute set pieces. "I try to capture the big themes [of a historical period], but I look for the odd little details that make people real" - Barton's paradoxical shyness, for example, or Rosalie's penchant for wearing her hair in the latest a la Greque style.

"I want the audience to leave saying, 'I didn't know that,' " she says.

In the case of Rosalie, Jung relied mainly on "Mistress of Riversdale: The Plantation Letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert, 1795-1821," by Margaret Law Callcott, published in 1998.

Rosalie, a descendant of the painter Peter Paul Rubens, came to America with her family, where she met and married George Calvert, a descendant of the Lords Baltimore.

When Callcott, a University of Maryland researcher, translated her letters from the French, she'd found a distinctive voice: that of an aristocrat who knew and often ridiculed the people who shaped early U.S. history.

As Rosalie, Jung describes life on a plantation (milking cows, planting crops, making candles), shares offbeat details (a letter's recipient paid the postage), and confides the rare fact that her husband trusted her, a woman, with running the estates.

What shocks, though, is how she treats famous Americans: President [Thomas Jefferson](#) ("Tommy Jeff fancies himself a great man, but I hate him"), Dolley Madison

("I cannot believe the first lady does her own shopping") and Francis Scott Key ("we call him Frank; he wants to marry my friend, Polly, but I do not like him; he is just a young lawyer with no prospects").

She even takes swipes at the audience. "I do not see any ladies here. Look how many of you are in trousers!" she says to boos.

"Look around you," she says during a question-and-answer session afterward. "Do you like everyone you see? Why would it be any different [200 years] ago?"

Anthem

For Jung, it's a tougher crowd than some. The room is so big that she must sacrifice accent for volume. The kids are spread out and seated at tables, and there's the usual adolescent eye-rolling.

But a few come onstage to don costumes and portray key characters. (Their friends cheer.) Jung proclaims half the room British, the other American, unfurling the causes of the War of 1812 as though talking to neighbors over a back fence.

"Huzzah!" roars first one side, then the other, as she calls out bits of news.

The Battle of Bladensburg ends badly, of course. The outnumbered Yanks run away so fast, wags later rename it "the Bladensburg Races." Days later, as Rosalie tells it, British Adm. George Cockburn eats President James Madison's dinner before burning down the [White House](#). (More boos.)

Soon enough, though, Jung stirringly narrates the the Battle of Baltimore, which ends more happily. She describes the Americans' joy while unfurling a U.S. flag. And when she asks the kids to sing the last verse of "Frank" Key's "Star-Spangled Banner," the crowd responds so vigorously the windows seem to shake.

Evidently, these teens do care. "Of course they do," Jung says with a shrug, gathering up her props to head home. "You just have to give them a chance."

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Mary Ann Jung

Rosalie Stier Calvert is one of six characters that Mary Ann Jung portrays in as many as 200 self-written one-woman shows a year.



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Mary Ann Jung

Mary Ann Jung, left, performs with Mallory Baldwin, center, and Lu Zhang, both 14-year-old eighth-graders at Ellicott Mills Middle School. Kids do care about history, she says; "You just have to give them a chance."