

LIFE IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Actresses talk about
the acting life
in San Antonio

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A gifted comedienne, Sandy Schwartz appears in virtually every production at the Steven Stoli Playhouse.

There's no business like show business, says the famous song, and few devotees would disagree. The hours are bad, the money scarce and the competition tough, but the thrill of being in the spotlight overshadows everything else.

Thanks to many talented folks who feel this way, local stages are alive year-round with musicals, comedies, drama, performance art and just about everything else that can be put on stage. ArtBeat decided to talk to three San Antonio actresses about their careers in the Alamo City and the acting life in general. Although they have followed different paths, the three have one important thing in common: a passionate love for what they do.

"I have always wanted to be an actress," says Ana Gangai, one of the best known actresses in town, who has worked with just about every local company. "My first big role was in fourth grade, and I adored it right away. I loved the audience looking at me and applauding, and I have been doing it ever since."

To pursue her dream, she majored in drama at UT Austin, spent a year at Purdue in graduate training and, like so many others, tried her luck in New York for a while. The Big Apple, however, did not agree with her. For every role she auditioned for, there were at least five other actresses with dark hair and high cheekbones, she says. Competition was fierce and life in

the not-so-friendly Northeast metropolis rather unpleasant.

After four months, Gangai returned to Texas, where she soon married her college boyfriend, Bruce Liesman, now an attorney with the Alamo Title Insurance Co. Although the couple spent a few years in Houston, it wasn't until they moved to San Antonio in 1985 that Gangai's career took off.

Today, she usually gets the lead roles and wins awards. In 2003, Gangai received the best actress ATAC Globe Award for her performance in *Dinner with Friends*, (San Antonio College's Summer Company), and in 2001 she was honored for her interpretation of Mrs. Lovett in the San Pedro Playhouse production of *Sweeney Todd*. She also won a Globe in 1997.

"I like to play strong women who have a tragic flaw," says Gangai. "I am a drama queen. But this way, I don't have to act it out in my real life. I can get all the drama I need on stage."

It's not unusual for her to be in three to four shows a year, both musicals and straight plays, spending six to seven weeks per show in rehearsals and another four to six in performance. To be competitive as the so-called triple-threat — actor, singer, dancer — she keeps her voice in shape by singing regularly, takes dance classes and works out in the gym.

In recent years, Gangai has portrayed many famous heroines, including Evita, Blanche DuBois, Desiree Armfeldt and even

Edwin Droid in *The Mystery of Edwin Droid*. She feels that San Antonio has given her great opportunities as an actress.

"There are advantages to being in a smaller city," she says. "I have had the same roles as (Broadway star) Patti LuPone. In what other city could I have done the range of roles I have done here? I am lucky to be here."

This is a sentiment that's shared by the other two actresses we talked to. San Antonio and central Texas offer certain advantages not found everywhere.

Twenty-nine-year-old Nikki Young, who, like Gangai, has been performing since grade school, is optimistic about career possibilities in the San Antonio-Austin area, which she sees as getting "hot." The growing film industry in Austin offers more chances to get movie parts – which she has had – and TV commercial jobs are on the rise, too. She also worked at Sea World of Texas, hosted a couple of TV specials and appeared in industrial/corporate videos.

"I so enjoy doing everything in this business," says the pretty brunette, positively bubbling with enthusiasm.

A native San Antonian, Young grew up in an artistic family that encouraged her desire to perform. After testing the waters with just about every young thespian group in town, she studied drama at SAC and eventually majored in theater at Southwest Texas State University. Now she's also begun making a name for herself in the grown-up theater community, notably in several well-received plays produced by the Renaissance Guild. Directors are calling her.

Echoing Gangai, Young, too, points out that being a bigger fish in a smaller pond helps visibility and access to good parts. But there are additional advantages, as well. Since fewer actors are generally available for the many shows being staged in town, directors are more patient and more willing to help you develop new skills, she says.

"I am not a singer, but I was cast in the musical *Godspell*, and they let me make mistakes; they put up with my emotions and my insecurities and encouraged me. And I did it!"

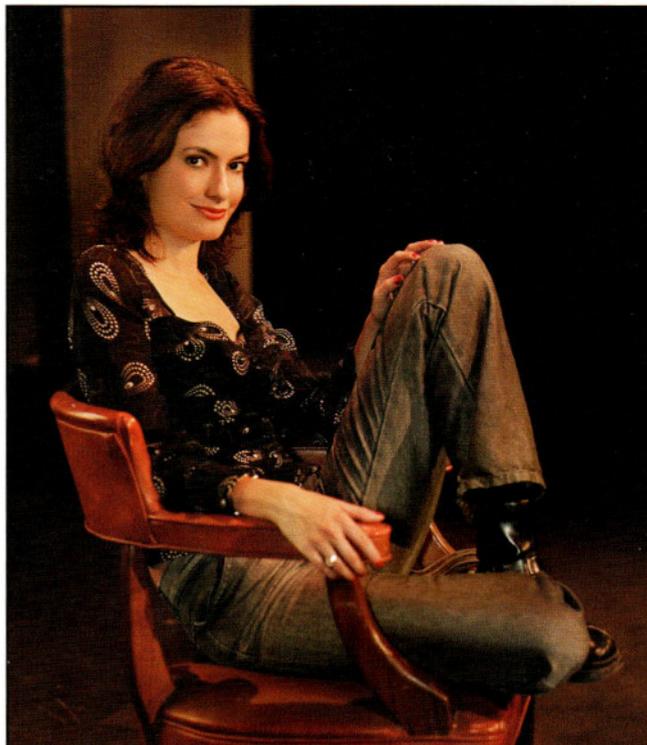
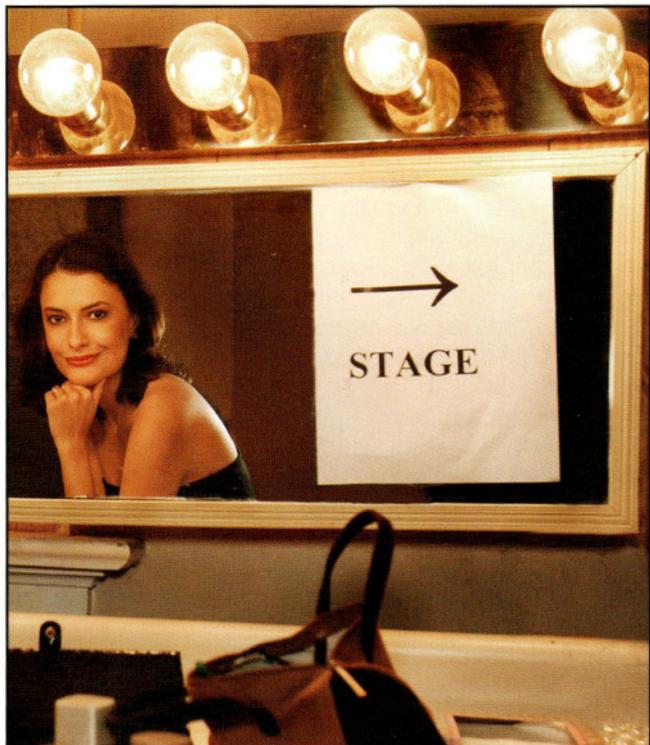


Ana Gangai's acting has earned two Globe awards from Alamo Theatre Arts Council.

In the same vein, auditions are generally friendlier as well, since directors and casting directors tend to know the individual actors and their abilities. Even if you don't shine at a particular audition, they'll give you a second chance. "That's not the norm elsewhere," says Young.

Still, auditions are never easy.

Nikki Young has appeared on the stage, in movies and television, at SeaWorld and in industrial and corporate videos.



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"It's still hard," admits Gangai, who always seems quite confident on stage. "I usually wear a skirt so nobody will see my knees shake. Auditioning is something different from acting. You have to train for both, separately."

One San Antonio actress who never has to audition, however, is Sandy Schwartz. A gifted comedienne and a seemingly tireless worker, Schwartz is almost exclusively affiliated with a single company, the Steven Stoli Playhouse, where she appears in virtually every production. Patrons love her, and many express disappointment when they discover that she is not in a particular show.

A three-time ATAC Globe winner, she is equally adept at portraying a grand dame of cinema like Bette Davis (*Me and Jezebel*), a quirky 80-year-old hip chick (*Social Security*) or a divorced Southern belle (*Divorce Southern Style*). Well aware of what he's got, producer Steven Stoli chooses plays with her in mind and has, in fact, even commissioned playwright Modrea Mitchell-Reichert to write two comedies especially for Schwartz.

"Modrea asked me, 'Would you be interested in playing such and such character?' I was very flattered. Both roles she wrote for me were fun to do," says Schwartz. "It's unbelievable! To think that someone thinks that I am so good that they will keep me busy all the time! I am living my dream now."

Schwartz's career is unusual in other ways as well. For one thing, at 60, she is a living proof that the old adage that there are no good parts for mature actresses is not necessarily valid. For another, she reached her present "dream" not by chasing it but by waiting for it to find her. It happened in 1991, when she was still working as a branch manager for a bank. An occasional amateur thespian who enjoyed organizing skits for company functions, Schwartz staged a musical segment for a fundraising show Stoli was directing for the San Antonio State School. The bank was one of the sponsors.

For her number, she dressed her female tellers as guys, in costumes of her own design, and choreographed a smashing rendition of *Gee, Officer Krupke!* from *West Side Story*.

Offstage, Schwartz is financial and box office manager at the Stoli Playhouse.



Gangai is a triple-threat performer — actress, dancer, singer. She's usually in three to four shows a year.

"That Monday, Mr. Stoli called me to ask if I would like to be in one of his other shows," recalls Schwartz with a smile. "He was producing murder mysteries at the time at various locations. There wasn't even a nanosecond of hesitation on my part. I said, yes, yes! During all those years I worked at the bank, I never looked for acting work. I didn't know how to go about it. It finally came to me."

Like Gangai and Young, she is willing to do what it takes for each role. She will invent a detailed life story for a character, learn a peculiar speech pattern or let her hair grow gray if necessary. The gray hair will be in the spotlight this July as Schwartz takes on the part of the aging Miss Daisy in the upcoming production of *Driving Miss Daisy*.

Yet for all their successes, not one of the three actresses, not even Schwartz, makes a living performing. While most theaters in town pay a small stipend now — an improvement over years past — actors must find other ways to pay the bills. It's a bargain they are willing to accept, especially if the paying job is also in show business. This is the case with Schwartz, who, besides being the star of the house, also serves as the Stoli Playhouse's financial and box office manager. Gangai looks to TV commercials and radio voice work to make money, but at present it is her husband who essentially supports the family. And Young works 30 hours a week as the marketing manager for SurveySA, a residential and commercial land survey company.

Part of the problem is that local theaters survive on tight budgets with little corporate or foundation support, and with limited marketing outreach. As a consequence, many San Antonians simply don't know about the many thespian riches being produced in town.

"We do have a following for live theater in San Antonio, but I wish we could reach more people," says Gangai. "But I wouldn't be happy if I didn't act. That's who I am."