

THE CURTAIN CALL CAPER

By Christy Barritt and Kathy Applebee

The Curtain Call Caper: A Novel

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Kathy Applebee would like to thank:

Christy Barritt, who not only introduced me to the fabulous Gabby St. Claire, but has graciously invited me and my imaginary friends into Gabby's world.

Mary Penuel, who accepts me for who I am and encourages me to be the woman God wants me to be.

My husband Michael, whose daily sacrifices allow me to pursue a dream. I love you.

My Creator, in whose image we are made and created, the Author and Finisher of our salvation. To Him be the glory forever and ever.

Christy Barritt would like to thank:

Kathy Applebee, for believing in my characters and my writing.

All the kids I get to hang out with and their delightful insight into life.

CHAPTER 1

A bell rang as I raced around the corner. Bam! I smacked into the seventh grade hall janitor and ricocheted backward. With the dexterity of an acrobat, I caught myself before plunging either a foot or my math book into the murky water of the yellow, rolling bucket Mrs. Whatever-her-name-was had positioned as some kind of hurdle for the unwary.

I managed a “sorry” on the fly and rushed the remaining half a hallway, skidding to an ungraceful stop in front of the auditorium of Oceanside Middle School. I cracked the door open and was surprised to hear someone singing.

Singing and dancing auditions aren’t today . . . are they?

I slid inside, squinting to adjust to the dimness so I could find my BFF. The musty odor of dusty, threadbare, velvet seats combined with the pheromones of sixty or so nervous adolescents made my nose twitch. I could only hope my generic deodorant was working overtime.

I spotted my friend’s pixie haircut midway back on the right side of the darkened auditorium. I tiptoed as stealthily as I could, fervently needing my five foot two frame to remain unseen.

For once, I managed not to trip, slip or spaz out. I slid noiselessly into a seat next to my best friend, Becca Chapman, in the gloomy auditorium.

“What have I missed?” I whispered. “Did she call my name?”

“Three times,” muttered Becca.

“What did you tell her?”

“Bathroom.”

I felt and heard rather than saw the scowl on my best friend’s face. Covering for me while I’d been in detention had been quite the moral dilemma for my scrupulously honest BFF.

When I’d asked her during lunch, she’d hesitated. I’d told her that there was a distinct possibility I could be in the bathroom at the precise moment my name was called and therefore there was hardly any real moral dilemma.

Becca could be a stickler for truth, justice, and the American way at the most inconvenient times.

I had to resort to desperate measures.

I had to beg.

“I’ve waited all my life for a chance to be in a real play, not just some stupid class thing about *The Tortoise and the Hare*.” I’d summoned up my best acting skills to school my face into what I hoped came off as a pitiful puppy look. “Besides, it was you and your family that got me into theater in the first place.”

That was a stretch. They’d had an extra ticket to *South Pacific* at Chrysler Hall and invited me along. For two whole hours, I’d forgotten my troubles as I was swept away to Bali Hai and into other people’s misfortunes.

Back in the present, Becca leaned toward me. “I don’t get why this is such a big deal, anyway. It’s not like we lowly seventh graders will get cast in big parts or anything. The high school kids will get those.”

She was probably right, but Mrs. Baker, a new eighth grade English teacher at Oceanside and the director of *Oklahoma*, would have to let some middle schoolers in since rehearsals were on the stage at our aging school.

I glanced around the auditorium to size up the competition. The Diva (our private nickname for Donabell Bullock) sat ramrod straight in her seat, like a queen on her throne surveying her dominion. She was surrounded by her Devotees (the fawning members of her social sphere). They took up nearly two rows, if you counted the other seventh graders who sat close enough to the group to overhear anything meant to be overheard but respectfully far enough away from the Diva to acknowledge they were just wannabees.

I craned further when I didn’t catch sight of Mitch D’cava, her BF. The two of them were usually Siamese twins. Mitch wasn’t just the hottest guy in seventh grade. He was everything I’d want in a boyfriend: attentive, funny, devoted, but not like the groveling, toadying Devotees. No, his was the genuine devotion of a gentlemen, like Captain Von Trapp in *The Sound of Music* or Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*.

The eighth graders had staked out the front and center and were engaged in a number of separate, hushed conversations. One of them was center stage singing “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning” accompanied on the piano by Madame Cherise, the ancient French teacher.

Madame Cherise’s cat eyeglasses were a throwback to the fifties and her pudgy upper arms were a sharp contrast to her thin, flexible fingers that tapped on the piano keys in front of her.

She'd probably been a music teacher in another life, back before the piano or French was invented.

"Where's Mrs. Baker?" I asked.

Mrs. Baker looked about twenty-eight or thirty and had seemed friendly but firm when I'd seen her in the halls or cafeteria. Her brown hair fell to her shoulders, framing a face without makeup, which wasn't unusual for female teachers, especially the married ones.

Becca replied in her best imitation of Madame Cherise's exaggerated French accent, "Ms. Baker has been unavoidably detained."

I stifled my laughter.

Becca whispered the rest in her normal tone. "She misplaced the audition scripts so Madame Cherise is doing singing auditions until—"

"Gabby St. Claire?" Madame Cherise's warbling voice interrupted.

Her annoyed tone rocketed me from my seat. "Here!"

I sprang to attention, scattering my books, pencils and notebooks everywhere. I heard titters of laughter and knew instantly it was coming from the Diva and her Devotees.

Klutz Queen!

With a zillion people watching, including some high schoolers who weren't supposed to be here anyway, I briefly wished I was back in detention instead of trying to pick up my strewn belongings in the dark.

"Go! I'll get this stuff," Becca murmured.

I mumbled a thank you before marching up on stage and taking the paper Madame Cherise waved in my direction. I glanced at the song and breathed a sigh of relief. "The Farmer and the Cowman." I knew it. I could sing it.

When the audition announcement was posted, I had raced home and broken out my mother's show tune cassettes so I could listen to and sing along with the songs from *Oklahoma*. We were probably the only people in the world to still have a cassette tape player, but mom nostalgically held on to it so she could reminisce about the good old days.

The stage lights were so bright that I couldn't see anything. I started perspiring about two seconds after I started singing.

I glanced up at the lights. Big mistake. They shone like the summer sun at the nearby oceanfront. When I looked back at the paper, spots danced over the words and music, making

both impossible to read. Not that I could read music anyway. Focusing on what I'd practiced, I forged ahead, grateful I'd taken the time to prepare.

I only flubbed a couple of times.

"*Merci, Gabby,*" trilled Madame Cherise. She said both of the words with a singsong, rhyming inflection that reminded me for a moment of a character who might have been on the old kids' show *Barney and Friends*.

Still temporarily half-blind, I shuffled toward the voice, unsure of how close to the edge of the stage I was, and considering which would be worse: the humiliation of falling off the stage or the hurt.

I overcompensated and stumbled into the main curtain instead. I clutched it to keep from falling. Big mistake.

A humongous crash sounded behind me.

Sharp little missiles flew into my legs. In my haste to curtail the catastrophe, I slammed into a hidden chair behind me and flipped over it.

When I stopped moving, I realized I was on my butt, staring at the overhead stage lights, and surrounded by broken glass.

This wasn't good. It wasn't good at all.

The humiliation, I decided. The humiliation was definitely worse than the hurt.

CHAPTER 2

“I don’t know how this happened.” Madame Cherise wrung her hands in front of her as she nervously explained the accident to Principal Black, Mrs. Baker, and most of the custodial staff.

The janitor I’d nearly tackled in the hall was sweeping up the shards of glass while another examined the smashed spotlight that had nearly clobbered me. My classmates all sat quietly in their chairs, watching everything.

I tried to stay out of the way, to ignore the stares of my classmates, and to pretend my butt didn’t throb like the heavy bass notes blaring six out of seven nights from my neighbor’s subwoofer speakers.

“Why weren’t you in here?” Principal Black glared at Mrs. Baker, his arms crossed, his voice authoritative and none too happy. “Someone could have been seriously injured. I expect my teachers to be on top of these things.”

“I had stepped out to run more copies of the audition scripts,” began Mrs. Baker. She held up a stack of papers, as if to prove her story. Lines of concern formed on her forehead.

Principal Black didn’t seem to care. “You should have been better prepared. Plan ahead. Be organized. I may just have to reconsider your request to have weapons as props if attention to safety is so lax.”

“It is not a real weapon that I want to use in the play.” Mrs. Baker sounded far more composed than Madame Cherise. “It’s a starter’s pistol. No bullets. It will be locked in a prop box except during tech week and the actual shows.”

Becca and I exchanged glances. The principal must be really scared or having a really bad day to chew a teacher out in front of students. For once, everyone auditioning was quiet, their eyes riveted on the real life drama in front of them. Reality was much more interesting than fiction sometimes.

The auditorium lights came back up, so I checked again to make sure the debris from the light hadn’t nicked me. Thankfully, I’d been wearing jeans and a long sleeve T-shirt, so I was

fine. Just a little bruised ego. In one way, I was relieved that the attention was off of me now, and focused on that spotlight.

“I had the audition scripts after school. I set them here.” Mrs. Baker indicated a seat on the front row. “I have no idea where they went.”

Madame Cherise tried to get a word in edgewise, but Principal Black wasn’t about to stop scolding the two of them on the dangers of being unprepared and the importance of setting positive examples for our students. He probably just didn’t want the school to get sued.

Just as Principal Black launched into another tirade about how safety always came first, Mr. Harold—the one custodian whose name I did know—spoke. His deep voice rumbled through the air and quieted everyone.

“The webbing was deliberately sliced.” He held up something, but the teachers were blocking most of my view.

I wondered what webbing was. The word reminded me of spiders and icky stuff that *should* be cut. Whatever webbing was, it had been slashed, allowing a spotlight to nearly take me out. Just a few more inches and the heavy equipment would have hit my head.

“No more auditions or anything in here until I’m sure all the glass has been swept up and nothing else is going to fall from the ceiling.” Principal Black’s scowl took all of us in. He wiped the sweat from his brow. The man seemed to sweat when he was stressed, and apparently he was stressed all the time.

I couldn’t even imagine what could be stressful about watching over the 400 little angels who called this school home for seven hours a day.

“The students’ safety is our first priority.” Mrs. Baker turned to the gaggle of students who’d been auditioning, smiling calmly like nothing happened. “I’ll let you know the adjusted audition schedule as soon as I figure it out. You are dismissed.”

I glanced around, fire igniting in my veins. This falling spotlight could put this play in jeopardy. I didn’t have to be a detective to figure out that Principal Black valued his reputation more than he valued performing arts. He was more of a sports guy; everyone at the school knew that.

This play had been all I’d dreamed about since I heard that auditions were happening. I wasn’t going to let one falling spotlight crush my dreams. Mr. Harold made it sound like the

spotlight was no accident, that the whole incident had been planned. Why would someone have deliberately made that light fall?

I was going to keep my eyes and ears open. No one was going to ruin this play. Not if I had anything to do with it.

CHAPTER 3

The following morning, I again dashed down a hallway, but this time in the empty corridor toward 322, Ms. Lynnet's dreaded pre-algebra class. It wasn't like I wanted to run in the halls. You could get silent lunch if you were caught. The person who had designed the school back in 1956 was to blame. He or she had done a terrible job. Even before a half century of use had given the institute of higher learning a drab, worn out look, some bozo had stuck the FACS (Family and Consumer Science) class on the exact opposite side of the school, at least forty miles from any seventh grade core classes. I *had* to run.

I nearly wiped out on a puddle of something slick turning the corner into the dull beige seventh grade hall. The institutional red lockers did nothing to spruce up the place, mostly because of peeling paint and deliberate scratches. I steadied myself by grabbing a passing lock and miraculously balancing my armload of books.

I slowed myself to a normal pace and halted outside of 322. I waited until I saw the math teacher turn back to the board, then quietly eased the old, wooden door open just enough for me to slide in. With the stealth of a panther, I closed the door soundlessly. Two more steps and I'd slip unnoticed into my seat. I was getting good at this.

Bam!

A Math for Middle School, Volume Eight crashed onto the floor. The sound surprised everyone . . . except Donabell the Diva. It didn't surprise her, I realized, because it had fallen from her desk onto the scuffed, yellow and black squared linoleum floor.

On purpose.

Not only was every student staring at me, I was caught in the crosshairs of the teacher's beady glare as I tried unsuccessfully to disappear from sight at my desk.

"Two more and I'll see you after school, again, Miss St. Claire."

Donabell Bullock turned to look down her nose at me. She tossed her chin length blonde hair around like she was posing for a shampoo ad. Her disdain was unmistakable as she muttered

loudly enough for her bevy of hanger-oners to hear, but not loudly enough for the math-witch-queen to notice.

“Something stinks.” The Diva wrinkled her nose imperiously while the Devotees set their schnozzles to sniffing. I gave her the “yeah, right” face when it struck me something did indeed smell awful. I glanced down at my feet and was horrified to discover that whatever I’d nearly slipped on in my haste to avoid another tardy had managed to stick to my scuffed tennis shoe.

Gross.

Donabell was looking at me out of the corner of her eye with contempt.

Why does Donabell hate me?

For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what I had ever done to Donabell so that she took every opportunity to humiliate, belittle, and verbally bully me. But she did.

As far back as third grade, I remembered her slinging nothing but poisonous barbs my way. She made fun of everyone who wasn’t part of her group, but seemed particularly delighted to humiliate me. Once we reached middle school, face to face confrontations were rare. Instead she relied on catty remarks. Condescending smirks. Deliberate snubs. I’d long since given up on making sense of it. She hated me and that was that.

If she thought I’d ever cave in and suck up like everyone else, she was dead wrong.

I, Gabby St. Claire, am a fighter.

“Being tardy is one thing. Not bothering to open your book is something else,” Ms. Lynnet said.

Her voice grated like nails on a chalkboard and jarred me back to reality. Daydreaming, like being late, was another of my many faults.

I lowered my head and dutifully flipped the book open, trying to ignore the negative vibes all around me.

“Page 286. Number 2,” Becca whispered.

The sound of my friend’s voice broke through my pity party and got me back on track. Becca was good at that sort of thing, keeping people on track. Which made our friendship that much more remarkable because I could be derailed as easily as a cheap toy train on an uneven floor.

The only thing I’d promised myself I wouldn’t get off track on? Making sure this play was a success.

Why? Because I desperately needed something to go right in my life.

“So, who do you think might have cut the webbing?” I asked in my most discreet, secret spy voice. I probably needn’t have bothered since the Oceanside cafeteria noise was ten decibels louder than a jackhammer.

Becca chomped off a bite of tuna salad sandwich to delay answering me. Her short pixie nose matched her hair but contrasted with her long legs and arms. While being tall helped make you a great basketball player, it did nothing for your love life. Few of Oceanside’s seventh grade boys had hit their growth streak, and Becca tended to look like an Amazon when she stood next to one of them.

On the other hand, I was waiting for my growth streak. I resembled a mushroom with a short stalk and a bushy, red cap. Except in my case, the cap was actually flyaway, frizzy, red hair. Whenever possible, I tried to straighten it into smooth locks that resembled The Little Mermaid’s. My efforts usually only resulted in more frizz.

If my hair wasn’t enough to scare away the boys, my mouth was.

I tried to stick to motto #1: “Think before speaking.” Or acting. Or being late to Lynnet’s class.

I really thought that by coming up with a firm, solid motto I could change my life. Fat chance. Having a motto was not enough. I actually had to put it into practice, and there was no magic wand to help.

I waited for my BFF to swallow and answer, inwardly fussing myself out for getting another tardy and Paulette Zollin for throwing up in the hall where I’d step in it.

“The webbing was probably worn out and no one noticed until it fell.”

“But Mr. Harold said—”

“I don’t know how Mr. Harold could be 100 percent sure the webbing had been cut deliberately.”

“So you’re saying the spotlight falling was an accident?” My tone left no doubt I thought her naiveté was ridiculous.

“I suppose next you’re going to jump to the conclusion that the Diva rigged it because she needed to eliminate you, her competition for the lead role?” Becca rolled her eyes and smiled impishly.

“I wouldn’t put it past her ...” I arched my eyebrows and allowed my words to trail melodramatically.

“Moving on—have you started using the diary I gave you for Christmas yet?”

I sighed internally. Becca was not going to be pleased that I hadn’t. I regretfully shook my head “no.” Personally, a diary seemed like a stupid idea even if you didn’t have siblings who might find it and share the embarrassing contents with the entire world.

I was saved from having to dream up another legitimate sounding excuse when Becca turned her attention to a guy in her English class who’d stopped to ask about their homework. Becca immediately gave him her full attention, leaving me to my McIntosh apple and thoughts about the play.

Of course my theory was ridiculous. How could the Diva have rigged the spotlight to fall on me? Manual labor might chip a nail or something.

But she has henchmen. Henchwomen?

When the guy walked away, Becca turned toward me and dropped her voice. I leaned forward in expectation of a juicy tidbit of gossip.

“By the way, I heard that Mitch D’cava is signing up to do tech. Georgia told Amy that the Diva gave him an ultimatum.” She raised her eyebrows in a knowing look.

Mitch, AKA the Caveman, had been my crush back in sixth grade. It wasn’t an original thing. Every girl in sixth grade had adored him and not just because he was athletic, witty and cute. He was also new to Oceanside, thus making him an exotic species. The Diva had reeled him in quicker than you could say “baby sugar glider.”

Oceanside Elementary and Middle were unique among Virginia Beach schools. Because they were old, the buildings were smaller and pulled from a smaller geographic area. It wasn’t until ninth grade that we’d get split up between the two nearest high schools and have an infusion of new blood. Not only that, the neighborhoods Oceanside drew from were polar opposites: either haves or have nots. Becca, whose dad was an ex-Marine and soon to be police officer and whose mom was a teacher and certified health nut, was one of the few middle class exceptions.

Lastly, for some reason unknown to me, we rarely got any students from transient, military families. Oceanside was its own little, unchanging ecosystem. Thus, everybody knew everybody. But I knew a couple of things I doubted anyone else knew about the Caveman, things that had only elevated my crush on him.

All of this was in thanks to our sixth grade English teacher, Mrs. Munn, who believed in peer editing. She'd partnered me with the Caveman. Thus I knew that as a kid he wanted to drive a concrete mixing truck, that he detested Bluegrass music, and that basketball was his favorite sport. All of that wasn't nearly as interesting as the fact that his mom was pursuing a music career. He said that he hadn't seen her in four years, but he was okay with that. He hoped she made it big so he could join her out in L.A. one day.

I wondered if he'd support me in the same way if we ever dated? Would getting the lead in the school play garner me his attention? Would he dote over me the same way as he doted over the Diva? I dreamed about any guy doting over me, for that matter.

It didn't really matter because none of the middle schoolers would get the lead roles. Those were for the high schoolers who were working with us on the play. I wasn't sure of all those details yet.

Despite that knowledge, I let my imagination run wild. In my dreams I was fabulous in the lead role. I was also popular, surrounded by many friends and a loving family, a good person, kind to the kids who weren't popular, a source of justice for the oppressed . . .

My daydream was interrupted as the Caveman lunged into view, deftly balancing his own lunch tray with one hand while grabbing an orange that had rolled off the Diva's tray, rescuing it before it splattered onto the floor. I sighed.

Must be nice. Having someone look out for you.

No one looked out for me. Dad was too sloshed to know I existed. Mom was too tired after forty hours a week at the drug store and then moonlighting as a house cleaner. Teachers tended to be annoyed with me, probably because I blurted things out, daydreamed in class, and was *occasionally* tardy. Like my red hair, my life frizzed out of control. But everything was going to change soon.

I was going to prove myself with this play. Maybe I wouldn't have a star role. But I was going to be dedicated, someone to keep an eye on for future school productions.

My bad luck streak was about to change . . .

About the Authors:

Kathy Applebee:

Kathy Applebee is an author, playwright and Virginia's 2011 Middle School Science Teacher of the Year (according to the Virginia Association of Science Teachers). She is a frequent contributor to PLAYS, the Drama Magazine for Young People and Fools For Christ. When she's not writing, teaching or directing plays, she can be seen on various stages in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Her favorite roles to date include the Wicked Witch of the West, Ouiser (Steel Magnolias) and Lady Macbeth.

Christy Barritt:

USA Today has called Christy Barritt's books "scary, funny, passionate, and quirky." Christy writes both mystery and romantic suspense novels that are clean with underlying messages of faith. Her books have won the Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Suspense and Mystery, have been twice nominated for the Romantic Times' Reviewers' Choice Award, and have finaled for both a Carol Award and Foreword Magazine's Book of the Year. She's married to her Prince Charming, a man who thinks she's hilarious—but only when she's not trying to be. Christy's a self-proclaimed klutz, an avid music lover who's known for spontaneously bursting into song, and a road trip aficionado. For more information, visit her website at: www.christybarritt.com.