

She's ready for the big time

For Stephanie J. Block, lead in 'Pirate Queen' is just deserts

"It's been like Halloween," said Stephanie J. Block of her life on the stage. "I've gone from being Liza Minnelli to a green witch to a pirate."

If things go well, the buccaneer outfit will be the big winner for the 34-year-old actress. She will be wearing it in her first starring role on Broadway, in "The Pirate Queen," the new musical from the creators of "Les Misérables." It begins previews Tuesday and opens April 5 at the Hilton Theatre.



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ONSTAGE

Block, a brunette with an impressive voice, has the title role

of Grace O'Malley, also called Grania, a real-life 16th-century Irish heroine who smashed traditional gender barriers to become a chieftain, sea captain and a leader in the fight against English appropriation of Irish land. She even had a diplomatic meeting with England's Elizabeth I.

"I'm ecstatic," said Block, who added that she never gets girl-next-door roles. "I love the fact that I'm playing someone who was a living woman, someone you could say changed the course of history. I love this character."

She said she has got to this high point in her career by going "rung by rung up the ladder."

Growing up in Orange County, Calif., she started singing in church at age 7, and that led to commercial voice-overs at 11 and joining the Young Americans singing group.

Block, who said her parents made sure she led a fairly normal kid's life, went on to the Orange County High School of the Arts.

"A lot of my friends there were amazingly talented," she said.

"They were in touring companies of Broadway shows or performing with Bette Midler."

Block, on the other hand, after a brief time in college, was learning the business from the ground



JOAN MARCUS

"I love the fact that I'm playing someone ... you could say changed the course of history. I love this character," Stephanie J. Block, here with Hadley Fraser, says of her role as Grace O'Malley.

up, performing in community and regional theater. At 22, she came to New York.

"I thought I was ready for it," she said, "but it was not the time. I was intimidated. It was too much too soon."

After six months, she headed back home and worked in a number of musicals before returning to New York in 2002.

That's when things started happening for her. She made her Broadway debut in the significant role of Mignoli in "The Boy From Oz," the Peter Allen biographical musical that starred Hugh Jackman. Next, she got the lead role of the green-hued Elphaba in the first national touring production

of "Wicked." And then came her chance for "The Pirate Queen."

It all happened fast, she said. There was a fairly brief audition, no callback, and within a week or so she got the plum job. "They told me they were impressed with my assurance, my comfort with who I was as a person," she said, making sure I understood she was quoting and not blowing her own horn.

Following the show's Chicago tryout last fall, its creators, Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg of "Les Miz" fame, along with Richard Maltby Jr. — who had co-written the lyrics for the French duo's "Miss Saigon" — got together to make some

changes, particularly in the book.

"I don't think American audiences are that familiar with [O'Malley]," said Block, "so you have to be very clear about who she is."

In addition to that, she said, a greater emphasis has been given to O'Malley's personal side, making the musical more than a sequence of her many adventures.

"Instead of the audience being spectators, the show now allows them to become involved with the characters' lives."

Finally, there's that middle initial Block uses. She said it's all because of the Internet. Anyone doing a search for her would often get directed to a religion writer of the same name and become confused.

"People were asking me for religious advice," said the actress — and now presumably more famous — Stephanie Block.