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TAYLOR SEXTON: LIFE CENTER STAGE

By Gina Dewink

Photos by Rhonda Milbrett

Taylor Anne Sexton will be the first to tell you she doesn't come from an "artsy" family. Yet without a family member suggesting she try out for a stage production when she was just seven years old, she may have never started on her path to life in center stage.

Passion for Performing

Now 18, Sexton has amassed a resume of someone twice her age. A musical theatre performer, actor, vocalist – and now pageant winner – Sexton credits her passion for acting as the reason for her success. "I love the ability to take a person out of their own head," Sexton said of acting. "To make them feel something. That magic that happens between audience and actor." Since her first performance at age seven, Sexton has been in nearly 20 plays, five as leading lady.

Some of Sexton's roles have included Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, Tiffany Houston in *Back to the 80s* and Liesl in *The Sound of Music*. She has also appeared in *Annie*, *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Guys and Dolls* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Through her years of acting, Sexton has attended several notable trainings, including Minnesota Renaissance Festival Academy, Ordway Triple Threat Training, Chanhassen Teen Intensive Camp, Chanhassen Theatre Musical Theatre Camp and CLIMB Theatre. ►





TOP 10 ABOUT TAYLOR

Nicknames: Tay & Tay Tay

First stage appearance: Age 7

Last book read: Art + Fear by David Bayles & Ted Orland

Currently binge-watching: The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt

Commercials seen in: 3

Instruments played: Guitar, soprano ukulele, baritone ukulele, flute, and learning piano

Mankato hangout: iNdiGo Organic, the Coffee Hag, the Fillin' Station, Bluff Park & JP Fitness

Most-used App: Netflix

Foods: Strawberries, raspberries & ice cream

Secretly loves: Bad jokes



Becoming a "Pageant Girl"

In December, Taylor Sexton was crowned Miss Mankato. "I never would have thought of myself as a pageant girl," Sexton stated. "In the beginning, I wasn't sure I wanted to enter. But I fell in love with the core values of the contest: scholarship, service, success and style," she recited. "It was something I knew I would be honored to represent."

Miss Mankato is part of the Miss America Organization, requiring each contestant to choose an issue she cares deeply for as her platform. Once chosen, the winners address local organizations about their platform issues. Sexton, often known to use the hashtags #kindnessismagic and #createmagic, knew just what her platform would be.

"Beyond performing, my other passion is kindness. I couldn't imagine a better tool for bettering my community than a 'year of service' through the Miss America Organization," she said. The title of Sexton's platform is Creating Magic One Smile at a Time.

The Best 'Me' She Could Be

When it came time for the talent portion of the contest, Sexton chose her most beloved character to represent: The Little Mermaid. After singing 'Part of Your World,' Sexton was awarded The George and Nadine Sugden Community Service Award, Miss Congeniality and crowned Miss Mankato. She tied for the People's Choice Award. According to Sexton, that's when the real work began.

"I begin my day waking early and getting ready," she explained. "It takes me about an hour to do my hair and makeup before a public event. I brush up on my platform as if I'm studying lines for a play. It's the hardest thing I've ever done, mostly because it's mental and physical. I have to be the best me I can be, and that includes keeping a healthy diet."

In June, Sexton was one of the state's teens who competed for the Miss Minnesota crown. Held in Eden Prairie, Sexton joined contestants from across the state. She grew to become one of the contestants' favorites when she asked the barista at a local coffee house "which mochas had chocolate in them." Sexton recalls, "He made eye contact, took a deep breath and said, 'All of them.' It quickly became the inside joke of the group."

Sexton was not crowned Miss Minnesota, but won the Miracle Maker Award, meaning she raised the most money for the Children's Miracle Network, and was placed in the top ten at Miss Minnesota. Sexton was overjoyed to be a part of it all. "You make so many friends whether you win or not! I say without a doubt, just try it. You never know what will happen. And you will meet so many other women who love and care about our community. It's an amazing experience."



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Renaissance Festival & Beyond

Sexton graduated from Mankato West, and was accepted into the University of Minnesota Duluth this fall. Life up north will not keep her from her work as part of the Minnesota Renaissance Festival. "I auditioned, joked with the directors and was hired on the spot," Sexton recalled. "When the directors asked me what I would like to be, I said what any girl would say – a princess or a mermaid!" she stopped to smile. "The director told me to stand up, turn around, and asked how long my hair was. I did. And to my great surprise, I was cast as Cinderella." Sexton later got her wish and performed in the festival's Mermaid Cove as a mermaid as well. "My greatest moment at RenFest involves a four-year-old named Autumn. Somehow, she recognized me as all of my characters there! When her mother asked her who her favorite princess was, Autumn said, 'My favorite princess is Princess Taylor.'" Sexton plans to drive down from school each weekend to continue her performances at the Renaissance Festival.

From "Dirty Dancing" lifts to dress rehearsals gone awry because of flying wigs, Sexton is full of stories of her love of acting. She concluded, "Of course the dream is to become a professional actor. Maybe at Chanhassen Dinner Theatre, the Ordway, or a touring company. But the goal is always the same. Maybe someday you'll see me singing on Broadway, maybe not... As long as I am performing, I will be happy." RVW



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