

English or American?

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BY MIKE KERWICK

WHO: Alison Larkin.

WHAT: An afternoon with "The English American."

WHEN: 3 p.m. Saturday.

WHERE: The Bickford Theatre, 6 Normandy Heights Road, Morristown; 973-971-3706.

HOW MUCH: \$30; admission includes an autographed copy of "The English American."

FOR MORE INFORMATION: morrismuseum.org.

When Alison Larkin's excitable imagination began splashing paint around, applying color and shape to a birth mother she had never met, her visions settled on an angelic coat of white.

"She tended to float in the air in a long white dress with her hair cascading down her back like an angel," Larkin said. "So she was a complete fantasy, because if an adopted person isn't given the facts, they will make up this stuff. So she'd be a floating angel or a down-and-out alcoholic.

"And of course I know that my birth father was obviously a Kennedy, because why else would I be given up for adoption?"

Larkin is sitting in the second row of red seats inside the Bickford Theatre in Morristown on this clear-sky Thursday morning. She is laughing – not crying – poking fun at the trail that led her to a cozy seat in this 312-chair auditorium. She has an upcoming performance here, a debut novel ("The English American," which hits bookstores Tuesday) that Redbook and Vogue have included on their recommended reading lists and at least two movie studios allegedly circling to secure big-screen rights.

And all of this is brewing because Larkin decided to share her journey, giving voice to the mystery of why someone who was born in the United States is now walking around with a British accent.

"I stood up in a New York comedy club," Larkin said, "and I said, 'Hello. My name is Alison Larkin, and I come from Bald Mountain, Tennessee.' And everybody laughed."

Second set of parents

She spent her childhood on three continents, deciding in her mid-20s it was time to hunt down her biological parents. But Larkin learned there are roadblocks, safeguards meant to protect children yet impede them from learning about basic things like medical history.

"I really want people to understand why someone from a very happy adopted family would want to find the truth about the people she'd come from," Larkin said, "but that it in no way threatens the relationship between that person and [her adoptive parents]."

Doors eventually opened, leading Larkin down to Bald Mountain. She met her birth parents, a

moment that was at first terrifying, then later gratifying.

Not long after the reunion, she went back to the stage. Larkin originally studied drama at the Webber-Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London. She had written a few one-act plays.

But this time, Larkin elected to go the comedy route. She began using her personal story as the centerpiece of her shows.

"Suddenly the phone started ringing and people started paying me to appear on television and on Broadway," Larkin said.

Heart and humor

It was this decision and these roads that led her to pen "The English American." She once dabbled in freelance book editing to pay the bills while she was honing her stand-up routine. Larkin became a fan of short chapters, gripping action ("I just don't like books that have endless description about what a room looks like") and stories that blend heart and humor.

"I've never taken a writing class or anything or a workshop," Larkin said. "I haven't done anything like that. I felt if I could write something as if I was talking to somebody, that's what I wanted to do."

She began waking at 4 a.m. to write in the attic of her Morristown home, so she wouldn't disturb her son, Toby, and daughter, Eliza. Larkin initially tried crafting a memoir before deciding she could tell a better story by using creative license. When the manuscript was complete, her agent began peddling it to publishing houses.

"I probably see a dozen manuscripts a week," said Marysue Rucci, Larkin's editor at Simon & Schuster. "I probably like a book once or twice a month if I'm lucky."

But she liked this one. She loved Larkin's heroine, a young woman named Pippa Dunn, who decides to confront her past.

"Adopted people are generally presented as eternally damaged at best or serial killers at worst," Larkin said. "And I wanted to create a heroine who was a heroine."

"People love it in-house, which is always the first step," Rucci said. "Our fingers are crossed that it reaches a big audience."

Parental promoters

Already both sets of parents – the Americans who gave her birth and the English who raised her – are doing their best trying to promote the book.

"[My English parents are] surreptitiously leaving copies of 'The English American' in hotels where they're staying, saying, 'This is a very good book,'" Larkin said.

"And my American parents – oh God – well, they're so proud you'd think they'd written the book themselves. And they're busy encouraging everybody to buy it in a much more American way.

"English parents are understated. My American parents, as soon as the book comes out, will probably be making sure it's the only book you can see in Barnes & Noble."

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