

Knitting a New Life

A ruptured vocal cord prompted Karen Allen's move to the Berkshires, but it's cord of an entirely different nature that keeps her here.

Best known for starring in *Animal House* and opposite Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Allen first visited our region in 1981 to play the role of Gittel in the Berkshire Theatre Festival's revival of William Gibson's 1958 Broadway play, *Two for the Seesaw*. During the play's five-week run, she was struck by the beauty of the Berkshires. Allen returned the next two summers for longer stints at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. Ironically, another Gibson play made her a full-time resident.

"A couple of years later I was on Broadway in *The Monday After the Miracle*, and I ruptured my vocal cord," says Allen, relaxing at home one fall afternoon in her serene sunroom, long legs folded up in her chair.

"When the play closed, I had to do something to help the cord repair itself. So I asked around, and it turned out a woman who I had already met when I was working at Berkshire Theatre Festival who lived up here is really the premier vocal person in the world."

Written by Bess Hochstein Photography by Gregory Cherin



VOICE TEACHER Kristin Linklater agreed to work with Allen every day for six months, and helped her rent a guest house near Chesterwood in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. "It was spring," recalls Allen, her lips curling into a broad smile at the memory. "I came up with a bicycle and my car and I didn't know a soul up here and I just worked with her and bicycled all over Berkshire County.

"And in that period of time I thought, 'You know, I need a place to get away to.... I'm working so hard all the time and when I go off on location to do a film or something I'm coming back to New York City and it's not relaxing, it's not nurturing, it's just all of the sudden, bang! I'm back on the treadmill...' I started to fantasize about finding a place up here."

That season Allen fell in love with a house on Lake Garfield in Monterey, Massachusetts, but before the sale went through the owners pulled it off the market. "I was heartbroken," she recalls. Vocal cord repaired, she returned to New York, but remained intent on finding a Berkshire home. "Whenever I had little breaks I'd come up here and I'd let realtors take me around and look at things." Seven years later, in the dead of winter, she found her Berkshire getaway in Monterey: a neglected former barn transformed into a home in about 1900.

Allen remained a weekender until her son was ready to start school. "I had fantasized for a long time that if I ever had a child I wanted them to go to the Rudolf Steiner School here because

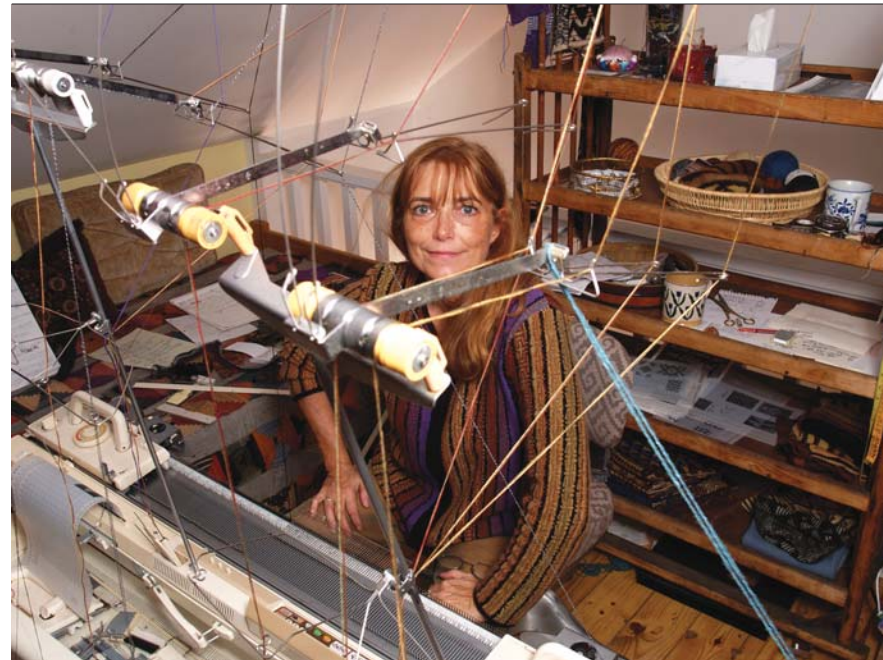
"I have my whole life been incredibly drawn to textiles. I love them!"

I was meeting so many people who had kids in that school. I was really impressed with the education that they were getting and with the way in which their parents spoke so lovingly of this school."

In 1993, Allen moved to the Berkshires full-time and switched gears in her career. "When I made the decision to move up here, with that came a sense that my career would be slightly put on the backburner while I was raising my son. So I thought 'If I'm not going to be acting as much, what would be a really worthwhile thing to do up here?'"

A student of yoga since the age of 18, Allen was familiar with the local community of yoga teachers—as well as the ill-suited places in which they taught. "I thought, 'Ah, you know that's a really lovely thing I could do, I could create a space here for people to practice yoga.'" She founded Berkshire Mountain Yoga in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1995, and also began to teach Ashtanga yoga.

Her first foray into business was not a money-making endeavor. "I never needed or really wanted to make any money from Berkshire Mountain Yoga. All I wanted it to do was support itself; I didn't want to have to support it. I wanted it to just make enough money to pay its bills, maybe have a little bit of money to bring people in or to send potential teachers off to do teacher



Machine Maven: Karen Allen overcame her initial distaste for knitting machines—she thought they were noisy and limiting—and her studio, Monterey Fiber Arts, now boasts four.

trainings. But I had another way I was making a living, so I didn't need to put that kind of pressure on it."

In 1995 Allen accepted a leading role in the film *Skaka*, about the rise of the Zulu king in the early 1800s. "It was the first film I had done in a while where I hadn't been in a supporting part or a cameo.... It was a fascinating film. I was in Morocco for about four months shooting this film, and it reignited something in me. I thought, 'There's something that's not completed about

my relationship to the theater and to film.' So I thought, 'Let's go back and live in New York.'"

Allen moved back to the city in the year 2000; at this point she and her husband had separated and she wanted her son to be able to spend more time with his father, who was living in New York. She told her agent she was ready to accept more roles and work in theater again. But the revival of her acting career was squelched by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. "Everything felt a little more tenuous and scary and the economy suddenly was shaky and I suddenly began to feel like I didn't want to live with the pressure of trying to support us in New York City."

The fact that her son's father had moved to Los Angeles made it easier for Allen to decide to return to the Berkshires on a permanent basis. Having sold her yoga studio, she again looked to her past to help her determine what she most wanted to do with her life.

"I have my whole life been incredibly drawn to textiles. I love them! When I was a kid, I used to go into fabric stores and I would stand there and almost weep with joy. I still feel that way," she exclaims, and this fact is borne out by the panoply of woven rugs and exotic pillows adorning her home. "I went to FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology] when I was seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, and studied design. And I was very interest-

ed, since I was a child, in designing things.... I had been a hand-knitter since I was just a kid, and I've knitted my whole life. During the same period of time that I was running Berkshire Mountain Yoga, people from Interlaken School of Art [now IS183 Art School of the Berkshires] had seen things that I had hand-knit. I had become over the years what one might call a 'master knitter' and I had begun, through invitation, to teach design courses in hand knitting." She taught classes at IS183 in Stockbridge, at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, and even at the yoga studio.

Her love of design, textiles, and knitting germinated into a business idea. "I've always had this fantasy in the back of my mind that I would start a company and design knitwear." Recognizing that she could not base a viable business on hand-knitting, Allen decided to learn about knitting machines. "I first ran into a knitting machine about twenty years ago and I took some lessons on it and I thought, 'I hate these machines, they're horrible, they're noisy, they're impossible.' But somewhere in the back of my mind I kept thinking, 'You know, if I'm going to ever really get into designing knitwear, I have to get over the hump of learning to use these machines.' Because you can't hand-knit things, you can't make it a commercial enterprise. So I went back to FIT in 2002 and I studied knitting-machine technology."

Stymied at first by what she saw as the machines' limitations, Allen pushed the barriers through experimentation and discovered new ways to work with knitting machines, creating patterns and designs beyond anything someone could knit by hand. "I suspect I'm actually getting them to do things that nobody's ever done with them before, because I'm using them in an unusual way. Some of the ways were accidents; I just happened upon doing these things accidentally and I said, 'Oooh, this is interesting.' I've now fallen completely in love with using them."

When she and her son moved back to the Berkshires in 2003, she set up a studio on her property and established Monterey Fiber Arts. She now has four knitting machines and works with Sara Parilli, an FIT graduate in knitwear who came for a summer job and decided to stay on full-time.

Having worked primarily in Shetland wool, Allen's medium of choice is cashmere. While cashmere knitwear is usually monochromatic, Allen produces luxurious, colorful, intricately patterned sweaters, scarves, and hats that are lightweight, incredibly soft, and comfortingly warm. While pricey, her knitwear is versatile; the sumptuous yet playful sweater she's wearing this afternoon looks great over jeans—but then again it's hard to imagine anything looking less than great on sylph-like Allen. She's also developing a lower-cost line in Merino wool. Her neck gaiters sold out at Lydia Mongiardo's boutique in Lenox, Massachusetts, in early 2004, and this summer she displayed her wares at the Monterey Tea Room, gaining broader exposure for her work as

well as the opportunity to gauge public reaction. As a result, she is currently backordered with special requests, and she has taken on another employee to work part-time.

After all her shifts from city life to country living, Allen has become part of the fabric of the Berkshires. With that, she has relinquished her persona as a Hollywood star, even though she has significant roles in two current films: *Poster Boy* and *When Will I Be Loved*. "As I was making the transition from New York back up to here, I just said, 'I want to reinvent myself.'...Actors act. If you're going to call yourself an actor then you'd better be acting," she declares, eyes flashing beneath her youthful bangs.

"I worked consistently as an actor for twenty or twenty-five years, where I was working eight or nine months out of the year either in the theater or in film....Now I've gotten to a point in my life where it's a rare thing for me to go off and do a film. Maybe in the course of a year I'll do one or two small roles, maybe it will just involve a week's worth of work....That's not a profession as far as I'm concerned."



Colorful Cashmere: While cashmere knitwear is usually monochromatic, Karen Allen produces luxurious, colorful, intricately patterned sweaters, scarves, and hats.



Allen's not complaining. "I need a more creative outlet in my life...something to do on a day-to-day basis as opposed to waiting for the phone to ring and somebody to offer me a job. That makes you feel very helpless."

She's found her outlet in knitting. "I feel like now suddenly I'm in the driver's seat. I get up in the morning and I say, 'Hmm, today I'm going to make these scarves and hats or I'm going to work on this sweater,' and it feels very OK."

While she is frequently recognized as a celebrity, Allen does not shrink from community involvement. She donates her knitwear to various fundraising auctions, participates in Steiner School events, and will be teaching "The Yoga of Knitting" at Kripalu in Lenox in February. This winter, she'll also share her professional skills; she's teaching a course at Simon's Rock College of Bard in Great Barrington on acting for film. **BI**

Bess Hochstein has written for the Boston Globe, Healing Lifestyles & Spas Magazine, The Wine Enthusiast, the New England Wine Gazette, and Wine Business Monthly.

{ the goods }

Monterey Fiber Arts
www.montereyfiberarts.com

Karen Allen's knitwear is on display at **Guido's Fresh Marketplace** (760 South Main St., Great Barrington, Mass.) through January 4.

Tanglewool (28 Walker St., Lenox, Mass., 413.637.0900) is hosting a trunk show of Allen's knitwear on December 11.

Allen's work can also be purchased at **Julie Artisan's Gallery** in Manhattan (762 Madison Ave., 212.717.5959 www.julieartisans.com).