

Downstage Center

Go behind the scenes with Kevin Selwyn



Picture this. A skinny college student in an audition room in New York City, operating a pink monster puppet named Penelope and making it lip sync to “Bad Romance” by Lady Gaga in a room full of working Broadway professionals.

Absurd and unlikely, perhaps, but it may have been this performance, along with some skilled puppetry, that earned junior musical theatre major Jonathan Carlucci a job working in the new Off-Broadway show, “Imaginocean: The Musical,” a black-light puppet show.

Carlucci heard about the audition for “Imaginocean” from Shenandoah alumnus Bradley Rakushin '09, who spotted the audition in *Backstage Magazine* and thought Carlucci would do well.

So, Carlucci hopped a bus to New York City and auditioned last Thursday at Pearl Studios in a room full of a creative team consisting of Broadway stars, including John Tartaglia, an original cast member in “Avenue Q” on Broadway and a past Sesame Street puppeteer and, Carlucci admits, his professional idol.

Auditions consisted of bringing a puppet, Carlucci’s being Penelope, and having the puppet lip sync to recorded music. Carlucci’s first musical selection was “Bad Romance” by Lady Gaga and his second was Lea Michelle of FOX’s television musical drama “Glee” singing “On My Own” from “Les Miserables.”

Eccentric choices to be sure, but characteristic of Carlucci as anyone who knows him will tell you.

Carlucci was one in 60-plus hopeful puppeteers auditioning that day, and the creative team liked him so much he got called back as part of a whittled down group of 25.

Call backs consisted of a dance call and improvisation with puppets.

The casting director and creative team were so impressed with Carlucci’s work that they offered him a job as a cast member in “Imaginocean: The Musical,” which is explained as “The Wizard of Oz” meets “Finding Nemo” meets ’80s black-lights.

Carlucci found the experience to be a wonderful sort of coming-of-age moment.

“I left knowing I didn’t have to book the job that day. I knew I had gone and had my passion and specialty realized by professionals. I felt completely fulfilled no matter what happened.”

Carlucci quotes the casting director when she offered him the job: “You came in against puppeteers with 15, 20, 25 years of performance experience, and you blew us away.”

Carlucci did not go unprepared for the audition though. He found ample opportunity to apply things he has learned at Shenandoah to help him get the job.

“I think I definitely stood out in the way I presented myself in the audition, because we’ve been trained so well here, and they were appreciative of that training,” he said.

As much as he tried to give off an air of comfortability and a polished performance, he had quite a few butterflies before auditioning in front of his idol Tartaglia.

“They always tell us to get control of our nerves by focusing on something outside yourself, so having a puppet allowed me to do that,” joked Carlucci.

Last fall, Carlucci was interviewed for *The SUN* after building and giving life to the 5-foot-tall puppet used in “Rumplestiltskin is My Name.” He has had an interest in puppets and puppetry for as long as he can remember. “I’m sure I was watching ‘Sesame Street’ before I could speak. I was just always completely and utterly fascinated. I just ate it up,” Carlucci said.

For “Rumplestiltskin is My Name,” Carlucci custom built the 5-foot-tall puppet complete with blinking eyes to play the role of Rumples-

tiltskin. It took two men, Carlucci and classmate Jonathan Richards, to operate Rumplestiltskin.

Carlucci is experienced in mouth puppets, often referred to as “Muppets,” but he also has experience in ventriloquism, glove puppets, blacklight puppetry, full-body costume mascot work and Bunraku, the Asian style of puppetry that was employed in the performance of Rumplestiltskin.

“I’ve competed in puppetry conferences, and I’ve done training at conferences, too,” he said. “But, puppet performance is just something that has to develop, just like actors acting; it’s an extension of that. You have to be a very strong actor to be a good puppeteer.”

“Imaginocean: The Musical” rehearsals begin on March 1, which means Carlucci will have to drop out of school for a time. He absolutely plans on finishing his degree some day, and he has the support of his family, friends and his SU professors.

Carlucci has yet to work out the details of his contract, but the only real speed bump he foresees is finding a place to live in New York City. He is actively searching out subtleties and has the support of his older brother who lives in Brooklyn.

Carlucci has experience an overwhelming outpouring of support from his friends in person and via Facebook and Twitter. *The SUN* staff and the vast majority of the theatre department wish him a wonderful and successful future doing what he loves.

For more information about this new show and to follow Carlucci’s new career, visit ImaginoceanTheMusical.com.



SUN Photo by CATHY KUEHNER

Jonathan Richards and Jonathan Carlucci, right, operate Rumplestiltskin, which Carlucci designed and built. Carlucci is now headed to Off-Broadway.