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Persistent Graham gets her shot

Ontario actor-singer lands plum role of Johnny Belinda after years of auditioning for Charlottetown Festival

BY DOUG GALLANT

The Guardian

If at first you don't succeed . . .
No one knows that better than Stephanie Graham, the Waterloo-born actor, dancer and singer cast this season in the lead role in the Charlottetown Festival's revival of Johnny Belinda.

"I've wanted to come here for such a long time," Graham said in a recent interview. "This is the fifth year I auditioned for the festival, hoping to make it into the company."

And when she finally got the call she'd been waiting for from festival artistic director Jacques Lemay, she wasn't home.

"Jacques called Saturday morning, but I was out. He left a message on my machine, saying that he would call again Monday, but he didn't say anything else. It was a very long weekend. I felt I'd done well at the auditions and I thought I'd connected with Diane (director Diane Nyland-Proctor) but you should never assume you've gotten the part until they tell you. I was up for hours Monday morning waiting for the call and I was a little nervous."

Graham says her stepfather knew she got the part before she did.

"He woke up from a dream that weekend, turned to my mother and said Stephanie's going to Charlottetown for the summer."

When she finally got the word she was ecstatic, she would play Belinda MacDonald in Belinda and Prissy Andrews, a small but fun role in Anne of Green Gables.

Landing the lead in Belinda was a major plum for Graham, a graduate of the musical theatre performance program at Sheridan College in Toronto, who's studied dance with the Carousel Dance Centre, Banff School of Fine Arts and the National



DON MCMANUS, right, who plays Black MacDonald in the Charlottetown Festival's production of Johnny Belinda, listens to Elizabeth Mawson, centre, who portrays his sister, as she explains why his daughter Belinda,

played by Stephanie Graham, left, does not seem to be herself. Both Mawson and McManus have appeared in previous festival productions of Johnny Belinda, one of the festival's most popular musicals.

Guardian photo by Brian McInnis

Ballet School.

Prior to the festival, she had already begun to make her mark in musical theatre, appearing in Nunsense at Theatre Brockville and the Red Barn Theatre, West Side Story at Huron Country Playhouse, A Chorus Line for Applause, Applause and, most recently, in Sleeping Beauty for Stage West.

But Belinda is the big one. Graham said playing Belinda, a

young woman who can neither speak or hear and must struggle to communicate with those around her appealed to her strongly when she read the script.

"I read the play before I auditioned and I felt I connected with her in some way. I thought it would be an incredible challenge to play her, but also a great opportunity to grow as an actor."

Once cast, Graham dove into the

role, as did Paul McQuillan, who stars opposite her as Dr. Jack Davidson, the young doctor who reaches out to her and opens up a whole new world for her by teaching her to sign.

Both began to study sign language in Toronto and to work on their respective roles. They even began to learn each other's roles.

In addition, Graham said she also viewed films that involved deaf

actors like Children of a Lesser God to help her gain further insight into the role.

Graham said learning to communicate without speaking was an incredible experience.

"It's been an incredible journey, physically, emotionally and spiritually . . . It's also been exhausting at times, because you're going through virtually every emotion."

She said there were times during rehearsal when the intensity of the experience brought her to tears.

But she received a lot of encouragement from her peers, and things like that helped to get her through.

She says she also felt very fortunate to have Diane Nyland-Proctor as her director because she had played the role of Belinda in the festival's original production of the musical in 1968 and knew exactly what she was going through, and what she was looking for.

Likewise she felt fortunate to have Paul McQuillan playing Dr. Jack because she had worked with him before and felt very comfortable with him.

"He's a very generous and supportive actor."

Graham's efforts to recreate the role of Belinda have won the hearts of her audience and her peers.

Nyland-Proctor noted she and Lemay auditioned hundreds of actors for Belinda.

"While it was a very exciting time, it was also very difficult to find someone to be me!" Nyland-Proctor said. "A strong actress and a beautiful dancer, Stephanie was just right. She expresses her emotions through movement, dancing from her very soul. There's no question in my mind she was the right choice."