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Lifestyles


'Two Lads From Liverpool' Premieres

He keeps writing music — and having people perform it makes Vancouver native Collin Warren very happy

Thursday, March 19 | 4:05 p.m.

**BY BRETT OPPEGAARD
FOR THE COLUMBIAN**


Collin Warren, a VSA graduate, coaches students recently in "Two Lads From Liverpool" at Northwest Children's Theater in the Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center in Portland. (Andrea J. Wright for The Columbian)

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Through his Vancouver School of Arts and Academics connections, Collin Warren was offered the job of music director for a rendition of "Plaid Tidings" in Portland. He had a big problem, though. No access to a piano.

He began making cold calls to arts organizations throughout the area, hoping he could arrange practice time on one of those prized instruments. But only one person called him back: Carolyn Newsom, co-founder and education director of Northwest Children's Theater and School. That started a friendship that eventually led Warren to a full-time job with the Portland company and increasing levels of artistic opportunities, highlighted this weekend by the debut of his original musical "Two Lads From Liverpool." It was inspired by Shakespeare's "Two Gentlemen of Verona."

Warren's piece is similar in premise to the Monty Python film "Life of Brian," about a boy born in the stable next to Jesus on the same night. Only Warren's main characters in the comedy compose a rock band, called The Egg Beaters, which constantly lives in the footsteps of another group from the same town, symbolically representing The Beatles.

"(The Egg Beaters) are the band down the street," Warren said. "They are misfits. They want to be stars. They are good, but they just can't get it all together."

The 80-minute show, with a cast of 17 students who are part of the theater's TeenNW program, features Warren's original music as well. The score is fashioned after songs that influenced The Beatles during the band's formative period in Hamburg, Germany, including the distinct styles of Little Richard, Chuck Berry and Eddie Cochran. The 26-year-old tucked in riffs and refrains hinting at influences from Mersey Beat magazine to the Reeperbahn clubs of Hamburg, creating subtext for music buffs to add to the Shakespearean undertones.

'Oozing with talent'

Northwest Children's Theater co-founder Newsom said she didn't have any idea what kind of talent Warren had when she returned his call. She simply was trying to help an artist in need, adding, "I'm a pianist. So I know what it would be like to not have one to work on."

Warren would come to the theater and play, and Newsom found herself walking by and thinking, "He's pretty good."

The more she talked to Warren, the more she liked him.

"He's very personable," she said. "I tend to form immediate impressions of people, and he had just such a warm and friendly aura around him. It just grew from there."

Newsom at first asked Warren to provide accompaniment during classes, then if he had any experience teaching kids. Warren quickly could relate what he had been doing since graduating from the Vancouver arts school in 2001.

After studying music at Mount Hood Community College, Warren was hired to play the title character in a Portland production of "Woody Guthrie's American Song." The owners of the American Heritage Theatre Project company, which had put on the production, decided to move back to Indiana and take the show with them. Warren went along to reprise his role. Those theater owners, Darrin Murrell and Julie Barber, took over the Muncie Civic Theater and asked Warren to stay and help there, too, while he started taking classes at Ball State University. Warren worked on just about every aspect of theater production in that role, including teaching classes of kids.

He also became a local celebrity of sorts after playing the part of Frank-N-Furter, an alien mad scientist, in a late-night rendition of "The Rocky Horror Show." He later had the chance to create his first original full-length production, "Bridges," inspired by a true story about a Portland woman who left her home and job to join a street family, only to be killed by them. In response, a critic for The Muncie Star Press said about Warren, "One thing is for sure. This guy is oozing with talent."

Imaginative possibilities

After the "Bridges" debut was such a success in 2004, Warren decided it was time for him to leave Indiana and return home.

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If you go

-- What: Northwest Children's Theater and School presents Collin Warren's original musical "Two Lads From Liverpool," based on Shakespeare's "Two Gentlemen of Verona," only set in the 1960s in England and performed by students in the TeenNW program.

-- When: 7 p.m. today through Sunday.

-- Where: Northwest Children's Theater, 1819 N.W. Everett St., Portland.

-- Cost: \$5.

-- Information: 503-222-4480 or www.nwcts.org.

"I felt I could get really comfortable there. I had a theater willing to produce my work. There was an amazing group of actors," he said. "But I felt 'Bridges' was what I had come there to do."

He originally thought "Bridges" would be his pass into the professional theater community in Portland. Only when he came back, he still wanted to tinker with it. He then became sidetracked by other projects, and the show went into his drawer. Warren spent most of the first year after his return playing gigs as a singer-songwriter at various coffee shops, cafes and bars in the area.

Through an online ad, he then took an acting job on the Mount Hood Excursion Train, dressing up like a cowboy, which led to a similar role in "Wild Bill's Murder Mysteries" corporate functions. In those, he played a detective, and one time he happened to be cast on a night with one of his former mentors at Vancouver School of the Arts and Academics, Mike Van Liew, accompanying the action on piano. Warren reconnected with Van Liew and began taking lessons from him. When Triangle Productions asked Van Liew about interest in the music director position for "Plaid Tidings" in 2005, and he had a conflict, Van Liew recommended Warren for the job.

Triangle hired Warren, even though he didn't have a piano, which led him on his search that ended at Northwest Children's Theater, the largest auxiliary school in Oregon, with more than 2,000 students.

Warren works now as an actor, sound designer, composer, music director and fundraiser for the company, what he calls "an amalgamation of teaching and development of the arts with the creative side."

Newsom said, "He seems to do everything well. ... He's self-motivated. Creative. A good musician, actor, singer. Very approachable and easy to work with, just a wonderful person."

Warren, who now lives in Portland, said he's learning a lot in his new role about how to balance the business realities of the arts with the imaginative possibilities.

"I want to keep writing music, and just to have the projects get bigger and better," he said. "Right now, I get to write music all of the time for people to perform, and that makes me very, very happy."

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