

## Acting bug strikes local dancer in Toronto production



**By Brock Weir**

As 'Coricopat' in a new production of the landmark musical CATS, Aurora's Eric Abel portrays one half of a feline duo that could be considered to have something of a shared sixth sense.



Dancer Eric Abel is an Aurora native. (Auroran photo by David Falconer)

They can tell where danger lurks and have premonitions of what's to come, but this psychic streak doesn't extend into Mr. Abel's own life, no matter how method an actor.

When he responded to an open casting call for the show in Toronto, he figured it was simply for a small-scale community theatre production. Leafing through the Toronto Star shortly after his audition, however, taught him otherwise.

He is now part of an all-Canadian cast of Cats, produced by Marlene Smith with Nu Musical Theatricals Inc., in association with Classical Theatre Project and Starvox Entertainment.

A multimedia student at McMaster University and a dancer by training, Mr. Abel was encouraged to try out for the show by his parents John and Tracy. After some deliberations on whether to step up to the challenge — after all, it did fall right in the middle of his Monday morning classes — he decided to give it a whirl.

'I had no idea until after they confirmed they wanted me for the role,' he says of the scale of the production. 'I then wondered what I had gotten myself into! I am just really excited.'

Mr. Abel has had a passion for dance since he was a young child. He first got the spark accompanying his elder sister to her dance classes. Often arriving a little bit early, he liked to go off and watch some of the older students take to the floor with complex tap routines. As soon as he saw what these girls could do with their feet, there was no turning back for him.

'Making noises with your feet kind of blew my mind,' he says. '[After being signed up for lessons] it grew each year until I was doing well over 20 hours of dance a week. Today, tap is still probably my favourite style. That is what I put all my effort into when I was first starting because I wanted to be a good tapper. I do like all the other styles, but tap is all it is made out to be and more.'

But as a dancer, despite limited background as an actor and singer 'two obvious prerequisites for CATS' producers evidently found what they were looking for.

'Once I figured out how big this show was I was taken aback because it doesn't happen that often [to land a role] with someone who is not in Equity or the Actors Union,' he says. 'Obviously something about me stood out and that is really surreal. I am still kind of in disbelief going into rehearsals with everyone.'

A typical rehearsal day begins every day at 10 a.m. in Downtown Toronto. The troupe is currently rehearsing at the historic Elgin Theatre and there they begin with vocal warm-ups, followed by learning new choreography, and then tackling the songs with their complex harmonies.

'It is a crash course in learning everything, getting it into our bodies and feeling good,' he says. 'Coming from the dance world, I was good at dancing, I knew what to do and how to execute choreography, but adding in the acting and singing is not something I am used to, but getting to work with all three is fun at the same time.'

Landing this somewhat unexpected opportunity has also afforded him the opportunity 'and possibly the necessity' to re-evaluate his own personal and professional goals. Going professional, he says, was something that was always on his mind growing up, training, and taking on dance competitions, sure in the knowledge that he could never not dance.

He had seen dancers graduate from high school, going off to university, and never dancing again, so he wanted a backup plan through his degree. He didn't let his feet cool down, however, being an active part in the university's dance company, but now he is now at a crossroads.

'At such a young age, the world is your oyster,' he says. 'It is now something that is on the back of my mind 'do I do this at the same time as finishing up my degree? It is now something I am going to have to reconsider all over again.'

'I want a tangible degree, but at the same time if out of this I go audition for another contract and get it, I am probably not going to turn it down. It is all a matter of whether the industry agrees with me and I am something that they're looking for. If I am, I am going to roll with it.'

A more pressing concern is opening night, however. By then, he says he is most looking forward to the acting-singing-dancing combo to be a second, fluid language and ensuring he has his character down to a science.

'I am really interested in the character more than the 'chore-eography', as we call it,' he says. 'I am just really excited to be able to do the whole thing from top to finish, be able to give it my all and say that it went well 'and also to be able to eat what I want!'