

Everybody say "Yeah!" for Aurora's Jesse Weafer



By Brock Weir

The first time he stepped on stage at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, Aurora's Jesse Weafer was just 12 years old, playing a homeless boy taken under the wing of Al Jolson.

He had his own scene, his own song, and it was an 'awakening' in his career.

Fast forward over a decade and Mr. Weafer is treading these hallowed boards once again - this time in six inch heels as one of the Angels in the smash hit Kinky Boots.

'I have gone from my first professional job to being on stage as a drag queen,' says Mr. Weafer. 'I have gone full circle.'

A professional dancer and actor, Mr. Weafer got an initial taste for dance at Jaymor School of Dance where, as a little boy, he would wait outside watching his sister take part in dance class. It came to a point, he says, where the instructor took their mother aside and said, 'can you please put this child in dance, because he is clearly doing the classes outside in the hallways!' he recalls.

'I just knew it was something I wanted to do,' he says. 'Once I started dancing I started singing around the house and realised there are so many different levels. I didn't want to be just a dancer, but dancing itself was at the core.'

Mr. Weafer was touring the United States in a production of The Wizard of Oz when he first learned a production of Kinky Boots was bound for Toronto. After seeing a number from the musical during the 2013 Tony Awards, he says he just knew it was a production he had to be a part of.

Kinky Boots centres on Lola, a London-based drag queen, and Charlie, the down-on-his-luck owner of a floundering shoe factory. In the musical, the two come together and grow. Lola is brought on as a designer for the factory's new niche product - footwear for drag queens - while, in the process of being a designer, Lola helps find a part of herself, surrounded by an entourage known as 'Angels.'

Soon after the Tony broadcast, Mr. Weafer learned there was a vacancy for a Broadway Angel and there was no stopping him as he pursued an audition before director Jerry Mitchell, with whom he worked in the Toronto production of Hairspray. Mitchell asked him to try out for the upcoming Toronto production as well and by the end of 2014 he booked the gig.

'When I first saw the Tony performance, there was just something about the Angels,' he explains. 'In my career so far I have been

looking for a great challenge. I have been very blessed in everything I have done in my life, but I was kind of looking for something that would take me out of my comfort zone. The Angels are all about cocktails and giggles, and the people [with whom] the audience is able to say, 'I would love to be friends.'

'There is something about them they really cherish and love, and that got my attention. There is also something about dancing in heels, which has always been an interest of mine, too. I have a lot of friends who are drag queens in Toronto right now and seeing them perform on stage for years I thought that would be fun to do.'

Dancing in six inch heels, however, presented something of a challenge for this very experienced dancer. It is difficult enough to walk in a straight line, he says, but leaping in the air, turning, and landing in the splits is something else again.

As a dancer, he is used to working from his core, but there was little to prepare him for this, he chuckles.

'Not only are you strutting down a stage, but you have to pivot, turn and change formation and in heels it can be very dangerous,' he says. 'You have to be aware of your surroundings, aware of your core, but this just transforms your body because if you put on a pair of heels you can't look like a big block on stage. We have five different pairs of heels in the show, so it is not only working with one pair, you're working with different pairs. Every show I have is a different strap, or a different way of putting it on, so it is learning how to feel comfortable in a different style of heel too. After dancing in heels, I feel I can do any style of dance now!'

The public has just over one month left to see Mr. Weafer in action.

The production closes May 15 after being held over for several months.

While at this point he is looking for his next gig, perhaps even opportunities to join another production of Kinky Boots somewhere else in the world, he admits it will be nice to have a bit of a break as well.

'It has definitely taken a toll on my body!'

But, it's a show that has had personal resonance with both himself and the audience at large.

'One thing that is great is a lot of people have no idea what the show is about, thinking it will be fun with high heels, but they always say they had no idea how moving the show would be,' he says. 'They didn't realise [going in] the message of acceptance, being who you are, and allowing yourself to really open your mind to anything, whether it is something you are afraid of, or something you would never think to allow yourself to associate with.'

'The message is very empowering. You get the glitz, you get the glamour, you get the fun, but then you also get the tears and the love and joy leaving the theatre every day, and that is really cool to see.'