

James Brown lets his 'Hair' down and the sunshine in



By Brock Weir

Sitting in the audience of a Broadway theatre, the lights dimmed and the sights and sounds of the freewheeling 1960s opened up a whole new world for Aurora's James Brown.

Mr. Brown, a 21 year old Queen's University graduate, was fresh out of Aurora High School when he caught his first production of the musical Hair. Its message of acceptance was something which resonated with him at a particularly difficult time in his life.

'I was just out of high school and confused about the future, much like the tribe members in the show,' he recalls. 'I was going through mental health issues, so seeing the show itself really had an impact and it made me feel like I belonged.'

This sense of belonging carried him through his time in Kingston where he received his Bachelor of Music at Queen's specializing in the piano. When the budding musician heard the local Wavestage Theatrical Company, formerly known as the Aurora Performing Arts Group, would be opening their newly rebranded season with Hair, he knew he had to be a part of it.

Playing tribe member Steve, as well as an authority figure in the play who rails against the 'kind of antiquated thinking where men should have short hair and women should have longer hair?', it gives him a chance to explore the other side of the message which so resonated with him.

'It was my love of the show that spoke to me,' he says of why he went out to audition. 'I automatically knew I had to be a part of that experience and process. When I do other productions, I am usually on the musical side. I teach acting at a children's theatre company but I wouldn't classify myself as an actor, but more of a museum.'

'Parts of the show have been very liberating. You can do all these things you wouldn't necessarily be able to do in a straight show. It has been exciting and I think I definitely want to pursue more facets of acting performance.'

While Hair may have sown the next few seeds which could spur him more towards the acting side of things, it is the piano which remains his chief passion. As is the case with so many kids, tickling the ivories wasn't initially his idea. Mr. Brown says his parents kept pushing him in that direction until Grade 8. By then he was old enough to make his own decisions and they said he could do what he wanted, he says.

'I realised there was a part of me that still wanted to play music and all through high school I practiced and played on my own and

decided to play it post-secondary.?

At Queen's, he found a very free environment where he could study the music the way he wanted. He also had a particular professor who stuck with him through thick and thin all four years as a private piano instructor where they developed a remarkable rapport.

?A lot of what I learned I owe to him and his passion for teaching,? he says, noting this fall he will return to Queen's for further instructions and also to work towards a Bachelor of Arts focusing in Philosophy. ?Right now I am all about creating. What I love about Hair is that it is just so unique and the fact it sprung from someone's imagination just blows my mind. I would rather be the person who creates rather than the person who does the performing.

?I want people to walk away from Hair feeling happy, to walk away smiling and to walk away having felt they have experienced something positive and that maybe the negative things they experience, the small little judgements of people and the harsh realities of our world don't in the grand scheme of things really matter much. We have ourselves, we have our life, and we have the people we love. When you get down to it, that is what is most essential to a happy and meaningful life.?

Hair opens this Thursday at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts. For more information and tickets, visit www.wavestagetheatre.com.