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Dramatic opportunity for local grad

Michael Bullard will tour Europe in 'West Side Story'

By CHRIS KNIGHT

SARANAC LAKE — Michael Bullard was crying on Super Bowl Sunday, but not because of the New York Giants' dramatic come-from-behind win over the New England Patriots.

Feb. 5, 2012, was the day Bullard, a 2009 graduate of Saranac Lake High School who's been studying theater in New York City, found out that he'd been selected to join an international tour of the musical "West Side Story." He'll play the character Baby John.

"I cried the entire day, but not for the reason that other people cried because of the Giants winning the Super Bowl," Bullard told the Enterprise Wednesday. "I was crying for myself."

Bullard flew across the Atlantic to Berlin this weekend to begin four months of rehearsals for the international tour of "West Side Story," which is produced by Sundance Productions and BB Promotions, and is directed and choreographed by Joey McKneely. The show opens in Berlin. After that, the tour will visit major cities across Europe, including a 10-week run in Paris, through April of next year. There's also a possible second leg that would run into 2014.

"I've only been to Europe once, on a 10-day chorus trip in high school, but never of this magnitude, so this is going to be a very new adventure," Bullard said.

Bullard, 21, just finished his junior year at Wagner College on Staten Island. Although he'll miss his senior year to take advantage of this opportunity, he plans to finish his degree once the tour is over. College officials have also allowed him to get credit for the tour as an internship, and he'll also do two independent studies while he's abroad.

Bullard said he was auditioning in Manhattan for various summer theater roles when he heard about the open dance call for "West Side Story."

"I went just for fun because I was like, 'Well, I don't need to be on a tour because I have school,' so I was very at ease, which I think helped get me through," he said.

Bullard survived three rounds of cuts that day. The following day he got a call from the tour's casting director asking him to show up for another audition in two weeks.

"Two weeks later it was the final callback, and we danced again, we sang, and we read scenes for the music director and the producers. We all left not knowing what was going to happen," Bullard said. "The next day, Super Bowl Sunday, I got the email."

Bullard's mother, Saranac Lake High School history teacher Kathleen Bullard, said she didn't know Michael had tried out for "West Side Story" until after he was offered the part.

"Then he called right away so we could kind of scream together," Kathleen said. "We're very proud of him — even more thrilled once we found out it meant he didn't have to quit college."

Set on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the 1950s, "West Side Story" tells the story of teenagers from two rival New York City street gangs — the white Jets, led by Riff, and the Puerto Rican Sharks, led by Bernardo. Tony, one of the Jets, falls in love with Maria, Bernardo's sister. Bullard's character, Baby John, is the youngest Jet.

“West Side Story” echoes William Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet,” and Baby John parallels with Romeo’s cousin Benvolio, a struggling peacemaker between rival factions.

“He’s bright eyed and bushy tailed and thinks it’s just cool to be a part of the gang,” Bullard said. “My role is really key. There’s a dream ballet sequence at one point where Tony and Maria want to escape, and because I’m this figure of youth and naivety, I lead a lot of that sequence. Baby John also really foils Riff’s character. He’s this young kid in the gang that doesn’t really understand the violence that’s part of the aggression toward the Puerto Ricans.”

Bullard will be paid, and his travel and lodging expenses will be covered during the tour. While that’s nice, he said he’s not in it for the money.

“To get to do an amazing show like ‘West Side Story’ over and over again, and to keep exploring it for a year or however long I get to do it, that’s why I do it,” Bullard said.

Bullard has been dancing since he was 4 years old. The Bullard family moved to Saranac Lake from Midland, Mich., in 2000, when Michael was in fourth grade.

“When we first got here, we pulled into town and he saw the street sign for Broadway, and he said, ‘I made it, Mom!’ ” Kathleen recalled with a laugh. “I said, ‘No, we’re still a few hours away.’ ”

Kathleen Bullard credits Saranac Lake’s arts community, both in and out of school, for creating opportunities for her son and her daughter, Rachel, who graduated this weekend from SUNY New Paltz with degrees in painting and art education.

“We’ve got Melissa (Posthauer) at Mountains in Motion Dance Studio that (Michael) has worked with, Jessica Deeb with children’s theater, Pendragon Theatre, the high school musicals, the drama program — it’s an incredible place for the arts in this town,” she said.

Saranac Lakers are most likely to remember Michael Bullard from his high school musical performances. His first was “The Music Man” when he was still in seventh grade, followed by “Les Miserables” as an eighth grader, “Oklahoma,” “Carousel,” “Guys and Dolls” and “Once on This Island.”

Since graduating, Bullard has kept a busy schedule in college. In addition to his studies, he’s been in college productions of “Little Women,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Cinderella” and “Smokey Joe’s Cafe.” During his summers, Bullard has performed at SurfFlight Theatre in New Jersey and at Ogonquit Playhouse in Maine. This past year, Bullard was in “Jesus Christ Superstar” and “My Fair Lady” at the Snug Harbor Music Hall on Staten Island. He played Freddy in “My Fair Lady,” his first singing role.

“I’m a dancer first, but everything has started to level out, and my acting and singing and dancing all started to be on the same page,” Bullard said.

Bullard said he wants to perform and dance “for as long as my knees and hips will allow.” He said he plans to stay in New York City after finishing his degree.

“Broadway is the goal, of course,” he said, “but there’s so many other ways to be performing without being on Broadway — like this tour. It’s not affiliated with Broadway, but it’s going to be at that level. But Broadway would be an ultimate goal at least once before I die.”