

Lafayette Sixth-Grader Lands Role on SF Stage

By Michael Sakoda



Blake Johnson Photos provided

For many young local actors, landing a role on a San Francisco stage can take years, if at all. For Blake Johnson, a sixth-grader at St. Perpetua School in Lafayette, it took one lengthy audition. Blake will be performing in the A.C.T. (American Conservatory Theater) production of "A Christmas Carol" beginning Dec. 6.

"I am playing two parts," Blake said. "Boy Dick, in a past scene, and Candle Child in a present scene."

For anyone new to the show, or just a little rusty on their Dickens, Dick Wilkins was the childhood friend of Ebenezer Scrooge, who ends up marrying Scrooge's childhood sweetheart.

Blake's somewhat serendipitous journey to the stage began when his parents settled down in Lafayette almost 20 years ago. "We liked the small community, the beauty of it," said his mother, Lesley Johnson.

Just three and a half years ago, Barrett Lindsay-Steiner, the director of Standing Ovations, a renowned East Bay musical theater program for kids, paid a visit to St. Perpetua.

Johnson encouraged her son to sign up for the school play. Blake remembers his reluctance. "I didn't really want to do it," he said matter-of-factly. "But then it grew on me."

Blake did the shows at St. Perpetua for one season, and has stuck with Lindsay-Steiner ever since, performing in musicals and plays on a regular basis, and more than that, finding a calling.

"I want to do this as a career," Blake said.

But performing is in his blood.

Before Johnson met her husband and Blake's father, James, she herself had something of the drama bug.

"Growing up, I did all sorts of shows with my friends," she said. "And I was a ballet dancer for several years."

Blake's sister, Claire, an eighth-grader at St. Perpetua is also involved, studying acting and singing in addition to her school work.

So far, Blake's favorite productions have been "Alice in Beatles-Land" and "The Emperor's Gnu Clothes."

"In 'Alice in Beatles-Land' I played the Grave of Hearts ... that was a really fun role," he said.

So how did this Lafayette sixth-grader find himself in a professional show?

"My mom booked me an audition for 'A Christmas Carol,' and it just went from there," Blake said. "(The audition process) was really nerve wracking, but once I saw how they were doing it, I got more comfortable. I sang a song and did a monologue and I left hoping for a part."

Blake doesn't study voice yet, but Johnson says it's on the horizon. "Voice and dancing, that's what he wants to do next," she said.

"The music teacher at A.C.T. who plays for 'A Christmas Carol' says I have a natural voice," said Blake.

Outside the theater, Blake is a typical Lamorinda kid, who loves playing video games, soccer and golf. "He's been playing golf with First Tee over at Boundary Oak," Johnson said.

With the show set to open this week, the rehearsal schedule has been hectic – six days a week, 4 to 7 p.m. on school days, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekends – but it has helped build Blake's and his family's excitement.

"They send us an email the night before rehearsal telling us what we're going to be working on," Blake said.

"We kind of live by that email," added Johnson.

On the plus side, the cast just moved into the theater on Geary Street where they started to work with lights and mics, and wardrobes and hair, said Johnson. "That was all new for (Blake)."

"A Christmas Carol" opens to the public Dec. 6 with 29 performances that run through Dec. 28. For information, visit www.act-sf.org.

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Blake Johnson (center) in the May 2012 Standing Ovations production of "Emperor's Gnu Clothes."

Orinda Author Discusses Sequel at Orinda Books

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He and Anna rip at their relationship when they begin to disagree about the wisdom of manipulating events.

Regretfully, Stone's writing is far more layered and believable with Anna as the protagonist than with Bennett at the helm. In this second book, we learn more about Bennett's family and his morality, but fail to move beyond a repetitious, shallow treatment that ultimately bogs down the book's momentum. Despite Bennett's increasing anger – at his father and Anna for pushing him to "fix the world," and at himself, for giving into it – the tension isn't enough to sustain a transformational arc. Stone's solid writing chops keeps it from becoming droll, and it's a double-edged criticism to say that "Time After Time" fails to propel page-turning in the same way as its predecessor.

Fans – and there are many, "liking" Stone on Facebook and lining up the stars on Goodreads' review site – clearly relish this paired book set. Readers who encounter the time-travel novels by reading out of sequence can follow the plot without having read the debut book. But if you do read "Time After Time" first, don't be afraid to time travel backwards yourself: "Time Between Us" is available for purchase and offers Stone's best writing to date.

Tamara Ireland Stone will discuss and sign copies of "Time After Time" at 3 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 7 at Orinda Books, 276 Village Square in Orinda. For information, visit orindabooks.com.