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Dramatic debut

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Dramatic *debut* ALLEN FOX STEPS FR

David Allen Fox's Furman résumé reads like that of your typical, highly involved college student. It includes:

- A summer internship in Washington with Georgia Congressman Nathan Deal.
- Work with Furman's student activities board, student government and Orientation staff.
- Study abroad in London and Brussels.
- Membership in KA fraternity.

And when the strapping, amiable Fox marched across the Paladin Stadium stage June 3 to receive his bachelor's degree in political science, those credentials suggested he was fully prepared to pursue his pre-college plan of attending law school. Right?

Not exactly. Instead, he's about to hit the road for the next six to nine months — as Jimmy Smith, the male lead in Troika Entertainment's national tour of the Tony Award-winning musical "Thoroughly Modern Millie."

A song and dance man? In a traveling Broadway show? Where did this come from?

You wouldn't be the first to ask. As a casting agent at the Southeastern Theatre Conference in Greensboro, N.C., said to Fox last spring, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

This was, mind you, after he had gotten 47 call-backs based on one 90-second audition. We're talking a fair amount of dramatic presence here.

So who is this poli sci guy, who took only one college acting course and never appeared on stage at Furman?

"He's one of the most gifted and talented students I've known in 41 years of teaching," says Pam Ware, legendary drama instructor in Gainesville, Ga., where Fox's story begins.

Under Ware's leadership, the Gainesville High drama department has over the last three decades established quite

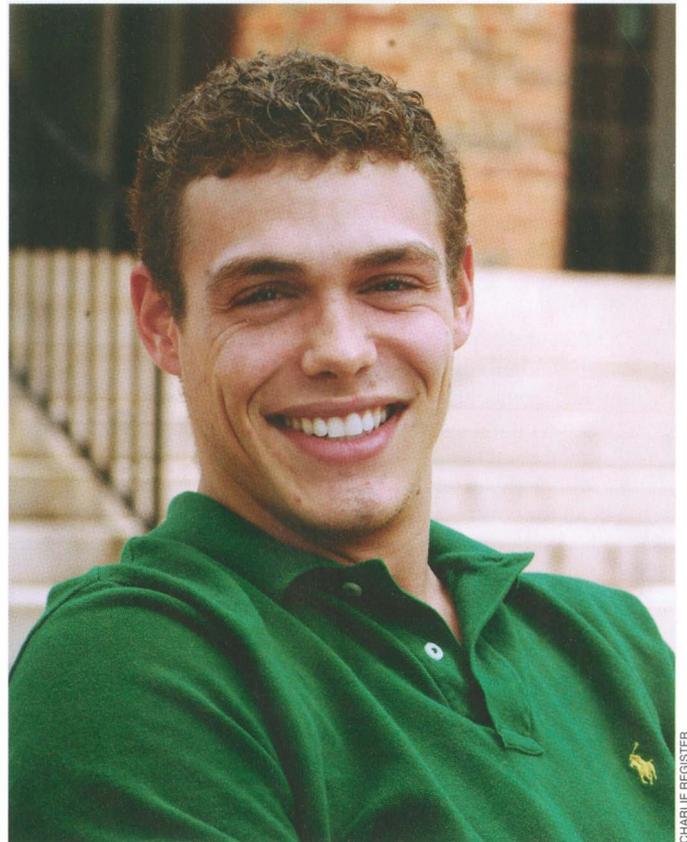
a name for itself, producing three major plays and as many as five musicals a year. Says Fox, a product of the school, "The joke is that the soccer and football coaches set their seasons around the theatre schedule."

Through the Gainesville parks and recreation department, Ware also conducts theatre classes for children of elementary and middle school age. That's where she and Fox began working together. By the time he reached high school, she knew full well what kind of talent he had — and promptly began casting him in major roles.

"He performed in all sorts of plays and musicals," she says. "And he had no professional vocal training — just God-given talent."

Fox responds in kind: "Pam Ware is one of the most influential people in my life and I wouldn't be anywhere I am today without her."

When time came to consider colleges, Fox looked into studying theatre at such institutions as Carnegie-Mellon, Florida State and Webster Conservatory in St. Louis. Ware was all for it, but Fox decided he wasn't ready to commit to theatre life.



CHARLIE REGISTER

FROM THE FURMAN CLASSROOM TO A LEADING ROLE IN A TOURING BROADWAY SHOW.

“I thought I needed to focus on academics,” he says. “I knew that a career in theatre wouldn’t be anything like high school. It’s a business, and I didn’t want to ruin those happy memories.”

He decided to enroll at Furman, where he immediately immersed himself in college life. Except for theatre: “With Furman’s academics,” he says, “I couldn’t do everything.”

Thinking he wanted to follow his father’s lead and become a lawyer, he arranged to intern with Congressman Deal following his freshman year (2002). But he emerged from that summer with much more than he had bargained for.

On a break from his Washington work, he and a friend traveled to New York to see “Oklahoma.” There, enthralled by the Rodgers and Hammerstein show, Fox had his Damascus-road moment.

“I need to be doing this,” he recalls thinking. “I need to be on stage.”

Pam Ware’s response when he informed her: “I told you so.”

She encouraged him to pursue summer stock the next year, referring him to Seaside Music Theater in Daytona Beach, Fla., one of the South’s premier companies. He hadn’t sung or attended an audition in two years when he traveled to the Seaside tryouts in the spring of 2003 with only his résumé and Christmas card photo — prompting plenty of “Who is this guy?” stares.

But the folks at Seaside knew Ware, who has sent her share of talented performers on to bigger things, and Fox evidently delivered in his audition. He landed a role in the ensemble of “Ragtime,” then was invited back for the next summer, when he was cast as Cupid in “Two Gentlemen of Verona” and as a baker and an enchanted fork in “Beauty and the Beast.”

Still, he was an unknown college kid who had come out of nowhere to land parts with a professional theatre troupe. “Everyone was kind of confused,” Fox says. “Even I was confused. I was from the South, a fraternity boy, a Republican — I really didn’t fit the image.”

Once Fox’s 2004 stint at Seaside ended, the theatre’s general manager and director, Lester Malizia, called him in for “the talk” — and told him he should pursue a career in theatre. Malizia urged him to attend the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) in the spring, where hundreds of performing companies and casting agencies gather to audition talent.

Heading into his senior year at Furman, Fox said OK, I’ll go for it. He began taking voice lessons with Tina Thompson-Broussard, a former Furman professor, and sailed through the regional auditions for SETC in September.

Soon enough, March and Greensboro arrived. There, given the 47 call-backs, his confidence got a bit of a boost.

Among the 47 was Dave Clemmons Casting, a New York agency that casts Broadway shows and national tours. For the Clemmons representative, Fox chose to sing “On the Street Where You Live” from “My Fair Lady.” When he finished, she asked him to sing “What Do I Need With Love?” — Jimmy Smith’s big number in “Thoroughly Modern Millie.” No problem; Fox knew the song.

Then things quickly got more interesting.

Rep: “We’d like to talk with you further. We need you to come to New York on April 9.”

Fox: “Sorry, can’t make it. That’s the weekend of my fraternity formal.”

Pause. Beat. Jaws drop throughout the room.

Rep, regrouping: “OK, we’ll work it out.”

Which they did. Fox eventually traveled to New York several times for meetings about “Millie” — and for talks with another company about the lead in a production of “Will Rogers Follies.”

Pretty heady stuff for an enchanted fork.

The attention left him both stunned and amazed. “I mean, come on,” he says. “I was competing against people who have Web sites.”

Fox made it to the final three for “Rogers,” but “Millie” emerged as the most promising opportunity. The “frat guy,” as he came to be known, met with various members of the show’s production team; they ran him through the steps and had him read, read and read some more, all the while filming and coaching him — and even asking him to sing for the producer via cell phone. When they finished, they sent him home with a “We’ll be in touch.”

So he returned to Furman to complete spring term. “I left feeling good,” he says. “It was such a cool experience. I knew I was meant to do theatre, and at least folks in New York knew my name.”

The first call came April 13. The message: “It’s between you and one other person, Allen. We’ll call you tomorrow.”

And that’s when the payoff came. He had landed the role of Jimmy, smitten suitor to Millie Dillmount, a small-town girl looking for a fresh start and a husband in roaring ’20s New York. Rehearsals start August 22 in Manhattan, he was told. Work on your dancing and tone down that Southern accent.

In many ways, Fox is still reeling from how fast everything happened. After all, his out-of-left-field story is itself the stuff of a Broadway show. But he’s ready for the fun to begin.

“This is going to be a great way to tour the country,” says Fox, who spent the summer waiting tables in Atlanta. “I’ll also get reviewed, which can only help me get better. Plus, they treat the leads pretty well in these shows. I’ll have my own seat on the bus.”

And after the tour ends? He anticipates moving to New York, where, as he points out, he’s already made contacts with major casting companies.

For now, though, he’s focusing on the task at hand — and likely reminding himself that, as Jimmy Smith says, “Other guys would kill to fill my shoes.”