

Don't rain on my parade

Steven van Wyk speaks to Eugene Yiga about his role in *Singin' in the Rain*.

What is your background?

I grew up in the Deep South of Cape Town, in Tokai. Cape Town is the great love of my life. The more places I travel to, the more I realise how beautiful and special the city is, geographically and culturally. And the wine, let's not forget the wine!

What inspired you to become a performer?

Mine is the classic story of tagging along to your sibling's audition and ending up getting the job. The international musical *Les Misérables* was casting for the big children's roles and my sister was auditioning to be young Cosette. She was too tall for the role, but I landed the role of Gavroche, the feisty street urchin. So, at the age of ten, the theatre bug bit hard. I've never looked back.

Could you tell us more about your studies?

For ten years I studied at the Waterfront Theatre School under the watchful tutelage of Delia Sainsbury and the late, great Keith Galloway. Post-Matric, I completed my Diploma in Musical Theatre at the same institution. I knew my parents wouldn't leave me alone until I held a degree, so I then completed a Bachelor of Social Science, majoring in dance and anthropology, at the University of Cape Town.

And what was it like studying abroad?

Although I was eager to get to dancing professionally since the career span is so short, UCT offered me an exchange to study toward my honours degree at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. While in North Carolina, I got a scholarship to attend the American Dance Festival (the largest modern dance festival in the world), where I was cast as Riff in *West Side Story Suite*, which Jerome Robbins revised for the New York City

Ballet. After years of pursuing pure dance, this experience made me fall in love with musical theatre again.

What was it like when you first started working in the industry?

I was just thankful to get work! While studying I'd taken some baby steps into the industry, being apprenticed to Cape Town City Ballet. I wanted to dance professionally first, and I was fortunate to work with Cape Dance Company, where Debbie Turner's genius vision exposes one as a dancer to the most remarkable, rewarding choreography by top local and international choreographers. I've gotten to perform some incredibly fun roles for Bovim Ballet too, and that company feels like a family to me.

How was it different to what you expected?

I had no idea how much hustle would be required! When you start out you have to make things happen for yourself. You have to use your contacts and pursue every opportunity.

And what would someone find surprising about the work you do?

It's surprising how self-motivated you have to be. You don't sit at a desk with a manager. You have to arrive at rehearsals knowing your lines. You record rehearsals on your phone so you can go home and practice. You have to take control of maintaining your fitness and technique. The rehearsals and the performances are just the tip of the iceberg; there's so much else that we do around that.

What's been challenging so far?

It's difficult not having a singular passion – I love performing,

but also choreographing, producing work, and studying. So sometimes it's difficult to choose which direction to go in. I try to make time for my three passions as much as possible. I enjoy juggling studying, performing and creating because I think they feed each other. My studies definitely inform my choreography, and I love learning from the choreographers I work with as a performer.

And do you ever think you'll change careers?

I think when you're in theatre you're always considering other careers! It's not easy. You face a lot of rejection and there are dry spells, so you have to think of other things to do to fill the gaps. I have a dance company, Underground Dance Theatre, with three brilliant co-directors, so whenever I'm free I produce work. And I know that once my time as a performer is done, I want to devote myself full-time to creating theatre. My company is called Underground because when we started out we would do illicit things, like sneak into studios to rehearse and make work. Now we are above board, but the name stuck!

What do you love most about being on the stage?

There's a magic to live theatre. You're on this precipice of glory or disaster, forcing one to be in the moment and appreciate the present. Then the moment is gone and can never be re-enacted in the same way. There's something beautiful and enchanting about the idea that these moments we share on the stage with the audience are transient and fleeting.

What's been your greatest professional highlight?

As a choreographer, my highlight has been winning a Standard Bank Silver Ovation Award and the kykNet Fiësta for Best Dance Production for my piece *Skoornveld* that I created with Thalia Laric. Receiving recognition for this piece was significant as it was a personal piece about being Afrikaans by blood, but not by culture. As a performer, playing Cosmo Brown in *Singin' in the Rain* is my greatest highlight; it's a dream role that I've longed to play since I was a kid.

Could you tell us more about Cosmo Brown?

He is the sidekick and best friend to Don Lockwood, a fictional Brad Pitt of the silent movies. Don and Cosmo were poor vaudeville performers, but Don was discovered and became a huge Hollywood star, taking Cosmo along with him to play the piano and set the mood for Don's silent films. They hit a snag when 'talkies' are invented, and here it's Cosmo who is revealed to be the brains of the operation, as he navigates Don's career (and his own) out of this crisis.

Steven van Wyk



How do you relate to your character?

Cosmo and I have a lot in common! Cosmo doesn't have a huge amount of respect for authority and he loves to speak the truth disguised as humour. So he's the court jester on an archetypal level, and I think I play a similar role. Like Cosmo, I'm an 'ideas' person and can be a little slapstick.

How did you prepare for the role?

It's a dance-heavy show, so one has to take classes and get in dance shape. But this is a classic musical from the fifties, set in the twenties, so there's a lot one needs to understand about the style of performing. It's stylised compared to the naturalism of musicals today, so I watched other classic musicals of the period.

What was it like to perform in Asia?

It was fascinating how audiences responded in each country. The sense of humour and how audiences related to the characters and story varied, which ignites some sort of anthropological fascination in me. I love Asia for the food and the culture, but I am in love with Hong Kong, which I could make my home. It's like Cape Town nestled between mountains and the ocean, but then with a massive big-city bustle.

Why should audiences see this musical?

There's something for everyone: romance, comedy, production numbers, and a fun look at the historical transition from silent films to talkies. And it rains 12 000 litres of water on stage every night! The first four rows of the audience (the splash zone) get wet, so the whole thing becomes a 4D experience. How often do you get to experience that on a night out to the theatre? It's a joyful show since the ultimate message is that no matter how rainy the skies, the sun can be in your heart.

What are dream roles you'd like to play in the future?

I'm dying to try my hand at choreographing a musical, as there are so many classics screaming out to be re-imagined. My hit list as a performer is the Emcee in *Cabaret*, Leo Bloom in *The Producers*, Mungojerrie in *Cats*, and Timon in *The Lion King*.

And what are your plans for once the show's South African run ends?

I have to finish my master's thesis that I'm currently doing via UCT Drama. My area is looking at arts festivals in South Africa through the lens of Critical Whiteness Studies. Over at Underground Dance Theatre, we have many plans to put into action, with new productions and tours. ©