

Becoming 'Billy'

Teen dancer makes acting debut in Verona Area Community Theater's fall musical

KATE NEWTON

Unified Newspaper Group

The title character of Verona Area Community Theater's upcoming production of "Billy Elliot" overcomes steep odds to come into his own as a dancer, and it's a transformation Pete Pierantozzi, the 16-year-old performer portraying Billy onstage, can certainly identify with.

Since auditioning for the show – and his first major acting role – in July, he has packed hours of rehearsal and vocal practice into a schedule typically dominated by competitive dancing with the Kehl School of Dance. In the years since he began dancing at 8 years old, the Middleton High School sophomore decided he wants to pursue professional dance as a career, and said auditioning with VACT presented an opportunity "to broaden (his) performance skills" into singing and dancing, as well.

"I've definitely grown so much," Pierantozzi said of the experience. "I feel much more mature in my dancing and my performing, and in how I show emotion onstage."

Expanding into that unfamiliar territory has been anything but effortless, he told the Press, but Terry Dvorak, who is co-directing the show with her daughter, Alyssa, had quite a different impression after watching his growth over the past several months.

"What he has is magical – he is an incredibly talented actor without even trying," she said. "When he says that he becomes Billy, I absolutely believe him, because he makes it seem effortless. He's beyond his years, between his talent level and his composure."

All five performances of "Billy Elliot," planned for 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 20, Friday, Oct. 21, and Saturday, Oct. 22, with 2 p.m. matinees on Saturday and on Sunday, Oct. 23, will be held at the Verona Area High School Performing Arts Center, 300

If You Go

What: Verona Area Community Theater presents "Billy Elliot: The Musical"

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 20, Friday, Oct. 21 and Saturday, Oct. 22; 2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 22 and Sunday, Oct. 23

Where: Verona Area High School Performing Arts Center, 300 Richard St.

Tickets: \$15 general admission, \$10 seniors 65 years and older and children through high school (purchase at the door or online at vact.org)

Richard St.

The musical is based on the 2000 film, which follows a young English boy "who discovers a strong passion and talent for ballet dancing in the midst of the 1984-1985 coal miners' strike," according to a VACT news release. Its stage version, however, is more elusive when it comes to smaller audiences. The play, which features music by Elton John, first debuted in London in 2005, but the La Crosse Community Theatre became the first community theater company in the U.S. to tackle the production just earlier this year.

Part of the reluctance smaller theater companies have toward taking on a production like "Billy Elliot" is the worry that they won't find a young actor ambitious enough to handle the role. But from the moment Pierantozzi auditioned, VACT staff knew they wouldn't share that problem.

"There was nobody else that could handle the magnitude of this role," Alyssa Dvorak said, adding that capturing the emotional turbulence of Billy's experience, especially for teenager new to acting, is "a ton of pressure."

The show, which contains adult language and themes, even demands its performers



Photo by Kate Newton

Pete Pierantozzi, 16, holds a pirouette pose while rehearsing for Verona Area Community Theater's production of "Billy Elliot." This is the first starring role and first time singing in a musical for Pierantozzi, who is also a competitive dancer with the Kehl School of Dance.

speaking in the Northern English "Geordie" dialect. Pierantozzi said getting the hang of the accent was "extremely intimidating at first," but got easier as assistant director Sara Pfantz gave him one-on-one coaching and he started using it outside rehearsal around family and friends.

The show's plentiful dance numbers, meanwhile, are "constantly weaving in and out" throughout the story and highlight Pierantozzi's natural talent as a dancer, said Alyssa Dvorak, who also serves as the show's choreographer. Some of those numbers feature all or most of the show's 59-person cast, which share "tremendous chemistry" as a group, she added.

Pierantozzi sought private vocal lessons and help from VACT music director Brett Wagner to develop his skills as a singer. Meanwhile, building a rapport with his co-stars – including Shannon Seip as Billy's stern but well-meaning

dance instructor Mrs. Wilkinson, Steve Nibbe as his disapproving father and 13-year-old Flynn Marcus as his best friend, Michael – came even more naturally.

"It's amazing to see this level of talent and be right beside them," he said.

The Dvoraks said they plan to follow Pierantozzi closely as his talents lead him to what they believe could be Broadway and beyond, but they're eager to savor this moment while it lasts.

"This is one of our dream shows, and to have the cast step up and do it as well as they've done, it's better than we could ever imagine," Terry Dvorak said.

"Billy Elliot" is produced by VACT founder Dee Baldock – who also plays Billy's

grandma in the play – and features costumes by Lynn Vilker. Tickets are \$15 for general admission; \$10 for seniors 65 years and older and children/students through high school and can be purchased in advance or at the door, depending on availability. For information or to purchase advance tickets, visit vact.org, email tickets@vact.org or call 845-2383.

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