



Winter 2007

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Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel (2007) "Voice of Experience," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol16/iss4/2>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Voice of Experience

Jack Waddell '63 brings his vocal talent full circle as a teacher to Broadway's rising stars.

Story by Rachel Hatch



Waddell stands in front of Presser Hall, where he spent much of his college life as a voice major. After making his mark in Europe, Waddell returned to the U.S. and continues to perform, including a starring role in the musical drama *O! Freedom!* (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Jack Waddell's low baritone voice quickly commands any space he enters, whether in his vocal studio in New York, where he coaches Broadway stars to perfect their song, or while strolling through a fall-tinted Illinois Wesleyan University campus.

"When I look around, it seems like yesterday," says Waddell, who is a 1963 IWU graduate. He stops in front of a familiar building. "Ah, Presser Hall! I lived in Presser," Waddell says. He flashes back to his days as a music voice major, practicing for hours in the hall that has been a second home to generations of music students.

Waddell's 50-year career has spanned the stages of America and Europe, but it started in Bloomington and at Illinois Wesleyan. Now he has come full circle, returning in September to accept induction into the Bloomington School District's new Hall of Fame. Waddell graduated from Bloomington High School (BHS) in 1959, where his talent for singing was recognized by his teacher, Mary Selk. Waddell remembers being confronted by BHS's football coach, who asked him, "Are

you going to sing or play football?” Selk answered on her student’s behalf: “He’ll do both,” and he did.

Waddell sang for the BHS choir and joined a local community choir established by IWU Professor of Voice Henry Charles. “He was amazing,” said Waddell, tapping his index finger at a photo of Charles printed in the 1963 *Wesleyana* yearbook. “He volunteered his time and came down to the Twin City Community Center to start a choir for young, black men. Most of the other boys there would have rather played ball or hung out, but I listened and I sang.”

Impressed with Waddell’s voice, Charles arranged for him to take private lessons. “I told him, ‘I can’t afford lessons.’ I was living with my mother and grandparents, and we didn’t have money. But he let me work off the lessons,” says Waddell. “He also connected me with a scholarship for Illinois Wesleyan. He was incredible.”

Waddell jumped into student life at IWU with both feet. “There were only a handful of black students then,” he recalls, and he and his roommate, James LeVern Whitt ’63, “decided to conquer the campus. He took athletics, and I took the arts.” While Whitt (who died in 2003) competed in football, wrestling, and track, Waddell was busy in the Chapel and Collegiate choirs, the Singing Titans, Madrigals, and Opera Theatre.

The experience gave him confidence to tackle the title role in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* — widely regarded as the greatest opera ever composed, and among the most challenging to sing. “You had to have perfect, almost conversational Italian,” says Waddell, who knew no Italian and was taking a course in German with Professor William Bettger at the time. “I poured myself into the role and lost track of a lot of other things,” he recalls. The work paid off when “people from all over campus came to watch and see if this junior could nail *Don Giovanni*. After the performance, Professor Bettger came and told me, ‘Mr. Waddell, now I know why I shall have to fail you in German, because you speak Italian so fluently!’” Waddell’s laughter rolls in a low rumble. “The good thing is, I nailed the performance.”

After graduation, Waddell set his sights on New York, where it was assumed by his fellow performers that he would teach music. “I told them I was going to perform opera, and they laughed. They laughed! There were very few black people in opera at that time, and almost all of those were women. I thought, *I will perform.*” Realizing that opportunities were greater for black performers in Europe, Waddell moved to West Germany in 1967. “Germany still has the highest number of opera houses per capita in the world,” says Waddell. “Of course, I still knew no German, so I had to take a crash course.”

He enrolled in an intensive, six-week course in German, but found a better way to learn the language. “I would sneak out at night and go to the pubs. There you could find every accent,” Waddell says. “My teachers would look at me and say, ‘He doesn’t do the homework, but he knows so much!’”

Meanwhile, members of Bavaria’s Bad Reichenhall Philharmonic Orchestra heard of the talented young American singer and came to hear Waddell in person. “After hearing me, they signed me up as a visiting soloist, and I had my European debut,” Waddell says. The more he performed,

the more German accents he acquired. “It’s like America, with different accents in different areas. When I was in Frankfurt, I sang with a Frankish accent. In Berlin, I grabbed the modern accent. I became a chameleon.”

Waddell continued to sing and perform abroad for the next two decades, always finding himself in demand for German stage and TV. The West German government even considered Waddell a German citizen, issuing him a passport. His first major U.S. exposure came in 1969, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., when Waddell put together an NBC television tribute to King that featured classic African-American spirituals. It was a redemptive experience. “All those who laughed back in the day didn’t laugh anymore,” says Waddell.

While filming a crime series for German TV in the 1980s, Waddell learned that his mother was ill, and he returned to the U.S. After her death, he decided to once again make New York City his home, but this time with a new career in mind.

“It was during my first show in Germany — a production of *Hair* I did with Donna Summer — that I was first asked to be a vocal coach,” says Waddell, who was always willing to offer his help to other singers. “When I came to New York, I knew it was time to give back. Time to be that teacher I thought I would not be so long ago.”

From his studio on 49th Street in New York, Waddell now counts among his students many top, young Broadway performers. “I have close to 50 students now — some come to me and some are sent to me,” said Waddell. Among his students is Brandon Victor Dixon, who was nominated for a Tony award in 2006 for “Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical” for his role in *The Color Purple*. Waddell remembers coaching Dixon when the young actor was still a student at Columbia University. “His teachers asked me to listen to him sing, and I told them, ‘If you teach him to maintain his instrument, his voice, he will do you proud.’ They said, ‘We want you to teach him.’ And I did.”

Dixon says of Waddell, “He began teaching me at the young age of 20, and is largely responsible for the success I continue to achieve and enjoy today. Jack has always been there, not just with vocal instruction but with love, support, and advice on anything I’ve needed. Even when I



Among Waddell’s students is Brandon Victor Dixon (shown above). Nominated for a 2006 Tony award for his role in *The Color Purple*, Dixon says that Waddell is “largely responsible for the success I continue to achieve and enjoy today.” (Photo courtesy of Victor Dixon)

couldn't afford to pay him he taught me. He did it because he thought I was worth it. Not many people would do that.”

Waddell has an almost parental pride in his students and is thrilled that he can help them up the ladder of success. “It is a lesson I learned here at Illinois Wesleyan,” says Waddell, motioning to the serene campus around him. “To be the best you can be, and then help others see that same path.”