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Alumnae Make Broadway Debut in *Ragtime*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Numerous alumni of the Illinois Wesleyan University music and theatre departments have made the transition from the cozy, quaint McPherson Theatre and the ornate, chestnut stage of Westbrook Auditorium, to the lights of Broadway and the red carpet of Hollywood. This year the departments boast two more successful alumnae, recent graduates Lisa Karlin '06 and Bryonha Parham '07.

On Nov. 15, the young women make their Broadway debut in *Ragtime* (<http://ppc.broadway.com/shows/ragtime/>) revival at the Neil Simon Theatre in New York City.

The musical transports its audience back to the early 1900's and intertwines the lives of three distinctly different groups of people. In the performance, Karlin plays a female swing lead, covering multiple female roles and Parham plays the friend of the female lead.

Both alumnae graduated with bachelors of fine arts in music theatre and spent their four years at Illinois Wesleyan immersed in the theatre department. Karlin arrived at IWU from Overland Park, Kan., and starred in such well-known campus productions such as *Tangible Dreams: Dance Concert*; the musicals *A New Brain*, *The Rocky Horror Show*, *Chicago* and the folktale *1001 Arabian Nights*.

Karlin says during her first year she quickly learned the value of a private, liberal arts education.

"IWU gave me a well-rounded education not only as an artist, but as a scholar and a free thinker," said Karlin. "The music-theatre curriculum is great in the fact that everyone had to do everything. I feel like that experience gives each of us a deeper appreciation for every aspect of getting a show up and running successfully."

The inclusive curriculum at IWU required Karlin and all its first-year students to perform a certain number of hours, which allows music theatre majors to experience all aspects of theatre, not just performing. This means actors are working behind the scenes and helping on the crew, and crew members are taking acting classes and performing.

A year after Karlin started, Parham entered the IWU community from Kansas City, Mo., and was immediately absorbed into the music theatre family. Although Parham says she struggled initially due to inexperience, IWU gave her the tools she needed to succeed.

“My professors were wonderful and I never hesitated to ask for any help,” said Parham. “I always felt like my best interests were at hand.”

Utilizing the knowledge and experience she obtained in her classes, Parham secured roles in the musicals *A Man of No Importance*, *Chicago*, *Urinetown* and the comedy *Finding the Sun*.

Throughout their four years at Illinois Wesleyan, Karlin and Parham shared the stage only once, in the musical *Chicago* in 2005. While working on the production the two women became friends, admiring each other’s natural abilities and learning from one another.

Due to their heavy involvement in the department, they developed a close-knit group of friends and faculty upon which they could rely. “Many of my professors and peers were a support system both during my time at IWU and now,” said Karlin.

When Parham damaged her vocal chords the summer entering her senior year, it was this make-shift family of faculty and friends that jumped to her aid, helping to bring her back to health.

After obtaining their degrees, both women set out on different paths to the lights of Broadway. When Karlin graduated in 2006 she moved to New York City, working in multiple non-equity regional theaters before touring internationally with *Cats* for a year. After returning from her stint abroad, Karlin obtained her equity card and performed in regional theaters across the U.S., until attending an open call for dancers in *Ragtime*, in Washington, D.C.

To her excitement, she received a call back a few days later for her role. Currently, Karlin appears as the characters Emma Goldman, Kathleen and the Welfare Officer. Auditioning was a spontaneous decision for Parham, who was living in West Virginia and working on the production *To Kill a Mockingbird*. “My friend and I decided to drive the four hours to D.C. and audition,” said Parham. “I had no real idea that they would cast me at all.”

For faculty and staff who knew these women, their ascent to the big stage wasn’t a surprise at all. “Both women had the drive to carve out a career,” said Kelly Ullom, operations coordinator in the Illinois Wesleyan School of Theatre Arts. “That drive is very difficult to teach, it really has to be something that wells from deep within a person. They have to be persistent in their training and have the ability to accept constructive criticism, incorporate it and benefit from it. Lisa and Bry definitely proved they could do it.”

Jean Kerr, coordinator of the dance program adds that, “These ladies graduated as good people. They can recognize good work from bad and can appreciate the good work of others and do what they can to support these people.”

For the past few months, Karlin and Parham have been diligently working to prepare for the opening day. Their days begin with vocal warm ups before heading to the theater to start rehearsals. The eight-hour work days are jam packed with music and dance rehearsals, running the show and fittings for costumes and wigs.

In a few short months all their hard work will pay off when the velvet curtain lifts and the audience applauds. As the two fulfill their dream of performing on Broadway, they remain optimistic about how long the dream will last.

“The show has an open-ended run,” said Karlin. “I hope *Ragtime* runs on Broadway forever, and I have a job until the end of time.”

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