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Star Treatment

Evan Kasprzak '10 shares his knowledge of the entertainment industry with Illinois Wesleyan students.

Story by KIM HILL

When Illinois Wesleyan theatre arts instructor Sheri Marley told her dance students that Evan Kasprzak '10 would be teaching a master class on campus, she didn't have to list his credentials.

"They just went crazy," recalls Marley, who has taught dance and choreographed productions at IWU since 1989. "I overheard a few of them say, 'I can't believe he's here! I remember watching him on TV in high school.' I thought a few of the girls might faint."

Current theatre students get excited over Kasprzak for several reasons. They feel they know him from his star-making appearances on the Fox dance competition program *So You Think You Can Dance* (SYTYCD), they know his role as "Elmer" in the original Broadway company of *Newsies The Musical*, and they respect his reputation around the School of Theatre Arts (SoTA) for being the nice guy who's succeeding in a tough business.

This fall Kasprzak was back at IWU to serve as guest choreographer for SoTA's production of *Giant*, the first production of the musical after its New York City premiere. While on campus, Kasprzak taught several master classes and led a discussion for seniors about the business side of the entertainment industry.

Kasprzak was a music-theatre major at IWU when he auditioned for SYTYCD. After reaching the top 20, he danced each week for a TV audience of millions, including Kasprzak's classmates back at IWU who held weekly viewing parties. A third-place finish on the program landed him a place on the 40-city SYTYCD tour that fall. He returned to IWU, graduating in 2010, and then moved to New York. Within a few months, he was working in regional theatre, but his big break came when he was cast in Disney Theatrical Productions' *Newsies The Musical*, opening at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey before transferring to Broadway in 2012 and winning both Tony and Drama Desk awards for choreography and music.



Kasprzak performs in the Senior Talent Showcase on campus in the spring of 2010.



Evan Kasprzak '10 flies high in front of School of Theatre Arts Building. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Soon after *Newsies* closed in August 2014, Kasprzak appeared in a revival of *Can-Can*, again at the Paper Mill Playhouse. In 2015, he joined the star-studded cast of a Coen brothers movie, taught workshops throughout the country and married his college sweetheart, Britta Whittenberg '11.

Associate Professor of Theatre Arts Scott Susong, who directed *Giant*, jumped at the chance to bring Kasprzak back to IWU — the first return visit that his busy schedule had allowed since graduation. While on campus, Kasprzak took time from a whirlwind week of rehearsals, classes and catching up with favorite professors to answer *IWU Magazine* questions on how he came to IWU from the suburbs of Detroit, the importance of staying nice and why he never, ever messes with a fan who mistakes him for someone else.

More than just 'the dancer kid'

Susong says Kasprzak, already an exceptional dancer as a high schooler, was accepted to several other highly regarded college theatre programs. Susong believes other programs would have boxed in Kasprzak as "the dancer kid" and not pushed the hooper to improve his other talents. Kasprzak agrees: "I knew if I was going to be a working actor I needed to bring my voice and acting to where my dance skills were, and the wonderful voice and acting instruction really attracted me to Wesleyan. [At IWU,] I thought I could bring my voice and acting up to the same level that would make me a more employable product."

Tripping the light, and not always fantastic

"One of the things the School of Theatre Arts does is give students lots of independence, which is both a good and a bad thing, because you have a lot of opportunities to stumble and fall," says Kasprzak. "That's very important, because picking yourself up and dusting yourself off, that's where you learn and grow."

The right choice

"Coming off the high of *SYTYCD*, there was definitely the thought, I have this momentum. Should I just ride the wave and not come back to finish my degree? I'm so glad I came back. I have to give all the thanks to the faculty for urging me to come back and bending over backwards to help me get the credits I needed. Having my degree is something no one can take away from me. I graduated and moved to New York. I was there about eight or nine months and did *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* [at Kansas City's New Theatre]. Right before I left for Kansas City, I auditioned for *Newsies* at the Paper Mill Playhouse. I got the offer for *Newsies*, went straight there after *Joseph* finished, and *Newsies* ended up transferring to Broadway. We ran for 1,005 performances on Broadway across about two and a half years. So it all worked out."

Why he has a selfie with Channing Tatum on his phone

"In January and February [2015] I shot a film I'm super excited about. It's a Coen brothers film called *Hail, Caesar!* [scheduled for release on Feb. 5]. It's about a Hollywood fixer in the 1950s that has to keep a fictional studio's stars in line. I'm in this big dance sequence with Channing Tatum."

Starstruck, Part 1

"It's great to be able to be in a place where I can give back [by teaching workshops]. I remember being in high school and going to these workshops and looking up to teachers and faculty members. It's a little weird to think 'I'm one of these people now. How did that happen?' because I don't think I'm awesome. If I step back and look at my own career, I do recognize I've gotten to do some really great stuff and I know there are kids out there looking at it and saying, 'Oh, man, I want that.' I'm enormously grateful I'm able to support myself as a professional dancer. But I'm still looking at the careers of people like [Tony Award-winning choreographers] Andy Blankenbuehler [*In the Heights*] and Tony Christopher Gattelli [*Newsies*] and saying, 'Oh, man, I want what they have.'"



In the upcoming Coen brothers film *Hail, Caesar!* Kasprzak (far right) shines in a dance sequence with Channing Tatum.



Invited to choreograph the musical, Kasprzak puts the dancers through their paces.

Starstruck, Part 2

Because of *SYTYCD*, Kasprzak is still occasionally recognized on the street. "It's always the people you least expect. I got stopped a few months ago by a bike messenger, who said, 'You're that guy, you were on the dance show.' I said 'Yes,' and here's this full-tattooed bike messenger yelling, 'My wife and I love you!' I was just kind of like, 'Thanks a lot, man.' Another time my brother Ryan [also a contestant on *SYTYCD*] and I were walking down the street just after I'd moved to New York. This was not long after the finale had aired. A guy stopped us and said, 'You're the twins from *American Idol*!' I've always thought about having a little fun with people, like saying I'm the person if they mix me up with someone else, but I never follow through with it, though."

Nice is good

"One of the best bits of advice I got from my experience here, from alums coming back, other guest artists, the faculty, was to be nice to everybody. Your reputation is kind of all you have in this business, and that's so important. You never know when you'll be in an audition and the person next to you might be a director or choreographer for the next show, and they'll remember if you were a jerk to them. This wasn't a big hurdle for me; I was raised in Michigan with Midwest sensibilities, so fortunately I feel I haven't changed too much, and that's something I still try to follow: 'Treat others how you want to be treated.'"

Why dancers should also know philosophy and history

"The opportunities I had here at IWU, to be much more than just the 'dance kid,' inform my work as a performer. The more you know, the more you put in to it and the better you can make your work. It gives the work more depth. Becoming a better singer and actor made me a better dancer. The opportunity to take philosophy, history, religion, public health classes — all these made me a better actor, because it informs my experience and the knowledge that I put back into the storytelling. The very best performances tell an awesome story."

[Learn more about Illinois Wesleyan's School of Theatre Arts.](#)