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Alumnus and Voice Behind Broadway Honored

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Jack Waddell's low baritone voice quickly commands any room he enters, whether in his vocal studio in New York, where he coaches Broadway stars to perfect their song, or in Tommy's Grill on Illinois Wesleyan University's campus, where he reminisces about his days as a Titan.

"When I look around, it seems like yesterday," said Waddell, walking across the University's Eckley Quad. "Ah, Presser Hall. I lived in Presser!" he said of his days as a music voice major practicing for hours in the hall where music classes and performances thrive.

The 1963 Illinois Wesleyan graduate returned home this week to Bloomington to be inducted into his high school's Hall of Fame. His 50-year career has spanned the stages of Munich, New York, Amsterdam and around the world, but it started in Bloomington and with Illinois Wesleyan.

Waddell sang for the Bloomington High School choir, and joined a local community choir established by Illinois Wesleyan Professor of Voice Henry Charles. "He was amazing," said Waddell, tapping a finger at a photo of Charles in the 1963 Illinois Wesleyan 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," he said with a deep laugh.

Impressed with Waddell's voice, Charles arranged for him to take 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,'" said Waddell. "He also connected me with a scholarship for Illinois Wesleyan. He was incredible."

During his days at Illinois Wesleyan, Waddell jumped into student life, and began tackling the stage. "There were only a handful of black students then," said Waddell. "My roommate and I, James Levern Whitt, decided to conquer the campus. He took athletics, and I took the arts." While Whitt competed in football, wrestling and track, Waddell conquered the greatest test of all – the opera *Don Giovanni*.

"*Don Giovanni* is considered to be the most difficult opera in the operatic repertoire. You had to have perfect, almost conversational Italian," said Waddell, who knew no Italian and was taking a course in German with Professor William Bettger at the time. "I poured myself into it and lost track of a lot of other things," he laughed. "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 rolled in a low rumble. "The good thing is, I nailed the performance."

After graduation, Waddell went to New York, where it was assumed by his fellow performers that he would go into education. "I told them I was going to perform opera, and they laughed. They laughed! There were very few black people in opera, and almost all of those were women. I thought, 'I will perform.'" Opportunities were more open for black performers in Europe, so in 1967, Waddell moved to Germany. "Germany still has the highest number of opera houses per capita in the world," said Waddell. "Of course, I still knew no German, so I had to take a crash course."

Waddell enlisted in a six-week, intense course to learn German, but found himself uninspired. "I figured out the best way to learn the language. I would sneak out at night and go to the pubs. There you could find every accent from the natives," Waddell said. "My teachers would look at me and say, 'He doesn't do the homework, but he knows so much!'"

While studying in Germany, members of the Orchestra Bad Reichenhall heard of Waddell and came to hear him practice opera. "After hearing me, they signed me up as a visiting soloist, and I had my European debut," he said. The more he performed, the more German accents Waddell 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." Much as when he had wrapped his tongue around *Don Giovanni*, once the words came with song, Waddell became a natural. "I became a chameleon," he said.

Because of his knowledge of the language, Waddell never wanted for work in Germany. Yet it was an American tragedy that brought him international attention. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, Waddell put together a tribute for King, which consisted of a collection of classic, "negro hymnals." The show was broadcast on NBC in the United States. "All those who laughed back in the day didn't laugh anymore," said Waddell.

Waddell continued to sing and perform in Germany and across Europe for the next 20 years, always in demand for German stage and TV. The German government even issued Waddell his own passport, considering him an official German. While filming a crime series for German television in the 1980s, Waddell learned his mother was ill, and he returned to the United States. After her death, he decided to relocate to New York City.

"Now 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," said Waddell, who offered help to other singers throughout his time in Germany. "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 is close to many of his students who perform in Broadway shows from *Rent* and *Mary Poppins* to *The Color Purple* and *Lion King*. "I have close to 50 students now, some come to me and some are sent to me," said Waddell, who has been coaching 2007 Tony-nominated actor Brandon Victor Dixon since his days 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."

Waddell said he treasures his teaching and the chance to give back. "It is a lesson I learned here at Illinois Wesleyan," said Waddell. "To be the best you can be, and then help others see that same path."



Jack Waddell