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## IWU Grad Matt Raftery is Giving His Regards to Broadway

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Chicago  
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Locals

## IWU Grad Matt Raftery is Giving His Regards to Broadway

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--His "office" is the stage of Broadway's Palace Theatre on Times Square in New York. Eight times a week, he tumbles and cavorts across that stage, playing the role of the doormat in Disney's box office hit, "Beauty and the Beast."

Matt Raftery, a 1995 music theatre graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University, joined the 35-40 member cast in June. In addition to tumbling and performing some specialty tricks, he appears in a few musical numbers.

"I get to the theatre earlier [than other cast members] to do an extended warm-up," Raftery explained about his daily routine, "since my tumbling role is prone to injury. I try to be real careful and take care of myself."

Raftery, who is from Park Forest, Ill., and graduated from Rich East High School, also is understudying the part of Lefou, a comic character and sidekick to one of the play's principal characters, who sings a couple of songs. Lefou, Raftery explained, is the target of many pratfalls, he's hit and punched in cartoon-like fashion.

"It has been a whirlwind couple of months," said Raftery of moving to New York from Chicago, where he performed in a revival of Jerome Kern's ever-popular musical, "Showboat," at the Auditorium Theatre.

"It has been overwhelming for me," he added, noting that performing on Broadway was a "long-term goal for me, but it came up so quickly."

Raftery initially auditioned in New York for "The Sound of Music," where a caster spotted him and suggested he audition two days later to replace an injured "Beauty and the Beast" cast member.

"I'm replacing someone with tendonitis in the wrist," Raftery explained. "He could come back. I have another four weeks on my replacement contract, but it possibly could be extended. I also might be called on to do other things in the show. The future is a question mark."

"Beauty and the Beast" has been running on Broadway for three-and-a-half years.

"Ticket sales are great," Raftery said. "The show remains around third or fourth in Broadway box office."

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However, the show is getting a facelift at the end of September, when singer Debbie Gibson joins the cast in the female lead, Belle.

"We're redoing the show," Raftery explained. "We're going into rehearsal for eight hours a week in September."

Raftery lives in the Astoria neighborhood of New York's borough of Queens with his 10-month-old Golden Retriever, Jack.

"Life in New York," Raftery said, "is very fast paced. I didn't think it would be different from Chicago--since Chicago is a big city--but there are differences.

"New York," he added, "is very invigorating, but it also is sometimes exhausting."

After graduating from IWU, Raftery did a number of shows in Chicago, including the 1995 Disney production of "Pocahontas," a stage show at the Chicago Theatre that promoted the movie. He also went on tour with the show to Rome, Italy.

Raftery performed in "Showboat" from February, 1996, until the end of March, 1997. He had a number of small feature roles, including newsboy and sailor, was in the ensemble, and danced.

"I've always loved performing," Raftery said. "I started singing when I was three or four."

As a youngster, he performed in several local theatre and high school shows. "I found that I liked acting and dancing," Raftery said.

When Raftery began college, he knew he wanted to sing, dance, and act.

At Illinois Wesleyan, he performed in several mainstage productions, including "Most Happy Fella," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," "Magic Flute," "Baby and the Bathwater," and "My Sister in This House." He also performed in three dance concerts and in several plays produced by the university's laboratory theatre.

Legendary performers Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire--whose careers combined singing, dancing, and acting--are inspirations to Raftery. He also admires the work of actors Glenn Close and Harrison Ford, who recently teamed up in the summer film hit, "Air Force One," and two-time Oscar winner, Tom Hanks. Among Raftery's favorite films are "The Sound of Music," "Singing in the Rain, Woody Allen's "Bullets over Broadway," "Parenthood," and "Philadelphia."

Raftery is looking forward to a visit next month from Linda Farquharson, IWU associate professor of voice, who was his voice teacher.

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As Raftery eyes his career, he'd like to do choreography, perform in non-musical plays, and have the opportunity to appear in films and on television.

"My sights are very wide now," Raftery said. "Time will tell."

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,900 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and its Schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletic center, a \$25 million science building, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million liberal arts center. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching ranks Illinois Wesleyan a "Baccalaureate I" institution, a classification that places it among the 161 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges. IWU won the 1997 NCAA Division III men's basketball championship.