

Viva Ms. Boggess:

Alum shines in Vegas version of 'Phantom'

One of the brightest lights shining in Vegas these days does not come courtesy of Nevada Power Company, but in the form of Sierra Boggess '04 as she embodies the role of Christine Daaé five times a week in "Phantom – The Las Vegas Spectacular."

The role that may prove to be her star turn came to Boggess less than two short years after graduation. But first, she had to shine in an audition that would have filled even the boldest belly with butterflies.

To win the role of Christine, Boggess' singing had to catch the attention of two Broadway legends: Harold Prince, who has won more Tonys than anyone in history; and composer Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber, whose award collection includes Tonys, Grammys, Golden Globes and an Oscar. The pair was in search of the perfect cast to bring to life their revamped and reved-up Las Vegas production of "Phantom of the Opera."

"I had just gotten done studying about these two in my musical theatre history class," recalls Boggess. "I was so intimidated; not in my game at all."

But within a few short hours Boggess knew her future would include a famous phantom.

"It was one of the coolest days of my life," says Boggess. "Cool" days like these are making for a hot career in the short time since her graduation as a musical theatre major in 2004.

In choosing Millikin, the Denver native followed in the footsteps of her mother, Kellun Turner '69, and grandmother, Margery Coppenbarger Turner '56. She was joined in this family tradition by cousin and roommate Aubrey Ryan '04.

"I loved it," Boggess says of Millikin's cozy size and family feel. "It's a small school and you can get one-on-one attention. The teachers get to know your strengths and weaknesses and tailor their teaching to that."

Boggess particularly appreciates the amount of time she was able to spend practicing on her own in Millikin's facilities.

"I was constantly singing and dancing," she says. "I wanted to graduate a triple threat."

Mission accomplished, says Lori Bales, assistant professor of theatre and dance. "Sierra is skilled in all three areas," says Bales, who directed Boggess in Millikin's productions of "Into the Woods" and "Hayfever."

In addition to memories made on Millikin's stages, the university's international study program holds a special place in Boggess' heart. A semester spent in London her junior year "changed my life completely," she says.

Along with a newfound sense of independence, the U.K. offered Boggess a welcome break from performing, and the rare opportu-

nity to marinate in the London theatre scene. "I probably went to five shows a week," she says. "In one play, I saw Judi Dench and Maggie Smith perform on the same stage."

The fall following graduation, Boggess moved to New York City, where she landed her first role in only a matter of weeks, just as Bales had predicted. "I knew that her career would take off," says Bales. "I gave her two weeks from the time she arrived in New York, and that's about how long it took. That's remarkable."

A highlight in Boggess' blossoming career was originating the role of Binky in "Princesses," a Broadway-bound musical, and playing Cosette in the national tour of "Les Miserables."

She left "Les Miserables" behind last April, though, after winning the coveted role of Christine in "Phantom." The show opened last June on the stage of Vegas' The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino to rave reviews and standing ovations that continue to this day. Of the new production, the Chicago Tribune boldly declared, "There's no longer any reason to see this show anywhere else."

Boggess performs five times a week in the streamlined, but spiced up, version of "Phantom," which lasts 95 minutes with no intermission.

"It is a hard role to sing – really high – and she almost never leaves the stage," says Bales, who saw Boggess perform in "Phantom" last summer. "It was awesome to see her perform, knowing she is right where she wanted to be."

Boggess clearly loves every minute of it – in spite of the emotional and physical demands, and occasional mishaps.

The ultimate trial came in July when the sophisticated machinery that operates the high-tech set and its moveable floors malfunctioned in the middle of a performance. Unable to see the gaping hole that lay before her on the stage, Boggess fell into it, breaking her front tooth. In spite of the blood and shock that ensued, Boggess kept on singing – just before being rushed to the hospital.

"This is what makes her extraordinary," says Bales. "Her heart wouldn't let her quit singing."

"I want to enjoy this amazing job," says Boggess. "The worst thing I could do is take it for granted or not give 100 percent."

As much as she loves the music, it is the energy from the audience that inspires Boggess most. It is not uncommon for audience members to approach her after a show and thank her for providing a temporary escape from the stress of everyday life.

"My job is to make them forget their problems for however long the show lasts," says Boggess.



Photo by Joan Marcus

Sierra Boggess '04 performs the role of Christine along side Anthony Crivello as The Phantom in the Las Vegas production.

"It takes a lot of trust in yourself," she says. "You have to believe that you are where you're supposed to be, and know that you're good enough."

In Boggess' case, "good enough" is a bit of an understatement. Just ask the man who is arguably the most popular theatre composer of all time. After Lord Webber previewed the Las Vegas production of "Phantom," he informed Boggess that her rendition of the role was the best he had ever heard.

"Sierra just has 'it,'" says Bales, who describes Boggess' star quality as "an alchemical combination of her intelligence, determination and heart – which is big."

That alchemy will continue to transform Sierra into Christine at least through June 2007. After that, Boggess may return to the East Coast and her Broadway dreams. Though she has considered the appeal of television and movies, the stage still beckons the strongest.

"There's nothing better than performing live," says Boggess. "When I'm on stage, there's nowhere else I'd rather be."

Interested in seeing the show?

An alumni and friends trip from Decatur to Las Vegas is being planned to see Sierra perform in 2007.

For more information, contact Jackie McFadden toll-free at 1-877-JMU-ALUM (568-2586).