

By Jeanne McCartin for Seacoast Online

"I remember I was waiting for a call-back for 'Les Mis' from Alexis Dascoulias at Seacoast Rep. I was convinced I wouldn't get the part I wanted. I'd heard all the callbacks. When I got the call, she said I got Jean Valjean, I was on the bus. I jumped up on the bus and banged my head on the top of it. I was like -- anything that can make you that happy. Got to do it. That sent me in the right direction. I knew right then 'I'd keep on trying for it."

Miles Burns isn't insecure about his voice. If you've heard the young man sing, you'd understand. Strong encouragement started in grammar school and it's kept on coming. Burns, 20, opens his mouth in song and rooms -- even parks full of people -- grow still to listen to the rich sounds that emerge. He's got pipes.

He's also performed in theater, musicals naturally, first in school and then a few years back he landed a role in "Les Miserables, School Edition" at Seacoast Repertory Theatre. It being his first attempt at a professional show, he didn't expect much. He certainly didn't assume he'd get the coveted role, of Jean Valjean, which he of course wanted and, which of course his voice won for him.

It's always been about the voice, his safe place. Acting on the other hand remains a bit unnerving. He's continued to land roles including the lead in "Beauty and the Beast" at SRT, and the Lion in "Wizard of Oz" at Prescott Park. But he says he knows it's not his strong point.

"My acting chops aren't that good," says Burns, currently a junior, majoring in vocal performance at the University of New Hampshire. "I'm not that confident. But singing? I feel confident." Burns recently made the decision to pursue opera as a career. He knows that means being as good and as comfortable at performing as he is with his voice.

So Burns is taking a leap of faith. His next role is a non-singing part in "The Warmth of the Cold" at the Players' Ring (Dec. 29 through Jan. 14). The experience is made a bit more challenging because it's a straight role, he says. There is no humor to hide behind either -- the fall-back after the voice. ("I've always been able to do funny. I'm not afraid of that. It's the serious that makes me nervous. 'I've relied on my sense of humor. Some would say I'm loud and annoying some of the time.") He remembers the Lion in "Oz" as one of his best theater experiences simply because it married voice and laughs.

More challenging still is David, his character in "Warmth of the Cold," is polar opposite to the actor. David is a jerk. Miles, on the other hand, is known as a great, funny, good guy in the local theater community. The Somersworth native stands a half-inch shy of 6 feet. He's a big guy. But his standout feature is a massive head of bright red, curly hair, generally worn on the longer side, and obviously a bit unruly. The competing feature is Burns' oft-worn mischievous, good-natured smile, which reads right up through his blue eyes. It's a ready smile backed up by a genuinely nice person. Viewed in that context, David is a reach.

Not really, says director/producer Bill Butler. It's simply a matter of acting well, which, in Butler's terms, translates into relaxing and getting your technique down, something Burns is doing markedly well these days, he adds.

"I think he's fearing it less and less. He's realized all he has to do is sit back and be confident and calm and know, I can do this," says Butler, also an actor in the area. "I've equated my direction to musical theater in general. In a play 'I there's a rhythm. 'I When you have a long scene 'I you pause or breathe at this point, or that point. It's the same as in music. When I used that metaphor with Miles he totally got it. The next rehearsal he nailed it.

"Miles just needed to understand that acting wasn't talent, it was technique; experience, work ethics and knowing the language. 'I I think Miles will walk away from this production feeling a lot better about himself as an actor and an artist, whether he's an opera singer or a house painter."

When Burns agreed to the part, it was for a number of reasons. "The whole story is about how a family is coping with the death of the father of the family," says Miles. "A couple of months ago my father passed away. I got a call two days after I found

out about my father, (offering me the job). It was too much of a coincidence. I thought it would help me get through it"

Another reason was the challenge of a straight role, and the opportunity it offered to hone his skills. Butler directing also factored into the decision. Burns knew and admired him. Today, with time in rehearsal under his belt, Burns says the choice is paying off.

"It's already helping. "I Billy said, think about the character from the perspective of who you are and how you would deal with this situation. So, I'm putting more of myself into David, rather than David into me. I'm more natural on stage rather than forced," says Burns. "Bill will stop me and say, why are you saying that line.' He'll put ideas in my head I hadn't even thought of." Butler's made him question where and how he stands, why he'll put a turn to a phrase. "It opened it up for me, made it 100 percent easier."

"This play is the next step even for opera. I have to be able to act. "I feel I'm getting better. But, it's a step at a time."

In '06 Miles performed in the chorus of Granite State Opera's production of "Carmen." He was recently asked to return to perform in its '07 production of "Cavalleria Rusticana & I Pagliacci," which will star Daniel Rodriguez, the singing New York police officer of Sept. 11, 2001, now known as the American Tenor. Burns' first experience with GSO is what sealed his choice of career.

"Carmen' was the best experience of my life. I'd wanted in. I'd done some kind of opera things at the Bell Center. But I went to my first rehearsal for Carmen' and when the tenor opened his mouth I said are you joking? This is what I want to do! I've never heard someone just 10 feet from me so incredible." He was moved repeatedly by the performances of other singers as well, and impressed with the professionalism, and camaraderie of the troupe. "I thought, I could hang with these guys."

Opera is a huge commitment, but he's ready. Over the next 10 years his voice will continue to grow, he says. He'll continue to study, work theater, hone acting and take every operatic job he's offered. He assumes there will be grad school, and hopes it will be followed by a young artist opera program. "And if I'm lucky someone will offer me something," says Burns. "I'm definitely willing to do what it takes. It's pretty much what I want to do."