



MCDOWELL HIGH SCHOOL
GRAD FINDS SUCCESS
ON
BROADWAY

Mike Karns is playing Broadway,
but still has Erie Playhouse
Youtheatre in his heart.

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

Photos by Michael Lavine.

Erie native Mike Karns is making it big on Broadway — but not from the vantage point you'd expect.

This past fall, Karns, 26, served as co-producer of the Broadway show "Allegiance," starring George Takei and Lea Salonga. A 2007 graduate of McDowell High School, he now lives and works in New York City as a producer and social media manager. He produces concerts throughout the country and in London, and also owns his own agency, Marathon Live Entertainment.

Karns' enchantment with live theater began when his parents, Alan and Joan Karns, took him to see "Miss Saigon" during a visit to New York City when he was about five years old.

"I remember the awesome bag of peanut M&Ms that I ate, and the helicopter landing on stage — but that's about it," he says jokingly.

After performing in a church play when he was very young, his passion for theater grew when he was cast in the Erie Playhouse Youtheatre production of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" in 2000.

"I loved the community. I loved being around kids my age who were interested in coming together to create something. Honestly, though, I just loved being a big ham on stage," he says.

He went on to act in multiple plays at the Playhouse. He played the Lion in the "Wizard of Oz," Snowboy in "West Side Story" and Fyedka in "Fiddler on the Roof." The summer after his senior year in high school, he played one of the leads in "The Full Monty." Still, while he says performing was a "great deal of fun," he knew that it wasn't his true calling.

"I was in more shows than I can count growing up. I loved being on the stage, but knew that having a life as an actor wasn't something that I was interested in doing. It didn't fulfill my entrepreneurial spirit or hunger to be a leader," he says.

In about ninth grade, he grew interested in the "behind-the-scenes" aspects of putting a show together.

"The staff at the Playhouse helped nurture that interest and gave me many opportunities to try out other areas of the theater," he states.

He considers former Playhouse Executive Director David Matthews one of his biggest mentors. Matthews had also put Karns in touch with Jim Wilhelm, another Erie native who is a talent agent on Broadway.

"That introduction and that relationship with Jim — whom I now consider family — was the most significant catalyst to propel my career forward early on," he says.

Following high school, Karns went on to study stage management and lighting design at Penn State University. In the fall of his senior year, he netted an opportunity to serve as the stage manager for "Peter Pan," which was one of the largest shows in the program's history. Then, in the spring semester, he worked as the lighting designer for the school's spring production of "Rent."

His first big break after college came when he began working as a part-time assistant for two Broadway producers who were working on "Allegiance." He advanced from that position to associate producer, traveling to San Diego for the show's world premiere at the Old Globe Theater.

"I learned a great deal about producing and about leading people that I will utilize for the rest of my career," Karns says. "Additionally, I learned the ins and outs of social media management through my work on the 'Allegiance' social media channels, as well as working closely to help develop George Takei's social media outlets. The show was also where I met my fiancée, so another added bonus."

At the time, George Takei, who is known for his role on "Star Trek," had about 1.5 million social media fans.

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Photo by Leon Le.

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“My bosses who were producing ‘Allegiance’ decided that helping George build a social profile could only help the show. After working on it for about six months, they realized that it was becoming a beast in and of itself,” he explains.

Karns worked closely with the show’s producers to grow Takei’s brand; by the time he left the role, Takei had more than 6.5 million followers.

Karns then used his knowledge of social media to launch Marathon Live Entertainment following a conversation with his father, who’s a former superintendent of General McLane School District.

“He’s a hustler like me,” says Karns. “He said, ‘You know, Mike, I think you can make a real business out of this stuff.’ I realized that I could.”

Focusing on social media, MLE designs campaigns, produces pictures and videos, and provides customer management for multiple brands. The company took off after Karns was introduced to Jeffrey Seller, one of Broadway’s most prolific producers. He hired Karns to work on the musical “The Last Ship,” which features songs by Sting.

“As that show was concluding, he invited me to be a part of ‘Hamilton the Musical,’ which has since become a cornerstone of my business,” he says.

Despite his bustling schedule, Karns’ affinity for Erie runs deep. He encourages young people who have an interest in theater to visit the Erie Playhouse, which he calls a “hub for creative development.”

“It’s creating people who are working all over NYC and the world, on and off stage,” he says. “From Broadway to cruise ships to regional productions, alumni from the Playhouse are making a major mark in the entertainment industry.”

Karns’ parents and brother still live in the area, and he makes it a point to come back as much as possible.

“Erie will always be my home and I am always looking for opportunities to create possibilities for myself there,” he says. ■