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Celebrated Star

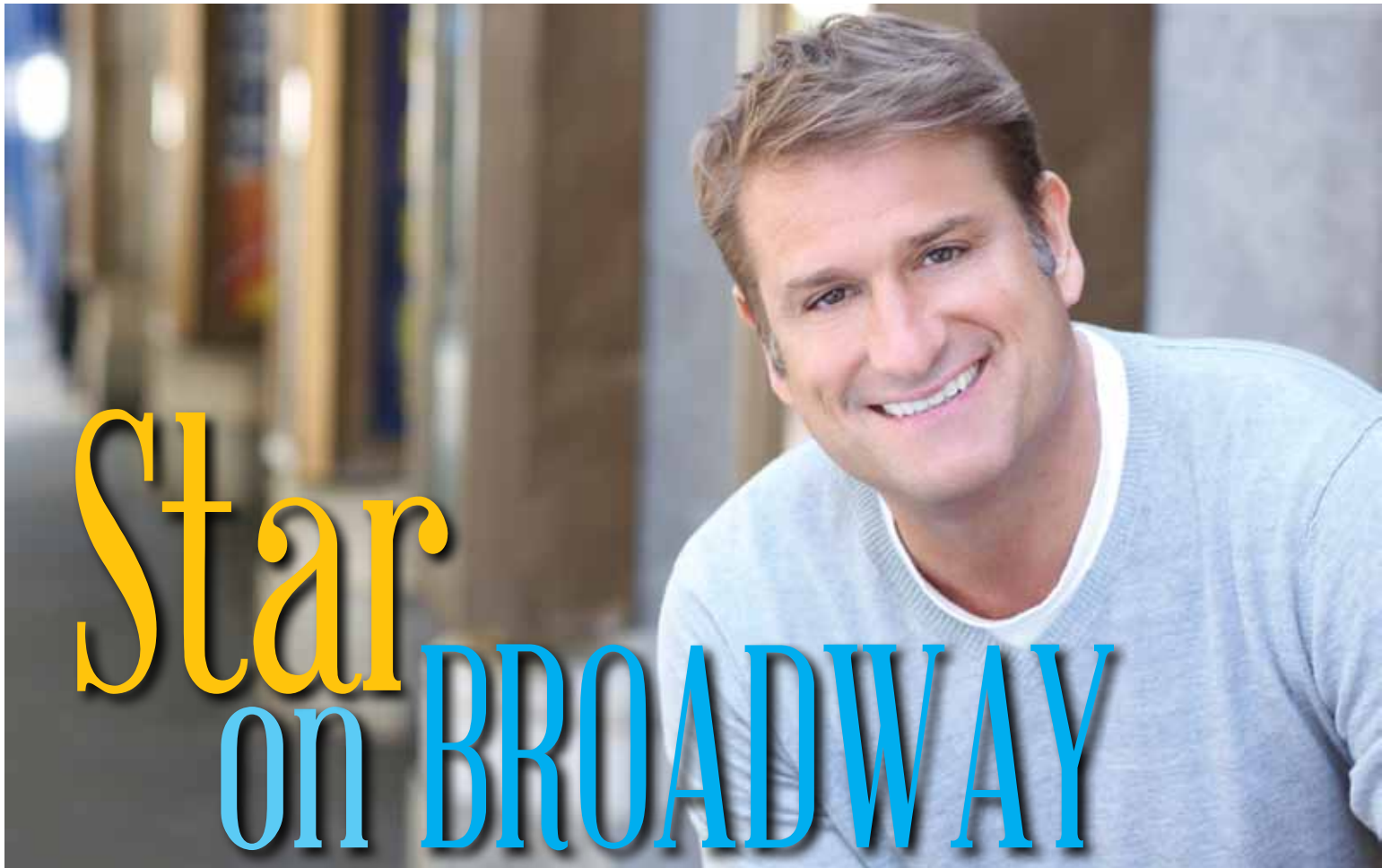
Pine-Richland's
Jeff Calhoun
lights up
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Star on BROADWAY

Pine-Richland native and celebrated Broadway choreographer and director Jeff Calhoun values his Pittsburgh connection.

By Jennifer Brozak

For Jeff Calhoun, 53, it all started with *The Carol Burnett Show*. Little would he know that, years later, his childhood fascination with the dancers on that show would evolve into a prolific career as a Tony-nominated Broadway choreographer and director.

Calhoun graduated from Richland High School (now Pine-Richland High School) in 1978.

As a child, he asked his mother to sign him up for tap dance lessons at the Fairgrieve School of Dance, a great local studio located in Gibsonia. Calhoun continued lessons throughout his school years, balancing his love of dance with his natural athleticism.

“Being from Pittsburgh, it’s somewhat mandatory to play football in high school,” he

says, laughing. “Every Wednesday, I used to have to leave football practice early to go to my dance lessons. That was a long walk off the football field.”

Calhoun, the team’s quarterback, did not allow the ribbing to deter him from pursuing his passion.

After a knee injury sidelined his sports career, Calhoun returned to the football field the following year – this time as the band’s drum major.

Calhoun began studying with Mario Melodia, an esteemed Pittsburgh dancer and choreographer. Melodia worked with the Kenley Players of Ohio, a prestigious summer theater troupe. At Melodia’s insistence, the 16-year-old Calhoun joined the troupe and performed in the production of Cole Porter’s classic musical *Anything Goes*.

Calhoun spent three summers with the Kenley Players, but says that each year, he had to make an early exit because of his marching band responsibilities, which involved choreographing the band’s halftime shows.

In the late 1970s, while still performing with the Kenley Players, Calhoun met the legendary Broadway dancer and choreographer Tommy Tune, who would become Calhoun’s mentor and also his longtime friend and professional collaborator.

After high school, Calhoun was attending Northwestern University when Tune invited him to perform in the first national touring production of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. He convinced his parents to let him withdraw from school for the 18 months the musical would be on tour.

"I made a promise to my parents that I would return to college as soon as the tour was over," says Calhoun. "Let's just say that my parents are still waiting for me to fulfill that promise," he adds wryly.

With Tune as his mentor, Calhoun immersed himself in the pursuit of a professional Broadway career. In 1982, he made his Broadway debut in the musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Although the show was considered a flop – he says it opened on Thursday and closed on Sunday – its inherent value was not lost on the young Calhoun.

touring productions of Maurice Hines' *Tappin' Thru Life*, Dolly Parton's *9 to 5: The Musical* and Disney's *High School Musical*.

After earning his second Tony nomination, he joked with his parents about his decision to leave college years earlier, "Now, I hope you think I made the right decision."

Despite his overwhelming success, Calhoun, who lives in New York City's Upper West Side, has never forgotten his Pittsburgh roots. Two of his biggest influences are his former band director, Robert Marshall, as well as Key Tronzo, a professional dancer



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Calhoun makes it a priority to return to Pine-Richland High School at least once a year to work with the school's theater students. For the past seven years, he has awarded a scholarship to a Pine-Richland student who wishes to make a living in the arts.

"Being in that show gave me very early experience dealing with the harsh realities of show business. It taught me a lot about how to overcome adversity in this business."

The following year, Calhoun was given the opportunity to temporarily star opposite Twiggy in *My One and Only*. This time, the show was a critical smash. Although he said the musical served as the "final bow of my performing career," the experience gave him the motivation he needed to pursue a career as a professional director and choreographer.

For the next four or five years, Calhoun took as many varying jobs as he could to gain experience as a choreographer. Then, in 1991, Tune invited Calhoun back to Broadway to collaborate on *The Will Rogers Follies*, which won the 1991 Tony Award for Best Choreography.

"When the show won for best choreography, it launched my career," says Calhoun.

Calhoun would go on to direct and choreograph the Broadway revival of *Grease*, for which he was nominated for a Tony in 1994 for Best Choreography. His additional Broadway credits include *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Brooklyn*, *Grey Gardens*, *Bonnie & Clyde*, *Jekyll & Hyde* and *Disney's Newsies*, which is currently enjoying an open-ended run and coming to the Benedum Center, November 25-30.

In addition, Calhoun has found both national and international success with

who choreographed local community theater shows and Calhoun's high school shows. Calhoun says Tronzo, who passed away in 2013 at the age of 93, was the first choreographer he ever met.

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"I want to do what I can to help kids like me who want to go into the arts," he says. "I've been given good fortune," pointing out that the arts as a career field is not always an easy path.

"It's too ridiculous of a livelihood to pursue unless it's in your DNA," he laughs. He said he encourages arts students to be kind and humble while pursuing their passion.

"It's a very small world and you never know who you're going to meet," he says. "As a young artist, you need to understand if you've been given a gift, it's selfish not to share it with the world. You want to put out a positive vibe into the world."

Always appreciative of his earliest influences, he adds, "Any chance I get to go to Pittsburgh – I take it.

"It's simply amazing how my influences from Pittsburgh have paved the way for the success I'm enjoying today. I've never forgotten that." ■