

local news

'Frankie and Johnny' Becomes a Tale of Multiple Johnnys

When the lead of the latest show at the Studio Theatre got in a car accident 10 days before opening night, the crew had to act quickly.

By **KRISTEN FIORE**
Daily Sun Staff Writer

There may have been only one Johnny on stage during the Studio Theatre at Tierra Del Sol's production of "Frankie and Johnny," but behind the scenes, it was a tale of three Johnnys.

When auditions were held back in August, Joe Llorens was cast to play Johnny opposite Whitney Morse as Frankie.

Frankie and Johnny are the only two characters in the show, which is a play about a first time together and a relationship that may or may not happen.

The cast began rehearsals in late November, but about 10 days before the scheduled Dec. 22 opening night, Llorens was in a car accident.

"It was the end of a very long day," Llorens said. "I was fairly close to the house and I happened to nod off for a split second. What they don't tell you about The Villages is that the trees come here to retire too, and they get real full of pranks in their old age. This one just jumped out of nowhere."

Llorens broke his right shoulder, forearm, ankle and a few ribs, making it a physical impossibility for him to continue with the production.

"It was honestly pretty heartbreaking," Llorens said. "Not only because I wasn't able to do the show, but because I can't shake the feeling that I let them down."

But, as they say, the show must go on.

It was quite a situation for the crew to be left 10 days before the show without a Johnny, a character who is not only half of the cast but who has about 65 percent of the lines.

While they were figuring out what to do, Morse worked with Timmy Walczak, Llorens' understudy.

"Timmy was fantastic and so prepared, but he had signed up to be an understudy, not to carry on the entire show," Morse said.

So, she offered the role to the Studio's resident director, Trevin Cooper, who accepted and then began what he said was his "nervous breakdown" of trying to learn the lines as quickly as possible.

"It was an experience," Cooper said. "I locked myself in the closet of my bedroom and started memorizing. I will say I didn't sleep a lot in those days. Basically anyone I could grab ahold of to run lines with me, I would ask them to — everybody from Whitney to my mother."

Still, Cooper said he had an advantage when it came to learning the lines: He had been the assistant director of a production of "Frankie and Johnny" 14 years ago.

Cooper knew he wouldn't be able to perform in every production. He had a wedding to officiate, and that would take him out of three nights of performances, so Walczak stood in.

Llorens, Walczak and Cooper each have a different take on Johnny, which meant Morse had to make adjustments to her own acting depending on who she was performing with.

"They're all working from the same source material, but it's coming through a different lens," Morse said. "If each of them were a prism, they'd have the same light source coming through, but they'd all cast a different pattern of light."

Morse said the biggest difference is in tempo. Cooper's was fast, Llorens' was slower and Walczak's was somewhere



Michael Johnson | Daily Sun

The cast of the play "Frankie and Johnny" at The Studio Theatre at Tierra Del Sol featured Whitney Morse, center right, as Frankie and the rotating cast of, from left, Trevin Cooper, Joe Llorens and Timmy Walczak in the role of Johnny. The original Johnny, Llorens, was injured in an accident and was replaced by Cooper and Walczak.

in between.

As Frankie, Morse had to pay attention to what they were saying and how they were saying it.

Morse said she knew what words were supposed to come out of her mouth, but she wasn't always sure how they would come out.

"There was this echo or ghost of Joe in my mind," Morse said. "I had to actively turn that off to make sure that I was on stage with Trevin and Timmy."

Llorens said while he feels bad, he was very happy to see how the cast and show recovered. "This has been an unbelievably daunting task for Whitney to incorporate three different people," Llorens said. "It's just two characters up on stage that whole time. I've personally been in awe of watching her navigate through this."

Morse said she and Walczak

only got to run through the show twice together before performing it in front of people.

"This is the story of a first time together, so it was almost as if Timmy and I were truly

having our first time together," Morse joked.

Walczak said for him, the experience was like a fly-on-the-wall process.

"I've done a lot of watching

the show, more times than I would like," he said, laughing. "Not to say that wasn't immensely helpful for me to be able to step into this role."

Morse said Walczak should be proud of his performance, because understudying a two-person play and having to jump in as the character who talks the most is an extraordinarily terrifying situation in which to be.

Morse said she knew this production would be a mountain to climb every night because of its intimate nature.

"But rather than being like an Aspen mountain, it turned out to be a little more like Kilimanjaro," Morse said.

Yet, all involved parties are in agreement that because it was a difficult experience, it was even more rewarding. They learned more about acting and about themselves. The show had to go on, and it did.

"For me, this show is a cast of four, and every time there's a performance that happens, it's a part of all four of us," Cooper said.

Kristen Fiore is a staff writer with The Villages Daily Sun. She can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5270, or kristen.fiore@thevillagesmedia.com.

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