

INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR, JOEL WAGGONER
NYC – MARCH 24, 2017



Steve Taft and Joel Waggoner after the show.



The Winter Garden Theatre - NYC

Joel Waggoner received his undergraduate degree from the School of Music at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) and his MFA from NYU's Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program. He is a composer, performer, vocal coach, musical director and violinist. Joel was a 2012 Dramatist Guild Fellow and his work has been performed in New York at Lincoln Center, 54 Below, Joe's Pub, and Merkin Recital Hall. He was featured as an actor and orchestrator at the Public Theatre in *Southern Comfort* and composed the music for the musical, *Presto Change-O* at the Barrington Theater Company which premiered in May of 2016. www.joelwaggoner.com

By happenstance I was at a restaurant in NYC relaxing and reading a script I picked up previously at the Drama Book Store. I looked out the window and sitting on a bench across the street was Joel Waggoner relaxing in between performances of *The School of Rock*. Being a graduate of UNI, he was on my list of potential interviews. We hadn't been able to schedule an official interview as of that time, but I quickly high-tailed it out of the restaurant and over to the park bench where Joel was sitting. After exchanging greetings we decided to embrace fate and we did an impromptu interview.

Steve Taft: Congratulations on being cast in *The School of Rock*, your first Broadway musical.

Joel Waggoner: Thank you.

ST: You've been doing the show for five months, eight-shows-a-week. How are you enjoying acting on Broadway?

JW: You know what's funny is every night I still ask myself, "Am I acting"? Am I doing this right?" Because if you feel like you're doing a perfect job, I question where you are and what you're doing? There's a part of you that's always feeling like, "Do I belong here? Did they make a mistake? Are they going to find out?" You know, the fraudulent imposter thing? I have that. So, I'm having the time of my life, but when you say I'm acting on Broadway, it still doesn't click for me at all.

ST: You are doing something that thousands of people have dreamed of, or never had the opportunity of doing . . .

JW: . . . or will ever. I could have gone my entire life without this experience. It very easily could not have happened. I didn't spend the last nine years of my existence here solely performing and auditioning and acting like all my other friends have, so it took a little bit of time for me to think that I deserve this, but everybody has a different route. Do you know what I mean? One of the other guys I'm in the show was like pre-med. He was a biology major. You never know what's interesting for people to watch. Sometimes a casting director may like somebody that doesn't have the polish or sheen of a musical theatre performer or actor.

ST: Sometimes that rawness can be intriguing.

JW: Yeah. I don't know if that's the case [with me], but I've also been teaching musical theatre and acting for a long time and now I've done something like 175 shows and we're going to keep going. I think we have tickets sold through like next January. So it will be very interesting to see how I last over the span of say, a year, (knock on wood), if they keep me. But already I can tell you that by the end of Sunday you've done five shows and you're a little tired. You're sort of like, "Ok, let's do this." And then Monday, Tuesday you only have one show a day so that's fun and fine and then Wednesday you have one and then your off (Thursday). But I have to tell you that after a day off I'm excited to go back.

[Note: Traditionally, "Dark Night" is on a Monday for Broadway shows, but dark night for the Broadway production of *SCHOOL OF ROCK* is on a Thursday with two shows Saturdays and Sundays and one performance the rest of the week.]

JW: I like the routine of it. I like that I have to be somewhere. Someone's expecting me to be there. And my characters fun because he's an ensemble member and I have a couple of laugh lines. I play a lot of back ground acting parts and have six or seven costume changes.

ST: How difficult is it for you as an actor to stay focused and quickly switch from one character to another in this fast-paced production?

JW: You know, it sort of does it for you. My challenge now is "Am I going as deep as I can as quick as I can?" Because the funny thing about theatre like this is, especially Broadway theatre, is it moves so quickly and it's so expansive, you have to be there, ready to go, however many layers, you need to go instantly. There's not a lot of warm-up time to it.

ST: Tell me a bit about the audition process for this show.

JW: It was my first Broadway audition ever and I felt like it was awkward, but I also was myself and I felt very relaxed and I was just talking to people, like people whom I'm seeing if I'll get along with them as much as they want to get along with me. Really, all you can do is try to be in the room and be relaxed and chill and be someone . . . someone people want to hang out with. And that's usually not an over-eager person, that's usually not a person that has a bunch of questions or seems worried or anxious or seems like they might like text you or email you with follow-ups, or somebody that's particularly picky or pushes too hard to get you to like them. All of those things that you wouldn't necessarily go on a second date with that person. So, you know it's a little bit of training. If you're getting feedback from your

professors that your personality is a little bit much or a little too much to handle on a first impression, if you want to do well at an audition sometimes you might have to feel that out.

ST: What did you present at the audition?

JW: I sang one song and I read the sides which I think were a total of four lines that I had to say. It was very quick. I was videotaped. I didn't hear back until the Friday, like three days later, and I got a call in the afternoon that said: "Joel, just wanted you to know that you're still on the top of a very short list for this part still. The director needs to watch the tape." And by this time I had let it go off the table. I was like, "Oh, that was a fun first try." But then I got that call and I thought, "You got to be kidding?" I was terrified. And she said, "We need you to know that if you do get the part you'll find out in the next hour-and-a-half and it means you'll have to start tomorrow."

My parents were in town randomly. They had asked, "When should we visit?" And I said, "Oh, I don't know, I have nothing going on this fall. So, why don't you come this week." So, they arrived in town on the day that I got this show. And I don't think they really knew I had auditioned for it, so it was a big surprise for them and I got to celebrate with them. So, they were there to celebrate when I had my first rehearsal and of course, they came back two weeks later to see my Broadway debut which happened to be the day before the [2016 Presidential] elections. Talk about highs and lows. It's another thing to be ready for in this life, the highs and lows of it all. But the audition was fun. It was a little strange. Getting direction, it's been . . . I'm much more comfortable singing than acting oddly enough. I'm OK acting if I'm myself, telling a story.

ST: Now, you were a replacement, taking the role over from someone . . .

JW: Yes, I replaced the original guy.

ST: We often don't talk about it in college much, but when an actor takes over for another actor on Broadway they are playing a "track". Who comes in and communicates with the actor regarding their "track"?

JW: For me it was the Assistant Director. I was lucky, because along with me there were eleven other people coming into the cast. So, it was a brand new transfusion of contracts and people going in. So, my rehearsal consisted of the new "Dewey" going in (the lead), and seven new kids and a couple ensemble people. We were the only ones in rehearsal. The music director was present, a different pianist every day, and the Associate Resident Director and the Assistant Choreographer. And so my entire track was taught to me by the Assistant Choreographer. I never met the original choreographer and I still haven't met the director. I met Andrew Lloyd Weber the first time the other day and I don't even think he recognized me. And he saw the show. It was crazy. Yeah, I've never met the real director of the show. The Assistant Director's been doing it. He's my point person. But it's funny because the Assistant Choreographer is also a "swing". So sometimes I'm on stage (because he has to go on) with the guy that taught me my role.

ST: So the first time you were on stage with the entire cast was . . .

JW: November 7th [2016]. Now, we had a "put-in" rehearsal. A put-in rehearsal for me, I know I was lucky. Every experience I've had with this I've been lucky because normally for a replacement you only get one-week of rehearsal and barely a put-in. I had two weeks and full put-in. A "put-in rehearsal" is

basically you go to the theatre at 2pm on a Friday, you get mic'd and in costume and anyone in the original cast who's doing it that night (they are in street clothes), and you run the show. Luckily enough for me I had full-band, full-automation of the set pieces that move, because we had a lot of new kids going in, but we did not have lights. All the house lights were up, all the work lights were on. It was very weird. And that's the thing that makes Broadway, Broadway. When you feel the lights on you and you don't see the audience at all, it's bizarre. I still can't believe . . . it doesn't make sense to me that I get to go do that in an hour. It doesn't make sense. Because it's fun! Ultimately, theatre is the same anywhere you go. The lights go down and it's the same experience.

ST: Being a composer of musicals yourself, are you able to not pay attention to the musical composition of the show and totally focus on the acting?

JW: Oh, yeah. It's never going to change and I have nothing to do with it. I've sort of found this amazing release in it, because the show is doing well and I want the show to do well and it doesn't need my advice if such and such is not happening. It's Andrew Lloyd Weber! I'm not going to argue with Andrew Lloyd Weber. Some other show I might go "If this song were gone it'd be so much better." I show up and I do my thing. I try to structure my days so that I am making headway creatively in my own right. So that if and when this goes away I have disappeared for awhile.

ST: Tell me a little bit about your musical, *Presto-Chang-o* which premiered at the Barrington Stage Company with an impressive artistic team and cast.

JW: We had an incredible cast. Jerry Spector, who was Franki Valli on Broadway [*Jersey Boys*] for six years, Tony Award-winning actor, Michael Rupert, Barbara Walsh, a Tony nominee, Marc Bruni directed *Beautiful* on Broadway, Ken Billington designed lights. He is the most well-known lighting designer in the industry (designing lights for the original *Sweeney Todd*). We had Derrick McClain who did sets for the Academy Awards [2013-2016]. It was an incredible experience. It was also a little traumatizing. It's the first production of a show that you've written (music) and what comes along with it are some real vulnerabilities. Seeing incredible actors do your work, but have the work not be what you want it to be and that would not be their fault, it's yours. And the audience maybe doesn't respond the way you want them too, that's all painful stuff.

ST: Have you gone back and . . .

JW: We haven't gone back yet because it was a lot. It was great . . . the show went well . . . I wish we could go back now and really enjoy the experience, but it was such a vulnerable time . . . it takes a little time to be brave enough to go back in. But, I believe in the piece and I had a wonderful time writing it and I think with some work it could be really spectacular.

ST: Now, being UNI alum. What advice do you have for students that are still in school?

JW: It's so funny. I was a music major crossing over into theatre and I've spent time spreading myself in all these different directions and then finally now I'm getting the opportunity to do the thing I really love doing and always wanted to do, but avoided it. So, I guess I would say, don't avoid doing the thing you really want to do and do it as soon as you can and get better at as soon as you can. Give yourself a couple other options, you know . . . so you don't starve. I'm not sure I'd recommend my journey per se, but it's mine.

Do as much as you can. Tell your professors to really tell you and to be honest with you. When's it going right, when's it going wrong. And help you have a real career. If you're going to a certain area, go there with a real plan, or a job you already have, or a group of people. Even if it's Chicago, sign-up for Second City even before you go or if you're going to do a regional job somewhere be "in" the show when you get there. The friends you make in the show and in the community can help you stay on track afterwards. I did a musical theatre writing program at NYU. That's why I moved to New York and it required me to be with a group of people everyday who were required to care about where I was and what I was doing and those relationships are the ones that got be off the ground, particularly the professors. I met Bill Finn when I got to NYU and he's the reason I got the Barrington job and the reason a lot of people know my music anyway. Hopefully, that was helpful.

ST: Very much so. I thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences, your advice and look forward to *The School of Rock* this evening.

After the show (which was outstanding and had an outrageously fun audience), Joel was kind enough to invite me backstage and onstage. I finally made it onto a Broadway stage! We chatted and took a couple of photos and chatted a bit more. Then he was kind enough to introduce me to Jenn Gambatese (Rosalie in *School of Rock*), an extremely talented performer and gracious in person. It was a good day.



Steve Taft and Jenn Gambatese backstage at the Winter Garden Theatre.