

Actor 'signs' for deaf in his theater debut

By Victoria Diaz
special writer

TWENTY-FOUR-YEAR-old Hubert Richards of Plymouth was laid off from his job as a CAD operator last month, and he has been smiling ever since.

"It gave me an opportunity to concentrate on something I'd rather do," he said.

What Richards — a theater lover of the first order — would rather do is devote practically every waking hour to preparing himself for an important role in the Wyandotte Community Theatre's upcoming production of "Children of a Lesser God."

Performances of the play, which focuses on the world of the hearing impaired, will be presented at 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, Feb. 26-27 and March 4-5, at Wilson School Auditorium in Wyandotte. A matinee will be given at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, March 6. For the hearing impaired, interpreters will be on either side of the stage throughout each performance.

Though Richards has often worked behind the scenes in high school and community theater, this is his first stint as an actor.

You might expect a neophyte to start off in an undemanding role, but Richards is having none of that. In the lead, as speech therapist James Leeds, Richards must not only speak his lines fluently in English but also must learn to communicate in a language that, only a year ago, he knew nothing about.

IN THE PLAY, Richards will supplement some half of his spoken lines by signing — the form of communication used by the hearing impaired. In addition, when lead actress Renee Garofoli of Taylor (in the role of the hearing impaired Sarah Norman) signs, he is required to communicate to the audience what she has said.

As pleased as he is with the way things turned out, Richards didn't exactly plan them that way. When he went to audition for a part in "Children of a Lesser God" near the first

of this year, he meant to try out for a minor role. Director Susan Finney saw Richards in the lead, however, and encouraged him to go for it.

Two weeks and four auditions later, he had the part. Not bad for somebody who had to compete for the role with two actors who had extensive knowledge of signing.

"I'd never really spent any time around the hearing-impaired," Richards said, taking time out between rehearsals. "But I'd seen the movie when it turned out to be one of my all-time favorites and that had sparked my interest enough so that, several months back, I bought a book on signing. The book, though, didn't really help me much because I was never able to communicate (to the hearing-impaired) on a day-to-day basis and use what I was learning."

Then at a local shopping center one day last December, he came across a copy of the original stage play by Mark Medoff. Only a few days after he finished reading the play, he spotted an announcement that auditions were being held for Wyandotte Community Theatre's next production, "Children of a Lesser God."

FINNEY SAID, "From the time he walked into auditions that evening, I knew he had that puppy, college look I wanted. When you cast a show, you have visual images of what you want, along with what kind of acting ability you seek."

It turned out, he had the acting ability. "There were four auditions in all," Richards said. "The first three, we didn't have to sign, but at the end of the third, I knew we were getting down to the wire and some of the others who were still up for the role were really fluent in signing."

Because he wanted the part so much, Richards arranged for a kind of last-minute crash course in signing.

"After that third audition, I went up to Susan and said, 'If you're worried because I can't sign — don't. Then, she said, 'OK, come in tomorrow, and be able to sign this monologue.'"

Robert Richards of Plymouth plays the lead role of speech therapist James Leeds and Renee Garofoli of Taylor costars as the hearing-impaired Sarah Norman in "Children of a Lesser God" at Wyandotte Community Theatre.



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

could pick something up. I already knew his acting was fine."

EPPERSON ACCOMPANIED him to the final audition, he said.

"I introduced Brenda to Susan that night, and let Susan know that she had signing ability and told her if I got the part Brenda would be available to coach me," Richards said.

"I think he did everything but offer me money for the role," Finney said, laughing. "I really liked his initiative."

Epperson has since joined the group as a consultant. Also acting as consultants for the production will be actress Lori Jeffrie — who is hearing impaired, and Gaoutol, who has studied signing extensively.

AFTER SECURING the lead role,

Richards found his work had just begun.

He and Epperson, he said, are tackling the job one day at a time.

"First, Brenda reads each line and shows me how to sign it. Then, we'll go through one act. She'll read all the other parts, and I'll do my (spoken) lines and, as I do them, I'll try to sign as much as I can. I've been able to get the spoken lines down pretty well, but when I have to work in signing along with them, it's very confusing for me because I'm trying to communicate in two different languages at one time."

Another difficulty occurs, Richards said, because what is said in spoken English is not exactly what is signed in American Sign Language, a more literal means of communication.

"THINGS THAT really mess me up are words like 'should,' 'would,' 'could,' 'do,' 'going to.' All of them have signs that are very, very similar, but still different."

"I'm working to get to a point where the signs will come so naturally that I won't even have to think

about them," Richards said. "The real difficulty comes now because I'm thinking about my lines and, at the same time, thinking about what I'm signing for each line. What I want to achieve is for the signing to be just a natural form of communication, just to flow along with my voice."

"Now, when I'm trying to sign and keep the pace up in my spoken lines, I lose the pace."

James is a kind of sharp-tongued, witty character," Finney said. "So, the lines have to come quickly."

WITH A role that would probably make even an experienced actor more than a little nervous, Richards seems unbothered and totally relaxed about it all.

"Whenever I walk into a theater, I feel comfortable and good," he said. "It's a very personal thing for me, something I love dearly."

I just have this feeling that, on opening night, it is just all going to come together. And when it does there's going to be this wonderful explosion of emotion onstage."

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