

# Student performer dazzles audiences with comedic ways

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Josh Funneman has been performing on the main stage in Dunham Hall Theater for a few years now, capturing the hearts of audiences with his comedic ways. Yet, if it had not been for his eighth-grade crush, this may have never occurred.

“I really got into theater stuff because my eighth-grade play — I had a huge crush on this girl, so I went and did it and I ended up getting the lead role,” Funneman said.

However, for Funneman, a senior theater and dance major from Teutopolis, success did not come as smoothly as one would think.

“The audition [freshman year] went terrible — I had no idea what a monologue was,” Funneman said. “[When] I came into this program, I thought I was talented — [but] I was a really bad actor. I came in the day of the audition, having memorized a monologue from a crappy movie, and I just bombed it — my words just stopped coming out. I don’t remember what shows were on that season, because I didn’t get called back for any of them.”

Theater and dance professor Chuck Harper said Funneman was enrolled in his beginners acting class his freshman year, and saw potential right away.

“My first impression of [Funneman] was he was a very raw talent,” Harper said. “He was really funny — that was clear — but had some issues with focus and honing in on what he was doing. His energy was really scattered. Over the last four years, what we’ve been doing is keeping his sense of humor, — his weird, wacky sense of humor — but to really be able to direct it and use it to maximum effect.”

Funneman said since he already signed up for the program, he might as well give it another try. This second chance came in the form of The Cougar Theater Company.

“That experience was awesome,” Funneman said. “[Theater and Dance Properties Manager] Kate Slovinski was in charge of it at the time and she is a saint. She takes actors like me who had no idea what they were doing, and puts on a show. What’s cool about it is that back then, the company would perform at the Wildey Theatre and children would get out of school to come see us. Kids are the best audience — you learn to get out of your box, to actually do stuff. My next three or four shows were with [Slovinski] and CTC, and that ended up being my training ground.”



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Slovinski, who at the time was production manager of CTC, said shaping Funneman was mostly a refinement of technique and using his strong suits to compliment and strengthen his other, less-prominent qualities.

“His first role was as the Frog Prince in which he had only one line, which was ‘croak,’” Slovinski said. “To begin with, Josh and all of his 6-foot lithe hopping was hilarious within itself. Then the subtext of how he said ‘croak,’ it’s so hard to explain, but he stole the show. To hear somebody say ‘croak’ with such conviction — croak as in ‘No,’ croak as in ‘What?’ croak as in ‘Stop it,’ all with just the word ‘croak.’ To see him not only do that, but pretty much walk away with the show when he was onstage, was when I was like, ‘This is it; this kid’s got the stuff and he’s better than I thought.’”

Slovinski said the next show her and Funneman collaborated on was a children’s melodrama titled, “The Perfumed Badge” and during this process was the first time she saw the true potential of Funneman’s comedic abilities.

“I remember the first moment it dawned on him he told a joke, but didn’t physically tell the joke,” Slovinski said. “I knew Josh was on his way to being as funny with what he said and how he said it, as he was with his movements. I remember that moment and thinking, ‘Oh my gosh there’s a comedian, I just saw it, it’s going to start, and it will start here.’ And that was huge for him and for me. I thought I knew how funny he was but we were just getting started.”

Once Funneman had developed his skills, he decided it was time to try the theater department auditions once again. Funneman said the Theater and Dance Department was quite different from the theater he knew prior.

“It’s insane [on the main stage],” Funneman said. “I came from my high school — our director was a guy who worked at Wal-mart and our stage was in the grade school gymnasium; they fold out uncomfortable chairs and moms are there to see you. But here, the community comes out to support us; it’s insane.”

Harper said the first time he saw Funneman’s full potential was in the play “The 39 Steps.”

“‘39 Steps’ was where he found the kind of role he can just nail — that really played into his comic skills,” Harper said. “I didn’t direct it, but I assumed he would be in it. He was still at that point [where he was] a little bit rocky in terms of his focus and his technique, so it was a really big step for him to get that big of role in one of the faculty shows on the big stage. Coming to see that show and seeing the work he did in it was the moment I was like, ‘Okay, it’s all coming together for him. He’s starting to really put the pieces together.’”

After roles in various other plays during the next two years, it was finally Funneman’s time to shine. This time, it came in the form of a play called, “Servant of Two Masters.”

“That was the best experience I’ve had, ever,” Funneman said. “My favorite moment of [‘Servant of Two Masters’] was one time where the Theater 111 students are forced to come see the show by their professor. I saw one kid with his notebook, taking notes from the show. So I jumped offstage, took his notebook from him and I wrote, ‘The actor portraying Truffaldino is both particularly talented and handsome.’ And I tossed it back to him and said, ‘Put that in your paper and you’re bound to get an A.’”

Harper said Funneman's role in "39 Steps" solidified his potential in the theater department and proved he could handle larger roles, such as Truffaldino.

"There are people who are good actors, but are they good enough to hold down a show, be the centerpiece of a show? He wasn't the centerpiece of that show, but the work he did in it was what told me he can be the guy — you can build a whole show around him, which is what 'Servant of Two Masters' was," Harper said.

Funneman has recently expanded his comedic horizons and taken to the stand-up world. He performs at Hey Guys Comedy Club in Fairview Heights most Wednesdays.

"Stand-up is awesome; you get to meet all kinds of people through it," Funneman said. "I got to perform with Dustin Diamond, Screech from Saved by the Bell, and Todd Bridges from Different Strokes — like, 'What you talkin' 'bout Willis' — I met Willis. I think [theater and stand-up] kind of inform each other. I look at stand-up as a play that I wrote. I know what hits and what doesn't. When you're actually writing about real things in your life, those tend to be the funnier things."

Slovinski said the two things one may see the moment that he or she meets Funneman is his enthusiasm and people-pleasing skills.

"If [Funneman] would have a spirit animal, it would be a golden lab. He's just so sweet and so inviting," Slovinski said. "What struck me was someone who was willing to pour it all into getting better at this craft and wanted so much to give. I thought, 'I have to work with this guy. I will find something just to have that kind of energy and enthusiasm;' I think that's something we don't have enough of in this world."

Harper said he hopes Funneman will leave the university with a greater sense of confidence.

"He's funny, and I think he's always known he's funny and has enjoyed that, but I think maybe he knows now that he can be professionally funny," Harper said. "He cannot just make his friends laugh, but through his work here and the work he's started doing off campus with stand-up, I think he knows that comedy is a potential career. I think when he got here he might have dreamed of it in a big, nebulous way, but I hope now he knows if that's what he really wants, he's got the tools."

Funneman said it means the world to him to have been part of this department.

"I don't care what kind of day you're having, if you go see a show like ['Servant of Two Masters'], you walk out of there a different person," Funneman said. "Being with these students and professors, everyone is so passionate and it's incredible."

Harper said Funneman is an interesting guy when he is not trying to be funny, something that happens to be his biggest challenge.

"What do you do when you can't be funny? How do you deal with a play or a scene where you can't use humor? For a lot of people, trying to be funny is very vulnerable," Harper said. "He's a stand-up [comedian] too and that's the most terrifying thing in the world that I can think of; I can't imagine getting up in front of people and either you're funny or you suck. So, for some people, comedy is a very vulnerable thing; I think, for Josh, he's more vulnerable the opposite way."

Slovinski said the biggest legacy Funneman leaves in his wake is how he shows others to follow their dreams.

“Many believe that school is something you have to complete and then begin working toward [the dream],” Slovinski said. “[Funneman], from that really genuine place of wanting to share laughter and to be onstage, he began working immediately with stand-up and continuing with shows. I think that’s the biggest lesson I can say I’ve learned from [Funneman]. Josh Funneman should remind you, your dream begins today — and that’s a great gift.”

Harper said some of the moments he felt he really got to know Funneman were the times standing around talking before or after class.

“He’s funny onstage, but he’s really funny and insightful offstage in a humorous way, just when he’s talking about life,” Harper said. “I’m a fan of the man. I’m going to miss him; he’s graduating and we are just getting to the point where he’s doing great stuff — but that is the point where he should be leaving.”

Funneman said he plans to stay in the St. Louis, Mo. area, audition around and perfect his stand-up performances.

“There is a girl who books comics and showed interest in working with me, so I’ll see if we can do something with that,” Funneman said. “Stand-up is something that I can pick when I’m performing. I’m still going to act as much as I can, but you have to audition and this and this. Stand-up, I can just go onstage and perform.”

Slovinski said as the end of his senior year draws near, she cannot wait to see what is next for Funneman.

“It doesn’t matter how great his career will become — he will never be the person that won’t give an autograph, won’t give a hug, won’t go back to where his family is from,” Slovinski said. “I don’t see, as powerful as the world can be in making us a little less warm, I just don’t think the world can make Josh Funneman a little colder — it’s just not in his nature. He’s the kind of person where when you hear his voice or see his name, you can’t wait to see what’s next. I’m just happy to know him.”

Funneman said acting has given him something he can be proud of for years to come.

“I got through high school with bad grades and thought, ‘This is something I’m good at,’ even though I wasn’t — but now I actually am,” Funneman said. “I think it just comes naturally to me; I’ve been making people laugh my whole life. Any time you can get me in front of people to do my thing, I eat it up. Personally, I can’t imagine doing anything else.”