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SPiN Wired Entertainment Editor

It’s 10:25 p.m., ten minutes before South Pointe’s production of “Interrupting Vanessa” is going to be presented in the South Carolina Theatre Association competition before a panel of judges and several schools from across the state.

The cast and crew are waiting backstage in a hallway alcove smaller than a typical office break room. Merely two hours ago, they had been taking apart and rebuilding pieces of their set that had been warped on the drive over. The part of the wall that held the door had fallen over and nearly destroyed another school’s set. Tensions are tangible, practically radiating off of everyone in waves.

In the middle of this crowd is Tyler White, dressed in a green shirt with a bright yellow hoodie and khaki pants, the signature look of Timmy Fibbins, the ten-year-old autistic boy White plays in “Vanessa.”

“We were all extremely nervous,” White said.

White had every right to be nervous. By playing a character with a mental disability, he was opening himself up to a lot of criticism, not least of which was from himself.

“I was very intimidated – I still am very intimidated by it because I knew [Timmy] was a very delicate character to play,” White said. “I was treading in waters I had never been in before.”

Despite his reservations (and maybe even because of them), White started extensively researching autism, watching movies and TV shows involving autistic characters, and even observing a special needs class with Teacher Cadets..

South Pointe theatre instructor and “Vanessa” director Jimmy Chrismon told White that he needed more believability. “I remember him saying, ‘I need to know that you are autistic,’” White stated. “I realized that if I did too much, I might be offending someone, so that’s when I really became hyper-aware.”

This awareness drove White to intense analysis of the script in order to figure out what Timmy would be thinking and feeling during specific lines, allowing White to properly place nervous ticks without going overboard. “Once I found those spots, when the show opened, I had gotten used to doing them at those times… I was still worried about overdoing them, but I knew I had the timing right.”

This careful analysis combined with his previous real-world research about autism lead to White’s performance earning him the award for Best Actor at SCTA over all of the actors from the other 30-plus schools, with “Interrupting Vanessa” winning fifth place out of over thirty schools.

Long before he walked across the stage within Furman’s McAlister Auditorium to receive his Best Actor trophy, White’s theatre career began in his first grade year when he played Foxy Loxy in “Chicken Little.”

“My mom always tells me I stole the show with that character,” White said, laughing as he remembered this.

His promising theatre career was then put on hold until sixth grade when he was cast in “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.” He’s been actively involved ever since, both in the performance and technical aspects of theatre.

Despite the award, White felt that the comments from audience members were rewarding by themselves. He had many encounters with people who personally connected with the show and his character specifically because they had family members or students with autism.

“Before the show, I got to talk to two people from [a York high school] because they noticed that there was a puzzle piece on our [‘Interrupting Vanessa’ show] shirts and they asked if our show was about autism… I told them I played an autistic child and they told me that one of their siblings was autistic, so I asked if I could talk to them after the show,” White said. “I caught up with them on Saturday [two days after ‘Vanessa’ performed] in the dining hall and asked them how they liked the show and the teenage girl looked at me and said, ‘I bawled the entire time. I was so touched.’”

“I kept thinking, ‘How in the world could *I* make someone react like that?’ It just doesn’t seem real… that I connected with someone on that level.” White said. “I guess I did something right.”

In fact, these judges were so impressed by White’s performance that before they met him, they genuinely thought that he was autistic, with one of the judges commenting that before she spoke with White, she was going to tell Chrismon that he had made a very brave choice casting an actual autistic boy in the role.

In fact, White’s performance even had some South Pointe teachers questioning whether or not he actually had a mental disability. Cindy Koon, who teaches Journalism at South Pointe, stated, “When I was watching him, I leaned over to Joe [Koon] and said ‘I know I know him… You’ve taught him…’ But I was still almost wondering if he was autistic.”

The process of congratulating White was something that people from across South Carolina took part in. “People from Northwestern, people from York, people from all over were just saying that I did awesome.”

White said some of the most enthusiastic responses throughout the entire process, from the performance to his award, were the students from Northwestern’s theatre department. In fact, one of Northwestern’s students predicted White’s future win.

“One of my friends over there… he just ran right up to me and gave me a big hug and said, ‘You guys did a great job,’” White recalled. “And then he said, ‘You know you’re going to get that award, right?… That’s yours. There’s no way it’s anyone else’s.’”

“[Our performance] was late at night,” White said. “When we were getting adjudicated, only one school stayed and that was Northwestern… We were completely gracious to them… Just the love that they showed us after that—it just blew us away.”

Despite all of the recognition he has received, White has remained incredibly humble.

“I’m still getting used to it,” White said. “I consider myself lucky to be among the best, that have had that title, that have been considered the best in the state. I just considered myself to be *among* them—I’m not the best, but *among* the best.”

Receiving this award has boosted his interest in pursuing theatre in the future, according to White. He’s currently considering going into theatre education or technical theatre, or even going to New York after college and travelling.

He’s also been put on the radar for colleges as a result of his win. “It’s hopefully opened the door a little wider in that respect,” White said. “I’ve always wanted to go into theatre every since I got back into it… This has definitely pushed me and made me believe in myself a lot more.”

White will perform in South Pointe’s production of “The Wizard of Oz” as The Cowardly Lion this spring. He will also continue to be very active in South Pointe’s technical theatre department until he graduates.

As his senior year continues, White is very clear about how honored he feels to have taken part in a production like “Interrupting Vanessa.”

“The only words I can say are thank you… Timmy is a part of who I am now and I will always treasure that.”