

Tampa Bay Times

WINNER OF 12 PULITZER PRIZES

Tampa teens represent Straz in Broadway competition

By Sheila Mullane Estrada, Times Correspondent

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TAMPA — A week after performing on Broadway, local high school students Maggie Musco and Christian Meany still have stars of wonder in their eyes.

When they describe their experiences in a national competition at New York City's Minskoff Theatre on June 26, their voices become animated and their smiles widen to grins.

They also say they learned some important life lessons: the importance of being a "nice person," of working well with others, of "giving 110 percent," and of being able to accept temporary setbacks confident that "there is a part for everyone."

Maggie, 17, and Christian, 18, were picked from among 32 Tampa Bay area students who competed at the Straz Center for the Performing Arts on June 4 to represent the Straz at the 2017 National High School Musical Theatre Awards, sponsored by the Broadway League Foundation.

The Straz Center competition also awarded a \$500 Spirit of the Straz college scholarship to Blake Royster from Clearwater Central Catholic High School.

That school, as well as Palm Harbor University High School, Berkeley Preparatory School, Howard W. Blake School of the Arts and Alonso High School were also recognized for their "outstanding" musical productions.

Two weeks after learning they had won the Straz nomination, Maggie and Christian were on a plane to New York City where they would be immersed in the world of Broadway theater.



For nine grueling 12-hour days, they joined 72 other students from across the country to rehearse with professional directors, producers, coaches and actors before competing for a Jimmy® Best Actor Award and a \$10,000 scholarship.

They sang, they danced, they acted, and have few regrets at not winning. (The winners were Orlando students Tony Moreno and Sofia Deler.)

"You don't go there expecting to win. Just to go was a wow type of thing," Maggie says, laughing.

"Even the kids who won didn't expect it. There were so many talented people, it was kind of luck of the draw," says Christian.

Suzanne Livesay, the Patel's vice president of education and their chaperone in New York, said her heart beat fiercely when the two students performed.

"It was like they were my own kids," she says. "I was a cheerleader for them."

Maggie's coach was Howard McGillen, Broadway's longest running Phantom in *Phantom of the Opera*.

The final night, the boys' dressing room was next to the event host, Ben Platt, who won the 2017 Tony Award for his leading role in *Dear Evan Hansen*.

"The girls were all jealous," says Maggie.

But it was far from luck that they were selected in the first place to compete in the Jimmy Awards, named for James M. Nederlander, a leading Broadway theater owner and producer whose plays and musicals won 11 Tony Awards.

Both students have been performing for a decade in local shows at their schools, as well as in community theater or at the Straz Center's Patel Conservatory.

Christian qualified for the Jimmy competition as Will Bloom in his school's production of *Big Fish*.

But his favorite role was playing Shrek.

"I had to wear about three fat suits and it took about an hour each night to put on the makeup," he says.

Maggie was picked for her performance in two roles — as Wednesday Addams in *The Addams Family* and as Audrey in *Little Shop of Horrors*.

"I am not like Wednesday at all, but I liked how confident and fierce and powerful she is, how she finally embraces herself," she says.

They both reprised their winning roles in Jimmy competition medley performances.

As for their future, Maggie and Christian admit they are tempted by Broadway lights, but are also practical.

Christian recently graduated from Tampa Catholic High School and performed at Alonzo High School, which has an active theater program. He will attend Florida State University in the fall where he plans to double major in theater and political science.

He says he loves the theater, but is aiming for a different kind of stage: that of a trial lawyer.

"As a child I was really shy," Christian said. "With the theater I was able to come out of my shell. I love the attention now."

Maggie will be a senior at Plant High School in the fall and is looking forward to majoring in theater arts in college.

"I love performing, but I also love teaching musical theater," Maggie said. "Kids are just so open to everything. I love that."

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