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School of Acting Grad Embraces Variety and Taking Risks

School of Acting alumnus Sean Gunnell (right) in Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center's production of Cabaret. Photo courtesy of Sean Gunnell.

BY DOROTHY O'DONNELL

Academy of Art University School of Acting alumnus Sean Gunnell hadn't been in a musical since he was a kid. But when his girlfriend encouraged him to audition for Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center's production of *Cabaret* last fall, he was up for the challenge. Set in a 1930s Berlin nightclub, the play captures the city's sinister transformation under the Nazi regime. Usually cast as a good guy, Gunnell hoped to land the role of a villain, Nazi Ernst Ludwig. He prepared diligently for the audition, working especially hard on his singing. But when his big moment arrived, he choked.

"I went into the audition and bombed," said Gunnell, who graduated from the Academy in 2013. "The pianist began playing, and I forgot where to come in and my voice constricted."

To his shock, he got called back for another audition that included dancing. Gunnell felt like a fool as he stumbled along with a group of professionally trained dancers. He considered bolting after his less than graceful performance but stuck around for another chance to read and sing. The play's two directors asked if he'd be interested in reading for the role of Clifford Bradshaw, one of the main characters. Gunnell figured he had nothing to lose. The next day, he received an email offering him the part.

"I had this terrible audition and felt so awkward at the callback, and here they were offering me a leading role," he said.

School of Acting alumnus Sean Gunnell. Photo courtesy of Sean Gunnell.

The production ran for six weekends and was a big hit. Gunnell appreciated the directors for pushing him to get out of his head and approach his character from a more instinctual place.

"I related a lot to Clifford," he remarked. "As an American writer living in Germany, he was a fish out of water. As an actor, I've devoted most of my time and energy to film and straight plays. Stepping into the world of musical theater was very foreign to me. I felt uncomfortable and ungrounded, but excited to experience it all."

Diane Baker, executive director of the Academy's School of Acting, attended a performance of Cabaret and called it "stunning."

"I had only heard Sean sing a little bit before, but when he sang in the show, his voice was perfect," she said. "He can sing, he can move around a bit and he can act—he does it all."

Gunnell's positive attitude and willingness to take risks have brought many other acting opportunities his way. He's worked with director and writer Tony Gabaldon on a spec Doritos commercial for the 2016 Super Bowl and several Internet spoofs. Last year, Gabaldon wanted to cast Gunnell in one of two leads in *Collar*, a short film he wrote about an encounter between a priest and a regular guy (aka the Tall Man). But the director and producer Gabaldon teamed up with, Russ Emanuel, envisioned a higher-profile actor in the role.

"Troy was selling me to Russ," said Gunnell. "He wanted Russ to meet me, so I went location scouting with them. Within half an hour, we were laughing and talking. There was no awkwardness."

A couple of days later, Gunnell checked *Collar's* IMDb page and discovered he'd been cast as the Tall Man.

"It was the biggest short film of my career," he said. "It felt like we were creating something really special. We didn't know how special until we wrapped up post-production and started submitting *Collar* to film festivals."

So far, the film has been accepted by 16 festivals around the world, including the Culver City Film Festival and the Global

Film Festival Awards. It has also received a number of honors.

Along with his stage and film work, Gunnell stays busy with a variety of other acting gigs. They include playing a veteran for a USC School of Social Work program for students training to be therapists specializing in helping vets.

"Their job is to build a rapport with me, and get to know me, so I can hit specific information points for them to ask further questions and figure out what's going on with the veteran," explained Gunnell. "I trained with actual veterans to honestly portray what it's like for them to come home post-deployment."

He also recently signed on with The Blackwell Files, a San Francisco modeling agency that casts individuals in photo shoots and videos for corporations such as Google and Apple. In addition, he pursues background work on TV shows and chances to be an extra in films. Gunnell admitted his schedule can be erratic—he might get booked for a job late in the evening and have to be on set at 7:30 the following morning. Or have a dry spell where he goes a couple of months without work. But Gunnell wouldn't have it any other way.

"Every day is different," he said. "I'm constantly trying new things and setting new goals. This is what I'm planning on doing for the rest of my life and it makes me so happy. My message to other actors and performing artists is never give up on your dream. We all get to where we want to be in our own way."

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