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Living ♦ Entertainment

Performer draws on past to create her present role

Stephanie Graham stars in return of Johnny Belinda to Festival's stage

BY SALLY COLE

The Guardian

When Stephanie Graham was a little girl, her grandmother gave her a book on sign language.

Little did she realize that the signs that she studied for fun would some day come in handy for her role in a major Canadian musical.

"In Grade 6, I learned the (sign language) alphabet and I never forgot it. Every so often I go over it. As a dancer I retain movement very well," says Graham who plays a deaf mute woman in the Charlottetown Festival's production of Johnny Belinda.

Back by popular demand, the musical adaptation of Johnny Belinda had its world premiere on July 1, 1968 at the Charlottetown Festival, becoming one its most loved productions to ever grace the festival stage.

Since then, the show has returned to play on Confederation Centre Mainstage in 1969, 1974, 1975 and 1983. In addition, it completed a cross-Canada tour in 1973 and an Ontario tour in 1983.

The poignant story about Belinda MacDonald whose world opens up after she learns to communicate with sign language opens Friday, June 20 at Confederation Centre of the Arts.

Playing the role of a physically disabled person has created some personal challenges for the 23-year-old Waterloo resident.

"It's quite an emotional journey. During the first week of rehearsals, I kept going home in tears, thinking 'what am I doing in this business?'"

The first challenge facing the talkative actor/dancer/singer was learning to become quiet. Oddly enough, it was developing this skill that allowed her to switch from her verbal world to the interior world of thought and feeling.

"At rehearsals I try not to talk to anyone and this is hard. My co-star Paul MacQuillan (who plays Dr.

Jack) is an extremely funny person and he's always joking around.

"At times, it's very hard to block him off . . . I tell him, 'Paul, I'm not listening to you, I'm deaf,'" she laughs.

Next came the hurdle of getting into her character's personality.

"I had to understand — how does this woman think when she doesn't have words? What does she think about?"

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— Stephanie Graham

"My inner monologue couldn't be sentences because the character has never had any use of language. She only has emotional or physical feelings, she doesn't understand about sentences."

In retrospect, the easiest part of her research has been refining the hand signs that she learned as a child. Earlier this spring, both Graham and MacQuillan studied with a sign language teacher in Toronto.

"Being a dancer I picked it up a lot faster. It feels like choreography sometimes, especially when we do the Lord's Prayer. . . The Lord's Prayer becomes a dance," says Graham, who read books on communicating with the deaf and watched Children of a Lesser God while researching her role.

It will be a busy summer for Graham, who also plays Prissy Andrews in Anne of Green Gables and is understudying the Ladies of Avenel.

"I'm looking forward to it very much," says Graham, a graduate of the Sheridan College Music Theatre



STEPHANIE GRAHAM practices sign language in a scene from Johnny Belinda, a musical written by Elmer Harris. The 23-year-old native of Waterloo, Ont., is playing Belinda

MacDonald in the musical about the deaf mute girl. Graham is also in Anne of Green Gables — the musical where she plays Prissy Andrews.

Guardian photo by Sally Cole

Performance program.

In addition to her film and television and theatre training, she has studied dance for many years at the Carousel Dance Centre,

Bann School of Fine Arts and the National Ballet School.

Her theatre credits are numerous and include appearances in Nonsense, at

Theatre Brockville and Red Barn Theatre, West Side Story at Huron Country Playhouse and for Applause Applause she performed in A Chorus Line.