

Finding Nemo - The Musical shows Disney's Broadway quality

by Andy Cingolani

On a shimmering sea-green stage at Disney's Animal Kingdom, Grant Norman is performing as Bruce, a great white shark struggling to maintain his will power in the presence of Dori and Marlin.

"Fish are friends, not food," he repeats with his shark sidekicks, Anchor and Chum, in *Finding Nemo—The Musical*.

On stage, the performers are focused on the precision of their choreography and their singing, as well as the manipulation of the character puppets.

For Grant, though, this scene also means that he is only seconds from his favorite moment in the performance: his solo.

He steps out from under the Bruce puppet and into a blue spotlight.

"The stress of life in the ocean will lead to emotional eating," he sings. "When you need help getting through it, and kelp just won't do it, don't start feeding!"

After 17 years performing on Broadway and touring around the country, Grant joined the cast of *Nemo* in February 2011. His Broadway experience includes playing the lead role in *Phantom of the Opera* in London and touring across the United States.

"I reached a point where I wanted to raise a family," he said. "We moved to Orlando to be near my in-laws. At the time I just assumed that I'd have to change careers."

One day, he decided to audition at Walt Disney World and see what happened. "I had no expectations," he said. "We were annual passholders and I had been very impressed with the quality of the shows. So I auditioned and landed a role on this show. And I couldn't be happier with the way it's worked out."

For Billy Flanigan, the path to his spot on the *Nemo* cast took a dramatically different route. In fact, with more than 30 years as a Disney performer, it's practically the only job he's ever known.

"I spent quite a few years in the *Tarzan Rocks!* show, which was a lot of fun," he said. "I was Ken in the *Barbie* show. I was the emcee for the Disney holiday parade, which was a lot of fun interacting with the guests. But this show is the highest production quality I've ever been a part of."

To create this level of entertainment, ample resources have to be committed. For example, the approximately 70 *Nemo* puppets were designed by Michael Curry, who also worked on *The Lion King* for Disney, as well as on Super Bowl halftime shows and Olympics opening ceremonies. The musical score was written by Robert Lopez, who earned Tony Awards for his work on *The Book of Mormon* and *Avenue Q*.

"In my opinion," Billy said, "if they made this show longer, they could take it on Broadway. It's that good."

As Grant steps back toward the stage after his solo, the performers move back into formation under the puppets swimming gracefully above them. Bruce's movement and expression convey a playful flirtation with Dori then switch seamlessly to a more menacing stance toward Marlin.

It's as if his performance is simultaneously alive with movement and emotion, yet completely invisible to the audience.

"It's a magical experience," Grant says. "For me, as well as for the audience. It's almost like playing two characters at the same time. I have to make that puppet come alive. Otherwise, it's just a big fish on a long stick."