



TALLAHASSEE'S SUNDAY MAGAZINE

Breaking the mold

Young actor Ryan Harris
takes a leap with lead
in TLT production



Ryan Harris caught acting bug at Leon High

Actor 'throws inhibitions to the wind' to play gay character in TLT's 'The Little Dog Laughed'

By Dana Edwards
Special to the Democrat

Standing 6 feet 4 inches tall and sporting ear gauges and dreadlocks, Ryan Harris, 24, says it's hard to get cast in the Tallahassee theater world. That's one of the reasons he's so thankful for the opportunity to play a leading character in Tallahassee Little Theatre's upcoming production of "The Little Dog Laughed."

Harris, who is African-American, plays Mitchell Greene, an on-the-rise movie star — a role written for a white male. He appreciates the fact that director Randi Atwood has given him the chance to portray the character.

"I feel like it's the first time someone looked at me and they didn't have to 'fit' me in," Harris says. "I always like breaking the mold. I've been doing it since I was born."

Harris started his theater career at the age of 16 when he missed the try-outs for the Leon High School basketball team, and drama was the only class available for his schedule. He enjoyed drama so much that he stayed with it until graduation, and still stays in contact with teacher Rod Durham, a local director and actor Harris says is one of his "most favorite people in the world."

A district theater competition became the defining moment when Harris chose his career. In total,

Leon High students earned 18 "superior" ratings for their performances. Three of those awards belonged to Harris.

"Mr. Durham was so excited for us that he set up a performance at FSU so our parents could see 'The Superiors,' as he called us," Harris recollects. "I must have done my sketches more than 40 times, but something about that night felt new and real — I wasn't tired of it. I wanted to have that feeling forever."

For the past year Harris has been singing and dancing in musicals around Tallahassee and Quincy. With a background in the martial art of capoeira, Harris has become known for his ability to do flips and learn choreography quickly. But he was anxious to get back to non-musical theater.

"I like trying out different interpretations, improvising and bringing myself to whatever the character is supposed to feel," Harris explains. "I try to tie the emotions to the lines — that makes them easier to remember."

'Bits and pieces'

Memorizing the tremendous number of lines for a four-person play didn't faze Harris. For "The Little Dog Laughed," the plot was his initial concern.

"At first I hesitated when I read that the lead characters were both gay," Harris states. "But my fiancée encouraged me to audition,



CAROLINE V. STURTZ//SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Ryan Harris, right, plays Mitchell Greene in Tallahassee Little Theatre's Coffeehouse production of "The Little Dog Laughed."

to keep practicing and to play a more challenging character."

As Harris read more of the play, which revolves around a closeted movie star who falls in love with a rent boy while his agent becomes increasingly worried about his career, he realized that the role was a leap he wanted to take.

"Something made me throw my inhibitions to the wind," says Harris with a chuckle. "Though I never expected to be naked on stage. I thought if I ever had to show my 'bits and pieces,' it would be for a James Bond-type movie."

"My co-star, Jordan Arnold, is more OK with nudity — he could get

naked in a crowd if someone asked him to," he laughs. "But it's just one of those things you do if you're an actor. I'm gonna have to focus on the show, nothing else."

Harris also faces turmoil at home for playing a gay character. He describes his extended family as "deeply religious and church-going."

"I'm walking on eggshells around them right now," Harris says. "But my mom and sisters don't care about the types of roles I play. My mom has gone to every show I've been in and this one won't be any different."

Harris hopes his performance will help encour-

age more groups to stage works like "The Little Dog Laughed."

"I feel like I'm making a statement. Controversial plays shouldn't be stuffed in a corner," Harris says. "They break down barriers, invisible barriers that can disappear."

A stand-up guy

After this show, Harris plans to focus more on his newest performing passion, stand-up comedy. About six months ago, one of his friends signed him up for a 3-minute slot on a Wednesday with the Howler Monkeys, a local comedy troupe, and he was immediately hooked.

"There's something



IF YOU GO

What: "The Little Dog Laughed"

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Jan. 15; the show runs through Jan. 22

Where: Tallahassee Little Theatre Coffeehouse, 1861 Thomasville Road

Cost: Tickets are \$13

Contact: Call 224-8474 or visit www.tallahasseelittletheatre.org

Warning: The play contains adult language, adult situations and brief nudity

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RYAN HARRIS
actor

about monkeys that just get us," says Harris in reference to the troupe's name. "They are one of the loudest animals as they can be heard 20 miles away, plus we're wild comedians! I'm named 'spider-monkey' since I'm tall, skinny and lanky."

Some of Harris' own favorite comedy sketches include jokes about relationships and about his 4-year-old nephew, who wants to be a freestyle rapper.

"Now I'm not sure what I like more, stand-up or acting," says Harris with a laugh. "It's hard to decide which I would put on the back burner to focus on one. But who says I can't do both?"