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Up for the challenge



A true professional: With only two days notice, local actor Justin Guarini stepped into the role of Santuit in Bucks County Playhouse's new production 'The New World.' Photo: Bucks County Playhouse

Local star Justin Guarini joined the cast of Bucks County Playhouse's The New World with only two days to prepare

By Samantha Bambino

Justin Guarini is a jack of all trades. From dominating season one of *American Idol* to starring as the high-pitched Lil' Sweet in a series of Diet Dr. Pepper commercials, the curly-haired heartthrob thought he had done it all. That is, until the Bucks County Playhouse called. Now, as Guarini charms audiences as Santuit in the theater's world premiere, *The New World*, one would never know he had only two days to prepare for the role.

In the weeks leading up to the show's first performance on Nov. 7, energy was at an all-time high during rehearsals. A stellar cast was formed for BCP's third world premiere of 2017 — a comedic yet historic portrayal of the first Thanksgiving. But things took a dark turn when Julius Thomas III, who was set to play the male lead of Santuit, aggravated an old injury days before the first show and was no longer able to perform.

Producers Alexander Fraser and Robyn Goodman were in crisis, but only briefly. There was one local actor they knew could be counted on in a pinch — Guarini. Not only is he a member of the Playhouse Artists Board of Directors, the nonprofit that supports the Playhouse, but he previously appeared on the BCP stage in the new musical *Cake Off* as well as its production of *Company*.

Guarini had just returned to his Bucks County home after filming a new Diet Dr. Pepper commercial in Los Angeles when he received Fraser's call. At first, Guarini assumed he had weeks to learn the role of Santuit. Needless to say, he was momentarily stunned when told he had two days. But with his deep love for theater, especially BCP, he couldn't say no.

"It was a crazy idea, but I'm always up for a challenge," he said.

Fraser, who had no understudies on hand to play Santuit, was thrilled.

"What a tremendous stroke of luck that Justin was available to help us launch *The New World*," he said. "When we needed someone to step in, Justin did so brilliantly. He handled the process so smoothly and effortlessly that it immediately put the entire cast and creative team at ease."

The team welcomed Guarini with open arms and set to work in helping him learn an entire production, including a handful of new songs, in less than 48 hours. On Sunday, Nov. 5, an assistant director played Santuit during a dress rehearsal as Guarini watched from the seats, absorbing *The New World* in its entirety for the first time.

The next day, Guarini traveled to New York for a previously planned event honoring Steve Martin, squeezing in rehearsal time where he could. All too quickly, Tuesday was upon him and after another six or so hours of practice, it was time to break a leg.

If Guarini was feeling any nerves on opening night, they didn't show, though he does owe thanks to actress Jillian Gottlieb, who plays Santuit's love interest. During that first performance, while he was focused on remembering lines and making his character come alive, she subtly guided him around stage, always making sure he was in the right spot.

"I was literally learning the show in front of the audience," he laughed.

But for him, that's the beauty of theater, whether it's Broadway or regional. Audiences get to watch actors discover and evolve their characters live on stage. This is especially true of a new production like *The New World*. Unlike in classics such as *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Miserables*, actors have more freedom to make the role their own — audiences have no idea what's supposed to come next. Still, Guarini didn't use this as an excuse to flub or forget lines. An entire cast depended on him, all of whom had been rehearsing for three weeks prior.

"It's a unit," he said of the cast. "We're all protective of one another."

As *The New World* draws to a close, Guarini is looking back on the experience with a sense of pride. Despite his years in the fast-paced music, film and television industries, learning the role of a lovestruck Native American in two days might be his most unforgettable moment yet.

"It was one of the biggest challenges of my career for sure," he said.

So what's next on Guarini's agenda after he says goodbye to Santuit? First, he'll enjoy a much-needed holiday break with his wife and children at their Bucks County home. Though he regularly travels to Los Angeles and New York, Bucks remains his home base. After a memorable upbringing in Doylestown, complete with friendly neighbors and a big back yard, he wants a similar experience for his two kids.

"It would've been difficult to give up this beautiful place," he said.

Next year, in addition to a number of Broadway projects in the works, Guarini plans to focus on writing music and expanding his catalog.

The New World will run through Dec. 2 at Bucks County Playhouse. For ticket information, visit bcptheater.org. The theater is located at 70 S. Main St. in New Hope.