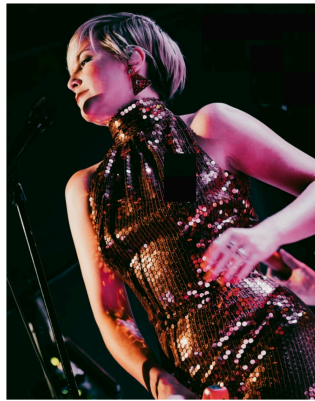


**Cirque de la Symphonie at Blossom:
conversations with vocalists
Hugh Panaro & Morgan James**

by Mike Telin



What can audiences expect to see and hear this weekend at Blossom Music Center? “Dizzying acrobatic heights and eye-popping feats together with top Broadway hits from *Les Misérables*, *Frozen*, *Wicked*, *Chicago*, and more...the perfect way to close out the summer.”

On Saturday, August 31 and Sunday September 1 at 7 pm, Cirque de la Symphonie joins the Akron Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Lucas Waldin in a show featuring Broadway stars Morgan James and Hugh Panaro. Tickets are available [online](#).

I spoke with Hugh Panaro by Zoom at his country home in Connecticut.

Hugh Panaro: It’s a tiny farm town with deer, cows, and goats. Having grown up in Philadelphia, it’s not anything I would have imagined for myself.

Mike Telin: When people ask, what is Cirque Goes Broadway, what do you tell them?

HP: This is only going to be my second time out of the gate with this show but if I’m honest, it’s one of the most exciting shows that I’ve ever been part of — I’ve always had a blast doing orchestra gigs.

This show combines two things that I think are really exciting — Broadway music and beautiful acrobatic acts. Obviously it’s not a full circus, but it’s stunning.

MT: What songs will be featured in the show?

I don't want to give too much away, but I do have a song from *Jekyll and Hyde* during which this beautiful young lady does an entire act on a tiny little cube. It's almost like watching the Olympics because she's so flexible and does all these crazy tricks and acrobatics. Sometimes I get so lost watching the act that I think, gosh, I hope I remember my words.

And there's a gentleman who literally flies around the stage while my friend Morgan will appropriately be singing "Defying Gravity."

We also do *Singin' in the Rain* while a gentleman is high up doing acrobatics. it's really something else.

It's a full evening of song along with some orchestra pieces that the performers do their routines to. There's a beautiful segment dedicated to *Les Misérables*, which was my very first Broadway show. So that's kind of near and dear to my heart.

MT: How did you get into musical theater?

HP: I was going to be a veterinarian, but when I was twelve my mom and dad took me to see *Annie*, my very first Broadway show. The little girl who played Annie was Andrea McArdle from my neighborhood. My mom said, hey, we should get tickets to this show and support the local girl, so we drove from Philadelphia to New York City. And as soon as the overture started and the curtain went up, I was bitten by the bug and I didn't want to be a veterinarian anymore. I think it's so great that parents bring their children to the symphony and ballet and dance because it really does change lives. It changed mine at twelve, and I've never looked back.

I actually started my career in music as our church organist. I played five services every Sunday in Philadelphia, and I made a whopping five dollars per mass. I thought I was rich, because when you're a little kid, you think that's a lot of money. When I started singing, my piano and organ teacher got me a voice teacher who took me on my very first audition when I was twelve. I was cast as Friedrich in *The Sound of Music* and that just sealed the deal.

MT: You've played many different characters. Do you identify with any of them?

I identify with all of them. That's such an actor thing to say, but it really is the truth. What's beautiful about acting is that you can take five actors, put them in the same costume, give them the same songs to sing, give them the same choreography, and

you're going to have five completely different performances because none of us are the same. We're all unique, and everyone brings something of themselves to the role.

It's our job to really give those characters the most truthful version of ourselves that we can. One of the very first roles I ever played in summer stock when I was 21 was Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It was one of the most joyful roles I've ever gotten to play. You go from being loved one minute to being hated the next. You have to experience all of these very human emotions, and to do that truthfully. So every character, whether it's Jean Valjean or Jesus, takes you on a roller coaster ride. And that's the beautiful thing about acting. It's magical.

MT: Is there anything you'd like to add?

I just want to say that my co-star Morgan James is going to blow everybody's socks off. Her voice is like nothing you've ever heard. She's also a dear friend of mine and we have a great time together. It's going to be a really joyful evening. And, I love Blossom.

We reached Morgan James by cell phone just after she finished driving through the mountains of Wyoming.

Mike Telin: I had a great conversation with Hugh Panaro yesterday — he said wonderful things about you.

I've performed with Hugh many, many times and he's truly my favorite person because he is such a special human being and artist. So I'm always excited to be reunited with my Huey. But this is my first time doing this show and I hear it's absolutely stunning and the performers are amazing.

MT: What songs will you be featured in?

MJ: I'm going to be singing "Cabaret," "Memories," "Let It Go" from *Frozen*, and "Defying Gravity" from *Wicked*. It's some real guilty pleasure music for me.

MT: You have such a varied career — every link I clicked took me to a different aspect of your life. When you were studying at Juilliard did you imagine yourself having such a diverse career?

MJ: No, I had no idea where my life was going to take me. When I went to Juilliard, I was studying classical music of course, but my goal was to be on Broadway. The beautiful thing about life is that your goals evolve, and I'm so lucky that I reached so many of them when I was a younger person. Then you have to make new dreams.

So I've had a really evolving, diverse career and I wouldn't have it any other way.

MT: What first attracted you to Broadway?

MJ: My mom and dad were both in the arts, and they brought me up on musical theater albums. I really started listening to musical theater when I was probably in 3rd or 4th grade. When I joined choir in 7th grade, I got the bug. I love doing theater and my dad was my drama teacher, and that was it. I was hooked.

MT: What was your first show?

MJ: The first show I ever did was *The Secret Garden* when I was in seventh grade. I did community shows all through high school, and when I went to college, I did musical theater during the summer until I kind of broke into the Broadway world.

MT: What was your first show on Broadway?

MJ: My first show was *The Addams Family*. It took me a long time to get my first Broadway show, but once the field was broken, I did five back-to-back shows pretty much without a break, so it was great.

MT: Tell me about your time with Postmodern Jukebox.

MJ: Post Malone and Jukebox is a collective of musicians, but obviously what they do is a bit tongue-in-cheek. The great thing about working with them is that they've been a great gateway for people to find me because of the virality of some of those early videos. I did ten videos and four tours with them all over the world.

MT: Is there anything more that you would like to say about Cirque de la Symphonie?

MJ: I think people are going to be blown away by it. And I think audiences are just going to fall in love with Hugh — he's magical.

MT: It's interesting that both of you originally wanted to be veterinarians.

MJ: Yes we did! We are animal lovers, the two of us always bond over that.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com on August 29, 2024

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