

Two May Graduates bring International Pokèmon Phenomenon Alive on Musical Stage

All children's fables have generally the same plot - good and evil collide, a struggle ensues, and the forces of good win out in the end. Now take that basic bedtime story, and add mythical creatures with wondrous powers that only special trainers can harness, splash some vibrant colors on your monsters, mix some cool music for effect, and not only do you have a truly tall tale - but you have the makings of a phenomenon.

A Pokèmon phenomenon to be exact. One that millions of children know, and an event that has now reached the community of JMU. Two May 2000 graduates have joined the touring company of a musical stage show called Pokèmon Live!, the latest addition to the Pokè-family that has taken the United States by storm.

Alumni Jennifer Rissler and Suzanne Wogisch know better than anyone just how big that storm can be. Since joining the show last year, they have witnessed the smiles and heard the voices of countless children at sold-out shows across the country.

"The response is amazing," says Rissler. "(The kids) are so uninhibited and very vocal. There is a lot of booing for the bad guys and clapping for the good guys."

For anyone who isn't familiar with Pokèmon, it is an entity all its own. With the slogan of "gotta catch'em all," it began in early 1999 with a simple Nintendo game and TV show and has now blossomed into a billion- (yes, billion) dollar industry in the United States alone. It has generated card-collecting games, Web sites, video games, movies, toys, clothing, and more than 1,500 other Pokè-products. It seemed natural that it should also take the stage.

Reilly Brennan, a Nintendo of America representative, says his company knew that Pokèmon had the potential to be huge. "We knew that once the core component of the video game became a hit that Pokèmon was a natural for licensed products. It was actually quite easy to expand into things like toys and the stage show."

Even though it may have seemed like a logical idea, the implementation is anything but simple. To hold the kids' interest, the stage is surrounded by two huge Gameboy props whose screens show clips from the cartoon and close-ups of the actors. The story is set to music, and the scenes are full of fireworks and special effects. The producers also use Pokèmon the kids all recognize from the video games and movies.

Ranked as the most-loved Pokèmon is Pikachu, played by none other than Rissler. As one of the main characters and a Pokè-favorite (there is even a song totally dedicated to the yellow beast), she had big ... monster feet to fill.

"I try to have a lot of fun with the character and keep a high energy level," says Rissler. "There is a lot of dancing and running around on stage."

Although Pikachu never speaks (his voice is recorded so children will recognize it), he is definitely the focus of the story. The main characters - Misty, Brock and Ash - are all human teenagers on their way to a Pokèmon tournament with Pikachu. Along the way Pikachu is captured by the evil Team Rocket, and it's up to Ash to get him back. Through it all, Rissler dances and moves in a bulbous yellow costume where she can only see through Pikachu's mouth.

"There were points when I first started working with that costume that it was tough," Rissler says.

Her mother, Carolyn Hartman, was very impressed with her daughter's ability to move around in such an outfit. "She does very well in that costume," she says. "I'm not sure what she can see, but she knows when and where to move, which is amazing."

Although Rissler never performed while at JMU, she always knew she wanted to be in a stage show. She went to an open audition for The Radio City Christmas Spectacular, not knowing that the try-out was also for the Pokèmon show, and landed the part.

Wogisch had a similar experience to land her ensemble role. A native of New Jersey and a theater major and former JMU Dukette, she auditioned in New York, her first out of college, and eventually heard news that she was in.

"I have nieces who love Pokèmon, so it became important to me to get the role," says Wogisch, who like Rissler, is in virtually every scene of the show, as either a dancer, or background character. One of her duties also includes going out into the audience and involving the kids. "They are there for the sheer spectacle of the show, so it's really fun to interact and talk to the kids," she adds.

Like every fairytale, Pokèmon Live! will soon end, and bring both Wogisch and Rissler back home. Wogisch plans to try and get into television while continuing to audition for musicals. Rissler would like to eventually head to graduate school.

Until then, both alumni will continue to delight the hordes of children coming to witness the

phenomenon known as Pokèmon on the stage, instead of in cartoon land. To truly understand the Pokè-world, you just "gotta catch-em all!"

Story by Rachel Woodall ('98)