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Life imitates art: EHS musical too real for comfort as punch breaks nose

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But on opening night of "Guys and Dolls" Thursday, the infamous punch Big Jule took from Sky Masterson wasn't an act. In fact, it was as real as a broken nose.

"What was supposed to happen in the play really happened in real life," said Steven LeBlanc, who played Big Jule in the Easthampton High School production. The scene went like this:

Amid a craps game, Big Jule lost all his money and resorted to playing on credit, intimidating the others with his shoulder gun to prevent them from leaving. Sky Masterson, played by Alex Meisner, later joined in, and, noting Big Jule's attempt to cheat the others, he turned to Big Jule and said, "If you are looking for some action, if you care to make a small wager on a proposition, am I right-handed or left-handed?"

Big Jule responded, "How would I know a thing like that?"

"I'll give you a clue," Sky Masterson said, as he went to punch Big Jule.

In rehearsal, Meisner had practiced the punch, slowly, with an open fist. In the final act on opening night, he fully and quickly punched LeBlanc with a closed fist.

"I just clunked him right in the nose," said Meisner, a junior. "I didn't know it happened at first, and then I looked at the blood on my hand. Blood started pouring out like Niagara Falls."

"We had practiced it slowly during rehearsal millions of times, but on opening night he speeded it up - he just does this crazy haymaker job out of the right and clipped my nose," said LeBlanc, a senior at Easthampton High School. "I was going down and thinking 'something's wrong, there's this pain in my nose'... I didn't realize I had a broken nose."

LeBlanc, on the ground, looked up at the crapsshooters surrounding him.

"They were supposed to have fake shock on their faces; they all had real shock on their faces," LeBlanc said.

LeBlanc said he didn't want to walk off the stage in front of about 250 people, so he lay in his blood on the floor. He heard somebody whisper, "We've got to get him out of here."

Meisner said he wanted to walk off the stage at that point, but he realized the show must go on.

"I thought for a moment I was going to get in trouble for it," Meisner said. "I wanted to step out of



JERREY ROBERTS

Easthampton High School students rehearse for "Guys and Dolls" at White Brook Middle School last week. R.J. Pause, the last actor on the left, stepped into Steven LeBlanc's role after LeBlanc was accidentally punched on opening night Thursday.



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character and cry and just help him off stage and have a 10-minute break. But it couldn't happen that way."

LeBlanc, who was supposed to pass out anyway, was dragged off the stage.

"Most of the audience wasn't really aware of what was going on, it was so well covered," said John Meisner, treasurer of the Parent Council, which sponsors the musicals.

The aftermath

LeBlanc said he was furious at first, "cursing out a storm" in front of his castmates as he left the auditorium.

"Everyone in the hallway went from laughing to pale faces," LeBlanc said. "I told them to go back to the play, 'you've got scenes.'"

In the dressing room, LeBlanc, holding an ice pack to the bridge of his nose, wondered if his friend had done this on purpose.

"He gave me the meanest, maddest look ever," Meisner said. "I was scared almost."

LeBlanc said he realized it was an accident after he saw Meisner.

"The look on his face said it all," LeBlanc said. "He was completely pale with huge eyes. His jaw was quivering and his hands were shaking. I knew he didn't mean to do this - he looked so traumatized."

About 45 minutes of the musical remained after the punch. R.J. Pause took over for LeBlanc.

"That was very good of R.J.," Meisner said. "That is why we love R.J., he can do anything."

Meisner said he felt "lost."

"When you punch out a very good friend of yours in front of all those people, it takes you in hard," Meisner said. "Every scene after that I had to try to get myself back together."

The self-described drama "family" supported Meisner.

"I would just connect eyes with theater kids and they looked at me like 'you did nothing wrong, it was a total accident,'" Meisner said. "It was really like no other way I was helped before."

LeBlanc's father took him to a nearby hospital, where a doctor in the emergency room held a small flashlight to LeBlanc's nose and told him he'd likely heal within a week.

LeBlanc wore his hospital arm band to school the next day.

"It was my badge of honor," he said.

Meisner and LeBlanc made amends with a handshake, a hug and a joke about Meisner's strong right arm, despite the fact he is left-handed.

Onstage at the show Saturday night, Meisner gave LeBlanc a get-well card, and both boys played their parts again, this time with no mishap. The card will forever remind LeBlanc of his first and last high school musical. "My first time onstage and I broke my nose," LeBlanc said. "This performance is going to be a lot more memorable than if it didn't ever happen."

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