



On Stage **Again**

Local actor overcomes cancer and lands his dream role in 'Camelot'

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Local actor Jack Wilson has wanted to play the role of King Arthur in the musical "Camelot" for more than 20 years, ever since he saw a broadcast of Richard Harris in the role. Wilson's turn comes this Friday, when he takes the stage as King Arthur in the Baton Rouge Little Theater's production of the play.

He auditioned for the role, both despite of and because of his fight with cancer two years ago. "If I can do even a decent job at this, then it (the cancer) hasn't beaten me," Wilson said in the days prior to the show's opening.

Wilson is a survivor of head and neck cancer that threatened to take his voice. Instead, he was able to participate in a new, national clinical trial protocol of an intense regimen of radiation and chemotherapy that added a second drug to his chemotherapy. In the months following the end of treatment in August 2008, Wilson learned he was cancer-free. "He actually achieved a complete response. He has no sign of cancer," said Stephen Hebert, clinical research network coordinator for Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center, who helped enroll Wilson in the clinical trial.

While still suffering the after-effects of the treatment, which include dry mouth and trouble swallowing, Wilson decided to go ahead and audition this winter for the part of King Arthur.

Wilson missed the first audition - he wasn't feeling well enough - and was severely disappointed, he said. "As fate would have it, for some reason there was a very thin turnout for the first audition," Wilson said. With his family and friends encouraging him, Wilson won the part at the second round of auditions.

"I think it's a once-in-a-lifetime role for someone like Jack," said Keith Dixon, managing artistic director of the Baton Rouge Little Theater and director of "Camelot." "Some people are born to play certain roles. He's born to play Arthur," Dixon said of Wilson.

In the play, Arthur is king of Camelot, husband of Guenevere, guiding light for the knight Lancelot and student of the wizard Merlyn. But all is not perfect in the kingdom, and Arthur feels it all.

Before he was cast in "Camelot," Wilson had his own, very real trials. In the early summer of 2008, Wilson, then 52, was diagnosed with a stage IV squamous cell carcinoma at the base of his tongue. Wilson, who had no health insurance at that time, was referred to the local public hospital, Earl K. Long Medical Center, and found the doctors who would help him become cancer free. His primary doctors are Dr. Charles Wood, radiation oncologist with Mary Bird Perkins, which provides radiation treatment for Earl K. Long patients, and Dr. Bryan Bienvenu, with Louisiana Hematology-Oncology Associates. Bienvenu, with other of his partners, operates the outpatient oncology clinic at Earl K. Long, where Wilson would receive chemotherapy treatments.

The recommended treatment options were radiation and chemotherapy. If that didn't work, the treatment would be surgery that would remove "most if not all of the tongue," Wilson said. But Wilson also learned from Bienvenu of a new clinical trial protocol that was available.

"I didn't hesitate at all in choosing to try for the trial option," Wilson said. "As far as I was concerned, the surgery option wasn't an option," he said.

"Both these men seemed to feel confident that what they were going to do was going to fix this. Because they were confident, I was confident," Wilson said. "Jack looked like an ideal client for the national trial," Wood said. "He was young, healthy and motivated."

Wilson was enrolled in the trial, which was "extremely intense," Wood said. Seven weeks of treatment were scheduled into six weeks, and radiation was given six days a week, instead of five, as is the norm, Wood said. The drug Erbitux was added to the regimen. "It's not normally given in combination of chemotherapy and radiation," Bienvenu said.

Wilson began the treatment on July 1, 2008. "He never had a bad reaction to the chemotherapy, he said." The radiation,

though, he said, "was the hardest thing I've ever done." He completed the treatment in August 2008. Several scans since

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Dr. Charles Wood

then have shown him to be cancer-free, and he'll continue to be monitored, he said.

A sister, Jimmie Murvin, who lives here, helped Wilson through the treatment, as did several of his friends from the theater, including his Guenevere in the play, Jennifer Ellis.

His first return to the stage following his cancer treatment came after he was invited to participate in a night of one-act plays for Ascension Community Theater this past fall. A business graduate with an MBA, Wilson discovered his love of theater in his college years at the University of Louisiana at Monroe (then Northeastern), when a girlfriend encouraged him to try out for some plays, going beyond his experience on the university's speech and debate team. He took her up on it, loved it and did a semester in theater before graduating.

Since then, Wilson has performed in more than 30 shows in the area and directed another 26. He's also the lighting designer for Ascension Community Theater. His most recent performance for Baton Rouge Little Theater was as Professor Higgins in "My Fair Lady," in 2006.

Wilson, who is an instructor of public speaking and oral interpretation at Southern University, continues to deal with after-effects of the treatment, such as dry mouth, difficulty in swallowing and tiredness. He said, in fact, that rehearsal has been the second hardest thing he's ever done, after the radiation treatment. But, he said, "When I'm out there doing a scene, singing a song you're somebody else. I'm not unaware of the symptoms," he said, "but they don't get in the way," he said.

There's ego involved in doing theater, Wilson admitted, but he said "the real reason we want to (act), is to make you laugh, cry, think. That's why we do this stuff," he said. At one point, when Wilson doubted himself, Wood, his radiation oncologist, encouraged him. "I was trying to back-pedal on it. He wasn't listening to any of that," Wilson said. "At some point Jack and I made a deal," Wood said. "If he got the part, I'd be there to see him." Wood and others on Wilson's medical team plan to be there on opening night this Friday.

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