

Sooner Nation



Photo provided

OU alumnus tackles New York feet first. BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

FOR CHRISTOPHER RICE, THE CREATOR OF YOUTUBE'S "TAPPY" VIDEOS, THE SOUNDTRACK OF MANHATTAN IS AN INVITATION TO DANCE, choreography waiting to happen. Whether it's an unexpected shuffle of his iPod or a rhythm on the street, "I wonder if I can dance to that," is the first response from a guy who not only thinks on his feet, but with them.

When he's not ringing doorbells in "The Book of Mormon" on Broadway, the 2011 University of Oklahoma alumnus

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moonlights as producer, director, choreographer and star of the popular YouTube dance videos. At OU, Rice was a staple in musical theatre productions, including "Once Upon a Mattress," "The Scarlet Pimpernel," "A Chorus Line," "Chicago," and "Rent," among others.

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The hard work paid off. Rice moved to New York the summer after graduation. On the one-week anniversary of his arrival, he was cast in the Broadway touring production of "West Side Story." When Rice finished the tour, he auditioned for "The Book of Mormon" and was hired as "swing," a type of understudy who learns multiple roles, or "tracks," to cover for cast members when needed.

"It's kind of a crazy job that a lot of people don't even know exists," says Rice. "You have to learn everything they do on and off stage — quick changes, grabbing props, wigs and getting to the right place. You don't want to be in the wrong place or you'll get smashed by a set piece."

To keep the seven parts straight, Rice created a notebook with details of what props, harmonies and solos he has at any given time. And if that fails? "As the Mormon characters, we have name tags on, so I can always glance at my name tag to make sure I know who I am."

Even when Rice is not scheduled to perform, he is in the theatre each night in case someone gets sick or hurt. During a streak of remarkable cast health, he was backstage wondering how to make the best use of the downtime when a random song caught his attention.

"I was listening to my iPod and Anna Kendrick's song 'Cups' came on," he recalls. "The percussion line is created with hands and plastic cups, and I thought, 'I wonder if anyone has tried tapping to that.'"

As a student in the Weitzenhoffer School of Musical Theatre, Rice had filmed and edited videos of rehearsals and performances for the school's blog and found he enjoyed capturing dance on film. Inspired by "Cups," he created choreography, taught it to friends and recorded the first version with his smart phone. When he posted the finished work on YouTube, it got a million hits in the first eight days.

Energized by that success, Rice planned other projects and recruited fellow dancers to join him. "What's great about friends, is if you say, 'Hey, can you come dance for me at a studio for a couple hours?' they will help you out. Especially if you bribe them with food," Rice says. "If they're not busy, they may just want the opportunity to dance, to do what they love."

One of the most ambitious projects was filming "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" aboard the USS Intrepid, a WWII aircraft carrier now berthed in Hudson Harbor. The ship is the centerpiece of the Air, Sea and Space Museum and is often used as a set for theatrical films, renting for thousands of dollars an hour. Rice told museum officials he wanted to make the video to honor veterans and they agreed to let him film early in the morning before the museum opened.

"The day we shot on the Intrepid, the girls were in hair and makeup by 4:30 a.m. It had rained that morning, so we had to scrub the deck to get it dry before we could dance," says Rice. "Looking around seeing all these people working so hard to make this video happen and realizing we were getting to dance on the deck of this ship was incredible."

With each video, Rice learns how to improve lighting, camera angles and sound. He gets a kick from setting his choreography to nontraditional tap music. A recent video to "Uptown Funk" begins with a grungy street look and transitions to uptown elegance without missing a beat. His current project is set to Demi Lovato's "Confident," which Rice calls a "fight song" for all artistic types.

"It's not a song that you hear and go, 'This would make a great tap dance.' But I hear the beat and it stirs something inside me and makes me want to tap to it," he says. "The song is about choosing to be confident and not worrying about what anyone else thinks. I like that vibe. What's wrong with doing something your way?"

Last March, Rice returned to OU to perform at a fine arts fundraiser and dropped in on a couple of dance classes. "I had a lot of fun working with the kids," he says. "I told them never again will you have these classes set up for you where you are learning all day long, so take advantage of the excellent professors who know your strengths and weaknesses and are there to help you get better. Because of them, so many of my friends from OU are now working in New York."

For now, performing on Broadway is right where Rice wants to be. And if the future takes him into directing or film or music videos, you can bet he will land on his feet.