by Stacey McLachlan

Liam McDonald, BCom '15, was 14 years old in 2007 when he saw Spamalot on Broadway during a trip to New York with his family. And while he didn’t fully grasp what was going on, he knew he wanted in on it.

“I was way too young to grasp all the jokes, but the audience was dying with laughter, and I thought, ‘I wanna do that,’” says McDonald, who now works as director of product and sales at Giftbit, a rewards platform that allows people to buy, send and control digital gift cards.

McDonald spent the rest of that family vacation banging rocks together in imitation of the famous Monty Python bit and driving his family crazy. But just a few years later, he was on stage himself, playing Thenardier in his Calgary performing arts school’s production of Les Misérables. (Applying for this specialty school was the result of a bit of teenage bravado: “A girl I had a crush on told me she was auditioning for a dance program there and I panicked and I thought, ‘I wanna do that.’”)

As a student, he aced presentation assignments. As a community leader in residence, he produced YouTube videos, and proved himself to be a resourceful problem-solver in the process (when no one showed up for a shoot about how to speak to professors, he simply played all the parts himself). As a co-op student at Target, he learned about how to speak to professors, he simply played all the parts himself). As a co-op student at Target, he learned about how to speak to professors, he simply played all the parts himself)

The result was a video which showed McDonald in the role of a customer service representative, playing all the parts himself.

The audience was dying with laughter, so McDonald set his sights on a vaguely related field. “My drama teacher told me being a lawyer is the best-paid acting gig out there,” says McDonald. He headed west for Victoria and Gustavson.

Over the course of his studies, his focus turned from law into entrepreneurship and an interest in the city’s tech scene, but he couldn’t fully shake his drive to perform. “I couldn’t really stop trying to make people laugh,” he says.

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While he was rusty and a little intimidated by the close-knit theatre scene, McDonald mustered up the courage to audition—and got the part. Since then, McDonald has become a regular in local productions, earning rave reviews with his work in roles like Mark Cohen in Rent.

The world of theatre might not seem like an obvious place to flex one’s business school muscles, but McDonald actually finds himself regularly tapping into lessons from his Gustavson days.

“Closing Time” while wandering the empty box store. The resulting video went viral and landed him a CNN interview.

When he went to see a show at Victoria’s McPherson Playhouse between semesters and came across an audition call for his old favourite, Spamalot, it didn’t seem like a big leap to get back on stage. Though he was rusty and a little intimidated by the close-knit theatre scene, McDonald was determined to embrace the opportunity.

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Although technically offstage from nine to five, McDonald is also making waves in Victoria’s tech scene with his day job. At Giftbit, he applies his theatre expertise to the business world. “There’s an advantage in being able to think on your feet and to empathize with others. You learn so much about people in acting as you step into the shoes of characters. And the ability to understand other perspectives goes miles in business.”

In the future, McDonald hopes to enter a director or producer role, where the similarities between boardroom and stage will become even clearer: the leadership skills, strategic thinking and management of the business world all lend themselves directly to the management side of the theatre, too. And while his time at Gustavson is over, his education continues.

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