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Pickerington high schooler earns recognition on Broadway with drag performance

Grace Tucker Columbus Dispatch
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Christian Strong in Pickerington North High School's November 2022 production of "Kinky Boots." Photo By Kamaryn Reedus

In the titular red latex boots worn by his character Lola — the drag-performing protagonist of the musical "Kinky Boots" — Christian Strong strutted his stuff from his high school theater all the way to Broadway, when he represented his central Ohio high school as Lola at the [2023 Jimmy Awards](#) in New York City.

"Getting to put the boots on and represent my school that way, it was so cool. I get chills just thinking about it," said Strong about the awards show, which took place on June 26. Strong will be a senior at Pickerington High School North this fall.

In addition to earning \$3,000 in scholarship money, Strong also made history that night, becoming the first student sponsored by the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts (CAPA) to be named a finalist at the Jimmy Awards.

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Although he didn't snag the winning title, reaching finalist status can open major doors; previous Jimmy Award finalists have gone straight from the high school awards to [snagging leading roles in Broadway](#) productions of "Mean Girls" and "Dear Evan Hansen."

On an even greater scale, Strong got the [chance to perform](#) as his larger-than-life drag character on a legendary stage, and for a top-tier audience during a time when the [right to perform drag publicly](#) is in peril in his home state.



What are the Jimmy Awards and how does a performer qualify?

The Jimmy Awards are a national musical theater awards show, hosted on Broadway's Minskoff Theatre stage, that brings together nearly 100 high school students from across the country for a week of training under the industry's top professionals. In the spirit of professional awards shows like [the Tony Awards](#), each high schooler must first receive a nomination as "Best Actor in a Leading Role" or "Best Actress in a Leading Role" for their respective high school productions.

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Then, the performer must be named a finalist of their respective regional award program before advancing to the real deal: the week-long Jimmy Awards experience in New York City.

The whole week culminates in a live showcase, where Jimmy Award nominees get the chance to perform a short song from the show for which they're nominated. And at the end of the night, the group is narrowed down to eight finalists: four actors and four actresses.



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How Christian Strong became a Jimmy Awards finalist

CAPA is joined by nearly [50 other regional award](#) programs across the country that send students to the Jimmy Awards, representing over 140,000 high school performers who are eligible for this type of national recognition. And Strong advanced to being named one of the top eight of those performers.

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"I can't describe it with words, it was absolutely insane," Strong said of that moment his name was announced while gripping his fellow nominees' hands on the Broadway stage.

"It felt like a dream. It didn't feel real," he said.



Christian Strong was awarded "Best Actor in a Leading Role" at the regional Marquee Awards at the Ohio Theatre, earning him an invitation to the Jimmy Awards. *Harry Acosta*

Weeks before, this past May, people close to him knew exciting things were in store for Strong once he was awarded with "Best Actor in a Leading Role" at the regional Marquee Awards at the Ohio Theatre.

Strong's high school theater director, Allen DeCarlo-Boyd, says that when he watched Strong become a finalist at the Jimmy Awards last month, he was so thrilled he was stunned.

"Very rarely am I left speechless," DeCarlo-Boyd said. "I felt like a proud dad. ... I've known Christian for 10 years (and have seen this) kid grow up to be everything I want my kid to be."

Because the Jimmy Awards' audience often includes top producers and talent agents, the event has become known by many in the theater community as being like an NFL draft for Broadway. And this is not lost on DeCarlo-Boyd, who helped convince Strong to start doing musical theater four years ago.

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"All of the kids on (the awards show) stage are the next stars that we'll see in film, Broadway. People don't get (the Jimmy Awards) is the NFL," DeCarlo-Boyd said, adding that agents have already reached out to Strong since the awards.

Amy Handra, CAPA's director of education, also refers to the awards as the "NFL draft for musical theater."

"This opportunity is a chance for these young performers to ... get into this environment where they are surrounded by people just like them ... wanting to make a theater career for themselves in the future," Handra said.

Strong's director presented 'Kinky Boots' despite backlash

Perhaps equally as monumental as Strong's national recognition for his role in "Kinky Boots" on a Broadway stage is that he did it all in drag — a type of performance art under serious scrutiny by some members of Ohio's legislature, as well as across the country.

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DeCarlo-Boyd was aware of the controversy the drag element in "Kinky Boots" might arouse in the community from the get-go, when he selected the show for Pickerington High School North in April 2022. Nevertheless, he knew the show carried a message worth telling.

"We did 'Kinky Boots' because I'm the head of diversity and engagement for my school ... and this (show) features a Black drag queen (Lola)," DeCarlo-Boyd said. "And really, the message of (the show) is 'you can change the world if you change your mind.'"



The cast of Pickerington High School North's "Kinky Boots," led by director Allen DeCarlo-Boyd (far right). Karmryn Reedus

He estimates that Pickerington North was the second high school in the nation to ever do the show, so he wasn't surprised when the district called a meeting to discuss his selection.

"After I announced the show, the district had pulled together some of the principals, the assistant superintendent, arts administrators ... some of them didn't even show up to the meeting. And I thought, 'This is a waste of my time.'"

So, DeCarlo-Boyd moved forward, put together the show and, by the premiere in November 2022, he was overcome with support.

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"(It was) the largest audiences that we've had in a very long time," he said.

Strong, whose character Lola performs several demanding drag numbers in the musical, also found great fulfillment in doing the show. He knew he wanted to play the part as soon as DeCarlo-Boyd announced the show.

"(Lola is) everything. There's a lot of her that I resonate with. She's a Black man (in drag) ... she's not afraid to stand up for herself, she does have her moments of fear and insecurity," Strong said. "This was my first time playing a drag queen, and playing someone who is big and bold."



Pickerington High School North students Ryan O'Malley (left) and Christian Strong (right) hold the titular red latex shoes of the musical "Kinky Boots" in their performance of the show. Kamaryn Reedus

Ultimately, DeCarlo-Boyd says that his students adored doing the show — drag costumes, latex boots and all.

"Drag is an art, it's a way to express your identity," he said. "It's not something that should ever be banned. You have a community where you can come together and feel safe and feel heard and ultimately feel seen. And so, what kid in today's world doesn't want that?"

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