

Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 20 May 2009 06:00

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"We were looking for a name for the group," says Genesisus Guild founder Don Wooten, "and I knew of a play called The Comedian, which was about St. Genesisus, who was the patron saint of actors. So I called it Genesisus Guild. But no such person ever lived

. I just thought it was wonderful for actors to have an imaginary patron saint."

For more than 50 years, however, local actors have found a very real patron saint in Don Wooten, the Rock Island resident whose intimidating list of accomplishments includes broadcasting stints for WOC-TV, WQAD-TV, and WHBF-TV, the founding of radio station WVIK, two terms - from 1972 to 1980 - as a senator in the Illinois General Assembly, and the annual presentation of classical-theatre productions in Rock Island's Lincoln Park, the majority of which Wooten himself directed and/or adapted until his Genesisus Guild retirement in 2006.

Or rather, until his "retirement" in 2006.

Although he did step down from active duties at the conclusion of Genesisus Guild's 50th season, Wooten wrote the adaptations for the Greek comedies The Frogs in 2007 and The Clouds in 2008, and this summer finds him more directly involved with the Guild's lineup than he has been in years. In honor of his 80th birthday, which he celebrated on March 16, Wooten will not

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only adapt and direct this year's season-ending comedy - Aristophanes'

Thesmophoriazousae

, running August 1 through 9

- but also 2009's three other classical-theatre offerings: Euripides'

Hecuba

(June 20 through 28) and Shakespeare's

Henry VI; Part I

(July 10 through 25) and

Henry VI; Part II

(July 17 through 26).

"It's hard to say about the Greek comedies, but I'm pretty sure this is my valedictory for Shakespeare," says Wooten of his busy summer season, adding, "Of course, you know, never say never again." And during a recent interview, Wooten spoke about his continued pride in - and passion for - Genesisius Guild, the organization's (and his own) theatrical beginnings, the role that young people play in the Guild's future, and the influence of this venerated local institution.

This Is Fun

Born and raised in Memphis, the young Wooten excelled in Catholic school and has been, as he says, "a straight-A student all my life. In class, once the nuns said something, that was it - I knew

it - and with my inclinations toward the church and my scholastic aptitude, they obviously wanted me to be a priest." Yet Wooten also took an early interest in the arts, and theatre in particular.

Our family was always into theatre. Mom was really the one who wanted to be an entertainer - she wanted to be Gloria Swanson - but there were absolutely no opportunities for her. So she saw to it that her children had those experiences.

In grade school, the very first role I played was in a Christmas thing called *Crosspatch*. I was

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Wednesday, 20 May 2009 06:00

cast as Old Crosspatch, a character who was somehow reformed by ... I dunno, Christmas carols or something, and I enjoyed that very much. And I used to do radio plays, and then in high school, I was cast as Jonathan Brewster in

Arsenic & Old Lace

. There's that great moment when Jonathan comes through the windows and the audience just *screams*

- I remember it took them a hell of a long time to settle down after that -

and I just thought, "This is

fun

!"

And my older sister, Marge, had been a dancer. But she eventually quit, and I asked her why, and she said, "Theatre is no life for a moral person." And as a kid, I believed everything every older person told me until it was proven wrong. So I decided I couldn't go into a career in theatre, although that was my inclination.

Ambrose Actor

Wooten graduated from high school and moved from Tennessee to Iowa, where, in 1946, he entered the seminary at St. Ambrose University. "And it took me two years to realize that a priest was not what I wanted to be," he says. "I could not take, could not take, the regimentation, and the idea of obeying somebody simply because they said to did not sit well with me. So I opted out." Yet Wooten chose to stay at St. Ambrose, where he had also found the opportunity to pursue his love of theatre - "immoral" career choice or not.

My sophomore year, while I was still in the seminary, [instructor] Charlie Castello spotted me as an actor, and said he was gonna do a play by a guy I'd never heard of - Henri Gheon. It was called *Old Wang* - it was the story about a missionary and his conversion of an older Chinese peasant, and a contest between the missionary and the China Devil - and he had me play the China Devil. There was an elaborate costume, and my skin was kinda red It was a spectacular role.

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Wednesday, 20 May 2009 06:00

And then when I dropped out of the seminary, he immediately put me in a part in *The Male Animal*, and he gave me Prince Albert in *Victoria Regina*, and senior year, he was going to do *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*. So I memorized all of *Macbeth*. I knew the whole damned play. And when I tried out, it was clear that I had that [title] role down. But there was one theatre major that Charlie had that was graduating that year, so he wouldn't give me *Macbeth*; he gave *that* guy *Macbeth*, and gave me *Macduff*.

But I did a *really* good *Macduff*. I remember when I took Ross and did *Macduff's* "all my pretty chickens and their dam" [speech] and the actor playing Ross started to cry. I thought, "What are you *doing*?" He told me later, "I just couldn't *take* it." I didn't need much after that.



Playcrafters Detour

While still a senior at St. Ambrose, Wooten joined the production staff of WOC-TV and worked as a radio announcer at Muscatine station KWPC, and soon after graduation, began his nearly 20-year broadcasting career with Rock Island's WHBF-TV. He also married girlfriend Bernadette (this past November, they celebrated their 58th wedding anniversary), and it was in her company that Wooten began his post-graduate love affair with theatre.

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 20 May 2009 06:00

Bernadette and I went to a Playcrafters play when I was still working in Muscatine. It was *The Solid Gold Cadillac*,

and it was done in Rock Island's Little Theatre, and I thought, "These people are really *good*

." So I went to see them, and they had a play coming up - an old-time *mellerdrammer*

- and they cast me as Mortimer Frothingham. The villain.

The

good role.

And I wanted to be active in Playcrafters when I moved to WHBF-TV, but I worked nights. And talk about a guy having his priorities wrong: My first thought was, "What can I do to change my schedule?" Eventually, I had a schedule where I could come in at 10 or 11 and work until about 6, so I could be in a play. But after I became a member of Playcrafters, WOC-TV asked them if they'd be interested in doing a monthly TV drama, and so they scrapped their whole season and did stuff on Channel 6. And I *couldn't*, because I worked for Channel 4. I thought, "Boy, this is the *pits.*"

But I had also been teaching part-time at Alleman, and I'd begun directing plays and was having a great deal of success with students. So I thought, "Well, what the hell, why don't I just *form* a drama group?"

Outdoor Play

Gathering some two dozen friends, students, and former students, Wooten shared his idea for a local theatre organization that would perform in the summer, and the group found success with its debut presentations of Henri Gheon's The Parade at the Devil's Bridge and The Sausage Maker's Interlude

- along with an offer to perform in an unexpected venue: the great outdoors.

I called a group together in the fall of '56, but we couldn't seem to get organized. They were ready to do the plays, but the organizational stuff they weren't interested in. At the second

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Wednesday, 20 May 2009 06:00

meeting, I was saying, "Who would like to be in the play-reading committee?" and so on, and finally Joel Hubbs said, "Don, just *tell* us what you want us to do, and we'll do it." And that's how I became the dictator of the Genesis Guild. It's just nobody else was *interested*

We entered the Marshall One-Act Play Competition [with *The Sausage Maker's Interlude*] - we won second prize and the director's trophy - and the Rock Island park director at the time saw the play, and he was impressed. He said, "We're starting the Starlight Concert Series" - they didn't have a name for it then - and he said, "Would you like to be part of that? Would you like to do an outdoor play?" I said, "Sure." I was up for anything in those days. I said, "Where do we do it?" He said, "Pick a park." So I was looking at parks - Black Hawk and so on - and when I saw that circle of columns in Lincoln Park, I thought, "Greek play! We'll do a Greek play!"

We chose to do *Antigone*, and we decided to do it in masks as a publicity stunt. We made big *papier-mâché* masks that covered your whole head and rested on your shoulders, and we took sheets and we dyed them, and Bill Hannan made a *papier-mâché* statue of Apollo to sit on top of that circle of columns, and the actors processed in, and it was a *knockout*. It was terrific. And the park board said, "Why don't you keep doing this?"

One of a Kind

After 1957's Antigone, Genesis Guild did, indeed, continue to perform classical Greek drama in Lincoln Park, and began adding Shakespeare (starting with 1960's Henry IV: Part I) and Greek comedy (beginning with Aristophanes' The Birds in 1961) to its repertoire. Productions by Opera@Augustana and Ballet Quad Cities debuted in 1973 and 1997, respectively, and Wooten says the keys to Genesis Guild's success are

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Wednesday, 20 May 2009 06:00

simplicity, diversity, and the presentation of works not commonly staged.

We try to do things straight on. We don't monkey with things in Shakespeare, we don't do Civil War dress - you may have to change a few things for a contemporary audience, but you don't have to stretch the plays out of shape. And with the Greek tragedies, we try to create, as near as possible, something of the aura that must have surrounded them in their day. You need excellent actors, and if you've got that, you don't have to change a word. You can make everything comprehensible.

When you look at what we program, we're the only theatre company of its kind in the country. We do Shakespeare, we do Greek tragedy in mask, we do Greek comedy in a modern adaptation, we have opera in English, we have ballet - and *except* for the ballet, it's all amateur, and it's all free. You put all that together and you can't find *anybody* that does that. A community theatre that does classics? I think there are a few, but they don't do the *range* of stuff that we do.

My favorite story, which I've told to the point of tedium, is a letter I got from a mother. She wanted to thank me for helping to awaken in her what had become the great interest in her life - Greek mythology - but she also said, "I want to tell you about my daughter. I dragged her to a Greek performance one summer, and thereafter she went of her own volition. And when she went away to college, there were some electives she could take, and one was Greek tragedy, so she signed up for it.

"She went to get the reading list from the professor and she looked at it, and she said, 'Oh, there's a play here I haven't seen.' He said, 'You mean a play you haven't *read*.' She said, 'No, I've seen 'em all but *this* one.' He said, 'Where in the name of God can you see even *one* of these?' She said, 'Back home. Rock Island.'"

I mean, you think *that* doesn't keep you goin'?

Written by Mike Schulz

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More Than Scales

As proud as he is of Genesis Guild's success, Wooten is equally pleased about his organization offering immediate stage experience and vocal and language coaching to up-and-coming performers. "We serve mostly as a training ground," he says. "Almost every theatre group around here has in its roster or in its inner workings somebody who's been through the Guild."

I remember Leo Nucci, the baritone, was talking about learning to be an opera singer, and he said, "For two years I sang scales. Two years, nothing but scales." Well, you can't do that here. You gotta put [novice actors] on the stage, get 'em working on the voice, the body, everything.

You sometimes find you have to teach 'em how to *talk*. I mean, most young people don't know how to speak. There's no articulation. And since we're doing classical theatre, language and articulation have to come first. There's a lot of resistance to this because people like *action*, but action doesn't mean anything if you can't understand what's going on.

And this is special language. Sometimes *lofty* language. Shakespeare uses more different words than any other author. I mean, the King James Bible uses, what, 5,000 words? Shakespeare uses four or five times as many different words. He was *drunk* with language. He loved to play with it. So if you can't get that right, why bother? And if you get it right but nobody can *hear* it, why bother?

Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 20 May 2009 06:00

It takes a kind of steely courage to cast somebody in a part when you're not real sure what they can do, but when you *think* you see what you can get out of them. And it takes a little coaxing along. But if you're patient and you work with them I mean, I could cite names of people who came in and, oh God, you've never *seen* so many problems, but then they develop into the kind of actor that everybody wants to work with.

Blood on the Floor

Despite his 2006 exit from full-time Guild duties, Wooten says he did put in a stipulation. "When I retired, I said, 'I might come back when I'm 80 and do Henry VI,' because I'd never done those plays. So they were ready for me to come back at 80, and when I did, I said, 'Well, hell, I might as well do 'em all.'" He adds, though, that staging an entire season's worth of classical theatre is perhaps a simpler undertaking than his current task of adapting Shakespeare's three Henry VI plays into two. (He laughs and says, "I'm telling them that they should be done by January.")

It's actually easier to do all of the plays than to do one. Because if you're doing all the plays, your focus is on the season, so when you're casting, you think, "Well, I can use this actor here in a big role, and in a minor role *here*, and a medium role there, and in a big role there." Or, "I've only got so many women's roles, so if I use her for this, she won't be in *this ...* ." You can juggle everything.

You ought to see the blood on the floor on *Henry VI*. You've got these three four-hour plays that I'm cutting down to two [plays]. But you have to figure, "What is the *line* of the play? What's the thread?" And the thing is, it's as varied as a tapestry. Like the Bayeux Tapestry or something. There's just *so* much going on.

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 20 May 2009 06:00

What Shakespeare did was give us a pretty good sampling of every difficult time in English history. He literally throws *everything* into those plays, but basically there are three fights going on: one between England and France, for territory; one within the house of Lancaster, for control; and one between the houses of Lancaster and York. So I had to figure out, "What am I gonna shovel *out* of this?"

So I've taken out Jack Cade's rebellion, and compressed the story of Talbot, and I've taken out that funny thing in the third play where one king is captured and released, and another king is captured and released, and *another* king is captured You know, you can't start with a scalpel. You have to start with a meat ax.

The Glory of Art

Fifty-two years after Genesius Guild's debut offering - and more than 70 years since his interest in theatre began - Don Wooten still finds the art form's opportunities well worth the challenges, and is grateful for the chance to share his passions with new generations of artisans and audiences.

I got an e-mail from a young lady. She said she just thought it was time she thanked me for something. We had a program for students to come out and learn to do a little stage combat and how to project their voices, and she said, "When we were doing this, you came over to me and said, 'How would you like to be in the chorus of the Greek tragedy?' I was very flattered, and so I came out and I was in the play, and it was an unforgettable event in my life. That turned everything around for me."

The thing about plays is that [the character] Hamlet could live right next door and you would know nothing about him. But if you see him on a stage, you not only know about him, you care about him, you identify with him, and he helps you realize things about *yourself*

. Putting him up on a stage, with other people watching in a communal setting, does something important - something important to you as an individual, and as a member of society. And that's

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why, as remarkable as television and the movies are, it's never gonna be the same as live theatre.

I remember my first hearing of a fragment of an opera - it changed my life. It really did. That's the glory of art. A picture, music, a play ... it can really get into you and *change* you, and for the better. I think kids ought to sing and dance and play their way through school, because if you want a kid to develop the discipline that's required for education, get 'em in the arts. And let 'em *do*

stuff. Art has always been on the periphery. It belongs in the center of everything we do.

Auditions for Genesisius Guild's 2009 season will take place on May 24, 30, and 31 at 1 p.m., and on May 26 and 28 at 7 p.m. Volunteer opportunities are also available for each of the summer's shows, and more information on Genesisius Guild's season is available by visiting Genesisius.org