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BUCKS COUNTY **Courier Times**

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J. EDGAR!

'Cheers' ' George Wendt rocks and rolls as FBI's Hoover at Bucks County Playhouse



Actors George Wendt (center) and Alan Campbell (right) attend a news conference at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, to promote the world premiere production of the new musical "Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story."

Kim Weimer/photojournalist

By Liz Johnson

It's hard to get a laugh playing J. Edgar Hoover, even for George Wendt.

"He's a pretty unrelenting villain," said the comedian, best known for his role as Norm on the long-running TV series "Cheers."

Wendt stars in the musical "Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story" at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, running through Oct. 1. The official opening of the play is set for Saturday.

"A lot of my end takes place in the courtroom, where the opposing counsel is Little Richard. There's some humor inherent in that," Wendt said.

Written by Gary Kupper, Larry Marshak and Rose Caiola, the rollicking musical drama tells the story of disc jockey Alan Freed, who's credited with discovering and promoting rock 'n' roll. Pursued by the notorious Hoover, Freed perseveres, releasing the sound that would define a generation.

Part original score written Kupper, part jukebox classics by performers such as the Everly Brothers, Little Richard, Frankie Lymon, the Coasters, the Drifters and Chuck Berry, Wendt describes "Rock and Roll Man" as a "hybrid musical."

In all, the cast totals 18, "which is a bit small for a musical. But it's big for the playhouse. A lot are playing multiple roles, which is what you do when you have a big show with a small cast," he said.

Wendt, who got his start with Chicago's Second City comedy troupe, has appeared in more than 100 TV shows, including nine "Saturday Night Live" episodes.

But he has also made his mark on the stage, appearing off-Broadway, in London and touring with the Roundabout Theatre production of "Twelve Angry Men," starring alongside Richard Thomas.

He has worked with director Randal Mylar in the past, who tapped him for this role, he said.

"I'm not a great singer, which I'm reminded of every time I work a musical," Wendt said, demonstrating with a deep gravelly voice like Louis Armstrong's.

The rest of the cast, though, "are amazing," he said. "It's like being at a concert every day, like a music festival."

Wendt, who now splits his acting gigs between television and regional theater, said he knew of the playhouse by reputation.

"I always thought it was a cool deal. The town is ridiculously cute, and the history in terms of George Washington and the theater, it's just amazing," he said.

If You Go

What: "Rock and Roll Man:
The Alan Freed Story"

When: Through Oct. 1

Where: Bucks County
Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New
Hope.

More information: Call the
box office at 215-862-2121 or
visit bcptheater.org