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September 15, 2017

Cheers to George Wendt! - The sitcom legend is playing the villain in 'Rock and Roll Man' at the Bucks County Playhouse



George Wendt is playing J. Edgar Hoover in "Rock and Roll Man" at Bucks County Playhouse.

By Keith Loria

When the character of J. Edgar Hoover first appears on the Bucks County Playhouse stage in the world premiere production of a new musical, "Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story," audience members might have the urge to call out, "Norm!"

That's because veteran sitcom actor George Wendt, best known for playing the lovable, beer drinking, never-met-a-tab he would pay Norm Peterson for 11 seasons on "Cheers," is playing the historical figure.

"I'm always flattered when people remember me, and it is almost always because of 'Cheers,' but I don't think it gets in the way for more than five seconds," Wendt says. "With each new piece that I get involved in, the train is leaving the station and they just hop on board, and forget that I was Norm."

After “Cheers” ended its run in 1993, Wendt continued to work on TV, including leading his own series, “The George Wendt Show” in 1995. He also guested on numerous comedies, and starring opposite Disney Queen Ashley Tisdale in the 2015 workplace comedy, “Clipped.”

Some of Wendt’s fans might be surprised to know that he also is something of a theatrical veteran, appearing on Broadway in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” “Art” “Elf” and “Hairspray.” He also played Juror #1 in a national tour of “Twelve Angry Men,” and is a veteran of Chicago’s Second City comedy troupe.

“I really enjoy doing musicals and each time I do one, I am reminded in a very up-close-and-personal way of how inadequate my background is for musical theater,” Wendt says. “Most of the stuff I get to do is where the singing is less important because I can hit the odd note, but there’s no nuance at all. I like to say, ‘I can’t sing and I can’t dance but I will do what I’m told.’”

In “Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story,” Tony nominee Alan Campbell (“Sunset Boulevard”) plays the title character of the legendary disk jockey who died in obscurity and poverty in 1965 after a tumultuous career in which he introduced rock ‘n’ roll to the world and broke racial barriers.

Anyone who knows history, knows that despite those triumphs, Freed also dealt with crushing setbacks and crises as the center of the great payola scandal of the late 1950s and a target of Hoover and the FBI, partly because rock ‘n’ roll seemed so threatening. He died at the age of 43 from uremic poisoning. The show is basically a fever dream of Alan Freed’s last night on earth after sadly drinking himself to death.

Randal Mylar directs the production and the musical includes original songs by Gary Kupper, a book by Kupper and Larry Marshak with Rose Caiola. It also features some classics from the period by the likes of Little Richard, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers and Screamin’ Jay Hawkins.

“I’ve worked with Randal before and he always has really interesting projects and the subject matter here is terrific,” Wendt says. “Our culture from the ‘50s and ‘60s in regards to rhythm and blues being introduced to white audiences and becoming the phenomenon that is rock ‘n’ roll.”

Wendt was also drawn to the fact that it was a new work and he would be getting to play a role that hadn’t been done before.

“I’m always interested in work in general, so when I hear of an offer, I’m automatically interested as long as I am available,” he says. “Plus, I’ve always heard about Bucks County Playhouse and I wanted to get in on the fun.”

Wendt was young when Freed died, and although he knew a little about his story, he wasn’t familiar with the role Hoover had on his life.

“I didn’t really get it back then,” Wendt says. “At least in our play, Hoover sort of invented this payola scandal to squelch interracial socializing because he thought it was leading to the downfall of traditional American values. It was sexy. It’s been well documented that Hoover himself had issues with his sexuality, and he saw this all as a threat.”

For the role, Wendt didn’t deal with any of that speculative part of Hoover’s life, saying it doesn’t really serve the play.

“Hoover is really a straight-up villain in this piece and there’s no sympathy for his personal life, really,” he says. “It informs me to know he was very smart and very fearful his whole life of being outed probably. But this is not the J. Edgar Hoover story.”

Playing a villain is something new for Wendt, whose career has mostly been spent playing the lovable guy.

“Sometimes directors will try to cast against type and like to consider unlikely people playing villains,” Wendt says. “Hoover doesn’t consider himself a villain, he considers himself in the right.”

"Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story" is at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, Pennsylvania, through Oct. 1. Tickets cost \$40-\$75; bcptheater.org; 215-862-2121.