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What a Nerd! Joe Kinoshian is playing a dream role at the Bucks County Playhouse

- By Anthony Stoeckert

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Joe Kinoshian is playing the title character in "The Nerd" at the Bucks County Playhouse.

As a child growing up in Wisconsin, Joe Kinosian saw a lot of shows at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre. Seeing all those performances helped him fall in love with theater, one actor in particular became a favorite of his.

“This wonderful actor James Pickering was my hero,” Kinosian says. “He was just the most versatile guy and he was super, super funny, and he would do all the plays and all these great characters.”

One of those plays was Larry Shue’s comedy “The Nerd,” which made its debut at Milwaukee Repertory in 1981. The play went on to a year-long Broadway run (starring Mark Hamill, AKA Luke Skywalker, in the title role) and a successful run on London’s West End.

Shue wrote the part of Nerd specifically for Pickering. A teacher of Kinosian’s knew the actor, and got him to sign his personal copy of the Nerd script for the young fan.

“He wrote in it to me, 'Dear Joe, best wishes for a career in the theater,' and signed it,” Kinosian says. “I got this when I was 13 and I've lived in a lot of places since then, and I've carried this script around with me from place to place because I was like, some day I want to play that part.”

That day has come, as Kinosian is preparing to play the title character when the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, Pennsylvania, presents “The Nerd,” June 23 through July 15.

In the play, Willum Cubbert (played by Kyle Cameron) is a shy architect, who is hosting a party with his friends Tansy (Clea Aslip) and Axel (Gavin Lee). Tansy and Axel used to be engaged. These days, there's an attraction between Willum and Tansy, but neither are bold enough to say anything about it, and Tansy is set to leave Terre Haute, Indiana, for a job in D.C.

Willum gets an unexpected guest in Rick Steadman, the Nerd of the title. Rick saved Willum’s life in Vietnam, but the two never met. Rick is awkward and his behavior is completely inappropriate. On top of all that, he asks to move in with Willum, a request Willum feels obliged to grant, but comes to regret as Rick ruins Willum’s relationship with his boss Warnuck Waldgrave (played Grant Shaud).

Kinosian learned the Bucks Playhouse scheduled "The Nerd" as part of its summer season when he was in a holiday version of "Murder For Two," the show he co-wrote, and often performs in.

"While we had the meet-and-greets at Bucks County, which would have been in early December, I saw in the lobby — we're all introducing ourselves — and I see in the lobby hanging up, their summer season being announced," Kinosian says. "And one of the shows is 'The Nerd,' and I went right up to Alex and said, 'I just want to tell you right now, I've always wanted to do that part. And I'm sure you want to approach people who are much more famous than I, but if they turn you down, I'm around.'"

Kinosian says his quest for the role fit the character, because The Nerd is irritating and drives the people around him to insanity. Kinosian says he basically did that by constantly messaging and checking in with Alex Fraser and others at the Playhouse.

Director Marc Vietor says the play is a twist on "The Man Who Came to Dinner," the 1939 comedy by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart. In that classic, a stranger invades a home, and the hosts feel obligated to him because he is a revered critic, a man of stature.

"The reason they feel obliged to him is because of his social standing and their need to feel important," Vietor says. "In this play ["The Nerd"], the main character, the man who came to dinner if you like, the Nerd, is also someone to whom one of the main people has a huge obligation to, namely he saved his life in Vietnam.

"So anything this guy does, he gets sort of carte blanche, because he is the honored member of this little group of friends that he's come into. And that's the story of the play, essentially, the way this guy comes into this person's life, this nerd, rattles him and brings him to his senses in a way, brings him down to earth as a person."

Vietor adds that the fun and charm of the play come with watching how the people in Willum's lives get exasperated by the Nerd, a character the director says could be played by Jerry Lewis or Martin Short.

“He's the guy who's exasperating and obnoxious and at the same time you have a proprietary feeling about him," Vietor says.

Key to the production is that the play was written in 1979, which is when it will be set in Bucks County Playhouse's production.

“We're going to be very literal about it," Vietor says. "We're going to have music from that time, and we're going to have costumes and furniture from that time."

Setting in the late 1970s also is important because there's an answering machine that is important to the play.

“It almost has a life of its own," Vietor says. "It's not a conscious thing, but it does so many things for the plot. It acts in so many unusual ways, it's almost another character. And of course, it keeps us in that time of 1979 . . . people don't have big gangly answering machines like they used to.”

The play, "The Nerd" is set in Indiana, but the character of the Nerd is from Wisconsin, and Kinoshian recently had a chance to do a little research for his accent.

“I recently went home for a family wedding," he says. "And it was right about the time I was really starting to learn my lines. I don't want to throw anybody in my family under the bus, but I will say it was really well timed.”

"The Nerd will be performed at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, Pennsylvania, June 23-July 15. For tickets and information, go to www.bcptheater.org or call 215-862-2121.