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Television: Norm! George Wendt takes his acting skills to Bucks County



File Photo George Wendt is in "Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story," playing at New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse from Sept. 12 until Oct. 1.

By Neal Zoren

Though modesty triggers denial, it is clear quick-wittedness and droll line delivery helped actor George Wendt succeed in two ventures that made him a star.

Wendt reminds it was rewarding fun playing a loveable barfly with great one-liners, as he did for 11 seasons as Norm Peterson on NBC's "Cheers." Though Norm's lines were written, you can hear the cadence and talent for quips in his conversation, where funny phrasing and deadpan delivery prevail.

That knack for humor and patented delivery might have been formed at Chicago's Second City, where Wendt spent six years as part of the regular company.

Second City served Wendt in two other ways. It provided a job, and career, at a time when Wendt was wondering how he was going to earn a living as an adult and was the place he formed a bond with a fellow alumnus, Brandon Tartikoff, who would later run NBC and greenlight series like “Cheers” and their casts.

Wendt getting into acting because he admired an improv troupe and his tenure on “Cheers” were ongoing subjects of a telephone conversation he and I had to talk about his latest role, the first in a busy fall season — J. Edgar Hoover in a world premiere musical, “Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story,” playing at New Hope’s Bucks County Playhouse from Sept. 12 until Oct. 1.

In the 24 years since “Cheers” signed off, Wendt has gone back and forth between television and theater roles, with some movie credits as well. His last stop in Philadelphia was as a juror in “Twelve Angry Men.” He appeared on Broadway as Edna in “Hairspray.” Following his BCP stint as Hoover, he plays two more well-known characters, Willie Loman in a Toronto production of “Death of a Salesman” and Santa Claus in a Christmas season revival of the musical, “Elf,” in New York.

Wendt says staying busy in the theater indicates no preference for the stage over the small screen.

“If I had been offered a TV part, I’d have been unavailable for the theater roles. I’ve been a working actor for 44 years, I like working, and I look for what comes along,” he said.

Wendt is also aware of what might not be coming along. Asked whether he thought his long stint as Norm typecast him, he says no, he doesn’t think casting directors see him only as a wisecracker on a bar stool. He adds the variety of the work he’s done since “Cheers” attests to that. More than feeling ruled out because he played a character that can be seen regularly on cable, Netflix, and Hulu today, Wendt says what worries him is the parts he doesn’t hear about but might suit him.

Meanwhile, work abounds.

In “Rock and Roll Man,” which deals with the ‘50s payola scandal, disc jockeys and radio station programmers taking money to give records airplay, Wendt is the former FBI chief who investigates and plagues the life of Freed, a popular New York deejay and hit maker. Freed is played by Broadway veteran Alan Campbell, who originated the role of Joe in the 1995 Broadway production of “Sunset Boulevard.”

“Basically, Hoover is the lead character in Freed’s nightmare,” Wendt said. “The musical is set on the last night of Freed’s life, the night he dies from a heart at age 41, and Hoover’s pursuit could be the cause of that fatality.”

Wendt says he did not have to do any extensive research of Hoover to play this part.

“This is a case in which the script is doing the work for me. I just have to stick to its intention and its lines, and the character will emerge. ‘Rock and Roll Man’ is not a profile of J. Edgar Hoover that would require insight into the total man. It’s a subjective snapshot of one man’s relentless investigation into another person’s life and means of support.

“The Hoover the writers (Gary Kupper, Larry Marshak, and Rose Caiola) provide is enough. To do more would be too much.

“I like to stick to what the authors have in mind. I remember a hilarious essay by (playwright) David Mamet in which he says doing a part is not all about acting. He says there is no character, only lines to be played. He warns actor not to help but to just do their lines. He likens anything more to a pilot of a 747 flapping his wings in the cockpit to help the airplane fly.”

Leavening Hoover's closing in on Freed, Wendt says, is a sharp musical and combines original tunes with jukebox material.

"The ensemble is terrific," he said.

Music heard in the background during our talk revealed there's certainly some Fats Domino in the score and a tune that must be composer Kupper's because I couldn't place it.

Forty-four years as an actor starts with Wendt, a college graduate with a degree in economics agonizing over what he wants to do for a job.

"Economics was considered a social science and not part of the business curriculum that might have led to work. Besides, I was lazy and not really looking to work hard or be overly ambitious.

"I had to concede I was a clueless young man who had a college degree but no prospects and no idea about what I could do to make money.

"Acting never entered into the picture. Even when I decided what I thought might be fun, or at least interesting to me, I didn't think of it as acting. Maybe performing, maybe entertaining, but anything anyone, or I, would consider an art or something that involved effort."

Wendt's idea was to become a member of Second City, probably the most famous sketch comedy and improvisational troupe of the time when this phase of his life and career was taking shape.

"I needed a short-term goal, and it was Second City. Had I known then how hard it was to work with Second City, I would have plotzed. But I was too dumb to know you can't just walk in and get on stage or that there was actual work involved. I just knew I loved Second City and wanted to be part of it. The miracle is they took me.

"This was better than I expected. I, who just needed a job, was hired by an iconic comedy troupe I went to on flyer because it was the only place I actually thought I'd want to work. Then, I get there, and I find out it's a performer's dream. Not because it's easy or would let me bask in my usual cocoon of laziness, but because shows ran 52 weeks a year. Most actors in Chicago, and there were dozens, some who became stars, auditioned and auditioned and were lucky if they scored nine weeks of consecutive work before they had to audition and audition again. Second City put on eight shows a week and never took a break. You never had to audition and were never out of work. That was great I loved doing the work. Not that even then I thought I was acting."

Success at Second City was important because Wendt's college career took a detour. He spent the first three years at Notre Dame and says the first two of the years went well, but before the third he moved off-campus to a place that involved public transportation to get to school. "I missed classes and exams. My grade point average was 0.0. I had to go." Wendt completed his degree at Rockhurst University in Kansas City.

As mentioned, one of Wendt's friends and colleagues at Second City was Brandon Tartikoff.

"We were close," Wendt said. "One day he told me he was leaving to go to New York and work with Fred Silverman at NBC. Soon, Brandon's running NBC. He thought of me when the pilot of "Cheers" was being produced. That's how I got the job and became a well-known working actor."