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George Wendt coming to Bucks County Playhouse to play J. Edgar Hoover in new musical

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AP PHOTO/CHARLES KRUPA

George Wendt, raising a pint here, is best known as Norm from the TV show Cheers.



by **Tirdad Derakhshani**, Staff Writer tirdad@phillynews.com

George Wendt of *Cheers* fame will be in New Hope in September to star in Bucks County Playhouse's next original production, *Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story*, a musical about the legendary radio DJ who popularized rock 'n' roll in America in the 1950s.

Set to make its world premiere Sept. 12, *Rock and Roll Man* stars Tony nominee Alan Campbell (*Mamma Mia!*, *Contact*, *Sunset Boulevard*) as the Cleveland-based deejay and Wendt as his nemesis, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. The musical will run through Oct. 1.

Rock and Roll Man is Bucks County Playhouse's second original production of the year, following *Clue*, which has been booked for on a national tour following a phenomenally successful run in New Hope this spring. A third original musical, *The New World*, will premiere in November.

Other recent Playhouse successes include the rock musical *The Buddy Holly Story*, which had its world premiere at the playhouse last year and is currently playing at the Kimmel Center.

"We've always done original shows, of course, but three in one year, that's a first for us," said Playhouse producing director Alex Fraser. "*Rock and Roll Man* had been in development in New York for a few years. We were invited to a reading two years ago, and we said 'This is a great show, we'd love to have it at the Playhouse.' "

The musical was created by composer and lyricist Gary Kupper (*Freckleface Strawberry The Musical*), who co-wrote the book with longtime friend and collaborator (and rock promoter) Larry Marshak and Tony-winning Broadway writer-producer Rose Caiola (*Dear Evan Hansen*, *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*)

"Alan Freed coined the term *rock and roll*, and he's the reason the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is in Cleveland," said Kupper, a New York-based rock keyboardist who toured with Chuck Berry for three decades beginning in the 1980s.

"Both Larry [Marshak] and I grew up idolizing Alan Freed, so when I heard he had an idea about telling Freed's story, I jumped on the chance," said Kupper.

Freed, who had battled alcoholism for years, died in 1965 at age 43 shortly after his career was destroyed in the payola scandal, a system of bribery which had record companies paying off DJs to play their records. In 2014, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame caused a stir when it decided to remove an urn containing Freed's ashes that had been part of the museum's permanent collection.

“*Rock and Roll Man* is set on the last day of his life,” said Kupper. “And he’s having fever dreams as he’s dying of cirrhosis. .. He’s’ been drinking himself to death because of how he was hounded by Hoover and the FBI.

“Hoover believed Freed’s greatest crime,” Kupper said, “was to promote black music to white teenagers.”

Kupper said several production companies vied for *Rock and Roll Man*.

“We had several people who were interested, but we felt the people at Bucks County Playhouse were the right ones to take it,” he said. “It feels like a great venue for us to put it on its feet. [The Playhouse] is just beautiful and it has such an enticing and wonderful atmosphere. Plus it’s close to New York so we can attract that audience.”

Including Broadway producers looking for the next big hit?

“Of course,” said Fraser. “We’ll be inviting everyone from Broadway to come down.”

Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story

Opens Sept. 12 and runs through Oct. 1 at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope.

Tickets: \$40 to \$75.

Information: 215-862-2121, buckscountyplyhouse.org