

# Eugene Wolf's passions are music and theater

Greenville, Tennessee, native Eugene Wolf can trace his life onstage back to a local commercial and his grandmother.

"At the age of 2, my grandmother noted my extreme love of the Valleydale Pigs commercial and began grooming me for a life onstage. She taught me to sing a hit song of the day, 'My Shoes Keep Walking Back To You,' and entered me in a talent contest at the Capitol Theatre. I won. I was on my way."

He began appearing in Greenville Little Theatre plays, high school plays, joined the band and became a drum major. He then went on to the University of Tennessee - Knoxville to become a concert clarinet player.

"In a short time, I realized that performing on stage was my true love and shifted focus. I switched my major to theater, did a CBS network TV show, then took a break from performing. A soulmate college friend, who was born 20 minutes before me, encouraged me to enter the dinner theater field. That was April 1980. I've never stopped acting since," he says.

In 1982, he got a phone call from Bob Leonard, founding director of Johnson City's The Road Company, a professional community-based theater, asking him to join the acting ensemble. He joined and stayed for 16 years. While he was with The Road Company, he was among the first American artists to perform in the former Soviet Republic of Bashkortostan. In 1994 he performed there in "Echoes and Postcards."

His International Bluegrass Music Association Award also grew out of this trip to the Soviet Republic. He and Mitya Kuznetsov created a recording in Rybinski, Russia, called "Where We'll Never Grow Old," a collection of American gospel and spiritual songs. Wolf is planning to return to Russia to sing and tour with Kuznetsov.

A second important relationship came from the 16-year tenure with The Road Company, where he met singer/songwriter, Ed Snodderly. The two of them combined a love of music and

performing and created the country singing duo, The Brother Boys.

In 1997, he was invited to join Barter Theatre's Acting Company and is an associate company member to this day.

"Barter Theatre offered me acting opportunities that were beyond anything I could have imagined: Presidents Richard Nixon and Woodrow Wilson; the Creature in 'Frankenstein;' King Lear; Iago in 'Othello;' Randle McMurphy in 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest;' Willy Loman in 'Death of A Salesman;' Fagin in 'Oliver' and my signature role — A. P. Carter in 'Keep On The Sunny Side - The Story Of The Original Carter Family.' Seeing the doors that the Carter Family show opened for many folks who had never attended the theater is a true highlight of my career. Barter Theatre has given me an artistic home that has allowed me to cultivate who I am and why I'm here," Wolf says.

His latest project and one that is truly close to his heart is "The Book of Mamaw." This is a one-man show of stories, songs and sketches about his grandmother, Bernice Rader. He is touring this show currently and takes it to the United Solo Festival in New York in October.

If he isn't on tour, he's on stage at Barter Theatre or performing with Snodderly or hosting his radio show on Emory & Henry College's public radio station, WEHC 90.7. "What in the World" features music from around the world.

Wolf says one of his biggest challenges was coming to terms with who he is as an East Tennessee actor and artist.

"Embracing the dirt I came from. As a young artist I thought I had to leave my home and 'flatten out' my regional flavor. When I returned home in 1982 and joined The Road Company, I began to understand that my identity was my contribution to art.

"Art shines light on things we sometimes just can't see. And connects parts of our lives that don't even seem related. It reveals questions we may



Eugene Wolf

not ask. Life has become so black and white, and art is a vital prism that brings the color back to our daily life.

"Art opens doors for young people that may not be open in their lives. It immerses them in areas that might be foreign to them, helping to dissolve fear.

"Theater in particular is valuable to the community because it brings us closer. When people sit in the dark together and experience a shared live interaction, their hearts beat as one

heart. We breathe together. We're lifted together. In a world that seems bent on division, theater unites.

"Being recognized by your peers is salve for the soul - a chance to take stock. There are many daily rewards when art is the focus of your life - many setbacks as well. And recognition like this gives you some needed fuel to keep up the work. I'm grateful to be a part of this artistic community - a community that tells stories and sings songs and makes art to celebrate the gift of capacity we've been given as human beings," he says. A!



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