



The Storytellers

Deerfield Grads Follow the Footlights

BY DAVID TREADWELL

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FOR TOM LOCKE '92, IT STARTED WITH A CRUSH. AS A DEERFIELD JUNIOR, HE WAS AN ATHLETE NOT AN ACTOR. BUT HE HAD HIS EYE ON A COMELY SENIOR, AN ACTRESS DESTINED TO PLAY THE LEAD FEMALE ROLE IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *THE CRUCIBLE*. IF TOM, WHO HAD NEVER ACTED, COULD LAND THE MALE LEAD THEN, HE REASONED, GOOD THINGS MIGHT DEVELOP. AFTER TAKING AN INFORMAL CRASH COURSE ON AUDITIONING FROM A DEERFIELD FRIEND, HE LANDED THE PART. TWO WEEKS LATER, THOUGH, TOM'S PLAN WENT AWRY: HIS CO-LEAD HAD TO DROP OUT FOR FAMILY REASONS. BUT THE STORY HAD A HAPPY ENDING. "I DISCOVERED THE STAGE IS THE ONLY PLACE WHERE I CAN TRULY BE MYSELF," NOTES THIS SUCCESSFUL ACTOR, PRODUCER AND PLAYWRIGHT. ♦ FOR FARRA UNGAR '02, IT STARTED WITH A FLOURISH. SHE BEGAN ACTING IN MUSICAL THEATRE AS A SEVEN-YEAR-OLD AND, FOUR YEARS LATER, PLAYED THE LEAD ROLE IN A NATIONAL TOURING PRODUCTION OF *ANNIE*. "I LOVED IT!" SHE RECALLS, ADMITTING SHE DIDN'T FULLY APPRECIATE THE MAGNITUDE OF THAT EXPERIENCE AT THE TIME. ♦ TOM LOCKE, FARRA UNGAR AND THE OTHER DEERFIELD GRADUATES INTERVIEWED FOR THIS ARTICLE EACH HAVE UNIQUE STORIES TO TELL ABOUT THE ROLE OF THEATRE IN THEIR LIVES. BUT EACH TALE CONTAINS A COMMON THREAD: THE HUGE IMPACT OF DEERFIELD'S DIRECTOR OF THEATRE JOHN REESE ON WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY DO NOW.

"JOHN REESE IS TRULY AMAZING," SAYS TRISTAN Chirico '02, who has played lead roles in *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and several other plays at Wesleyan University. "He knows kids, and he knows what it takes to get them to do what they need to do."

Lauren Coppola '03, a history major and student-actor at Yale, echoes that enthusiasm. "He's a great director! He demands perfection and always stretches us. And the final product is amazing." Lauren calls herself one of the "fortunate few" because she's landed several roles on the highly competitive Yale theatre stage (e.g., in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Medea*). Reese, a top actor himself, returns the compliment. "Lauren has a remarkable ability to do Shakespeare. She's something else!"

Michael Kohn '01, a senior theatre major at Northwestern University, says, "John Reese helps students focus on getting into the character they're

playing, rather than wondering to themselves 'What am I looking like?'" Kohn also cites Paul Yager, the primary set builder at Deerfield, as an 'unsung hero.' "With Reese and Yager, you have a real force to be reckoned with!"

Ben Clark '96, currently the assistant master electrician at the Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, adds, "On the technical side, professionals usually focus on lighting or sound or sets, and Paul Yager does all three. I still use the tools I learned from him."

Chris Burns '86 recalls a painful lesson he learned from Reese as a senior during a rehearsal for the play *1776*. "I was talking and horsing around one day so John Reese kicked me out. He said to me in front of everybody, 'You have the potential to be one of the best in the show and now you're the worst! Come back when you're ready to take this seriously.' I returned the next day. More than anything, John taught me to respect what I'm doing, to respect the art."

Simple Lessons

John Reese maintains simple goals for his theatre students. “I want them to become more relaxed, more comfortable with themselves. I want them to develop a better stage presence that will serve them well in whatever they do. And I want them to learn that acting takes discipline, hard work.”

In his beginning acting classes, Reese has each student prepare a three-minute talk about an incident in their lives and then tell it to another student. Then *that* student must share the incident they’ve heard about with the class. “There,” Reese tells them, “you now qualify as an actor!”

What Reese emphatically does *not* do is push students into acting careers. “I **never encourage students to go into the theatre as a career, because acting is often not a nice profession.** But for students who just *have* to be in the theatre, I’ll give all the support I can.”

Different Stages

Chris Burns not only respects his art now, he makes a living from it in New York City, across the U.S. and around the world. “Some years it’s amazing; other years it’s depressing. I guess the key is perseverance, just showing up every day.” As to career highlights, Chris recalls a night right after 9/11 when he converted a subdued audience to laughter while acting in a two-man vaudeville show (*Stones in His Pocket*) in a theatre in London’s West End. “They got to escape reality for a few hours,” he reflects, “that was a gift.”

George Demas ’87, another New York City-based theatre professional, possesses a typically eclectic resume: he’s acted in classics, sketch comedy and new plays; performed on the television series *Law and Order*; directed plays in New York, the U.S. and abroad; written plays; and helped young playwrights get exposure for their work. “You have to wear lots of hats these days,” he says, “and besides, poverty long ago lost its romantic sheen for me. As long as there are stories to tell, I’m in it for the long haul.”

Tom Locke, the actor whose career started with that boyhood crush at Deerfield, plans to move to LA to run his own production company, Wild-Eyed Pictures, after graduating from NYU in the spring with an MBA. In addition to performing in plays in and around New York, this versatile professional has acted in independent films; starred in commercials for Pizza Hut and Six Flags; played a major role in an MTV series *Live Through This*; and written three screen plays.

Mike Sucsy ’91 set his interest in theatre aside when he went on to college at Georgetown University. A summer internship in NYC, where he worked in commercial film production, rekindled that spark as well as opened his eyes to a new career possibility. “When I saw people producing films,

I thought ‘Wow, I didn’t know anyone really did this!’” When a film crew came to Washington, D.C. to film *The American President*, Mike badgered the director to let him be the production assistant—for free. “We were on the set, and I was getting drenched because I didn’t have my full rain suit,” he laughs, “and I thought: ‘This is what I want to do with my life.’” After earning an MFA at the Art Center College of Design in LA, Michael joined a firm specializing in filming



Director of Theatre John Reese

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commercials. Still searching for the right fit for his talents and passions, Michael decided to take the next step: going into the film entertainment business. He’s currently working on a documentary screenplay which chronicles 40 years in the lives of a rich-then-poor eccentric woman and her equally eccentric niece. Moreover, he plans to direct the film in the future.

Peter Cambor ’97 is another budding theatre professional for whom random chance—and John Reese—proved provident. “For no good reason, I decided to take acting rather than ceramics at Deerfield. In my first monologue I was terrified, but John Reese saw something in me; he really opened me up. Acting was the first thing I was really good at!” Peter is still ‘really good,’ as evident from his acceptance into the prestigious American Repertory Theatre Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard. In addition to intensive acting classes, the experience has featured a trip to Russia to perform, as well as a role in *The Provok’d Wife* at the ART. Peter looks to the future with determined optimism. “I always have to remember that I’m an artist who can do incredible things.”

The American Repertory Theatre’s Ben Clark ’96 discovered at Wesleyan that his skills were better suited to the

technical aspects of theatre—especially lighting—than to acting. Why lighting? “With lighting, you’re basically painting a picture on stage that can enhance the mood. You don’t want people to leave the theatre saying, ‘What great lighting!’ or ‘What a great set!’ You want the technical aspects to be an integral part of the show.”

At the Crossroads

After graduating in June 2005, Michael Kohn, who’s performed in numerous plays and musicals at Northwestern, plans to join a troupe of young actors on a tour showcasing their talents in Chicago and New York. He has his sights set squarely on a career in theatre.

Farra Ungar, the former *Annie* touring star, is a junior at Brown with a double major in political science and theatre. She’ll go on to graduate school after Brown, though she remains undecided as to what degree she’ll pursue.

Jon Wolanske ’94 got bitten by the acting bug in fifth grade when he was chosen to play the hooded fang in the play *Jacob Tutor and the Hooded Fang*. “The audience laughed at what I said, and that was addicting.” Still making people laugh in his off-work hours, Jon is a member of “Killing My Lobster,” a comedy sketch group in San Francisco. For a day job, he works as a publicist for the American Conservatory Theatre. “I’ve discovered that acting doesn’t have to be ‘your job,’” he reflects. “You can still fulfill your passion for acting outside of your paid vocation.”

Sam Elmore ’96 began his acting career at age eight doing commercials, and he’s been acting ever since: in middle school and community theatre; at Deerfield and Middlebury;

and in Washington, DC, with a theatre troupe composed of several fellow Middlebury performers. He’s currently studying body psychology, dance therapy and theatre at Naropa University, a Buddhist university in Boulder, Colorado. After earning a degree from Naropa, he plans to go into leadership training for businesses, schools and organizations, an enterprise that will tap into his skills in theatre, dance and human communication. When asked if his family has supported his theatre-based career decisions, Sam says, “Absolutely! They know that finding and pursuing your passion is much more important than other factors such as making a lot of money or earning social approval.”

Putting Voice to the Passion

What is it? What is the magnet? What is it about life in and around the theatre that so captivates certain people such as the Deerfield graduates featured here? And what is the meaning? Why, at the end of the day, when the final curtain comes down, does theatre matter in the grand scheme of things?

“I love to pretend, to create my own world. And I get to go to good theatre every night!” (Chris Burns) ... “I’m a shy person, and theatre gives me a chance to make a fool of myself. Our society can be very isolating, and theatre helps us connect about something greater than ourselves. Besides, in this crazy world, a little illusion goes a long way. And you know, we all wear masks every day anyway.” (Tristan Chirico) ... “Theatre is about opening up, about give-and-take—between the actors and also between the actors and the audience.” (Lauren Coppola) ... “Coming together as a community and hearing stories about ourselves can be a form of psychotherapy.” (George Demas) ... “Theatre requires working together to create a shared vision. Without community, nothing gets done.” (Sam Elmore) ... “Sometimes I get to play a part or say something that’s really important, that really says something, that helps me understand myself better. Theatre gives us the chance to say things we’re not necessarily comfortable saying.” (Michael Kohn) ... “Theatre is a representation of all of human life—birth, passion, joy, anger, sorrow, death.” (Farra Ungar) ... “Theatre lets us come together for a night and share our stories in a very personal way. And it’s right in the moment, completely unrepeatable.” (Jon Wolanske) ... “It’s a warm professional community working together to produce a live show. I love it!” (Ben Clark) ... “It sounds almost Zen-like, but in theatre you create something out of nothing, in that very moment on stage. Your truthfulness—that’s what moves the audience.” (Peter Cambor) ... “Being in the theatre is what I was meant to do. What’s not to love about it?” (Tom Locke) ... “Storytelling is fun!” (Mike Sucsy) And so...on with the show. ■



Theatre Technical Director Paul Yager

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Ben Clark ’96, assistant master electrician, Trinity Repertory Theatre, Providence