

Ghost Tours guide taps Tallahassee history



Thomas Wilson will dress in ghoulish garb as a guide for the Ghost Tours in Downtown Tallahassee. THOMAS WILSON

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

In a month when all things haunted and spooky are in high demand, writer and actor Thomas Wilson thinks locals should look no further than the cityscape right outside their doors.

Dressed in ghoulish garb as a guide for the Ghost Tours in Downtown Tallahassee, Wilson has spent the past three years sharing Tallahassee's rich history with tour-goers in what he calls the "ground zero of

Southern gothic history." He got involved with the organization given his passions for storytelling and history. This year he will portray the late Dr. William Gunn, one of the first black medical doctors in Florida.

"Tallahassee is basically one big museum," remarks Wilson. "We at Ghost Tours only scratch the surface, as every single older building in this town has a story to it. The goal of the Ghost Tours is to get people to pay attention to the history that is all around us."

Though he has dabbled in both the music and theater worlds, Wilson considers himself foremost a writer and event specialist. In town, Wilson is an actor with the Canopy Roads Production company, performing in their productions of "A Raisin in the Sun," "To Kill a Mockingbird," and the upcoming, "Fences."

Wilson grew up and around the arts scene in NYC, attending an arts high school and performing weekly at fund-

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If you go

What: Ghost Tours in Downtown Tallahassee
When: 6:30-9:30 p.m., Oct. 27-29
Where: Andrew's Capital Grill & Bar, 228 S. Adams St.
Cost: \$17 per person, \$5 per child aged 5 and under
Contact: For more, call 850-212-2063 or visit toursintallahassee.com

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A rundown of this month's fall festivals and Halloween events.

Tour

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raisers and banquets. He went on to attend Fisk University for his bachelor's, and Binghamton University for his master's, as well as the Florida State University film school for his MFA. He is currently a member of the Tallahassee Author's Network, a writer's group that cheekily states its specialty as "harassing its members into finishing their work."

"The only thing I ever wanted to do was write my own stories," says Wilson, who has had a few works published, and likes to focus on character development. "I like to pay attention to what the character wants. I don't view any character as being better or worse than me. They're just simply people."

Wilson gravitates toward characters that are "the flies on the wall," that maintain objectivity and view everything from a slight distance. He believes his ability to spot and flesh out these Jiminy Cricket-like characters has led him to often be cast as the voice of reason in various productions.

At the FSU Film School, Wilson appeared as Fess Whately in "The Collegians," the strict professor who tried to straighten out the main character Erskine Hawkins. It wasn't hard for Wilson to get into the mind of the character, as he taught drama for 15 years from elementary school through university level courses, as well as in the juvenile justice system.

"My only goal was to try and get the students to adopt a philosophy of objectivity," states Wilson. "In other words, it's normal for human beings to bring baggage with you, but in life sometimes you have to go against the grain. That doesn't mean that you're betraying your upbringing or belief system, but it does mean that you sometimes have to assume you might not be right in all situations."

Encouraging his students to grow and learn as much as possible was always Wilson's goal, and he feels lucky to have had significant mentors that helped him along his way. Among them are the late educators John L. Motley, director of the All-City Chorus and head of the music department at the New York City Board of Education, and Murray Brownstein, a writer, playwright and high school English teacher.

While the latter helped him to become a better writer, the former instilled in Wilson a love of music and drive for perfection. In fact, he says it was theater educator Rodger



The Old City Cemetery marks the end point of the ghost tours. SARAH STONE/FSVIEW

Askwed at Fisk University, playwright Lofton Mitchell at Binghamton, and Stuart Kaminsky, former head of the FSU Film graduate school, who all gave Wilson valuable advice on writing. They said that, "what matters is your hand to the pen, your fingers to the keyboard, and your butt in the seat," and that "writing is writing."

"I believe that all creativity is related in some way," says Wilson of his own philosophies on creating. "Writing can be music, music can be poetry, poetry can paint pictures, and the visual can also touch that which is not visual. I believe it's all related and when something is right you just know it."

For the Ghost Tours, Wilson says each guide has a script they follow but are also given agency in how they tell stories and what they would like to focus on. Presented by Guided Tours in Florida's Capital & The Forgotten

Coast and given from Oct. 27-29, tours are tailored for age appropriateness so that they are always family-oriented, and most importantly, fun. Wilson says for his own presenting style, he enjoys making topical jokes and asides based on recent current events.

"If something doesn't go over well I joke about that too," laughs Wilson. "Since I'm wearing zombie make-up, if something I say is not funny, I'll say, 'these jokes are almost as rotten as me.'"

Middle-school students have made up some of his best tours, as Wilson enjoys their boundless energy. What keeps him coming back each year, however, is the opportunity to give students and adults alike a look at the city's history through a unique lens, and allow them to see how they can connect the past with our current world.

"The whole purpose of the ghost tours is not just

to keep memories alive, but also to pass these stories down so the next generations can realize we all stand on the shoulders of our ancestors," says Wilson. "No one is really dead as long as we remember them."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



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Cliff Hinkle Round to Remember
 Monday, November 6, 2017
 Capital City Country Club
 Registration 8:00 a.m.
 Shotgun start 9:00 a.m.
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