

Wrestler-turned-director pins down 'White Christmas'

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A self-described "Napoleon Dynamite," actor and director Stephen Donaldson never imagined he'd find himself in a white tuxedo and tap shoes. Standing tall at six-foot-five, he trained hard for the moment when he'd hoof it onstage as "White Christmas" Phil Davis. The number "I Love a Piano" was Donaldson's favorite to perform every night last year for Theatre Tallahassee's second run of the holiday favorite.

He hopes as a director to bring some of the same movie magic into this year's run from Dec. 1-18 at Theatre Tallahassee, and create a sense of community among the audience members.

In truth, Donaldson's primary love wasn't acting. He first found his artistic side in his high school TV Productions class where teacher and mentor Chris Miller encouraged his niche talents. Miller helped him and his classmates produce a high quality televised morning show. Donaldson admired Miller for not only teaching them how to do the work, but how to be good people, and also for the chance to get creative behind and in front of a camera.

Horsing around with friends in his Ocala backyard, Donaldson idolized the televised stars from what he considered to be the golden age of professional wrestling—The Rock, Sting, Hulk Hogan. He and his friends were inspired to start their own monthly wrestling events and ended up acquiring a following of nearly 50 people.

At age 18, a professional wrestling trainer moved to town and offered to help Donaldson train seriously in this athletic art form. He began working out in a real ring, and soon was part of the National Wrestling Alliance, performing in Florida, Georgia, and Alabama on the largest independent circuit under the WWE. Part soap opera, part sport, Donaldson credits much of his performance skills and characterizations to his early wrestling career.

"In wrestling, people love to hate characters, and that's true in the theater too," explains Donaldson. "I played good guys and bad guys, but it's so much more fun to play an unlikable character than a likable one. I felt a great sense of satisfaction getting people to



IF YOU GO

What: "White Christmas"
When: 8 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. on Sundays, Dec. 1-18
Where: Theatre Tallahassee, 1861 Thomasville Road
Cost: Tickets \$25 for Adults, \$20 for Seniors/Military, \$15 for Students
Contact: For more information please call 850-224-8474 or visit www.theatretallahassee.org.

be engaged in the show and boo at me."

Simultaneously touring and attending college, Donaldson was a dual major in journalism and theater at the College of Central Florida in Ocala, earning a theater scholarship and working as a stagehand. However, growing up in central Florida for 16 years, Donaldson's wanderlust led him and a college friend to sell everything they owned, aside from a single suitcase and guitar, and take a 72-hour Greyhound bus ride to Sacramento.

The move helped Donaldson realize the dreams that he was capable of pursuing while he endeavored to begin a career in rock music, though he eventually migrated to Tallahassee.

He briefly fronted the band Radio Disturbance, playing covers of nineties and alt-rock music like Blink-182 and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and opened his own business, Flippin' Great Pinball, buying and selling pinball machines with an interactive showroom.

Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Nile" was the first show he'd seen in town, reigniting his appreciation for theater. Within five minutes of sitting down, the quality in the set, acting, lighting, and sound design, convinced Donaldson to audition for whatever show was next, which happened to be "Rock of Ages."

"I showed up and put all the professional singing and wrestling experience on the stage and got cast as Dennis Dupree, the goateed bar owner," said Donaldson. "The entire community, production team, and cast of that show could not have been more welcoming despite the fact that I was new to all of them. They instantly treated me like family, and that's the best feeling I've felt in any work or arts that



MELINA MYERS

Though he never expected to dance, the former wrestler put on tap shoes to play Phil Davis in last year's production.



ANDRÉ PEELE

Stephen Donaldson is directing "White Christmas."

I've done."

His next role was as Phil Davis in the theater's second annual production of "White Christmas." Adapted from the 1954 blockbuster with Bing Crosby, the story follows two WWII buddies who scheme to save a former general's Vermont inn by putting on a big show.

For this year's production, Donaldson is stepping into the shoes of theater director for the first time, building on the show's sense of home, belonging, and family that the holiday season brings. He's enjoyed working with an all-new and mature cast this year, delving into each character's mind and emotions.

"It's really interesting being on either side of that fence where you had a vision for your character versus now you have a vision for a show," said Donaldson.

The show is also a chance for people to see the inner workings of what it takes to put on a musical within the musical, as "White Christmas" characters rush to pull together a show-stopper. Moreover, Donaldson sees this year as a chance to establish a tradition and provide a new perspective on this holiday classic.

"The show can really be a reflection on how you can get a wildly different finished artistic product when you put different painters behind the brush or use different colors to paint the same picture," said Donaldson. "The theater is also made up of so many amazing people, who work long nights to hang lights, put up entire sets with carpentry skills, move backstage, hand off props, and volunteer to usher and take tickets. It takes every single one of those people to create a night at the theater and it all has that sense of com-

munity and positive energy from everybody involved that you just can't find anywhere else."

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).