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David zum Brunnen: a Dickens of an actor

BY KATIE SCARVEY
SALISBURY POST

If you're a Salisburian of a certain age, you might have worn a leisure suit or a mini-skirt to see a precocious blonde youngster named David zum Brunnen perform in the Piedmont Players productions of "Mame" or "The Sound of Music" or "Finian's Rainbow."

Now, the leisure suits are long gone (one hopes), the mini-skirts have been recycled and the precocious youngster is a professional actor whose blonde hair has darkened to a shade he creatively describes as "pecan pie."

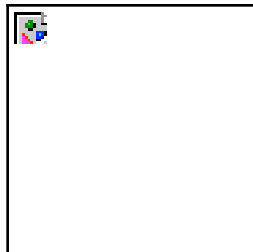
You can see zum Brunnen perform "The Night Before Christmas Carol" today at Catawba College's Hedrick Theatre. The 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. shows will raise money for Friends of the Catawba College Library and will be followed by receptions in the Catawba's Crystal Lounge.

Tickets, which are \$15, will be available at the door, and a discount is offered for those purchasing Friends of the Library memberships.

The heralded one-man show, based on the life of Charles Dickens, is directed by zum Brunnen's wife of 13 years, actress Serena Ehart.

The play was written by noted Dickens scholar Elliot Engel and takes a historically accurate look at the writing of Dickens' holiday morality tale, "A Christmas Carol."

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The play is set on Halloween night, 1843, the very night Dickens came up with his idea for a “ghostly little book” that would become a beloved story.

Although the 30-year-old Dickens had “The Pickwick Papers” and “Oliver Twist” under his belt in 1843, he was in some financial difficulty when he got the idea for “A Christmas Carol,” which he wrote in just a few weeks.

In the play, zum Brunnen plays Dickens and 17 different Dickens characters.

“I have the perfect facial features to play Dickens characters,” said Zum Brunnen, during a telephone interview from his secluded Chatham County home. “I’ve got the chin, the ski slope nose.”

Dickens walked the streets of London at night, sometimes 20 miles.

“He would then go home and act out the scenes that he had created in his head,” zum Brunnen said.

The play recreates some of the creative process that Dickens actually went through as he wrote “A Christmas Carol.”

Zum Brunnen enjoys playing a broad spectrum of Dickens characters in the play. Then again, he’s got a history of performing Dickens. He started playing Dickens characters when he was a high school student in Salisbury.

“My father and I did ‘A Christmas Carol’ with the Piedmont Players. My father played Jacob Marley, and I played young Ebenezer,” zum Brunnen said.

Rodney Lippard, of the Friends of the Catawba College Library, has seen the play performed and said that zum Brunnen brought a lot to the role.

“It’s amazing to see him transform from Dickens to Scrooge to the old lady selling Scrooge’s bedclothes,” Lippard said.

Zum Brunnen is happy to be returning to his hometown to perform for the first time since he went away to college. He’s returning to the very stage in Hedrick Theatre on which he first performed in “The Sound of Music” with the Piedmont Players.

Zum Brunnen spoke of his Salisbury childhood with

great fondness.

"I used to hang out in the basement of the Catawba College library after school," he said. "My 'Uncle Pete' [Pete Cooper, no relation] was in the archaeology department there, and I'd amuse myself playing with skulls and arrowheads."

Zum Brunnen said his love of drama began when he was a student at Overton Elementary. He singled out two Salisbury educators for getting him fired up on the power of storytelling.

"One of my influences was Betsy Detty," he said. "She was the librarian at Overton. At holiday times, like Halloween or Thanksgiving, she would make a rather elaborate production for us. We'd walk in the library, and there would be a scene set; she'd be in costume and create a story in a very theatrical way.

"That had a very powerful influence on me. I learned from her the powerful and positive impact that the telling of a story could have. That's one big reason I do what I do."

Dr. Detty certainly remembers young David zum Brunnen, who, she says, had "a special bright light in his eye."

"After seeing David in 'The Sound of Music' and 'Finian's Rainbow', I thought he had found his vocation — drama — something which he loved and could be absorbed in all his life," Detty said.

Zum Brunnen's other big influence was Nelle Troxler, or "Miss Nelle," as students called her.

"Miss Nelle was the kindergarten teacher at St. Luke's Episcopal for years. She would take a moment during the day in the morning, and she'd put on some music and we'd sit down and listen to her tell a story.

"It would be very animated, and it was a powerful way of saying what fun and joy can be allowed," Zum Brunnen said.

Nelle Troxler, who taught high school as well as kindergarten, died in March.

Zum Brunnen continues to appreciate the value of the arts in education in his role as executive director of the North Carolina Theatre Conference.

"Through grassroots efforts we've been able to reach historic increases in arts funding at the state level, and we've persuaded the state Board of

Education to reinstate the arts as one part of the recommended curriculum to meet graduation requirements," he said.

Zum Brunnen also spoke of Piedmont Players memories, remembering Karl Hales, John Hartledge and Becky Lippard.

Zum Brunnen expressed much affection for his parents, Betty Jean and Chester zum Brunnen.

"I was adopted, and I was fortunate enough to be selected by these two folks who were very nurturing... they really nurtured that creative spirit in my sister and myself," he said.

They did not, however, necessarily envision zum Brunnen acting professionally.

In fact, zum Brunnen said, "They had notions that I would carry on the family accounting business. My grandfather started it, and my father followed in his footsteps.

"I took the accounting courses at UNC, but at some point I decided I wanted to pursue acting. Initially my parents weren't sure, but after, they were incredibly supportive."

Betty Jean zum Brunnen said it only took one semester of accounting to convince her son that an accounting career was not for him. She still lives in the Sells Road home that David zum Brunnen grew up in, and she said she isn't sorry that her son chose not to pursue the family business.

"David's career keeps me entertained and travelling," she said.

Zum Brunnen's father, Chester, died a year and a half ago.

"Dad was one of my best friends," he said. "I am extremely fortunate to have had that kind of relationship with my father."

Zum Brunnen said that luck led him into his current role.

"The role was originated by a New York actor, who performed it from 1991 to 1996. Five years ago, he wasn't able to perform it, and I got the chance to take it over for the season," zum Brunnen said.

"I thought it would be a one-time gig, but after I did it, I continued to get offers to do the role, and it

evolved into something more than I expected.”

Zum Brunnen has been touring the show between New Jersey and North Carolina during the Christmas season for the past five years.

Since performing as Dickens in Elliot Engel’s play, zum Brunnen has been fortunate enough to collaborate with Engel, a world-renowned Dickens scholar, on other projects.

“He and I are working on a couple of pieces, one possibly for the summer,” he said. “He’s also developing a couple of cabarets with my wife.”

David met his wife Serena — who is almost five months pregnant with the couple’s first child — when they were students at UNC.

“We were in a horrible, horrible, horrible production of ‘Lysistrata.’ We would go over to Franklin Street and get sandwiches and sweet tea and sit and cry over our tea,” he said. “It kind of went from there.”

Zum Brunnen feels lucky to be able to work with his talented wife. He has acted with her many times.

In “Raney,” John Justice’s stage adaptation of the Clyde Edgerton novel, the two played Southern newlyweds.

“ ‘Raney’ was a lot of fun,” zum Brunnen said. “There were moments on stage when we couldn’t look each other in the face or we’d crack up.”

In their current production, Serena directs David as he plays Dickens and some of his most famous characters.

“I trust her eye and ear implicitly,” he said. “Working together has become quite a fruitful journey for us.”



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