

Published Monday, September 3, 2007
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Producer's Dream Takes the Stage

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The Ledger

SCOTT ALAN COOK

AGE: 40.

BORN: Feb. 26, 1967.

FAMILY: Single.

JOB: Entertainment producer.

EDUCATION: Graduated from Notre Dame High School in 1985. Technical certificates in motion picture technology and digital media technology from Valencia Community College, 2003.

FAVORITE HOBBY: Collects horror films from all over the world.

FAVORITE FOOD: Grilled chicken.

FAVORITE TELEVISION SHOW: "24," because I love the writing.

FAVORITE BOOK: "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" by C.S. Lewis.

FAVORITE PLAY OR MUSICAL: "Six Degrees of Separation" and "Hairspray."

PET PEEVE: Wasting time.

QUOTE: "There is no Plan B."

LAKELAND

Entertainment producer Scott Cook was still reeling from the most successful show of his career - the 2006 Theatre Winter Haven production of "Cats" - and contemplating life after 40 when he toured Lakeland's Polk Theatre.

Walking through the historical landmark, he felt the creativity of those who had performed on the stage, from the early vaudeville acts to Gene Autry to Elvis Presley.

"The next thing I know, this idea was bubbling out of my body," Cook said, his hands imitating the path of imaginary bubbles.

TheatreWorks Florida - a new, Lakeland-based theater company working toward regional and professional status - was born.

"It was time to move on and do something bigger," said Cook, 40, who has acted and directed for a dozen community theaters in Central Florida, including the Pied Piper Players and Theatre Winter Haven.

TheatreWorks Florida will present its inaugural performance with a production March 6-9 of the Disney hit "High School Musical" at the Polk Theatre.

A sneak preview will be performed Friday during the Downtown Lakeland Partnership First Friday event. Representatives from the TWF cast of "High School Musical" will perform hit songs from the show at 7 and 8 p.m. in the Munn Park area.

Scott Alan Cook was born Feb. 26, 1967, in Utica, N.Y., to Barbara and Roger Cook, a carpenter. His mother was a school bus driver.

At 8 years old, he was discovered by cabaret singer Carol Brown when she heard him sing at his cousin's confirmation. Brown performed in resorts throughout New York state.

Brown told the Cooks that their son needed to be in a show. Two months later, he was on stage. He worked with



(Photo by: Rick Runion | The Ledger)

Brown for a year before joining Rhythm-Lite Touring Productions, a sister company to Up with People.

"Carol was my training. Rhythm-Lite is where I blossomed," Cook said.

During his nine years with the company, he became the male lead - actor, singer and dancer. When he wasn't performing, he was taking acting classes in New York City.

He remembers when he received word that he was cast in his first professional show just after graduating from Utica's Notre Dame High School in 1985.

"I was sitting at the breakfast table staring at the rooster on the corn flakes box," he said. Soon he was on stage in "A Chorus Line" with The Talent Company in Syracuse, N.Y.

A LONG VISIT TO FLORIDA

On March 3, 1986, Cook traveled to Florida to visit his grandparents and never left. He now lives in Davenport.

Central Florida has been good to him. He's performed and directed shows for Walt Disney World, Universal Studios and numerous community theaters. He has directed films and videos and designed Web sites.

For several years, he ran Onstage II, a young adult musical theater company in DeLand, and owned his own dance studio.

Cook spent nearly nine years - 1991-1999 - acting, singing and dancing on various stages at Walt Disney World. He also toured Japan as part of the Disney crew.

"Disney gave me the opportunity to perform every day, five times a week," he said "I have the performer's personality that makes it easy."

He left the Disney stage after an old injury returned, rendering him unable to continue the long hours of strenuous performing.

While picking and choosing stage projects, he supports himself with CBC Creative, a company he owns through which he designs and rents the AUDREY II puppets, the man-eating plants from "Little Shop of Horrors".

He also owns and operates High Energy Entertainment, which produces a variety of shows for different venues.

man of many talents

Cook has been in Central Florida community theater for more than 20 years as a performer, choreographer and director. Theater Winter Haven Producing Director Norman Small describes Cook as dedicated, demanding, disciplined and persistent. This reputation earned him the respect of actors and frequent invitations to direct and choreograph productions.

Cook began a long association with TWH in 1994 when he was asked to direct "Dames at Sea." He's been weaving TWH into his directing schedule ever since. Most recently, he directed the 2006 production of "Cats", which he describes as a turning point of his career.

Small holds "Cats" up as an example of Cook's talent.

"He was as prepared for 'Cats' as one would be for the debut of a Broadway show," Small said, adding that Cook had the most detailed pre-production plans he has ever seen.

But the actor-turned-director puts that type of planning into everything he does. Every aspect of a show is well-planned in advance - set, lighting, makeup, costumes - and estimated costs of the show. Cast members of "Cats" said they were required to "move at the speed of Scott."

Cook has a healthy self-image - his life philosophy falls somewhere between following the guidance of God and being the guide, himself.

"My worst habit is a tendency to micromanage. The reason is because nine times out of 10, it's easier to do it myself,"

he said, adding that he tries to delegate tasks during each show but often finds himself doing them, anyway.

Small said Cook's major strength, his perseverance, is also his biggest fault.

"He knows what he wants and he will do whatever he can to get that," Small said. "It is a fault and a blessing. A person will take 'no' one time. It takes three times for Scott."

Hearing this, Cook grins under the black baseball cap that has become his signature.

"In my mind and my work ethic, there is no Plan B. So, sometimes I can get us into precarious situations because I don't back down easily when resources do not appear to be readily available," he said. "I have extravagant vision that costs money."

his new company

For the past year, he has been laying the groundwork for TheaterWorks Florida. He decided upon a nonprofit regional theater - he is in the process of completing paperwork to become a 501C3 - that would use 60 percent union professionals and 40 percent local professionals.

"Being a professional company, we will be able to bring in top-notch, professional-level entertainment at an affordable price," Cook said. "We have a big vision but will take baby steps to get there."

He's analyzed scripts for more than 50 shows, looking for the edgier, recent releases from Broadway. He chose "High School Musical" because of its commercial success and meaningful message.

At the moment, he is searching for rehearsal and set-building space.

Developing a regional theater is a monumental task, Small said, but if anybody can do it, Scott Cook can.

"Given his artistic background and attachments to other organizations, he has the resources to do it," Small said. "He is quite aware of what it takes from the business aspect and understands the concept of a show and communicates that to others."

Meri Mas, a Polk Theatre board member, also thinks that Cook can make the company happen.

"His endeavor is a difficult one but he has all the qualities (necessary) to be successful - drive, talent, experience and energy," said Mas, who has worked in marketing for the Burt Reynolds Theatre in Jupiter and the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in Palm Beach County.

Though Polk Theatre board members haven't made any formal agreement with Cook other than to rent the facility to him for "High School Musical," Mas sees more collaborations in the future.

"I have a feeling he is going to do very well," she said. "I'm hoping for a long-term (working) relationship with him."

Some folks have voiced concerns that Polk County, with community theaters in several cities, can't support another theater company.

Paul Hughes, veteran artistic director of the Lakeland Community Theatre/Pied Pipers Players, is one of them.

"The only way it will work is if we communicate and work together and not against each other. We need to be part of the same dialog. He hasn't talked to us about it."

He also wonders whether there are enough actors to go around.

Mas, though, disagrees.

"Can you get too much? I don't think so," she said. "Better is better for everyone. There is room for more. There's always room for better."

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