

***York Daily Record archives***

York County native lands movie and TV work He also stars in a Phila. play  
December 10, 2009

Section: FLIPSIDE

Page: 02-10

Russ Widdall's early acting days read like the script of "High School Musical."

He was a jock at York Suburban Senior High School. Then, his English teacher suggested he try out for a play.

Widdall said his role as the judge in "The Crucible" helped him become more well-rounded. It also marked a turning point: His future was on the stage, not on the football field.

Widdall's first acting role should have given him a hint. In fifth grade, he poured ketchup on his head as Banquo in "Macbeth." Drama is what he does best. He's not a singer or comedian.

He began auditioning for York Little Theatre productions and landed the role of Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol" at the age of 25.

Widdall knew he wanted the role of Vietnam War veteran Teddy when he recently auditioned for New City Stage Company of Philadelphia's production of "When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?"

"It was a fastball down the middle of the plate for me," he said about the intense scenes.

Teddy, the protagonist of Mark Medoff's 1973 play, is an emotional terrorist. He wreaks havoc on a New Mexico diner by exploiting patrons' weaknesses and turning them against each other.

Teddy might be cruel, but Widdall said the character gets viewers' sympathy.

"We all have demons," Widdall said. "(Teddy) speaks to that dark side we all have."

Widdall said "When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?" will resonate with audiences since it has parallels to current times.

There is soaring unemployment, an unpopular war and youth looking at a mountain of debt and other problems created by previous generations, Widdall said. Actors are having more trouble than usual getting work these days, he added.

Widdall, who moved to Philadelphia in 1990 to pursue his theater career, now lives in New York City. At home, he tries out for TV and commercial work, but he still commutes a few hours to Philadelphia for plays.

"It's been a really brutal environment," Widdall said.

The arts rely largely on public and private funding, which are drying up because of the recession. TV commercial budgets have been slashed, since advertisers are focusing on Internet campaigns without actors. But Widdall is not discouraged. Luckily, an actor's job is to constantly reinvent himself.

So far, Widdall has landed roles on the HBO series "The Wire" and in the Renee Zellweger movie "My One and Only," which had a limited release last August.

He was only supposed to appear in one episode of "The Wire" as a lab technician who screwed up blood work and got yelled at by Detective Bunk (Wendell Pierce). But the writers decided to write his character into another season five episode.

In "My One and Only," Widdall is only in one scene for a few minutes, but those were important minutes. He had to kiss Zellweger.

She was great to work with, Widdall said. She popped into his makeup truck to chat and share granola.

Unfortunately, most people won't recognize him in the movie, since he gained 30 pounds for the role plus the other 10 the camera adds.

But Widdall said he didn't mind. He said he learned a lot about the filmmaking process from the experience. There was a lot of waiting around, but he had to be ready to do his best at a moment's notice.

And with film, unlike with theater, his work is preserved, so he hopes to get more on-screen time in the future.

Right now, Widdall's focused on "When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?," which opens tonight.

"Theater is still the best training," he said. POPEYE is a bi-weekly column focusing on the ever-changing landscape of popular culture. To reach writer Erin McCracken, call 771-2051 or send an e-mail to [emccracken@ydr.com](mailto:emccracken@ydr.com). PIC: SUBMITTED Robert Dupont, left, and Russ Widdall, right, rehearse a scene from the drama 'When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?'

---

All content © 2009- York Daily Record (PA) and may not be republished without permission.

---

All archives are hosted by NewsLibrary, a division of NewsBank, inc.