

## Inside the Artist - George Woodard February 2015



### You are a man of many talents. What started you performing? Tell us about your journey.

Are you doing a whole cussed story? In my senior year of high school I got into a couple of plays and said, "Oh...this is good." The one that was really important was when they did "Oliver." I auditioned for the bad guy, Bill Sykes, 'cause thought I might get up enough inside of me to do one song. But they gave me Fagan, who had three, and I thought "Oh crap, I can't do that." But I did and I said "Oh...this is good." So that's kind of where I started. When to VTC (Vermont Technical College) I sought out the community theater and did a couple of things down there. After I graduated, I sought out the Lamoille County Players and Steve (Woodard) and I were in a show in '74 together and that's how that happened. Steve Hall was the director, and it's nice to have a director who really knows what they're doing. When she came to rehearsal she had everything, dialogue blocking, dance blocking, she had it all ready and she'd go through it with everybody. And, to have somebody who was that prepared and was capable and one step ahead of everyone so that there was no question where we were going. To have someone who was Johnny on the Spot every second was great. Steve Hall was hugely inspirational. When I wasn't up on stage, I would sit in the audience and watch her direct. This old woman, in '74 we was something like 72, and to watch her get up on stage and show these young people how to actually do the dance steps that she was trying to get them to do. It was so much fun. But I also learned from her that you can look at a script and see what it is, but you can look at it again and see how you can do it different. I learned a lot from that because she did not like love songs. So her love songs were full of slapstick and pratt falls which made me say, "huh," and showed me that a just because it's a love song, it doesn't have to be done gushy. Just because it reads "this" doesn't mean it has to be presented that way.

At the same time, I got started with the cows and directed my first show at Lamoille County Players, "Godspell." The Barre Players had resurrected the Barre Opera House and they were doing a play that had a choreographer that I wanted to see what he was doing. I was in the

chorus on that one. And the Barre Players heard that I had directed (One play!) and so they asked me if I was going to direct something, what would I direct? So I gave them a couple of ideas and they picked one of them and we did that following year, "Mr. Roberts." After that I went to Los Angeles for a few years, and that was more or less a big learning experience of technical stuff. I was on stage in a few things that were good and I stage managed some plays and ran lights for a few things, and on the weekends I would work on short films with people I had met and be in the films or be a grip on things behind the camera. I had to keep coming back and forth (to Vermont) because of milking, and that lasted three or four years. At the end of '88, I said that was enough. Steve had taken over looking over the things here and he was getting a little thin on it and so I came back. And I figured that the stuff that I had learned out there was all technical stuff (not open heart surgery) and stuff I could do here and still milk the cows. I realized I could do (what I did there) here much easier and much cheaper. I still have friends that I keep in touch with from that time period. So I came back in '89...that's the year we did Woody and the Woodchuck. I got in touch with Al Boright and we put that together. I met him at the Lamoille County Players, and he had written this political satire called "Do Little Things." When I called him about a Pinocchio style story set in Vermont, and explained to him all of the politics of the day and how they plugged into the original Pinocchio story line, he just went with it. We worked on that for a few months and wrote songs and had auditions in early September. We went to the Lamoille County Players and said I want to rent the theater. They didn't have a show in their fall time slot, so they suggested that we do our show then, but I told them that I wanted to do it for two weekends. They said we wouldn't get an audience. I told them to let me worry about that, because we're actually going to do the show for four weekends and take it to Burlington one weekend and Montpelier one weekend. And I think they've done their fall play two weekends ever since then. We did that for two years. After that I wanted to do a play I had seen in California, "FOXFIRE", and I did it at Lamoille County Players, but I told them that I wanted to run the show two weekends. Then we did a Ground Hog Oprey there as a fund raiser and then we did another one to raise seed money for Woodchuck Theater, and then we started Woodchuck Theater. We did pretty well.

### Why did you start writing your own plays? What was the impetus for that?

You just get ideas. (First original piece--1987) When I was in California, there were two girls that were in the cast of a play I was in and they come up to me and they said, "We're going to a one-act in this festival



that we've written, but the guys say it's not enough and they need something else to go in there. Could you put something together?" I told them I could. So I came up with the idea of the Ground Oprey, with all the costume changes and stuff. 'Cause I knew another guy who plays the guitar and at the last minute they changed how much time I had to fill by half. I said okay and scraps the Ground Hog Oprey and did another play with all the music, just shortened them. And we did it and it was fun.

(*Woody & the Woodchuck*) The Pinocchio story started because Madeline Kunin was governor. She said something at the farm show and being a farmer, I thought, "That's good." And then a week later, she said the complete opposite on TV and I said, "What the hell, can't she make up her mind?" and I said, ".Oh!" I got an idea! Of course, down on route 100 there was chainsaw art, 3 or 4 places that had chainsaw art. So I figured, let's make a story about a chainsaw carved hired hand who wants to be a real hired man, so he has to go through these things to become a real hired man. And the Blue Fairies come and they can't decide what to do, and the Blue Fairies are Madeline Kunin.

We started the GHO in '91 and toured it in ten different places that year, but Al came on in '95 and that's when it really jelled.

### You have a lot of music in your work. When did you start playing music?

I think music is really important so I like to incorporate music in what I do. I started out playing piano with Francis Stowe Havens. And my father played the guitar when he was younger, and I'd beg him to dig the guitar out and play a couple songs. After I graduated high school I started playing the guitar and I started playing out a month later at a

variety show at Harwood. Steve did that with me. He was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and didn't play an instrument then, other than taking piano lessons too, so he got on stage with me and we did this song named "Mountain Dew," that had all these characters in it. And so we had this pile of costumes. When he was ready, he'd jump and turn around and act out the verse and we'd both sing the chorus of "Mountain Dew". It was kind of ridiculous, but it sure was funny.

When he (Steve) was going to UVM and came home on Fridays. I bought that bass and he would learn what I wrote down for him and that's how that kind of started. We entered a contest once. In 1976 they were having the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual County Music contest up in Barre. So we went up to it and won the dang thing. We won it because we put on a show, not because we were technically fantastic. That made us different than everyone else. It worked. We won.



#### When did you start making films?

In the early '80's, before I went to CA, I took a video tape production class @ CCV. I did a couple of little things. All the equipment was really clunky and you had to shoot stuff in order. I came up with a silent film story line where everything is fast and I played all the characters. Mom ran the camera. I had all these sight gags that would happen, so I had to rig up all these gags to work on camera. Mom helped me with that...Steve wasn't around...she didn't seem to mind. Sarah-Lee (Tarrat) bought me an 8mm video camera in '92. It was also the year Henry was born. So I shot a lot of footage of Henry when he was little. (In '96) I was taking another class down in Burlington at a place where you had to make a commercial. You had to have your own camera, which I had, and I used Matthew (Woodard). And then I took a film class at Burlington College. That was real film so that was scary because you had to shoot 100 foot of film a week. (But I did it.) And I had (been in) a

couple of other pictures here in the state by then. Like *Mother's Early Lovers*, and *Time Chasers*. I shot another film with Matthew and Henry about getting a Christmas tree, which is kind of a sweet little story. And then Walter Hacks was it. I had notes in the barn about a story because I was curious to have a story about two young children who both their parents were killed in a car accident or something. What would they do if they had the responsibility of an actual farm? They would've been split up in foster care, so if they knew what would happen, what would they do? And I thought the farm was an interesting setting and it hasn't really been done much, and not very well. (But maybe *The Red House*. Ooh, that's a good movie.) And I asked Henry if he wanted to do it. It would be a big commitment, and he wanted to do it. He's the only kid I know who can milk a cow, drive a tractor, the truck and play the fiddle. And he has a little bit of film chops. He was pretty damn good. And I wanted the kid to carry the thing and everyone else to be a supporting player. It'd be a first, I think. That's what I wanted to do. And that took a while to do.

#### Is there one thing you can point to that inspires you to create?

Stuff works best if you have knowledge of what your subject is. Most of what I have done is people in a small town situation, and I'm influenced by old films. I do think that people in a certain time period dress better than they do today. If you watch any Film Noir, even the lowest bums in the alley have a suit on. There ratty looking, but it's still a suit. They have some sort of sense of inner (integrity). As bad as they look.

In Walter Hacks I wanted to SHOW young people able to do the work. No funny stuff of falling in manure; but showing them actually doing the stuff. They pulled the farm out of the financial hole their father left it in and they've got the bills all paid for and they're making the place work. Children successfully doing a job consistently. I also wanted to show an 11 year old kid successfully playing music in front of an audience because I think music is important too. And we didn't put anything in it that was offensive (too much) so that a 10 year old kid could go see it if their parents would take them to it. To have those kinds of things in a story and make it accessible to a wide audience makes it so that people my age or older recognize and remember that stuff that they grew up with and if you can get that audience from 8 year old up to someone much older than me can see this film and get something from it, that means a lot to me. I also like funny stuff.

#### Tell us about activities you enjoy outside of the performing?

I don't knit, I don't have a garden. I watch films and I'm interested in

my family history from 1912 up through to when my siblings were born. So I'm trying to put together something on that. I've done a lot of research and I have a lot of pictures so I'll probably do a book or a documentary or something.

#### What are you watching right now?

Season 11, *Gunsmoke*. I've seen every episode from 1955 to 1965. When I saw the first episode of season 11, the one I missed, *Seven Hours to Dawn* on September 18, 1965 because I was stupid enough to beat up on my brother 10 minutes before the show (and was sent to bed). When I saw it, I started have the sweats. It was so fantastic! It holds up 100%. I was right there. I also sat there looking at it appreciating the work that went into it. I was watching the story, but I was also seeing how they did it, I was paying attention to the soundtrack music and the movements of the camera, at the same time staying with the story. Not tearing the thing apart, just observing the whole thing. It was great. I probably wouldn't have gotten that out of it in 1965.

#### What's next for you?

I've got a WWII story I want to make, but that will be harder than Walter Hacks. The Ground Hog Opry Saturdays in March: 3/7 @7pm Hyde Park Opera House; 3/14 @7pm Vergennes Opera House; 3/21 & 28 @7pm Thatcher Brook Primary School; 3/29 @2pm Thatcher Brook Primary School. Or <http://bit.ly/GHO2015>

