

For actor/theatre director John Lepard, there's no place like home

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By Susan Parcheta

It's not Kansas.... not Iowa... and it's definitely not L.A. For actor John Lepard, who starred in Williamston Theatre's opening production for the 2008-2009 season *Leaving Iowa, there's no place like Michigan*. There's no place like home.

That sentiment seemed punctuated this spring, as Lepard co-starred in W.T's *Flyover USA, Voices of Men From the Midwest*.

Lepard left *Flyover Country* (that low-key portion of the USA you fly over between the so-called cosmopolitan coasts), as many young people do in search of the elusive rainbow at the end of the yellow brick road. But he came back.

Coming home to Michigan after 15 years in L.A. turned out to be one of the best things for the Haslett native, after testing the waters in Hollywood.

Lepard is a founder and executive director of the Williamston Theatre, which opened in 2006.

Growing up in Haslett, his entertainment aspirations blossomed as part of the singing Lepard Family: John, his three sisters Debbie, Cindy, Lisa and his mom and dad, Eileen and Larry.

From 1973-1980, they traveled the highways in their bus...performing gospel music in concert and making records. The family toured during the summer months...from Canada to Florida. As for living in the bus, Partridge family style, Lepard reflects on the memory and fondly quips, "We had a better bus."

The story sounds like something a scriptwriter might grab onto. Lepard says he had worked on a screenplay, but it's on the backburner. "The screenplay is called *Gifts of the Spirit*, I may try to pick it up again someday, but not soon."

As for the Lepard family music, John says, "We have the recordings on Vinyl, but none digitally recorded yet."

The family started singing about 1967, he recalls. "I started around 1969, and we were still limping along until 1985. I know we had one final concert in Hastings in 1987, so I guess technically, I was singing with the Lepards until I was 23."

Lepard's dad, who worked for Fisher Body, died in 1994. His mom (now married to Red McIntyre) lives in Okemos, as do his sisters, Debbie (Steve) Zynda and Lisa (Greg) Bell. Cindy lives in Haslett.

When asked what it was like growing up with three sisters, Lepard, noting that the experience had been helpful, remarked sincerely, "I feel like I can talk to women."

That ability is a plus, given his performing arts career and all the women he works with as actor, director, and teacher... not only in the arenas of theatre, but film as well. Recently, he shared movie sets with Drew Barrymore in *Whip It*, where Lepard plays a cop, and Hilary Swank in *Betty Anne Waters* (he plays a minister).

Both women were great to work with, he said. "The movie stars have been very nice. Drew was a sweetheart, and Hilary was really busy wrangling her 'kids' the day I shot on that set. She's a good fake mom though!"

The two movies were filmed in Michigan. Barrymore directs and stars in *Whip It* about Roller Derby player Shauna Cross. *Betty Anne Waters*, filmed at the Southern Michigan Correctional Facility in Jackson, is about a single mom who earns her law degree to defend her brother, who'd been wrongly convicted.

A 1988 Graduate of Michigan State University, with a degree in Theatre, Lepard earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Telecommunications in 1992 from the University of Nebraska.

He currently instructs in the theatre department at Lansing Community College, teaching acting for the camera and how to audition. He enjoys coaching dialects: British, Scottish and Geordie (a more localized New Castle area dialect).

This spring, Lepard directed the LCC drama by Lanford Wilson, *Balm in Gilead*. Next winter he'll direct *You Can't Take It With You*.

This summer finds him directing *Hank Williams: Lost Highway* (July 15-19) for LCC Summer theatre. Williamston Theatre Manager Chris Purchis also appears in this production.

He told Lansing *City Pulse's* Liz Reyna: "I want the audience to have seen this shooting star that was Hank Williams. He lived his life so quickly, like a match. I just want to tell the story of his life, what a great human being he was and what a tragedy it was to lose him."

Lepard directed the popular 2008 Williamston Theatre production, *Talley's Folly* and Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* winter 2009.

As an actor, Lepard has performed for various theatre companies: The Hartford Stage, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, St. Louis Rep., Fords Theatre in DC, Meadowbrook The JET, the Purple Rose, Performance Network, the Tem in Detroit and the Signature Theatre Off-Broadway. At the Signature in 2002, he played Rev. Bobby Jones in Lanford Wilson's *Book of Days*.

The kind of theatre roles he enjoys playing the most? "Anything where I can play characters that talk to people and tell the truth." His desire, he says, is not just to play a caricature, but to portray a truthful scene.

In *Bus Stop* by William Inge (2004-2005 Purple Rose) he remembers the extraordinary experience of portraying the professor, Dr. Gerald Lyman, a role for which he won the Detroit Free Press Award for Best Featured Actor.

"I played a drunk throughout the show. It was an interesting experience because you let yourself become intoxicated during the play." Reviewer Steve Daut described Lepard's speeches as "mellifluous and melancholic," adding "Lepard is a wonder to behold as he quietly drinks himself into oblivion."

Of the award, Lepard says, "It's nice to be recognized by the Michigan professional community like that."

He is still an Associate Artist at the Purple Rose Theatre, having done 13 shows there from 1993 to 2007. "Jeff wrote a play for me and two others in 1998, which he also directed (*Boom Town*). It went well, and has been done by several other theatres since."

He also won the 2004 Detroit Free Press Best Actor Award for his Purple Rose performance of Don in

Leaving Iowa, the role reprised for Williamston Theatre.

Leaving Iowa....”I love that play,” reflects Lepard. “I get to turn into a 12-year old kid...going back and forth in time...that was fun.”

As for the effect of *Leaving Iowa* on the Williamston Theatre audiences, Lepard comments: “It was a fun cast. I think we got the message across...the importance of family.”

Lepard’s stage and screen career spans the past 20 years, since he departed for Hollywood and then came home. His film and TV credits include:

Crash Landing: The Rescue of Flight 232 (1992 TV or *A Thousand Heroes*), an authentic drama of United Airlines flight 232 from Denver to Chicago. The TV movie is based on the 1989 Siouxland rescue of passengers following the crash landing in Iowa.

Full Blast (1997) with David Carradine. Lepard plays a waiter; ***Brimstone*** (1998) TV episode where he played an assistant D.A.; ***The Limited*** (2000) a short film (one of the first films of Stephen Simon’s Spiritual Cinema Circle).

Lepard’s character, John, involved in a car accident, finds himself at a train station where he must jump on *The Limited*... described as “a mysterious train that we all board at one time or another.” Simon introduces it simply, “a journey into the unknown.”

When John talks to the man in the ticket window, he asks where he’s going. “You’re going to give an account for your life,” is the reply.

“Am I dead?” John asks. “No, but your life is over. You do not want to miss this train.”

Talking about that experience, Lepard says, “I auditioned for *The Limited* because of a casting call from a paper called Backstage West in LA. I didn’t know any of the people in it, but we had a good time shooting it. The train scene was very claustrophobic.”

In 2002 he was Cy Suckerton II in Jeff Daniel’s comedy ***Super Sucker***, about vacuum cleaner salesmen. The movie was filmed in Jackson, MI. He was a town hall officer in ***Barn Red***, a Michigan movie with Ernest Borgnine about people who love the land.

He appeared again with Borgnine in the 2006 comedy *Frozen Stupid*, as a conservation officer. The film, per media description, “tells the tale of a cantankerous father and his bumbling but well-meaning son who share a joyous obsession for the age old art of ice fishing.”

Regarding acting with renowned stars like Heston, Carradine and Borgnine, Lepard remarks, “As for the three guys, they were all very different, and two of them are gone now.

“Borgnine was about the sweetest man alive. He would sit with us at lunch and tell stories about the old days, Oscar night, etc. Carradine sat with me in a little room in an abandoned building in Detroit smoking cigarette after cigarette. He was nice, but he really seemed to hate being on the road.”

Lepard doesn’t mince words about Heston. “Heston was a pompous jerk. I was about 27 when I shot the movie with him, and I introduced myself in the make-up trailer. He actually looked down his nose at me and we sat in silence the whole time we were together. I do understand stars wanting their privacy, but he was really not very nice.

“I have since learned not to approach the stars unless they approach you first, and I think they all have since then. The good thing about movie sets is you can always escape to your trailer!”

In *Mr. Art Critic*, a 2007 film set on Mackinac Island, Lepard plays Frank, an artist. The story revolves around M.J. Clayton, a Chicago art critic who’s known for cringing reviews. He vacations on Mackinac Island, where he meets up with Frank at a local pub. Frank had been the subject of a scathing

review.

In a drunken state, Clayton bets that anyone can be an artist and that he can prove it. The story takes a unique twist, revealing Clayton's painful arrogance in the end.

Slated to come out this year is *Red and Blue Marbles* in which Lepard plays Thomas Jenkins. The movie features Ruby Dee. The story is about five graduate students who must choose whether or not to remain on Earth or sell themselves into "corporate slavery" for transit to Mars.

With movie sets popping up all over Michigan, due to the state's film production incentive program, Lepard finds himself among the Michigan actors who land a role from time to time. Even with the incentive, he points out that lead roles generally go to actors from Hollywood.

Keeping Michigan actors here in the new creative economy, he says, is vital. He's grateful for film opportunities that do come along for local actors. He's also pleased that the Williamston Theatre offers another venue for their talent.

For the second consecutive year, WT has won a good share of local theatre awards. In the 32nd year of Thespie Awards from the Lansing State Journal, Lepard won best actor for *Leaving Iowa, Flyover USA: Voices from Men of the Midwest* won best new show. The play by Dennis North and Joseph Zettelmaier was the original idea of Tony Caselli, WT artistic director.

Gloria Vivalda won Best Supporting Actress for *Gamma Rays*; Bruce Bennett, Best Featured, for *Leaving Iowa*; Bartly Bauer won Best Set Dressing for *Panache*.

Emily Sutton-Smith won Best Actress award as Beatrice in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, directed by Lepard.

It's a fairy tale story for Lepard and Sutton-Smith, who were married last October on stage at Williamston Theatre during the run of *Leaving Iowa*.

The couple shares a huge part of their lives in common: The Williamston Theatre. Lepard and Sutton-Smith are two of the four theatre founders ...along with Chris Purchis (managing director) and Tony Caselli (artistic director).

Sutton-Smith is the theatre's development director. Recent acting involvements include: *Forbidden Broadway* at the Boar's Head Theater, and *A Picasso* in Ann Arbor. She's also an accomplished pastry chef, having studied at the French Culinary Institute.

John and Emily live in Williamston, with Lepard's daughter Clara (14). She'll be attending East Lansing High School his fall. While she loves the theatre, says her dad, her dream is to be involved one day with a non-profit organization wildlife preserve for big cats.

She performed this spring in a production for her church, All Saints Episcopal in Lansing, portraying the story of Esther and how she saved her people.

Clara may often be found at the Williamston Theatre, critiquing the shows along with the audience members on opening nights.

Summer is anything but slow for Lepard and company at the Williamston Theatre. Lepard is teaching Acting Fundamentals for Adults this summer.

There's a play reading series, summer workshops for teens and a 2-day Shakespeare Studio in conjunction with the last show of the season, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) July 2-Aug.9*.

Lepard admits it's challenging wearing the different hats of executive director, actor, instructor, and play director... meaning, he says, "I have to be organized more than I ever was."

But it's all worth it, he insists. The theatre is coming into its own as a singular piece of the entertainment industry in Michigan.

W.T.'s focus on the Midwest caught the imagination of theatre goers, with last year's successful *Maidens, Mothers & Crones: Voices from Women in the Midwest* and this year's *Flyover USA*.

Comments Lepard: "The two Midwest shows are now available for any theatre to perform, but we haven't really pitched them too hard yet. We will take submissions for the third until the fall I think, then we have to start putting that one together."

A form to submit a story idea may be found on the WT website: www.williamstontheatre.org. This play features family stories of the Midwest.

The 2009-2010 season opens Oct. 1. Already, though, Lepard is preparing for a monumental acting challenge. He'll be the one-man show for *This Wonderful Life* for the holiday season. Alone on stage, Lepard portrays more than 30 roles.

When asked how he could possibly do that, given the energy it takes for an ordinary show, Lepard gives a classic response for a man with acting in his veins: "Some nights it's harder to find the energy than others, but you know, when the lights come up...!"

For Lepard, Flyover Country is a good place to be after all. As he recalls his long ago appearance in that tiny film *The Limited*, in his early days in Hollywood, "I could never have imagined at that time, that I'd be doing the Williamston thing now."

Like Don in *Leaving Iowa*...like Dorothy in Kansas, the rainbow bend winds to Michigan. Home.

For more information about Lepard and the Williamston Theatre happenings, visit the website: www.williamstontheatre.org.

Now playing: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* July 2-Aug. 9.

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