

Derby favorite J.R. Stuart coming to Charlestown's A&E with "The Gospel According to Mark"

Written by Janna Ross

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"She asked me," J.R. Stuart stated with a small smile when asked why he chose to bring his show, "The Gospel According to Mark" to Charlestown's Arts & Enrichment Center.

She is Donna McCreary. Stuart and McCreary have budded a friendship from the love of the theatre. The duo have been working on bringing Stuart's show to the local area.

"He is phenomenal," McCreary stated about Stuart. McCreary has been a long fan of Stuart's and his many roles at Derby Dinner Playhouse in Clarksville.

The idea of Stuart coming to Charlestown came from the popular networking site, Facebook. "I was looking for a show to do as a fundraiser for the Boy Scouts and I seen on Facebook about J.R.'s Twain," McCreary added.

She continued, "2010 marks the 100th anniversary of Twain's death and the 100th anniversary of the birth of Scouting, making this a Centennial celebration."

Stuart added, "It also marks the 125th anniversary of Huck Finn."

The proceeds from the fundraising show will go to purchase a permanent place to house the equipment of Boy Scout Troop 80.

Although McCreary and the Boy Scouts of Troop 80 in Charlestown are excited about a fantastic show and great opportunity for a fundraiser, the show has a very special place in Stuart's heart.

"I always dedicate Twain shows to my great grandparents. My great grandmother lived to be 100 and I had 40 years with her. That is rare. I had my great grandfather until I was in my 20's," Stuart explained of the special bond he shared with his great grandparents. "When it works, I have a handkerchief in the back of my pants for my great grandfather."

This year's show will also be dedicated to a very special little boy, Finn, the six month old son of Lem and Jana.

"My dear friends, Lem and Jana, who I adore, I want to dedicate the show to their son, Finn, as a tribute to the past and future." Lem is a part of Stuart's Derby Dinner family.

The upcoming show is not the first time Stuart has taken his talent and helped a cause. Two years ago he held a benefit show for The Park Theatre in North Vernon, where his great grandparents dated.

"This is the first time I have done the Twain show as a benefit. You know he (Twain) floated down this river. We are just like 100 yards from where he's been," Stuart stated as he looked out over the mighty Ohio River from the table at the Bristol Bar & Grill on Riverside Drive in Jeffersonville.

Stuart has spent the majority of his life on a stage, in front of an audience. He first began performing in 1969.

Stuart wrote "The Gospel According to Mark" as a senior thesis project at Ball State University in 1985, where he earned a degree in Theatre Performance in 1987.

Although the faithful of Derby Dinner Playhouse have loved Stuart for many years, he will celebrate his 20th anniversary with the dinner theatre next month, Stuart was a Decatur County youth. He graduated from South Decatur High School before heading to Muncie to pursue his degree from Ball State.

Stuart and his love of the theatre has allowed him many memorable roles. His favorite role,

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"Tevye in Fiddler, easy," Stuart answered. His first role was Rip Van Winkle.

"My first show ever was Rip Van Winkle. I have always been a character man. My costume change was going behind a tree and taking my black 30 cent beard and replacing it with my white 30 cent beard," Stuart explained with a laugh about his first role.

The luck and timing was with McCreary when she was searching for a fundraiser for the local Boy Scout Troop.

"It just so happened I had three months open. I figured surely we can make this happen," Stuart added. "We have a shared passion for historical performances."

When asked his favorite scene in the show, Stuart paused to collect his thoughts.

"Sweet, sweet, sweet. There are so many but the absolute favorite part would be when he evokes his late wife's spirit when reading a passage from Eve's diary. It is just so personal. It speaks to every husband and wife or anyone who has ever loved anything," Stuart explained. "I just love pushing the limits!"

Stuart concluded by explaining why he would come to the show.

"If you ever want to know the most forward thinking American ever come and see Twain's vision of the world as we still as a human race are trying to achieve. He was the first to deal with prejudice in such a subtle way that it could appeal to the hearts of everyone. He was an original American genius," Stuart stated about Mark Twain and the show he wrote from the words and works of Twain. "It's just humor that cuts right through."

McCreary added how she believes Twain has shaped who she is and how she believes today.

"I really think reading Mark Twain in my youth helped shape my adulthood," McCreary added.

Stuart immediately agreed, "Absolutely!"

McCreary concluded, "That is another joy of J.R. doing the show, it is my favorite American author."

The last time Stuart performed "The Gospel According to Mark" was in 2004. He has performed the show on the Derby Dinner Stage multiple times including shows in 1993, 1995 and 2004.

This year Stuart will have three performances of the "...one-man, two-act masterpiece!," as reviewed by The Tribune-Star, in Nashville at the Red Barn Jamboree. Performances are scheduled for July 23, 24 and 25 at 1:30 p.m.

He will also perform the show in North Vernon, a small town that holds a special place in his heart, on Saturday, July 31 at The Park Theatre located at 25 North Madison Avenue in North Vernon. The show is set for 7:30 p.m.

The date for the local show is Friday, August 13 at the Arts & Enrichment Center, located at 999 Water Street in Charlestown. Performances will be held at 1:30 and 7:30 p.m.

For tickets to the Nashville shows please call 1-888-71-TICKETS (842-5387).

For tickets to the North Vernon Show please call The Park Theatre Box Office at 812-346-0330.

For tickets to the local show to benefit Boy Scout Troop 80 of Charlestown please call 502-645-1886 or 812-256-2370.

Reservations are required for all shows. Ticket prices will be \$15 for adults and \$12 for seniors/students.

Tickets are now on sale for the local show.