



A FEW MINUTES WITH: Actor, singer and acting instructor Steve Blackwood

By Donald V. Calamia

Every actor has to start somewhere, and Warren native Steve Blackwood discovered his passion at Oakland University. After leaving the Mitten State to pursue his career, he found steady employment on daytime TV - but he eventually returned home where he recently starred in two critically acclaimed audience favorites at Meadow Brook Theatre on the Rochester campus where it all began. And now he's helping others pursue their acting dreams by working as an adjunct professor and workshop instructor. Blackwood talked recently with EncoreMichigan.com about his life in the theater - and his latest passion, teaching.

You're a local guy who's "done good" – with an impressive career on television, stage and film. Where did you grow up? And were you a "theater kid" in high school?

Thanks for the compliment, Don! I grew up in Warren and went to Cousino High...and no, I was not a theater kid at school. I thought the plays they did at Cousino in the '70s were hokey - lots of children's theater. There's nothing wrong with that, but I just wanted to play on the baseball team and I did. I was the Patriot's second baseman!

But I went to lots of movies and loved the theater. I saw Jack Albertson and Sam Levene do *The Sunshine Boys* at the Fisher Theatre and I was hooked, especially on comedy.

What type of educational background do you have? Did you go to college and major theater?

I went to Oakland University ('74-78) and actually majored in English, with designs on being a journalist (and maybe work at Encore!), but I took an Introduction to Acting class for my credits towards a communication minor and ended up changing my major to theater...a major blow to journalism, I'm sure.

OU was great. I did lots of "cutting edge" '70s plays there, mostly David Rabe (*In the Boom Boom Room*) and Sam Shepherd at the old Barn Theatre. But I was too scared to audition for Meadow Brook. The theater seemed INTIMIDATING to me then. I was too scared to audition.

It wasn't until 30 years later when I came back to do *Boeing Boeing* that I felt I had finally completed my theater major at OU...at 53. Better late than never.

At what point, then, did you become interested in a career in the performing arts?

It was that first acting class I took at OU. Our final exam was to do a scene - I did *Summer and Smoke* in front of an invited audience. I heard the applause for the first time! I was hooked.

It was also the first time I felt I belonged somewhere, because it all felt so natural to me on stage. As an actor being on stage is still is the most fun - feeling the audience energy, and a different energy every night.

What was your first "big break" in show biz? And how did that come about?

My first big break was in New York when I was lucky enough to audition with Uta Hagen at HB Studio and earn an acting scholarship. She was a genius (Matthew Broderick and Jason Alexander were in my class) and taught me the basics - and busted you if you didn't put in the work.

My first LA break came when a director (Rob Bowman) saw me do a scene in Milton Katselas's acting class and cast me as a KKK villain in *Quantum Leap*. Networking was the key. Kazan said 90 percent of this business is getting along with people.

If I'm not mistaken, you spent 10 years playing "a lovable bad guy," Bart Beiderbecke, on *Days of Our Lives*. How did that role come about? And did you initially expect to be with the show for such a long time?

Oh my God, NO. The casting director from *Days of Our Lives*, Fran Bascom, saw me do a play in L.A. and hired me to do a three-day role as Stefano Dimera's (Joe Mascolo) minion. I tried to give the character another dimension within the "yes sir" dialogue - to make him not the sharpest knife in the drawer - to make him funny (but still capable of killing someone). The writers let me rewrite some of their words, and the directors were generous enough to let me find the physical humor of this guy. The fans loved it and I stayed for 10 years. Temp. to Perm.

But I couldn't have stayed if I didn't do what I loved (and was best at), comedy. I had to follow my passion, not what was on the page.

I'm sure some people think "acting is acting." But how different is acting for the camera versus acting the stage? What different skills are required for each?

To me, acting is listening and reacting - and on camera, it's important to reflect this in your eyes and to know how the camera can pick them (the eyes) up. (On *Days*, I spent all 10 years looking at the downstage eye of fellow actors like Ali Sweeney). This is important in the three-camera framework we had, and especially in the close-ups. The camera and mikes pick up everything - so if you are "full" of inner emotions, it will pick it up without any projection.

On stage you have to hit those back rows vocally...although even on stage, if your intention is real, Uta Hagen told me you can whisper and those back rows will hear you.

So sometimes acting is indeed acting.

In all mediums and in my teaching, it's about personalizing the work, that is, what would I do in the given circumstances of a scene. What do I wear?

What just happened before the scene? How high are my stakes? And always, who am I?

I write a backstory and entire personal history of every character I do...even in a farce like *Boeing-Boeing*. If the character is not based in reality you may get away with it (cheap laughs, etc.), but you'll feel empty as an actor at the end of a performance.

Unlike a play for which you might rehearse a few weeks to a month or so, *Days of Our Lives* was a daily show. How much rehearsal time did you have for each episode you were in? And on average, approximately how many pages of script did you have to memorize per episode? (And how difficult WAS that?)

We actually shot an entire one-hour episode in sequence in one day! From 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. or midnight. To compare: Prime time, like *Detroit 1-8-7*, takes about a week and a half to shoot. So we had to move fast; it almost felt like live theater in that we never got more than one or two takes and then we were "moving on" to the next set-up. And they didn't reshoot my flubs! Cringeworthy, but that's the nature of the beast.

It was a good thing I was trained on stage. I memorized about 11-13 pages a show, but it wasn't like we got it the night before. (That's a myth). Usually I had at least a week to start memorizing multiple episodes.

Your character was killed off in 2007 – in a sword fight, no less. Is that when you decided to return to Michigan?

We - my wife, daughter and I - were actually going back to the New York area from L.A. to work on stage and soaps and live in Connecticut, but we ended up not loving (the area) and heard they were shooting movies in my hometown of Detroit. So we came back home. No regrets.

In fact, I've done four movies since I've been back, two (*Cedar Rapids* and *Mooz-Jum*) are in theaters now, and *Machine Gun Preacher* (with Gerry Butler) is out this fall. *Oogieloves* (my daughter's favorite) is in video stores.

Since your return, you've been in two critically acclaimed comedies at Meadow Brook Theatre playing a character named Robert – first in *Boeing-Boeing* and more recently, *Ding Dong*. How much fun was it coming back home and returning to the stage in these two successful hits?

Boeing-Boeing was the most fun I've ever had as an actor. (We won the Wilde Award last year, I won the Andes) and *Ding Dong* was also a kick. Both casts had as much fun as the audiences!

In both cases hard work - timing and physicality had to be a team effort, and I worked with two wonderful teams of actors) - and good direction by Travis Walter paid off.

But that's not all you're doing these days. You're also teaching the craft of theater. Is this a new endeavor for you?

Yes, Don, theater and on camera acting as well.

I've been teaching in Michigan for almost two years now at Michigan State University and Oakland University, and am currently an adjunct professor at Hillsdale. I also teach teens and adults once a month in Bloomfield Hills.

What is it about teaching that appeals to you?

I love to teach how to send and receive with a partner and not anticipate what will happen. I love to teach them to trust themselves in the moment. And I love to teach them to find the good in "bad" characters and the bad in "good" ones. Watch Jimmy Stewart, the nominal "good guy" in those '50s Anthony Mann westerns. In each one there is a dark side (obstacle) he battles to overcome in his characters.

I also like passing on what I learned from Uta Hagen. (I recommend her *Respect For Acting* and my book *Tapping Into Your Gold* as source material).

You've scheduled a class for May 15 called "The Art of Listening in a Two-Person Scene." What's this class about? And who is it designed for?

For teens 13-17 and adults of all ages. We are exploring the two-person scene and how listening can perhaps lead to spontaneity and new reactions NOT rehearsed within the scene. Trusting your partner and getting out of oneself is the key.

My goal is for the actors to surprise themselves in their work, and thereby the audience and camera. We want the scenes rehearsed, but the rehearsal is thrown out when the cameras roll. Moment to moment work is stressed.

Is this a one-shot deal? Or are you planning on other classes in the near future?

We'll be doing classes in Bloomfield Hills once a month, and students can sign up at www.steveblackwood.com or just sign up to get on our mailing list.

What else do you have in the works? Is there a third "Robert" coming to Meadow Brook any time soon? (laughs)

I hope so! I think *Don't Dress For Dinner* (playwright Marc Camoletti again) would go over very well there. Let's bug Travis and Cheryl Marshall! (laughs).

ABOUT STEVE BLACKWOOD:

Steve Blackwood is back in Detroit after 10 years playing the bumbling Bart Biederbiecke in the long-running NBC soap *Days of our Lives*. He has appeared in many other TV shows and movies, including *Judging Amy* and *Ed Gein*, and the Michigan-based *Cedar Rapids*, *Machine Gun Preacher* and *Mooz-Jum*. On stage Blackwood was in the recent Meadow Brook Theatre productions of *Boeing-Boeing* and *Ding Dong*. An accomplished jazz singer with two national releases out, Blackwood has sung in nightclubs across the country, on network TV, and performed the National Anthem for the LA Lakers at the Staples Center. Steve is currently an adjunct professor at Hillsdale College.