

Wally...A Brief Memoir of a Life in the Theatre

By Paul Warshauer

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Thanks again, Wayne. Your story brings up some good and bad memories. I am writing this story for the first time and sharing it with you alone. I might edit this later but I think you will get the idea as few of our colleagues remember Wally and fewer understood him.

My love for the theatre began in December, 1964 when in 5th grade, I starred as Macbeth at Anshe Emet Day School, a private school on the North side of Chicago. I had never been in a play and loved the process. I had a great teacher and principal who were encouraging and nurturing. The kids and audience had a great time and my memories of it are lifelong and career setting.

I think you remember Michael Gordon, the boy whose life you saved on a camping trip? He attended Anshe Emet and brought me to Camp Waupaca. Then together we brought Jeff Lewis and Darrell Widen. I met Al and Wally my first week and what a difference.

One of my first recollections of Wally was "what a character!" I loved his energy. I believe during on my first nights at camp, Wally led songs at the horseshoe. He was flamboyant, charismatic, pranced around but he was not warm. He was always looking over the heads of the little kids to see how the staff and older boys reacted to his antics. I do not recall if any of us understood what sexual orientation was but he certainly was a poster child for being gay. This is not to say that he ever bothered any kids that I recall. He also led the camp songs with fervor but not compassion. He taught us a rather Christian hymn which was slowly phased out, by me, at Camp, "Green Grow The Rushes, Ho!" Although a catchy song, and one that was fun to sing, it had overt Christian themes.

Wally was always driven and not in a positive way for the kids. He would get angry and yell at us. We were campers not destined for Broadway yet Wally made us feel like every performance was the most important in history. That was not the case and for some kids it might have turned them off to theatre forever. Not me!

I was cast in the annual Camp Waupaca 4th of July play, where every year Bruce Fogel, a fat kid, played Betsy Ross in drag. I thought it offensive but he didn't seem to mind. I really wonder years later how damaging that might have been for him. I was cast as the Step Mother, in drag, in "Final Dress Rehearsal," a cute short play about the backstage antics of a presentation of Cinderella. I didn't mind but I recall choices being made about my boobs! I think we opted for socks. I recall rehearsals where Allen Schaeffer would calmly direct in a fun way while Wally yelled and occasionally stomped out of rehearsal like a prima donna. They were indeed an odd couple.

I loved theatre so much that I persevered despite him. I KNOW that most of my shows were more fun, productive, and a positive experience. After Wally left...I think by 1968 he was gone...I starred in "Oliver," directed by Joe Fewsmith (where is he, I wonder?). Then I heard for the 1970 camp season that Ron Lavine wrote a play for me called, "The Magic Man." I was to play the lead but I went to Europe that year so I was not there to star in what Ron had written. He cast his little brother, Steve Lavine who was my nemesis!

This is the key: I recall telling myself that if I ever directed a play I would never yell at anyone or take it so seriously that I would get that upset. Now after directing and producing over 350 shows, and hundreds of original murder mysteries, I have kept my word...mainly because of Wally!

It is funny that for many years Wally's directing style was all I recall and being delighted to find out that very successful plays did not require the services of a talented yet driven person who would check himself into the hospital after a production "to rest!" I know that happened a few times.

I went on to do lots of shows in elementary school, and at various junior and senior high schools as well. I was so much into the theatre that I applied to Yale, Northwestern, and Boston University where I accepted by all three. I attended Northwestern and acted and directed every chance I got. In 1974, my sophomore year, I created the Mee-Ow Show that is now in its 36th year. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mee-Ow>

I learned improvisation, performed in many shows, and started "Drama Classes" at Camp Waupaca. I asked Northwestern University professor Anne Thurman for ideas and she turned me on to more Viola Spolin theatre games and projects. Ron Lavine understood that some kids did not want all that competition and he encouraged my efforts. He enjoyed my plays and watched everyone of my shows from the back. It was one of the few times I saw him laugh!

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s I taught improv theatre to hundreds of campers and presented at least two shows a year at camp. By 1988, (the last year of Camp Waupaca) I was teaching three or four theatre classes filled with all kinds of kids including sports legends, great swimmers, and competitive kids like Jeff Rissman, and Ricky Goldman. The greatest compliment I received was from Steve Prebish, many years later that he regretted NOT taking my theatre classes. Steve is still my personal attorney to this day!

All of my shows at Camp were original, topical, and created by the kids in the classes. Yes, we did Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple" a few times (with one version starring Mike Lurie as Felix) but nearly all the shows were originals like "Shuzzbutt the Revolution" loosely based on the popular TV show "Mork & Mindy," starring a very young but talented Robin Williams. Our show starred Todd Laff as Orkin and Jeff Rissman and Mork. Brenda Wanty played Mindy! All the boys and many of the staff enjoyed seeing Brenda Wanty on stage. Thereafter I tried to put a few kitchen girls on stage but like Wally, I dressed boys as girls. Even then I knew that sex sells!

I think some of shows were actually better than some of Wally's but this is not a comparison as much as a piece about mixed emotions regarding this complex man who profoundly changed my opinion of performing and the PROCESS of creating shows.

Tonight I present an original sold out murder mystery in Omaha at the historic Renaissance Mansion then tomorrow morning I fly to Birmingham Alabama to present another murder written for Accenture and ATT. I make a good living writing, directing, and hosting murder mysteries nationally and love my work. It is fun and I want everyone to have a good time creating the performance and watching it. The audiences and professional actors I hire tell me that I clearly enjoy my work. I do! I never yell at my casts or have to check into a hospital for exhaustion.

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