

# King of the Stage

## *Local graduate makes name in New York theater scene*

By **ANGEL JENKINS MORRIS**

*People Editor*

Christopher Presley is living proof that all the world really is a stage. His stage, in fact.

The 1987 Duncanville High School graduate started acting at DHS, grew into the Duncanville Community Theatre and, eventually, made his directing debut there.

"I have to tell you that Duncanville Community Theatre is where it all started for me. The people there are loving and creative and the work is great," Presley said. "I learned professionalism at DCT. I learned collaboration at DCT. And I learned what theater is really about at DCT.

"I have yet to come across another theater from New York City to Alaska to England that runs a more professional program. The people of Duncanville and the surrounding areas are so lucky to have this organization and should take complete advantage of it."

Presley's not just waxing nostalgic. He has plenty to compare with DCT, having spent the better part of his adult life acting and directing.

"I finally had the courage to sign up for theater arts my senior year. I was one of those 'I have to do the right thing,' sort of students (and) I thought, the 'right thing,' was to take as many science and math classes as possible," Presley said. "Anyway, I dropped physics and took theater and here I am now - doing it for 18 years."

The 34-year-old New York resident has made a name for himself in the most competitive theatrical city on the map. While his training began in high school, he also earned a bachelor's degree in radio/television/film from The University of Texas at Austin in 1991 and most recently a master's of fine arts in theatre directing in 2001, where he was valedictorian of New York's New School University.

He has honed his skills through countless hours of training and in numerous stage productions. Among the many jobs that prepared him to work in the industry, from 1995-97 Presley was executive director for Plano's The Classic Theatre & Arts for Children; from 1993-97 was also producing director at Deep Ellum's Opera Theatre in Dallas; and from 1997-1998 was assistant to the show coordinator for renowned Neiman Marcus, Live Fashion Presentations of New York. To supplement his income, Presley even had a



submitted photo  
Chris Presley, second from left, in a performance at Duncanville Community Theatre, where he directed his first play.

stint as a freelance make-up artist with the famed Bobbi Brown Cosmetics in New York from 1999-2001.

"My employment is in constant flux. One day I may be directing a play, the next teaching, another working on the producing end of things. This sort of variety can be wonderful but also exhausting. The bottom line is you always have to eat so in this business you learn to be industrious and creative," Presley said. "The nature of this business is temporary - shows open and shows close so many theater people have to do jobs they hate in between gigs. I'm fortunate in that I have built a foundation with my training and experience that allows me to consistently work in the theater - even when I'm not directing."

Presley's various accolades make for a nice resume, as well. He was awarded Lifetime Membership in The Actors Studio in 2002 - one of America's most prestigious theater institutions. Famous for what is known as "method acting," The Actors Studio is an institution of invited membership where professional theater artists practice their craft.

"I'm very proud to be a part of this organization and consider myself fortunate. In this theatre, I can take chances out of the public eye. I can put up my work and get feedback from fellow members and colleagues such as: Ellen Burstyn, Estelle Parsons, Carlin Glynn, Al Pacino, Harvey Keitel, Lee Grant. These guys are truly the masters of the craft," Presley said.

Presley was also awarded an assistant position by Society of Stage Directors & Choreographers and was mentored by Director Michael Mayer on Broadway in the Tony Award-winning revival of Arthur Miller's "A View from the Bridge," and earned an apprenticeship on "Miss Saigon" in London's West End and his production of "Hair" received Best Choreography honors by The Dallas Theatre League.

Since 2001, Presley's "day job" has been in theatrical marketing and audience development with SRO, New York, N.Y., where he builds strategies to maintain audience interest in order to keep shows running. Productions he has been part of include "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," "Forbidden Broadway," "The Last Five Years," "The Thing About Men" and "My Kitchen Wars" featuring two-time Emmy winner Dorothy Lyman.

It is his "night job" in theater direction, however, that fuels Presley's passion and makes him truly happy, he said.

"I realized a wonderful achievement last year while I was walking home through Times Square the night of my 34th birthday. It was July 28, a warm night and it was drizzling. I was coming from an outdoor screening of the movie "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" (and) I was happy. I mean really happy," Presley said. "I looked around with all the lights of Broadway flashing in my face and realized that I had made it. I mean, there are all kinds of accomplishments that I still want to achieve in my life and in my career, but I had made it.

"This was my city and I was a part of this business, no matter how small a role I may be playing. I mean think about it; I was born in the backwoods of Alabama, grew up in suburban Texas and somehow I found the courage to go for my dreams. That's what I mean, I'm giving my life everything I have."

To that end, Presley is currently working on a new play with a playwright and is scheduled to direct the premiere of three One Acts this fall in New York. And as if all this wasn't enough, Presley and partners Dara Whitehead and Courtney Loving have founded a business that trains professionals in the basic techniques of the theater, offering the tools necessary to develop themselves as "competent, engaging, credible and persuasive communicators."

"Acting is not deceit, insincerity or impersonation. I believe that acting is the honest expression of oneself within a given set of circumstances in an effort to achieve a desired result. This is a technique, a learned craft facilitated by basic skills such as relaxation, body language and vocal expression. Led by a team of highly educated and experienced theater professionals, our workshops offer you the tools and practice necessary to develop these skills," Presley said.

Basic Stages programs are for anyone, according to Presley - Any attorney, professional, actor or individual who wishes to become a more effective communicator. Moreover, the courses have been approved for Minimum Continuing Legal Education credit by the State Bar of Texas Committee on MCLE - one way for any attorney to meet the annual Continuing Legal Education Requirements.

"Our seminars are designed as 'creative workshops' - safe and creative environments for learning. Through personal instruction, live demonstrations and in-depth discussion and analysis you will learn communication skills that can enhance your professional endeavors as well as your everyday life," Presley said.

Basic Stages conducted its first seminar in October 2003, noting that "every workshop is catered to the needs of that specific client." The group also works with educational institutions and is scheduled to instruct students at UT Law School in April.

"I'm telling you, the breadth of our work is enormous. It is relevant on so many levels to so many professions and people. We would love to build relationships with other universities or even high schools. We love what we do and want to share it with as many people as possible," Presley said.

Anyone interested in learning more about Basic Stages and its workshops can visit the website [www.basicstages.com](http://www.basicstages.com).

Presley's experience acting, directing and even teaching enable him to help others improve their communication skills, he said.

Presley taught as a guest lecturer at Pratt University in Brooklyn on similar subjects and at The New School on "The Business of the Biz." This month he will collaborate with professors in New York University's English Department to teach adult education drama and literature; specifically, the German Expressionist play, "Woyzeck," by Buchner.

"My job is always to approach the material as theater as opposed to literature. These pieces are meant to be seen not read; a fact many people do not remember when approaching dramatic literature," Presley said. "We look at the material as living documents that provide powerful insight into human nature. More importantly, especially with Shakespeare, I try to make the material accessible by removing any sort of air of elitism."

Through Basic Stages and his role as a guest instructor, Presley moves one step closer to another dream - securing a teaching position at the university level. For the time being, at least, continuing to direct is dream-come-true enough.

"This is my greatest achievement. I love the fact that I finally feel legitimate. That took some time. Now, I find myself collaborating with Tony winners, and Oscar winners and they actually care about what I think and what my opinion is," Presley said. "Learning to be confident that I had something to say that was

valid and important and inspiring was, I think, my greatest accomplishment. Of course, I didn't need the award winners' approvals to legitimize my talent but they certainly helped me learn the skill of confidence."

Presley also credits Duncanville Community Theatre Director Amy Jackson for developing his confidence.

"Amy has had a huge impact on my career. She cast me in my first show in high school. She gave me my first show to direct at the community theater. She is always available when I lose direction or just need a friend who understands this wacky business," Presley said.

Hearing his story now, it may seem Presley took the fast track to theatrical success. He recalls a number of bumps along the path, however, and said his largest obstacle was within himself.

"I had to give myself permission to succeed. I had to stop deifying other people in the business and find the confidence to believe that my talents and ideas were just as valid and could quite possibly be exceptional. I had to stop judging myself against the scale of other people's lives," Presley said.

"I had to learn to live within a non-traditional definition of stability. I had to find strength and joy in 'selected family' - I'm far from my family but I'm not alone here. When we can't be with our biological families, we form selected families. Let's just say we make sure no one is alone on Thanksgiving, even if they have to perform in a matinee and can't go home for the holiday. Often we're working when everyone else has a holiday."

Today, self-assured and supported by this network of friends and a loving family, Presley is guided by the wisdom of Director Harold Clurman who said: "Direction is a job, a craft, a profession and at best, an art. The director must be an organizer, a teacher, a politician, a psychic detective, a lay analyst, a technician, a creative being. Ideally, he should know literature (drama), acting, the psychology of the actor, the visual arts, music, history and above all, he must understand people. He must inspire confidence. All of which means he must be a 'great lover.'"

"I live by these words. My point is that my typical day as a stage director isn't about collaborating with designers or working with the actors. It is about keeping myself prepared to play the role of director when the time comes along," Presley said. "I am always reading - new plays, classics, current events. I see plays, musicals, speakers, concerts. I meet new people. I am always trying to learn more, not only about what is out there but about who I am. All these things make me a better director. This is the fuel that keeps me alive."

Clearly, Presley has a dramatic flair. It is fueled by his love of the arts and the belief that art is important in people's day-to-day lives.

"Art defines who we are. Art is how we understand the issues of our world. Art is how we preserve our history. Art makes us take action in response to issues of contemporary relevance," Presley said. "The theatre should be celebrated not as a luxury item but as a necessary part of our society. I'd like people to know that the arts are essential in our lives."

Presley would also like to inspire others to try their hand at his trade. Be it through a Basic Stages workshop or watching or participating in a community theater play, he dares anyone not to enjoy giving it a try. And for anyone who has dreamed of acting but fears getting started he offers some advice.

"I would ask them what they were afraid of - Their fears may actually be valid. (But) then I would ask, "Can you live the rest of your life without regretting that you didn't try?" If they can then they should find happiness some other way," Presley said.

"If they can't, then I would tell them to stop crying and get up and do something about it because dreams don't just happen on their own and life is too short to waste time on fear. They have a lot to do; they better get started. Be confident that you have something special to offer."

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*To learn more about Presley or see photos of his latest productions, visit the website [www.christopherpresley.com](http://www.christopherpresley.com) and click on "Productions." There are separate pages for New York, Children's and Regional shows.*

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