

John D. Alexander: Endless Juggling, Countless Rewards

By John D. Alexander

Although I am a member of Actors' Equity and SAG (Screen Actors Guild), and am often gainfully employed in the cast of professional theatrical productions, it is impossible to make a living solely working as a stage actor in Vermont. I have done eight shows in a year, overlapping and back to back, but would by no means be able to pay the bills were it not for my "day job."

Before mid-1999, that day job was as a research technician at the USDA Forest Service in South Burlington. There, I studied the stressful effects of acid rain and drought on indigenous tree species, while taking time off to do some off-off Broadway and rehearsing and performing shows at night, fitting in several film projects, and becoming a member of Screen Actors Guild. The trouble was that professional theater almost always rehearses during the day, and my very secure, fairly well-paying government job was an absolute conflict. It became time to do something about that.

After leaving the Forest Service to pursue acting on a more professional level, I worked for two years as head of security for a very popular music spot on Church Street, then as a waiter and bartender at a restaurant on Shelburne Road. This represented a huge cut in pay (and a total loss of benefits), but the choice was to stagnate at the level at which I'd been, or to impoverish myself and grow as an actor in my profession of choice. As a result, I was able to perform with professional stage companies and in two big films that came to town. An interesting side note is that, because of that particular "day" job, I worked with Jim Carrey, Renee Zellweger and Chris Cooper by day, and often saw them at the club when I was working, and so got to know them on a level that would not have been possible in the star-protective world of the Hollywood film set.

After two years of the low pay and sometimes high stress of bar security, in combination with juggling rehearsal and nighttime performance schedules with a "night" job, I decided that it was time to go back to some kind of "normal" work. So I parlayed my experience writing journal articles for the Forest Service into a job as a production editor for thoracic medicine journals, which brought back the benefits and more pay, but once again limited my availability as an actor. I did this for three years, during which time I joined Actors' Equity Association (the stage actors' union).

Six years ago, I became a freelance science editor, which gives me great scheduling flexibility for acting, but often sees me editing at 3 a.m., and, once again, has no benefits and pays somewhat modestly. That, raising two boys, who are now 18 and 20, and running Off Center for the Dramatic Arts with my colleagues in the Old North End of Burlington (from which none of us draw a penny of salary, but is a true labor of love), are currently my day jobs ... unless it's at night.

I'm still busy performing on stage. It's an ugly business, it usually pays poorly, and the endless juggling causes untold stresses and anxiety, but I love it.

John D. Alexander is an actor who lives in Burlington.