

LOS ANGELES TIMES FEATURE ON MATT WALKER AND
TROUBADOUR THEATER COMPANY
JANUARY 2, 2004

A laugh-meter reader

Matt Walker leads his company in musical spoofs that link literature and movies with Top 40. Case in point: "Twelfth Dog Night."

By Don Shirley, Times Staff Writer

On an overcast December day, Saddam Hussein's capture has just been announced. The comic opportunities intrigue Matt Walker. "We've got to work Saddam in there somehow," he says backstage at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank as he prepares for a matinee of "It's a Stevie Wonderful Life." It's a raucous spoof of "It's a Wonderful Life" that uses tunes from the Stevie Wonder songbook, with somewhat changed lyrics.

Walker is the show's director as well as one of the writers. So it's his job to deliver a brief onstage pep talk before the audience enters the theater. "It's the end of a long week," he tells the cast, "but people have paid good money, so let's keep it loud, fast and funny." Each of the 20 actors extends a hand into the center of a tight circle and joins in chanting: "Boogie boogie boogie ha!"

Next, Walker turns to his role as usher. Dressed in an old-fashioned movie theater usher's outfit, he guides some of the theatergoers to their seats, using the most circuitous routes possible. Then he briefly takes the stage as the emcee. "How many of you remember the old movie?" he asks. "Wipe it right out of your minds."

The show begins with Caleb Rapoport playing George Bailey (the Jimmy Stewart role in the movie) as a child. But then Walker emerges as the adult George — even though he's noticeably shorter than Rapoport. Both Baileys wear Afro wigs; in this version, George's father is black.

Even while playing Bailey, Walker doesn't abandon his directorial role. If an actor flubs a line, even if it's only an errant syllable, Walker whips out a handkerchief called the "foul flag" and drops it on the stage. With much ado, the offender repeats the line correctly. Occasionally Walker pretends to measure the audience's reaction to a joke by holding his arms in the position of a fluttering laugh meter.

No, he hasn't forgotten Saddam Hussein. Deep into the second act, Morgan Rusler, who's playing the mean old Mr. Potter, threatens George Bailey: "You can't hide in a little town like this. We found Saddam Hussein; we'll find you too!"

The laugh meter jumps.

Peripatetic troupe

Walker and his Troubadour Theater Company have become L.A.'s reigning monarchs of musical spoofery. Their titles alone get laughs: "Twelfth Dog Night," "A Midsummer Saturday Night Fever's Dream," "Romeo Hall and Juliet Oates," "All's Kool That Ends Kool," "A Christmas Carol King," "Fleetwood Macbeth." The Troubies — as they are known to friends and fans — are an itinerant bunch. Every winter, they usually hang out at the Falcon. During the summers, they go

on the road: Grove Theater Center venues in Orange County; Miles Playhouse in Santa Monica; the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre in Hollywood; the Ojai Shakespeare Festival, where they camp in tents. They've also ventured farther afield to the Adelaide Fringe Festival in Australia and Bruce Willis' Liberty Theatre in Idaho.

Their first production, a loose adaptation of "The Taming of the Shrew," began with the cast literally driving a car onto the stage of Santa Monica High School's amphitheater, as if they were arriving late from another engagement. Walker had been asked by the drama teacher Frank Ford to stage something for the amphitheater's 1995 summer season. The young director, a 1986 graduate of Santa Monica High, gathered fellow alumni and newcomers who became the core Troubies.

When Michael Sulprizio auditioned, Walker asked him to grab his leg and flip him. Sulprizio, who knew the stunt, tossed Walker onto the floor. That was the entire audition. He was in. He's now Troubadour's executive director as well as an actor. From that first production, he said, he realized Walker has "an amazing sense of the big picture. Sometimes in rehearsals things seem so disjointed. And with a snap of his fingers, it all comes together."

Walker was born and raised in Santa Monica. But he spent three years in East Hampton, N.Y., where his divorced mother worked as a nighttime radio DJ. She enlisted her 7-year-old son to record sports scores for broadcast, although he usually fell asleep before his voice hit the airwaves. As a teenager back in Santa Monica, he became active in school and community theater. He got a Hollywood agent and a one-line role in a TV movie at age 17. Two years later he landed a regular role as a naïve seaman on the Navy-themed TV series "Supercarrier." He made \$6,000 a week, but the job lasted only 12 weeks before the show was canceled. Still, that income enabled him to make his professional directing debut: He and his mother produced "The Glass Menagerie" at a small Venice theater. A Times review from 1988, which noted that Walker was only 19, called it "a luminous rendering" and "a fragile and breathless production."

He continued as a stage and screen actor into his mid-20s and started directing small cable TV spots. He harbored no illusions about Hollywood. "I wasn't going to be Tom Cruise," he said. "I wanted to be a character actor. But you can't always do that when you're cast with David Alan Grier," as he was in the Fox series "The Preston Episodes" in 1995. "He's going to get the laughs." In his spare time, Walker was investigating a wilder brand of live performance. He took improv with Richard Kind at Second City's outpost in Santa Monica. He studied with performance art diva Rachel Rosenthal for two months. He took a summer workshop with the brilliant clown and mime Bill Irwin and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

"I didn't get the same fulfillment in TV as I did in front of a live audience," he says. "Doing it from beginning to end in one go — it's so visceral." After two unsuccessful callbacks for "Mad TV," he entered the Clown College of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey. Three months later, he joined the circus as a \$300-a-week clown, touring for 12 weeks. "I never thought I'd join the circus. I just thought I'd enhance my bag of tricks," he says. It wasn't a great experience. "I lived in a small compartment on a train, I was in cookie-cutter production numbers, and I missed the Troubies."

The Marshall plan

But he brought some of his clowning back to the Troubies. In 1998, they staged "Clown's Labors Lost," an adaptation of Shakespeare's "Love's Labours Lost," for the Grove Theater Center. A year later, with "Twelfth Dog Night," they began their series of classics set to retro Top 40 hits. Garry Marshall, whose Falcon Theatre will follow the just-ended "It's a Stevie Wonderful Life" with "Fleetwood Macbeth," opening Friday, became a fan after "Twelfth Dog Night." Recalls

Marshall: "When I first saw Matt at an audition, I said, 'Look at how he jumps and hops all over the stage — I've got to get him on my softball team.' " Indeed, Walker is now the captain, manager and third baseman of the Marshall-sponsored team. He also has a role in the movie Marshall is shooting, "The Princess Diaries 2."

Marshall says the Troubie shows cross all age boundaries. "Adults come with the kids, and even if the kids don't get the jokes, they get the movements." Troubadour also produces children's shows under the "Funky Punks" label.

Troubadour has never obtained performance rights to the songs it uses. Walker said that an attorney representing Carole King's oeuvre wrote a letter to the Troubies in 2002 during "A Christmas Carol King." After consulting with a lawyer, the stepfather of one of the Troubies, they responded that the production was protected as satire under the 1st Amendment. They never heard back from the attorney. King's music publisher did not return Times calls about the matter.

This issue will be dicier if the Troubies ever take their act to TV or film. Marshall, who's thought about a Troubadour TV show, says, "the problem would be in getting music clearances."

Walker too wants to take the Troubies to the screen. He doesn't get a salary now. The troupe shares what's left after expenses — usually no more than about \$400 per Troubie for a summer season. So it's not surprising that he's interested in finding a more lucrative way to express Troubie spirit, even though he consciously chose to pursue success on stage. The Troubadour style relies heavily on breaking the fourth wall, talking directly to the audience. This wouldn't seem practical on the screen, but the ever-inventive Walker wonders if he could somehow add live performers to movie audiences. This doesn't mean, however, that the Troubies plan to stop their stage work any time soon. Indeed, for each Shakespearean play, the group has three potential pop-inflected titles. And, of course, they've recently expanded beyond Shakespeare. Coming up next holiday season, Walker suggests: "It's a Charlie James Brown Christmas."