

Art makes life worth living for Havertown man

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HAVERTOWN TWP. —Actor, director and educator Neill Hartley has come a long way from his beginnings in the tiny, rural town of South Worcester, New York.

South Worcester was, as Hartley recalls, a place where cows outnumbered people, and the nearest school was nearly a half-hour away.

Though he loved its quaint, country charm, Hartley seemed headed for bigger things. At age 11 he won a talent show for playing different characters, and realized he wanted to be an actor. Hartley recalls looking out at the audience and thinking, “This is great. I love this.”

Hartley subsequently participated in every school play and went on to major in theater at State University of New York at Oneonta. He earned a Master of Fine Arts from Temple University in 1990.

Since then Hartley has built a reputation as an independent actor and director on the Philadelphia scene. Arden Theater’s “Working” was his “first big play,” followed by numerous parts with the Philadelphia Shakespeare Festival, Philadelphia Area Repertory Theater, InterAct, Peoples Light & Theater, and more. Hartley shared a best ensemble Philadelphia Barrymore award for “Batboy, The Musical,” performed by 1812 Productions.

Hartley also does one-man shows that have proved popular at schools, museums and libraries, in which he plays colorful characters like Sherlock Holmes, Ichabod Crane and P.T. Barnum.

Hartley’s experience as an actor helped him segue into directing. He has worked with many university and professional theater companies, such as Isis Productions, Luna Theater, University of Pennsylvania and Arcadia University.

Since 2005 Hartley has served as artistic director for Acting Without Boundaries, a theater company that provides performance opportunities for children, teens and young adults with physical disabilities.

Additionally, Hartley has appeared in films and documentaries, serves as a spokesperson on QVC, and does commercials and voice over projects for numerous corporate/industrial clients, including Wawa, Kodak, Unisys, SmithKline. and more.

Last, but not least, Hartley wears the hat of assistant professor of voice and speech at University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Hartley said he enjoys the mix of everything he does, and despite a busy, sometimes stressful schedule, he feels fortunate to be making a living in the arts during tough economic times.

To stay on top of his game, Hartley said he's "always aggressively marketing" and has gotten good at "promoting Neill Hartley, the product."

He thinks it's unfortunate that the arts do not always receive the support they deserve. Citing a remark by actress Kathleen Turner, Hartley maintains that art "makes life worth living."

"When you look at a beautiful painting, hear gorgeous music or go to the theater, that's what makes life rich, interesting, full. Otherwise it's just about survival," Hartley said.

Married and the father of two sons, Hartley said he used to attend career days at his children's school because "There are kids out there who are into the arts and don't see examples of successful working artists who have homes, families, and lives. People think either you're a star or nothing. There are a lot of people like me who are in the middle somewhere, and make a fine living doing theater. You don't necessarily have to go and get your MBA."

Among current goals, Hartley wants to bring professional theater to Havertown. He helped make improvements at St. Andrew's Church, currently in use as ad hoc art center, and has used the venue for dress rehearsals. Last February, Hartley arranged for Isis Productions to do a preview performance of "House of Blue Leaves" at St. Andrew's. A robust turnout confirmed that "there are people in Havertown who would like to see theater," Hartley said.

Coming up on his calendar, Hartley will present his one man show, "Sherlock Holmes and the Speckled Band," 7 p.m., on July 24, at Hamilton Township Library in Mercer County, NJ.

And under his artistic direction, Acting Without Boundaries will present "Some Enchanted Evening: the Songs of Rodgers and Hammerstein," 4 p.m. on July 22 at the Arden Theater in Philadelphia.

For more information about Hartley and upcoming events, visit his website at www.neillhartley.com.