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APPALACHIAN PLAYWRIGHT

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I first met Billy Edd Wheeler in the early 1970s when I was acting in one of his plays, *Hatfields and McCoys*, at Cliffside Amphitheatre in Grandview State Park near Beckley, West Virginia. He was right much of a legend in the area, having been born just up the road in Highcoal, West Virginia. At least I think it was just up the road—the town no longer existed by then.

At any rate, folks in those parts knew Billy Edd for his music, as did people all over the country. I was personally familiar with “Jackson” because I was a Johnny Cash fan, as well as “The Coming of the Roads,” which still makes my heart hurt when I hear it. The show’s director had called a ten-minute break, and I noticed a small crowd of tourists at the top of the house, so I went up to see what they were so interested in. I heard a woman exclaim, “You’re Billy Edd Wheeler!” and there he stood in the middle of it all.

“No ma’am, my name is Suggins, Elwood P. Suggins” he said, with the emphasis on the *P*. I was also a Jonathan Winters fan and recognized the name right away, but the lady was confused and continued her stare, puzzled, but not convinced. Soon everyone was laughing, and he proceeded to autograph whatever pieces of paper they were able to come up with.

I knew right away that I liked the man. It didn’t take long for my opinion to grow into genuine admiration as I got to know him and to realize what a multi-talented individual he is. I learned that he was a veritable hit machine when it came to his music. It seemed like everybody who was anybody in the music business had covered at least one of his songs. And it’s a joy to hear him sing his own stuff. *Song of a Woods Colt* introduced me to his gift for poetry. He is even a painter, and I don’t mean houses. He is equally at home with landscapes and impressionist works, which he executes as “Billy Picasso.”

But theatre is my life’s work, and that’s what I want to talk about. The more we rehearsed that summer, and the more I researched the

story of the Hatfield and McCoy feud, the more I grew to appreciate what a fine playwright he is. People ask me, "How in the world can somebody make a crowd-pleasing musical based on a feud where people killed each other for revenge?"

My answer? Do your homework and find a hook on which to anchor your plot. Billy Edd first read everything he could find about the feud, and then he spent a good long time exploring the backcountry "hollers" of West Virginia and Kentucky. He met and interviewed relatives and friends of both families, and he realized just how deeply proud these people were. There would be no hillbillies in his show, only proud mountaineers who laughed heartily and loved life and family. And the natural "hook" appeared with the star-crossed lovers, Johnse Hatfield and Roseanna McCoy. All of a sudden he had himself a latter-day Romeo and Juliet, and on this he built his play.

Was he successful in recreating these giants for the stage? Well, the *New York Times* reviewer liked it, as did the other critics who attended the opening. But I think the comment that Billy Edd treasures the most came from Willis Hatfield, Devil Anse's only surviving son, who, after seeing his father portrayed on stage, smiled and proclaimed, "That's my daddy."

I tend to focus on the Hatfield show as it's the one I know the best. After playing the role of Rand'l McCoy for three summers, I got the opportunity to direct it. I soon found that Billy Edd is a director's dream as a playwright, always ready to discuss his play and explain his *raison d'être* for this or that scene or character and willing to rewrite if it will make his play better. Because of our relationship and my love for his play, I've returned to direct it some twenty times over the past thirty-five years.

Over the years, I have learned that Billy Edd utilizes the same careful methods to research and develop his other plays. 1977 saw the advent of *Barbry and Willie*, a "folk flavored" musical inspired by the internationally recognized ballad of Barbara Allen's rose and briar theme and produced at Warren Wilson College.

In 1979 came the premier of *A Song of the Cumberland Gap*, a new outdoor drama staged in the Pine Mountain Amphitheatre in Pine Mountain State Park, Pineville, Kentucky. Originally commissioned and recorded as a folk opera by the National Geographic Society,

Billy Edd recognized its potential to be made into a production that could shine under the stars as live theatre. He conceived the idea of combining live actors in a natural outdoor setting with projected slides and orchestral music. With this novel approach, he told the story of the discovery of the Cumberland Gap and the establishment of the early settlements in Kentucky by Daniel Boone and other hearty frontiersmen. I saw the show several times and always came away happily humming the music.

Later that same year saw the Theatre West Virginia production of what may well be my favorite among Billy Edd's plays. Directed by his friend Ewel Cornett, *Mossie and the Strippers* had its premiere on the stage of the West Virginia Culture Center in the capital city of Charleston. Unlike most of his other work, *Mossie* is a non-musical play. He gives us a dramatic confrontation that is echoed again and again throughout the mountains of coal country—the company versus the miner. Only in this play the miner has given up, and it's his wife, Mossie, who has taken matters into her own hands and is defying big business and its even bigger machines by standing up to the strip-mining operation that is a threat to her home and her life.

Billy Edd's gift for character development was never more apparent than with Mossie and Gid, his leading characters in the show. From the very first scene, we believed that these people were real and the play's dénouement never failed to make all of us in the audience want to cheer. After the Charleston performances, the production toured in southern West Virginia, the heart of that state's coal industry, and the cheering continued.

The play moved to Kentucky in 1987 when Warren Hammack produced and directed it in his Horse Cave Theatre. As I write this, there is interest in mounting a new production in Pikeville, Kentucky, and as time passes, I seriously doubt that Mossie will ever lose her appeal. She is one of the strongest, most determined, yet likeable women to ever speak to us from the stage.

The Glass Christmas Tree came on the scene in 1983. Once again, Billy Edd collaborated with composer Ewel Cornett, who had provided the score for *Hatfields and McCoy's*. The play focused on the child labor that was utilized at the turn of the twentieth century to keep the glass factories operating and was produced by the world-

renowned Stage One: Louisville Children's Theatre. Once again, Billy Edd demonstrated his skill as a playwright by utilizing this sad time in our nation's history to create a tale filled with hope and optimism.

While all of this was going on, Billy Edd was working on a commission to write another outdoor drama for a brand new amphitheatre to be built at Lincoln State Park near Lincoln City, Indiana. This play would tell the story of the Lincoln family's arrival from Kentucky when Abe was seven until he was a young man of twenty-one. Once again, Wheeler was meticulous in doing his homework. As he had with *Hatfields and McCoy's*, he filled in the gaps in the historical record with carefully crafted bits of "what might have been." One of Billy Edd's particular strong points is his gift for finding and developing humor where most folks wouldn't spot it in the first place. This latest effort, *Young Abe Lincoln*, fairly bristles with fun. Then, in contrast to the foot-stomping dances and toe-tapping music, we are introduced to Abe's serious side—his love of reading and thirst for knowledge, his common sense, his heart-wrenching despair over the loss of his mother and sister, and his shock and anger when, on a flatboat trip to New Orleans, he witnesses the slave trade first hand. In this play, storyteller Wheeler gives us a youth who is well on his way to becoming the man that people the world over believe was our greatest president.

That same year, Wright State University produced *Bird on the Wing*, a "country music musical" co-written with Bob Morrison and Haila Stoddard. Then came *Voices in the Wind*, a play with music, written in the style of *Spoon River Anthology* to celebrate the sesquicentennial of McDowell County, North Carolina, in 1993.

Jim Crabtree, producing director of the Cumberland County Playhouse in Crossville, Tennessee, had the bright (and right) idea of weaving a new tapestry from Billy Edd's poetry, songs and plays with additional music by Dennis Davenport. The resulting production of *Wings Over Appalachia* had its premiere at the Playhouse in 1990.

Nothing succeeds like success, and Billy Edd once again teamed with composer Ewel Cornett to write *What a Way to Go* with the added composing talents of Dennis Burnside. Produced just across the river from Louisville, Kentucky, at the Derby Dinner Playhouse, this musical comedy is the story of the weekly gatherings of five

retired men who spend the time reminiscing about life, love, ex-wives, children, grandchildren, sex (or the lack thereof) and other things that matter. Director Bekki Jo Schneider aptly described it as “a *Steel Magnolias* for men.”

One can only wonder what future characters might spring to life through the pen of Billy Edd Wheeler. Toward the end of the last century, he added *Johnny Appleseed* near Mansfield, Ohio, to his list of outdoor dramas. With the dawning of the twenty-first century, he’s already been approached by backers for a new play to be produced at Indian Fort amphitheatre in Berea, Kentucky, where Paul Green, known as “the father of outdoor drama,” premiered his *Wilderness Road* in 1955. Coincidentally, Billy Edd Wheeler, Ewel Cornett, and several others who went on to successful careers in theatre, were performers in that production. I will refrain from making comments about “coming full circle,” however, as it is my fervent wish and belief that this gifted man will continue to surprise, educate and make us laugh with his wonderful stories for years to come.