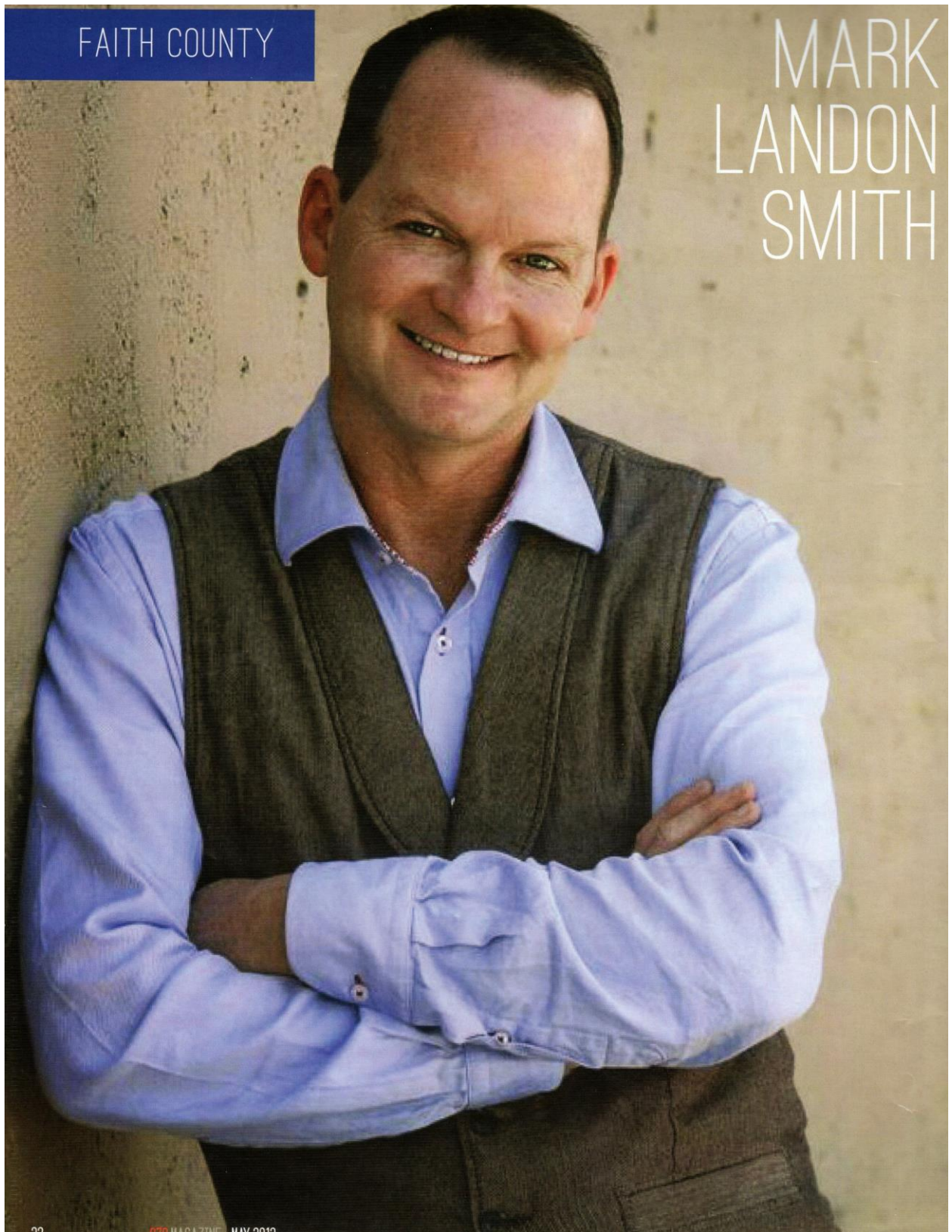


FAITH COUNTY

MARK  
LANDON  
SMITH



# FAITH COUNTY

BY JOHN ABERNATHY

*"My heart is in Northwest Arkansas," Mark told me. "New York and LA are not the end all and be all. As a writer I can be based anywhere. And as an actor, too. I have a unique situation in NWA. The region is extremely supportive of artists not only in audience, but also in those wanting to promote the arts."* -Mark Landon Smith

**T**wenty two years ago Jonesboro native Mark Landon Smith had his first big break as an artist. He was a regional actor/director involved in local theater and describes the era as, "one of those golden times." His play, Faith County, was published during this "golden time" by Samuel French. The year was 1991.

Today much has changed for Mark, though much has stayed the same as well. His work is nationally and internationally known. He has published fourteen plays in multiple foreign languages, some of which have been seen in Los Angeles and Off-Broadway. He has appeared on television, in films, and of course on stage, but despite these opportunities for ego Mark appears to be the same grounded-but-driven Arkansan that was excited to have just one play published so long ago.

"My heart is in Northwest Arkansas," Mark told me. "New York and LA are not the end all and be all. As a writer I can be based anywhere. And as an actor, too. I have a unique situation in NWA. The region is extremely supportive

of artists not only in audience, but also in those wanting to promote the arts. Producing in NWA has been a very smooth process with national and international results. My scripts are workshopped here before being submitted for possible publication, which brings attention to the area as a creator of original work. And there are several theatre companies in the area doing outstanding work and we all work together as an artistic community being mutually supportive and sharing resources and ideas."

That environmental support of art was present in Mark's youth as well. Mark's parents were both creative themselves and, in his own words, "...have always been stunningly supportive, which they remain to this day. ...My parents never told me 'you have to be a doctor, lawyer, etc.' When I told them I wanted to go into the theatre, they were 100% for it. They recognized my being a writer when I was very young."

Of course Jonesboro in the 70's and 80's was quite different from the present. Opportunities for artists were still present, but there certainly

wasn't the same boom being experienced today. Mark discovered the Foundation of Arts in high school and returned there after his BFA at Rhodes. "[I] was given such support and freedom and we were really given the opportunity to grow as artists and experiment. Their support of producing Faith County is what led the eventual publication of the script."

On May 9th the Jonesboro High School theater department is bringing Faith County back to where it all began, the Foundation of Arts. Dawn Tucker, the department's teacher/director originally chose the locale out of necessity as their own theater was not available. The occasion, however, is not lost on Dawn nor on the students in the production.

Faith County is a snapshot of seven lives, all drawn together by an impending county fair. Some are there to compete in food or craft competitions, others to perform or showcase a talent. A poetry reading turned avante garde musical performance in the first act could stand alone in any art house for an audience attracted to the comically oblivious. "Most of my work is Southern in nature," Mark said. "And very colloquial. And comedic. As a gentleman from the South, I write about what I know. Southern culture."

The atmosphere and characters are delectably southern and instantly familiar. As Dawn put it, "if you don't recognize one of the characters as someone in your own life, you're lying to yourself." Mark, however, stressed that the characters themselves aren't meant to be funny. "All characters have to be based in truth to be believable regardless of the genre. Something like Faith County could be played very broad



Some of the cast of Fair County from left to right: Badria Mryyan, Chandler Winningham, Molly Dobbs, Brooke Earheart, Brooke Sablich. Not Pictured: Stefan Simmons, Nick Chancery, Director/Teacher Dawn Tucker and Stage Manager Reagan Procter



and over-the-top. But these characters are real people. They do not find their lives to be funny, which is what makes it so funny. If the characters are played as caricatures, it destroys the credibility. Faith County is meant to be played straight. Let the audience laugh. Not the characters.”

It’s a task much easier said than done and one that Badria Mryyan, who plays Gladys Pimbleton in JHS’s upcoming production was quick to point out as difficult. During one early rehearsal the actors still had to stop on occasion to laugh at themselves. Excusable, of course, because the script is funny, the situations ridiculous, and the characters so unaware.

Brooke Sablich plays Naomi Farkle in the new production. Brooke describes her character as, “very emotional. [Naomi] gets excited about everything.” The gossipy hairdresser is also “boastful, proud, and two-faced” according to the cast, adding another layer of difficulty for Brooke who said, “That’s just not me.” Stack on top of that the thirty- or forty-year difference in the actress’ and character’s ages then consider the aforementioned challenge of playing the role straight-faced and you’ll begin to understand just how difficult these roles may be for Tucker’s young cast.

Gay Jackson, the original Naomi Farkle in Mark’s 1991 debut of Faith County, describes the character in similar terms: “Over the top,” and “larger than life.” In 2004 she had the unique experience of directing the play as the drama teacher at Westside High School. Now, as she prepares to see the play from the last possible angle—that of an audience member—she’s happy that Northeast Arkansas’ artists are being

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something on, but there weren't any dressing rooms, just bathrooms at the opposite end of the building. When one of clerks refused to let us use the bathrooms, fearing we'd steal the merchandise, the other clerk recognized my mother and said, "No. It's OK. That's Miss Sharon."

Fast forward several years later. I work with the comedy improv group Phunbags, as emcee, a director and team player. During the crowd warm-up, I sometimes mention my mother was Miss Sharon, which never fails to elicit audible gasps and applause.

After one performance, a man introduced himself and asked, "Was your mother really Miss Sharon on 'Romper Room?'"

I responded, "She certainly was."

"That's amazing," he said, in obvious awe. "I loved that show as a child. I'd watch it every day hoping she'd say my name in the Magic Mirror, but she never did."

I stepped away and called my mother, giving her the gentleman's name. I tapped him on the shoulder and gave him the phone. "Miss Sharon wants to talk to you," I said.

He was visibly shaking as he took the phone. "Hello?" he said timidly. I heard my mother say: "Romper Stomper Bomper Boo, tell me, tell me, tell me do. Magic Mirror tell me today, have all my friends had fun at play?" and she said his name. Tears welled up in this gentleman's hardened face, and he was barely able to say "thank you" as he hung up the phone, hands still shaking. Through his now steady flow of tears he whispered, "Miss Sharon said my name."

I left him alone, choked with emotion, his shoulders shaking. Later in the evening, still weeping, I overheard him on his phone telling someone, "You won't believe what happened tonight ..."



Mark Landon Smith

Mark Landon Smith is the executive director of Arts Live Theatre; co-founder of Ceramic Cow Productions; co-director of Phunbags Comedy Improv; and co-director of the Arkansas Playwrights Workshop for TheatreSquared. As a playwright, he

has had nine scripts published; his work is produced throughout the world and includes two foreign translations, an Off-Broadway production and a film adaptation. He is also a contributing author of the humor book *Dear Elvis: Graffiti From Graceland*. ■

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