





Life on a Stage

A southerner might describe **Mark Landon Smith** as a character and, to that point, they would be correct in so many ways. His vivacious personality and infectious smile are that of a Hollywood variety, but he is perfectly happy to perfect his talents right here in Northwest Arkansas and serve as the executive director of Arts Live Theatre in Fayetteville. He grew up in Jonesboro with an older brother and parents who were uniquely suited to raise a child with such bursting creativity.

Mark describes his mother as “funny, though she doesn’t even know it! And she’s really sassy. I called her a couple of months ago and told her I had hurt my back from carrying around the weight of my celebrity and she didn’t miss a beat before she replied, ‘Do you also have a migraine from your growing ego?’ She has her master’s in child psychology, so for many years I served as her guinea pig. But she has done a little bit of everything. I definitely believe I got my sense of humor from her.”

Mark’s father is what he calls “a Jack of all trades.” He started his career as an insurance adjuster, but then he owned fast-food franchises, and now does commercial real estate brokerage. “He will never retire. He is constantly moving forward and he is impatient for the next thing to come along. He wants to do so much so quickly. And I am exactly like that! I definitely get my impatience from him.”

He says his parents completely supported acting as a career choice, even when Mark was a young child. He explains, "I knew I wanted to do something creative, and my parents let me know that acting was an option even before I knew it. I couldn't go on the Internet and look up options, so it took a lot more to discover what was out there. My dad would always say that if you work in your passion then you never really work a day in your life. So I was encouraged throughout my life to pursue my passion."

Mark remembers taking a piece of crystal from his mother's china cabinet as a child and pretending it was his Oscar. "I would practice my acceptance speech over and over again!" But as he got older, he didn't set such lofty goals for himself. "I didn't let adulation be the goal, but rather doing good work and surrounding myself with talented creatives." So he worked toward goals he felt sure he could attain. He began after graduation from high school by attending Rhodes College in Memphis.

He laughs and says, "I didn't even look at the theater program there before deciding to go. I was just so enamored by the campus and when I closed my eyes I could just picture myself there! Luckily, I was able to get in. And college really was so great. For the first time, I got enormous encouragement from people outside of my family. I majored in acting and worked quite a lot during college doing small films and commercials. The faculty and staff really encouraged that, and it helped so much with the transition of finding jobs after I graduated."



Mark with his parents at the 2012 premiere of Gordon Family Tree

Q & A WITH MARK LANDON SMITH

1. What is your favorite role you ever played?

Definitely Macal in *Macbeth*. It was one of those rare instances in which I could have done the show perpetually. I felt the same way about *Amadeus* at TheatreSquared. And also *Nicholas Nickleby* at the McCoy Theatre [at Rhodes College]. *Nicholas Nickleby* is an 8-hour show. Quite epic. The company was outstanding and the only time I have become misty-eyed about a show ending because it was such an experience comprised of several months. My dream role is to be on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as The Sassy Ensign whose response to every order and each directive is a curt "Your Mama."

2. Where do you get inspiration?

As a writer...by simply watching people be who they are in everyday life. Where did they come from? Why are they here now? Where are they going? And small-town newspapers are a gold mine.

3. Where do you like to write?

I like to write sitting on my 1950s sofa, computer in lap...ice tea to my left, bowl of peanut butter cups within arm's reach.

4. Do you have a favorite vacation spot?

I love going on cruises. The destinations are secondary as the ship itself is my destination.



But I also enjoy London...it's very British. And Paris...it's very French. And my front porch...it's very porch-y.

5. What's your favorite part of Northwest Arkansas?

I love the entire region. It really is extraordinary and my favorite place I have lived. I love how unique the area is, its beauty, its diversity and how art is embraced and encouraged. And the hospitality. And the people.

6. What has been your proudest moment?

Anytime I see my Arts Live kids applying what we teach them, not just about performance, but in becoming confident and kind people who care for and encourage others.

7. Do you have a trademark saying or philosophy?

So there.

You cannot always control your circumstances, but you can control your attitude.

What would Tootie from *The Facts of Life* do?

After graduation from Rhodes, Mark stayed in Memphis for a time doing film and theater. Eventually he moved to the East Coast and began working on Cape Cod doing a show in Provincetown, Mass. He says, "It was then that I decided I wanted to go back to school. At some point along the way, I made a real connection with Amy Herzberg, who is the head of the acting department at the University of Arkansas. She brought me to Fayetteville for the Masters in Fine Arts

program in acting in 1999, and I fell in love with the place and have been here ever since."

Mark was asked to direct a show for Arts Live Theatre in 2002, which led to his being asked to teach a few classes. When Arts Live received a grant to hire an artistic director, Mark was the perfect person for the job. In 2008, the executive director left Arts Live, and Mark made the suggestion that the job of executive director and artistic director be combined into one position.

The board liked the idea and Mark took over full time as executive director. "I'm in charge of programming, classes and production, as well as casting, budgets and fundraising. I'm the only full-time staff person here!"

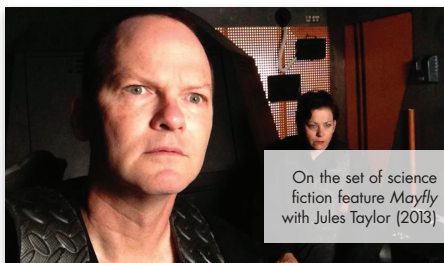


Mark, as Tate Summers, on the set of *Valley Inn* (2013)

But Mark is thrilled to be the "everything" person for Arts Live. He loves the focus put on the kids. He says, "Kids seeing other kids perform is a key ingredient to what we're doing here. We really work our kids very hard to produce fantastic shows. We put them through their paces and they rise to the occasion. The more that is expected of you, the more you give and the more I see their confidence rise. I just love that we are a safe place for these kids to become who they are."

In addition to guiding Arts Live Theatre to a really wonderful place (with nine shows this year and 54 classes offered), Mark is working on all kinds of things on his own. "I have a book that will hopefully be released this summer called *Mister Fancy Pants* and just finished working on a movie, *Parker's Anchor*, where I was an associate producer and regional casting director, plus I had a role in the film," he says.

He is definitely a busy man, and loves every bit of it. He says, "Sometimes I can't even sleep at night because I'm just so excited about what is going on in my life!" Mark feels he is in the perfect place to be supported by a creative community. There is no doubt this community feels the same about him and his commitment to the local arts. ■



On the set of science fiction feature *Mayfly* with Jules Taylor (2013)

For more humorous responses and insight into the creative mind of Mark Landon Smith, visit www.citiscapes.com and click on "profile."



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