

Tom Wopat
by [Kathy Henderson](#)
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Tom Wopat

It's been a busy year on Broadway for Tom Wopat, whose performance as patriarch Tom Hurley opposite Faith Prince in *A Catered Affair* earned the actor his second Tony nomination. Suppressing his innate charisma to play a 1950s Bronx cabbie who put his dreams on hold to care for his family, Wopat seized the moment in the show's climactic musical number, "I Stayed." After *A Catered Affair's* four-month run ended on July 27, Wopat went straight back into the Broadway company of [Chicago](#) as Billy Flynn, a role he's played off and on for the past five years in New York and on tour. He's also at work on his third jazz album and moonlights in a solo act at the Metropolitan Room, recently prompting a *New York Times* reviewer to note that "the personality he projects is that of a weathered man's man (he is 56) who still has a keen eye for the ladies." In conversation, the blue-eyed actor has a Midwestern-style reserve, with traces of an accent from

his native Wisconsin, where he grew up on a dairy farm with six brothers and a sister. Thirty years after achieving TV stardom in *The Dukes of Hazzard*, Wopat has proven his versatility as a stage star and singer.

You went back into *Chicago* the day after *A Catered Affair* closed! Didn't you need a break?

I could only have taken a week off, and I'm in the middle of making a new jazz record, so I decided that I would rather have the money from the extra week [in *Chicago*]. I'm already in the [eight show] schedule anyway, so I might as well jump right in.

Does *Chicago* feel like old-home week? The role of Billy Flynn fits you so well.

I've always said that this is one of the easy parts in the sense that you show up late, you leave early, and you've got one outfit. That's what my goals are these days [laughs].

How many times have you done *Chicago*?

On Broadway, I've been in at least four or five different times. I've done it multiple times on the road as well, the first time for 16 weeks. I have a couple of isolated weeks coming up again [on tour] in November and December and then a couple of weeks over the new year.

Are you surprised that the *Chicago* revival has run on Broadway for 12 years?

I think this is one of those shows that hold up well. It's a period piece, first of all, a classic kind of cynical Broadway show that these guys [Kander & Ebb] do so well. Also, with the deal that's in place at this theater, they can run it pretty inexpensively. But they're still doing a really good percentage [of capacity]. It's a franchise! Few shows achieve that kind of status, but this is one.



Tom Wopat in *Chicago*

Have you ever been to a city in which audiences seemed taken aback by the show?

Well, we did five performances in Abu Dhabi, and it was pretty hard to gauge how they responded. That's a whole different ballgame because they cover their women from head to toe there. That was really odd. It's a show that travels well, though. It's built to travel.

Let's talk for a minute about *A Catered Affair*. Did you expect it to have a longer run?

You have hopes, for sure, when you get involved in something of that quality. I don't think anybody was under any illusion that it was going to be a huge draw commercially, just because of the nature of the material, and there's not a real "name" value to it. It was more of a play than a musical. And from the get-go, it was difficult to market. I think it would do well in London. I'm kind of embarrassed that it didn't do better here. This town should have taken better care of a show like that. I'm not impressed with the *Times* for one thing, and with the Tony people, for another group. Between the two of them, they pretty much sent *A Catered Affair* away.

Was it the song ["I Stayed"] that made you want to play Tom Hurley?

Yeah. The song and the scene that precedes it. He's kind of a long-suffering guy, and then he finally gets the chance to speak up. He's not saying, "Poor me." He's saying, "Look, I persevered through all the crap you give me and I love you anyway. So don't accuse this of being a loveless marriage." That was really a poignant number and a poignant moment. I think it speaks to a lot of people in that generation. I mean, my father was of that generation, and there are a lot of dads from the '50s and '60s who kept their noses to the grindstone and did what they were supposed to do and took care of their families.

You really had to repress your natural ease on the stage in that part.

Glengarry Glen Ross [with Wopat as James Lingk, a mild-mannered victim of real estate hustlers] was probably closest to the character I played in *A Catered Affair*. One of the best compliments I had from *Glengarry* was when several friends went to the show and didn't recognize me in the first act. They got to intermission and said, "Where the hell is Tom?" I've done some other dramatic stuff in the past few years—a play called *The Last of the Boys* down at Princeton and *The Guys* at the Flea. It's freeing to be able to do different styles of things, and to open people's eyes to your capabilities. It's not necessarily that I was stereotyped, but I enjoy the flexibility that comes with that kind of

role, and it informs everything else I do. *A Catered Affair* was a nice combination of singing and drama.

You and Faith Prince have sung together in concert. Was there ever a moment during rehearsals when you looked up and said, "Why doesn't somebody write us a lovely duet?"

That's not what the show was about. I think we both went into it with our eyes open and knew that that wouldn't be happening. It was a trip, doing a show with Faith. We've done stuff together for over 20 years [including *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway and *Carousel* in DC]. She's an amazing talent and a challenge as an actress to work with. She's really skilled and has a lot of variety in what she does. We had an interesting time. It was an amazing dynamic, that's for sure.

We could do a whole interview about the ins and outs of *A Catered Affair*.

The show is what it is. The movie is what it is. It's a story about people discovering that they still love each other. When you've been grinding as long as they have, one day you have to ask yourself, "Is there a relationship there? Or is it just that we've been doing it for so long, it's a habit?" The redeeming factor of the show is the realization that these two actually *do* love each other, they just don't show it in ways we've become accustomed to in the 21st century. My dad never told me he loved me. We shook hands, we didn't hug. That was not uncommon in the 1950s and '60s, not where I come from.



Tom Wopat with Faith Prince in
A Catered Affair

Did you grow up thinking you would end up on the stage?

No. I guess I thought I'd be a singer. I thought I was going to be a football player first! But I studied voice at the University of Wisconsin and had some one-on-one acting classes there. I was in the applied voice program, not the acting program, and at that time they didn't teach musical comedy like they do now. If you were in applied voice, you studied opera and art songs and Schubert lieder.

Where are you in the birth order of your siblings?

I'm fifth. I have four older brothers, then me and my sister and two younger brothers.

It's so interesting that you left a Wisconsin farm and created a very successful career in show business.

We've all done interesting things. I have an older brother who is a physician in Oregon; he's a big shot as far as the medical profession there goes. He goes to Washington and testifies about insurance and stuff like that. I have a brother who is kind of a computer

genius. My younger brother is a singer/songwriter. My sister teaches voice at the University of Washington. I'm one of the few who doesn't have a college degree. I never graduated, but I managed to squeak by.

Does it seem like 30 years have passed since *The Dukes of Hazzard*?

Yes. It's a lifetime ago. I'll be 57 next month, so it's over half my life since I did that show.

I've never read a negative word from you about being associated with *Dukes*.

Well, what are you going to do? It would be pointless to try to negate it or to deny it or anything like that. It was a big, defining moment in my life, and John [Schneider] is one of my best friends, a guy I've really counted on over the years. You can't take those things away. The show was a lot of fun, and it opened a lot of doors for me.

Do you keep up with Catherine Bach?

Not a whole lot. I talk to her now and then. I just saw everybody a couple of months ago at Dukesfest, down in Atlanta. They do one every year, but I've been twice. I did it this year because John was in charge of it.

Was Dukesfest fun?

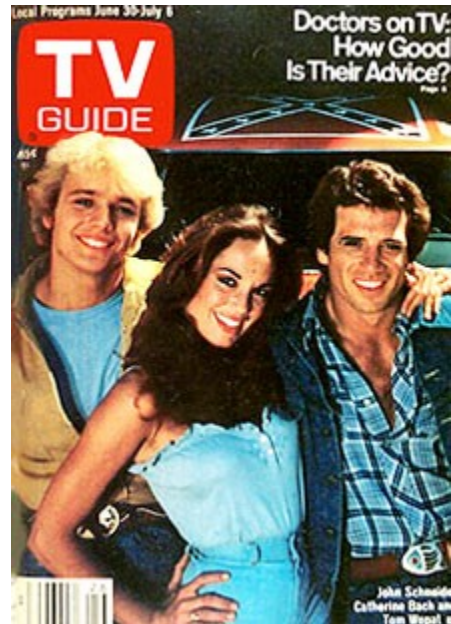
Kinda. It's a little bit rabid. The fans are fanatic.

Do they have any idea that you are a Broadway star?

There's not that many of them who don't know. They're pretty knowledgeable; they all get on the internet. There's a certain percentage of them that are just...that's what they do: They're *Dukes* fans.

Has your loyalty to the theater kept you from doing other TV series?

Maybe, just in the sense that I wasn't available to audition for everything. I've been fortunate enough to work a lot here, and especially in the last three or four years the diversity of the work has been really interesting. Having said that, I wouldn't say no to a series if it was the right thing. I still read for stuff on occasion. I think John is doing that American teenager show [*The Secret Life of the American Teenager*]. The thing about television is it's an amazing tool for facilitating other stuff. If I had a hit TV show, I could book as many concerts as I want. Going from a little jazz room like the Metropolitan Room is harder. Singing is something I enjoy, and I have a certain amount of credibility as a singer now. Between the jazz stuff and the Broadway stuff, I stay busy. And I've had a couple of [Tony] nominations. One of these days, I'm going to win one of those suckers [laughs].



Tom Wopat (r.) with John Schneider and Catherine Bach during the run of *The Dukes of Hazzard*



Tom Wopat and Liev Schreiber in
Glengarry Glen Ross

What's your new CD going to be like?

It's a little more of a saloon record. A little less introspective, a little more horn-oriented. Things like "Spinning Wheels" by BS&T [Blood, Sweat & Tears], "Natural Man" by Lou Rawls. There's an original tune that I wrote, and a song called "50 Checks" from the new Marc Shaiman musical *Catch Me If You Can*. [Wopat is on tap to play Frank Abagnale, the role created on film by Christopher Walken.] It's a great show; it will probably start somewhere next summer [before coming to Broadway].

Nobody has said you should do an album of love songs?

All of the records have love songs on them. On *The Still of the Night*, it's bittersweet love songs. The record we're making now is kind of a companion piece to that, but a little more extroverted, a little more...

Fun?

Yeah, it rocks. And it swings.

What do you like about singing in a cabaret setting?

Wow... I guess the unfiltered nature of it. I don't really do a cabaret show in the sense that there's a theme and I tell a story. I do a bunch of songs that mean something to me, and I try to let the audience know why I'm doing them. But a lot of it is just great musicians performing great songs, and I get to relay my enthusiasm for the music. It's exciting, and it's physically rewarding as well. I very much enjoy singing with a band. It's a gas.

Did you read the *New York Times* review of your most recent show at the Metropolitan Room?

I did! Nice review!

Especially this line: "Lurking beneath his debonair facade is a barely concealed wild man."

Mr. [Stephen] Holden has been pretty nice to me over the years. I like to think that there is a little bit of unruliness in what I do [*laughs*]. It's not all self-contained, and it's not all extremely civilized. But it's always musical.

You've always had the image as a ladies' man. Does that bother you?

I've not been a ladies' man for some time now. I've been married for about nine months, but I've been going with the same woman for a number of years. I haven't been dabbling in a long time. As a leading man, you want there to be some kind of attraction and some kind of magnetism. It's not something that I worry about or work at, but if there's an attraction, that's great. It helps sell product and helps keep me working.

What's been your happiest experience in the theater?

Oh gosh, there have been a number of them. Working with Bernadette [Peters] in *Annie Get Your Gun* was probably the most fun, hands down. I loved playing Sky in *Guys and Dolls* and Stone in *City of Angels*. Great show; again, hard to market. Those are probably the top three. The guy in *Catered Affair* was satisfying to play; that was angst-ridden every night. And the reaction we got for *Glengarry Glen Ross* was satisfying as well.



Tom Wopat with Bernadette Peters in *Annie Get Your Gun*

At one point you mentioned wanting to talk Bernadette into doing *Sweeney Todd* with you.

That was my idea before they did the revival. So I don't know that it would ever happen. I thought she'd be great, and I know I could do it.

Will any of your five children go into the business?

I hope not. My oldest daughter works in the art department in film. She's an artist and a designer. She's done really well. But it's a tough way to live. I like what I do, but I'm in that one percent who has had a high rate of success. It would be hard grinding it out in a lesser capacity, no disrespect to anyone else in the business. It's not easy work.

But now you've made it to Broadway's "A" list.

I don't know about that. I feel like I'm not out of place here, that's for sure. The ironic thing is that I've always kind of felt like an outsider. When I went to do television in L.A., I was coming from a Broadway stage. And then when I came back in *City of Angels*, it wasn't like the stunt casting they do these days, but you could make the case that I was coming from *Dukes of Hazzard*. I'm not really considered a TV star anymore; I think I'm more considered a Broadway actor. I enjoy what I do, and people keep coming to check it out. I have no complaints.