

# Knoxville-area actors finding an abundance of dramatic roles close to home

By Bonny C. Millard

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The Knoxville area has a rich legacy of actors who have found success in show business: Patricia Neal, David Keith, Cylk Cozart, David Dwyer, John Cullum, Bruce McKinnon, Polly Bergen, Dale Dickey, Brad Renfro, Johnny Knoxville, perhaps the most famous of all, Dolly Parton, singer/songwriter turned actress.

The list is, by no means, all-inclusive of the talented actors who've flourished in the business nationally or those who find fulfilment doing what they love on the local or regional level.

For those who want to hone their craft, pursue their passion, and even make a living, the area has many opportunities.

The early efforts of many actors are enough to engage them in a lifetime pursuit. Knoxville actress Tyra Haag found the passion as a teenager, while Maryville actor and filmmaker Mitch Moore discovered the itch in college.

The level of involvement in the acting arena depends on what the individual actor is looking for and how much he or she is able to commit.

As Dwyer was getting started in the movie business, he knew he wanted to pursue it as a serious career, which meant he couldn't have a fulltime job. So when he's not on a set, he's working for himself.

"You really can't have a regular job and pursue this fulltime because you don't know what you're going to have to do or where you're going to have to be at any given time," he says.

Dwyer has had roles in 91 feature films and TV movies and series, appearing in such notable films as "Selma," "The Blind Side," "We are Marshall" and "October Sky." He's lived in Maryville for many years, and in the early days was traveling 50,000 miles a year to audition for roles.

Actors have a passion for what they do, and this area provides opportunities for people to develop, whether or not they're trying to make a living from acting.

"There's a very strong independent film community in Knoxville that I will credit for giving opportunities, albeit usually not paid, although some of them are," he says. "There's a good opportunity for budding young actors or (those) new to the game to get experience and be in front of the camera by getting involved in the local independent movie scene."



Knoxville actor David Dwyer as Selma Police Chief Wilson Baker in a scene that was cut from the movie "Selma." He also has appeared in "The Blind Side," "We are Marshall" and "October Sky."  
-- Photograph Submitted Courtesy Of David Dwyer

Haag has been able to tap into that network, with small roles in "Memorial Daze" and "You are My Sunshine," which both won awards at the Knoxville Film Festival. She also appeared briefly in an independent film, "Something, Anything," made in Knoxville, in which Dwyer was the main character's father. The movie was released last year.

Haag has been performing in front of audiences since she was 14 when she landed the role of Anne Sullivan in a high school production of "The Miracle Worker," which was held at the Sumner County Playhouse.

Since then, Haag, represented by Talent Trek Agency, has appeared in national and local commercials (both speaking and nonspeaking roles), TV shows, theater productions at the Oak Ridge Playhouse and in local independent films.

An experience as a teen pushed Haag, from Hendersonville, out of her comfort zone and cemented her love of acting.

“I certainly wouldn’t have had the confidence to audition for things outside of my community, but the Tennessee Performing Arts Center in Nashville had an audition for an upcoming show, “Little Women,” and I went to audition for that with some encouragement from my high school theater teachers,” Haag says.

“I was actually cast as Amy. It was my first real audition for a role. I was 15, and I just had the best experience. After that, I was truly bitten by the acting bug.”

The number of TV shows produced locally, such as “Snapped,” “Killer Couples,” and “When Murder Comes to Town,” has given Haag and other actors the chance to expand their acting resumes while gaining national exposure.

“I think I’ve been in just about every recreation show,” Haag says. “Thanks to Knoxville being one of the top production hubs in the country, I have played waitresses, murderers and victims, so that’s been interesting. It’s also been great experience as well.”

Haag’s bit role as a receptionist in the 2012 pilot of the ABC musical drama “Nashville” gave her a lifetime memory.



Haag  
-- Submitted

“I was in a scene with Connie Britton (the show’s star), and she is just as stunning in person as she is on TV,” Haag says. “During one take though, her heel caught on some tape, and she nearly fell flat on her face, but I caught her. She turned to me and said, ‘You saved me.’ We laughed and then got ready for next take. It’s certainly a memory that I’ll always cherish having that experience.”

In recent years, Haag has been in many local commercials including Food City, Markman’s, West Chevrolet and Visit Knoxville as well as national spots.

“Every now and again, when I’m shopping at the grocery store, I’m called the West Chevrolet girl, which is kind of funny,” she says and laughs. “I’m definitely proud of the national commercial work I’ve done.

“About four years ago, I signed with Talent Trek Agency. ... I’ve done spots for Hallmark, Regal, HGTV, Food Network, DIY, Jewelry Television, and Blackberry Farm. My favorite local commercial was for Tennova (Health care). I had a super quick scene with Peyton Manning.”

The Hallmark commercial offered a unique challenge and confirmed a lesson that Haag had learned from live theater. Fortunately, she was working with a director who knew her because she had worked with him on prior occasions.

“One thing theater taught me was the show must go on, and for the Hallmark card commercial, I had a cast (put on) about a month prior to the shoot,” she explains. “I had shattered my ankle in a freak accident and was on crutches longer than expected.

“But thankfully, I had worked with the director previously and convinced him I could still work a 12-hour a day on set, and sure enough, we worked around the cast, and we filmed a really lovely Christmas card commercial that aired during the holidays.

“He trusted me enough to know that I could handle a national spot like that even in a cast.

“Literally between takes I would hobble on crutches from one area set to the next or someone would kind of help me limp along to where I needed to be, and everyone was just very supportive.”

Haag works a full-time job as a public relations specialist in the Office of Communications and Marketing for the University of Tennessee, her alma mater, and has a young family of three sons, Noah, 7, Brenton, 5, and Eli, 18 months, so she has to work around her already busy schedule. Her husband, Eric, is supportive of her acting dreams, she says.

“I try to do what I can when I can. Now that we’ve got three kids, it’s certainly gotten a lot harder, and I do work full-time. I try to do little things here and there. When my third one gets a little older, I’ll certainly be able to do more,” she says.



Moore stars in and directs his web series “State of Franklin.” His budget for the production is “zero,” so he relies on volunteer cast and crew.  
-- Bonny C. Millard | The Ledger

“I’m just kind of seeing where things go. I think just because one doesn’t make a living as an artist doesn’t mean they aren’t one. I love acting when I can, whether it’s on stage or on camera, and hope to keep it up as I get older.”

Moore, also represented by Talent Trek Agency, is an actor, filmmaker, freelance writer and screenplay writer.

He has performed with area community theaters, in commercials and public service announcements, in local film projects and online ad campaigns. He combined all these experiences into writing short films and a feature-length film, which he had hoped to produce on his own.

Finding investors to back a film can be daunting, and it requires focusing on the business end of a project rather than the creative side. When he was unable to get the necessary funding for the film, Moore turned his energies to creating a web series, “State of Franklin,” in which he stars and directs, using local talent: actors Randy Thompson and Amy Eakins.

Ashley Blair, who has been gaining recognition in local Honda commercials, plays his daughter.

“I knew I could get enough quality cast and crew who would do it as a volunteer effort,” Moore says. “We really do it on zero budget. Otherwise that puts me back into having to scrounge for money again, which was what I trying to avoid.”

Blair, 10, say the series is different from other projects she’s done, and she’s been able to watch Moore as both an actor and a director, something she’s interested in doing when she gets older.

Her parents, David and Robyn, have a high regard for Moore’s work.

“Mitch is super talented,” David says. “He has a very broad skill set. His writing is great, his acting, his directing. He does all the editing.”

Robyn says working with Moore is also an enjoyable experience. “He has fun, and he wants to have a good time while he does it.”

Each episode is about 10 minutes long and can be viewed on YouTube. Moore says he and his wife, Jennifer, have always admired Benjamin Franklin and his life’s accomplishments.

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“One day the paths kind of crossed in my brain. I thought it would be interesting: ‘What if Ben Franklin were alive today? He’d be amazed by this.’ That led to the story of Ben Franklin in the 21st Century, and then I developed my character, who is the guy he interacts with,” Moore explains.

“I’m editing number eight right now, and that’s the end of season one. And we’re going to take a couple months off. I’m going to take some of that time and decide exactly what’s going to happen in season two. I have some rough ideas. I have some broad strokes as far as to what’s going to happen to some of these characters.”

The series has received local publicity and even national exposure through web series websites. He realizes the comedy may not be for everyone, but he has received positive feedback and encouragement as well as developing a loyal following of viewers.

“The first episode has gotten the most views. It’s gotten like almost 1,300 views, which in the web world, that’s not a lot. You’ve got to have tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands to really be considered significant,” he says. “We have a loyal core of up to 200-300 viewers who seemed to have stuck with us through every episode.”

In the last couple of years, Moore has been in commercials for East Tennessee Children’s Hospital, the Knoxville Honda dealerships and Food City Pharmacy. Much of Moore’s work taps into his comedic roots.

“I did an ad for DenTek products. They had an online ad campaign called ‘Go F Yourself.’ The f stands for floss,” Moore says. “So it’s all these commercials where people have stuff stuck in their teeth, and somebody says ‘Go F yourself.’ It was fun. I was the one who was told to ‘go f himself’ though. I didn’t get to say that.”

Moore’s theatrical pursuits developed during his freshman year at Vanderbilt and continued through his college days.

“I wound up doing a bunch of productions my senior year and that kind of really whet my appetite for acting,” Moore says, adding that his interest went beyond just acting. “I had always, kind of in the back of my mind, wanted to be a standup comedian. It’s something I actually actively started pursuing my junior year in college.

“The summer after my junior year, a comedy club, the first one in Nashville, opened up – Zanies Comedy Club. That was 1983. I took that as a sign. I was already trying to think about how I could break into it, but when that club opened up I thought okay ‘yeah, this as a sign.’”

During his senior year, he stayed busy with classes, acting in college productions and spending his Tuesday nights at Zanies sharpening his comedic skills.

“After I graduated from college, instead of going after a real job, I found a job waiting tables so I could keep pursuing standup. Within two years of graduating, I was doing comedy fulltime.”

He was touring 25-30 weeks out of the year, and in 1991 when he son was a toddler, he decided to call it quits on the grueling schedule because he was missing too much of his son’s life.

Moore ended up in East Tennessee when his then-wife was offered a job in Gatlinburg. Later, after he and his wife divorced, he worked as a desktop publisher for a Realtor’s association, which published a magazine.

But by the mid-90s, he was itching to get back onstage again and returned to community theater in Sevier County and then again about 10 years later with Maryville’s Foothills Community Players.

He moved to Maryville after meeting Jennifer in 2001 and around that time signed up with Talent Trek.

For now, he’s concentrating on Season 2 of “State of Franklin” and where that series is headed. Moore says that the Internet has given writers and filmmakers opportunities to create low-budget or no-budget series that can help get them noticed. With this series, he’s showcasing his writing, acting, directing and comedic skills.

And, as Dwyer says, “Everybody in this business had better have a lot of skills in their back pocket to make it.”