

agent of change

James Bundy wants to take Great Lakes Theater Festival to new heights of artistic excellence – and financial health

By CHRISTINE MCBURNEY

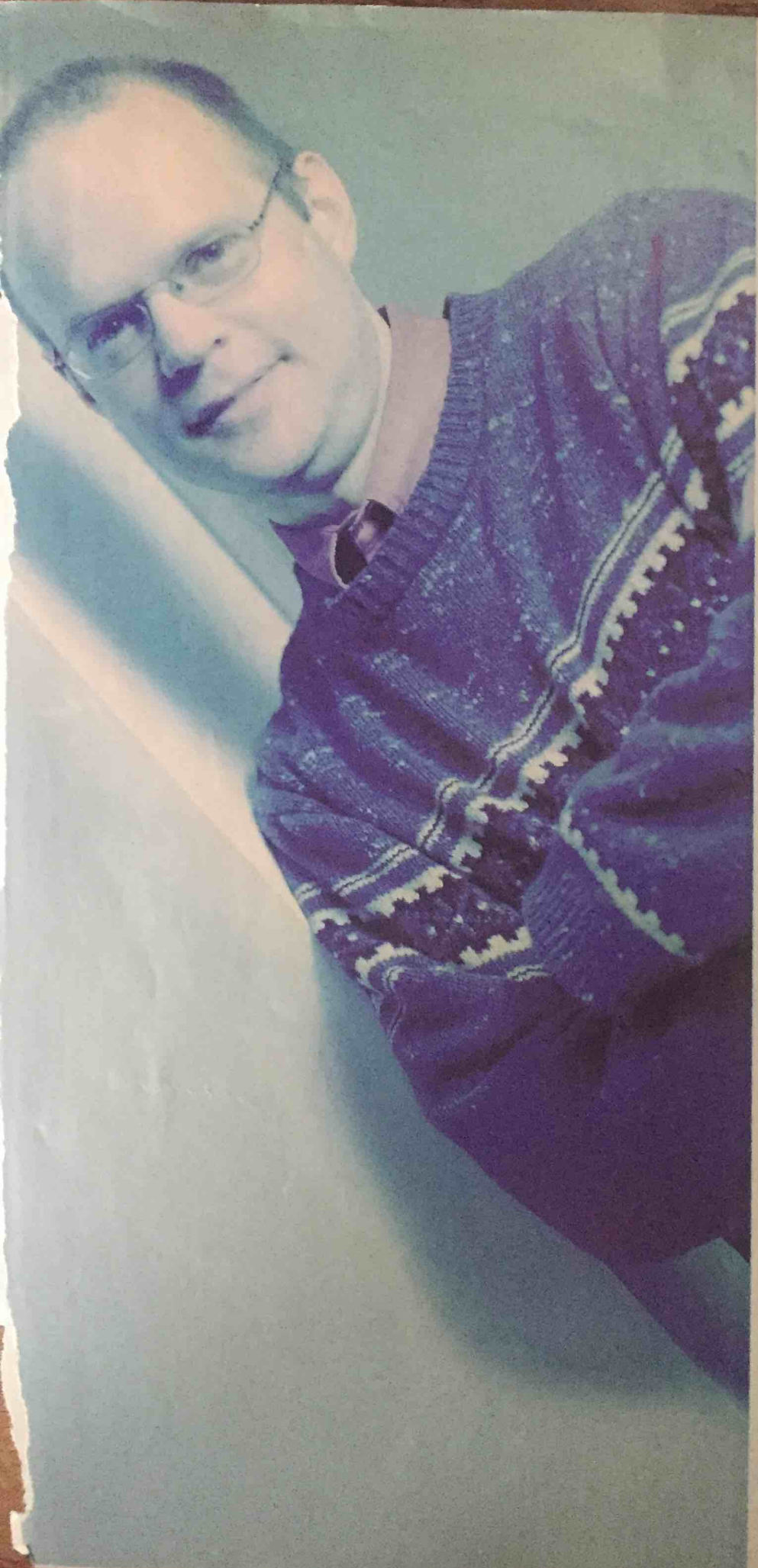
James Bundy makes his way through the small crowd that has gathered in the east room of Playhouse Square Center until he's right next to the pixieish blonde. After planting a kiss on the woman's cheek, Bundy grins. "This," says the new artistic director of Great Lakes Theater Festival, "is how I welcome the talent to town."

The talent, it turns out, is singer and actress Anne Tofflemire, aka Mrs. James Bundy, and her husband clearly enjoys the joke he's just played, which is pretty well typical of the man who last year assumed the helm at Great Lakes. In his short tenure, he has already endeared himself to the theater company by his easy manner and ready sense of humor, both of which stand in marked contrast to the Great Man demeanor of his predecessor, Gerald Freedman. Under Bundy, Great Lakes has a new look and new feel – leaner, more youthful and willing to challenge its longtime subscribers by testing the limits of the classic theater that is the *raison d'être* of the 37-year-old company. And, some would say, the change

comes none too soon, because in recent years, critical successes have been plentiful – but so has the red ink. When Bundy took over last summer, the company had a projected budget shortfall of more than \$300,000 for the current season.

Within months of his arrival, Bundy had hacked nearly a quarter of a million dollars from the projected deficit, moving swiftly to dump an expensive Molière play (too many actors, too many wigs), replacing it with the area premiere of an acclaimed Irish drama. That move raised some eyebrows among those with a restrictive view of classic theater, but that's fine with Bundy. If people have problems with decisions he makes, Bundy says, he wants to hear about them. In fact, many of the moves Great Lakes has been making under his leadership seem aimed at increasing communication between the company and the theater-going public. There's a direct e-mail link to Bundy on the Great Lakes Web site. There will be sign-interpreted and audio-described performances to make the plays available to the vision- and hearing-impaired. Subscribers now have access to more generous reimbursement for baby-sitting. A revised "pay what you can" program aims to allow those with limited resources to take in Great Lakes performances. And cast parties, once closed to all but cast and crew, are now wide open to everyone, including the audience.

An artist and administrator in one,



Bundy wants to dispel false assumptions about the adversarial relationship between art and commerce, while getting the word out to as many people as possible that classic theater isn't dead theater, but a vital civic event. Bundy believes theater will survive because of its power to change people's lives. But he also believes theater doesn't exist until the audience participates and become an agent of change. "We're all in it together," he says.

That spirit has impressed Barry Doggett, the chairman of the company's board of trustees. In fact, when asked to assess Bundy's performance as artistic director, Doggett tells a story about going out to dinner with Bundy. It was only a few months after his arrival here, Doggett says, and Bundy already knew people at the restaurant. What's more, they knew him.

IT'S THE FIRST SUNNY DAY in January and light is pouring into the Playhouse Square rehearsal space. *A Little Night Music* begins rehearsals today and the room is filled to capacity with the people who will put that play on a few weeks hence. Dressed in Dockers, tweed jacket, a cobalt blue shirt and multi-colored tie, Bundy makes his way through the crowd, quietly introducing himself to groups of people and chatting about everything from his cats to the Hanna Cabaret's closing.

When he notices there aren't enough chairs for everyone, Bundy begins dragging them in from the hallway. Before addressing the cast and crew, Bundy spies two young women – a student and an understudy – in a balcony, so he climbs a ladder and invites them to join in. Surprised and

flattered, they follow him down.

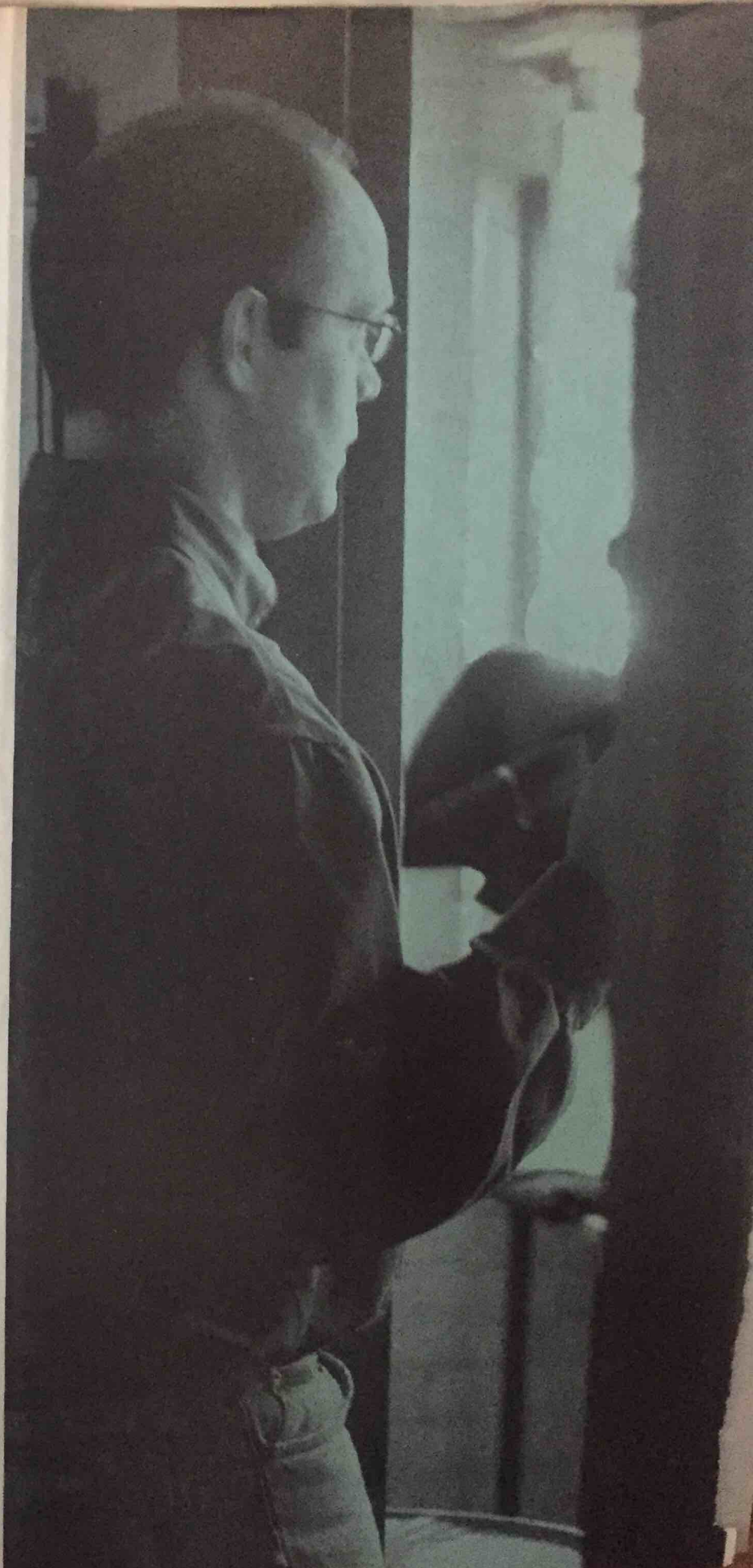
When everyone is assembled, Bundy tells the people behind this next Great Lakes production of the connection a theater company must have with its community. And he vows to help them make that connection. "I'm here to serve you and make your work better on stage," he tells them. "I live here, I work here. Please let me know if you need anything."

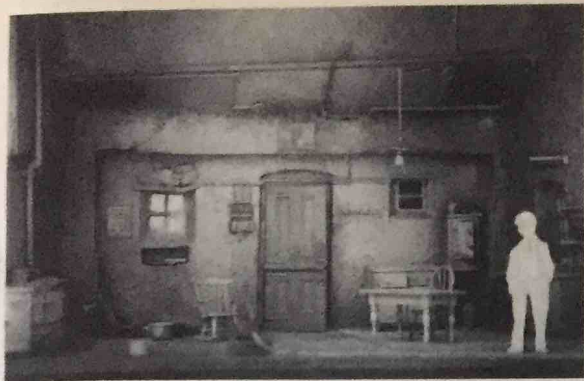
It's exactly that sort of touch that leads people associated with Great Lakes to use such terms as "vision" and "charisma" when talking about Bundy. Staffers speak of a more collaborative atmosphere, of being inspired by the personal investment the new artistic director has made in coming to Cleveland. "It's not just his job," says one. "It's his life."

With degrees from Harvard, Yale and the London Academy of Dramatic Arts, directing credits from Juilliard and managerial experience with leading touring companies, the 39-year-old Bundy brings with him an artistic pedigree to match his family background — he's the son of McGeorge Bundy, John F. Kennedy's national security advisor.

But art isn't Bundy's only concern. Unlike his predecessor, the new artistic director must concern himself with the company's finances without the help of a managing director. He'll choose seasons, direct productions, hire artisans, directors, designers and actors, and, in collaboration with the board and staff, raise money.

Getting more of the community to the theater is another task. For Bundy, outreach is in-reach, an opportunity to bring more people to the theater. GLTF's new mission statement is "to bring the pleasure, power, and relevance of classic theater to the widest possible audience in Northern Ohio." From the looks of this season, the audience is getting wider. It opened with a box office hit, the "rock and roll Shakespeare" production of *Richard III*, and ticket sales have continued to meet or exceed projections.





SET FOR THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE BY CITY RESIDENT DESIGNER JOHN EZZEL

(Top) Set for *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. (Bottom) James Bundy (right) chats with *A Raisin in the Sun* actors after a performance.

So far, so good, in other words.

In the end, though, Bundy will be judged on the basis of his artistic accomplishments, and this month marks his first big gamble, with the area premiere of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the darkly comic play by 28-year-old Anglo-Irish *enfant terrible* Martin McDonagh. Landing *Beauty Queen* was a triumph in itself, because only five companies nationwide were able to secure rights to stage the play, while dozens – including the Cleveland Play House – wanted it.

Writing in *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley called *Beauty Queen* “more immediate and vital than any new drama in many seasons.” Note the word “new,” however. The choice of McDonagh over Molière led to some grumbling among the more tradition-minded patrons of Great Lakes, who sniff at the idea that a contemporary play should be performed by a company rooted in classic theater.

Bundy tosses aside such concerns.

Beauty Queen, he says, fits squarely within his definition of classic theater: “plays with universal impact.”

“*A Raisin in the Sun* isn’t a classic because it’s 40 years old and someone said it’s a classic. Classic theater is visceral and immediate. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* has the ability to create real excitement in the community about telling a story.”

BEFORE MOVING TO Shaker Heights, Bundy and his wife and two kids lived a comfortable life in New York’s Connecticut suburbs, but he doesn’t

sound as though he misses it much.

“Every three weeks, when Anne and I have 15 minutes alone, we are amazed at our new lives in Cleveland,” he says, going on to rave about the enthusiasm and civic pride he’s encountered here. “I love the [Great Lakes] staff, the board is supportive, our neighbors are friendly and we love our children’s schools. We pinch ourselves.”

But this new life is not without its challenges, which include plenty of 18-hour days in pursuit of artistic excellence and financial health for Great Lakes. Asked how far the company has come since his arrival and how far it needs to go, Bundy lets out a wild chuckle and sings, “500 miles, 500 miles.”

Then, with seriousness in his tone, he notes that more people have come to Great Lakes this year than did last year, and he’s confident that things will continue to improve.

“We’re a challenged arts organization,” he says, “but we’re a group of people who will walk through fire to make this theater a success.” ♦

Christine McBurney’s eyes are smiling, and that’s no blamey.

Northern Ohio Live’s
19th Annual

Awards of Achievement

For 19 years, *Northern Ohio Live* has asked our readers to help us recognize those people in our community who have used their talents, time and ideas to make Northern Ohio a better place to live. Please help us again this year. Between now and June 15, 1999, we’ll accept letters of nomination; then, an advisory committee drawn from the community will help *Live*’s editors choose the 1998-99 Awards of Achievement winners. **Watch for a nomination form in the June issue of the magazine.**

Northern Ohio Live looks to our readers for awards recommendations in a variety of categories, including but not limited to:

Architecture, Benefits/Fund-raising,
Civic Leadership/Volunteerism,
Classical Music/Opera,
Community Events,
Corporate Citizenship,
Cultural Exhibitions, Education,
Film/TV/Radio, Medicine,
Natural Resources, Neighborhood
Revitalization, Popular Music/Jazz,
Restoration/Renovation,
Science/Technology, Sports,
Theater/Dance, Urban Affairs,
Visual Arts, Writing.

All activities nominated for an Award of Achievement must have taken place between July 1, 1998, and June 1, 1999. **Nominations must be received by June 15, 1999.**

Mail nominations to **Northern Ohio Live**, 11320 Juniper Rd., Cleveland, Ohio 44106; FAX to (216) 721-2525; or e-mail to editorial@livepub.com

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