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Shakespeare, the NFL and NASCAR theater

Jim Birdsall's voice is heard by millions but he always returns to the stage.

By ROBERT TRUSSELL
The Kansas City Star

"Physically and vocally, he can play a variety of things. In most plays there's a place for Jim Birdsall. Aside from that, he's hardworking, insightful and intuitive."

Director Mark Robbins



JENNIFER HACK | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Jim Birdsall (left) stars as Orson Welles along side Jim Korinke as Lawrence Olivier in the Unicorn Theatre production of "Orson's Shadow." The show runs through Nov. 12.

Jim Birdsall has achieved what many actors only dream of: reaching a mass audience.

It's just that most people don't know who he is — even though millions of TV watchers and radio listeners nationwide have heard his voice.

From his rented storefront office on State Line near 39th Street, Birdsall records introductions to Hallmark Hall of Fame movies. He leads viewers through recaps of NASCAR races. He alerts them to what's coming up on "Power Lunch" or "Mad Money" on CNBC.

He narrates team histories for NFL Films. His voice emanates from a kiosk at the NFL Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. He has been heard as the voice of Blockbuster Video. He has recorded manic promos for radio stations.

The veteran voice actor reports for work Monday through Friday, sometimes as early as 8 a.m.

Producers on the coasts fax him scripts for the commercials, promos and sports-show narration. He records the words and sends them back by e-mail. He can speak slowly or quickly, he can adjust his tone, he can be happy or somber, serious or aggressive, slap-happy or omniscient.

Producers then match his voice to images he won't see until they hit television screens across the country.

Birdsall has made a good living as a voice actor since the 1980s. But before his voice-over career took off, he was a stage actor. Still is. But he had gone eight long years without appearing on stage before he played the patriarch of a comically dysfunctional family in "Next of Kin" at the Unicorn last spring. He never wants to go that long again.

"It's a great gift for me to be able to do theater," he said.

He says he wants to do one, maybe two shows a year. But he's choosy. He has to like the play. And he has to trust the director.

His wife, Jeri, said she sees a difference when he's working on a play. "There's a spark that comes back," she said.

Still, Birdsall said he hesitated before he agreed to do "Next of Kin."

"I was just being a whiny (baby) about it," he said. "I really wanted to, but I was afraid to. You know, I get in my little cave here and I don't want to come out. But then I came out and did that show and had such a good time doing it."

A major factor in his decision was the play's director, Mark Robbins. He and Birdsall have been friends since graduate school. Now Robbins is directing Birdsall in another Unicorn show, "Orson's Shadow," in which he plays that great bombastic auteur, Orson Welles.

Birdsall agreed to play Welles on one condition. Robbins had to direct.

"I have to trust the guy who's standing out there," he said. "And I trust Mark."

Oddly enough, they took an immediate dislike to one another as fellow graduate students at the Hilberry Theatre in Detroit.

"We didn't like each other at all," Birdsall said. "I thought he was just a pompous little (jerk), and he thought I was a glad-handed salesman. And we were both correct."

Robbins agreed that he "took an instant aversion" to what he called Birdsall's Type A personality. Later, Robbins said, he recognized Birdsall's "true, subversive, freakazoid nature."

In the mid-1980s they appeared together as crazed brothers in a production of Sam Shepard's "True West," which has acquired semi-legendary stature.

"Physically and vocally, he can play a variety of things," Robbins said. "In most plays there's a place for Jim Birdsall. Aside from that, he's hardworking, insightful and intuitive."

Birdsall grew up in western North Dakota, in tiny Gladstone, where his father ran the grain elevator. In high school he helped organize the Lost Souls, a rock band that became popular in the region and recorded one hit single, "Artificial Rose."

He continued playing music professionally as he attended North Dakota State University. He was drafted into the Army in 1970, saw combat in Vietnam, played in the 101st Airborne Division's rock band and came home with a Bronze Star and a Combat Infantryman's Badge.

He moved to Kansas City in 1980 after he got a call from Robbins. What was then called Missouri Repertory Theatre needed a character actor, and that's what Birdsall has always been. In those days the company was a real repertory theater. Each year it presented a season of plays in a complicated rotating schedule that allowed theatergoers to see the same actors perform radically different roles.

"I'm one of those utility players," Birdsall said. "I'm a big body, and I can change my voice and do accents ... so I came down and

auditioned for Pat McIlrath (the Rep's founder), and she hired me. I played Malvolio in 'Twelfth Night,' the Gravedigger in 'Hamlet' and the drunk, Tarkinton, in 'Look Homeward Angel.'"

He at first saw voice jobs as a way to augment his income as a stage actor. Then one day he got a statement from AFTRA, the union for radio and TV talent, telling him how much he had earned for the year.

"It wasn't as much as I earned at the Rep, but it was darn close," he said, "and I didn't remember doing that much. And I went, 'HMMMM ... I wonder if I actually started working on this what would happen?'"

Bernstein-Rein, the Kansas City advertising agency that handles a range of national accounts, hired Birdsall for one of his first jobs in the early '80s: a Wal-Mart radio ad. There were three actors involved — Birdsall, a child performer and Dick Guthrie, a veteran announcer who for years was the official voice of Wal-Mart. Only Birdsall was classically trained.

"I think I screwed up every take," he said. "The kid did it great. And Dick Guthrie was perfect every time. You know, it's a revelation to you when you go, 'Oh, there's a little bit more skill to this than just having a low voice.' It opened a door in my head."

That day he went home and began honing his voice-over skills. Every day he sat with a stack of magazines and read the ad copy out loud in different tempos, different voices and endless variations.

"I chose to turn down a season for the first time at the Rep," he said. "It wasn't because I wasn't offered good roles, but my wife and I had decided that I was going to give it a shot. What would happen if I really did work on it and I didn't have restrictions of being at the theater eight hours a day?"

Soon he was tapped for Payless Cashways commercials. It was a national account and paid serious money.

"It went from getting by to 'What the hell just happened?' " Birdsall recalled. "The gift Bernstein-Rein gave me by hiring me was a chance to get my chops."

Birdsall has been the voice of Hallmark Hall of Fame since 1988. He's been the voice of CNBC for nine years. And he's been one of three voices of the NFL for six years. More recently he was tapped for two NASCAR shows on the Speed channel — "Seven Days" and "Beyond the Wheel."

Birdsall counts himself a lucky man but he questions whether he would have had as much success as a voice actor without his theater background.

"The theater informs my voice work," he said in his office on a recent Saturday afternoon. "It makes it stronger. It makes it more lively. And when I left it for eight years I missed it. I missed it a lot."

He missed it enough that maybe once a month he would bring a play to read in his office. He would voice different characters, try different line readings, find different ways to get at the meaning.

"I would sit and read Shakespeare out loud," he said. "I would read plays out loud here — just play with it, you know, all by myself."