

100 Years of Gratitude

Orlando theater audiences have much to be thankful for — these four beloved actors with nearly a combined century on local boards are a big part of the reason why.





Story by Mary Frances Emmons

Photography by Phelan M. Ebenhack

Fearless. It's the word that unites four Orlando actors who between them have logged nearly 100 years on Orlando stages, playing every conceivable role from classic to crazy to back again. If you've seen any of Orlando's best theater in the last 20 years, you've seen one or more of these actors. Luckily for us, they're here to stay, and committed to creating more great art in their own backyards.



Grande Dame — Peg O'Keef

"A lot of folks think acting is a young person's game, but the really great roles — the most human roles, the climb-the-mountain roles — are mostly written for characters over 40."

— Peg O'Keef

One way to achieve longevity on stage — 37 years, to be precise — is to start when you're a child.

Peg O'Keef had done some community theater in her native Leesburg but was still just a student when she was cast in her first real Orlando role, as a horse in Rollins College's explosive 1979 production of *Equus*.

"My first — and only — nude audition, and it took place in front of my college professors, no less," says O'Keef, 56.

The hullabaloo included a march on Winter Park City Hall, a bomb threat and coverage in the *New York Times*, "a phenomenal learning experience for a

Rollins College's Annie Russell Theatre provided the perfect stage for *100 Years of Gratitude's* photo shoot. Named after the British and American stage actress who helped shape the College's theater program, it's the longest-running theater in Central Florida. In 1998, the 370-seat venue built in 1932 was named to the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its architecture and its role in education and the performing arts.

19-year-old kid," she recalls, "an object lesson in academic and artistic freedom."

O'Keef eventually would become an instructor at Rollins and elsewhere; of her many artistic pursuits — actor, teacher, writer, editor, arts administrator and more — teaching has moved her most deeply, "and given me the greatest rewards," she says.

The reverence she is held in today by Orlando directors and audiences alike — a distinct contrast to her always irreverent and witty self — is explained more by her unwavering dedication to craft than mere years in the public eye. But O'Keef thinks that staying power has been the vehicle for her reputation.

"Well, that and the fact that I like doing the scary stuff," she says.

From Edward Albee's *Martha (Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?)*, which O'Keef has played twice, to Eugene O'Neill's *Mary Tyrone (Long Day's Journey into Night)*, also twice, and Samuel Beckett's *Winnie (Happy Days)* — in which role the *Orlando Sentinel* pronounced her "unforgettable ... so heart-rending and brave that she seems to encompass everything that being human is" — O'Keef has given life to some of the grandest grande dames of theater.

"A lot of folks think acting is a young person's game, but the really great roles — the most human roles, the climb-the-mountain roles — are mostly written for characters over 40," she says. "Because I stuck around and earned a bit of sweat equity, I have been able to do some of those."

Happily for local audiences, she's not going anywhere — she's appearing July 7-17 at The Abbey in the third installment of *The Ladies of Eola Heights*, a cruise-themed lark called *Wanzie's Ladies of Eola High Seas*.

"Central Florida has offered me ample opportunity to explore — I love it here," she says. "And much of what I love is here."

T Robert Pigott is a triple threat — singer, actor, dancer — quadruple if you count roller-skating, a skill honed in the original Vegas cast of *Starlight Express*. Quintuple, if you throw in his most unusual trait, for an actor who's spent more than a decade as an audience favorite: He's a sweetheart.

That generosity shows if you ask him to name his favorite roles over 16 years on local stages: He can't do it.

"Picking a favorite is what I imagine it would be like to pick a favorite child. While I'm doing each role, it becomes my favorite," he says.

His darlings are the ones that most affect audiences. From his 2000 Orlando debut in Orlando Theatre Project's searing *Wit* — "I remember many people staying in their seats to collect themselves before leaving" — and 2005's *Coyote on a Fence*, where Pigott turned a mass-murderer into a "heartbreaker," as one review put it, to bringing down the house last year in Orlando Shakespeare Theater's *Spamalot*, Pigott knows how to make an impression.

"It's more important to me that I'm telling a story people are moved by. I don't care how I do it. I just love doing it."

Pigott is anchored here by the secret sugar daddy of Orlando theater: the theme parks, a source of steady paychecks and solid community. Each of Orlando's attractions employs reams of theater professionals, helping to keep the region's "legit" theater healthy. Pigott points to the relationship between Actors Equity and Walt Disney World: "Not only are you guaranteed a professional contract with fair pay — with full health insurance and enough benefit time to be able to do outside projects — you are producing art backed by arguably one of the best entertainment-based corporations in the world."

Pigott, 47, cherishes his days at Disney's

defunct Adventurers Club and Comedy Warehouse, "perhaps my most rewarding job ever," he says, "singing, acting and improvising with some of the most talented people I've ever known. You can't help but grow as an actor in that kind of environment." (You can catch his improv work these days with SAK Comedy Lab in downtown Orlando.)

"Being in a full-time job where you're performing and improving constantly is a rare acting job anywhere," he says. "As long as I've got the security of a professional job in the arts with Disney, I intend to stay."



Sweetheart — T. Robert Pigott

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Unforgettable — Trenell Mooring

Guaranteed: No one who saw Trenell Mooring in Mad Cow Theatre's 2008 *I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document Given to Me by a Young Lady from Rwanda* will ever forget it. In a cramped, darkened space, Mooring conjured the entire saga of the Rwandan genocide in terms so gripping you felt you were living it too, in a performance the *Orlando Weekly* called "searing" and "unforgettable."

"It was such an incredible piece, funny and heartbreaking," Mooring says. "I was also terrified of the play. I wanted to do justice to those whose lives were destroyed by the genocide."

That's typical of Mooring's work: all in, no holds barred, whether comedy or tragedy or a little of both.

An Orlando resident since 1985, the University of Florida grad who studied at New York's Stella Adler Studio of Acting started on local stages in People's Theatre's 2002 *Purlie Victorious*, about a Jim Crow-era preacher who returns to his Georgia hometown to try to emancipate local cotton pickers.

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— Trenell Mooring

"I had seen the musical version *Purlie* on PBS as a little girl. I had never seen a play before, but I knew this was somehow different from most TV. It was what made me want to become an actress. I stalked People's artistic director," she recalls with a laugh. "I just had to play the role."

At 41, the petite Mooring still looks like an ingénue. But she inhabits characters so fully that she's able to play virtually anyone — or anything. She's a self-confessed cosplay wonk who recently joined a burlesque troupe.

"It's a nerdy burlesque troupe," she says. "It combines several things that I love: sewing, cosplay and general geekiness. And I am the oldest one in the troupe!"

Her willingness to put herself out there is a calling card.

"I will audition for anything. Unless the breakdown specially says 'Not you,' I'll submit," she says.

"I have to do two things when I audition for roles not written specially for African Americans: 1. Be damn good. And 2. Change minds.

"Don't get me wrong — I love doing shows written for African Americans. But I have more to say than my experience as a black woman. I am much more universal in the stories that I want to tell."

Mooring has roots here, a husband, a child and doting grandparents. She's a full-time actress, thanks to the parks, doing improv and playing a Jedi at Disney, as well as wand-keeper for a certain young wizard at Universal. But even without that, she says, "I like it here. Orlando is a nice home base."



Mr. Fringe — Christian Kelty

At 47, Christian Kelty says age and fatherhood have mellowed him — his son Beckett just turned 3 — but they're not slowing him down.

The veteran of 15-plus Orlando Fringe shows is taking the latest installment of *Joe's NYC Bar*, his long-running interactive serial, to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the granddaddy of all Fringes.

Spontaneous, sometimes combustible, always memorable, then-23-year-old Kelty started in Orlando theater on a lark.

"I was visiting Orlando from NYC on vacation back in 1992 and went to auditions for *Sinbad* at the Civic Theatre, just to do it. The day before I was due to head back, I got the call offering me a role. It's pretty much the reason I stayed."

He's enlivened characters from Pozo in Empty Spaces Theatre Co.'s 2008 *Waiting for Godot* to The Player King in Mad Cow Theatre's 2010 *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. ("Kelty stands out as an exceptionally lewd and lascivious Player King," wrote a reviewer for *The Wall Street Journal*.) And as leader of the

hilarious and profane *Bad Santa* and the *Angry Elves*, Kelty is responsible for a six-year holiday tradition dear to Orlando's hipster bar flies. But it's Gabriel, the expansive bartender-host of *Joe's* — a fictitious Manhattan dive introduced at the 2001 Fringe — who has captured Kelty's heart.

"There's something about creating a character and getting to constantly explore and examine the nature of that person," he says. "I've played Gabe in almost 100 shows now, and I love being him."

As is true for most enduring local performers, Orlando's theme parks and Fringe — at 25 years, the nation's longest-running — have provided Kelty a framework and a mooring, and a reason to stay, with chances to act, write, direct and produce.

"I've had opportunities and accomplishments here that I would have been hard pressed to achieve in other cities," Kelty says. "Mostly though, it's about the people I've gotten to collaborate with here. I don't think people realize the abundance of talented creatives we have

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in this town. I'd put our best against the best in the world, and I think we totally measure up. Theater, music, dance, visual arts, we're stacked with 'rock stars,' and that's inspiring." **OAM**

Mary Frances Emmons spent nearly 15 years as an arts and entertainment columnist and editor for the Orlando Sentinel. Today, she mostly covers the underwater world as a writer and videographer for several Winter Park-based scuba diving magazines.