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Living | Arts

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Vermont's DeWees is a cutup in 'The Logger'

By Anne Marie Donahue

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Humor and humanity are all too rarely paired these days. Garrison Keillor consistently couples laughs and love of humankind, as does local playwright/actor John Kuntz, who peoples his multicharacter solo shows with endearing weirdos. But one-man comedy, particularly of the stand-up sort, is unkind more often than not.

Rusty DeWees, billed as "Vermont's best-known and best-selling comedian," comes off as something of a Keillor/Kuntz hybrid in "The Logger," his arch and earthy one-man homage to the eccentrics and eccentricities of his native state. Clad in ripped clothes and boots patched with duct tape, DeWees walks on the rural side for most of the show, but he makes a foray into the wilds of New York City toward the end.

Stage Review

The Logger

Comedy in One Act by Rusty DeWees
At: The Institute
of Contemporary Art through Dec. 2

In the guise of the Logger, DeWees is a rough-edged but oddly erudite raconteur. On a spare stage, with no set and few props, the Logger weaves his own stories with those of other wacky but solidly rooted Vermonters.

Among the most memorable is Little, whose idiocies are redeemed by his loyal love for the one-legged dog he maimed while mowing under the influence. With less fondness, the Logger recalls the exploits of Marshall, a 57-year-old sheriff who has a side business selling boulders, and who's attached to a 16-year-old girl.

In the best segment of the show, DeWees blends looniness and lyricism in his account of the

Logger's encounter with the sheriff in his official capacity. While stalking a deer out of season, the Logger approaches his prey "silent as a fiddlehead fern in bloom but with the strength of a spruce bough sprung from beneath the spring snow." He slashes what turns out to be a decoy deer and draws nothing but sawdust and a citation for "deerjacking."

In "The Logger," as in the whole of his career in film, theater, and commercials, DeWees shows energy and exceptional range. He brings a diverse assortment of Vermonters vividly to life and endows even the most ridiculous with dignity. Although his accents are sometimes inconsistent, his tim-

ing and delivery rarely falter. His writing, however, isn't as well-honed and some jokes have the stale smell of bar-room banter.

Overall, "The Logger" is inventive, entertaining, and often poignant. It would be more powerful piece if DeWees expanded on the New York adventure, and gave more shape and substance to the Logger's aching ambivalence about his hefty wife.

Finally, DeWees should accord himself the dignity he gives his characters, by bringing his show to a proper close instead of stepping out of character to hawk his merchandise. Although the shtick is amusing, it belongs, like the Logger himself, outside.

One-man show strikes chord with 'real' Vermonters

By Stacey Chase
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

RUTLAND, Vt. — Rusty DeWees pulls up to the Rutland Intermediate School in his beat-up 1995 Volkswagen Golf, hauls out a wooden sandwich board plastered with fliers, and plops it on the sidewalk. He unloads his props. He unpacks the cider doughnuts that will be served at intermission.

"It's either this, or walking around New York City or L.A. trying to get some [bit] part in 'Law & Order,'" he said.

Welcome to another day at the office for the man whom one film producer calls "the most successful working actor in the state."

Cider doughnuts aren't exactly dinner at Spago, but make no mistake: DeWees is a serious actor. He trained in New York and boasts several handfuls of

film and TV credits. Right now, however, his biggest role is one of his own creation: "The Logger," a one-man show that draws standing-room-only crowds throughout the state, and which has become a rallying point for "real" Vermonters in a state infiltrated by flatlanders.

For the past two years, DeWees, 39, has performed the show in venues ranging from opera houses to jails. His appearance at the Rutland school marked the start of a 16-show tour that runs through mid-December.

"The Logger" is, in true Vermont fashion, an unpretentious affair. DeWees's monologue is a combination of storytelling and comedy delivered in an authentic, if sometimes over-the-top, Vermont accent. He performs it on a

THE LOGGER, Page B7



GLOBE PHOTOS BY CALES KENNA

'Real woodchucks . . . know frost heaves aren't what yuppies get when they've had too many margaritas.'

RUSTY DEWEES (ABOVE), performing "The Logger"

'Logger' a hit with 'real' Vermonters

► THE LOGGER
Continued from B6

stage with minimal props, wearing work boots strapped with duct tape, ripped jeans, and a red over-shirt with the sleeves torn off to expose his bulging biceps. On his head is a forest-green wool cap with a pompom on top.

The subtitle of the show is "A Vermont Comedy in Two Ax," which may give you an idea of his sense of humor.

Appreciating "The Logger" — both the character and the show — takes a fine sense of what makes Vermont Vermont, including a grasp of deer-hunting terminology and native patois that may elude your average weekender from Manhattan.

For instance, part of the act is dedicated to woodchuck jokes. A "woodchuck" is a dyed-in-the-wool backwoods Vermonter, kind of a Northern cousin to a redneck, and a different species from the non-natives that woodchucks call "flatlanders." Which, more or less, makes Rusty DeWees Vermont's answer to Southern comic Jeff Foxworthy.

"Real woodchucks . . . don't give zucchini away," runs one of his lines. "Real woodchucks . . . know frost heaves aren't what yuppies get when they've had too many margaritas."

"A real woodchuck . . . will offer to pull a flatlander out of a ditch for nothin'. He considers his payment the opportunity to humiliate. . . . 'No, I don't want no money. I just want to know how in the hell you got into that ditch!'"

DeWees's mixture of gentle mockery and indigenous pride touches a chord with locals. "I'm a bit of a Vermont redneck, too, so I guess I relate a lot to the things he jokes about," said theatergoer Tony Russell, 57, a Rutland maintenance worker. "He's real funny."

He gets away with it partly be-

cause Vermont natives see DeWees as one of their own. He was born in Philadelphia but raised in Vermont, and has lived here long enough that James Mandigo, 38, of Morrisville, who attended high school with DeWees, said: "We don't like outsiders talking to us like that, but Rusty seems to be one of us."

That would probably flatter DeWees. "I like to perform in deference to what we call the 'old Vermonters,'" he said. "Perform in deference to the place that I live. That I love."

"But I do, sort of, put those people up on a pedestal. The lunch ladies, you know, who are bakin' biscuits at 5:30 in the morning."

DeWees knows about hard work. For the past seven years he has earned his living as an actor, but before that he poured concrete, played drums in a country band, pumped gas, and drove a dump truck.

His acting resume still lists some rather un-Hollywood skills, like stonemasonry. As a child, DeWees dreamed not of acting, but of becoming a Greyhound bus driver like his father. He has a deep affection for ordinary people doing an honest day's work.

And he has a tough work ethic himself. Said Rutland filmmaker David Giancola, 32, who has cast DeWees in three of his projects: "The fact that 'The Logger' is a success is that he went out and humped it all over the state."

DeWees downplays the effort. "What I do isn't hard," he said. "It's hard on one level, but it's not hard on the level of being hard."

"Man, when you're down in a hole" and it's 5 degrees outside "and there's concrete pouring on your head, down your neck, and you gotta do that for 10, sometimes 12, hours a day . . ." he said, that is "hard-in-the-ground difficult. And I'm impressed by that."



GLOBE PHOTO/CALES KENNA

One film producer calls Rusty DeWees "the most successful working actor in the state" of Vermont.

DeWees lives on a dirt road less than a mile from his parents, William, 89, and Marilyn, 70, in Elmore, about 8 miles east of Stowe. "He's a great son," Marilyn

DeWees said. "He'll see if the trash needs taking out."

Never married, DeWees lives in a cedar-shingled, contemporary house featuring a spiral staircase,

a loft bedroom, oak floors, and hand-crafted butternut cabinets trimmed in cherrywood.

If that doesn't sound much like a woodchuck's house, well, that's because the actor and the Logger are alike but not identical. For one thing, DeWees has logged but never made a living at it. For another, an actual logger probably wouldn't have amassed DeWees's resume of film roles, including parts in Peacham filmmaker Jay Craven's "A Stranger In The Kingdom," starring Martin Sheen, and "Where The Rivers Flow North," which stars Rip Torn, Michael J. Fox and Treat Williams.

DeWees's only leading role to date is his portrayal of Vermonter Jerry Earle, a deer poacher, in the independent film "Mud Season," which earned him a Best Actor award last year from the Pasadena Film Festival.

While waiting for bigger roles, DeWees has turned his one-man show into a one-man industry. His appearances are accompanied by: a \$19.95 videotape of the show, a 2001 wall calendar (\$15), a compact disc (\$15), a cassette (\$10), and a poster (\$3). A second video, "The Logger Visits New York City," is due out next month.

DeWees plans to export "The Logger" to Boston and New York City in the next year, with hopes of increasing his visibility. No word on whether woodchuck humor will carry over to an audience where most people aren't quite sure what "deerjacking" means — or who aren't attuned to his slightly bittersweet kind of folk comedy.

"There's a fine line between laughter and pathos," said Frank Bryan, 58, a Starksboro humor specialist who coauthored the 1984 classic, "Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats."

"To do Vermont humor," he said, "you have to walk that fine line."