

# Woodchuck Onstage

Actor Rusty DeWees Is Darn Nice and Damn Good

By MARIALISA CALTA

**W**ALKING INTO the Plum & Main in Johnson with Rusty DeWees is a Vermont version of what it must be like to walk into Hollywood's Four Seasons with John Travolta. Young girls giggle. Older women work hard at not staring. The owner of the small but popular restaurant comes over to shake hands.

Okay, so it's a very Vermont version, but a fitting scene for a very Vermont kind of actor. DeWees may have been cast as a psychopathic killer on TV's *Law and Order*, but he is known in Vermont as a kind of woodchuck Gary Cooper, playing the role of a rugged individual who is tough but honest, decent and sweet. His most memorable characters — Antoine, the French-Canadian logger, and Raymond, the farmer, in *Judevine*; the deer-jacking Jerry Earle in last year's independent film *Mud Season*; and the character of The Logger in his gritty, hilarious, if sometimes raunchy, one-man show of the same name — all pay respectful allegiance to a vanishing species of Vermonter: fiercely independent, eccentric, unschooled but keenly intelligent.

"He's the best-known actor in Vermont," says David Budbill, the Wolcott poet who wrote *Judevine*. "He's also one of the best."

Oddly enough, DeWees — the man who, as *The Logger*, makes fun of such "Flatlandian inventions" as "the wind-chill factor" and "the snow day" and who delivers such lines as

Left and right, Rusty DeWees, in character.

"real woodchucks don't give zucchini away" — is a Flatlander himself. DeWees was born 38 years ago in Pennsylvania, the second child (he has an older sister, Holly, who lives in Arizona) of Bill and

Marilyn DeWees. The family moved to Stowe when Rusty was 7; the elder DeWees continued his career as a Greyhound bus driver and Mrs. DeWees worked the next 30 years (until last spring) as business manager of the *Stowe Reporter*, the town's weekly newspaper. Rusty adopted Vermont as his own and became an acute observer of all things rural, from the local constabulary on patrol to the farmer baling hay.

The first thing people tend to notice about DeWees is his biceps, a real show-stopping, scene-stealing set of bulging muscles that were much in evidence during the run of *The Logger*, swelling out from under a worn, sleeveless chamois shirt on his 6-foot, 4-inch, 195-pound frame. Then there's his smile, a thin-lipped grin that can cover the territory from beguiling to goofy.

Another thing people tend to notice is his red hair, a now-thinning thatch that prompted the nurse who attended his birth to give him the nickname he still carries. (His given name is William, after his father and grandfather.)

Last, if people spend any time at all with DeWees, they can't help but notice what a nice guy he is. Not "nice" as in namby-pamby milk-toast,

## REAL WOODCHUCKS

### From Rusty DeWees's show *The Logger*

Real woodchucks will offer to pull the Flatlander out of the ditch for nuthin'. He considers his payment the opportunity to humiliate.

Real woodchucks shovel the snow off from their roof. They shovel the snow off from their roof RIGHT down onto the path to their front door and walk over it all winter.

Real woodchucks put their Christmas tree up ON Thanksgiving Day. They take it down ON Christmas Day. Throw it out in the front dooryard. Stays there 'TIL Memorial Day. Fully trimmed, stand on it and everything.

Real woodchucks don't give zucchini away.

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



Michael Spive

but as in decent, honest and personally generous. "Rusty never has said bad things about anyone, not even in high school," says his mother, who lives with his dad in Elmore. "Everyone has always liked Rusty."

Which is not hard to believe. He has an almost wide-eyed appreciation for people and for life, and despite his hard labor, trying to make a go of an acting career, he seems surprised and delighted by his successes. "It never occurred to me that I'd wind up as an actor," he says. "In fact, who knows what I'll wind up as. I'm sure not there yet."

His has hardly been a straight path. DeWees had at one time hoped to become a Greyhound driver like his dad. Over the years, he has held a wide variety of jobs: He's driven school buses and 18-wheelers, poured concrete, laid stone, hauled gravel, worked as a landscaper, a furniture mover and a pump jockey at a gas station.

A mediocre high school student, he had no plans for college until, four years after graduation, a scout for Champlain College's basketball team spotted him at a local game and offered him an athletic scholarship. He spent the next two years playing forward and earning an associate's degree in business.

It was after college, hanging out in Burlington ("that was the big city to me then," he says) that he started paying attention to local theater. He teamed up with his friend and fellow actor George Woodard to produce *The Groundhog Oprey*, a kind of Vermont vaudeville. At Woodard's urging, he started auditioning for serious parts. He and Woodard remain close.

"I respect George as much as any man I know," says DeWees, who can be found at odd hours helping Woodard at his dairy barn in Waterbury Center.

Woodard returns the compliment.

"There's something about Rusty, about his focus, drive and talent," he says. "I think he could go anywhere with his career."

Robert Ringer, founder of the Vermont Repertory Theater, remembers the day DeWees came to read for a part in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*.

"He walked in like some big farm boy, and I took one look and thought 'well, I'm not going to get anything here,'" recalls Ringer. "Then he read,

oh, maybe a line and a half. And I knew right then that here was a real actor."

DeWees's strength, according to Ringer, who also directed him in *Judevine* and several other plays, lies in his "tremendous concentration" and "great instincts."

Budbill praises his attention to detail. He described a scene in *Judevine* in which DeWees's character, the logger Antoine, builds a fire, then holds the backs of his gloved hands up to the flames to warm them. "You have to understand," Budbill says, "the fire is imagined, the gloves are imagined. But the way he is moving about on the stage makes you see everything. And then he does this amazing thing. He whips his hands back and starts blowing on them. The little fuzz on the back of the cotton work gloves has caught on fire." Budbill almost crows in delight at the memory. "He had defined that imaginary world so completely that the fuzz on the gloves caught fire."

"Rusty's acting is about concreteness and specificity," says Budbill. "It's the same thing that great writing is all about."

Although known for his he-man roles and his intense physicality, DeWees also brings a surprising gentleness to his parts. "He's got a delicacy about him that seems at odds with the barrel chest, the muscular arms," says Budbill. "But he's as light-footed as Twinkletoes, and as sweet." There is, for example, a scene in *The Logger*, in which DeWees tells a somewhat grisly tale about a dog losing three legs to a mower, and then caresses the imaginary animal in his arms until it falls asleep. There is another in which — while simultaneously beating on a drum — he delights the audience by sliding into a split.

Budbill says it frustrates him that DeWees has been mostly cast on national television as a psychopathic killer or a cop. "You wish the TV guys would see the whole range of what he can do," he says. He recalls a car commercial — filmed in Canada and aired in France — in which DeWees appears, handsome and suave, in a suede jacket and horn-rimmed glasses.

"Not only does he have range," says Budbill, "but he cleans up nice."

DeWees, however, does not seem

frustrated. Asked if he worried about being typecast as the backwoods type, he laughed. "Go ahead! Typecast me!" he says. "If someone wants to turn *The Logger* into a television sit-com that would run for 12 years, I would be nothing but happy."

He just ended several years in Manhattan, where he worked as the driver for the owner of an East Side art gallery. He took acting classes and began the often tedious process of auditioning in both New York and in Los Angeles. He became familiar with New York night life and is as comfortable at 21 as at Plum & Main, although he'll tell you he is happier at the latter.

His New York years provided the basis for the second act of *The Logger*, in which DeWees plays the parts of a subway conductor, homeless man, snooty maitre d' and a female stripper, among others.

DeWees has now "retired" from the New York gallery job and is pursuing local opportunities, including a movie being made by Rutland filmmaker David Giancola, tours of *The Logger* last fall and this spring and making and selling a videotape of the show. In its previous run, *The Logger* drew an audience — including trips to some prisons and schools — of about 15,000, along with rave reviews, although some people took offense at the salty language and found the characterization of "woodchucks" insulting.

With a one-man production under his belt, DeWees says he plans to re-establish himself in New York theater circles in the near future.

Romantically, he is unattached, a state of affairs his folks wish would change. "I just can't focus on a relationship now," he says. "I expect that to change."

It may surprise people that the man who has made a career of playing a beer-swilling backwoods Vermonter does not smoke or drink.

"Once, in high school, a bunch of the guys got together and had some

beers. I drank two. When I went home, I felt too sick to eat the supper my mom had prepared. And I thought 'this isn't worth it.'" It was the first and last time he consumed alcohol.

He likes bringing this anti-substance-abuse message to high schools, where he is frequently asked to speak. "I always tell 'em I don't have one friend who's come up to me and said, 'Gosh, Rusty, my life has gotten so much better since I started drinking,'" he says. "Kids have got to hear the message that they have got only one body, and best take care of it."


Likewise, it may surprise his fans that the man whose screen characters often live in near squalor keeps an extremely tidy house, about a mile from his parent's home.

"I'm too lazy to be messy," he says. "I figure it would just take more work to try to find things."

This kind of self-deprecation is vintage DeWees and belies the iron discipline he exercises while working, whether laying brick or bringing a Chekhov character

to life. "If I'm gonna do something, then by God I figure I just am going to go full speed ahead and do it the best I can," he says.

Yet, oddly, he does not seem driven in the sense of feeling that public acclaim would be the best or only measure of his success. "If it happens, it happens," he says when people bring up the idea of a "big break." "If it doesn't, that'll be okay, too." He still feels the most important things in life are "the cornball stuff: Health. Family. Appreciating the trees."

He delivers this line at the Plum & Main, his mouth full of banana cream pie, his fork punching the air to make a point. A middle-aged woman wearing jeans and a pressed work shirt passes by and says a quiet hello. DeWees looks up, grins goofily and puts a finger to his forehead in a small salute. The woman beams. The woodchuck Gary Cooper has done it again. 

## SEEING RUSTY

Rusty DeWees will perform *The Logger* at Burlington High School, Dec. 3-5. He plans a spring Vermont performance tour. For information on the schedule and how to purchase a videotape of *The Logger* (the first act, plus interviews with some of his friends and neighbors — \$19.95 plus shipping and tax), check his Internet Web site at [www.rustyd.net](http://www.rustyd.net) or call (888) 917-8789. *The Logger* contains language that may offend some people. DeWees rates it "SC (some cussing)."