

Saturday night, in Bartlett

A smooth, nonfrantic evening for director

By Jon W. Sparks
September 5, 2006

It's showtime.

A recent Saturday at 8:05 p.m. finds Ron Jewell, director of the Bartlett Performing Arts and Conference Center, onstage and working the crowd. He's not the entertainment, he's taking a minute to pitch memberships, one part of his job along with planning, scheduling and worrying about what might fall through the cracks.

His nightmare is just offstage.

Jeff Daniels is scheduled to perform. The actor, resigned to his everlasting fame from "Dumb and Dumber" despite a long and varied career, is also a troubadour. He's standing in the wings about to sing and amuse an eager crowd.

But as Jewell finishes his exhortation to the audience, Daniels turns, gripping his guitar and deadpans, "Can you tell Ron I can't do this? I am terrified and we're going home. I'm just an actor -- I didn't know there'd be people out there."

His road manager, Dana Gamarra, tells him it's OK: "They're just cardboard cutouts."

They grin evilly at the tension-puncturing mischief as Jewell calls out "Ladies and gentlemen ..." and Daniels strides into the spotlight and the embrace of welcoming applause.

By most standards, the Daniels show was smooth, from pre- to postproduction.

Joe Beasley, BPACC's operations coordinator, said Daniels and his people -- only Gamarra and two others -- had few requirements. Fresh fruit and nonalcoholic beer were all that was called for in the rider of food items to be supplied. Earlier in the month, Bruce Hornsby came through with 11 in his entourage and Beasley spent two hours in Kroger getting hummus, Clif Bar energy food, organic foods and such.

The Daniels show was also fairly simple from a technical standpoint.

Sound technician Justin Keathley said, "This is kind of on cruise control. We knew what they'd want, so I came in yesterday to set up."

It was a quick sound check with Daniels but the Hornsby show took lots longer with more musicians in the mix. But there's the other side of the equation. Beasley says, "With a solo guitar or vocal, you cannot take anything for granted. In a big show, if you blow one lamp or mike, it's not as obvious. If there's just one performer, then one mistake and that's the end of it."

Stephen Weeks is the technician handling the lights. He's got the song list and has programmed his board for the few demands of the Daniels show. He likes, as he says, "to paint with light," and is glad he won't have to grow five more fingers as is sometimes required during more manic sets.

At 5:58 p.m., Jewell says, "This is pretty nonfrantic. Everything's in place." He doesn't say this with finality, because Murphy's Law always lurks in the wings. He and Beasley juggle last-minute cancellation calls and queries about ticket availability. "We've sold out about five times," Jewell says of the back-and-forth ticket traffic.

At 6:38, Beasley goes out to show the young volunteers from Youth Leadership Bartlett how the concession operation works. Jewell says, "I'm tired of pacing. I'll sit in his chair."

At 7:54, Daniels is warming up in his dressing room having digested a late Rendezvous lunch, taken a nap and given an interview. He's relaxed -- or acting that way -- and wears a snappy shirt, jeans, boots and a fedora. When he goes onstage, his first tune is "In Bartlett on a Saturday night," which gets great cheers, especially a crack about the humidity.



Courtesy of Frank Piechorowski

Jeff Daniels performs at the Bartlett Performing Arts Center on a recent Saturday.

He teases the crowd and asks, "We got any 'Dumb and Dumber' fans?"

Oh, yeah. He looks a bit rueful.

At 8:51 he sings the last song of the first set, "Forgive me Robert Johnson." The lyrics: "Get up every morning so I can dust my broom -- I have no idea what that means. ... I'm another white boy with the blues."

During intermission, you can hear him in his dressing room relaxing -- by playing his guitar.

Jewell, meanwhile, is monitoring lobby buzz, circulating among attendees and gauging reaction to the show. He's listening to see if anyone objected to the tiny bit of raw language Daniels used. No problem. "Now this is when I can relax. It's out of my hands," he says.

At 9:18, Daniels suddenly comes back onstage, surprising the light and sound techs, who, nevertheless, don't miss a beat.

In the lobby, Gamarra is setting up the merchandise table with CDs by Daniels and some from Christin Lavin that have one song by Daniels: "Tomato Pudding."

A CD is \$20, cash or check only, and the proceeds go to the Purple Rose Theatre. The theater in Chelsea, Mich., is Daniels' pet project and the beneficiary of these concerts.

At 10:08, Daniels does his encore, "Highway 416," an uncharacteristically somber song and one that has the audience completely quiet.

"You could hear a pin drop," said Gamarra.

Daniels, backstage after the final bow says, "When in doubt, depress 'em."

The concert is over, but the event is not.

Gamarra peeks in the lobby and likes what he sees: a healthy line at the merchandise table waiting for Daniels. The sad song did not diminish the crowd's need for celebrity.

At 10:21, Daniels walks into the lobby to generous applause. His T-shirt reads:

BEALE STREET

BLUES DEPARTMENT

MEMPHIS

Gamarra worries about a storm brewing that might complicate their return trip that night. Jewell makes sure that 8x10 glossy photos are autographed. The crowd poses for pictures with the star.

Daniels is weary, but when the time comes for a picture, he breaks into that famous grin. He still manages to joke about "Dumb and Dumber."

It's after 11 p.m. The last light goes out and the last door closes.

Good show.

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Read his blog at <http://blogs.commercialappeal.com/outoftheloop/>

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