

George Wendt, Norm in 'Cheers', stars onstage in 'Twelve Angry Men'

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The Sacramento hotel operator couldn't find his name.

"George Wendt," I repeated. "He's with the national tour of 'Twelve Angry Men.' "

"Oh, you mean Norm from 'Cheers'.... Yeah, here you go."

After several rings, that voice as comforting and familiar as your favorite beer answered. He's best known for playing the amiable barfly with the world's longest-running tab.

Wendt plays the foreman/juror one in the national tour of Reginald Rose's classic play, which will open next week at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles.

But he'll be the first to tell you that tackling this character is as easy as converting oxygen into carbon dioxide.

"It's not a big process," Wendt said. "The foreman is fairly close to who I am."

When he found out that "Twelve Angry Men" was being produced onstage, he got very excited and thought, "Oh, man, there's a play for all of us character guys. I wish I could do that."

The late playwright Rose wrote what became his most famous piece for the 1954-55 season of CBS' drama series "Studio One" and adapted it into a feature-length film in 1957.

A jury wants to quickly convict a young man on trial for murdering his father, until a holdout (played here by theater veteran Richard Thomas) persuades his fellow jurors to take a closer look at the evidence and themselves before rushing to such a devastating conclusion.

Wendt said that while his foreman has a vote and an opinion, he has to put his agenda aside to keep some control in the room as passions ignite.

Scott Ellis, the director responsible for bringing the play to what was its first run on Broadway in 2004, told the touring company to brace themselves for audiences' reactions to the show.

"He wasn't kidding," Wendt said. "You can hear laughs and shouts and gasps in the crowd during every performance."

Ellis was also one of the reasons that Wendt wanted to be in the show.

"He's a very clever and economical director," Wendt said. "Watching his play is almost like looking at Rembrandt's 'The Night Watch.' He's got a brilliant eye for what works onstage."

"Twelve Angry Men" still resonates with people more than 50 years after it first aired on TV, especially in the current climate where sensational trials abound and the American jury process remains largely the same.

But Wendt pointed out, "It's not just a bunch of white men deciding your fate anymore."