

The Life of Riley

Free program to celebrate legacy of 'The Hoosier Poet'

BY BRENT BROWN
DAILY NEWS

GREENSBURG – A veteran actor will bring to life an Indiana treasure whose contributions to arts and culture – and to the Hoosier State as a whole -- are still felt more than a century after his death.

Danny Russel, an actor with more than two decades of stage experience, will bring his energetic interpretation of James Whitcomb Riley to the Greensburg Adult Center for a free program next week.

The event begins at 9:15 a.m. and will feature a performance that spans virtually the entirety of Riley's life and career and incorporates some of his best known work.

Riley was celebrated for poems that utilized a unique dialect for humorous effect as well as for works that tended to evoke more sentimental feelings from readers. In his day, he was among the most popular poets and humorists, and his legacy is cemented in the continual publication of his works as well as the attachment of his name to several institutions, the most famous of which is likely Riley Hospital for Children at Indiana University Health in Indianapolis.

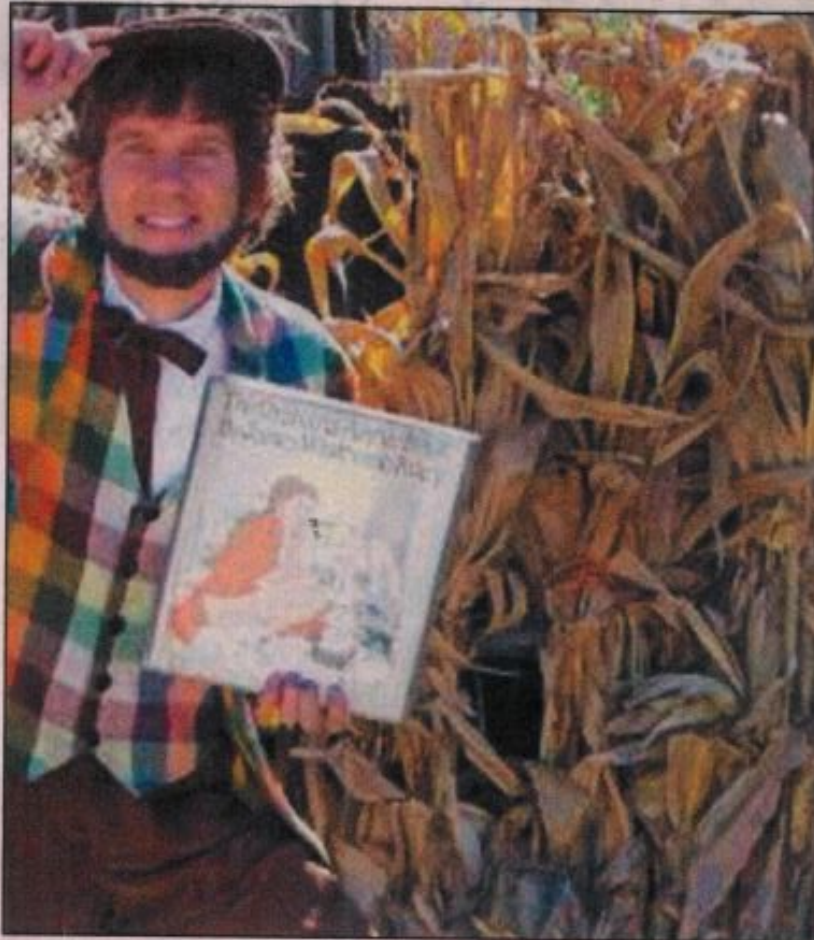
He is known as "The Hoosier Poet" and is

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Actor Danny Russel's performance as James Whitcomb Riley is expected to include samples of "The Hoosier Poet's" best known works, such as "Little Orphant Annie" and "When the Frost is on the Punkin."

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Actor Danny Russel will appear as famed poet James Whitcomb Riley Wednesday, Oct. 18 at the Greensburg Adult Center. The performance begins at 9:15 a.m., is free and open to all ages.

RILEY

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remembered for enduring poetry such as "When the Frost is on the Punkin" and "Little Orphan Annie."

Russel spent months researching the famed poet, and he's honed his craft through years of work on the stage and by appearing around the state as Riley.

Russel told the Daily News that his career sprang from a love of theater, and that affinity for the stage later led him to use his talents to portray Riley and other important historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Daniel Boone.

"Since my parents possessed the wisdom to accompany their tiny son to live theatre, I was galvanized by the crackling performances, actors' spellbinding charisma, muscular direction, taut storytelling and all the design elements," said the actor.

Twenty years ago Russel was cast in a play about Riley that was performed at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis. The popular show was brought back three times in subsequent years and helped the actor gain a new appreciation for the iconic Hoosier Poet.

"We opened to wild applause - playing to thousands of students from across the state for three months," Russel reflected.

In the time since, he spent months researching Riley and turned his portrayal into a traveling show. At its heart is a firm reverence for the man on which the performance is based.

"After hundreds of performances, I'd grown fiercely protective of Riley's legacy, developed a one-man show and have been on tour ever since," said Russel.

Information from Russel's website, famoushoosiers.com, says he traveled to Riley's boyhood and adult homes in Greenfield and Indianapolis, respectively, for research. He also visited the Lilly Library, which boasts the largest collection of written information about Riley in the world.

The culmination of those efforts is a performance that pays homage to the beloved author while educating the audience about an important historical figure.

"Only stubborn, unflagging persistence brought him fame and fortune," Russel said of Riley.

That determination led to a wealth of accomplishments that have helped Riley's name become synonymous with Hoosier values and culture.

"Riley's unique understanding of human nature made him a national hero, produced dozens of best-selling books, and immortalized him as America's finest dialect poet," Russel wrote. "He sold out Madison Square Garden in February and March 1894, inspired

the creation of Raggedy Ann, and with his gift to the Indianapolis/Marion County Public Library, he revealed how important it was that future generations have free access to books. The Riley Memorial Association, Riley Hospital, and Camp Riley for Youth all still operate in his name, making the Hoosier Poet's legacy unique because of what he symbolizes for children of his home state."

The performance is also intended to be entertaining in much the way the real Riley left audiences laughing during speaking engagements and public readings of his one-of-a-kind works.

"The experience he delivers proves to be exciting for the Riley aficionado and novice alike," the website states.

Indianapolis Monthly called Russel a "Riley impersonator extraordinaire," praising the performance.

"After more than a decade of playing the famous scribe, Russel's got the poems (and the poet) down pat," the magazine said.

Although the Hoosier Poet is distinctly endearing to Russel, the actor said he has also enjoyed performing as his two other alter-egos - Lincoln and Boone - throughout the years.

"My wife suggested I tackle Abe Lincoln (since I'm tall and skinny)," said Russel of the beginnings of his portrayal of the 16th president. He spent a year researching "Honest Abe" before taking that show on the road about a decade ago.

Boone, a frontiersman and folk hero, became part of Russel's repertoire via a request from the Kentucky Humanities Council.

Other roles for Russel include a portrayal of Galileo at the Indiana State Museum and a performance as Ichabod Crane in a production of Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* at Conner Prairie. Russel considers the latter one of the pinnacles of his career.

He is also a four-time grant recipient from the Indiana Arts Commission and earned a featured role in "Movers and Shakers," a PBS documentary.

Russel's wife is Teresa Russel, and they have two sons: Grant, a firefighter and Drake, a barber.

Russel said in his spare time he enjoys reading, songwriting and playing guitar.

He has a Facebook page that features samples of his performances.

The Oct. 18 program also features coffee and donuts. Russel will take audience questions in character as Riley.

The event is sponsored by local radio station WTRE. There is no cost to attend.

The Greensburg Adult Center is located at 905 E. Main St. in Greensburg.

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