

Coming Soon: A Theatre Near You

-by Gerald Reid

When Van Zeiler portrayed Buddy Holly, little did he know at the time that the beautiful young Brit, Victoria Stilwell, who played Buddy's wife, Maria Elena, would eventually become his wife in real life. It sounds like a fairy tale, but what better place than London for a fairy tale to originate.

Van Zeiler was born and raised in Atlanta, having attended the Westminster Schools. His acting career began in junior high school with commercials. From Atlanta, he studied theatre at the University of Virginia, and after graduation, he moved to New York. After working in some small Off-Broadway plays, his first big break came in 1997 when he was cast as Buddy Holly in the long running *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*. A U.K. tour eventually settled at London's West End for a long, successful run. Later, they moved to the U.S. and continued to tour in the same production. The run finally came to an end after 3 ½ years.

Victoria Stilwell was born and raised in Wimbledon in south London, England. Drama school followed college and, after about two years, she was cast as Mrs. Holly. The couple now lives in New Jersey, just outside of New York City, and are the proud parents of Alexandra who is almost a year old. Stilwell is

BELOW: Victoria Stilwell & Van Zeiler entertain the crowd at the Pickens County Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner on January 28, 2005.

(Photo: G. Reid)



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currently doing commercials and is the official spokeswoman for TrimSpa Diet Supplement.

While Zeiler knew of Buddy Holly, he would learn much more about his impact on music while playing the title role. "I learned a lot doing the role, obviously," said Zeiler. "I knew his bigger hits, but I didn't know the influence he had on music." Stilwell said that Buddy Holly was bigger in England than he was in the states. "My mother was a big fan of his," said Stilwell. "I grew up with Buddy Holly playing all the time." Interestingly, Zeiler and Stilwell met Holly's real wife, Maria Elena. Stilwell remarked, "She's an incredible woman; she's in her seventies now." Stilwell continued, "It was very strange to be playing Buddy and Maria on stage and have Buddy's real wife in the audience."

While *The Odd Couple* is calling Zeiler and Stilwell to an Indiana theatre this summer, their main focus is establishing a summer theatre right here in Pickens County. Why Pickens County? Zeiler's parents, Van & Rita Zeiler, live in Pickens County. Through visits, Zeiler and Stilwell both have come to love the area and have adopted it as their home away from home. "It's pretty much turning into a fulltime job," said Zeiler. Since Stilwell came up with the idea about a year ago, both of them have been working to turn this dream into a reality. They recognize that there's a lot of great community theatre in the area and that while North Georgia Rep's mission includes bringing the highest quality professional theatre to the region, they stress that the new theatre would be an exciting addition to

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the area's arts community and not a replacement. A steering committee has been formed and fund raising will soon begin. Both Stilwell and Zeiler are in Pickens County about once a month to go to meetings and meet people. They are available to speak to civic groups about their plans. A 501(c)3 organization has been formed to make all private and corporate donations tax deductible. The goal is to bring professional quality theatre to the north Georgia region by the summer of 2006. Initially, two shows are planned for next summer: one musical and one play; eventually this would increase to three shows each summer, and long range, this theatre could become year round. These would be originally produced productions. Zeiler explained

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“What more beautiful place to come to than north Georgia.”
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that they would hire their own creative team and added that shows would be cast primarily out of New York and supplemented by local talent. Of the 90,000 members Actors Equity, the professional actors' union,

only ten percent are working at any one time. Stilwell explained the birth of summer stock theatre: in the 1920s, when it got hot in NYC, Broadway actors and actresses would migrate to the nearby Berkshire mountains and mount their own productions away from the heat and critical glare. Throughout the past century, the summer stock tradition has grown and spread throughout the country. “It's a wonderful way to work, have a job, and go to beautiful places. And, what more beautiful place to come to than north

Georgia,” said Stilwell. She said that when they hold New York auditions for North Georgia Rep, Equity actors would be lining up to work here in Pickens County. “Van and I have had some of our best experiences doing regional theatre elsewhere,” Stilwell said. She went on to say that they not only want to create a great experience for the audience but a great destination for the actors. They promise classic British and American plays.

Great theatre in this area would not only provide entertainment to the Pickens County residents but would likely become a tourist draw. You'll be hearing more about this project in the months ahead.

Look for auditions for local acting talent and technical talent. Acting and music workshops are also in the plans.

For more information or to schedule Van Zeiler and Victoria Stilwell to speak to your organization, go to northgeorgiarep.com.



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-Josh Billings