

# Tennessee Repartee

Vol. III

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## Daddy's Girl Takes Center Stage

*Steel Magnolias. A Streetcar Named Desire. Grease. Dracula. Sweeney Todd. The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas. Our Town. Annie.* And on and on and on the list goes.

Martha Wilkinson's stage credits are plentiful. But where did this multi-talented actress with an impressive resume get her start?

"My first role was in fifth grade," says Wilkinson. "I was Jesus. Back then, I had long hair like the pictures of Him."

But the truest beginnings of a career spent wowing audiences actually didn't begin with that "divine role," but instead watching her father.

"Obviously, it was cool to have a dad that was an actor," says Wilkinson. "He did stage but mostly film and television out of Atlanta from 1974-1990. When I was ten, I helped him learn his lines for *The Lion in Winter*. I still remember seeing him in that show and thinking, 'Wow! He's amazing!' I so wanted to be up there doing the show with him."

She likens having a talented actor as a father to "living a master class."

"He would help with monologues and shows I was working on, but there were so many other things," explains Wilkinson. "He would make me read parts of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* aloud without a Southern accent every Sunday morning after brunch. There were times when I would think, 'Really? I have to do this?'"

"We used to go shopping in Atlanta a lot, and we would walk around Lenox Square talking in British accents. . . or we would sit and people watch—absorbing the way people walked or talked—storing them in our 'actor's bag' to potentially use later in a role. I attribute my strong observation to those times. I still love to people watch, too."

It was all a part of living up to her father's mantra: "Don't get ready for the job. BE ready for the job."

And time and again, Wilkinson has proven herself more than ready for her roles on the Nashville stage.

The vivacious actress has many fond memories from her years of acting, but none compare to portraying Mrs. Lovett in Tennessee Rep's production of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. She quickly admits to considering this her most challenging and gratifying moment in the spotlight.

Says Wilkinson, "The music of Sondheim is absolutely thrilling to hear and amazing to sing but damned hard to learn! But once you 'get it,' it's an unbelievably gratifying ride to perform. To be the vessel that communicates that fabulous music is an honor and a privilege.

"The whole experience was pure magic and a dream come true for me," she continues. "I could STILL be running that show. I will forever hold that experience up as incomparable; I am doubtful anything could top that as it was the epitome of all that embodies being an actor."

And Wilkinson certainly held up her end of the bargain in *Sweeney Todd*, which was completely sold out. She won two best actress nods for her portrayal of the pie shop owner, and had those who saw the production leaving the theatre thinking that New York had nothing on Nashville; Angela Lansbury and Patti

tricks' which is wonderful. The cast includes three of my favorite people on the planet, so I couldn't be more excited."

While Wilkinson will display her comedic talents in Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, she will showcase the voice that has endeared her to Nashville audiences in the Tony-nominated *Pump Boys and Dinettes*.

"This is my third production of *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, and I cannot wait," explains Wilkinson. "It is a show that provides good solid entertainment, great music, and funny stories. It is a great escape for the audience, and I love singing this music—such a fun mix of styles and harmonies. All of the characters are somebody we all know and love. It is feel good fun that takes you away from the trials and tribulations of the day."

Despite her own tremendous achievements on the stage, Wilkinson still remembers her Georgia roots and idolizes a father who was her first exposure to the theatre.

"It was just fun to be his daughter. He was a truly wonderful man and my best bud. Every day I try to emulate the kind of actor and human being he was. Before I step on stage every performance, I say, 'Go with me, Daddy,' and I honestly believe he does."

**Don't miss Martha Wilkinson in these upcoming productions:**



*The 39 Steps*  
March 19–April 2



*Pump Boys and Dinettes*  
April 23–May 14



Clockwise from top: *Sweeney Todd*, Mrs. Lovett; *Steel Magnolias*, Truvy; *The Underpants*, Gertrude Deuter; *Idols of the King*, Zephyr; *Noises Off*, Dotty Otley

Lupone (both of whom played Mrs. Lovett on Broadway) could take notes from the tour de force of talent that is Martha Wilkinson.

She continues to amaze audiences in Middle Tennessee with her work on Tennessee Rep's stage, most recently as Truvy in *Steel Magnolias*, and also with her work at Chaffin's Barn Dinner Theater where she serves as Artistic Director. 3P's production of *John and Jen* last year won Wilkinson even more critical acclaim.

And this spring, she turns her attention to two Tennessee Rep productions: Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* and the musical *Pump Boys and Dinettes*.

When asked what was challenging and exciting about the farce based on the Hitchcock movie, she responded, "I ADORE playing multiple roles! Obviously as actors we like to play 'other people' and the opportunity to play more than one in the same show is just so much fun. I enjoy a challenge. . .and having to create three different characters with three different accents in the same play is thrilling. Throw in the comedy, and you've got me hooked!"

"Of course, any opportunity to work with René, and I am there! Because we've worked together for years, she keeps me honest as an actor and lets me use 'my bag of tricks' when necessary but encourages me to learn 'new

"Martha is a kind of dream actor for a director," says Tennessee Rep Producing Artistic Director



René D. Copeland

René D. Copeland. "She is so talented—she has great instincts, a great sense of humor, and when she is on stage she's totally in control of it. . . and yet she brings a genuine openness in response to direction and to her fellow actors on stage. Martha is one of those actors who really brings everyone on stage along with her."

René D. Copeland, Tennessee Rep's Producing Artistic Director

