

Lt. Dan's Back in Beaufort

Written by Story and Interview by Mark Shaffer

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A Conversation with Gary Sinise



Author's note:

*As this issue of Lowcountry Weekly hits the streets and the giant pneumatic tubes of the internet the 3rd Annual Lt. Dan Weekend (LDW3) gets underway. The event to benefit Wounded Warriors and their caregivers is named for Gary Sinise's Oscar-nominated roll of Lt. Dan Taylor in 1994's *Forrest Gump* (filmed in and around Beaufort). The original event – a waterfront concert by Sinise and his Lt. Dan Band – was attached to Beaufort's 2010 Shrimp Festival. The overwhelming hordes of fans seemed to merit a stand-alone Lt. Dan-themed weekend, and 2012 marks the the band's third consecutive appearance in Lt. Dan's figurative place of birth. I spoke to Sinise by phone from the set of *CSI: New York* a few days before he was due to fly in for the show. It was his first trip back to Beaufort since filming *Gump*. The following was originally published September 29, 2010.*

“People just don’t have high expectations from an actor with a band. The goal is to always surprise them.”

- Gary Sinise

The Wrath of Grapes

Long before Lt. Dan there was Tom Joad and the “little theater company” that took Broadway by the throat, but I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m standing in line at the discount ticket booth in the middle of the maelstrom that is New York City’s Times Square circa 1990. This is the last stop on a long theater weekend in the Big Apple and once again we’re hoping to score some of the hottest tickets in town, the Steppenwolf Theater Company’s production of John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath.” A few nights before we paid a ridiculous amount of money for a spectacularly forgettable evening with “The Phantom of the Opera.” I believe Andrew Lloyd Weber actually negotiated a deal with the city making this a requirement for all out of town visitors back in the day. There was no Sarah Brightman and no Michael Crawford, but each audience member was actually assigned a personal souvenir vender, as I recall.

The next day was no better as once again tickets to the Steinbeck show disappeared faster than free hair mousse at a Flock of Seagulls concert. I was eventually talked into an off-Broadway show billed as “The next Rocky Horror Picture Show!” A couple of those words were right. It technically qualified as “show” and was indeed a horror. Two decades later and I still can’t quite scrub away the memory or find a meaning. I am only left with the “Why?” “Off Broadway” was way too close to Broadway for this little bit of theatrical Ebola. Come to think of it, Ohio would have been too close.

The weekend was looking grim. I needed something *substantial* – a legitimate Broadway experience, something that smacked you in the face with the stunning possibility of what live theater can accomplish and inspire when it’s fearlessly produced and acted. I am told “Grapes” is that kind of production.

“Hey, I got the last ticket,” says my brother. He’s standing there holding it up looking all at once conflicted, guilty and really, really *pleased*. My brother is an actor. People behind me, who have been standing in line for an hour or more, fall out and stumble back into the urban chaos muttering vague epithets. I do not mutter mine. And that was it, my last shot at seeing what has since become a legendary theatrical production of the quintessential Great American Novel by a vital new force on the American stage. To this day my brother still refers to it as “amazing.”

The upstart Steppenwolf Theater Company of Chicago had already forged a reputation off-Broadway with Sam Shepard’s *True West*. The show starred two up and coming young lions of the Windy City theater scene, John Malkovich and Gary Sinise. Sinise – one of the three founders of Steppenwolf – also directed and won an Obie (the off-Broadway equivalent of the Tony) for his effort. Broadway took notice and so did Hollywood.

Six degrees of CSI

In the mid 1980's *French Connection* director, William Friedkin, was looking to make a comeback with a gritty crime drama called *To Live and Die in L.A.* Friedkin wanted unknowns and sent casting director Bob Weiner on a talent quest. Sinise was offered the role of rogue Secret Service Agent Richard Chance but recommended that Weiner take a look at his pal William Peterson instead. Peterson got the job and ultimately went on to headline as Gil Grissom in the original *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* for nine seasons. In the interim, Peterson was instrumental in bringing Sinise into the *CSI* fold with the second spin-off series *CSI: New York*. Peterson retired Grissom after the 2009 season and promptly returned to Chicago where he is [at this writing] an official ensemble member of the Steppenwolf Theater.

Sinise's career took a more roundabout path. Before bringing the Joad family to Broadway he continued to hone his skills in the director's chair both on stage and behind the camera. In the late 1980's he helmed two episodes of Michael Mann's critically acclaimed but short-lived *Crime Story* TV series and made his feature film directorial debut with *Miles From Home*. The movie starred Richard Gere but Sinise fleshed out the cast with a Steppenwolf ensemble that included Kevin Anderson as Gere's brother, company co-founder Terry Kinney, Malkovich and a pre-*Roseanne* Laurie Metcalf as an "Exotic Dancer." The Tony-nominated production of "The Grapes of Wrath" led to another Steinbeck project, this time on film with *Of Mice and Men*. Once again Sinise pulled double duty directing the picture and taking on the role of George. He cast his "True West" partner Malkovich as the gentle, doomed Lenny and convinced Oscar

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winner Horton Foote (
To Kill a Mockingbird
) to write the screenplay.

"Careers, like rockets, don't always take off on time. The trick is to always keep the engine running."

- Gary Sinise

The rocket finally took off in 1994. On TV Sinise headlined the blockbuster mini-series adaptation of Stephen King's *The Stand*. And then a little movie shot right here in the Lowcountry changed everything. Sinise's portrayal of the physically and emotionally scarred Vietnam veteran, Lt. Dan Taylor in *Forrest Gump*, earned him an Oscar nomination and launched a high profile film and television career (*Apollo 13*

,
Ransom

,
Truman

). But Lt. Dan turned out to be more than just a character left to fade gently into the cinematic mists after the wrap party and awards shows. It's no coincidence that Sinise's character on his hit CBS series *CSI: New York* is named Mac Taylor and Lt. Dan has long served as a touchstone for the actor's other role as humanitarian.

Along with his involvement in working with disabled veterans and countless USO tours, he is also the co-founder with Seabiscuit author Laura Hillenbrand of Operation International Children

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(formerly Operation Iraqi Children). Over the last five years the organization has worked with troops to deliver more than a quarter of a million school supply kits, half a million toys and thousands of other necessary items to children in Iraq. The OIC is currently expanding these efforts to Afghanistan and other countries.

Gary Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band perform for the 16th annual Beaufort Shrimp Festival. It is the first visit back to the Lowcountry for Sinise since shooting Gump, somehow fitting that the film celebrates its 16th anniversary next year. After a series of scheduling snafus and miscommunications I spoke to Mr. Sinise by phone from the set of *CSI: New York*.

The Interview

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1. The above information is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief. I am not aware of any other information that may be relevant to the above information.

"I do get a little bit nervous," she says. "But I'm not nervous about my job or my company."

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