



Photograph by Dominick Fiorille

# A Conversation

with

## Samuel E. Wright

Actor

Sam Wright says he doesn't know how old he is – or his birthday. It's the way he lives life: from one story to the next, not worrying about silly things like time.

After 20-plus Broadway shows, a lengthy film and TV resume, two Tony nominations, founding the Hudson Valley Conservatory and voicing Disney's most memorable crab, Sebastian, Wright has no shortage of stories. And he's in the process of adding one more: the one about how he and his wife, Mandy, built an outdoor amphitheater on the Wallkill River in their adopted hometown of Walden.

Orange Magazine's Lindsay Suchow caught up with Wright at the Conservatory following a rehearsal for "On Golden Pond."

**Orange Magazine:** How does the Hudson Valley Conservatory enable kids to actually pursue acting as a career?

**Sam Wright:** The hardest thing to instill in a child who wants to be great is the difficulty of achieving greatness to start out with. The academia have given the impression to performers that it's about books. All you have to do is learn how to do this, and – like every other profession – go out, stick your nose to the grindstone and you will become an actor. No. Ninety-nine percent of our union is what? Unemployed. I did a thing at Rutgers University. Me, sitting there like I knew what I was talking about, and 350 kids sitting out there, waiting to be told how to get there. And finally I just looked at them all, and I said (to the professor), "Excuse me, sir," and to his chagrin I got out of the chair, walked down to the front of the stage, and sat down on the edge. "There are 350 of you in this room, and you all have all the disciplines in theater. And every one of you all want to be working on Broadway next year, don't you? Let me tell you something. There's another 350 of you graduating from Columbia. And another 350 graduating from New York University. And another 350 graduating from C.W. Post. We haven't even left New York state, and already you've got the competition of the damned behind you. But there is a reason

you're getting this education, and the real reason is not so you can get on Broadway, but so that you could do what?" And somebody raised their hand, and the voice of innocence said, "So we could do theater." Forty-Second Street doesn't make theater theater. What you've been given the knowledge to do is to go get a room. Put some chairs in it. Get some scoop lights. Put on some plays, right there in your home. Charge people a little bit of money to see something really, really good.

**OM:** Let's talk about your voicing of Sebastian the Crab. Do you see "The Little Mermaid" resonating with the next generation?

**SW:** It is crossing generational lines, and that's what makes it wonderful. It must have set a tone in everybody, in the young minds of those people who now have children and are playing it for them. Their parents saw something in it that was worth repeating in their children's lives. Whether it's values or whether it's characterization, there was something about that movie that clicked.

**OM:** Any funny stories?

**SW:** The funniest and the weirdest of them all was the way he was created. In the old days, when Disney did the voiced cartoons, they always voiced the voice first so that they could get an indication as to what the character was doing or saying so it would look more realistic. The animators either drew themselves saying the lines in the mirror and making faces, or as time passed, they would film the actor and take the characterization from them. At that particular point was when I entered the Disney equation.

Disney wanted to make movies, and "The Little Mermaid" was kind of touted as the last one. So we were under the gun to do this, and we had a five-year limit. It took a long time in those days – it took five years to draw all that stuff. And could a person maintain the characterization for five years? Most people got fired because by the third year, they couldn't do that voice anymore, because it's a made-up voice. Well, Sebastian wasn't

a made-up voice. He was just me being silly, so he was easy to evoke.

I did it, and they loved it. But they still hadn't decided what Sebastian the Crab was going to look like. He originally started out as a turtle, but when they started working with maniac here, they kind of changed their minds about a lot of things. As he got more and more animated and became a crab, it turned into Geoffrey Holder. He was a big tall Jamaican who used to be on the 7-Up commercials years ago. I thought my job was on the line.

All the animators of the whole cartoon – 19, 20 of them – said, "Sam, we're going to go to lunch and we want you to come with us." I said, "Oh, shoot, this is the last supper. I'm out of the picture, obviously." And at the end of the table, there is literally this Christ-like looking figure (Roy Disney). Now I'm getting really scared. We finish our lunch, and I'm trembling in my boots, and eventually the guy at the end of the table says, "All right ... We have to finish this cartoon. What does he look like?" My animator (Duncan Marjoribanks) sketched up this thing on a piece of paper and he passed it down the line. And as each person saw it, they laughed and passed it on to the next person ... And it finally gets to the guy who looks like Disney and he says, "OK, guys, get to work. You've got the money – you're on for the finish of the film." Off he left, and they cheered. It was a picture of my head on top of a crab's body. And that's what Sebastian looks like.

**OM:** How is the community receiving your vision for an amphitheater on Walden's waterfront?

**SW:** After "The Little Mermaid," I wasn't filthy rich, by any stretch of imagination. But I did have some money, and I said I could do one of two things. I could buy a yacht like those guys in California and live in Malibu until I ran out of money. But I thought, this is people's hard-earned money. I wasn't trying to be philanthropic, but I said I have to give something back. I started making designs and things – picking the buildings that were available in the village, doing stuff to them, spending money because they didn't have any money. But I had no idea what I was getting into. I would get as far as maybe a little funding, and the project would die.

We have complete support from this new regime, because these guys were children when I first came here. They were the same age as my kids – they went to school with them. They remember, in my house, me talking about all these ideas and building these little models. So now they've all grown up and they've taken over the village politics. They got rid of the old school and are willing to brand Walden as an arts community now.