

WONDERFUL WORLD THE OF ★ RICH TAYLOR ★

by CAROL J. BURR

What kid hasn't yearned to live in Fantasyland? To have Mickey, Pluto and Winnie the Pooh as daily companions. To laugh with the Muppets, cross swords with Captain Hook, rescue Snow White or fight crime with Dick Tracy. But rather than lament with Peter Pan the loss of such childhood dreams, one Sooner alumnus has found a way to grow up and still reside in Never Land.

For the past 11 years, Rich Taylor has been an integral part of the entertainment colossus known as Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

Currently Taylor's title—and he has had many in the fast-moving, ever-changing Disney organization—is manager of talent resources. Throughout the three theme parks and all the resort areas, his division must stock the stages, festivals and parades with every conceivable type of entertainer, from singers, dancers and actors to jugglers, stunt people and high school bands. The task grows more challenging with each passing year.

"When I first came to Walt Disney World, there was the Magic Kingdom, there were two hotels—and all this

undeveloped land," Taylor recalls.

Today he points proudly to the addition of Epcot Center and Disney-MGM Studios, every sort of living accommodation from palatial to campground, and entertainment attractions such as River Country, Discovery Island, Typhoon Lagoon and Pleasure Island. Add to that facilities for shopping, physical fitness, golf, tennis, swimming, boating and fishing.

With Disney World celebrating its 20th anniversary in 1991, just a year after Disneyland in California marked its 35th, with Tokyo Disneyland in its

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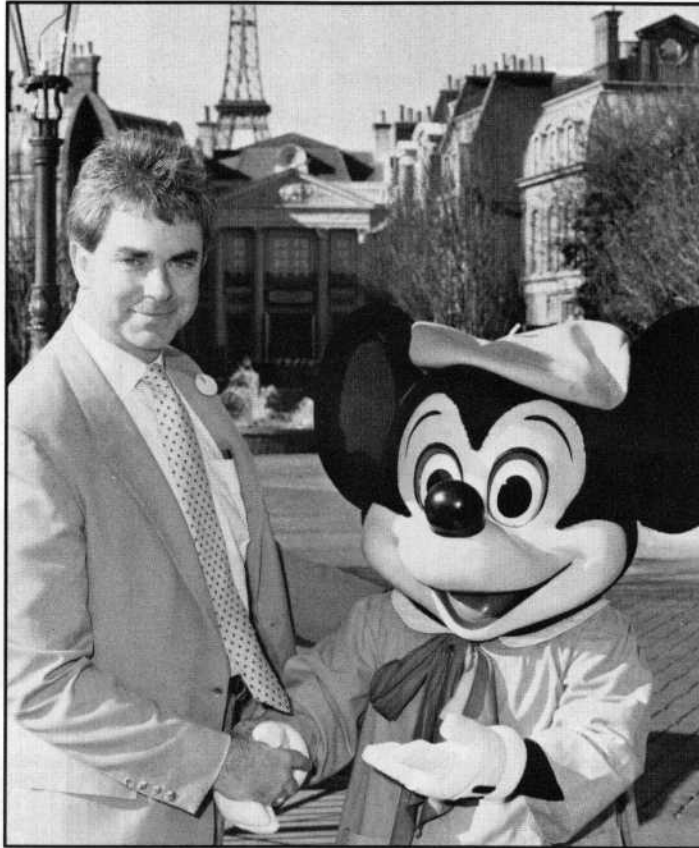
seventh year and Euro Disneyland scheduled for spring 1992 completion in France, founder Walt Disney's prophecy is being fulfilled.

"As Walt said once, we'll always be in a state of becoming; we'll never sit still," Taylor explains, paraphrasing a man he never met, who did not even live to see Disney World completed but whose presence still pervades the Disney organization. "And once Euro Disney is open, the sun will never set on a Disney recreation resource."

The Florida enterprise itself is far from complete. By 1995, mid-way through the "Disney Decade" expansion, Disney World will boast 25 separate resort hotel complexes with more than 21,000 rooms and convention space approaching half a million square feet. Disney-MGM Studios will double in size. A 25-year plan will be under way to create a real city in Osceola County—Celebration, Florida—complete with scientific and industrial development, the arts and 6,000 homes. New attractions within the theme parks are going on-line with amazing regularity—thrilling rides, futuristic journeys into space and the world of science, animated adventures, live shows and musical revues and stirring parades.

"All the development we're doing would just be a bunch of buildings without entertainment," Taylor says. "Millions and millions of people come here every year. We're the world's number one resort destination, but we have to keep them coming back for more with new attractions, new shows."

Disney invests heavily in creative—or live—entertainment, and finding the talent is the responsibility of Taylor and the five departments he heads—professional talent, "name" or celebrity talent, educational programs, guest talent and International Festival talent. While today he oversees the myriad



Rich Taylor greets an old friend in front of Epcot Center's French pavilion at Walt Disney World. Taylor organized Epcot's International Festival Program in 1982, and supplying talent for its live entertainment is still one of his responsibilities.

of administrative details involved in managing these vast talent resources, Taylor spent four years traveling the country conducting auditions "the Disney way."

"We do things differently than some," he explains. "We want the audition to be a good experience, not unnecessarily cold and cut-throat but encouraging to the kids. We look for people who are going to be good backstage as well as onstage. You can't just be a great performer and a creep and survive working year round in theme parks for Disney, because it's tough work."

"Take the show we have here now, 'Here Come the Muppets,'" Taylor says. "We do 34 shows a day—live shows. It takes five casts a day to do that show, and it's amazing how hard they work. The last show is as good as the first show because they care and they do a good job."

"The 'Hollywood Hollywood' show is

the same way. They're out in the heat doing that show five, six times a day, dancing, singing, performing—and it's tough in Orlando in the summer."

Taylor acknowledges the existence of the so-called "Disney look" among the entertainers as well as the other Disney "cast members," as all Disney park and resort employees are called. "It takes a certain type of person to be a Disney entertainer," he admits. "They have to have talent, and they have to look the part—and a lot of our jobs call for the very clean-cut, all-American look. But with the studio being here and all the character types we need, we have to look for all different kinds of people in all different kinds of places."

The search—10 separate auditions every year—is expensive, as is bringing performers into Disney World and taking care of them once there. "We have more than 800 full-time entertainers on the property working for us year round. We move them around so they can better their talents while they're here. Hopefully the best ones will stay with us longer, which is better than finding new people and starting all over."

Although Disney has a respected college internship program for short-term employment throughout the parks and resorts, there are few summer employees on the entertainment side. College undergraduates are eligible for the summer orchestra, band and dance troupe, with the expectation that they will return to school.

"The colleges wouldn't be too thrilled," Taylor explains, "if we came around to audition and took their best people away."

The University of Oklahoma nearly experienced such a loss in 1968 when an 18-year-old freshman named Rich Taylor took a year off to join Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians.

A Waring appearance in Oklahoma City's Municipal Auditorium had provided Taylor's introduction to show business. "My grandmother and my mom took me to see the Fred Waring show," he recalls. "We sat in the third row left of center. I was five, and I remember it like it was yesterday."

Later his Enid High School chorus teacher, Maurine Priebe, suggested that Taylor spend a summer at the Fred Waring Choral Music Workshop in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania. The next summer he returned on a scholarship.

Taylor spent two semesters at OU majoring in pre-med and playing freshman football, but Waring's subsequent offer to join his professional touring company was too tempting to refuse. That year was enough to convince the young Oklahoman that he wanted a life in entertainment; he also discovered that he had a lot to learn about music.

He returned to OU, enrolled in the School of Music and eventually earned a bachelor's in fine arts. But the classroom and music and drama productions weren't enough for Taylor. He already knew that his talent was in being the catalyst for other people's performances. The director and master of ceremonies for Sooner Scandals and show coordinator and MC of the Miss OU Pageant for two years running, he decided to form his own entertainment troupe.

"I came up with the idea for the Student Entertainers," he explains. "I went to Anona Adair and some of the gang in the student development office and sold them a bill of goods. They gave me a little money, and we auditioned a group from the music school. Basically it was a talent agency. President Hollomon loved to take us around to entertain. We'd go out and sing for University events and pay each kid ten bucks."

Taylor takes great satisfaction in the continuation of the Student Entertainers after he left OU. The successor to that group, Broadway Gala, now a part of the music school, is under the direction of Irvin Wagner, who used to do the charts for the Entertainers.

"Jimmy Faulconer, who is now the



By its third year, 1972-73, Rich Taylor's Student Entertainers had acquired show costumes and bookings for all sorts of University events. Taylor, back row, third from left, organized the group as a student talent agency. The Student Entertainers survived into the 1980s to be succeeded by the present-day Broadway Gala.



Having honed his organizational skills at OU, Rich Taylor, back row center, rejoined Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians, in 10 years gaining experience in all phases of entertainment, including co-founding and directing "Today's Pennsylvanians," pictured here with Waring. Taylor still serves on the board of Waring's summer workshop, which he first attended as a high school student from Enid.

assistant dean of fine arts, played piano for us," Taylor recalls, "and Bruce Govich's wife Marilyn was in the group. We thought we were hot stuff back then—but it's probably a good thing there isn't a video. I'm sure we were better in our own minds."

"It was fun, a unique experience that gave me tools that I use today, along with what I learned from Nat Eek and the repertoire theater in the drama school and studying with Tom Carey and Bruce Govich in the music school."

Taylor, who garnered every senior honor available in 1972, including the gold Letzeiser Medal as the top senior man, Pe-et, Omicron Delta Kappa and the presidency of Beta Theta Pi fraternity, has maintained his OU connections. During the fall 1990 Centennial Weekend, he was asked by Eek, the show's director, to MC the Centennial Gala in Lloyd Noble Center.

Keeping in touch with Fred Waring during his college days led to a 10-year career with that organization that afforded him experience in nearly every phase of entertainment. As a performer, he rejoined the touring company as baritone soloist and Glee Club member, later doubling as a master of ceremonies and an assistant conductor. At various times he served as the show's assistant producer/director, co-founded and directed a contemporary music group called "Today's Pennsylvanians," was the press/publicity director, staff and show photographer, assistant company manager for the road show and personal "on-tour" manager for Waring.

In addition he returned each summer to Waring's summer workshop, now located at Penn State University, where he still serves on the board of



As a performer, Taylor toured with Waring as a baritone soloist and Glee Club member, doubled as master of ceremonies and assistant conductor. Here he pairs with another of Today's Pennsylvanians in one of the contemporary music group's appearances.

directors. He also began another of his favorite sidelines as a guest clinician and adjudicator for show and swing choir clinics and contests throughout the country.

"All these experiences you put into your bag, never knowing when you'll use them," Taylor reasons. "But at some point—especially in the entertainment business—you're able to pull them back out, and they are exactly what you need at the moment."

Taylor had to call on all his acquired skills to go job-hunting in 1980, when Waring decided to "retire" him from the show.

"I had met Andy (Andrea Everroad), who was also with the show," Taylor

says, "and we were getting married. Mr. Waring didn't allow married couples to be on the road together. We knew that, but we thought he might alter the rule."

Waring didn't. "Retiring me was the best thing he could have done for me," Taylor reflects. "At that point I had done everything there was to do there and probably should have moved on to something else sooner."

After applying for a number of different jobs, Taylor was summoned to Orlando and hired as the stage manager for the Magic Kingdom.

"This is a very complicated place," Taylor says. "It's so big, but it's very structured, so it runs very smoothly. I had never been a stage manager before, but Disney is great about bringing people along through the process, letting them learn the system, promoting from within. I've had 10 different jobs in 11 years."

From his initial Magic Kingdom assignment, Taylor's responsibilities soon were expanded to include management of all the park's stages. With the opening of Epcot Center, he became manager of the

International Festival Program, organizing and coordinating the artists-in-residence.

"We were bringing over all these international groups," Taylor explains. "The logistics were mind-boggling—bringing Africans or Yugoslavians or Japanese with all their stuff, meeting their dietary and other needs, helping them adjust to life on International Drive rather than what they were used to. We had to adapt their performances. Their shows had to be shortened; if our shows aren't jam-packed full of entertainment, our guests are going to go over to Space Mountain or the American Adventure."



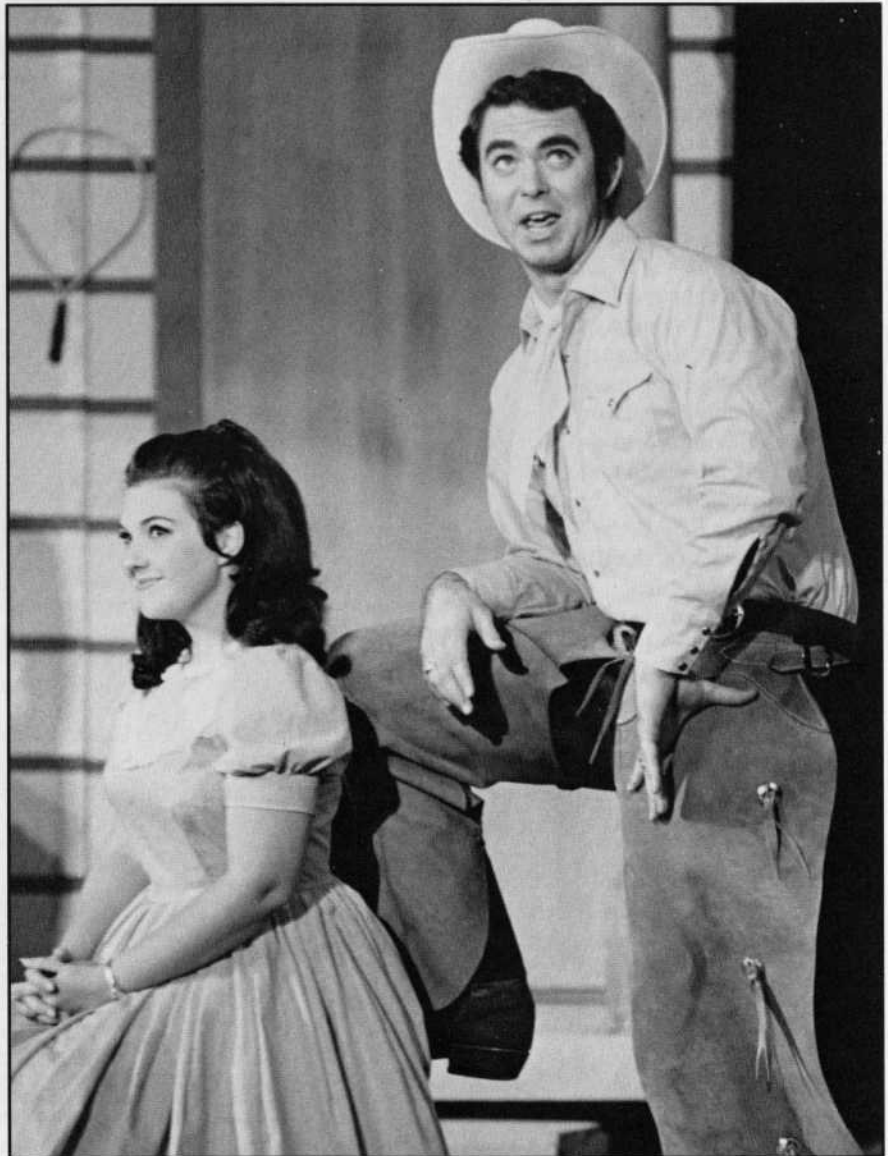
Alumnus Rich Taylor returns as master of ceremonies for the Centennial Gala.

Epcot Center was a smash hit from opening day. "We had 21 groups from all over the world—French stilt-walkers, a boys' choir from Austria, Egyptians, Japanese, the whole gamut—performing all around the lagoon the whole day," Taylor recalls. "When they came together for the dedication, they all had brought water from the rivers of their countries, which they poured into the big Epcot fountain."

His next stop was the Creative Entertainment Division as manager of special events, both on and off the Disney World property. Involved were such diverse assignments as the Super Bowl half-time show, the Indianapolis 500 festival, opening ceremonies for the Pan Am Games, opening a Disney retail store in a shopping mall or sending Mickey to the Special Olympics.

He became manager of show development for Disney World, then in 1988 was assigned to the embryonic Euro Disneyland as director of the Entertainment Division. The project was

"I had never been a stage manager, but Disney is great about bringing people along through the process, letting them learn the system, promoting from within."



Taylor appeared in a number of OU musical theater and dramatic productions. Above he plays the role of Curley to Patti Breeden's Laurie in the Norman Players production of "Oklahoma!," which toured the state in 1970. In OU summer repertoire theater, he had roles in "The Tempest," "Night of the Iguana" and "Anything Goes" with Ed Harris, who left school to pursue a successful stage and film career.

exciting but taxing. Unlike the more-or-less franchise arrangement at Tokyo Disneyland, where the parent corporation retains creative control and the Japanese manage, Euro Disneyland is a more traditional partnership requiring skillful liaison work and diplomacy.

Taylor traveled constantly, spending at least half the year in France, and eventually would have moved his family there for three or four years. But in the meantime, Andy was in Orlando with three-year-old Blake and baby Zane, and back in Enid, Taylor's father had just died.

"What may be right for your career isn't always right for your family," Taylor says, so he returned to Disney World as head of the casting department, then manager of creative show development for all Disney attractions worldwide.

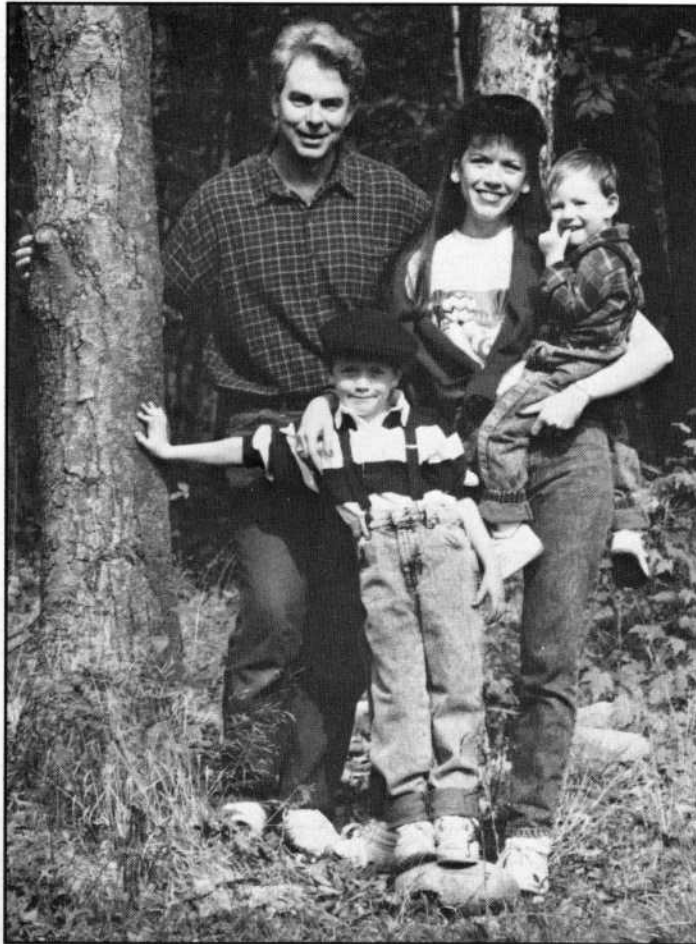
Although he may be in a more exotic setting, the 42-year-old Taylor is determined to give his family the quality of life he experienced in Enid. "My folks were the world's best,"

he says earnestly. "My brother is a captain in the Navy and has been all over the world, but we still think of Oklahoma as home; it's an amazing place.

"I was in the high school chorus with a young lady named Leona Mitchell," he muses. "Today she is about as famous as they get in opera, but she's still the sweetest person in the world, still goes back to Enid, where she had 10 brothers and sisters."

Mitchell was not Taylor's only now-famous classmate. His colleague in OU drama productions, Ed Harris, is an award-winning stage actor whose many film roles have included that of John Glenn in "The Right Stuff."

"We were in 'The Tempest' in summer repertoire theater, and 'Night of



Rich and Andrea Taylor, above with sons Blake, 6, and Zane, 3, found that to have the kind of family life they both wanted required some compromise with the demands of their entertainment careers. For now, Andy sings part-time, and someday, if she makes it big, Rich will be content to retire and become her manager.

the Iguana' and 'Anything Goes.' I was a young character actor, and Eddie always ended up with the bit parts. So one day he said, 'I'm going to California,' and he left. He was going to be an actor."

Taylor and his Sooner friends still network. Steve Hetherington of Edmond, an old Sooner Scandals director, and set designer Orvis Rigsby, who now lives in Florida, have had assignments for Disney. He keeps in touch with old Betas like Democratic Congressman Mike Synar and attorney Marc Nuttle, former executive director of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

"I've got it all covered," he quips. "No matter who's in power, if I need a White House tour, I think I can call the right guy."

If Taylor misses the performing side of entertainment for which he was known at OU, he has managed to adjust. "You miss doing things that you think you're good at, that gave you pleasure—which performing did. But you have to give up a lot to be a successful performer; you have to have that killer instinct. There will always be somebody better or younger or sharper or with better timing, who's going to come along and take that job from you."

Although their boys still come first, Andy Taylor has been able to maintain a part-time career as an entertainer. Disney, like Waring, had restrictions on married couples working in the same division; she eventually was able to appear in several shows, however, including the original "Top of the World" production. Now she is a featured vocalist two nights a week at the five-star Hyatt Grand Cypress Resort near Orlando.

"She is a tremendous performer," Taylor says proudly. "She is beautiful, sings great—and she needs that

outlet. And if she makes it big, I can retire and be her agent. I'd do that too."

Barring that happy circumstance, Rich Taylor seems to have found the best of all possible worlds. "I love the fact that I'm still making a living at show business," he insists. "Just being with Disney is a kick; it's a thrill. You say the name Disney, and it means quality. Being a part of that makes you feel good.

"We're entertaining more and more people; the movies are hits; the home video is great; we've become masters at marketing. We're headed down a track where nothing seems impossible."

Perhaps it is true, as Walt believed, that with a lot of hard work—and a good sense of timing—"every dream that you dream can come true." 