

Another Play Forthcoming From Jack Of All Trades Ron Scott Stevens

Written by Robert Mladinich

Wednesday, 27 January 2010 18:00

Boxing meets Broadway in “The Cutting Den,” the fifth play to be written and produced by Ron Scott Stevens, who is widely credited for resurrecting boxing in New York while serving as that state’s Athletic Commission Chairman from 2002 to 2006.

According to a press release, the play, which is directed by Richard Caliban and opens on Thursday, February 4, at the Soho Playhouse in downtown Manhattan, is “a modern day flood story set in a Brooklyn barber shop/ bookie parlor during the first week of a Major League baseball season. When debts go unpaid, sparks fly until the shop burns red.”

Like the previous works of Stevens, this play is full of ambiguities, moral and otherwise. His first, “Three of us Left,” which was produced in the early 1980s, dealt with the debilitating impact a gambler had on his family.

“Lippe,” which was produced in 1985, starred renowned character Bill Hickey in the title role of Lippe Breidbart, the manager and advisor to troubled heavyweight contender Tommy “Hurricane” Jackson, who challenged Floyd Patterson for the heavyweight title in 1957.

“Red, Green and Yellow (An Urban Myth)” was a four-character play centering on the personal and professional relationship between two complex men, one a drug dealer, the other plagued by immense anger issues, who make their living driving the same New York City taxicab on different shifts. The men, and their women, wind up at a surprise party where, Stevens says, “the bleep hits the fan.”

His last show, “Cherry’s Patch,” which also ran at the Soho Playhouse in 2006, chronicles the military tribunal type “trial” of fire officials after a Christmas Eve inferno leaves a beloved captain dead. One of the main characters in the play, Elbert Cherry, is reflective of Vernon Cherry, a New York City firefighter who, prior to losing his life on 9/11, used to sing the national anthem at pro boxing shows promoted by Stevens.

Among the stars of “The Cutting Den” is former WBO middleweight champion Doug DeWitt, who Stevens says brings the same intensity to the stage that he did to his memorable ring battles against James Toney, Milton McCrory, Nigel Benn, Matthew Hilton and Robbie Sims. DeWitt beat out four more experienced actors for the coveted role.

“Very few people realize the dedication it takes to be a successful boxer, much less a world champion,” said Stevens. “Doug was a very hard worker as a fighter, and he brings that same dedication to acting. He knows what it takes to be successful, and he’s willing to put in the work. He really wants to be a movie star, and he is not afraid to do what it takes to get there. This is a great opportunity for him to hone his craft.”

The 63-year-old Stevens has been doing what it takes for quite some time. To say he has a wealth of life experience would be a gross understatement.

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He was born in Manhattan and raised in Brooklyn, Queens, and North Miami Beach. He attended but never finished law school. As a young man, he lived in Woodstock, New York, where he worked in radio and television.

Returning to New York City in 1980, he had no idea how he was going to re-invent himself. Never lacking in ambition, he drove a cab and wrote plays. He also got involved in boxing, as a ring announcer, magazine writer and editor, and later as a matchmaker and promoter.

He was the principal in several different promotional companies, including Powerhouse, Stillman's Gym Inc., Star Bouts, and the Dukes of Boxing. Among the future champions he promoted were Lou Del Valle, Kevin Kelley, Jake Rodriguez, and Regilio Tuir.

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He had exclusive promotional agreements with former junior middleweight titlist Verno Phillips and cruiserweight belt holder Robert Daniels.

As a matchmaker for Cedric Kushner Promotions from 1998 to 2002, Stevens worked night and day, traveling the country, filling cards for shows and venues large and small. He was instrumental to the success of CKP's Heavyweight Explosion series, where he garnered much appreciation for fighters like Frankie Swindell of Tennessee, Ron Guerrero of Texas, and Sedreck Fields of Georgia, who despite having nominal records still possessed gargantuan hearts.

"They could conceivably upset anyone on a good night," said Stevens. "Guerrero came to New York and fought Jameel McCline to a draw. Fields beat former champion Al Cole in ten rounds on Long Island."

For Stevens the most challenging part of being matchmaker was satisfying the needs of so many entities. In a sport where he says the availability of fighters is a lot scarcer than it was decades ago, matchmakers must get two fighters, as well as two trainers and managers, to agree to a match. Once that is done, the promoter still has to approve it.

In the event that time permits an undercard bout to be screened on television, the matchup must also satisfy television executives who don't always understand the nuances of the sport.

"The television people want competitive fights, even in four and six rounders, and I don't blame them," said Stevens.

"But it's not easy to get an 8-0 guy to fight a 7-0 guy. The TV people might accept a 4-4 guy, if it's a good 4-4. There could also be hometown issues or size issues. Look at Manny Pacquiao, who wouldn't fight Yuri Foreman because Yuri's too tall. There is a lot of work that goes into solidifying a fight. Most outsiders can't begin to understand that."

Because Stevens had built his stellar boxing career from the ground up, he was widely viewed as the best man for the job when then Governor George Pataki named him New York State Athletic Commission Chairman.

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This occurred despite the fact that Stevens is a lifelong Democrat and Pataki was a highly regarded Republican. When Eliot Spitzer replaced Pataki and asked for resignations from numerous agency heads, Stevens' held on to his job. It was only after Spitzer was forced to resign amid a sex scandal that the new governor, David Patterson, replaced him with Melvina Lathan, who is the current commissioner.

Under his stewardship, boxing in New York flourished, with the number of pro shows going up incrementally each year. When he first arrived, there had been only 17 pro shows the year before. When he departed, the number stood at 40. Despite the growth, there had been no fatalities or life-threatening injuries incurred by any fighter on his watch.

There was controversy, however, when Stevens placed Evander Holyfield on medical suspension after a lackluster performance against Larry Donald.

"There was a lot of misconception about what really happened," said Stevens. "The fact is that Holyfield was outpunched 4-1, and he lost 10 out of 12 rounds. This bad performance followed three previously bad performances. After what I witnessed against Donald, where Holyfield wouldn't let his hands go, I suggested he be suspended until he could be fully tested to see if anything was wrong."

To be fair, and in order to not take away Holyfield's livelihood, Stevens arranged for a sophisticated set of tests that would be paid for by the state. If Holyfield passed them, the suspension would be immediately lifted. Holyfield stalled in taking the tests, but when he did he passed them, although not with flying colors.

Stevens saw fit to lift the medical suspension, which by virtue of the Muhammad Ali Act precluded him from fighting anywhere in the country. He put him on administrative suspension, which meant he could fight in other jurisdictions if he passed local tests.

It was only much later that Holyfield admitted having a shoulder problem that precluded him from throwing punches with the intensity that he used to. Had he disclosed that ailment earlier, much of the hoopla could have been avoided.

"I think we handled it the right way," said Stevens. "Evander could have been boxing much sooner if he chose to. As a commissioner, you often have to protect the fighters from themselves."

Most recently, Stevens was one of the four finalists to be interviewed for an executive position on the California State Athletic Commission. No decision has been reached as of yet, but he would love to throw his hat back into the boxing ring. He wholeheartedly believes he could do as much good on the West Coast as he did on the East Coast.

"The safety of the fighter always comes first," said Stevens. "I expect the referees and the judges to be on the money, and in most cases they are. It's important to allow the drama to remain, but you must keep the event as safe as possible. When in doubt, I'd much rather see a fight stopped sooner rather than later."

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Whether or not Stevens brings his fine administrative skills to California is yet to be seen. But what is looming on the immediate horizon is the production of yet another of his plays that he has poured his heart and soul into.

As a longtime boxing person, he defends the sport's rank and file players as being among the finest and most selfless people he's ever known. He said trainers often spend months working with a fighter, with their only monetary payoff being 10 percent of a \$600 or \$1,000 purse.

And despite the seemingly noirish quality of his urban morality tales, he said the recurring themes in all of his plays is far from dark.

"I realize a dark side exists in the world, but I believe in the ultimate goodness of man," he explained. "This is not to say I don't plant my characters in dangerous terrain, but there is always a sense of hope. If there is a recurring theme in my work, I hope that is it."

"The Cutting Den" will run from February 4-21. The Soho Playhouse is located at 15 Vandam Street, New York, NY 10013, phone 212-691-1555. Tickets range from \$30 to \$55 and can be purchased by visiting www.sohoplayhouse.com.

Also check out: www.thecuttingdenoffbroadway.com.

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