

Theatrical Outfit's 'Big Fish' puts magic onstage

ARTS & THEATER

By [Bo Emerson](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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"Big Fish" is the story of a young man trying to decide if his father's life is a collection of myths, fables and outright lies, or if there is a kernel of truth in his dad's tale-spinning.

Travis Smith, who plays voluble traveling salesman Edward Bloom in the [Theatrical Outfit](#) musical production, opening Dec. 1, can sympathize.

Smith's own father, Jerold Smith, once a buttoned-up risk manager at a Winston-Salem, N.C., hospital and now a long-haired natural healer, experienced a vision foretelling Travis' birth when the father was stationed in Portugal with the Air Force, 42-plus years ago.

The elder Smith awoke in the barracks to see an old man in a white beard and a lab coat who told him his son would be born soon. The bearded man then melted into the air, Cheshire Cat-style, until there was only an outline left.

Jerold called his wife Billie back in the U.S. She'd awakened in the night and seen an evanescent woman with the same message. She'd been unable to conceive until then. But, after Jerold returned, she became pregnant that summer.



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“I grew up with that,” Travis Smith said. “I connect with that.”

Life, it seems, can be just as surreal as musical theater.

“Big Fish” is derived from the 1998 novel by Daniel Wallace, which begat the [2003 film by Tim Burton](#). It’s a story that walks through a world of Southern-fried magical realism, peopled with giants, witches, mermaids and such.



Travis Smith plays the role of tale-telling fabulist Edward Bloom in the Theatrical Outfit production of “Big Fish.” (Theatrical Outfit)

The 2013 musical (with music and lyrics by Andrew Lippa and a book by John August) includes 18 songs that amplify the tale, and the new production by Theatrical Outfit adds a little stage magic, including a beautiful gold-leafed portal, a revolving set, a river that runs across the stage, flying fish and a rain of daffodils.

A twisty path brought Smith to this role. He was a big fish back home in Winston-Salem — the pitcher on the baseball team, a singer in a rock band and a performer in productions at his high school, the North Carolina School of the Arts. (He liked Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams. Musical theater was not his thing. “I didn’t buy it. Except Sondheim.”)

Moving to Atlanta in 2004 was a bit of a bring-down; he sold cars for a year, and was bad at it. Then, he used his guitar talents in the Hank Williams musical “Lost Highway,” and became wrapped up for three years in the Alliance Theatre’s pioneering production of the John Mellencamp-Stephen King musical “Ghost Brothers of Darkland County.”

Under the influence of Theatrical Outfit’s artistic director, Tom Key, who cast him as John the Baptist in “Godspell,” Smith began to change his mind about musical theater.

In this show, he plays an Edward Bloom of three different ages, but he doesn’t use latex foam or any other makeup devices. “Just my voice and my body,” and perhaps a cane. Other members of the 12-person cast play multiple roles, something that impressed writer Daniel Wallace when he visited Atlanta earlier this month to help promote the show.

“It’s a creative challenge and physical challenge — becoming two, three or four people over several hours,” Wallace said from his Chapel Hill, N.C., home. “It’s a testament to the talent of the people involved that they were able to do that.”

It takes talent, and stamina. “Unquestionably, it’s like being a professional athlete,” said Smith, a well-put-together 42-year-old with a crinkly smile. Of singing his half-dozen songs every night, he said, “After a show, there is no going out for drinks. I have to get home, have a chamomile and get to bed, so I can have a voice the next day.”

The sleeping is intermittent these days with a new baby in the house, named Jesse Jerold Smith.

“I had a son born seven weeks ago,” Smith said, “and I’m starting to understand why it’s going to be important for me to teach my son the value of storytelling: It’s all we do! It’s how we teach, how we pass on information. It’s the most valuable thing we do as human beings. If you find meaning in it, who gives a (hoot) if it’s true?”

A song called “How it Ends” that Edward Bloom sings toward the end of “Big Fish” contains some lyrics that, for Smith, sum up the bittersweet flavor of the show:

I know I wasn’t perfect

I know my life was small

I know that I pretended that

I knew it all

But when you tell my story

And I hope somebody does

Remember me as something

Bigger than I was

IF YOU GO

“Big Fish.” Dec. 1-18. 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays. \$20-\$50. Theatrical Outfit, Balzer Theater at Herren’s, 84 Luckie St. N.W., Atlanta. 678-528-1500, theatricaloutfit.org. At 12:30 p.m. Dec. 11, there will be a community dialogue in the Balzer Theater at Herren’s, open to any patron with a ticket to any show.