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Jeff Daniels comes to Durham to tell a few stories

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By Cliff Bellamy

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DURHAM -- Film enthusiasts know actor Jeff Daniels' extensive body of work in that medium -- from "Terms of Endearment" to "Dumb and

Dumber" to "The Squid and the Whale." To Daniels, film is just one way in which he practices what he considers his real job -- that of storyteller.

Sometimes he tells stories as an actor in film or plays. Other times Daniels himself is the playwright -- he has written 14 plays, many of them for The Purple Rose Theatre, the nonprofit theater he established in Chelsea, Michigan.

Wednesday, he will tell stories through another medium when he performs some of his original songs on the guitar at the Carolina Theatre. Daniels has released four recordings -- "Live & Unplugged," "Grandfather's Hat," "Together Again" (a collaboration with song writer Jonathan Hogan), and the most recent release "Live at The Purple Rose."

Writing songs and playing guitar give him a level of creative control he does not find in other media, he said during a phone interview last week. "You get to a point [in acting] where, as the agents say, you're always going to work," he said. The challenge then becomes keeping work interesting, he said.

"I want to do things that challenge me, that interest me. ...To be honest, I'd be very happy with the guitar, touring around ... to be completely in control creatively," he said. "That's the purest creative thing I do is walking out with the guitar and doing that," he said. "When you walk out with a guitar and everything is on

you to deliver a complete evening, that's a challenge and it keeps me interested."

Daniels' songs sometimes chronicle events. One example he cited is "Dirty Harry Blues," about his experiences working with director Clint Eastwood on the film "Blood Work." "There are other songs where I kind of create a story out of elements, much like writing a play," Daniels said. Like plays, songs can emerge from "a character or two, or an idea " He calls the process "that 24-7 writer's radar."

His love of the guitar began in 1976, when he moved to New York City to work as an actor. He taught himself to play using guitarist and educator Stefan Grossman's guitar tablature method books. "Looking back," Daniels said, "I needed something to keep me sane ... something I can keep control of. In acting, you're always waiting for the phone to ring," and in some years, you take the best work you are offered. Learning guitar and writing songs out of his experiences helped him through the early lean years, he said.

In his songs, Daniels finds the humor and irony in the everyday, as evidenced on "Live at the Purple Rose." "Daddy's Little Daughter" is about the joys and pain of teaching a young girl to drive. "When You're Fifty" is a whimsical take on the reality of aging. In other songs, he finds humor in being a public figure. In "Here's a Little Somethin," he tells a story about the difficulty of shopping for Christmas, and noticing other customers looking his way -- including the man in the red suit and white beard.

The role is reversed in a story Daniels tells in his performance of George Harrison's "Here Comes the Sun." Daniels played the part of Ray Macklin in the 1989 film "Checking Out," produced by Handmade Films, which Harrison ran. Harrison came to the set one day, and visited an awe-struck Daniels on set. At Daniels' request, Harrison signed his guitar, and played "Here Comes the Sun" on the instrument. (Because of security concerns, Durham audiences will not see or hear that guitar, but they can hear the guitar on the CD.)

Writing plays comes closest to the artistic freedom of song writing, Daniels said. "You kind of give yourself over to a director," he said. At The Purple Rose Theatre, Daniels said he does not attend rehearsals during the first weeks. He attends later rehearsals to fine-tune, "but usually not too much," he said. The theater itself is "designed within an inch of what we do and how we want to do it."

At his theater, he most enjoys writing plays related to the experiences of people in Michigan, where he was born and raised. The theater's mission is to produce new American plays, and offer opportunities for Midwest theater professionals. "I want to write about things they know... I love doing that because then it becomes their play." His new play, "Best of Friends," which opened this month at the theater, is set in a small town in Michigan and is a comedy about the longtime friendship of two married couples.

At Wednesday's concert, Daniels will bring about 25 songs, and perform about a dozen of them. The set list varies, depending on the mood of the audience and whether the audience is more interested in his guitar playing, or having a good laugh. "You just kind of gauge it," he said. "I'll change it up for me, too, just to keep me interested."

GO & DO

WHAT: Jeff Daniels, in a one-man show with his guitar

WHEN: Wednesday, 8 p.m.

WHERE: The Carolina Theatre, 309 W. Morgan St., Durham

ADMISSION: For tickets, visit www.carolinatheatre.org or call 560-3030.

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