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PROFILE | Coleman Ray Clark has turned childhood dreams of the stage into successful career

Like so many kids, Coleman Ray Clark dreamed of a life in theater. Like so few of them, he is successfully navigating that life in New York and, this summer, in Northwest Arkansas. *by*

[Becca Martin-Brown](#) | July 23, 2023 at 1:00 a.m.



"Every once in a while you get an opportunity to work with someone who challenges you to become an even better version of yourself," says Kenny Timbrel, who plays Sweeney in the AOP production of "Sweeney Todd." "Coleman is the director who did just that for me. His vision for Sweeney has been crystal clear, and the 'execution of that vision has been nothing short of amazing." (NWA Democrat-Gazette/Andy Shupe)

TheatreSquared founder Bob Ford remembers meeting Coleman Ray Clark in a T2 summer camp when he was just barely in elementary school.

"I was directing a scene from Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' with the youngest kids," he recalls. "We were throwing ourselves back and forth across the room to simulate a ship being tossed by a raging sea. I felt a tug on my shirt. It's Coleman. He's like 6. He says, 'Mr. Bob, would it be more realistic if, when I get to the edge, I lean over like there's a railing there?' And I thought, 'Uh-oh, this kid's going to be a director.'"

Not long after, Clark was cast in Ford's adaptation of "It's A Wonderful Life" at T2 and "held his own with highly trained and experienced actors."

"It wasn't just me," Ford says. "Everyone saw the potential in him, so much so that the saying went, 'Stay on this kid's good side -- he'll be hiring you one day.'"

That day came sooner than anyone but Clark could have imagined. He was a sophomore at Fayetteville High School in 2012 when he started his own company, New Threshold Theatre, with friends Reed Carson and Jacob Benson.

"We saw a need for an outlet for students to create theater together and call the shots," Clark says. "We had student directors, designers, stage managers, box office managers, marketers and writers. By the time we graduated high school, New Threshold Theatre had produced seven full-length plays and musicals.

"That experience was critical for me as a director moving forward. I was walking into college with real experience."

After graduating from Fayetteville High School in 2015, Clark attended the University of North Carolina School of the Arts for one year before transferring to Marymount Manhattan College in New York City. Timothy Douglas was a guest director and acting instructor that year at UNC.

"Ever the industrious soul, he took the initiative and decided to sit in on my rehearsals of 'Hedda Gabler,' which I was directing there," Douglas says. "Though we barely talked, I was always hyper-aware of his focus, attention and genuine interest in the process, and fully enjoyed having his enthusiastic energy in the room."

But he also found out that Clark wasn't short on his own opinions, even as a freshman.

"I was hanging out in the lobby and from behind the pillar I was leaning against, I heard Coleman's voice sharing his views, and dissecting -- with great intelligence and artistic simpatico -- the deeper meanings of the play and production," Douglas says. "It was a vivid articulation of a director's insight -- he was not parroting mine; he was totally expressing thoughts and opinions based on his own sense of

directing. I actually learned a thing or two about my own production that was revealed during my eavesdropping.

"I knew, despite how early he was in his artistic journey, that Coleman was most definitely touched with a gift for storytelling on the stage."

STARTING YOUNG

Clark was born in Little Rock and moved to Springdale for kindergarten through second grade. He was in Fayetteville for the rest of his school years, attending Happy Hollow Elementary, McNair Middle School -- where he staged his first play in front of a real audience, he points out -- then Woodland Junior High and Fayetteville High School.

His father was involved in various small businesses, and his mother was a diabetes educator who worked at Washington Regional Medical Center for many years. Clark was the middle child of three boys.

"Although I wouldn't call my family 'artsy,' my brothers are both musical," he says. "Our home was lively and always a pass-through for friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors. My parents have always valued community and creating memories with whatever we had. Ultimately, I think that's where my sense of directing comes from. 'What can I make with what I have?' To me, that's always the best way to tell a great story."

Clark says his first time on stage was as a zebra in a summer camp at the Arts Center of the Ozarks in Springdale, but he had been re-creating TV shows and movies as stage plays from the time he can remember.

"I would play all of the characters -- or attempt to cast my brothers when I could -- and design the sets, props, lighting, and costumes myself," he says. "I remember being inspired by big Hollywood action movies because of the level of detail that went into creating worlds on screen that were entirely fake in real life. I repeatedly watched the behind-the-scenes to learn how the filmmakers used their craft to transport us to new worlds. I was obsessed with seeing all of the elements come together to tell a story."

Clark considers his role in that TheatreSquared production of "It's A Wonderful Life" as his first real job.

"This experience taught me what the job of a professional actor looks like," he says. "I was amazed by the actors around me. I will never forget starting rehearsal, and on the first day, Bryce Kempf, who still works at T2, was fully off-book (memorized). That impressed me, and I wanted to be like him.

"I didn't know what it was like to show up to 'work' and for that work to be in theater. They showed up, and gave it their all, but it was work. I saw that people around me made careers from acting and

directing. Knowing there is a path forward in the arts was essential to my success."

Although acting was his first love, Clark admits he much prefers directing now.

"At first, I thought I would work on screen," he says. "That was, until I found theater. I like the interaction with the audience, which you miss when working in film and TV. As I grew up, I continued to act and started designing sets, lights, and sound until I found directing, which merges all those skills into one position."

CITY LIFE

Clark fell in love with New York City after transferring to Marymount Manhattan College for his sophomore year. He says he studied not just theater but business, marketing, sound design, puppetry, world history and more.

"I also committed to seeing as much theater as possible while I was in New York," he says. "I would get the cheapest seats to be in the room. New York City became my home."

Clark says even now there is no typical day in his life in New York, but "on a perfect day, you'll find me eating a bagel in Central Park before getting work done in a coffee shop or WeWork, then heading to rehearsal."

Chris Morey, general manager at 101 Productions Ltd., met Clark when he applied for a general manager assistant position.

"This was in 2021 when Broadway theater, which had been shut down for over a year, was starting to come back," Morey says. "On the [Zoom] interview, Coleman let us know he was a director, but he had some experience working for a not-for-profit theater and wanted to learn more about the business side of commercial theater."

At the time, 101 Productions was working to reopen Broadway, U.S. touring and London West End companies of the musical "Dear Evan Hansen," which Morey says were all in performance at the time of the shutdown in March 2020.

"It turned out that reopening the live performance industry after a pandemic was difficult work," he admits. "Covid had not gone away, employees were demanding a shift in the balance of power with their employers and the cost of doing business was escalating at the same time audiences had not yet demonstrated they were interested in returning to the theater. ... Many industry veterans were choosing to leave the business rather than return in such circumstances.

"Into our office came Coleman, with no prior commercial management experience and he embraced these challenges and worked alongside us with enthusiasm," Morey says. "Coleman was smart, curious, creative, personable, funny and worked tirelessly. ... He jumped into all projects no matter how small.

"I recall finding him in the office very late one night helping one of our managers create accounting reports required -- we had just learned -- under the Economic Recovery Act," Morey says. "I didn't even know Coleman knew how to use Quickbooks, but here was this young director at his desk at 10 p.m. playing with financial reports and, ultimately, getting the work done before the deadline.

"Ironically, I don't know Coleman as a director," Morey adds, "but the curiosity, intelligence, humility, sensitivity, professionalism and attention to detail he displayed in our office are all qualities possessed by the best directors."

ATTEND THE TALE

Clark has been back in Northwest Arkansas this summer to direct the Arts One Presents production of "Sweeney Todd," and he says it's "almost impossible to say no to anyone who wants to do ... one of the greatest musicals ever written."

Clark has set Stephen Sondheim's dark comedy, which premiered on Broadway in 1979, in a shopping mall in a community more like London, Ark., than London, England. It's a concept he says he's been dreaming about for some time.

"'Sweeney Todd' is one of the first musicals I purchased the script of," he says. "I think I first bought it from a bookstore in middle school. I remember looking at the photos in the printed script and thinking about how gorgeous and humongous the musical was. Those thoughts are still here, but I feel more equipped to handle them now.

"Getting to try a hyper-localized 'Sweeney Todd' in Arkansas really is a dream come true. I hope this concept allows the audience to empathize with the characters, to understand their pains."

It is also, he says, the longest musical he has ever directed, coming in right around three hours and using "all of the same music, lyrics, and scenes in the Broadway and professional productions."

"The show involves a lot of dark themes but also has a good bit of comedy and lighthearted wackiness," Clark muses. "It requires actors and singers who can handle the weight and difficulty of the material. I have to say... we've found them. These actors are some of the best at tackling this material efficiently and gracefully.

"The scope of the show is the most challenging aspect. For each scene and character, there are even more decisions to make offstage with props, costumes, lighting, and sound. ... I have to say, the reward of committing to complex material is that when all of the elements come together, it's magical."

Clark adds that even with more than two dozen actors on stage and another two dozen musicians in the orchestra, "I think my nerves are better suited for directing. I prefer to sit in the back of the audience and for no one to know who I am. I like experiencing the show I helped create with the audience."

"Every once in a while you get an opportunity to work with someone who challenges you to become an even better version of yourself," says Kenny Timbrel, who plays Sweeney. "Coleman is the director who did just that for me. His vision for Sweeney has been crystal clear, and the 'execution' of that vision has been nothing short of amazing.

"I have learned so much about my own approach to acting. Coleman meets you where you are and gives you tools to elevate your craft to new levels."

"Working with Mr. Coleman has been a fantastic experience since the time of auditions," says 13-year-old Asher Jordan of Fayetteville, who plays Tobias Ragg, the youngest character in "Sweeney Todd." "As a young actor, watching him direct such a large-scale production at this point in his life makes me believe I can achieve my theater goals as well."

"I like to think about directing for theater like directing a circus -- I have never directed a circus, but I would love to," Clark concludes. "It's about showing off the company's talents and producing shock and awe for the audience. That means each actor brings a specific ingredient, but no one is supposed to bring it all. It's also like cooking with all the right spices!"

After "Sweeney Todd," Clark will return to New York, where he's directing "The SpongeBob Musical" at Marymount Manhattan College, his alma mater. Asked to look further into the future -- five or maybe 10 years -- his immediate answer is, "Oh. I really don't know."

"Not because I don't dream about it," he adds, "but because I prefer to live in the moment. Maybe directing in New York City. Maybe running a theater company somewhere. Maybe working on films. As an artist, I'm driven by new challenges. As long as I'm learning and growing, I'll do that anywhere I can."

And if New Yorkers wonder about taking a chance on a young director from Arkansas, Bob Ford encourages them to "check your bias."

"Coleman is one of a whole lineup of young artists who give the lie to the utterly false notion that being from Arkansas is a liability," he says. "Quite the opposite. There's amazing training and productivity here. Coleman walks into a room and stuff starts to happen. Automatically."



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Coleman Ray Clark is directing "Sweeney Todd" this summer for Arts One Presents. He is pictured with his wife Bailey Lee.

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None

Best advice I ever received: I continue to soak up advice and I hope I continue to learn always. When thinking about the best piece of advice, I actually think about a period of my life in junior high and early high school when the theater folks in Arkansas were pouring into me about the power of creativity. I was brought up in a "yes, and" culture. That attitude and commitment is fundamental to how I make theater.

If I was stranded on a desert island, I'd have to have: If I could bring one book to a deserted island, it would be the complete works of William Shakespeare.

Something you may be surprised to learn about me: My favorite place to be in the whole world is inside of a theater. I love seeing the lights and the curtains hanging down and the audience seats. I've joked about building a theater in my basement someday. When I get a basement!

If I had an extra hour in the day, I'd: meditate more.

If my life were written for the stage: I would pick Andrew Garfield to play me. Mostly because I love seeing Andrew Garfield on stage.

I want to be known for: my work in life and onstage.

A phrase that sums me up: I would hope people say that I'm a visionary, and that I'm fun to be around.

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