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Oney plays starring as theatre arts professor

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When Jay Oney graduated from Furman in 1978 with a degree in drama, he went on to earn a master’s degree from Penn State — and then to pursue a career in acting.

For much of the 1980s he lived the nomadic life of a journeyman actor, finding parts where he could and making due with odd jobs during the slack times. It was in many ways an exciting period for him, as he was able to travel, polish his craft and perform a variety of roles.

But the “big break” never came — unless you count his walk-on on “One Life to Live.”

By 1987 he was living in a small apartment in New York City, waiting tables at night, auditioning during the day and landing few parts. Suddenly, at the age of 30, the glamorous ideal had given way to reality.

“I knew that I just had to get on with my life,” he says. “I had always been interested in the academic side of theatre, so that’s what I decided to do.”

He enrolled at Ohio State University to pursue a doctorate. There he also met his future wife, Carol Sutton. In 1993, after spending a year in Japan teaching English to school children, the couple moved to Greenville, his hometown. He landed an adjunct teaching job at Furman and began assisting with local productions.

In 1996, he was asked to join the Furman faculty full time. It proved to be a fortunate decision, for both parties.

Today, besides being a sharp-shooting star of the tri-weekly faculty-staff basketball games, Oney is chair of the theatre arts department and a 2007 recipient of the Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching. Students and colleagues applaud his humorous, insightful lectures and ability to work with students as both a mentor and a creative collaborator.

Theatre arts professor Rhett Bryson, who taught and directed Oney during his undergraduate days, lauds his colleague’s “unbridled enthusiasm and keen sense for what’s funny. He has just the right amount of humor and seriousness and creates a marvelously welcoming atmosphere for students.”

Oney is also known for going the extra mile on students’ behalf.

After twice being turned down for the University of Georgia’s doctoral program in theatre, Kristin Stultz ’99 turned to Oney for help with her application. “He did it all in a busy time made more harried by both a teaching load and rehearsals for Furman’s fall production,” she says. The result: She is now enrolled in the program.

“I am still learning from him,” she says. “Dr. Oney is a professor for life.”

In addition to directing at least one production each year, Oney finds time to feed his acting jones on occasion. He has won rave reviews at Furman for performances ranging from Elwood P. Dowd in “Harvey” to Prospero in “The Tempest.”

Those moments under the lights, he says, remind him of the excitement of his younger days — until he recalls the hardships and the dry spells. As he says, “I don’t miss it a whole lot, but I miss it sometimes.”

The theatre’s loss, though, is Furman’s gain.

— JOHN ROBERTS