

Take 5 with MaryJane



Reporter MaryJane Slaby asks arts folks for the scoop on their latest projects.

In the hot seat: Danny Russel

Known as the “Hoosier Poet,” James Whitcomb Riley helped make Midwestern literature famous in the late 1800s.

And Danny Russel keeps Riley’s spirit alive by impersonating the author in performances throughout the state. Although his shows are geared to fulfilling education requirements for Indiana fourth-graders, he said, people of all ages are entertained by Riley’s work.

Russel will perform at the Fountain County Clerk’s Building, 516 Fourth St. in Covington at 2:30 p.m. Saturday. The show is free; in the case of extreme heat, it will be moved to the Covington United Methodist Church at 419 Washington St.

So what can an audience expect? Here, Russel shared just how he went from an actor to impersonating Riley.



Danny Russel is a James Whitcomb Riley impersonator who performs throughout the state. PHOTO PROVIDED

1 What made you decide to be James Whitcomb Riley, of all the historical figures you could be?

Stumbling upon Mr. Riley was entirely a happy accident in 1997. I was merely another typical unemployed actor who was thrilled to be cast in an original play all about the Hoosier poet’s life and career.

We opened to wild applause and ran for three solid months, playing to thousands of students across the state, and our production was such an overwhelming success that we staged it again in 1998, 1999 — the 150th anniversary of Riley’s birth — and 2002.

I was so enamored, amazed, amused and inspired that I had no choice but to develop a one-man show for touring purposes.

2 How did you learn about Riley?

I’m pleased to own an original set of all 1,044 poems but to also absorb every aspect of his life. I’ve done exhaustive reading of biographies as well as Riley’s personal correspondence. Many of his original letters and other writings are housed at Indiana University’s Lilly Library. I’ve also visited his childhood home in Greenfield, his final residence on Lockerbie Street in Indianapolis, his grave site and, of course, the hospital that bears his name.

3 What do you wear to your performances?

Many impersonators portray Riley as an older, venerable man, but I take a different approach by wearing a multicolored suit to represent his younger bohemian life on the medicine show circuit.

4 Do you bring anything to your performances?

My props include a now-rare book, passed down by family members, published in 1908. The artwork is simply dazzling and it contains his most famous — and my personal favorite — poem, “Little Orphant Annie.” Everyone seems to know those immortal words, “The gobble-uns’ll git ye ef you don’t watch out!”

5 What are your goals when you perform?

Today, my goal remains the same as it was when I first hit the road 10 years ago: to entertain with hilarious boyhood tales, to teach about his remarkable achievements and to keep alive Riley’s memory and legacy.