

# Interest in Florida history gives Ben Gunter role at Mission

By Randi Atwood  
Special to the Democrat

Ben Gunter is a rare breed in Tallahassee — an actor and musician who manages to make a living doing what he loves.

Not surprisingly, his interest in performing began early. Gunter made his theatrical debut playing a magician in a first-grade play. In fourth grade, his school librarian told his class stories that were not the standard fairy tales.

"I vividly remember her telling us about Aztec sacrifices," says Gunter. "I acted that out at home with my brothers and sisters. I was the sacrifice. My grandfather had made each of us stools engraved with our names, and I insisted on being sacrificed on my own stool."

Both Gunter's parents are musicians, so he and his siblings learned to play the piano at a young age and sang in choirs as soon as they were old enough to carry a tune. His father was one of the founders of

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Gaines Street Tree Wall Unveiling  
**When:** 10 a.m. Thursday  
**Where:** Gaines Street between Duval and Bronough streets  
**Contact:** Call COCA at 224-2500.

**What:** Gaines Street Block Party "G-eopardy" Game  
**When:** 6 to 10 p.m. Friday  
**Where:** Gaines Street between Bronough Street and Railroad Avenue, Boulevard and Burnette parks  
**Admission:** Free  
**Contact:** Visit the Gaines Street Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/GainesStreet](http://www.facebook.com/GainesStreet)

FSU's opera program, so he saw and performed in many operas and musicals growing up.

Gunter spent time studying at the University of Toronto and earning his living as a freelance performer and church musician. But all his performance work was extracurricular.

"In Toronto it was fine to spend your spare time performing, but in your professional time you had to be producing credible scholarship," says Gunter.



Man of many talents Ben Gunter puts theatrical skills to work at the Mission San Luis.

"If I stayed there, I would eventually have had to choose between being an artist or an academic."

So he returned to the U.S. and started studying dramaturgy — a discipline that connects the artistic and the academic aspects of theater — and auditioning for regional theaters.

"I was in Orlando for the Shakespeare Festival in the spring, Alaska for dinner theater during the summers, and coming back to Tallahassee for the legislative session," he says. "Back in those days you could actually sell

performance art to lobbyists because they could legally entertain people."

Locally, Gunter put together a group of actors to re-enact debates about the adoption of the U.S. Constitution. He created a "magical reception" for a corporate client where the governor appeared out of a giant top hat. He was the music director for Theatre A La Carte, played in churches and performed wherever and whenever he could.

He also had many non-arts jobs, but always managed to relate them back to his passion.

"I worked in the Supervisor of Elections' office. Officially I was a word processor," he says. "Unofficially I was a dramatic coach for poll personnel. From my perspective, it was a great theater job because we got to train poll workers in how to act their role. The audience was the people who were coming into vote."

Later he became the artistic director for Tallahassee's Southern Shakespeare Festival.

"That was enormously exhilarating — exhausting, too — and it was the first time I looked for ways to connect with audiences by letting them help



choose plays," explains Gunter. "Ion Sancho printed ballots for us. We sent out teams to campaign for candidates, and then people actually voted on which play we should do. I think the SSF at its height was a shining example of connecting classical plays to contemporary audiences."

Eventually Gunter left the Shakespeare Festival to concentrate on his dissertation, which focused on translating classical Spanish plays for modern American audiences. He has a vision for a drama festival that could connect Floridians with the state's Spanish, French, British and even Confederate roots.

"Florida's culture has had major interactions with Spanish culture," he explains. "And every census is saying we'll move into a more and more Spanish/Latino presence in our culture."

## Mission theater

"I'm doing a lot of experimentation at Mission San Luis with the play 'El Nuevo Mundo (The New World),' says Gunter. "It's got the first scenes ever written that were set in the New World. It was written around 1600 by the greatest playwright in history, Lope de Vega. And I say 'greatest' in terms of output — he wrote more than anybody else. Shakespeare wrote about 40 plays; de Vega wrote about 800."

"It's a phenomenal interesting play for Floridians because it's got character and place names that come right out of Florida," he continues. "And even more, it's got themes that come right

out of Florida's history and Florida's future. How can people from different cultural backgrounds coexist? How do you share your faith without imposing it on somebody else?"

Theatre with a Mission is busy translating scenes from the play and showcasing them at various events. The troupe is actively seeking performers and technicians interested in participating in these New World performances.

As for Gunter, he will continue to do what he has always done — cobble together a living as a professional actor and a musician however and wherever he can.

"My bread-and-butter job now is being music director for a Methodist church in Georgia," he says. "I develop scripts for Christmas and Easter celebrations. We have created our own methods of mixing drama with music and making it work."

He is also a long-time member of The Laughing Stock (you can see him in the upcoming New Year's Eve show) and a freelance performer available for hire.

This week, Gunter's talents will be showcased twice. On Thursday morning, he will play the "Once-ler" in an adaptation of "The Lorax" for the unveiling ceremony of the new artwork commissioned for the Gaines Street Tree Wall. On Friday night at the city's Gaines Street Block Party, he will play Alex Trebek to host "Gaines Street G-eopardy." Members of the public are encouraged to come down and test their wits against questions written by some of Tallahassee's actual past "Jeopardy" contestants — Kim McShane, Patrick Pence and two-time winner Jim McMurtry. — Holly Thompson contributed to this story.

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