

# Mr. Roger's neighborhood

Stephens College musical highlights comedic hero Will Rogers



ERIKA KELSEY

Will Rogers, played by Jim Shipley, center, campaigns for President of the United States with members of the Debunk Party during a rehearsal for *The Will Rogers Follies*.

When Will Rogers died in 1935, Congress observed a moment of silence, the Roosevelts offered their condolences, and NBC and CBS radio went off the air for half an hour. His obituary filled four pages in *The New York Times*.

This era ended nearly 70 years ago, but Rogers' voice, once omnipresent over the airwaves, on stage and screen and in print, still resonates with unprecedented historical, philosophical and cultural significance.

*The Will Rogers Follies: A Life in Revue* offers a poignant yet humorous account of Rogers' rise to fame as an entertainer. The musical, which opens at Stephens College on Friday, features Cy Coleman's original composition and arrangements written in 1991. If you're looking for a history lesson, a philosophical journey or just to find out why Rogers thinks mosquitoes are smarter than humans and Democrats have the most fun, the Macklanburg Playhouse will have the answers.

More than a few hours of roping lessons are required to transform a college student into a convincing Will Rogers, but Jim Shipley is up to the challenge. "The hardest part about playing Will are the long monologues," Shipley says. "There's a technique to remembering them that I haven't mastered yet. I knew he was a great guy, and through this I learned a lot more. I just hope I can do him justice."

Alice Eacho, who plays Rogers' wife, Betty, admires the couples' devotion to each other. "He never cheated on her," Eacho

says. "And he was always around beautiful women. I think that says a lot about their relationship."

Rogers credited himself with being the only man in Hollywood who still had the same wife he started with. In the play he says, "The day I roped Betty was the greatest performance of my life."

In *Follies*, Cowboys swing lassoes, and ladies tap their high-heeled shoes as old-fashioned piano tunes fill the background. The roaring '20s are in full swing, and Rogers elicits laughter and respect from everyone.

After the stock market crash of 1929, *Follies* takes a serious turn. Millie Garvey, who is directing the musical for the second time, says the audience begins to realize how Rogers lived through things they've heard from their parents or grandparents.

Garvey compares the play to the movie *Forrest Gump*. "He's a goofy character. You're so involved with his life you become part of it. Facts become real." She remembers the first time she saw *Follies*. "For a person who didn't know a lot about Will Rogers, I found myself really moved."

Cast members often find themselves moved too, sometimes to laughter.

"Reggie, try not to smile before you say that," Garvey says to 8-year-old Reggie Tyler during rehearsal. Reggie then proudly reveals a missing front tooth. He is one of four youngsters enlisted to play Will Rogers' children.

They try the scene again, and his mouth twists slightly in anticipation, but he holds the smile back and completes his line. The rest of the onlookers stifle giggles as the show continues.

Rogers once ran for election as a member of the Debunk Party stating, "Politics is the only branch of show business I haven't tried yet."

He never made it into the Oval Office, but he did leave some advice for anyone who was nominated in the future. "Don't go around telling the truth," he said. "In an American election, nothing can hurt you as bad as telling the truth."

Rogers' humor earned him a place in many hearts, but Garvey says Rogers' real contribution was simply being compassionate.

"He was a person who could really relate to the poorest person and the richest person in the world," Garvey says. "The Democrats wanted him, the Republicans wanted him, and people listened to what he said as if he were the president."

In two acts, *The Will Rogers Follies* explores Rogers' personal relationships as a son, a husband and a father in the complex times that saw the first World War. But he always made the best of situations, even during the Great Depression, about which he recalls somberly, "the cheering up business had never been better."

Will Rogers gave people more than cheer; he gave them truth, hope and friendship: "I never met a man I didn't like." He said that so much, the quote became a song, and it plays softly in the background of a powerful final scene.

Actors turn one-by-one to face the audience and reveal facts about Rogers' life. Rogers responds as he meanders through the crowd.

Before the audience members can dry their tears of laughter, they might find new tears forming. Amidst his playful anecdotes, the cowboy philosopher has become a legend. And luckily, legends are immortal.

— ERIKA KELSEY

## EVENT INFO

**What:** *The Will Rogers Follies: A Life in Revue*

**Where:** Macklanburg Playhouse, Stephens College campus

**When:** Dec. 3-4, 7:30 p.m.; Dec. 5, 2 p.m.; Dec. 8-11, 7:30 p.m.

**Cost:** regular admission, \$10; seniors and students, \$5

**Call:** 876-7199