

## JOHN CONRAD FIEDLER

### MAKING YOUR OPPORTUNITY

by Tom Hunter

**T**he hustle-bustle lifestyle of Southern California is a far cry from that of a college campus in the rolling hills of West Virginia. In

reality, it's just a step away in the mind of John Fiedler. He would be the first to tell you that the journey to this different world now seems like a small stitch in time.

The New Jersey native and Marshall University alumnus is in the midst of a successful producing career in the film industry. He has

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called the Los Angeles area home for the past two decades, where he stays busy with two careers—his and that of his wife, accomplished actress Bess Armstrong—and a busy family life with sons Luke (age 14) and Chase (age 11).

A 1973 graduate of Marshall's College of Fine Arts, Fiedler reflects on his time in Huntington with great admiration. He is appreciative of the opportunities he was afforded as a young theater student and relishes the ties that have kept him close to his alma mater.

A native of Newark, New Jersey, John was the fourth of six children in the Fiedler family. “We lived in Bergen County, New Jersey. I was raised in Wyckoff, a town of about 12,000.”

His father arrived in the United States as a seven-year-old German immigrant in 1929. After his arrival in America, Werner Fiedler settled in Roselle Park, New Jersey and later volunteered for World War II. After serving in the Armed Services, he used his G.I. Bill benefits to study electrical engineering at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon) University in Pittsburgh.

John's father's strong work ethic was instilled in his children. “He was the second son in a German family who came here to seek opportunities. He was raised in a blue-collar, middle-class upbringing. I would not say they were poor, but he had to work very hard,” Fiedler said of his father's early years.

Werner and Rita Fiedler's home in Bergen County rested on an acre of land that was “all lawn.” John remembers, because he and his brothers had to cut the large lawn in sections. On Saturday mornings, the brothers used to stay busy working on household chores—sweeping the driveway, cleaning the garage, and cutting the huge lawn. “We used to paint the house every other year, whether it needed painting or not, only because my dad had the labor force to do it. So, I learned how to do work with my hands,” John said.

His mother, Rita, was part Italian and a bit more emotional. She was raised in north central New Jersey and met John's dad while attending high school at Roselle Park. “They adjusted to the fact that we weren't all going to become electrical engineers. My parents came to learn that no two children are the same,” John states.

Growing up in a busy household with four brothers and a sister, John fondly recalls the routine that he and his family developed on Sunday mornings. “Every Sunday, my father would go to the Wyckoff Bakery and bring home the *New York Times* with various rolls, buns and crumb buns. We would all run for the particular section of the newspaper that we wanted. My dad would always get the editorial section of the *Times* and the *Times Magazine*. I always wound up getting the Arts and Leisure section, which no one else wanted and the Sports section was already taken. So, I came to read a lot about the theater at a young age,” Fiedler recalls.

The Sunday readings helped spark an interest in the creative arts. In the mid 1950's, one of theater's most influential producers was dominating the scene in New York. Broadway producer Joe Papp co-founded New York's Public Theater and Shakespeare Workshop in 1954. The Central Park-based project evolved into one of the nation's preeminent cultural institutions.

“In those days, Joe Papp was being written about on a regular basis because he was a formidable personality. He was constantly mentioned in the news,” Fiedler notes.

Growing up a half-hour away from the theater capital of the world, the Fiedler children used to make trips to museums and theaters in Manhattan. Those trips dovetailed with John Fiedler’s growing interest in theater.

“I was the type of kid who had an appetite for the arts and theater, which was contradictory to my Dad’s view of the world,” John said. “When you come from a hard-working, immigrant background, theater can be perceived as being frivolous. My dad never discouraged my desire to pursue that type of career, but he was always curious about how you made money doing it.”

John’s father worked as an executive with the Bendix Corporation, an aerospace parts manufacturer, but was a man not cut from the same mold as many other 1950’s-era New Jersey working fathers. While many of these men passed on corporate advancement to maintain their homes and lives in New Jersey, Werner Fiedler was enterprising and ready to improve his family’s fortunes elsewhere.

During John’s first year in high school, his father was offered an opportunity to leave New Jersey for a better opportunity within the company. “Many executive types don’t want to move,” John said. “They live in one area during their lives. Dad was an opportunist in that sense, so he transferred for a bigger opportunity in Baltimore.”

After arriving in Baltimore, John Fiedler made a connection with his drama/theater coach and teacher at Dulaney Senior High School. “George Sledge was a big influence in encouraging me to pursue a career in theater,” John recalls. “In tenth grade, that’s when things started to interest me in theater. I did a lot of plays, probably more than the average. We had a strong program at Dulaney.”

John’s interest in theater continued to bloom as he became more exposed to the craft, through school productions, classes and opportunities to see traveling productions in the Baltimore area. “I remember seeing some Neil Simon plays that were very funny. I also recall seeing several musicals, because that was a more popular diet

for people in the Broadway sense,” John said. *Barefoot in the Park* was one of the early productions he had the opportunity to see.

“Acting and theater are typical of any early exploration—you have to figure out if you are good at it,” John intones. He admits he is not the best singer or dancer, a fact that he is tender about even today. But that doesn’t dampen his passion for musical theater. “I certainly enjoy watching musicals. Musical remains part of the fabric of my life. I still see a lot of them.”

Imagine placing a blindfolded student in front of a map and letting him or her toss a dart at the chart. That might sound like good instruction for a teenager struggling to find a way through the college decision process. At a time when high school students didn’t face the same pressures as today’s students in making early college decisions, John Fiedler was trying to decide where he could best improve his fortunes.

As John and his classmates finished high school at Dulaney, many decided to stay close to Maryland and attend colleges and universities in and around the state, such as Rutgers University, Fairleigh Dickinson University and the University of Maryland at College Park. John’s mentor, George Sledge, suggested that John take a look at two universities in West Virginia—West Virginia University and Marshall University.

“In my senior year, I took a journey. My first visit was to Morgantown and West Virginia University. I stayed at the home of Dr. Beverly Cortez, a speech professor at WVU, and then traveled down to Huntington to visit Marshall. I didn’t know anybody at Marshall. Once I arrived on campus for the first time, I felt very comfortable. It just felt like a good place for me to be,” he says, smiling.

After applying to several schools he visited and being accepted, John had to make a decision. He knew he wanted to study theater and believed a larger school would provide fewer opportunities for him to practice his craft. “I thought WVU and many of the other schools I visited were too big. I felt that a larger school would hinder my ability to actually do theater work,” Fiedler said. “At an institution the size of the University of Maryland, I would probably only get three opportunities in the course of four years to do plays and theater work.

Marshall was going to provide me with more opportunities, so I decided Huntington was the place for me.”

In the late 1960’s, Fiedler had easily made the adjustment from an urban setting along the offshore waters of the Atlantic to a small community along the banks of the Ohio River. Huntington was, and remains, the typical college town where the world of the student is the world of the campus. “My first year at Marshall, I remember leaving campus on an odd weekend here or there, going away with some of my friends to their hometowns in West Virginia. The longer I was there, the more I got comfortable with the campus and the area,” John said.

He maintained a very busy schedule, filled with classes, rehearsals, and part-time jobs to help him work his way through school. He worked as a busboy at a sorority house in exchange for meals and later became a part-time delivery boy for Ridenour Pharmacy in the old downtown Huntington Arcade.

“Part of figuring out who you are is also figuring out who you are not. The sooner I got hooked into theater, the more consumed I was (schedule wise). My life became all my classes and a number of plays. I only got off the campus, generally speaking, for work. I didn’t have a lot of idle time, because I was busy running to rehearsals.” The university theater department staged six productions each year.

“Some of the plays were one-act productions. You would direct and act.” The major theater productions were staged in the Old Main Auditorium, while Smith Hall’s recital facilities were used for smaller campus productions. While Old Main’s facility didn’t afford Marshall theater students the flexibility of its successor, the Joan C. Edwards Performing Arts Center, it served as an inspirational venue for young actors hungry to learn.

“I did not feel hampered by the Old Main Auditorium. The emotional warmth of that place is quite real to me. I remember getting dressed and made up downstairs in Old Main and having to walk up what must have been about 50 stairs to get to the stage. I love that Old Main stage to this day.” Marshall’s theater department also staged smaller traveling productions and readings. All of which, with summer theater work, kept John Fiedler very busy.

John remembers it as a very active time. “I stayed a couple of summers in Huntington to do theater work. It allowed me to get a head start on classes for the following fall. I figured that I could do a play and take a couple classes, lightening my load in the fall when I would be working on additional theater projects. There was that kind of selfish, subjective management of my life, which is what college should be.”

His first foray into the production aspect of theater was a stage manager’s role in a musical production by the Marshall Theater Department. “Stage managing in theater is the equivalent today to production managing a movie. That was a terrific experience for me,” John said. He also had the opportunity to direct and act in several productions, including a theatrical presentation of Walt Whitman’s written works.

“We took a lot of Whitman’s poetry and prose and formed it into a one-hour presentation. So you were, in essence, adapting, editing and performing that work,” Fiedler said. “The Whitman project was a good example of the over and above projects we would tackle. We did so much more than the normal, straightlaced play. These productions were a little bit different and equally important in our evolution as theater students.”

Although John enjoyed acting while he was at Marshall, he realized that theater wasn’t a one-dimensional profession. He decided to take a hard look at what could become the best career path for him in theater—production. “I realized that there were people who were better actors than I was. Acting is as much about type as it is talent. To this day, if I had the time, talent and energy to be an actor, I would do it,” John said. “To me, theater and film are a raw example of self expression. Writing or performing takes bravery.”

At Marshall, John’s appetite grew. The possibilities for making a statement were greater than just acting. “My dad was an electrical engineer, and that’s how he expressed himself. Ultimately, he didn’t retire as an electrical engineer. He retired as a senior manager who started out as an engineer and evolved into an executive,” John explained. “I believe everything is an evolutionary process. I liked it, but also realized that acting wasn’t all there was in the realm of theater.

Going into the professional world, you realize that you have to make your opportunity."

During John's years at Marshall, Clayton Page was head of the theater department. He was a very disciplined man who encouraged students to have a well thought out plan. "The myth about theater is that everyone thinks they can do it. That is simply not true. I made sure to be on top of my game around him. He didn't yell or ever make you feel bad. He just preferred you to have a plan. That's a discipline. Most everyone at that age thinks they can shoot from the hip. He also encouraged you to do things that you didn't think you could do," Fiedler said of Page.

One of Fiedler's strongest influences within the department was Bruce Greenwood, who was a talented creative thinker with a strong knowledge of technical theater. "Bruce was a truly talented guy. An original. He was the first to show me how to think outside the box. Technical theater is not easy. He had great design instincts and was passionate about his work," Fiedler said of Greenwood. "The mechanics of technical theater, once you've mastered them and overcome any fear or hesitation, make you a little freer in learning your craft. Greenwood just radiated that."

One of Greenwood's projects, playwright Lanford Wilson's *Rimers of Eldrich*, had a profound impact on John. "When you open a playbook, you'll often see a picture of the set along with a list of characters and props. I remember seeing that picture in my copy of the play. To this day, I remember Bruce's set," John said. "The original production was off-Broadway but couldn't hold a candle to Bruce Greenwood's set."

In fact, Greenwood's work for the Marshall production left a lasting artistic impact. So much so that he would later share Bruce's vision with Wilson during a business luncheon several years later. "During that luncheon, I talked with Lanford about Bruce's set design and I showed him pictures of his set on the Marshall production. Bruce's work left that strong an impression on me."

Perhaps the most profound influence on John during his Marshall years was Bill Kearns, who had an understanding of the emotional aspect of theater unlike any John had encountered. "Bill understood

that theater was an emotional medium. He taught me that each night had a life of its own and that was the exciting thing about theater, not the scary thing. His approach to material was genuinely emotional and it was hard to articulate that."

Kearns understood that theater is not a finite science and allowed the possibilities to be virtually limitless for his students. "He was not a coach who would pull you from the lineup for making a mistake. If something happened on stage, Kearns would review it with you, shape and correct and mold it. That's the hard thing in the construction of a character," Fiedler said. "You had to figure out your place in the larger story. Many people who are performing in theater just think about themselves. Bill always made it clear that you were part of a bigger picture and that there was a whole."

November 14, 1970, is a day that remains embedded in John Fiedler's mind, as it is in the head and heart of every member of the Marshall community. The football air tragedy rocked the Huntington campus, its students and the community. As one of the shocked students on campus that cold, rainy Saturday evening, John was left to deal with the tragedy on his own terms. Like many, he still has a difficult time understanding why it happened.

"That day and the weeks following it are still difficult for me to talk about. I used to walk among those players in the dormitories, dining halls and around campus. I can still almost reach out and touch those guys," said Fiedler, reflecting on the tragedy.

Although he didn't really know any of the football players well, John remembers the young men from the 1970 Thundering Herd football team as people who were in the same world he was. "I remember Ted Shoebridge and Marcel Lajterman. Marcel was a superior athlete, a gifted kicker," John said. "That tragedy shook my world and certainly, without saying, rocked the world of the entire community. Nothing can ever adequately explain that to me."

In November 2000, filmmakers John Witek and Deborah Novak, in cooperation with West Virginia Public Television, released *Ashes To Glory*, a two-hour documentary to coincide with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the crash. For Novak, there was a personal connection to the project. She was a native of Huntington, a Marshall alumna and the daughter

of Elaine Novak, who was a member of the theater department faculty during John Fiedler's years at Marshall.

Fiedler became aware of the project during its development and offered his assistance. He eventually traveled to Virginia with Deborah Novak to talk with a child of one of the victims. Nearly two years after its completion, John Fiedler can't look at the finished project. He loves Deborah Novak and knows her heart's work was a fitting tribute to the members of the 1970 Marshall Thundering Herd football team. But, the memories of November 1970 are still too painful.

"It's a difficult thing. I have *Ashes To Glory* sitting on a shelf in my office, but I can't sit down and watch it. In a strange way, the crash is a harder thing for me to deal with now than it would have been 10-15 years ago," John utters. "I'm an emotional guy and I remember the emptiness and not having a place to go. You didn't have your parents or family close by to help you get through it. I remember the stillness of that campus. Those images are forever etched in my mind. And some of the silence has lasted a very long time. It's still a very hard thing for me."

"I find it hard beyond the immediate community to get people to fully understand the weight of the 1970 tragedy. I cherish the success that Marshall has today," John continued. "But if Bob Pruett's football team goes 0-12, that's fine with me because that is just a hiccup in the grand scheme of things. I wish the Herd enormous success, but I don't need Marshall's football team to be successful for me to still have pride in them."

Shortly after receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree from Marshall in 1973, John Fiedler left Huntington and headed for New York City. But New York was going to be simply a stopping point for John, as he prepared to attend graduate school in London. As it turned out, he was in England for only a short time before technical issues with his immigration and visa status forced an early return to the United States.

Following his arrival back in New York, John started taking graduate classes and established a healthy habit of reading about the film industry. "I began reading an enormous amount of books about film. I realized that there were many people who started working in theater before film. Filmmakers who worked in both fields like Sydney Lumet (director of *Twelve Angry Men* and *Network*)," John said.

His movie education progressed with readings of renowned critics such as Peter Bogdonovich (who later became an acclaimed director), James Agee, Dwight McDonald, Stanley Kaufman, Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris. "Pauline Kael wrote emotionally and Andrew Sarris wrote historically. That combination was great for me," John explains. "I would read these critics and go see what they were writing about."

All of this inspired John to pursue a career in the film industry, but it wasn't a permanent abandonment of his desire to work in theater. Fiedler decided he needed to move to Los Angeles, because that was the principal hub of the motion picture industry. After arriving in Southern California, his first job in the film industry came with one of its leading companies—Los Angeles-based Technicolor. The world's number one processor and distributor of motion picture film, Technicolor has been a leading innovator in motion picture technology since bringing color to movies more than 80 years ago.

"When I was working at Marshall University, I never imagined that I'd be working at Technicolor. I loved every minute of it, because it afforded me an opportunity to learn very quickly about the film industry," John said. "Technicolor was a great observation deck where I learned about cinematography and conceptualization. I saw every aspect of a film project from beginning to end, because it came through there."

After working several years at Technicolor, John became an executive for Rastar Films Inc., a Los Angeles-based production company. During his tenure at Rastar, he had an opportunity to work as a production and development executive on several large film projects. Fiedler's association with the company came during a period in the early 1980's, when Rastar scored several box office hits. Movies such as *Blue Thunder*, *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip*, *The Toy*, *Spring Break* and *The Survivors* generated more than \$150 million in domestic gross revenue for the company.

Rastar Films eventually was merged into Tri-Star Entertainment, which was part of the Columbia Pictures family. After the merger, John continued working with Tri-Star in the development of major motion picture projects. Today, Columbia Tri-Star continues to be one of the most successful major studio partners in the film industry as a division of Sony Pictures Entertainment.

In 1988, John Fiedler had an opportunity to move from a primarily executive role into the more creative aspect of filmmaking. He served as a producer on the Kevin Reynolds-directed *The Beast*, an adaptation of a William Mastrosimone play about a Russian tank commander in a wartime struggle in the Afghanistan wilderness.

He followed *The Beast* with a producer's role in 1990's *Tune in Tomorrow*, based on Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. Set in New Orleans, circa 1951, Keanu Reeves stars as a news writer for a local radio station who meets and falls in love with his recently divorced aunt. A new-in-town eccentric radio-soap-opera writer, hired to help boost the station's bad ratings, begins manipulating the news writer's affair and uses it as the basis for his radio show. *Tune In Tomorrow* provided John his first opportunity to work with acclaimed British director Jon Amiel. Known for his directorial work in *Somersby* and *Entrapment*, Amiel directed the film using a successful story-within-a-story construction he used in "The Singing Detective," a mini-series that he directed for British television.

In 1995, Fiedler again worked with Amiel on the hit thriller *Copycat*, starring Harry Connick, Sigourney Weaver and Holly Hunter. The film also gave Fiedler the opportunity to work with prominent film producer Arnon Milchan, whose cinematic credits include the Oscar-winning *L.A. Confidential*, *Fight Club* and *Natural Born Killers*. *Copycat*'s plot focuses on a serial killer who stalks the streets of San Francisco, committing a series of murders that mirror famous American crimes. Trailing the killer is a criminal psychologist who is the reigning expert on serial killers. Unfortunately, she cannot predict his next style of killing, who he will kill, or when.

As the film's executive producer, John Fiedler said his role in the movie's production was a learning experience unlike his earlier projects. "Being an executive producer is different from being a producer. You, again, are in direct proximity to how all those decisions are being made and you're making some of them," John said. "Producing is not an exact science. It's not the same thing every time out."

In 1991, John co-produced the first on-screen pairing of then-Hollywood power couple Bruce Willis and Demi Moore. *Mortal Thoughts* was a thriller revolving around the relationship between two

best friends who are involved in the death of one of their husbands. The Columbia Pictures release was one of Fiedler's most commercially successful projects, garnering \$25 million in domestic box office revenue.

After completing producing work on 1992's *Beyond The Law*, Fiedler established a connection with a fellow Baltimore native and director that proved to be one of his most successful and enjoyable collaborations.

"I (and one of my partners) had a meeting with John Waters' agent at a time when we had a window of opportunity to finance a project with a major studio. I asked him about some available material and he replied that he had a piece by Waters that he thought was good and readily available," John said. "I knew it was doubtful that the studio we had been talking with would be interested in this material, but I was interested in it. When we returned to Baltimore during the holidays to visit my wife's family, I visited John."

The material Waters had been preparing turned out to be *Serial Mom*, the story of a perfect suburban housewife and mother who harbored a vengeful streak for those who would harm her family. Fiedler would serve as a producer of the dark comedy. Released in 1994 and starring Kathleen Turner, *Serial Mom* was one of John Waters' more successful commercial films.

In 1998, Fiedler produced another Waters-directed feature. *Pecker*, released by Polar Entertainment and Fine Line, was a \$6.5 million satire on the Manhattan art world. This rags-to-riches comedy follows the life of a blue-collar Baltimore kid who takes snapshots of family, friends, and customers. After a hip Manhattan art dealer becomes fascinated with the kid's photos, a big exhibition is in the offing, followed by overnight fame as the young man becomes the new darling of the New York art scene and discovers that fame has its price.

Following production wrap on *Pecker*, Fiedler and Waters soon started work on their next project, *Cecil B. DeMented*. Released in 2000 and starring Melanie Griffith, *Cecil B. DeMented* is a darkly humorous look at the underside of the film industry. "I love John Waters. I think he is a very talented and unique artist. He is the only guy who does what he does. To that extent, the working relationship is a very

unique experience. He is a man that is funny on every level," Fiedler said. "I am of the school of belief that you can't be witty, funny, and bright unless you are intelligent. John Waters is all of those things, so I like being around him."

As for his evolution as a producer, John Fiedler is pleased with his body of work thus far. He is a man who understands his role and appreciates the full evolution of the filmmaking process. "You know, I've made a dozen movies. I really like all of them, except for one that I just couldn't make work. You have to find material that you like, that speaks to you in some way and reflects something that you think is worthy to go see," John said. "The movie business is quite simply the business of ideas. You want to have a good idea. It's that simple. It's not always easy to find those ideas."

As far as producers are concerned, no two people do it the same way. John Fiedler's appetite for the business and pleasure of the craft comes from its level of unpredictability. "There are movies that are not well produced or well crafted. But, sometimes that doesn't matter," John explained. "For example, John Waters might not be as highly skilled a craftsman as Martin Scorsese, who arguably is among the more talented people on the planet when it comes to making a movie. That doesn't mean I enjoy John Waters' movies any less than I do a Martin Scorsese film.

"You have to watch movies with a certain frame of reference. You don't go see a John Waters movie for its great filmmaking, pushing the envelope of modern filmmaking technique. Whereas with a Martin Scorsese film, you're likely to see something you haven't seen before. That's part of the pleasure of producing. No two directors are the same," John said.

As for the future, John Fiedler has numerous film projects in various stages of development ranging from character thrillers to a small, independent film project that is a love story. In the interim, John and a group of business partners have established EStudio Network, an Internet technology company that provides document management and production services for studios and independent producers.

John maintains strong ties to his alma mater, primarily through his involvement with the Society of Yeager Scholars Board of Directors. He currently is chairman and loyally returns to the Huntington campus twice each year for board meetings. He enjoys the opportunity to work with some of Marshall's best and brightest students.

"Working with the Yeager Scholars program is exciting. These are great kids who are aggressively bright students. The opportunity to meet and interact with them is wonderful," John beams. "The more students of this caliber that Marshall can attract, the better the institution, the community and the state are for it."

John recently received a phone call from a fellow Marshall graduate following a career path similar to his own. The alumnus, one of Marshall's first Yeager Scholar graduates, recently earned his master's degree in cinematography from New York University.

"He was calling to let me know that he had a film that had been nicely reviewed in the *L.A. Times*. He wanted me to see his movie," Fiedler said. "It's nice to have an ongoing relationship with these students and watch them mature. The quality of the Yeager Board members and the students is amazing. My work with them is what I enjoy most about my association with Marshall University."

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