

Painless ride for Annie's Daddy



John Schuck, Daddy Warbucks in the touring production of *Annie* that opens this week, has enjoyed a successful show-business career that all began with his role in Robert Altman's movie *M*A*S*H*.



By: [Richard Ouzounian](#) Theatre Critic, Published on Mon Mar 05 2007

COSTA MESA, CALIF.—Suicide is painless; just ask Conrad John Schuck.

The 67-year-old actor who begins performances at the Hummingbird Centre on Wednesday night as Daddy Warbucks in the touring production of *Annie* has enjoyed a successful show-business career for 40 years.

He spent six seasons as Rock Hudson's sidekick on the TV series *McMillan and Wife*, made his mark in several of the *Star Trek* movies and has appeared onstage in *Annie* for more than 3,000 performances, both on Broadway and across North America.

"It's been a wonderful life," he says cheerfully in his dressing room on a bright California morning, as he gets ready for a matinee of the evergreen musical about the redheaded orphan and the balding billionaire.

But Schuck admits it really all started for him with a single role: Capt. Walter ("Painless Pole") Waldowski in the original 1970 Robert Altman film *M*A*S*H*.

As the well-endowed dentist whose sudden impotence led him to want to end his life, Schuck made such a vivid impression that Altman made him a part of his film family for three more pictures and the door opened to a world of television work as well.

"And it all happened by chance," laughs Schuck, "just like everything does in this business."

Back in 1969, Schuck was a stage actor, working for the mad visionary William Ball at his American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco.

One of his plays was *Little Murders* by Jules Feiffer, and Robert Altman dropped by one night to check out its leading actress, Michael Learned, for a role in a new film he was going to make about the Korean War.

He wound up passing on Learned and later gave the role to Jo Ann Pflug, but he was singularly impressed with Schuck, who was playing the starring role that Elliott Gould had originally created on Broadway.

"Altman called me up a few days later," Schuck recalls, "and told me he was thinking of me for the role of Duke, but he later decided to give that to Tom Skerritt. Then he asked me if I would consider playing Painless. I didn't remember him from the script and told Altman that.

"'Come on,' said Altman, 'he's the one with the biggest sex organ in the whole military.'

"'Oh,' I replied. 'A character part.'"

When asked what it was like working with the unconventional Altman, Schuck says, "You've got to remember that for most of us, it was our first movie. Altman wanted it that way. We were all naive and so we didn't know how crazy it was.

"His greatest gift was that he made you feel you were the only person who was right for a certain part. That was enormously freeing and it made you very confident."

Did Schuck ever regret not being a part of the successful TV version that followed?

"They asked me to do it," he explains, "but I told them I felt my character was basically just one sexual joke and I didn't see a future for him in a series. Someone else played him for a couple of episodes and then he was gone."

Besides, by then Schuck had other things on his plate.

"I had done two more films with Altman: *Brewster McCloud* and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. *McCabe* was a great experience. We shot that in West Vancouver, just north of the British Properties. They were building all these multi-million-dollar homes while we were constructing Mrs. Miller's brothel a few hundred yards away.

"I loved it so much in Vancouver that I was thinking of settling down there afterwards, when I got a phone call from Leonard Stern in L.A. He said, 'I'm about to start shooting a Movie of the Week with Rock Hudson and there's a not-very-well-written part I think you could do something with.' So I flew down."

The movie turned out to be the pilot for *McMillan and Wife*, one of a series of mysteries that NBC would run in rotation for six successful seasons. Schuck played Lt. Enright, Rock Hudson's right-hand man.

"Originally the concept was that he was a bumbler," explains Schuck. "I expressed quite forcefully that I wasn't interested in that. I'd rather he be an overachiever who tried too hard and failed because of that. That's a lot funnier."

During the run of the series, Schuck also made his final and favourite Altman film, *Thieves Like Us*. He played the short-tempered and violent Chicamaw, a performance that legendary critic Pauline Kael hailed as "rivalling Bogart's Fred C. Dobbs in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*."

Schuck has kept working steadily throughout his career, but he admits he's had to acquire a fairly tough skin to do so.

"You have to realize by a certain point in your career that your history is just that: history. To most of the younger generation, the things you did 25 years ago just don't exist."

He turned around one day and found himself playing the Klingon ambassador in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (a part he repeated in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*).

"I never thought I'd wind up as a Klingon," he chuckles, "but they were fun to do. ...

"You also become part of something that's very important to many people around the world. I remember shooting a film in the outback in Australia and one day, two kids showed up who had driven hundreds of miles to get my autograph to complete their collection."

But when all is said and done, Schuck is happy to be back onstage again in *Annie*.

"I really believe the show is a classic. The book and score are extremely strong and having all those wonderful kids in the cast keeps you from getting jaded and cynical."

Schuck has his own theory why the show still resonates so strongly today.

"When *Annie* first opened in 1977, we were coming out of Vietnam and Watergate, the economy was not good, we were in a kind of depression of our own and this little girl who had helped pull everyone through the earlier depression came to our rescue again.

"We're kind of facing that same situation now. We have a very contentious war going on and we've had a disaster in 9/11 that made us realize how quickly we could lose everything. We need that little redheaded girl to cheer us up once more, just as much as we ever did."

As for Schuck, things have worked out pretty much the way he always hoped they would.

"For my fifth birthday, my parents took me to see *Oklahoma!* on Broadway. I left the theatre that night knowing I would either be a cowboy or an actor. Guess which one I picked?"

Annie runs at the Hummingbird Centre, 1 Front St. E., from March 7-11. For tickets go to www.ticketmaster.ca or phone 416-872-2262.

CHRIS BENNION PHOTO /

It's been a long, accidental trip for character actor Conrad John Schuck, who played in three Robert Altman films and now stars as Daddy Warbucks in *Annie*, above, with Marissa O'Donnell.

