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Jeff Daniels Onstage at the Purple Rose for First Time in Theatre's 34 Year History

CHELSEA, Mich. (January 29, 2025) – A few lucky, unsuspecting audiences were surprised with a special treat last month when Jeff Daniels, appeared onstage in [The Purple Rose Theatre Company \(PRTC\)](#)'s production of "OFFICE CHRISTMAS PARTY GRINCH IN FIGHT WITH RUDOLPH POLICE CALLED."

When the production's successful sold-out run led to an extension, special circumstances led to Daniels putting on his heels and stepping in.

"Four out of the five actors were willing and able to extend, but the actress who was playing the role of Madge, The Elderly Secretary, had planned a trip to Spain. Turns out her understudy had also planned a trip to Sicily. Not knowing we had hired two world travelers, we talked of recasting with someone we knew would be terrific but would require rehearsal. Knowing the cast would be like a well-oiled Ferrari, blending in with actors who had been running the show for three months, trying to fit into their comic timing, the rhythm of the show, the Indy 500 pace – all these things would have been a tough fit for anyone. In the end, we decided we needed someone who knew the show and needed little to no rehearsal. Out of necessity, it made perfect sense that if I took on the role of Madge, I could just step in without putting the cast through lots of rehearsal, and it would give the audience a thrill. I also liked that it said when it comes to seeing a show at the Purple Rose, anything can happen."

The world-premiere play, also written and directed by Daniels, is about an office Christmas party that goes wrong when two employees dressed as The Grinch Who Stole Christmas and Rudolph, The Red Nosed Reindeer get into a brawl. Throughout the performance, Madge, the office's elderly, slow-moving secretary, assists her boss and even sings a sultry rendition of "Santa Baby." This character however also appears as an impatient police officer, a Local 4 TV reporter, a Gen Alpha intern, and an accountant who takes one too many drinks from the punch bowl.

"Jumping into any role with a cast that only knows one speed is a little like trying to hop onto a speeding train. Having written the play, I knew where the jokes were, where the setups were, what was important for the plot, etc. To be honest, I was more concerned with missing a cue or an entrance. Fortunately, I worked hard on the lines, knew the blocking, had a great backstage crew that kept pointing me in the right direction and, in the end, was able to seamlessly fit into the play about as well as a large man from the Midwest in drag can. And I got my laughs."

The plan was kept secret from all but a few of the administrative staff at the Purple Rose. If word got out that Daniels would be onstage, the box office would've been bombarded with calls, and the performances were already sold out. Even the cast found out the day of his first performance. Previously, they were told a "big name from New York" was coming. They guessed Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Susan Sarandon. When the big reveal

happened, there were a lot of dropped jaws, laughter, and shouts of, “I so prayed for this!” and, “It’s Christmas!”

“I was stunned we were able to keep the cast guessing right up to the day of the first performance. When the cast realized I would be playing Madge, the looks on their faces were a combination of being completely surprised that it was me and genuinely disappointed that it wasn’t Meryl Streep.”

In recent years, Daniels has been getting more and more hands-on at the theatre he founded in 1991 in his hometown of Chelsea, MI. Apart from his annual holiday concert series, “Onstage & Unplugged,” this is the first time Daniels has appeared on the Purple Rose stage in its 34 year history.

“I’ve been a professional actor for forty-eight years. That’s a lot of being gone, so I’ve always had to delegate the running of the Purple Rose to others. Now that I’m older, I find myself home in Michigan more than I used to, but the creativity that I have is still alive and well. One of the advantages of a career in the arts is that you get better with age. I’ve accumulated not only an efficiency to what I do, but a practicality to my craft, an earned experience to be able to see what needs to be done to make a play or a production work. Personally and professionally, this feels like my Third Act. When I asked a friend of mine who recently retired, ‘What do you do every morning?’ he replied, ‘Only things I want to do.’ Being more hands-on with the theatre company I founded is something I want to do. I’m unpaid by choice, so it’s not for the money or to pad my Social Security. I truly enjoy sharing what I know with some of Michigan’s best professional actors, directors, playwrights and designers.”

Daniels has worked all over the world as an actor, playwright, musician, and director, spanning nearly 50 years in the industry. However, there is just something special to him about the work that’s done at the Purple Rose Theatre.

“I’ve always said, ‘Art is local.’ The Purple Rose is a professional theatre company of which we should all be proud. Not just the artists who work here but our audience. This is our theatre. All of ours. I came from this town, I came from this state, I have been in the auditions with other actors from Juilliard and Yale and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London and, on occasion, I have won the role. You can be from here and be good. I have proven it. I’m why I know there is talent in this corner of the country. The Purple Rose was built for those who didn’t get the breaks I did in New York or LA or for those who chose to stay in Michigan because of a job or to focus on raising a family. Whatever their reason for being here, their talent didn’t go away or their potential to get even better. The Purple Rose is where they can work in a professional setting and create original theatre that is on a par with Chicago, Stratford and yes, even New York. And I oughta know.”

While “OFFICE CHRISTMAS PARTY GRINCH IN FIGHT WITH RUDOLPH POLICE CALLED” closed at the end of December, as Daniels said, you just never know what can happen at the Purple Rose. This season, they have three more productions: “Fourteen Funerals” by Eric Pfeffinger, “My Mother and the Michigan/Ohio War” by Paul Stroili, and “Bert & Trixie Visit the Vet” by Matt Letscher. All productions are on sale on their website, www.PurpleRoseTheatre.org.

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