

**THEATER**

# Central Ohio stage veteran hitting the road

By **Michael Grossberg**

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Geoffrey Nelson, top, and Jonathan Putnam in *The Duck Variations*

A pioneer of central Ohio theater is back in action with a new troupe.

Geoffrey Nelson, who co-founded and guided CATCO from 1985 to 2010 as it became the leading professional Actors' Equity Association company in Columbus, has launched A Portable Theatre to tour small works statewide.

“We want to take plays to places where not a lot of professional theater is being produced,” he said.

Inspired by the chance to create convenient and accessible theater, Nelson said, he hopes to develop a company with the potential to make a difference.

“I’m not interested in starting another theater just to do theater,” he said.

Nelson, 62, co-stars with former CATCO partner Jonathan Putnam in the first touring production: *The Duck Variations*, a short David Mamet comedy about aging and friendship.

At a recent performance, Nelson and Putnam garnered laughs while creating an endearing portrait of two old men on a park bench discussing ducks, nature and the patterns of life.

After its initial run, ending with a show at 2 p.m. today in the BalletMet Performance Space, the profanity-free two-character Mamet piece will be offered for tours through at least November.

“Geoff is a leader in theater, and he has an interesting vision here,” said Peter Hersha, president of the board of A Portable Theatre, a CATCO board member and a senior vice president at Nationwide Insurance.

“I’m excited about his idea of creating a professional touring theater to enrich communities around Ohio — especially the under-served.”

With an initial budget of about \$15,000, A Portable Theatre will target venues in small communities — including churches, libraries, school auditoriums, senior-citizen centers and prisons as well as performing-arts centers.

“Outside of the big Broadway musicals and some children’s theater,” Nelson said, “there’s not a lot of touring theater around the state, while most performing-arts centers book mostly concerts.”

After founding CATCO (formerly Contemporary American Theatre Company) with Lori Robishaw, Nelson spent more than 25 years with the troupe. The company merged in 2010 with the Phoenix Theatre for

Children, whose director, Steven Anderson, was named artistic director by the board.

Since then, Nelson has taught classes at Otterbein and Denison universities, and directed or played roles in occasional university productions.

He has maintained a career-long interest in taking theater to out-of-the-way places.

In the 1970s, during his post-college days, he performed with Montana Shakespeare in the Parks, traveling through the state. In the early days of CATCO, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, his company toured with small plays by Edward Albee, Harold Pinter and Tennessee Williams.

Hilliard resident Linda Dorff, a veteran actress who knows Nelson from her three decades in CATCO shows, applauds his re-emergence in theatrical production.

“Geoff is returning to do what he does best,” Dorff said. “He’s always been good at taking plays on the road. . . . I’m sure he’ll succeed.”

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