



# BURT REYNOLDS:

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## A CLASS ACT

BY CHRISTINA WOOD



At 73, Burt Reynolds would still look damn good in a tux. Now that the curtain has gone up on what he likes to call the third act of his life, however, the irrepressible hometown favorite isn't much interested in formal wear. He's sworn off Hollywood parties, passed on a number of high-profile cameo appearances and adopted a dog named Precious.

Reynolds is home, living and teaching in Jupiter. And these days he seems perfectly comfortable in his own skin.



Most people, of course, are familiar with Reynolds' acting career; with turns in more than 100 films, six television series and a handful of stage productions as well as a couple of Golden Globes, an Emmy Award and an Oscar nomination, it's kind of hard to miss. A respectable number may also be familiar with his directing and producing credits. Some may realize that he shared his success with us, bringing tens of millions of dollars in film production to the county. Hard core fans can probably rattle off football stats from his days as a first-team All-State, All-Southern tailback at Palm Beach High or talk about Reynolds' appearance as a guest host on the Tonight Show as if they were there.

Then there are the fortunate few, those who gather on Tuesday and Friday nights to see Burt Reynolds in the role of a dedicated teacher.

It's actually a familiar role for Reynolds. "There's a saying in our business," Palm Beach County Film Commissioner Chuck Elderd says, "You have an obligation when you succeed to pass it on. Burt is the epitome of that. Passing it on is tattooed on his heart."

Soon, Reynolds will be passing on his gifts to a growing

number of students. "We're in the planning stages of developing the Burt Reynolds Institute for Film and Theatre," says Suzanne Niedland, who is in Reynolds' class on Tuesday and Friday nights as well as on the executive board for the Palm Beach County Film and Television Commission, the advisory board to the Documentary Institute at the University of Florida and a member of The Kennedy Center National Committee for the Performing Arts. "It will be something the community will be very proud of." The new non-profit organization is sure to become known as BRIFT, even by those who might not remember its predecessor, the Burt Reynolds Institute for Theatre Training, commonly known as BRITT—which, along with the Burt Reynolds Dinner Theater, put Jupiter on the map in the 1980s.

As the newly appointed chair of BRIFT, Niedland talks about mission statements, business models, educational opportunities and the need for funding. Reynolds talks about making magic. "It's all brand new," he says. "My dream is to have a little 99-seat theater. You can create magic in a 10-foot space if you've got the right people." Classes in acting and filmmaking are currently





forming. (For information, please call (561) 743-9955 or visit [www.BRIFT.org](http://www.BRIFT.org).)

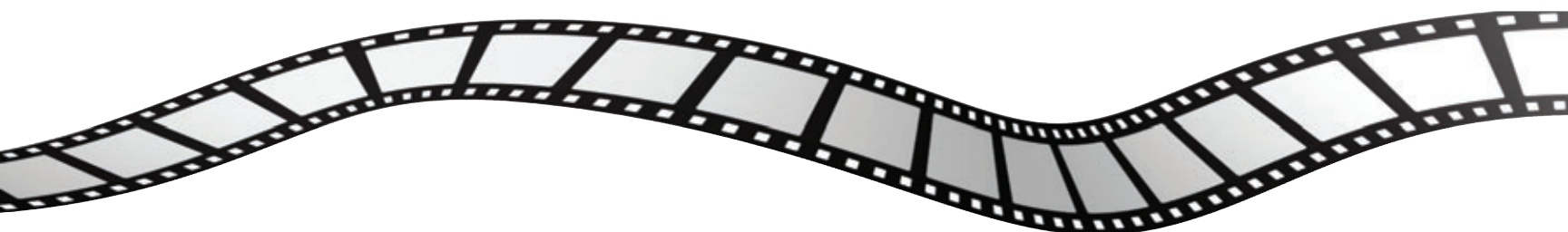
Reynolds has more than a dream and a slow, warm smile to offer students. The man has an impressive knowledge of film and stagecraft, a treasure trove of stories and a true appreciation for history. He draws generously on the experiences of a career spanning 50 years as well as those of a rebellious son, injured athlete and an angry young man. Some of the lessons he's now passing on, he learned the hard way. He stopped counting after 40 broken bones and he bears countless scars that will never show up on an x-ray. Palm Beach County is the place where he could always come to heal.

Even at the height of his success, when he was living in a beautiful home with a beautiful swimming pool surrounded by beautiful people, he still thought of Jupiter as home. "In L.A., I always had the feeling that I was going to be diving in the pool and somebody would say cut and it would all disappear and I'd land on the street. There's this whole sense of unreality. This," he says, stretching out his arms as if to embrace Jupiter's blue skies, "is where I found peace."

Reynolds has taught classes on acting in New York and L.A., he's worked with students at his alma mater, Florida State, and he's enjoyed every minute of it. "The difference now," he says, "is that when I finish, I can come home. I have my dog, I can look at the inland waterway and I can sit out on the porch. I just feel there's no pretension here."

"For him, teaching is absolutely the ultimate in satisfaction," says Niedland, who happens to be a BRITT alumna, Class of 1990. "Burt is so alive when he teaches. It's something I know he looks forward to. During a class, 100 percent of his attention is focused on the students. Seeing him in action is amazing."

At a recent class, held at the Burt Reynolds & Friends Museum in Jupiter, Reynolds stepped onto a stage that could barely contain him. Students, arrayed in two rows of chairs before him, listened attentively as he paid tribute to Spencer Tracy. He spoke softly and gently; when you have an audience in the palm of your hand there's no need to raise your voice. As a young man, Reynolds told the group, he visited the set of the 1960 classic *Inherit the Wind*; in the parking lot afterwards Tracy gave him a singular piece of advice:



"Don't let them catch you acting." Heads bob and nod around the room. Reynolds has never forgotten that advice. Chances are good that his students will now remember it for a lifetime, too.

The small crowd, a mix of Coach bags and earnest faces, shifted in their seats as three actors replaced Reynolds on the stage; the red light came on as cameras rolled. Reynolds sat at an editing console in front of three monitors, a package of decongestant and a pencil cup containing a single pen, a small American flag and a white feather. "Action," he called.


Before long, he was up, out of the chair, moving to the side of the stage, questioning the choices an actor had made, challenging another to take a risk, shouting encouragement. A dash of his self-deprecating humor often eased the actors' way into unfamiliar territory. They all wanted desperately to please him, to shine in his eyes, and so, in the space of an evening, they grew.

"People have a lot of ideas about who Burt is from his films," Niedland says, "but when they spend time with him, they see how much he really cares. He's an articulate, nurturing, fascinating man and a phenomenal teacher."

The clock was pushing midnight when Reynolds, once again, took the stage. "I remember a director putting his arm around me and saying I've got to tell you something. I thought well this is it, I've been waiting 30 years for a director to put his arm around me and tell me the secret of life or what it is that I've got to do to make the scene work." They had been shooting on location, he told the students, and the long day—like the class—was drawing to an end. "He said, 'The sun's going down, we're losing this location, give me a good one.'"

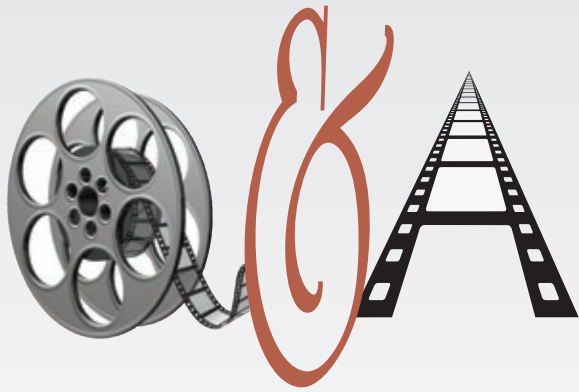
"You know what," Reynolds says, savoring the memory. "I did. I gave him the best one I could."

Reynolds apparently has no plans to retire. Ever. "My parents, God love 'em, always had the ranch," he says. "I really believe it had something to do with why they got to be 90. They both felt like they had a job to do and they had to get up in the morning to do it. When that stops I think you've got nothing to wake up for. Maybe that's part of what I'm doing. I'm scared to stop."

Besides, as he says, "I really think my best work is ahead of me." 







## WITH BURT REYNOLDS:

### **Why did you decide to base the new Burt Reynolds Institute for Film and Theatre in Palm Beach County?**

I wanted to give something back. Whatever success I had, I wanted to share it. I always felt a tremendous affection for this area; it's a magical, wonderful place. The world of film and the theater is a magical place, too, a place where you go and can forget your troubles for a couple of hours.

### **Did you always want to be an actor?**

I had no interest in the theater; that was a total accident. I was recovering from a really bad knee operation; the reality that I wasn't going to play football again hadn't set in yet. I was picking up some credits at the junior college [Palm Beach Junior College] and I had this English literature class. I sat, like all football players, in the last row. I had this amazing teacher; his name was Watson B. Duncan III and he truly changed my life. I slowly moved from the back row to the front row. One day, I was sitting in the front row and he said, "We're having readings for the play." I said, "What play?"

### **What is the key to your success?**

It is luck — no really good actor won't admit that—and I have been incredibly lucky. As corny as it might sound, that's truly what teaching is about, passing it on in some way.

### **Would you consider yourself an overachiever?**

I certainly was an overachiever as an athlete. I had more heart than ability. In football you could get away with it. Baseball and basketball are skill sports; football is all about getting knocked down and getting up. I suppose I had a lot of anger in me, too. I needed to put it somewhere. You can do that in football. I loved the sport.

### **You obviously take great pride in your students, both past and present. Have any of them gone on to successful careers in the industry?**

It's amazing. We've had four or five kids on Broadway. We had one young man, Tommy Thompson, who wrote and produced *Quantum Leap*. Another young lady, Lisa Soland, is an award-winning playwright. Mark Fauser has a great theater in the Midwest. The list goes on and on.



S. Niedland

### **What advice would you give someone who is considering a career in acting?**

I think you have to commit to being a little ridiculous and not to be embarrassed by it. You have to be prepared to make a fool of yourself. You have to have a sense of silly. I think you have to hold on to the spirit of a child. If you can hold onto it, then it will help you. We shouldn't put all of our toys away. If you're going to be an actor you have to believe in things that are not there.

### **Are there still acting challenges you would like to tackle?**

I want to do something that's kind of a surprise to everybody; I'd like to do something that's quite wordy. I certainly am not going to try to do Shakespeare — the English eat our lunch at it but they can't do Tennessee Williams and we can. I'd like to do something that Mr. [James] Cagney would be really proud of, something my age that has a little grit to it and hopefully some humor, something that would allow me to stretch some muscles that I haven't used as an actor. Someday, somebody's going to offer me something that's going to scare the hell out of me. That's the part I should play. Cagney was fearless and that's what I'd like to be.

### **How did you wind up with a dog named Precious?**

She was named by the wonderful people at Safe Harbor Animal Sanctuary, where I adopted her. It's not a name I would have considered on my own, but after spending time with her it was so fitting that I could not change it. Precious—"Of such great value that a suitable price is hard to estimate." Seems like a perfect name for a beautiful lady.