

SANIBEL SHELL SHOCKED

How Peter Rabbit Changed my Life

By Art Stevens

Most events that shape our lives take place during our childhood. One such event took place when I was in the third grade. I was chosen to play Peter Rabbit in a school play.

As one of the shyest kids in recorded history I shunned the limelight. I shunned it because I didn't want to subject myself to the leering and jeering of my classmates. I would rather have been glued to the decrepit wooden chair I sat on during my elementary school years so that I wouldn't have to get up and stand in front of the class.

But, as fate would have it, my third grade class was assigned to put on the annual school play. Our teacher agonized over what play the class should put on. I never imagined the role I would play in her decision, let alone the role I would play in the class production. And then one day it came to her. We would put on Peter Rabbit, a stage version of the famous children's story. But who would play the title role? It was to be a non-speaking role requiring a lot of prancing about on the stage.

She looked around the room and began to assign all the speaking parts. I tried dissolving into the seat I was in but I couldn't sink low enough so as not to be seen. And, finally the teacher's eyes fell on mine.

"Arthur," she said. "You're going to be Peter Rabbit."

Since I wasn't used to speaking in class under any circumstances I said nothing. The class began to laugh and then jeer, "Peter Rabbit, Arthur Rabbit, Peter Rabbit, Arthur Rabbit."

And that is how I got to put on a rabbit costume, complete with a bushy tail and long ears and told to pretend that I was a rabbit. At first I was embarrassed as well as frightened. But the teacher calmed me down and gave me the confidence that was necessary for me to make a fool of myself.

The more we rehearsed, the more I plunged into the role. I liked being a rabbit. It was better than being me. Of course, that was my third grade mindset at work. The day was fast approaching when the fruits of our rehearsals would result in a performance before the entire school body in the main auditorium. I was a bundle of raw nerves. I had never been in a school play before and I had never faced hundreds of my schoolmates on a stage. The good news was that the Peter Rabbit costume for which I had been outfitted hid my sweaty face and no one outside of my classmates knew who I was.

But a strange thing happened once the play began and a hush fell over the audience. The stage lights were on and I couldn't see a single soul sitting out there. I had to be practically shoved onto the stage when the Peter Rabbit character made its first

entrance. And I heard laughter from the audience – not mean laughter but good will laughter, supportive laughter.

And from that moment on I became a ham. I pounced, I zigzagged, I upstaged the other performers, I mugged. I truly enjoyed being on stage. I became the character and the real me became totally submerged. I had caught the acting bug and the opportunity to be someone other than myself. The fact that the someone else I was playing was a non-speaking rabbit allowed me to discover method acting.

I was a big hit. When the performers took their bows I got the loudest round of applause. I was in rabbit heaven.

The next day when I walked into my classroom all the kids pounded me on the back and said what a great Peter Rabbit I was. For months afterwards classmates and neighborhood kids called me Peter Rabbit. I had to assume it was a compliment rather than a declaration of character deficiency.

The acting bug stayed with me throughout the rest of my elementary school career and into junior high school. I graduated from non-speaking parts to speaking ones. I played detective Nick Sherlock in a murder mystery farce. That was when I experienced my first stage kiss. The female lead was played by the prettiest girl in school, one who would never normally look my way.

But I got to kiss her during every rehearsal as called for in the script. We didn't get to know each other outside of rehearsals but it's fair to say that our lips became very acquainted during them. I thought to myself, this acting gig isn't so bad after all. And it all started with Peter Rabbit. When I began to audition and get leading roles in high school and college productions—and even think about the possibility of acting as a career -- I thought about how insecure I had originally felt about getting on a stage. But thanks to Peter Rabbit I began to open up, my shyness disappeared and I was ready for life.