

# Ears on a Beatle Star Dan Lauria Gets Personal

By Iris Wiener

It's intriguing, thought-provoking and full of challenging questions, but Dan Lauria wants it to be known that *Ears on a Beatle* is in no way your typical conspiracy play. "The play is really about two men having this heavy knowledge and not being able to do anything about it, and how it destroys them," he says. The Lindenhurst native, and star of television hit "The Wonder Years" comes to Off-Broadway this month with an original story based on FBI records maintained during the Nixon Administration's surveillance of John Lennon. Audiences will travel back to Lennon's last years, only to discover that his death came with secrets few could have imagined. A provocative look at the case from an altogether different perspective, this play will leave everyone asking questions about the real freedom of the seventies.

One of the most interesting questions is how such a fascinating story made its way to New York. "We had a reading program we did out in L.A. called 'The Playwrights Kitchen Ensemble,'" answers Lauria. "For ten years, Joe Cacaci and I would read a new play every Monday night and the goal was to try to get new American writers literary agents and then hopefully get some of their plays produced. We were very successful in getting a lot of them literary agents, but most of them ended up writing for television, you know that's the way Hollywood works," he says with some mild regret (Lauria is not one to quit, as has been demonstrated by his ongoing struggle to build a professional theater where the two counties meet on the south shore of Long Island). "We did get some plays production, maybe a dozen over the ten years got produced somewhere, but we're trying to get plays here to New York. I knew Mark [St. Germain, director and playwright] was one of the writers we had read, we always liked his writing, and then he called me and said 'I got a new play, and I can actually get a production, but we have to go to the Berkshires, and we're gonna be in a junior high cafeteria!' There was a beautiful 500 seat theatre where they did 'Funny Girl' for the nine millionth time, and we were in a junior high cafeteria." Luckily New York producer Daryl Roth read the strong reviews, leading to a New York reading from Lauria and actor Bill Dawes.

Lauria stars as Howard Ballantine, one of two FBI agents investigating the Lennon case, along with Dawes as agent McClure. As they study the icon of the decade, the men begin to discover more about themselves and their roles in America. In preparing for the role of the older, more experienced agent, Lauria found himself looking at the real-life role Leon Wildes (who also produced this play) played as Lennon and Yoko Ono's attorney. "In my character, and I think Leon sees a little bit of himself in it...it's my fault John Lennon was killed," he says, in reference to Ballantine's overlooking Lennon's possession of marijuana. "If I had done my job, he would have been deported, and he might still be alive. So maybe if Leon wasn't such a damn good lawyer, he would have lost the case, and John Lennon would be sitting there in England still writing songs, so that's a heavy burden. If you listen to the play really closely, it doesn't say the FBI did any of this stuff, it's just that they know...John F. Kennedy gets killed they have nothing to do with it, they go find out who really did it and then they say 'yeah but you can't reveal that.' That's what the play is really about, how that kind of know-



Dan Lauria & Bill Dawes star in *Ears On A Beatle*

edge just destroys these guys."

Lauria remembers his own encounter with Lennon with much fondness. "I met John Lennon about eight months before he was killed. I was playing 'Gus the Killer pimp' on 'One Life to Live' which was right by the park on 66. We used to block and shoot, so I shot, and then I had like six hours before they needed me so I was walking by the park, and he came walking by and I didn't know what to say, I just nodded, I said hello, and he said hello, and I got about ten feet away and I heard 'Gus!' and it was John. He said 'Oh! I watch you all the time, I love to watch [One Life to Live]. And I invited him to come down, he never called to come to the set, but he said he was a big soap opera fan."

*Ears* isn't the first time Lauria has had the opportunity to relive the years of John Lennon in front of an audience. "When we did a thing about Robert Kennedy on 'The Wonder Years,' we were talking a lot about that [John Lennon] and where we were, and Fred [Savage] was thirteen. We all started talking about John F. Kennedy and everybody knew where we were, and Fred didn't realize, and said 'What's going on?' and I said 'Well, I hope you never have a date like that, like our parents knew exactly where they were when Pearl Harbor happened, and we know where we were when John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King and John Lennon passed-it's all death. I hope you don't have one like that.' And the first call I got after September 11 was Fred. He said 'Now I realize what you guys were talking about, I'll never forget where I was.'"

Savage and others were able to pay their respects to the Beatle through poignant voiceovers throughout the play. "When I got involved," says Lauria, "Mark showed me all the voiceovers and he had Geraldine Ferraro and Dick Cavett, and eventually we got Leon. And I said, 'Well let me call my friends,' so I got Jack Klugman, Fred, Danica McKellar (also a 'The Wonder Years' vet), and Karen Valentine. They're all John Lennon fans. That's why we're hoping the play has a life. We're hoping that it catches on. It's like Leon says: 'John's protesting from the grave.'"

Lauria feels very strongly about America's current state as well. "I'm real radical. It's like with what's going on right now. I can't join with Tim Robbins because they're against all wars- I'm against this war. You know when 9/11 hit, a lot of actors went down there and shook hands and did photo ops. I went every Tuesday and worked for the Salvation Army, driving a golf cart down into the hole, giving coffee

and water and I wouldn't allow my picture to be taken for the newspaper. I'm a radical in a different way, I don't believe in lip service. I was just talking about 9/11, and I've been glued to the set with Richard Clark and all that stuff, and as far as I'm concerned, regardless of what politics, this is a whitewash of Saudi Arabia. Not mentioned, Nobody's talking about it, so I don't know what they're pulling. I hear everybody talking about Bush being the anti-terrorist president, so why are we in Iraq? Why aren't we in Saudi Arabia? Well I

think, personally, these guys Cheney and Bush are deliberately bankrupting the government, so they can privatize everything for themselves. I'm from Brooklyn, I know when I'm getting robbed. I don't think it has anything to do with terrorism, oil, guns, anything like that."

And this is where *Ears on a Beatle* comes in. "I want people to get involved. It amazes me that there's not enough protests going on with what's going on out there. I think this young generation is much smarter than we were before they lacked the passion." Lauria pauses to imagine what it would have been like if the last election occurred in the sixties. "They would have had tanks in Miami. I don't even see fighting. All I see are kids sitting behind video games. Nobody's involved. I don't see any college campus riots or anything. I don't see any protests. If they're out there, they're doing a good job of hiding them." What about the protests that we see every day, such as those concerning gay marriage and abortion? "Those are all smoke screens to get us away from bigger issues. I'm not trying to diminish them, but talking about abortion and gay marriage right now, as important as they may be, they're just a smoke screen to get us away from what's going on, this raping of America."

The sentiment behind Lauria's words is clearly reflected in *Ears on a Beatle*. With a perfect balance of comedy and suspicion, *Ears* honors a deep insistence in the honor of truth, while demonstrating the guilt that comes with even the most innocent of falsities. The play is persistent in demonstrating the need for questions and protest in all states of living. In the same fashion as Lennon, *Ears* will determinedly speak to all of its listeners. ■