

# Alumnus awards visit

## Producer's art career goes beyond *Silence*

A legendary career in the performing arts got its roots fifty years ago performing *Othello* with his English class at Elon College. Oscar-winning producer of *Silence of the Lambs* Kenneth Utt graduated from Elon in the Class of '42 as a voice music major and student body president. Utt's credentials read like a Who's Who of show business: attended Julliard Graduate School, performed on Broadway, worked alongside journalistic giant Edward R. Murrow and produced acclaimed films such as *The French Connection*, *Midnight Cowboy* and his crowning achievement, *Silence of the Lambs*.

Utt returned to his alma mater this weekend to accept the Elon College Distinguished Alumnus Award. He spoke with the Dean of Fine Arts and Humanities, Clair Myers, during the talk show *Arts in Alamance*. Here are some excerpts of their conversation.

**Myers:** While you were here you did some theatre, I understand.

**Utt:** Yes, I did. My wife Angie Henry and I did *Othello*. I played Othello and she played Desdemona. That was our claim to fame here.

**Myers:** You went on from here to Julliard.

**Utt:** I went to Julliard, almost finished the first year and went into the Air Force. I went to Miami Beach for basic training and was picked for the *Winged Victory* show, which happened about six months after that.

**Myers:** Tell us a little about what *Winged Victory* was.

**Utt:** They somehow managed to corral all the people in the Air Force that had had some kind of professional experience. We had a wonderful cast. I was in chorus - we had forty men in chorus. We had people like Mariel Lanza, Eugene Connelly. Actors, we had John Forsyth and Anthony Ross. Dr. Martin Ritt from Elon College was in that cast.

**Myers:** At the end of the war, did you stay in New York?

**Utt:** I went back to the Julliard.

**Myers:** Did you finish your degree there?

**Utt:** No, I didn't. I was in the graduate school and a degree was not offered. Some people were sent to Europe, paid for by the Julliard to get experience with European opera companies and that sort of thing... I got pushed out before I finished my second year. What happened was Jerry White, who was the stage manager for *Winged Victory* and for Rodgers and Hammerstein before the war, called me and asked me to replace Mervin Vye who was playing the villain in *Carousel*. I, of course, accepted it and that was the end of my classic training at the Julliard.

**Myers:** If you had stayed at Julliard, would you have gone to a classical opera?

**Utt:** Probably. I don't know where it would have ended. That's what got me interested in the backstage. I had a good association with the stagehands. I played poker with them down in the basement of the theatre and all that. When we were on the road... I helped them load in and hang the show. One week I'd be in electric, one week I'd be with the flyman, one week I'd hang these gels.

**Myers:** So you had these dual roles. Did you move over from acting to stage manager then?

**Utt:** I never made the decision to give up anything. When the assistant stage manager left the company, I took that job... Then Angie and I decided it was time for us to



Kenneth Utt, producer of *Silence of the Lambs*

think about raising a family because by that time we were getting along a little. We decided to leave the show and go back to New York.

**Myers:** What shows did you do?

**Utt:** I had Gene Arthur and Boris Karloff in *Peter Pan*, a great big flop with Burgess Meredith..., and then my best love, Shirley Booth, and George Abbott directed *Three Girls in Brooklyn*. That was my last Broadway show.

**Myers:** That was the Golden Age of American theatre.

**Utt:** Really, really terrific. After *Three* closed, CBS asked me to come over to set up a musical that was going to star Bert Parks, who used to do the beauty pageants. They invited me to stay and they offered me *Studio One*... The other show (I worked on) was Ed Sullivan. It was called *Toast of the Town* then. I was there with Betty Furness the historic time the refrigerator wouldn't open. That's a classic now. I was there ten years.

**Myers:** Did you do any acting?

**Utt:** Yes, I did. That was part of my deal... I did a lead twice... I did a couple of other things, one accidental. There was a Chrysler Medallion Theatre, starring Charleton Heston and it was a western up on the fifth floor of Vanderbilt Avenue off of 42nd Street in New York and we had three horses in that studio. They somehow got up there. During their dress rehearsal, Charleton Heston and Martin Brooks had a fight staged so that they rolled underneath one of the horses during the fight scene. The horse became excited, stepped on Brook's hand and he was sent to the hospital. I knew all the moves because I was a stage manager and I'd been in rehearsal all week, so we decided I'd take a crack at it. All of the stage hands had the complete script on cue cards beside every camera. Everywhere I looked there was the script and that's how we did that show. It went on to win a Christopher Award. That's what happened in live TV.

**Myers:** You worked with Edward R. Murrow during that time.

**Utt:** He did *Person to Person* and I worked on that series. It was fortunate for me that he was one of the finest men I ever knew in my life. He was just the best. He didn't particularly like doing this kind of show, being a hard-nosed newsman. He was a wonderfully warm, bright, bright man who smoked too much.

**Myers:** The integrity of television news at that time is something that people always point to.

**Utt:** We were very proud in those days of CBS, because it was a classy, classy network. It was a pleasure to go to work... because you knew that you were going to do the best that could be done in those days.

**Myers:** Let's talk about what it means to be an associate producer.

**Utt:** A funny thing that has happened to me is that I've been doing almost the same job all of these years, even with *Silence of the Lambs*. We keep changing titles... but it's basically the same thing. Our job is coordinating. We hire the crews, help with the casting and with whatever is needed. I'm doing my sixth picture with Jonathan Demme now so we have a family. We don't even have to tell each other what each other is gonna do. We just do it... I'm almost 72 years old and I've decided that I'm not going to anymore except with the Demme group. We hopefully are going to do a sequel to *Silence of the Lambs* one of these days. The book is being written.

**Myers:** How much did that film cost to produce?

**Utt:** *Silence of the Lambs* cost a very reasonable amount of money for this time, a little over \$19 million. For the picture we're doing now in Philadelphia, we have a budget of \$25 million... But you go back and *Midnight Cowboy* cost a little over \$3 million.

**Myers:** Which is what Dustin Hoffman would ask to do a film.

**Utt:** More. Oh my goodness, about double that. John Voigt for that movie made less than the teamster captain in charge of all the trucks and all the equipment. *The French Connection* cost less than \$3 million, with all those chases in the subway and all that. Gene Hackman received \$75,000 for that movie and won the Academy Award.

**Myers:** It was a good investment on his part... What is the name of your new film?

**Utt:** Right now, it's *Philadelphia*. It's the first major film on AIDS and we think we're going to be very proud. We have Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington, Joanne Woodward, Jason Robards... It was the story of a young lawyer in Philadelphia at a major firm who gets AIDS and is fired by the company. Washington plays the fellow who defends him. It takes him a long time to decide he wants to do it because he's very fearful of AIDS. We think we're telling it all about AIDS education.

**Myers:** This sounds like part of your own personal integrity.

**Utt:** That's one of the reasons I'm with Demme is that he has one of the best hearts I've ever known... He's a remarkable man.

**Myers:** What are you going to do when *Philadelphia* is over?

**Utt:** I'm coming back to North Carolina to play some golf. I'm not terrific but when I break 90, it's a celebration. I have no plans to retire. As long as I have my health, I'll keep going.