



Clutter creation: Burmester poses with one of his junk-art wall hangings

Putnam's Renaissance Man

An accomplished film, stage and TV actor, Carmel's Leo Burmester also plays the role of artist with his intriguing sculptures made of junk

by **Laura Joseph Mogil**

If you spotted Carmel resident Leo Burmester eating breakfast at George's, his favorite local morning haunt, you might think there was something familiar about his burly frame, combed-back white hair and broad, friendly smile. In fact, people frequently approach him to say just how familiar he seems. "I reply, 'You probably saw my picture in the post office,'" jokes Burmester.

What's much more likely is that you've spotted Burmester, 62, in one of the more than 60 films and TV shows he has appeared in during the last 30-plus years. A leading man he's not — that's why you can't quite place him — but during his nonstop career he has played dozens of quirky types in blockbuster films like *The Abyss* and *The Legend of Zorro*, and cops and Southern characters in shows like *Law & Order*. Theater buffs might also recognize him from Broadway: he recently played the role of Hucklebee in the revival of *The Fantasticks* and in 1987 he originated the role of the heartless innkeeper Thenardier in the smash hit *Les Misérables*. And while Burmester has spent decades hanging with the Hollywood set ("You find that in show business there are so many wonderful people that you fall in love with. You become like a tight-knit, crazy kind of family for a period of time, and then the film or TV show is over and you all go your separate ways," he says), around Putnam County, his passion runs more towards other people's rubbish. For almost 30 years, the actor has been crafting large-scale sculptures out of junk and knickknacks. "You can tell a lot about people by the things they throw away," he says.

A native of Louisville, Kentucky, Burmester earned a graduate degree in acting from the University of Denver; he caught his big break at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in the late 1970s. The place was "one of the hottest theater spots in the United

Profile Leo Burmester

States at that time,” he recalls. “Kathy Bates, Chris Cooper, and Holly Hunter all came out of there.” He originated roles in two plays, *Getting Out* and *Lone Star*, each of which snagged rave reviews and went on to Off-Broadway. Burmester came with them to New York, and never looked back.

One of the highlights of his long career was belting out such hits as “Master of the House” and “Dog Eats Dog” in front of 1,000 people a night in *Les Miserables*. It was a “huge moment in my life and a terrific, unbelievable thrill,” he says. “That was not just a show; that was an event. We were a hit before we went into rehearsal. I’d never experienced that kind of mass enthusiasm for anything.”

Movie roles followed his stage successes.

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He was cast as an apostle in Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and had interesting turns in three John Sayles films, playing a well-intentioned uncle in *Passion Fish* (1992), a bartender in *Lone Star* (1996), and a homophobic fisherman in *Limbo* (1999). But his biggest film role was in the 1989 thriller *The Abyss*, in which he played Catfish De Vries, a decompression specialist and sidekick to Ed Harris’s character.

So where did his interest in junk come from? “I was in between jobs and I didn’t have anything to do,” recalls Burmester. “I built this giant piece of junk art out of a plow, an American flag, corn, peas, beans, and little pieces of stuff I’d found around.” As a joke, he sent it to a friend in Connecticut, “I told him he should hang it outside so the birds could eat it. And he actually left it up for four years.” That was the end of his first creation.

In the 1980s, he started working in a shed outside his house in Carmel. People seemed intrigued by his art. “The pieces are quite large, and guests would often see them and comment on them,” he says. “It’s not something you can just look at and walk away from.” Soon Burmester found himself exhibiting his pieces. He also worked with his friend, the director Rob Travalino, to create a film about his work, *Leo Burmester and the Literature of Junk* (2001), which won Best Documentary Short at the Putnam County Film Festival.

Often made on bases of plywood, masonite

Thousands of trinkets (like the one pictured below) are part of Burmester's work titled *Unemployment* (right)



and glass, his junk-art wall hangings can take up to two years to finish. He made one piece for director and choreographer Susan Stroman while working with her on the play *Thou Shalt Not*. Her "sculpture" is fashioned out of knickknacks and trinkets brought in by fellow cast members. For his good friend, actor David Schramm (*Wings*), the artist made a creation using ticket stubs, figurines, scraps of cloth, and costume jewelry. He also constructed a four-by-eight-foot work which is on exhibit at the Schoolhouse Gallery in Croton Falls. "It probably has 100,000 pieces of stuff on it," he says, including a 48-star American flag, wrist-watches, string, rope, pottery shards, pencils, pens, beads, and seeds.

Burmester lives with his wife, actress Lora Lee Ecobelli, in a renovated 19th-century farmhouse overlooking the West Branch Reservoir. The pair, who through local volunteer work had known each other for 25 years, began dating "quite unexpectedly" after their respective divorces. After Burmester finished filming *The Legend of Zorro* in Mexico, the couple drove three-and-a-half hours to Real de Catorce where they got married atop a 10,000-foot mountain in a 12-hour overnight ceremony led by a Huichole shaman. More than 30 friends and family came to witness the spectacle. "The ceremony was amazing. The shaman bound

us with a rope and had us exchange our vows and then he began chanting in the morning sun," explains Burmester. "Now we spend all of our time together. We're just really crazy about one another."

The duo is working together on packaging a movie; written by Ecobelli, the script is based on the life of her grandmother who emigrated to the U.S. from Italy in the 1920s. Burmester sent it to his friend (and Academy Award-winning actor) Chris Cooper. "He read it twice, said he would do it, and that's opened up all kinds of doors for us," he says. Actress Julie Kavner (of *Rhoda* and *The Simpsons*) is also on board. "We're hoping to start principal photography in September," says Burmester.

Another of the couple's joint projects is *Blue Horse*, a rock, blues and jazz album. (Ecobelli composed the music; Burmester wrote the lyrics, sings and plays the Native American flute.) The two occasionally perform with an impromptu group of musicians at area venues like the Towne Crier Cafe in Pawling. More often, they'll just jam at home with good friends and their grown kids (all of whom are involved in the arts): Burmester's son, Daniel, and daughter, Colette; and Ecobelli's children, Adira, Alana, and Adam.

So what's next for this jack-of-all-trades? *Aftermath*, a movie starring the late Chris Penn, Anthony Michael Hall, and Tony Danza is due out later this year. Once again, Burmester will play a supporting role, this time as a sheriff. In his mind, his art has a connection with the movies: "To be able to take these things that people throw out and put them on display is something of a childlike fantasy. People look at a sculpture and say things like, 'I had one of those when I was a kid' or 'I've never seen that before.' It helps people to create the movies that go on in their minds." ■