

Ron Holgate

By Douglas Gladstone



Aberdeen native Ronald Holgate was doing a staged reading of James DeMarse's new play *Ceasefire* two months ago, at the Berkshire Playwrights Lab in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, when he suddenly flashed back to his days at Aberdeen Central High School, from which he graduated in 1955. On the surface, *Ceasefire*—the story of an American diplomat who attempts to negotiate peace in an African republic while simultaneously dealing with his troubled marriage—seems a strange vehicle to trigger memories of Aberdeen Central for the distinguished actor, who won the 1969 Tony Award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical for his scene-stealing portrayal of Richard Henry Lee in the original Broadway production of *1776*.

What exactly about *Ceasefire* rekindled memories of Aberdeen Central for Ron, now a widely respected and admired actor with more than 50 years of screen and stage experience? Did a certain line remind him of his high school drama coach Randy Fisher, who was instrumental in helping him win a state poetry championship?

Ron smiles. "No, Randy Fisher was a great guy. He was a key figure in all the success I've enjoyed." But it was another one of his teachers, Mildred Slater, who came to mind during the reading of *Ceasefire*. "During rehearsals, our director said something to me, and I told him that he sounded a lot like her," continues Ron. "She was always telling me, 'Now Ronnie, you can't do that.'"

As he speaks, he mimics her voice. It is high-pitched and shrill, like the sound of a whistle. "I remember one time, our homeroom teacher left the classroom," adds Ron, chuckling, "and well, you know kids, when their teachers leave the room for even a minute, you know what happens, we all went apeshit." According to Ron, the substitute who later covered for his homeroom teacher was Slater. "So she comes in, and I see her, and I yell out to her at the top of my lungs, 'Hi ya Millie,'" he adds, laughing. Ultimately, Ron said Slater would have the last laugh. "I ended up in her room after school, and we had a nice talk. Well, mostly she did all the talking."

That Ron would engage in a little friendly banter with a high school teacher is not surprising, since he was the kind of individual who marched to the beat of his own drum, according to one of his closest high school friends. "I remember we always had to ride this old bus to whatever baseball tournament we were playing in, and while the rest of the team was singing whatever the popular song of the day was, like "Rock Around The Clock," Ron was belting out some operatic aria," says Jim Lust, who still lives in Aberdeen. The father of David Lust, the Majority Leader of the South Dakota House of Representatives, Jim did all right for himself in his post-high school life too, just like his high school buddy.

Formerly on the Board of Directors of the Education Assistance Corporation, Jim also served as the president of the National Automobile Dealers Association. Now a fundraiser involved in local activities, Jim's auto



*Ron reading through
Ceasefire with, left to right,
Nelson Avidon, Meegan
Holaway, Roger Robinson
and Kofi Boakye.
(Courtesy of Berkshire
Playwrights Lab, Christina
Lane, photographer)*

dealership on Sixth Avenue in Aberdeen, Lust Chevrolet, is run by another of his sons, Steven. “Ron was always his own person and he still is,” Jim continues. Since they lived on opposite sides of town (the Holgate house was on South Lincoln Street in Aberdeen), he never met Ron until they played on the American Legion squad from Aberdeen that was a baseball powerhouse in the 1950s. Both Ron, who was the centerfielder, and Jim, who played shortstop, helped guide that team to three consecutive State A championships, from 1953 through 1955. “Ron couldn’t hit the curve ball,” jokes Jim, “but he was good, really good, and he could have been in the majors.”

Besides his prowess on the diamond, Ron also lettered in basketball, football and track. Sure, he was a member of the all-state chorus, but he was also captain of both the football and basketball teams—he was an all-stater in the latter—and led the Aberdeen Golden Eagles to the State A basketball championship game, where he scored 20 points in a 67-50 loss to the Sioux Falls High School Warriors. Which naturally begets the question: was Ron Holgate a jock at heart?

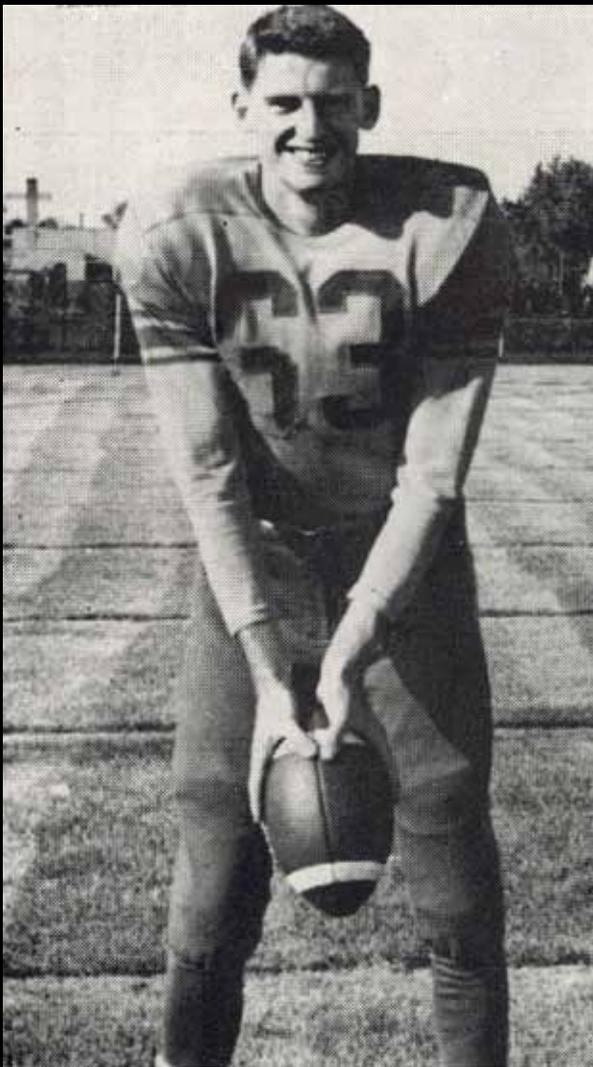
“If I had my druthers, I’d be a baseball player,” admits Ron, who says his idol growing up was New York Yankees slugger Joe DiMaggio. “I know people around Aberdeen thought I’d choose basketball, but I loved playing baseball. I still love watching it. Except when I watch the New York Mets.” After this year’s All-Star Game at Kauffman Stadium in Kansas City in July, the Yankees’ cross-town rivals endured a streak through September 1st where they lost twice as many games

(32) as they won (16). “Watching them,” jokes Ron, “is like watching the toilet flush. Whoosh, and down they go!”

How much did Ron love playing baseball? As a youngster growing up, he says he used to play ball in a vacant dirt lot near where the railroad tracks came through Aberdeen. Tired of always losing the ball in the weeds, Ron and his friends decided to make themselves what he calls “a dinky field. We were just so damned determined to have a baseball field to play on.”

Ron not only made himself a makeshift field as a boy, he claims to have invented a game called cork ball. “We used fishing cork,” he explains. “We wrapped tape around the cork to give it a little weight. It was somewhere between the size of a baseball and a softball, and it really helped me learn how to bat well.”

“Baseball is his true love,” agrees Ron’s brother, Richard Holgate. Three years Ron’s senior, Richard retired from the technical theatre department of the College of DuPage, in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, some years ago; he and his wife, Mimi Munch, now reside in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. “My kid brother is extremely talented,” says Richard. “He’s been that way forever. That voice of his was recognized as early as grade school.” According to Richard, their late mother, Helen, wanted Ron to be part of a touring school choir when he was in elementary school, but that idea was nixed by their late father, Cy. “Dad put a stop to that right away,” adds Richard. “He said, ‘No way. He can do whatever the hell he likes later, when he’s 18-years-old.’”



A visitor to his house in Saratoga Springs, New York, where Ron, his wife, Anny DeGange, and their two daughters, Chloe and Lily, reside, might expect Ron to be belting out show tunes all the time but, the truth is, he probably prefers waxing philosophical about sports. Here are a couple of his opinions:

On the use of performance enhancing drugs in baseball: "It's depressing. Will Major League Baseball crack down hard on these cheaters or will drugs win out? I mean, what am I watching here? A contest between gifted athletes or a drug fest? You start taking drugs and you're going to do harm to your body."

On concussions in football: "I had my bell rung a few times playing football. I mean, it's a fun game to play, but kids today shouldn't get so serious about it. You don't want to knock your heads together and cause yourself irreparable damage."

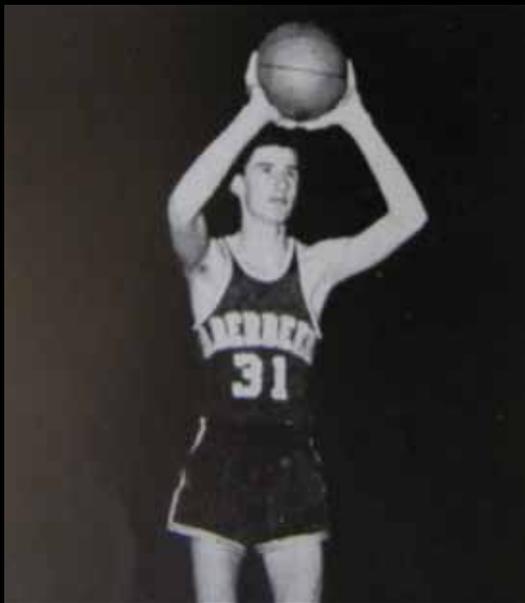
Despite their shared love of sports, the Holgate brothers both landed in the arts. "Richard built sets, did the lighting, that sort of stuff. I was on one side of the curtain, he was on the other side, and he was very good

at what he did." He adds that he and his brother, who speak to one another on the telephone every day, are extremely close. Richard agrees. "We're both not guys who have a lot of close friends. So yes, we are extremely close."

Given that they're also septugenarians, Ron can't resist getting in the following jab at his elder sibling: "He told me just the other day that he recently built a garage, but he couldn't carry the shingles up the ladder." When asked about the needling, Richard just laughs. "He's right, I got them up in pieces."

Their mother Helen, a college drama teacher who also hosted a weekly radio program about Aberdeen events, may have loved the opera, arts and the theatre, but it was their father Cy who was the sports enthusiast in the family. "Sports was his thing," says Ron.

So it isn't surprising that Holgate was as much an athletic standout as a talented actor and singer. According to Ron, Cy, who was the superintendent of Aberdeen Public Schools from 1951 through 1970, was such a gifted basketball player that he was good enough to suit up with an amateur hoops squad that once took on the Harlem Globetrotters. "This was at a time when the Globetrotters were run by Abe Sapperstein, when they were really serious about winning games," he reminisces. Cy Holgate was so good, his youngest son notes with pride, that while he was attending Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, he scored an average of 18 points per game, which led his National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) Division 2 team. The next player closest to him only averaged nine points per game.



*From left, opposite page:
Ron Holgate's high school
football photo; Jim Lust's high
school football photo; Ron and
Jim's championship baseball
team (Ron, back row, fourth
from left and Jim, seated
far left); Ron's high school
basketball photo; Jim Lust, all
grown up.
(courtesy photos)*

The Cy Holgate Memorial Award, given to the best student athlete in the Aberdeen Public School System, is named after the former superintendent. The Holgate Middle School, located at 2200 North Dakota Street in Aberdeen, is also named in honor of Cy Holgate; it opened in 1972 as Holgate Junior High. "I was very pleased my father was accorded that honor," says Ron, who has also been honored by his hometown, being inducted into the Aberdeen High School Hall of Fame in 2007.

Sometime around his sophomore year at Aberdeen Central, Holgate concedes his love of athletics dimmed in favor of the arts. "When I lived in Aberdeen, we had people who made certain that great artists came into our city," he says. "We were out in the middle of America, maybe 700 miles away from Chicago, and we realized that we had to import the arts.

"You know, Aberdeen wasn't hicksville, it still isn't," continues Ron, his pride in his hometown busting through. "New Yorkers think they're so cosmopolitan and all, but my mother had the radio tuned to the Metropolitan Opera every week. I wonder how many New Yorkers can say the same. They can be so provincial at times."

"Provincial" is certainly not a word that anyone can use to describe Ron. A lover of Italian food—Anny says he's got a thing for the cookbooks of Marcella Hazan, who is widely considered to be one of the foremost authorities on Italian cuisine—Ron is also a prodigious reader of books, in particular, political thrillers and history. "Being an actor requires you to know some history," says Ron, who earlier this year appeared in

both the Philadelphia and San Diego productions of *The Scottsboro Boys*, the controversial musical about the alleged 1931 rape of two white girls by nine African-American teenagers in Alabama.

Other shows he's connected with that illustrate his point include the show he's best known for, *1776*, and a groundbreaking show about the Civil War, *Reunion*, that Ron developed the story for. "Just look at the Mozarts, the Verdis and the Wagners, composers of that ilk. All their stuff was tied up in history," he explains. "Their countries were tied together by their music. Look at the amalgamation of Germany, of Italy. Those guys, they were activists."

Amazingly, given how many extracurricular activities he participated in while at Aberdeen Central, Ron says he "hardly ever went out on dates. Maybe I had six dates all throughout high school. I was so busy with sports and theatre, I just never had time," continues Ron. "Sure, everyone knew who I was, everyone knew who my father was, but I never had a private life. How could I? We were so public. There was no escape outlet for me, especially because of Dad's job."

Richard agrees with his younger brother's assessment. "Our father was a lot looser with Ron than he was with me," the elder brother says, "but if you did something stupid, we always knew it would reflect badly on him, and we didn't want that to occur. I'm not saying he was strict, but we always had that in the back of our minds."

"And I know my parents didn't want it to be that way for me," adds Ron, somewhat ruefully. "The truth is, I only came into my own when I went away to college. What a great release that was."



Lily, Chloe and Anny Holgate.

Ron trained as an actor at Northwestern University and as an opera singer at the New England Conservatory of Music. He made his professional debut in 1959 with Boris Goldovsky's New England Opera Theatre while still a senior in college. "I had an interesting choice to make," recalls Ron, who was preparing to play the title role in Henrik Ibsen's classic 1867 play, *Peer Gynt*, when Goldovsky reportedly discovered him at Northwestern. "It was one of those famous crossroads moments we all have in life." A bass-baritone, Ron chose to study under Goldovsky and subsequently finished second in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. Fifty-three years later, his decision has allowed him to seamlessly bridge the worlds of both musical theatre and opera.

Although Ron may not have viewed himself as the big man on campus at Aberdeen Central, he surely is a big man in Broadway circles. Besides *1776*, Ron's extensive Great White Way resume includes originating the role of Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), portraying the self-absorbed Tito Morelli in the screwball farce *Lend Me a Tenor* (1989) and playing the agoraphobic World War 1 veteran Gustave in *Heroes* (2009). Ron was also nominated for a Tony for his role as Colonel Tadeusz Boleslaw Stjerbinsky in *The Grand Tour* (1979); his first Broadway credit was *Milk and Honey* in 1961.

In addition, among the 30 operatic productions he has appeared in, Ron has starred as the Don in *Don Giovanni*, Mephisto in *Faust*, and Scarpia in *Tosca*. "Acting in opera is the ultimate challenge," notes Ron. "There's just so much stuff that's going on in your

head, that's going on in your brain. First, you have to understand the language, whether it be Italian or French. Then you have to translate it into English, then you have to sing it correctly. And that's even before you concentrate on your own blocking."

Ever the consummate professional, Ron actually enjoys still being able to challenge himself. For instance, during rehearsals for *Ceasefire*, the 75-year-old, semi-retired performer admitted he was concerned about memorizing his lines. "Could I do it, could I still do it?" he recalls wondering to himself. According to Ron, this fear first cropped up for him in the mid-sixties, when he was still in his salad days, but it recurred when he did *The Scottsboro Boys* this year.

How did he conquer the problem? "I just went back to basics," he said. "There's a certain construction to all this, to memorizing your lines, then doing them by rote. Then, when you don't think about the lines, you can concentrate on what your situation is, how you can play the scene, how you can play the emotions. I'm sure every performer, at one time or another, faces something like this," he adds. "You just have to get to the point where it's second nature, where it's comfortable."

After so many shows and so many performances—he even toured with *Lend Me A Tenor* in London, and has played Morelli in nearly five years' worth of productions—Ron can be considered something of a theatrical vagabond. In fact, with the exception of Alaska and Hawaii, he has done concerts and shows in every state in the country. Nonetheless, the transplanted Midwesterner concedes he has never felt comfortable in New York City, of all places. For a man who formerly resided in Washington Heights, Roosevelt Island and Sunnyside, Queens, Ron's admission is somewhat surprising. "New York was a big, big shock to me," he continues. "In New York City, it's not about people appreciating your talent. That's why I've never really gotten used to New York," he adds. "I just never liked living there all that much. The people there don't think there's life outside of New York City."

Asked to elaborate, Ron notes that "there's so much competitiveness there. We saw it especially with a lot of parents. A lot of mothers and fathers always wanted their kids to get into the best schools. And, while that in and of itself is fine, they put a lot of pressure on their kids. No parent should make their child neurotic," he

says. "They should develop naturally, at their own pace and in their own way. That's one thing I can say about my daughters; I don't have to tell them when they're wrong; they know when they're wrong. My kids are self critical."

He can also puff up his chest that both 22-year-old Chloe, who studies vocal music at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, and 20-year-old Lily, a violinist at the Conservatory of Music in Purchase, New York, are musically literate. A third daughter, Melissa, whose mother was the late Dorothy Collins, resides in Malta, New York.

Of his first wife, Ron says that the Canadian-American Collins, who first shot to fame as a featured vocalist on the 1950s television show *Your Hit Parade*, and then earned a 1971 Tony nomination for Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*, enjoyed her celebrity status. Ron, on the other hand, says he considers himself a working actor and never wanted to be a celebrity. "That's why I do so many different things. We treat our so-called celebrities horribly in this country," he explains. "It's a miserable life. In Great Britain, they treat their so-called celebrities the right way; the fans across the pond at least honor the privacy of the individual."

It's also the reason why Ron chose to relocate to Saratoga Springs, rather than deal with the celebrity-seeking paparazzi and the hustle and bustle of New York City. "I didn't want my kids to grow up exclusively in New York City," he says. "I wanted them to experience small town city life so it would round out their personalities."

Somewhat wistfully, he says he wishes that Anny and the girls would visit Aberdeen with him one day, but concedes "it's so difficult to get out there. It just takes forever." His last trip to his hometown was five years ago, when he was inducted into the hall of fame. While there, he reconnected with his old baseball buddy Jim Lust. "We went to a football game, then we went back to our house for dinner and drinks and I introduced him to (former United States Senator) Tom Daschle," recalls Jim. "Ron's got some liberal views, but that's okay. You know, Ron has achieved so much, but we still consider him just a regular guy," he continues. "It was a big deal here when he won the (Tony) award. And maybe you won't believe this, but I just saw the movie version of *1776* a few days ago for the umpteenth time. The community here is so proud of him."

Ron is equally proud of his roots in that community. So what does he miss most about his time in Aberdeen? "We had this Irish terrier while I was growing up," he says. "When I was a little kid, my mother could always tell where we were playing by where that dog was sitting on our front porch. Anyway, we've got an Airedale terrier now and, when I'm walking the dog in the wooded area behind our house, my neighbors are always surprised that I allow it off its leash," he notes. "They're always asking me if I'm afraid the dog will run away. Our dog back in Aberdeen was always on the run, going wherever it wanted to," he smiles. "That dog could roam free."

"I miss that," Ron says. "I really miss that."

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