

Brett Ryback

Actor/Musician/Composer/Lyricist/Writer

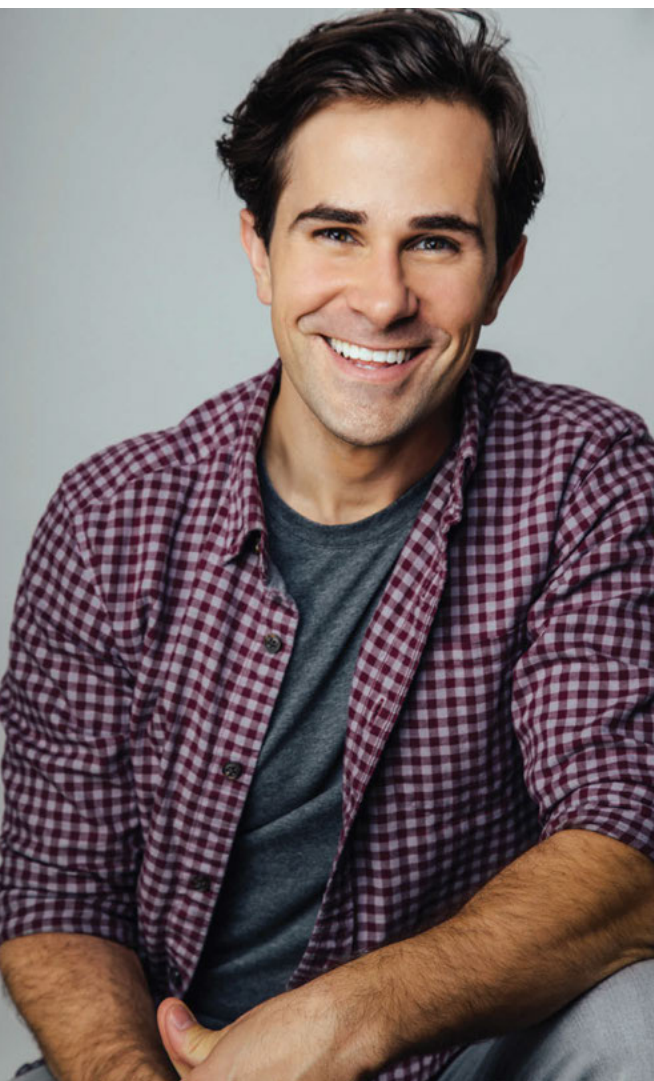


Photo courtesy of Jeff Lorch Photography

Milwaukee native Brett Ryback — based in Los Angeles as a stage, film and TV actor and as a writer/composer of musicals and plays — returns to his hometown this fall to play Milwaukee’s controversial musical genius *Liberace* at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre.

The one-man tour de force for an actor/pianist, “*Liberace!*” was created a decade ago for the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre by Brent Hazelton, now MCT’s artistic director, and by Jack Forbes Wilson, the Milwaukee actor/pianist who originated the role. For Ryback, it’s a very personal homage to an instructor who helped launch his career.

“I’m certainly intimidated to take on this part, not just because of the outsized persona of *Liberace* in Milwaukee and his incredible technical skill as a pianist, but even more so because I’m stepping into the shoes of my teacher and mentor, Jack Forbes Wilson,” Ryback says. “It’s a journey through *Liberace*’s career and life, but also a meditation on what it was for him to be a gay man in an era that didn’t embrace that.”

“He created the persona of ‘*Liberace*’ as a means of both protecting himself and also hanging a lantern on it. It’s a fascinating contradiction that he was so openly flamboyant and yet private about his sexuality. That’s really compelling to try to understand and recreate as an actor.”

The outsized persona steeled his unabashed confidence as an entertainer, making people happy even at his own expense.

“What I really like about the show is the intimacy,” Ryback explains. “It’s like welcoming a different group of people into *Liberace*’s living room each night and getting to be in communion with them. There’s great music, good jokes and Milwaukee history. He was shaped by Milwaukee in a way that I’m shaped by it from being there and growing up there.”

Ryback’s first acting job was at First Stage at age 5 — he was a member of the very first class in the First Stage Academy. He performed at First Stage through middle school, then took roles at the Milwaukee Rep, Skylight, and MCT. “[My last Milwaukee role] was ‘Hello, Dolly’ at the Skylight in 2001,” he says.

As a youngster, he also took piano lessons from Wilson. “He taught me how to be a musician,” Ryback recalls. “It’s not too much to say I was a protégé of his. He encouraged me to go to UCLA for music, and I studied music composition there.”

Wilson’s influence still resonates with Ryback. “Anytime I’m playing the piano when I perform — for example, I did a show Off-Broadway for about a year, ‘*Murder For Two*,’ a two-man piano show that I premiered in New York — it’s a homage to Jack,” he says. “I owe him so much of my career and my life as a musician. Milwaukee launched me in many ways. I’m very excited to take the experiences I’ve had as a performer across the country and bring that home.” **MKE**

Milwaukee Chamber Theatre

Performances at the
Broadway Studio Theatre Center
milwaukeechambertheatre.org,
(414) 291-7800

“*Laughs in Spanish*,” Sept. 22-Oct. 8

“*Liberace!*,” Nov. 15-Dec. 10

“*A Moon For The Misbegotten*,” Jan. 19-Feb. 4

“*The Mountaintop*,” March 3-24

“*The Not-So-Accidental Conviction Of Eleven Milwaukee ‘Anarchists*,” April 26-May 12