

Inside the Artist - David Schein November 2015



David Schein, a native of Burlington, has had a long career creating original theater, experimenting in front of the curve to find the work that most excites his artistic sense of adventure. Heralded by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as a “Hawkeye Stage Innovator,” he is a writer, actor, teacher, administrator, activist, editor, clown, and entrepreneur, always seeking a new mode of expression. He also has a long history of literary accomplishments including prose, poetry, and academic publications. His excitement for his work is contagious in the mobile conversation he squeezes in among his rehearsals and performances on his current tour. This time his work has brought him to Alaska, the Lit Fuse Poetry Conference in Yakima, Washington, and a three-week performance residency in San Francisco, opening Oct 9th.

Across Roads Center for the Arts is capturing Schein’s excitement on Saturday, November 7, by hosting this prolific author in Waterbury from 9:30am-12 noon to teach writing from the character’s physical voice. The workshop title is “Character Voices,” and will show participants a unique technique for exploring how a character speaks and how to apply it to first person narratives and dialogue in all sorts of written forms--poetry, prose, and playwriting, or to create a gateway to comedy. The community is welcome to join Schein at the White Meeting House as he shares his nearly 50 years of writing experience, cultivated in an evolution of self-imposed rigor. Although he has performed in published stage plays common to America’s regional theater, he is more likely to be seen performing his own written work or helping others compose theirs, inspiring to reach for a voice not quite accessed or recognized. He has written plays with collaborators spanning Ethiopian teenage AID victims to Broadway superstars.

Although the lines of his creative exploration have varied, Schein maintains his basic writing chops were forged in the mid 1960s at Burlington High School with three years of Gladys LaFlamme Colburn’s writing classes coupled with equal doses of Margaret O’Brien as his drama teacher. “They were remarkable women,

and are the reason I do what I do. I don’t do anything much differently, in this respect, from when I was 17 or 18,” his admiration still evident through the voice on my hands-free Bluetooth. “They were the best teachers I have ever had,” he says. Gladys Colburn’s teachings followed him throughout his writing training, which also included established authors like Tim Steele, Michael Jewel, Michael Breiner, and Michael Stein. Margaret O’Brien spilt her time directing at BHS with directing at St. Michael’s Playhouse, a professional regional theater in Winooski that she helped to establish with Don and JoAnne Rathgab.

From BHS he went to the University of Iowa, attending the Writers Workshop in the Theater Department as an Artist in Residence at the then brand new Rockefeller Center for New Performing Arts. He performed in pieces by Robert Wilson and John O’Keefe, gravitating towards performance that was more experimental and inspired by the Jerzy Grotowski and the Performance Garage influences. He co-founded the Iowa Theater Lab, a product of this new school gifted by the Rockefeller Center for the innovation of new creative endeavor. In this theater training setting, he was immersed in 45 hours of physical theater ensemble per week, and investigated the dynamics of music, movement, and writing in a theatrical context.

After a short stint touring in Canada, he hitchhiked back to the United States in 1973 to meet up with some of his former collaborators from the Iowa Theater Lab, John O’Keefe and Robert Ernst. With them, he further explored theatrical experiments of movement and sound, using jazz, martial arts, and John Cage music (among other influences). They continued their Theater Lab work ethic for twelve years, drawing on the fertile theater scene of the Bay Area, constantly writing and performing. During this time Schein created a body of original solo work that he toured to Vermont, Iowa, Montreal, Germany, San Diego, and Berkley.

While in California, he met a performer named Caryn Johnson. Their intimate writing collaboration, including trips to perform in Europe in the early 80s, yielded *Whoopi Goldberg: The Spook Show*, which evolved into *Whoopi Goldberg on Broadway*, an overnight success in 1984. He then created, with Joshua Brody, an environmental opera, *Tokens: a Play on the Plague* produced in San Francisco as the AIDS epidemic was undeniably erupting in America. Caryn Johnson produced.

But it’s not Schein’s nature to sit back on his laurels. Despite these successes, he immediately toured Europe and the USA, developing his writing until 1991 when he became the Artistic Director and then Executive Director of Free Street Theater in the South Side of Chicago. There he initiated Arts Education and Community Outreach programs, which provided writing and theater programs in Chicago’s Public School system. While still at Free Street Theater, in 2001, he established a children’s troupe of circus performers in Ethiopia, and a corresponding Illinois non-profit. This became the Awassa Children’s Project, an AIDS awareness education effort that uses Chicago artists to provide vocational training for Ethiopian youth. In 2003 he became the Executive Director of two non-profits in western New York: The Arts Council for Chautauqua County, and Reg Lenna Civic Center. In 2010, he returned home to the Burlington area as Director of the Willowell Foundation.

He recently published a book of poetry with Fomite Press called, *My Murder and Other Local News*, “Out Comes Butch” a performance monologue was published in West Coast Plays, and “Incident in Awassa,” was published in the American Theater Reader – a compilation of “best” pieces published in *American Theater Magazine* over the last 25 years. Locally you can see him November 27-29 performing selections from his theater works from 1973-2015 at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, 294 North Winooski Street in Burlington’s Old North End.



At the heart, what “jazzes” Schein is his love of people, words, music, and playful exploration. As a rigorous student of life, Schein finds the world around him a fascinating trove of treasure fodder. He’s busy finding his next inspiration, re-imagining his bank of ideas “in process,” or teaching at colleges, schools and community centers. Meanwhile he’s finishing a novel entitled, *Ethiopians and Americans: The Adoptions*, writing a musical *Hotball*, (with Vermont writer Geoff Hewitt), and reading *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, by Carl Jung.