

## Rose's Bedfellows Rises, Stehlin Staging

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The public often tends to see political issues and leaders in primary colors. But color schemes in politics tend to favor shades of gray. So it is with playwright Chuck Rose's new play *Bedfellows*, opening this week at the McCadden Place. The prolific Jack Stehlin, artistic director of the New American Theatre (formerly Circus Theatricals), is producing and directing it — managing Rose's campaign, you might say.

In a conversation with Rose and Stehlin, their comfort level with each other seems solid. In 2008, Stehlin and company produced Rose's *Safe* — another play that raises political questions.

### A rose in bloom

Rose, a Boston University business graduate, had taken a college elective in theater and connected with the arts. Initially he chose to pursue the path of Wall Street. Yet he couldn't stay away from the New York stage. By day, he was a Wall Street executive; by night, he was an actor.

He recalls reaching a point when he looked at the faces of bedraggled executives and thought, "I don't want to look back 30 years, be like these guys, and regret not following my passion." So he made a change.

"Everything was exciting - the challenges, even the setbacks. I was paying my dues, working in Boston, in Maine, touring, doing Children's theater. Circle in the Square Theatre School was my boot camp, where I studied."

A move across the country landed him a membership company, LA's Theatre Geo, where he learned about persistence - through another creative means.

"I wrote a play, *Weekend in Goshen*, really to just write a part for myself. I figured that was a way to do some work. After two submissions and thumbs down, I convinced Geo Hartley to have a reading of my play, which turned out to be a huge hit for the theater [when it was produced in 1996]. It taught me a very valuable lesson — if you believe in something, be a pain in the ass. Bug people about it. In the long run, you're doing them a favor."

Stehlin laughs and agrees with his compadre. "That's the way you make it in this town."

Rose continues. "It was the first thing I'd ever written, and suddenly there are people from the studios coming. I got an agent out of the experience."

What was next? "One-acts. That's what I started doing because I wasn't writing for a vocation. It was something to complement my acting. But one thing led to another, and I started writing screenplays. You know what, though? Writing one-act plays was a way to learn about character and material, to jump in, work those muscles out, to keep me working. If I had known at the time how much I didn't know, I probably wouldn't have written at all. Thank God I didn't."

Was there a shift in what he was writing and why? "Absolutely. After 9/11, the events of the world were encroaching on our lives. People were so polarized." Then it clicked. "If this is what I'm going to do with my life, then I have an obligation to write about the important things going on in the world."

In *Safe*, a group of wealthy would-be househunters are touring a secure subterranean apartment building when they are informed that they must remain underground because a terrible war has broken out above them. "It was powerful," states Stehlin. "A year later, we read *Bedfellows* and fell in love with it, did some workshops and tried to find the right time to put it on the stage. It just took longer than I'd hoped."

Stehlin describes Rose as a writer. "This guy is incredibly generous and extremely open-minded in the process; a great collaborator. In both plays, *Safe* and *Bedfellows*, there is a real social consciousness in the work, a purpose behind the work, a purpose in nourishing those who watch and receive the work."

Rose blushes a shade of red and thanks his friend. He adds, "When I write stories dealing with issues that make me angry — with injustice, stupidity, intolerance — I still try to find the goodness in people." He tries to show "the dangers inherent in the human condition but also the greatness that can be accomplished if we have courage. As bad as things can be, we need to acknowledge — even [despite] our own darker nature — we have the power to change, to turn things around."

### A California would-be governor with a secret

Politicians are frequently recognized as being "golden" or rising stars — while also having secrets that can crumble the foundation of sand beneath their feet, thereby ruining lives and careers. Does *Bedfellows* bring something more to the plate — beyond its focus on Sanford Mitchell on the eve of the election for governor of California?

Rose's eyes brighten. "Politics creates a heightened stage for ambition. It draws ambitious people to it, requires a certain ruthlessness to succeed. But so do many other endeavors in life. You're looking at people who are fighting for a very powerful prize. They can claim they are altruistic all they want. If you're really altruistic, would you be in this fight?"

Can integrity and ambition co-exist? "We've had our hearts broken so many times over the last few



Marc Jablon, Thomas Vincent Kelly and Robert Cicchini in "Bedfellows"



Playwright Chuck Rose and producer/director Jack Stehlin on the set of "Bedfellows"



Cameron Meyer and Robert Cicchini



Robert Cicchini and Jade Sealey

years — not just by politicians but by clergy, leaders in our schools and civic organizations... What is going on? What's happening with people? We look at this man [Sanford Mitchell] who seems to be very pure, idealistic, well-intentioned — and what happens when you're confronted with that dilemma. What kind of price does it take on everybody?"

"I want people to ask, 'What would I do if I were in that situation? Did I ever do something bad in my life that could bite me in the ass? What would I do if I could sell my soul and get ahead?' By looking at him, we can look at our own choices, our own actions."

Stehlin chimes in. "We're constantly being challenged by the outside when people are judging us as to what the truth is. In this moment in time, politics is a great place for this story to be told. It's an interesting place for this argument, because in some sense, everyone is being honest; everyone is being truthful. They're doing what they believe."

### The Stehlin saga

Originally from Allentown, PA, Stehlin admits his dad solidly pegged him with "You just need to be where it's most difficult." Not one to back down from life's challenges, he has made his choices thoughtfully while suffering a few hard knocks along the way.

He once believed he would be a baseball star. But as he approached the end of his first year at the University of South Carolina, Stehlin's path was crossed by stars of another kind — a company of actors from Juilliard who performed *King Lear*. It was a moment to remember, especially since his baseball hopes were being squashed. In a new field of dreams, acting was the thing.

Stehlin, through his own naiveté, lucked into an audition at Juilliard and was accepted a year later. Stehlin beams upon reflection, proud of graduating from this well-respected school and of what happened soon thereafter.

"After being on the road with the [Juilliard-based] Acting Company for a year, it was the middle of 1983. I'm a week out of work. What am I doing? So I called a couple of friends — Kevin Spacey, Tom Hewitt, Lili Flanders, Richard Ziman... to do something." With the support of Juilliard, Stehlin produced *Uncle Vanya* in a little black box theater on 54th Street. But the group needed a name.

"What were we going to call ourselves? I didn't even think about what it would mean — branding and the like. My family was in the circus [Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey] for three generations. How about 'Circus Theatricals'?"

What started out as "fun" and without a visualized future eventually became something to hang his hat on. "Every year, with a few weeks to spare, we'd do something again. We went through the classics. My friend, John Bunzel, wrote *Delirious* for us, which was a big hit." And they worked their way to the Scottish play.

In 1995, after working 12 years in NY, Stehlin reached his breaking point. "We had just done the Scottish play at CSC [Classic Stage Company]. I was absolutely finished with theater. I was ill, I lost all my money, my girlfriend broke up with me. I had hit bottom and was beyond exhaustion."

Stehlin packed his bags and traveled to LA in pursuit of a career in television and movies. He laughs and shakes his head. "I had no idea, zero, what I was getting into."

Freshly arrived in LA, he was invited to the reading of a play by his friend, John Bunzel, at the Hudson Theatre that Gary Blumsack was hosting. Stehlin thought there was no harm in showing his support. Isn't that what friends do?

"There's a critique afterwards. I say a few words — what I thought. Blumsack invites John and me to dinner. Fifteen minutes into dinner, Blumsack looks at me and says, 'How'd you like to be the artistic director of my theater company [the Hudson Guild]?' ... And I said 'Yes.' I had just sworn off theater! I'm in a little black box for one night and they pulled me back in!"

But another surprise awaited Stehlin the next day. Blumsack introduced him to the producing director. "I walked into that little theater, and there's this gorgeous woman — knock your socks off. It was Jeannine [Wisnosky]." Two years later, they were married and remain happily so.

Yet six months into the Hudson Guild gig, Stehlin knew a change needed to happen. With Blumsack's blessing, he transformed the membership troupe into Circus Theatricals. In 1999, the company shifted to the Odyssey Theatre, where it stayed for seven years. In 2006, it moved into Blumsack's new complex, the Hayworth on Wilshire. Recently it has been ensconced at McCadden Place Theatre in Hollywood, where *Bedfellows* is being produced.

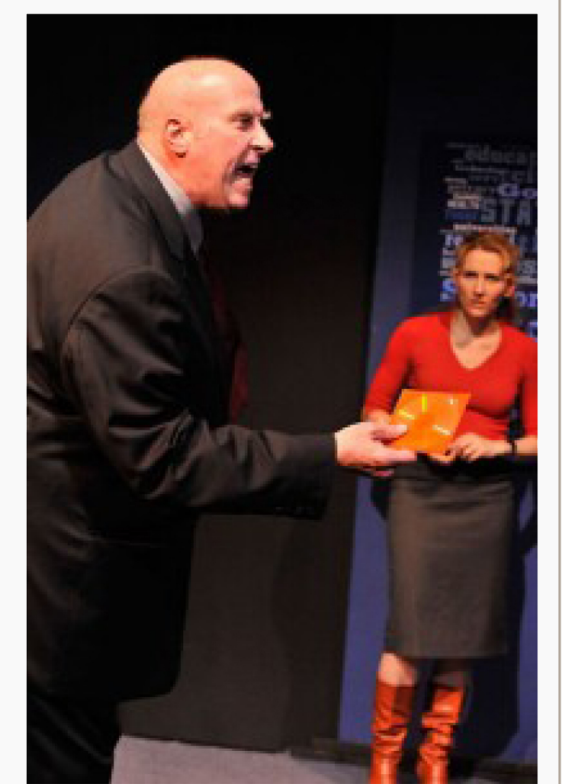
Stehlin rattles off a few critical darlings during the 28 years with Circus Theatricals — *The Job* (LA Drama Critics Circle's Ted Schmitt Award for best new play in 1998), *Richard III* with Alfred Molina, *Tartuffe* (LA Weekly Award for best comedy ensemble), *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Circle*, *More Lies About Jerzy*. But the name of the theater company was confusing.

"Jeannine, as managing director, and I would get resumes from professionals who had trapeze acts. People thinking we're a circus act — even after producing plays since 1983." In 2011 after focusing on "the life-blood and recognition of our energy — the teaching of acting," the group took on a new name — the New American Theatre.

Is there a permanent home in the company's future? Stehlin replies, "It's complicated, and I hope things will resolve themselves so we can produce at the Hayworth. But you know what? Things are good at the McCadden. I just want to be part of a community that holds each other up and looks for ways to gain strength."

***Bedfellows*, produced by the New American Theatre, opens April 21. Fri-Sat 8 pm (plus a matinee on Sunday, April 22 at 3 pm). Closes June 2. Tickets: \$34.50. McCadden Place Theatre, 1157 N. McCadden Place, Hollywood. 310-701-0788. [www.NewAmericanTheatre.com](http://www.NewAmericanTheatre.com)**

\*\*\*All photos by Daniel G. Lam



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