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# Playwright Matt Witten: Has He Got a 'Deal' for You

By HILARY DE VRIES

**B**OSTON—Sitting in a cafe, surrounded by a sea of luggage and sporting a Mickey Mouse watch and a madras plaid sport shirt, Matt Witten looks more like a kid obediently heading off to summer camp than one of the country's up and coming young playwrights.

Witten's "The Deal," opening Sunday at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys is a tough drama about an FBI sting. But its 32-year-old author wears an air of cheerful expectancy—an engaging good humor that dissolves frequently into giggles and circa 1960's expressions.

"Gee, I have a theory about why everyone in theater seems so much younger than they are," he says. "I think it's because we all refuse to assume the responsibilities of the 9-to-5 world."

Witten wrote his first play back in the early '70s when he was still a high school kid in Cincinnati. "I called it 'Mort-Free' and it was a comic-metaphysical study of humankind's Angst. A very Artaudian piece. It had a production at the ladies' auxiliary at the local Methodist Church. Afterward they asked me about my world views."

He still probes humankind's Angst, but with a comic-metaphysical touch. "I don't think my plays are messagey," says Witten. "But I like to think I can put the realities out there, and at least get people talking."

A quick perusal of his work finds a strong social consciousness at play. "Say It Ain't So, Joe" is a screenplay about a baseball player who overcomes drug addiction. "Washington Square Moves" deals with homeless New Yorkers who earn self-respect through chess-playing.

"The Deal" is a taut four-person drama about political corruption. "It just hits you right between the eyes, about where corruption starts in politics," says New York producer Michael Frazier, who optioned the play for an Off Broadway production.

"At the core of Matt's writing is tremendous heart," says director Bill Partlan who directed "The Deal" at Minneapolis's Playwrights Center and the Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays. "You get inside all his characters. You see the dramatic situation from all points of view."

Witten says he's concerned with "moral or ethical codes and how people view their own actions when those codes are under stress." In "The Deal," those moral codes belong to two FBI agents who set up some local politicians in a sting operation.

On one level, the play is a topical thriller, a drama about greed and entrapment drawn from today's headlines. But on a deeper level it is a morality tale of trust and deceit, an even-handed examination of the bonds of friendship and the bounds of professional ethics.

Back Alley producing director, Laura Zucker describes the play as



Matt Witten

"a real page-turner, whose characters are unusually complex. It took me to pieces I wasn't expecting."

Witten begins every play by asking himself a question. "In 'The Deal' I asked, 'How would an FBI agent feel to befriend one of his targets? Then I wanted to know, 'What pressures are there on a

politician to go crooked?'"

"After that, the characters just took over."

The play's ethical dilemma, hammered out in Mamet-style male bantering, is devoid of easy moralizing. "It's extremely important for me to maintain empathy with all the characters," says the playwright. "They all see themselves as being right according to their own ethics."

Press the playwright on his upbringing (he attended Amherst College and later earned his MFA in theater at Brandeis University) and you find a classic tale of the smartest kid in class, blessed with self-confidence, a witty/goofy sense of humor and a social activist bent as well.

"Matt was always very sure of himself," says Prof. Martin Heipern, one of Witten's drama teachers at Brandeis. "He always had this air of 'I know I'm going to make it.' But he was also a really hard worker and his comedy was

actually very serious."

"I think sometimes the most tense situations are also the funniest," says the playwright, who unhesitatingly lists his two favorite authors as Dr. Seuss and Elmore Leonard. "When I was writing 'The Deal'—which actually gets a lot of laughs—I spent a year just reading Leonard. His writes great dialogue that is really funny."

Witten's career is currently lodged at that awkward juncture between obscurity and success. He spends his time at such prestigious writing colonies as Yaddo and can boast of having the same agent as Sam Shepard and entertaining movie deals.

But his longed-for Off Broadway

debut has yet to occur ("casting conflicts" says producer Frazier) and his two most recent plays—"Washington Square Moves" and "Dancing on Plates"—have received staged readings, not full productions, in New York. And on this visit to Boston, Witten does his own photocopying, cheerfully hand-delivering a copy of his script half-way across town in 95-degree heat—smiling and sweating in equal measure.

"I knew I always wanted to be a writer," says Witten in a rare moment of self-reflection. "But I guess I'm only now learning what that takes."

Hilary de Vries is a free-lance writer based in Boston.

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