



Photo courtesy of Eliza Jane Schneider

Hearing voices

South Park's Eliza Jane Schneider delivers the voices and stories of homelessness in new show

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Eliza Jane Schneider is best known for voicing nearly all of the female characters on Comedy Central's "South Park."

She speaks with passion and nuance about a topic that South Park's characters would spurn — homelessness.

For 20 years, Schneider traveled the world, performing as a street musician and voice actor. She met numerous people living on the streets along the way and she recorded interviews with them. "It makes me feel alive to listen to strangers," Schneider said. "It's my religion."

She is now using those recordings as the backbone of a new, multi-media, one-woman show to premiere in Portland during the Fertile Ground Festival later this month.

"Displaced," a collaboration between Schneider and CompassWorks theater, tells

the stories of the homeless people she met during her travels using the interviews she conducted. On stage, Schneider augments the interviews with her own performance, using voice, fiddle and guitar.

Schneider, who moved to Portland last April, said that during her travels, she often relied upon people who were homeless for directions, advice on places to stay and on places to avoid.

"They know what's up," she said. "They've got their eyes open. There's a depth of human understanding that you acquire ... when you go through a certain level of trauma."

Amanda Waldroupe: *What made you want to travel around the world and interview people while you worked as a street musician?*

Eliza Jane Schneider: I went to UCLA to study theater. You learn that to be an actress, you need to be somebody that

"Displaced" will premiere Jan. 20 and run through Jan 28 at Abbey Arts, 7600 N Hereford Ave., as part of the Fertile Ground Festival: Portland's Festival of New Works.

you're not. I didn't know anything about any other cultures or anybody who wasn't like me. At UCLA, it was a bunch of white girls. I transferred to World Arts and Cultures. I wanted to study the dialects and accents of spoken English all over the world. So, it started as dialect studies that I funded and supported as a street musician and voice actor. People who appreciated the music the most and the people I enjoyed playing for the most were people who lived on the street.

A.W.: *You were in such close proximity to people experiencing homelessness.*

E.J.S.: I was in their living room. I was very grateful for the conversations with all of them. There were times when I was one of them — I would spend the night out there. I usually just stayed with people. During a lot of my trips around the states, I had a vehicle I stayed in. I lived in an ambulance for a while, which was one of my favorite homes.

A.W.: *Why was that?*

E.J.S.: It had AC outlets. It had power. It had IV hook ups, so I could hang my houseplants. It has the sirens and lights, which were fun. Sometimes, I would go on the PA and sing opera. I loved living on the road, I didn't have the best situation growing up. A sociopathic Vietnamese orphan was my adopted brother. My parents adopted a war orphan who was literally psychotic. Home wasn't always the safest place for me.

I lived in an ambulance. I lived in a bread truck that was a 1964 Metro International Bread Truck. I had a Eurovan for a while. I lived in a succession of vehicles while I was on the road here. When I traveled in other countries, I tended to stay with people.

A.W.: *What sort of music would you play on the streets?*

E.J.S.: I called my album "Gypsy Grass." I identify the melodies that come out of my violin as somewhat Middle Eastern sounding.

A.W.: *What did you learn from the recordings?*

E.J.S.: You certainly cannot separate the sound of the voice from the voice of a person.

A.W.: *What do you mean by that?*

E.J.S.: There are a few definitions of voice. There is the sound of the voice, which is what I was studying at the time — the literal sounds people make. I learned that those sounds are intrinsically tied to what's important to the person. The questions that got the dialect to come out the most pronounced were, tell me something of emotional significance, what's important to you, tell me something from your childhood. The sounds of their voices

became the most authentic when they were speaking their truth. I was very impacted by the stories that people had to tell. I started studying dialect and ending up studying humanity and using music to not only fund my travels but as a means of re-gifting. People were giving me a great deal of understanding. People were giving me their stories. I felt so grateful for that.

A.W.: *What sorts of stories did you hear?*

E.J.S.: One of the most meaningful is the story of a guy who's not actually homeless. He gives water to homeless people in San Diego. He spends every day giving socks, listening to people. He's 85, on Social Security and still goes out every day to give water.

I talked to a Nigerian woman whose mother used to beat her and put hot chilies in her eyes and leave her tied up for days to a tree. The "area boys" raped her repeatedly. But she put herself through film school. There's a lot of redemption in the stories I'm bringing. Resilient people that come back from the most incredible trauma.

I interviewed a man in Liverpool who was kicked out for being gay. His mother said, "I hate you David, and so does your dad." That begs the question — what is home? Does he have to identify with that family as being his home? His mother? So many people on the streets are suffering from a broken heart.

We have this issue in America, where we ignore people and humans suffering on the streets because we're scared or feel like we can't do anything. It seems endemic to Western countries.

A.W.: *What do you attribute that to — is it the mentality in the United States that we have to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps?*

E.J.S.: I think it's a practical matter of travel. Even here, we were tribal before transportation. I think in some of the third world countries where some people are on foot, they know everybody. It's a village and people take care of everybody in the village. It would be bizarre to have someone's family member ostracized.

A.W.: *So, you're saying that homelessness is not so much whether one lives on the streets, but if we're part of a village or community.*

E.J.S.: That's the conclusion I'm coming to. I think your sense of home comes more from a sense of belonging than it comes from a sense of house, or where you were born or where you're from. In a lot of Third World countries, they don't have as much of a homeless problem, because people take care of their families. They're more closer knit. You know where you mother is and even if she is crazy, someone is paying attention to her.

A.W.: *What do you hope people learn from watching the play?*

E.J.S.: I want people to get to know the people in their neighborhood. Acknowledge each other. If people can be listened to and be heard, then I've done something. Being seen and heard is one of the greatest gifts people can receive. It's so rare to really be listened to. It brings about powerful healing.