

Theater Q&A: An evening in Joe Musso's "Treehouse"

By Zach Silva
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The Cottage Theatre brought in Joe Musso from Alabama on Monday night to discuss his upcoming play, "Treehouse," which will premiere in town in August.

The play centers around a 17-year old, Johnny (Malakhi Schnell) that insists he is a 53-year-old man trapped in the wrong body and the play follows his journey as he deals with growing up, love and loss.

With the help of a grant from the Lane County Cultural Coalition, the theatre applied for a play from the American Association of Community Theatre's 2018 NewPlayFest. After being selected from a competitive field, volunteers from the local theatre were sent 12 scripts that they pored over until selecting Musso's entry.

Musso was around for the weekend and worked with the cast on the play.

On Monday evening, community members came to the

theatre where the audience engaged in a question and answer with Musso in addition to seeing the production of one of his 10-minute plays.

What follows are some of the answers from Monday's event that have been edited for clarity.

Did you always want to be a playwright?

JM: No, I think I actually wanted to be a zookeeper when I was growing up. I didn't actually start writing plays until I was almost 40.

What did you do before that?

JM: Actually, I was a college English professor for four or five years and decided that I needed to go out and make money so then I became a lawyer. And I was a lawyer for many, many years. Now I work in the federal court system as an administrator. I continue to work a full-time job.

But before playwrighting, I tried writing poetry, I tried writing fiction. It wasn't until I realized my real talent was in dialogue that I started

writing plays.

How would you say that being a lawyer informed your playwrighting?

JM: What informed my playwrighting most was my love of literature. I'm a voracious reader. But being a lawyer still did help. I've taken a few thousand depositions. And I mean, I'm not low-balling, a few thousand depositions.

"Each play usually has a eureka moment. For which I call a kernel. And the final project will look really nothing like that kernel."

— Joe Musso, playwrighter

And you really get to hear people speak.

You get to hear them answer questions. A lot of times they want to answer you in the shortest way possible because they really don't want to be there.

There's oftentimes conflict but you get to hear a lot of speech patterns, voice patterns of people from different socioeconomic standings. From CEOs of companies to a great cross section of society. It just helped my ear a lot, hearing all those voices.

And also, before I became a lawyer I think I was a little lazy in how I handled my writing projects. Once I became a lawyer, it taught me discipline as to, "These people are paying me a lot of money to write these very long complicated briefs." So, you know, I would always finish them. When I started writing plays

I was thinking, 'Okay, I'm not going to start a play and not finish it.'

So that discipline of just — when I was a lawyer I would sometimes work 80 hours a week and stay up real late at night writing depositions or briefs and that really kind of helped me learn to push myself beyond my mental limits even though my brain was

I realize, 'Okay, if you are going to write a play you have to write dialogue.' So I just start putting dialogue in that character's mouth and that helps me. Once I start writing dialogue, the character becomes more focused in my head.

A lot of times I will give that character a name early on but that won't usually be the name that ends up with the play.

This case was different. Johnny was Johnny from the start. I've written a full-length play since "Treehouse" and it is titled Aubrey and the title character is named Aubrey. But for the first several months her name was Carlotta

Sometimes I'll think of scenes of dialogue and I'll just write it down. It may take a year or two before I think about putting some of that in a play that doesn't even exist in my head yet.

Where were you when you got the initial idea for Treehouse?

JM: I had a play reading in Los Angeles and it was just a charity reading at a library. And so my wife and I are out there and we have some friends that work at the Dorchester hotel group, so we stayed at the beautiful hotel Bel Air.

So we'd been drinking in the lounge so we thought we would just go for a walk down Stone Canyon Road. So we went walking down Stone Canyon Road and if you've ever walked in Bel Air, it's very dangerous because they don't want you walking in Bel Air — so they build all their hedges to the end of the road.

It's a windy road and people are driving very fast in their very expensive sports cars.

And then these two figures

start coming down the road and they are wearing white bathrobes. This was Oscars weekend. And these two figures are coming down and, as they got closer, I looked at my wife and said, "That looks like Oprah Winfrey."

And it was Oprah Winfrey. She and her friend Gayle.

I guess they were going to the spa at the Hotel Bel Air or whatever. I don't know why they were walking down the middle of the street wearing bathrobes.

She's very nice, by the way. She waved and said hello. She's from Mississippi, I'm from Alabama so we knew the language. And that was the extent of the conversation — "Hello, hello." And we kept walking.

She was very nice. As we left, I looked at my wife and said the first thing that pops in my head; I need to write a play about it. And so I just looked on the hillside behind this house and I kind of visualized a man covered in blood, standing up, walking down and walking to a house. A woman then says you have to go and then he takes off running down Stone Canyon Road.

When you see "Treehouse", you'll say that has nothing to do with "Treehouse".

When I got back to the hotel room — we probably stopped at the bar before we got to the hotel room — I just started writing notes about this 50-some odd year old man and somehow that man became a 17-year-old boy who was in a treehouse and that's how "Treehouse" came into existence.

"Treehouse" runs at the Cottage Theatre from August 10 to August 26. Tickets go on sale on July 10.

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WATER SAFETY TIPS

Whether it's a trip to the beach or a dip in the community or backyard pool, you can ensure that swimming is as safe as it is fun by following a few basic safety tips.

THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR ACTIVE SUPERVISION

Actively supervise children in and around open bodies of water, giving them your undivided attention.

Whenever infants or toddlers are in or around water, an adult should be within arm's reach to provide active supervision. We know it's hard to get everything done without a little multitasking, but this is the time to avoid distractions of any kind. If children are near water, then they should be the only thing on your mind. Small children can drown in as little as one inch of water.

EDUCATE YOUR KIDS ABOUT SWIMMING SAFELY

Every child is different, so enroll children in swimming lessons when you feel they are ready. Teach children how to tread water, float and stay by the shore.

Make sure kids swim only in areas designated for swimming. Teach children that swimming in

open water is not the same as swimming in a pool. They need to be aware of uneven surfaces, river currents, ocean undertow and changing weather.

Whether you're swimming in a backyard pool or in a lake, teach children to swim with a partner, every time. From the start, teach children to never go near or in water without an adult present.

You can start introducing your babies to water when they are about 6 months old. Remember to always use waterproof diapers and change them frequently.

DON'T RELY ON SWIMMING AIDS

- Remember that swimming aids such as water wings or noodles are fun toys for kids, but they should never be used in place of a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD).

TAKE THE TIME TO LEARN CPR

We know you have a million things to do, but learning CPR should be on the top of the list. It will give you tremendous peace of mind — and the more peace of mind you have as a parent, the better.

Local hospitals, fire departments and recreation departments offer CPR training.

Have your children learn CPR. It's a skill that will serve them for a lifetime.

SUMMER BOATING TIPS:

Alcohol and boating don't mix. Studies have shown that even a small amount of alcohol, when combined with the marine environment, can seriously impair your judgement. Passengers should avoid going "overboard" as well.

When fueling your boat, stop all engines, motors, and other devices that could produce sparks. Always leave with a full tank.

Conduct a safety orientation before leaving the pier. This includes location of life preservers, how to put them on, location of life rafts and location of emergency check-off list.

Be prepared. Talk to experienced service personnel about what kind of parts and tools you should carry on your boat. A first-aid kit and emergency supplies are also a must.

Check the weather before leaving and heed all small craft advisories.

Make a float plan and make sure someone on shore knows your exact route.

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