

Blessings in Disguise: Playwright Salutes His Father – and Baseball – in "The Winning Streak"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 31 October 2006 22:42



In Lee Blessing's *The Winning Streak*, the locale is left unspecified; the only information the Tony Award-nominated playwright gives us is that the events transpire in "a city in the Midwest." But audiences can be forgiven for thinking there's nothing unspecified about it.

One of the play's seven scenes takes place "at the end of a dock." Another occurs at a sidewalk café within walking distance of a cathedral and an art museum. And, most tellingly, one takes place "in the stands of a major league stadium," where - to the delight of the show's protagonist - an eternally struggling baseball team is finally enjoying an unprecedented hot streak.

Could this, in fact, be Chicago, and could the beleaguered ballplayers be the Cubs?

When I asked him in an interview last week, Blessing laughed. "I purposely set it in a nebulous Midwestern city, you know?" says the Minnesota native who earned an MFA in playwriting from the University of Iowa. "It has elements of Minneapolis, where I grew up, and Chicago, Cincinnati, maybe St. Louis So it's going to be *fruitless* to try to decide precisely what town is being talked about."

Yet while Blessing is coy about *The Winning Streak's* setting, there can be no mistaking its inspiration; Blessing's 1998 play - which will be performed by Davenport's New Ground Theatre November 2 through 12 - is about fathers and sons, and as audiences might correctly surmise, the comedic drama is Blessing's tribute to his dad. (Blessing will participate in talk-back sessions following the November 3 and 4 performances.)

The Winning Streak opens with an awkward meeting between two men in an airport lounge.

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Omar is sixtysomething, a retired umpire, and fiercely - some might say pathologically - devoted to his hometown baseball team. Ry is thirtysomething and a museum art restorer, and he doesn't give a damn about baseball. They do, however, have something in common: DNA.

The result of a one-night-stand, Ry has finally tracked down his absentee father, and although they quarrel frequently and share no interests, neither is quite able to let this first encounter be their *last* encounter. For Ry, Omar is the chance to understand his family history and the dad he never knew. For Omar, Ry is a good-luck charm, as his beloved ballplayers began winning on the exact day Ry entered his life; Omar isn't letting Ry get away now ... at least, not until the streak ends.

A two-man show loaded with funny, flinty dialogue and underplayed insight into father-and-son dynamics - how they'll oftentimes come *this close* to connecting without actually doing so - *The Winning Streak*

has recently been enjoying one of its own, with recent, well-regarded productions of the show at the Apple Tree Theatre in Highland Park, Illinois, and the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, New Jersey. (The

Windy City Times'

Mary Shen Barnidge particularly praised Blessing's "always-articulate dialogue," and the *New York Times*

' Naomi Siegel referenced the "wonderfully vibrant" writing.)

For this, Blessing freely admits, he has his father to thank.

"The play really got written because my father passed away in 1998," he says. "I was fascinated by the possibility of writing a father-son story. You know, this [*The Winning Streak*] is certainly not my particular life or relationship with my father, but it occurred to me that it would be a very interesting way to approach all these father-son energies."

Prior to *The Winning Streak*, Blessing had certainly not wanted for subject matter, having written numerous one-act and full-length plays since graduating from the University of Iowa. By 1998, he says, "I was averaging a play a year since about 1980." (With a laugh, he adds, "It's been a fairly prolific career.")

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Among his credits are such lauded works as *Two Rivers* (concerning an American kidnapping in Beirut), *Fortinbras* (a satiric continuation of *Hamlet*), *Going to St. Ives* (a tension-filled comedy involving a British surgeon and the mother of an African dictator), and the achievement for which he's probably best known, *A Walk in the Woods*, in which two diplomats - played in the 1988 Broadway production by Sam Waterston and Robert Prosky - attempt to hammer out a nuclear-arms agreement; the show earned Tony and Oliver award nominations for Best Play, and made Blessing a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Yet despite the gamut of themes encompassed by these and other plays, several of Blessing's works do share a common subject.

"I've always loved baseball," he says, "and have written a number of pieces on baseball. A play called *Cobb*, about Ty Cobb, and a play called *Old Timers Game*, which is about a minor-league team, which was turned into a TV movie called *Cooperstown*, about retired ballplayers." And although *The Winning Streak* isn't, Blessing assures, "drenched in baseball," the sport did align with Blessing's desire to pay tribute to his father.

Frank Blessing, says his son, "had cancer, and he was pretty much unable, the last few months, to get out of the house. He lived in San Diego at the time, and I noticed that the thing that sort of got him up in the morning - that kind of made him *want* to see the next day - was the baseball game. The Padres happened to be playing very well in 1998, and he was a baseball fan, so it sort of took him through some very tough times."

In *The Winning Streak*, Omar, too, is dying, and much of the play is devoted to Ry's attempts to communicate with his father before his passing. But Blessing makes clear that the combative, often bilious relationship between *The Winning Streak's* characters was *not*

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taken from life.

"They were very pleased with the way I turned out," Blessing says of his parents, adding that "I was very lucky because I ended up getting a lot of shows done in San Diego County at the La Jolla Playhouse [in nearby La Jolla, California]. So they had a chance to watch four or five plays I had done at a major theatre.

"They were always somewhat dumbfounded," he says with a laugh. "You know, from having no hope whatsoever all the way through 'My God, he can make a *living* at this,' but they were very proud."

Yet even if there *had* been animosity with his dad - to whom *The Winning Streak* is dedicated - Blessing adds, "Once you start writing characters, they become their own people. I think my own conversations with my father would have struck audiences as incredibly *dull* compared to the way *these* fellows talk."

The *Winning Streak* will be performed Thursdays through Saturdays, November 2 through 12, at Davenport's Nighswander Theatre, and Blessing will engage in talk-back sessions following the 7:30 p.m. performances on November 3 and 4. For tickets and more information, visit (<http://www.newgroundtheatre.org>).