

Written by Mike Schulz

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In 2007, when Los Angeles-based actor/playwright Tom Dugan was first booked as a Quad City Arts Visiting Artist, it was as the star of his self-written, one-character performance piece *Robert E. Lee: Shades of Gray*

. When he returned as a Visiting Artist in 2008, it was as the author and director of another one-man show, *Frederick Douglass: In the Shadow of Slavery*

Now, with Broadway director Jenny Sullivan at the helm, Dugan returns for his third stint with Quad City Arts in *Simon Wiesenthal: Nazi Hunter*, another solo vehicle that the busy stage and film actor both wrote and stars in. And, it should go without saying, Dugan recognizes that audiences hesitant about attending productions on the Civil War and slavery may be even *more* leery of one concerning the Holocaust.

"When anyone is preparing to go see this," says Dugan during a recent phone interview, "I'm sure there's this feeling like, 'Aw, man ... do I want to sit *through* this?' And I'll tell you, when I sat down to write the play, I thought, 'Aw, man ... do I wanna *write* this play?'"

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He's quick to reveal, however, that audiences fearful of a downbeat lecture needn't fear *Simon Wiesenthal: Nazi Hunter*

, as the play's subject "had a great sense of humor, and I utilize that as much as I possibly can during the show."

To be sure, the one-man production - which will be performed publicly at Davenport's Mary Nighswander Theatre on September 26 - doesn't treat the Holocaust survivor's tale lightly. "It hits upon his help in capturing Adolf Eichmann," says Dugan, "and his bringing Frank Murer to justice - he was responsible for the deaths of 79,000 people. And then I talk about Franz Stangl, who was the commandant of the Treblinka concentration camp - he was responsible for the deaths of 700,000 people.

"With any magnificent life," he continues, "you have to choose which stories you're going to tell. And so I say in the piece, 'Everything you hear today is going to be oversimplified. What you're going to hear are Simon Wiesenthal's Greatest Hits.'"

Yet in writing about and portraying Wiesenthal, Dugan understood the need for occasional levity. "There's some ominous music that the play starts out with," he says, "and the lights come up, and I'm *very* serious standing there. And I start telling this story about this young skinhead. But it what it turns out to be is a *joke*, and the audience is so surprised that I start off with a *punchline* that it immediately breaks the tension.

"With all of my plays, I say that my number-one job is to entertain," Dugan says. "And if you're not careful, you might also *learn* something."

Reliable Sources

"I'm always snooping around for a new idea," says Dugan of the show's origins. "And after Simon Wiesenthal passed away [in 2005], I started reading about him, and I thought [his story]

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would be fascinating as a one-man play. And I had a particular interest in the subject to begin with."

Though the actor himself isn't Jewish, his wife and seven- and six-year-old sons are, and Dugan's father - a veteran of World War II - made sure that his son grew up with an understanding of his Army accomplishments.

"He was in the 83rd Infantry," says Dugan of his father, "and they're credited with being among the first to liberate the concentration camps. They liberated a sub-camp of Buchenwald" called Langenstein, "and a big part of my childhood was learning the lessons that *he* learned during his war experience - that not all Germans were bad, not all Austrians were bad, and not all Americans were

good

. That was something that stayed with me all of my life, and when I started researching Wiesenthal, I found that his philosophy very much matched up with my father's philosophy, and what I learned as a kid."

Research began, he says, "at the Simon Wiesenthal Center at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles; I made friends with the librarians there, and they just started giving me advice on what I should read." Dugan read Wiesenthal's books - finding particular inspiration in *The Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Memoirs*

and

The Sunflower: On the Possibilities & Limits of Forgiveness -

and was also fortunate that the librarians "really opened up their archives to me. They gave me some unpublished transcripts, translations of interviews that he had done in different languages. So I was privy to things that the general public wasn't."

Much of what he gleaned through reading matched commonly held perceptions of Wiesenthal, whose decorations included the United States' Presidential Medal of Freedom and Congressional Gold Medal, and his 2004 knighting as Honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. "Wiesenthal spent his entire life making sure that humanity learned something from the death of 11 million people," says Dugan. "That humanity was *different* after the war than it was before it."

Prior to Wiesenthal's work as a tireless pursuer of war criminals, "war crimes didn't really exist," states Dugan. "It was, 'Hey, this was *war*. So they did terrible things. Let's move on.' But now,

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humanity is held accountable, even in wartime, that after the war, if you have gone beyond the bounds of the 'rules' of war, then you will be tracked down and brought to trial."

Dugan also learned a great deal more about what he says "may have been the most important accomplishment of [Wiesenthal's] life" - his historic work on the subject of Holocaust denial.

"About the time that the play *The Diary of Anne Frank* became popular," says Dugan of the mid-1950s, "there was a movement among young people in Europe that it was a fraud, that it was a *fake* diary, and all the young people were starting to believe that the Holocaust itself didn't happen. So Wiesenthal took it upon himself to find the S.S. officer who actually arrested Anne Frank and get a confession out of him, which he did. So he really put an end to that generation's attempt to call the story a fraud."

Through his research, though, Dugan also gained added insight into Wiesenthal's many struggles, particularly "the frustrations that Wiesenthal and people like him went through in the '50s," he says, "when the enthusiasm for hunting down these Nazi war criminals waned. Much of the United States government was actually *against* the hunting down of these criminals, because many of them were being used in the Cold War as scientists against the Soviets. Learning about that was shocking."

Making Dugan's investigation even more challenging were the surprising numbers of factual inconsistencies within Wiesenthal's memoirs, which many of the man's critics have used to discredit his work.

"There was one [inconsistency] that kind of baffled me," Dugan says. "It isn't particularly important in the long run, but it was a story about a boy who was shot by Franz Murer, who was known as the Butcher of Vilnius. In one book, it said the boy was seven years old, and in another book, it said that he was seven *teen* years old. I couldn't find out which it was. But most other books said that he was seven, so in my play, I say that he was seven. If I find out for certain that he was 17, I'll change it.

"Everything that's in the play I've confirmed through three different sources," he continues, "which is my standard with all the plays I write. I've got to find three reliable sources before I'll

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put something in."



Making Education Entertaining

After a year of research, Dugan spent another year writing - and, as he says, "rewriting and rewriting and rewriting" - before *Simon Wiesenthal: Nazi Hunter* was ready to be put into production. And the playwright says that part of what made the experience so trying was the sheer emotional strain of putting Wiesenthal's memoirs into a proper stage format.

"To read some of the stories of the horrors that took place during the Holocaust was more emotional for me than any other research I've done," he says, "and I've done some pretty tough subjects. But with this, I would have to put down the book that I was reading, and I'd weep, and I'd say, 'No more. I can't do any more today.' And then I'd go and I'd hug my children, and play with my boys - it was an *extremely* emotional process."

Yet Dugan discovered that the key to making this verbal memoir less wrenching than fascinating lay in its fictionalized presentation, which casts *Nazi Hunter's* audience as students, and _____ finds Wiesenthal speaking from a room in Vienna, Austria's Jewish Documentation Center.

"It was the place where he worked out of," says Dugan, "and he very often invited students to come in and ask questions, and he would talk about his work - it was his favorite thing to do. And so the play is set on his very last day - the day of his retirement - with the very last group that's come to talk, to ask questions, to listen. So the audience itself is very much part of the play."

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This setup also lent the production a much-needed lightheartedness, as Wiesenthal - who, in 1962, published a pseudonymous collection of European jokes titled *Humor Behind the Iron Curtain* - was thereby free to banter with the audience as he would with his students. "You really win the audience over immediately," says Dugan of *Nazi Hunter*'s opening joke, and the subsequent "easygoing manner" in which he tells Wiesenthal's remembrances. "They all relax."

Helping to make the show entertaining as well as informative is its very clear design as a performance piece, with the 48-year-old actor playing Wiesenthal in his mid-80s. "I had a luxury that I haven't had with the other two plays," he says, "in that there were many documentaries, and a great deal of film footage of Wiesenthal giving interviews. So I was not only able to garner a lot of information, but character-study material as well."

While he says, "I have an ear for accents," the actor adds that capturing Wiesenthal's Austrian-Jewish cadences required a great deal of study under a dialect specialist, "and I always have to practice, you know, to get warmed up again." Discovering the key to the man's mid-80s physicality, though, was a more accidental occurrence.

"People ask me, 'Jeez, how did you come up with that *walk*?' " says Dugan of his Wiesenthal gait. "Well, during the summer, I was sick. I had some kind of infection that wouldn't go away - you know, just a bad cold for, like, three weeks. And I'm walking around the house dizzy, and I'm just trying to keep my balance, and I just want to get to the next chair."

Says Dugan with a laugh, "And I thought, 'This is *it*.'"

Cosmetics completed the transformation. "Wiesenthal was probably about 50 pounds heavier than I am," says Dugan, "so I had a fat suit created, which is very helpful. And since I have a full head of hair, I get to go to my hair stylist and say 'Shave it off,' which is a lot of fun. He gives me the big bald patch on top with hair on the sides, and I add a little old-age makeup, and there you are." (Laughing again, Dugan describes life as a newly bald man by saying, "I tell ya, the women can't keep their hands off it. And with the fat suit? Forget it. I'm like Tom Jones.")

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Though *Simon Wiesenthal: Nazi Hunter* was performed for several preview audiences prior to its debut at California's Torrance Cultural Arts Center, Dugan's Quad Cities engagement marks only the second time the piece is being performed since its completion. The playwright states that if the audience's response to the Torrance production was any indication, Davenport's attendees are in for a memorable evening.

"I couldn't have asked for a better response," says Dugan of *Nazi Hunter's* premiere this past February. "I mean, the preview performances went very well, but those were in small theatres. And this was, what, a 400-seat theatre, and we almost packed the place. And this was on Academy Awards night, too, so I had a lot of competition. I just kept saying, 'Thank God for TiVo.'"

Before long, audiences across the country may also be thanking God for TiVo. "I just went to one of these conferences where my booking agent is selling the show like *crazy*. So," adds Dugan with a laugh, "I think I'm gonna be bald for a long time to come."

Simon Wiesenthal: Nazi Hunter will be performed at the Mary Nighswander Theatre - located in Davenport's Annie Wittenmyer complex at 2822 Eastern Avenue - at 7 p.m. on Saturday, September 26. Admission is free, though donations will be accepted, and more information on the production is available by visiting QuadCityArts.com .