

An Original Play Adds Drama to the Jazz Fest

State of the Arts

BY **ERIK ESCKILSEN**

When Burlington is striking up the bands during the **Discover Jazz Festival**, local playwright and jazz trumpeter **Stephen Goldberg** will hit the stage with live theater: His jazz-centric play *Burning Bridges*, produced in cooperation with the jazz fest, opens at **Off Center for the Dramatic Arts** on June 1. Goldberg will reprise the role of down-and-out horn player Tony Franks.

The play has been produced twice before. Goldberg directed jazz guitarist **Kip Meaker** as Tony in a 1999 **Club Metronome** show; filmmaker **Allan Nicholls** directed Goldberg in the part at the **FlynnSpace** in 2003. Nicholls directs Goldberg again in the current production. And, though Goldberg admits he's reluctant to rewrite, the show includes substantial changes. There's "more meat ... tension, stuff content," he says, especially for the female lead, played by **Tracey Girdich**. "There's something big in the plot," Goldberg adds cryptically, "something big that she's gone through."

Fans of the playwright's gritty repertoire can expect this work to revel in the underbelly of the contemporary jazz scene — dark underbellies being Goldberg's comfort zone. In *Burning Bridges*, he draws on his rich reservoir of experience mixing with jazz musicians in New York City in the 1960s. The character of Tony Franks, for example, was inspired by real-life trumpeter Tony Fruscella, who died of liver cirrhosis in 1969. "I've been on the really crazed, New York drugged-out scene," Goldberg says. "I knew these people when I was really young. There are so many characters ... I mean, really unbelievable stuff."

Goldberg's Tony has also spent time on the wild side and must now survive the crucible of the recording studio. He's been led back into the booth by a young chanteuse, the daughter of a jazz crony played by **Emily Day**. The other session players are **James Harvey** on keyboards and **Ben Littenberg** on bass. **Paul Schnabel** plays the exacting producer with whom Tony clashes.

With the bulk of the second act set in a recording studio, the play features a fair amount of live music — some of it happening between takes. "I'm trying to have the piece have a certain rhythm, a crescendo, some dynamic moments," Nicholls says. A shared musical vocabulary among the performers has been a boon to the process, he notes.

The show's staging leverages this experience, with Schnabel's producer doing "talk back" to his musicians from the back of the house, as if from the control booth. Other staging choices that bring the audience into the action, as well as relatively simple, "portable" sets, inspire Nicholls to think *Burning Bridges* could tour. "You can stage this play in a bar in New Orleans," he suggests. "You can stage this play in a jazz club in Berlin."

For his part, Goldberg is focused on the more immediate challenge of memorizing his lines — a humbling bit of payback. "Actors complain often about learning my lines," he admits. "And now I realize why." Still, Goldberg didn't entertain the option of revising the dialogue. "I didn't want to make it easy on myself," he says. "It's gotta feel like jazz, like it's happening in this moment and never happened before and will never happen again."