

Tackling an 'Icon'

by Brent Hallenbeck

The idea for a script about 1950s film star Montgomery Cliff started in the mind of Seth Jarvis when the Burlington actor and playwright was in high school a couple of decades ago. A teacher told him about the star of "From Here to Eternity" and "The Misfits," and Jarvis later read a biography of the movie actor whose career disintegrated after a 1956 car accident.

Jarvis is finally ready to go forward with that idea that started all those years ago. His one-man play "Icon," focusing on the life of Cliff, premieres Wednesday at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in the Old North End of Burlington.

"This was a slow cooker," Jarvis said after a recent rehearsal, "one that kept going on the back burner."

The theater career of Jarvis could be compared to a slow cooker, too, but one that's getting especially hot. Jarvis, 36, has been on the Burlington theater scene for about a decade, performing in plays such as James Lantz's "American Machine" and "Oliver Twist" with Vermont Stage, and writing offbeat scripts such as the scruffy and imaginative "The Once and Future Ubu" and the surreal "The Next State." But he's often willing to sit on that back burner himself, leaving him out of the view of many local theater-goers.

Jarvis has been on fire in the past few months, however, turning in arguably his two strongest performances with an intense role in the fall production of Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman" with Saints & Poets Productions and this winter at Champlain College as the complex lead character in the restrained comedy-drama "Humble Boy." Now, with his latest self-penned play about to hit the stage, Jarvis is primed for his close-up.

"He's a little bit shy and not great at self-promotion," said Joanne Farrell, the artistic director of Champlain Theatre who has worked with Jarvis regularly since she began directing productions at Champlain College in 2003. She said he was always good in the physical aspects of acting and adept with voice and timing, but it was a production of Arthur Miller's "All My Sons" at Champlain Theatre early in Farrell's tenure that showed her how strong Jarvis is at bringing a character from the page of a script to dramatic life on stage.

"Every time I see him he's willing to take all kinds of risks, to try things," Farrell said. "I don't know that Seth is even aware that he is such a good actor."

Remembering the darkness

For "Icon," though, Jarvis is taking a position out of the stage lights again, and putting the focus on his brother, Nathan Jarvis, who's portraying Cliff in the one-man play. Seth Jarvis said his younger brother (Nathan is 32) possesses qualities similar to those of "classic Hollywood icons" such as Cliff, namely charisma and a touch of class.

At a recent rehearsal in a room near the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in the North End Studios, Nathan Jarvis displayed some of those traits while also depicting a man whose brilliant career collapsed into a haze of pain and painkillers before his death from a heart attack at age 45.

"My God, you're an ugly audience," Cliff says in a snarling greeting to start the play. Director Chris Caswell, who worked with Seth Jarvis on the 2008 play "Seeking" that she helped create with Heat & Hot Water Productions, said "Icon" unfolds after Cliff's accident in "quote-unquote 'real time'" as a soliloquy that might or might not be part of an interview.

In "Icon," Cliff is still reeling from the identity crisis caused by his near-fatal car accident. "Why shouldn't I be alone? I should be dead," Cliff says in one scene. "I remember almost nothing from the accident. I remember the darkness. Was I blind? Had I simply not opened my eyes?"

Cliff intrigued Seth Jarvis partly because of the medium in which the actor worked; Jarvis is best-known to non-theater-goers in Burlington as the long-time buyer of movies at Waterfront Video. "('Icon') was a chance to do something movie-related, which is a love of mine, or an obsession," Jarvis said.

He began writing the play not long after the initial run of "The Once and Future Ubu" in late 2005. He said he was intrigued by the idea that Cliff was famous for 20 years, at "the top of the A-list" in Hollywood and more renowned for a time than James Dean, Marlon Brando and Elizabeth Taylor. He said a teenager nowadays might identify those other three actors yet would likely draw a blank at the mention of Cliff.

"It would be akin to 40 years from now for the name 'Brad Pitt' to not register," Jarvis said.

He was interested in that dichotomy of fame vs. obscurity, but also in Clift's abilities. He said Clift was a serious performer whose natural style influenced Brando and Dean. He was very choosy about his roles -- maybe too choosy, according to Jarvis, which may help explain why Clift is not so famous today.

"As I learned about him I developed a great deal of respect for his artistry," Jarvis said, adding that he also learned that Clift was a damaged person with many demons who was injured as much by fame as by his disfiguring car accident.

Nathan Jarvis said he has seen only one brief film interview of Clift that didn't provide much of a glimpse into the actor's personal life, though he is "lifting from that a lot -- or 'being inspired'" by the interview to capture Clift's style. He's also been watching some of Clift's films to see how he holds himself in front of the camera.

Caswell said she knew little about Clift before Seth Jarvis asked her to direct "Icon." She's aiming to have Nathan Jarvis evoke, not imitate, the film legend.

"We're not showing Montgomery Clift the movie star," Caswell said. "We're trying to show the audience this man that is in terrible turmoil who happens to be famous."

Drawn to the offbeat

Caswell said her only previous job as a director came in a middle-school play. Seth Jarvis said he knew her to be "a phenomenal actress" expert in one-actor plays such as the one she'll be directing. "I trust her sensibility and her skills to do that," he said.

Caswell said she had an interest in becoming a director. "But not a lot," she said, "because I'm afraid of big productions. I'm afraid of lots of people moving around on stage." She said she was happy to answer the call of Jarvis, with whom she has worked in his capacity as a director, producer and actor.

"He's just fun and casual and low-key and really talented," Caswell said.

That echoes the words of Farrell at Champlain College, who has watched Seth Jarvis develop as an actor and writer who's heavily involved in the Burlington theater scene yet remains just under the radar for many.

"He'll stand back and let others take the bow," Farrell said.

Jarvis may stay just off the beaten track partly because of his tastes, which he admits veer toward the offbeat. His script for "The Once and Future Ubu" was darkly funny and almost psychedelic in tone, while "The Next State" was a challenging exercise in existentialism.

"This is what I'm drawn to," Jarvis said.

In keeping with his left-of-center tendencies, Jarvis said his next effort is due to land this fall through Saints & Poets Productions. It'll be a musical adaptation -- yes, a musical -- of the grisly H.G. Wells story "The Island of Dr. Moreau."