

Why I Wrote 'Feisty Old Jews'

Ten years ago, a rabbi asked me if I would do a short performance at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco on a Tuesday afternoon. My heart sank. Tuesday afternoon? Really? I pictured twenty old Jews in folding chairs.

But then a short story started writing itself. About an old Jew. The character was loosely based on a friend of mine, Mort Macks, who was 91 at the time. He lived in a Jewish retirement home. I'd visited him there a few times. One day at lunch, he looked around at the other tables, smiled, and said, "We're living too long."

I threw myself into the writing. On the appointed Tuesday afternoon, I performed the story for 30 old Jews at the JCC, including Mort. He loved it. So did the friends he had brought with him. So did a guy who lived at a different retirement home, and invited me to perform the story there. Which I did.

What was happening?

Old people, I was learning, were hungry for stories about their lives. Stories that were funny but also deep, that didn't trivialize or sentimentalize or sand down the edges.

And I was falling in love with my characters. And my characters were all falling in love with Selma.

And I was writing fiction!

As a young man, I had dreamed of writing short stories. Instead I wound up, very happily, in theater. I landed at a little theater in San Francisco called The Marsh, where I've written, performed and directed for the past 30 years.

Writing fiction was thrilling: the fluidity of time, memory, consciousness. I could start a sentence in 2011, and end it 75 years earlier.

I set the challenge of using my playwright's craft to create stories that obeyed the rules of theater: compression of time, demarcated scenes, characters entering and exiting, dramatic tension. And they had to be funny.

I spent nine years writing these stories. I developed them with my long-time theater collaborator and director, David Ford.

Along the way I put some of them onstage.

I spent a year adapting one of the stories into a duet for cello and storyteller, working with David and world-renowned cellist and composer Joan Jeanrenaud.

Each performing experience deepened my understanding of the characters.

The performances also showed me that the stories worked for a wide audience, including people who weren't old, and weren't Jewish.

And I realized the stories are my love letter to my parents' generation of American Jews.

When I finished the book, I realized it was a novel of linked stories.

But by then it was 2020, and I was throwing all my energy into the election, phone banking, performing political material, organizing, fundraising... I couldn't think about doing anything with my book until Trump was out of office.

And now he is, and here is the book.

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