



PROGRESSIVE THEATRE WORKSHOP
Tomorrow's Theatre Today

From East Valley Tribune

E.V. actor's chronicle of alcohol addiction plays Mesa

by Chris Page

March 20, 2008

Arts

John Caswell Jr. has no problem discussing his near-fatal battle with alcohol addiction in matter-of-fact terms.

Hospitalized with pancreatitis. Rehab. Relapse. Another trip to the hospital.

Yet explaining the emotional roller coaster of that time — that's a different story. One that Caswell, a 26-year-old Tempe actor and Arizona State University student, could only express onstage.

"There's not always words," he says. "So I've got to find a way to say it."

Last summer he debuted "Shots: A Love Story," his first foray as a playwright, at Mesa's Desert Rose Theatre. Directing and acting in the show, Caswell offered an avant-garde, semi-fictionalized chronicle of binge drinking, abusive codependency and cycles of self-destruction. The production hit audiences with a wallop — and ended up landing on this theater critic's top 10 list of shows in 2007.

With an arts grant from ASU, Caswell is restaging the show, this time at the Mesa Arts Center. It runs Wednesday night through Saturday.

“

Binge drink! Sleep! Vomit! Shower! Repeat!

— 'Shots: A Love Story'



“The first production was a scream for me,” Caswell says. “It was the first time I’d dealt with my addiction publicly, using art. It was kind of cathartic and it was a scream.”

This time, he says, he’s able to take a step back and evaluate the show in a calmer, more structured way. He’s no longer acting in it.

“I think it’s important, now that I’ve had a chance to live that on stage, to step out and really focus on the direction and orchestration of the piece,” he says.

Staged with a poetic, unconventional sense of abstraction, “Shots” finds a female character (this time played by Brittany Schoenborn, 21) and a two-actress Greek chorus of enablers swimming in the agonies and ecstasies of addiction (“Binge drink!” they chant. “Sleep! Vomit! Shower! Repeat!”), while a male actor (Louis Farber) plays an abusive partner and a kind of manifestation of alcohol.

What the show isn’t, Caswell stresses, is a condemnation of alcohol or a scared-straight confessional drama for 12-steppers. After all, some people can drink responsibly, he says.

“I don’t feel qualified to preach the woes of addiction and alcoholism,” he adds. “So I feel that by sharing my own emotions and feelings through abstraction is the best service I can do.”

After the Mesa Arts Center stint, Caswell will take “Shots” to the inaugural Phoenix Fringe Festival in May, and he’s submitted the show for the New York International Fringe Festival in August. Following that, he’s developing a first full season for his own theater company, Progressive Theatre Workshop.

He’s already working on a new play, “Closet Drama,” which he describes as being about secrets. (The central character is quite literally trapped in a closet.)

Reflecting back on that initial summer staging of “Shots,” Caswell admits to feeling “a lot more vulnerable” than he thought he would. This time, he’s facing a new anxiety: He’ll be in the audience, able to gauge people’s reactions, which he couldn’t do while he was acting.

“That scares the hell out of me, to be honest,” he says.

IF YOU GO

‘Shots: A Love Story’

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday

Where: Mesa Arts Center, 1 E. Main St.

Cost: \$15, \$12 for seniors and students

Information: (480) 644-6500 or progressivetheatreworkshop.com

Original article <http://www.getoutaz.com/story/3609>