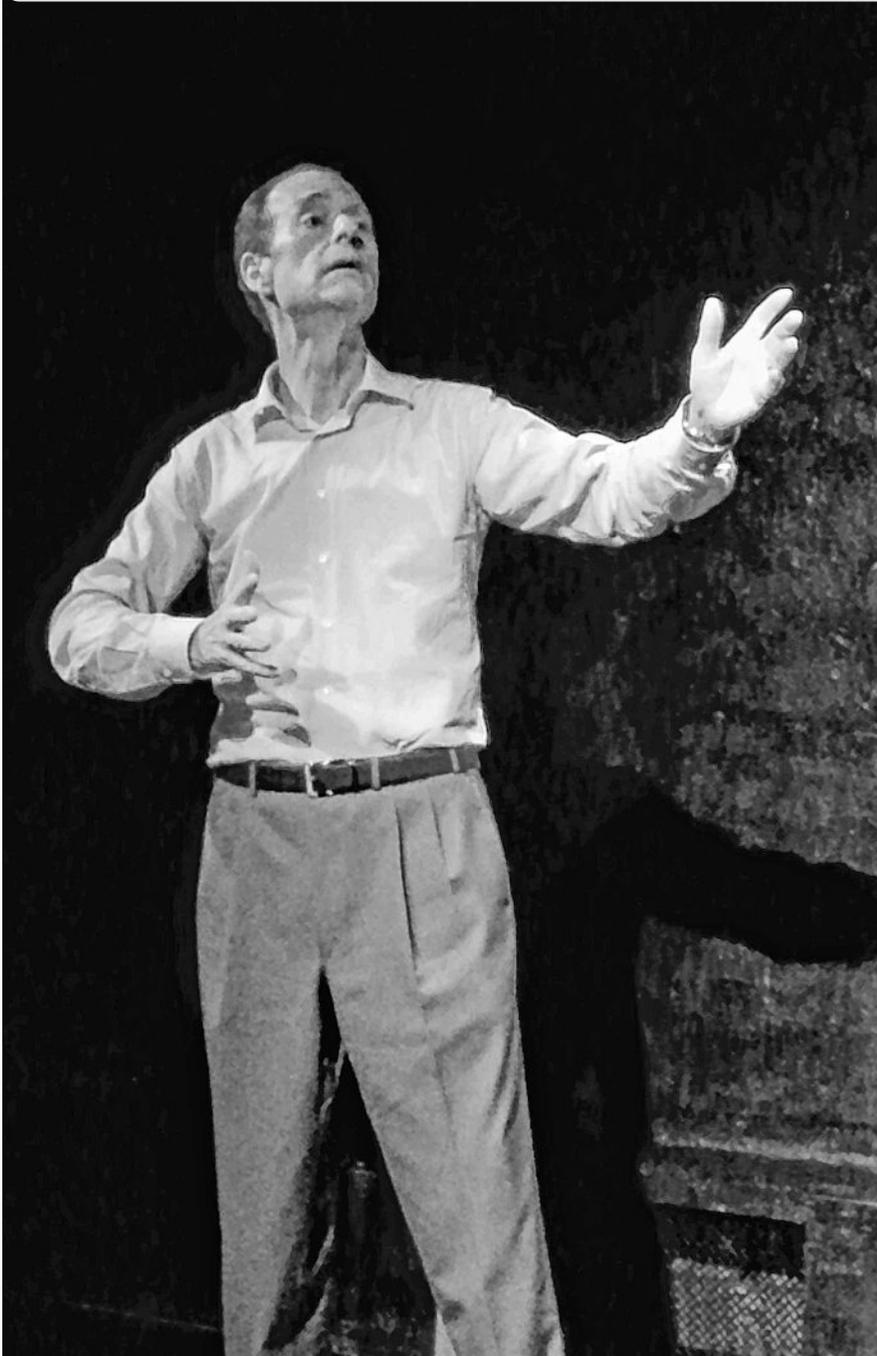


Talking about the unspeakable through theater



Samuel A. Simon performs "The Actual Dance." COURTESY PHOTO

By Marji Yablon

For Living & Being

The man on stage seems to be speaking to each of us individually. He is describing thoughts and feelings most of us hesitate to reveal.

After he shows us how he and his wife learn she has breast cancer, he wonders aloud whether she — his one true love, the one he married before either of them had even finished college, the one to whom he's been married for more than 30 years — will be less attractive to him after her mastectomy.

He muses over how it might feel to him, a man who has never lived alone, if he is to end up with the whole house to himself, his two children already grown and on their own.

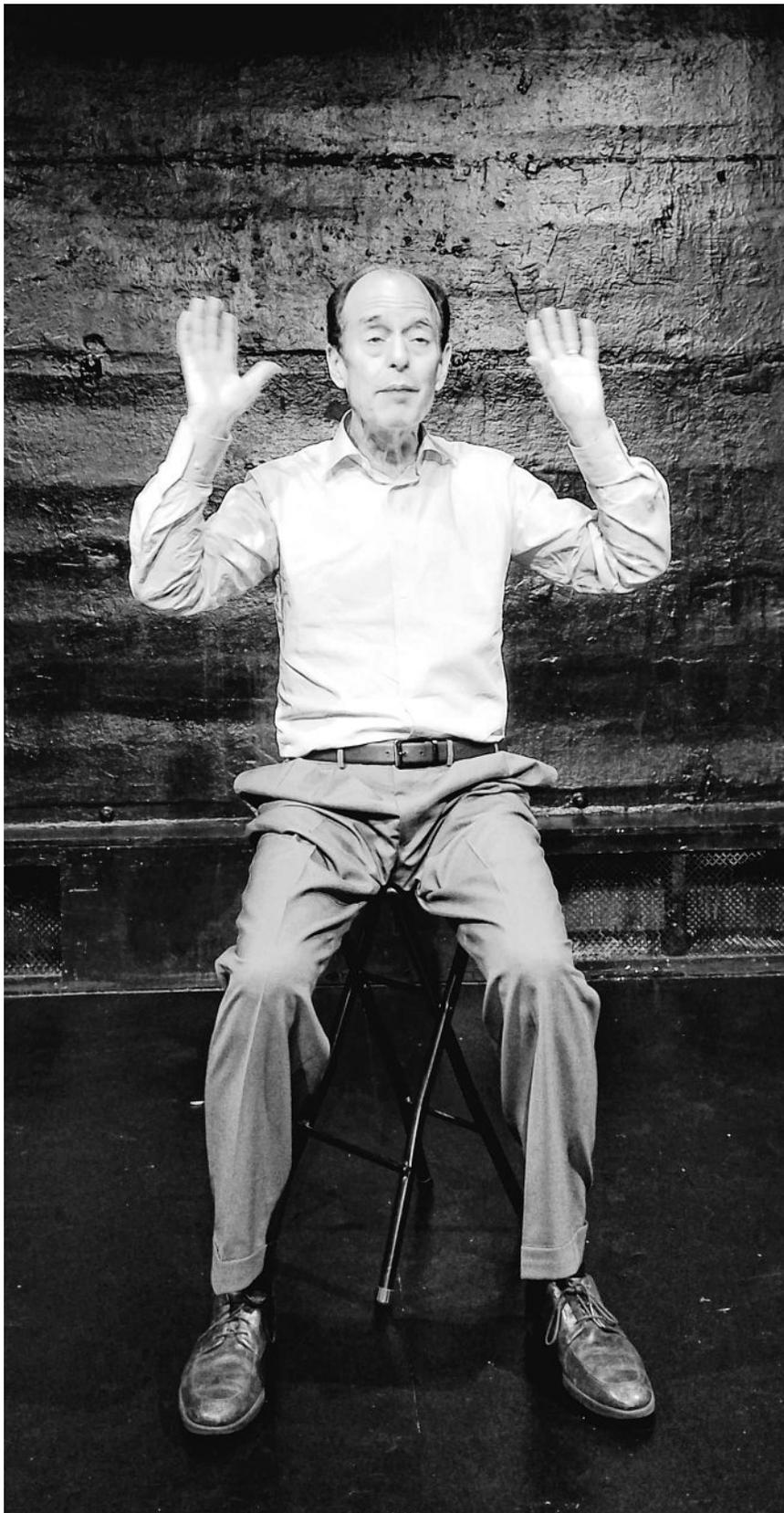
He relates an out-of-body experience, false alarms and false good news. He lets us know he has moved his work materials to his wife's hospital room, so he can remain with her during the days of her surgery and recovery. He muses that now, having already watched his mother and several other relatives die:

"It is my sacred duty to take Susan on that same journey."

After that uplifting statement, he is compelled to add, "I just don't know if I can do it."

In "The Actual Dance," it is the year 2000. The man is Sam Simon, husband of a woman with Stage 3 breast cancer. He is also Samuel A. Simon, playwright, who has applied theatrical license to his own experience, to create this play about a couple, about a husband, about an orchestra the husband senses is on constant stand-by, ready to be called to accompany him and his wife, as they dance their final dance together.

In real life, during the years that followed 2000, when Simon's wife really did receive her cancer diagno-



Samuel A. Simon in a scene from “The Actual Dance,” a one-man play telling the story of a couple facing cancer. COURTESY PHOTO

sis, Simon studied theater with a variety of teachers. Gradually, he transformed himself, an attorney and advocate of social justice, into a trained actor and playwright, who could offer audiences a personal, yet universal, story.

He learned how theatricality and honesty can make peace with each other. As Simon himself puts it, “‘The Actual Dance’ is a true story, but did it really happen?”

Whatever the answer to that question may be, audiences are uniformly moved and grateful. Simon gets to observe that again and again, when, at his invitation, audience members remain after performances, to talk with him.

His audiences have included a class of nursing students from the University of Arkansas, for whom he gave a reading of the play, cancer patients, their family members and theatergoers in the Washington, D.C., area, around Manhattan, and, lately, in Texas, Indiana and elsewhere.

Everywhere “The Actual Dance” has gone, audience members have had questions and comments. He remembers one former cancer patient who told him, “I never understood how my wife reacted while I had it. And now I do. Thank you.”

The audiences have included a largely unrecognized group: husbands, often of breast cancer patients. As Simon knows, they are too often left to fend for themselves. They may be asked by caring friends and relatives, “How’s your wife doing?” but seldom, “How are you managing?”

As the play begins, the first thing Simon offers each audience is his explanation of the play’s title. We will all eventually perform “The Actual Dance,” he tells them, just as millions of pairs have before us. Speaking from the year 2000, he shares with each audience the name of the classic song he and his wife will dance to. He pictures them performing it as a waltz, in a ballroom, accompanied by a full orchestra. He helps everybody imagine the gentle cacophony as the varied instruments tune up while he and his wife have a moment to notice that everyone they have ever known is gathering, prepared to watch them as they step onto the dance floor.

Throughout the play, we can sense

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that for this couple, the orchestra is not far off and always ready, and we wait and wonder if that final dance will take place before our eyes.

As a young attorney, Samuel Simon served as one of Nader's Raiders, young lawyers recruited by Ralph Nader to fight the legal battles that would significantly improve the safety of cars and other consumer products. Simon has worked in the area of public advocacy and, until recently, was a senior fellow with Intersections International in New York, which he describes as "a multi-faith initiative ... devoted to justice, peace and reconciliation."

About 15 years ago, he returned to a pastime he had pursued in college: He began performing in community theater.

Eventually, his experience with his wife's illness sent him on a mission to turn that pastime into a full, new phase of his life.

After retirement, he began traveling from his home in Washington, D.C., to attend classes offered in New York City by Carol Fox Prescott of Woodstock. Prescott, who had been a professional actor before becoming a teacher of other actors, had developed a technique that featured a sense of improvisation, of being in the moment, even when performing from a script. That process clicked with Simon.

Prescott encouraged her students in another area, as well. The state of live theater was changing; there were fewer regional theaters around the country than before, and more and more off-Broadway and other experimental venues were casting stars. Skilled but not-yet-famous actors were finding less and less stage work. Prescott urged her students to create their own one-person plays — in essence, to generate their own acting jobs.

Several of her students found success with that concept, eventually traveling with plays in which they told their own stories, or those of relatives or historical characters. Prescott herself toured for a while with a one-woman show, as the entertainer Sophie Tucker.

Prescott still remembers the first time Simon arrived at her class.

"It was like his soul was dying,"



ON THE WEB

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"Actual Dance" has been performed around the country. COURTESY PHOTO

she said.

Simon confirms that assessment.

"Carol changed my soul, as well as my acting performance," he says. "It's a spiritual journey when you work with Carol — to be fully present as a human being."

It wasn't until Simon had participated in the class for a while that, as Prescott describes it, he arrived one day and said, "I just wrote something. I don't know about it. Can I just read it?" Then he read the seed of what would grow into "The Actual Dance."

"We sat there stunned," Prescott recalls.

Over the next four years, Simon

worked on the play. He hired Gabrielle Maisels, one of Prescott's students who was also a playwright, to guide him through the playwriting process.

He eventually brought a director on board, Jessie Roberts, as well as several others, such as a stage manager, and Jon Roberts to prepare the sound, since he needed such audio as wisps of music for the beginning of "The Actual Dance."

Simon has formed The Actual Dance LLC. As its director, he is adding other ways, such as cafes and workshops, in which to "explore the ... emotional and spiritual realm of love and healing in the face of illness, disease, death and loss."

Meanwhile, requests for the show are growing.

For now, Simon is the only performer of his play, traveling where he is invited, including to an Oct. 6 performance in Kingston.

After one performance, Simon related, a man, a husband who had had a similar experience, said, "You gave expression to everything I've felt and have never been able to express."

Remembering that, Simon said, "I like playing that role, although I didn't (write the play) for that purpose."

Looking back on the careers he's had, Simon said, "I like to say that the things I've done in my life were all to get me ready to do this."

At first, he was surprised by the audience response, he said.

"I was prepared for (reactions) like, 'Great job, Sam. I can't wait for the next one.'" But this play "affects people so deeply; I am proud to be doing it."

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