

—Slug:.....COMM-0844.arts.Yazbek_interview
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[REDACTED]

Notes from editor (not for publication):

At line 83, he says he's a theater person, but at line 113, he says he lied about not being one? Not sure what's going on.

[REDACTED]

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

- 1 'I write music and lyrics for characters I love writing for.
- 2 And for ideas that I want to express.'

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

- 3 Broadway composer David Yazbek plays Next Stage with
- 4 his one-man show, 'A Few Cheery Songs About Death'

#####END SUBHED#####

5 **TEXT BODY:**

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

- 6 THIS SATURDAY at Next Stage Arts, David Yazbek offers a
- 7 one-man show, *A Few Cheery Songs About Death*, which,
- 8 according to a press release, "promises an intimate night of
- 9 music, witty repartee, and behind-the-scenes storytelling."

10 Yazbek, whose Putney stop is the show's only in New
11 England, has been described by *The New York Times* as "a
12 daredevil juggler catching spiked pins in the traveling carnival of
13 his imagination."

14 His current project is this 90-minute solo work — a
15 weaving of stories, wit, and songs, most from his Broadway
16 musical scores and the rest from his life and work as a comedy
17 writer and in rock 'n' roll.

18 Though Yazbek says he'd never thought of himself as a
19 theater person, he's managed to write music and lyrics for some
20 big Broadway projects: *The Band's Visit*, *The Full Monty*, *Tootsie*,
21 *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *Dead Outlaw*, and *Women on the Verge
of a Nervous Breakdown*, garnering many awards, including the
23 Tony Award for Best Original Score (*The Band's Visit*). And he
24 consulted on the music for *Buena Vista Social Club*.

25 Yazbek is an old friend of Next Stage co-founder Billy
26 Straus, a Putney-based award-winning musician, songwriter, and
27 music producer/engineer.

28 The two met when they were 12 — through common
29 friends, Straus explains, and have been close ever since. They
30 played in some bands together and eventually ended up at Brown
31 University in 1978.

32 They "worked on a wide variety of musical projects over
33 the years," including opening a recording studio on 14th Street in
34 New York City in 1985, Straus says.

35 Among other feathers in the cap, they recorded
36 Brattleboro resident Keene Carse with the New York City ska
37 band Urban Blight. They collaborated on music for various
38 children's television projects in the 1990s and, with Sean Altman,
39 on the theme song for *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?*

40 After Straus moved to Putney, "David invited me to help
41 with his first couple Broadway cast albums — *The Full Monty* and
42 *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* — which we recorded in NYC and
43 mixed here in Putney."

44 Noting that this is Yazbek's only appearance outside a
45 major city, Straus expects it will be "a great treat for our
46 community to have a chance to experience the show locally.
47 There'll be music, definitely some behind-the-scenes anecdotes,
48 a chance for Q&A," and a lot of laughs, he says.

49 *The Commons* had a chance to talk with Yazbek recently.

50 * * *

51 **Annie Landenberger:** What about the title of the show?

52 **David Yazbek:** You know, I'm experimenting with that.

53 *The New York Times* [rock critic] did a review of one of my
54 [David Yazbek Band] shows maybe 10 years ago. It was satisfying
55 because the headline for the [review](#) was "David Yazbek and a
56 Few Cheery Songs About Death."

57 I do write a lot of songs that touch on the concept of
58 mortality and the idea that life is short, hence it's precious. I play
59 in that playground a lot — with my own stuff, with my album
60 tracks where I get to say anything I want. When I recorded it, my
61 mother had just died. [But] none of it's maudlin.

62 **A.L.:** So the spine of the evening...

63 **D.Y.:** I've written 600 songs, and I probably know how to
64 play 50 of them. So it's easy for me to get up and perform them.
65 Because I'm also good at talking to an audience and I'm a
66 comedy writer, I'm trying to make an evening that isn't just "then
67 I wrote, and then I wrote."

68 I'm trying to cook up something that has a beginning, a
69 middle, and an end — and that connects with people. That's the
70 real reason I want to do it: I want to connect with people.

71 **A.L.:** What numbers from your musicals are in the show?

72 **D.Y.:** A sampling, I'll be singing (and playing) "Omar
73 Sharif," "Haled's Song About Love," and "Beat of Your Heart"
74 from *The Band's Visit*; "Breeze Off the River" from *The Full
75 Monty*; "Up to the Stars" from *Dead Outlaw*, and songs from
76 *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, *Tootsie*, and *Dirty
77 Rotten Scoundrels*. We'll have some songs off my solo albums
78 and a few surprises.

79 It's about two-thirds songs from my shows. And I tell a
80 story. It's about the creative process. I found that people really
81 love to know the background to certain songs and then to hear
82 them. That's my experience, too.

83 It's about going from this frustrated, touring rock guy to
84 something I never in a million years thought I would be: a Tony-
85 winning guy — like you said, a theater person.

86 I write music and lyrics. I love doing it. And I do it now
87 for characters I love writing for. And for ideas that I want to
88 express — along with lessons I've learned about life and mortality
89 along the way.

90 **A.L.:** So rock and roll, musicals, comedy writing...

91 **D.Y.:** A large part of that is letting go of conflicts. Parallel
92 to my theater career, I studied Zen Buddhism for many, many
93 years. And I was in therapy right around the time I was doing the
94 first shows. It was my personal journey from conflict and anxiety
95 to acceptance and, to a large extent, to getting joy in the process,
96 too.

97 **A.L.:** The curses and blessings of the multi-talented.

98 **D.Y.:** That's why it's hard for me to put it together in a
99 way. It's so personal, and I keep trying to find ways to make the
100 personal universal, but you have to present it the right way.

101 **A.L.:** We share an alma mater. Were you a music
102 concentrator at Brown?

103 **D.Y.:** No. I got a great piece of advice from a friend of my
104 parents who was actually a music critic for *The New Yorker*. She
105 said, "Don't major in music."

106 And I said, "Why?"

107 "Because you're going to be involved with music
108 anyway."

109 I ended up majoring in English and American lit.

110 It was great advice, because there are some people I
111 know who went to Berklee or Juilliard for music and are
112 spectacular musicians, but they just can't write a song [or] a
113 compelling melody, you know?

114 **A.L.:** Did you do theater at Brown?

115 **D.Y.:** I actually did a lot. So I guess I lied: I am a theater
116 person. I just never thought I would be a musical theater writer. I
117 acted in a bunch of stuff; I wrote a few one-acts.

118 I've always been someone who does a lot of things at the
119 same time. I'm trying to ease off on that, but college was like
120 that.

121 I wrote incidental music for a lot of things, too. [A sold-
122 out production of *Hair* co-directed at Brown] was my big dose of
123 musical theater before I came back to reality and went to write
124 for *Late Night With David Letterman* and got involved in a
125 recording studio with Billy [Straus].

126 **A.L.:** Tell me about writing for David Letterman.

127 **D.Y.:** Writing for Letterman: probably one of the best
128 moments in my career as a showbiz guy was when I was out in
129 Long Island fishing in Montauk, and I'm at this motel. And I got a
130 call [from a writer friend/collaborator].

131 Six weeks, before this showbiz moment, we'd heard [that
132 most of Letterman's writers were leaving the show to write for
133 Lorne Michaels' *The New Show*].

134 I said [to my friend], "Let's go to your house" — he lived
135 at his dad's massive apartment that had a stocked kitchen. "It's a
136 long weekend. We will spend all of Saturday writing with the
137 television on. We will spend all Sunday writing. Then we'll spend
138 all Monday editing what we wrote. And we'll send it in."

139 And we did. And then, then two months later, I'm in
140 Montauk and [that friend calls]: He goes, "You've got to come
141 back."

142 "Why?"

143 "Letterman wants to meet us."

144 And I was like, "Holy shit. We got the job." It was just
145 like all the sort of weird showbiz dreams — at 22 years old. It's
146 like, *I'm going to write for one of my comedy idols*.

147 So that's that moment — the phone call was the peak —
148 where all the illusions were still in place. Then we get there and,

149 you know, I'm there less than a year; [my friend is] there for like
150 three months.

151 It was grinding work with a very high kill rate for
152 someone who was extremely neurotic at the time. I wanted it to
153 be like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* or like the stories you hear
154 about Sid Caesar's show [in the 1950s].

155 That wasn't it. It was a little bit fun sometimes because it
156 was glamorous showbiz: There were always very famous people
157 walking around. We got to sit in a room with Steve Martin and
158 come up with stuff. That was fun.

159 But I got out of there and flew right to music. We'd won
160 an Emmy, which made it very easy for me to make money writing
161 pilots and a lot of children's scripts. There were weeks when I
162 would write three children's shows and like five or six children's
163 songs.

164 **A.L.:** You grew up in Manhattan.

165 **D.Y.:** Yeah, first on the Upper West Side in an expansive
166 apartment that cost \$300 a month. And then on the Upper East
167 Side; then I went to Brown and then I came right back to the city.

168 My dad was a clothing designer; my mom was a
169 homemaker and a really great pianist.

170 **A.L.:** And you?

171 **D.Y.:** Well, piano was my first instrument because we
172 had a piano. When I was 7, they sent me to lessons with the
173 piano teacher who lived in the apartment right under ours. I
174 didn't like the lessons. I didn't like playing. I didn't like the dots
175 on the paper.

176 [Then] I started playing cello — for like 10 years. That's a
177 tough instrument on the body.

178 And it was very frustrating to my teacher, because I just
179 couldn't bring myself to practice for an hour a day. So I was just
180 this vessel of untapped potential to her.

181 **A.L.:** When did you start composing?

182 **D.Y.:** I started composing as soon as I started playing. A
183 little melody would come out — even when I was 5, 6, 7. I

184 wouldn't say I was composing great full songs or anything, but I
185 was writing stuff, certainly.

186 **A.L.:** You and Billy met when you were in seventh grade?
187 **D.Y.:** He had just started playing guitar. And we played in
188 a band with some people. We went to different schools, but there
189 was some connector.

190 **A.L.:** You were at Brown together?
191 **D.Y.:** We met up again in Providence. And then Billy had
192 become like this young whiz kid engineer. And we recorded. I
193 would often record my own stuff or band stuff with him
194 engineering it and producing it: It was very collaborative.

195 We've written so many songs together — jingles, a lot of
196 songs for children's shows. He hired me sometimes; sometimes I
197 would hire him. We've just been in each other's soup for many
198 decades.

199 **A.L.:** You're taken with the piano at Next Stage?
200 **D.Y.:** It's just a cool Steinway concert grand. It's a great
201 piano. I've only tinkered on it once, and I was like, "Ooh."

202 Getting to play a really good piano is a real treat for me.
203 I'm an idiosyncratic pianist who might not deserve a concert
204 Steinway, but I'll take it when I can get it.

205 **A.L.:** So who are your idols? There's Letterman. Did you
206 ever glom onto Tom Lehrer or—?

207 **D.Y.:** Well, that's funny you're mentioning that, because I
208 did glom onto Tom Lehrer, but not as strongly as I did to Allan
209 Sherman. Allan Sherman just made me laugh, even when I was
210 very little. I didn't understand what the hell he was talking about,
211 but I was laughing really hard because it was so clearly funny
212 and original. And he sang in front of a live audience that really
213 appreciated him.

214 Also Spike Jones, you know, just for sheer pure musical
215 comedy.

216 I've also always loved Frank Loesser's musicals [e.g.,
217 *Guys and Dolls*]. He's sort of my guy: I'm not a Sondheim guy,

218 even though I've been inspired by five Sondheim songs that just
219 are gorgeous and I listen to them to psych me up.

220 **A.L.:** Such as...?

221 **D.Y.:** "Please Hello" [from *Pacific Overtures*]. It's such a
222 clever song, and it goes so many places. And I love "The Ladies
223 Who Lunch" [from *Company*] because of the rhyme scheme,
224 because of the depth of it, and because of how he lands the
225 plane.

226 At the end of the [penultimate] verse the line is
227 "everybody dies," but it ends on this high note, and it just breaks
228 your heart if it's done right.

229 That's the key to musical theater.

230 **A.L.:** Last question. You've been up here several times.

231 You and Billy are great friends. This Putney night is off your
232 current circuit. What are you looking forward to?

233 **D.Y.:** I'm trying out this show, you know. I'm looking
234 forward to meeting some more Putney people and Vermonters
235 from surrounding towns. I just love staying with Billy and Lynne
236 [Weinstein, Straus's spouse, a photographer].

237 It's always just a great hang. It's spending time with
238 people you've known for many, many years, who you're
239 comfortable with, who you're not in competition with, because in
240 the arts there's a lot of that.

241 I'm looking forward to the entire long weekend that will
242 peak, hopefully, at Next Stage Arts.

243 * * *

244 *David Yazbek performs his 90-minute one-man show,*
245 *with an audience discussion following, on Saturday, Dec. 13, at*
246 *7:30 p.m. at Next Stage Arts, 15 Kimball Hill, Putney. Advance*
247 *tickets are available at nextstagearts.org.*

248 * * *

249 *Editor's note: Stories presented as interviews in this*
250 *format are edited for clarity, readability, and space. Words and*
251 *ideas of substance not spoken by interview subjects appear in*
252 *brackets.*

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#####END TEXT#####
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BIO/COATTAIL:

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253 **ANNIE LANDENBERGER** is an arts writer and columnist
254 for *The Commons*. She also is one half of the musical duo Bard
255 Owl, with partner T. Breeze Verdant.

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#####END BIO/COATTAIL#####
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