

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Interview with Stephen Nathan

Steve Hochman · Wednesday, November 20th, 2019

Stephen Nathan's first showbiz gig was originating the role of Jesus, no less, in the debut production of *Godspell* in 1971. Talk about starting at the top.

"It was an amazing experience and kicked off my professional life in a way I could never have imagined," he says.

He could never have imagined what followed, either. After pursuing acting in New York and Hollywood, the Buffalo native switched to writing and producing, launching what would be a 40-year career in film and television. His many credits range from writing a few episodes of *Laverne and Shirley* to serving as producer and writer for *Family Law* and executive producer and writer for *Joan of Arcadia* and *Bones*. On the latter, he won a 2013 Humanitas Prize for writing the episode "The Patriot in Purgatory."

When a health issue forced a hiatus a few years ago, Nathan, who lives in Santa Monica with artist Jesse Welles Nathan, to whom he has been married since 1976, ultimately decided to shift things in his life. He's continued writing, but rather than returning to TV, he's now focused on poetry and plays, searching for big truths in the little details of life.

"I'm the luckiest person in the world," he says. "And I know that. Believe me, I appreciate it every day. I am grateful after working all that time to be able to turn my attention to something else. That's an enormous luxury which I don't take for granted."

How did you come to write poetry at this point in your life?

This probably sounds like it's not true, but honestly I have no idea. Since I haven't been working on a show or doing what I'd done for 40 years, I've just been writing whatever I wanted to write on my own. What I try to do is write every day. I'm not always successful, but as I do I discover things that I didn't really know were coming out. So I just had some notions, I guess, or feelings or observations. Somehow they came out as poetry. That was surprising even for me. But I didn't know what other form these things could take.

What kind of models did you use as you started to write?

I guess I've always been somewhat ornery in my life, so I'm not one for rules. Especially when I don't have to work for someone else. I just decided to do basically whatever the fuck I wanted to do. It was very liberating and also allowed me to see the value and force that poetry can have. It's

something small that can effect people in a very large way.

Does your past career in film and TV filter into your approach?

I come from a narrative background. I like a more narrative form. So the things I'm writing are in an odd way character-based, rather than based in some sort of neutral, etherial attack. So most of what I write — not all, but most — is based on some event. For me a lot of it is about aging and mortality. I think that's where I'm most comfortable *and* least comfortable. I think it's very difficult to face those questions head-on.

Are there poets out there who have had impact on your writing?

Kind of modern poetry. Tony Hoagland is somebody I like. He wrote a fabulous book, which is a great introduction to that world — *Twenty Poems That Could Save America*. I like Robert Haas, Stanley Kunitz. I guess I'm taken away by different people at different times. Billy Collins I love. I know to some people he's too popular to like. But I spent my entire life in popular culture and I have no gripe with it. I love his work. In school I studied all the classics. Of course they're great. But I think at this point in time I didn't want to be tied to the past. Basically I'm just tied to my own ornery take on things.

“In the Garden” is a very microcosmic picture from, well, your garden. Was there an inspirational moment behind it?

I don't know how to talk about it. When I'm starting to write something, it comes relatively quickly. I have an idea and then I write it as long as it takes. “In the Garden” really is about my life. It's about my relationship with my wife, where I'm at now in my life. Not being morbid, but I'm in the last chapter here. I wanted to find out what that's all about. That's what I write about the most. Nobody can tell you what it's like. You can observe what it's like for other people. But you don't know what this part of your life is like until you're in it. It's like adolescence, like having sex for the first time, having your first child or grandchild. No one can explain that to you. These are things that have to be lived. It's for me to get out, see where I am.

“The Sweep of Time” seems another side of that same notion.

It's the same world or experience that I'm trying to observe. And also I feel like such an outlier because so much poetry, at least what I'm reading now, is angry. And I totally get it. Everyone should be a bit angry. I'm not there in the same way. I totally get the fury and anger and disgust. I have it too. But that's not accessible to me as a writer, in this form. Other people do it far better than I ever could. It's something burning in them as writers. I can only struggle with the issues that I can struggle with.

How is it to show these intimately personal things to people close to you?

It's a way to tell them things that I wouldn't be able to tell them any other way. That discussion would be a disservice to those things. Maybe that's why I started to write the poetry, because it was the only way to communicate those sorts of things, to show the people close to me what is important.

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