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Playwright comes home to launch newest creation

Thursday, March 17, 2005

By ALICIA ZADROZNY
of *The Montclair Times*

Ian Walker looks nothing like the misfit he claims to be.

Upon first impression of the tall, lanky, playwright with the startling green eyes, a reporter gets the sense that he is at ease with himself and the world. But with the creation of "A Beautiful Home for the Incurable," this was exactly his point: the misfit exists in everyone. The play previews at Luna Stage on March 17 and 18 and runs through April 10.

Walker's presence at Luna Stage is a homecoming of sorts. The son of Pulitzer-prize winning composer George Walker, he spent several years of his childhood in Montclair. He eventually moved to Boulder, Col., with his mother after his parents divorced.

The word "misfit" really describes the way that people fall short of society's expectations to be more beautiful, successful and worthy of love, Walker said. His own feelings of incongruity come from being a black man in a white-dominated society and even trying to fit in as an artist.

"Artists in general have sort of a queasy place in society," Walker said.

The play examines the serious nature of mental illness in a light-hearted way. The main character, Bunny Temple, is an agoraphobic person residing in New



▲ IAN WALKER, LEFT, DIRECTS A SCENE FROM A BEAUTIFUL HOME FOR THE INCURABLES Staff photo by Adam Anik

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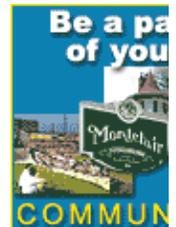
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York who organizes weekly get-togethers with other mentally ill friends. After Bunny Temple becomes the victim of identity theft and is left penniless, the four friends decide to catch the thief themselves.

In writing "A Beautiful Home for the Incurable," Walker said, he sought to create an ideal world where the misfit is not an outcast of society and whose quirks are accepted and acceptable. Like the characters in his play, people in Walker's idealized world would not shy away from eccentricities.

"Our primary responsibility is to see each other and look past stereotypes and preconceived notions. This goes for the misfit as well," Walker said.

Walker has some authority on people who live in the margins of society. He has had a long career in various therapeutic capacities, including working as a counselor for people with HIV, a drug abuse prevention counselor and a health educator. Walker's artistic and counseling sides have blended in his work as a coordinator for an AIDS prevention program, which taught drug abusers improvisational acting. Along with acting and playwriting, Walker is an environmental health educator.

Walker's inspiration for the play came from a moment of feeling very "other" while driving in his car one day and listening to National Public Radio. He doesn't remember the exact topic that sparked this feeling but does recall having the sense of disbelief that he could suddenly feel so different from his previous self-perception.

Even with serious topics such as mental illness, Walker's experience has taught him that laughter is a healthy response to life's challenges. Nonetheless, this comedic play is a switch for the San Francisco-based playwright. Usually, he takes on weightier and more political topics. As a founder and resident playwright of Second Wind Productions in San Francisco, Walker has touched on topics such as the oppression of apartheid, addictions and other darker aspects of the human condition.

"Comedy is the world I want rather than the world I'm concerned about," Walker said. "Drama is the world I worry about."

His desired end result is for viewers to merely "see" various types of people and be infused with a greater sense of compassion for the human condition, even with all its crazy ways.

"Being in touch with people is one of the really few joys of being alive," Walker said.

Walker said he hopes all the peace and understanding of his play will transmute into the personal lives of the audience.

"I want people to get back in touch with the love in their lives and feel closer to them," Walker said. "It's an affirming play in the end."

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