

SAN JOSE STAGE COMPANY

...The Bay Area's Award-Winning Off-Broadway Theatre...

Media Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SAN JOSE STAGE COMPANY

Presents

Winner of Olivier Award for Best New Play



by Martin McDonagh

September 23 – October 18, 2009

September 4, 2009 — San Jose Stage Company opens its 27th Season with THE PILLOWMAN, winner of the 2004 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play and a multiple Tony Award winner and nominee. In Martin McDonagh's explosive comic thriller, a writer, whose unpublished works mimic a series of gruesome murders, must decide whether his art is worth more than his life in this pitch-black comedy. McDonagh once again offers up his signature blend of domesticity and the macabre in a horrifying funny look at the power of the storyteller.

Previews of THE PILLOWMAN begin at The Stage, 490 South First Street, downtown San Jose, on Wednesday and Thursday, September 23 - 24, at 7:30 pm and Friday, September 25, at 8 pm, with a

For press passes or to schedule interviews with actors and/or the director, please contact Jill Arnone at The Arnone Group, at (408) 298-8905. More information is available at www.thestage.org.

Gala Opening on Saturday, September 26, at 8 pm. Performances continue Wednesday and Thursday at 7:30 pm, Friday and Saturday at 8 pm and Sunday at 2 pm through October 18, 2009.

THE CAST

In his Stage Company debut, **Aaron Wilton*** plays Katurian, the writer whose stories are the focus of THE PILLOWMAN. He was mostly recently seen in PlayGround's BEST OF PLAYGROUND FESTIVAL in San Francisco, and has appeared locally and regionally. This year, he won a Shellie Award for Best Supporting Actor as Stanley in Willow Theatre Company's production of BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS.

The two detectives charged with finding the truth are **Julian Lopez-Morillas*** (Tupolski) and **Randall King***. Julian returns to the Stage, having previously been seen in WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?, BETRAYAL, THE LIVING and SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR. Randall, the Company's Artistic Director, has recently appeared in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK, THE WHITE MURDER CASE, IDOLS OF THE KING, TRUE WEST and INHERIT THE WIND. Appearing for the first time at the Stage, **Justin Karr*** (Michael) plays Katurian's "slow to get things" brother.

Diahanna Davidson (Mother) has appeared at San Jose Stage Company in THE WHITE HOUSE MURDER CASE, URINETOWN, THE MUSICAL and INHERIT THE WIND. **Rich Miller** (Father) is making his first appearance at San Jose Stage Company. This marks **James McGregor's** (Boy) professional acting debut. **Leah Kolchinsky** (Girl) is appearing at the Stage for the first time.

THE DESIGNERS

San Jose Stage Company's Producing Director **Rick Singleton** directs the production. THE PILLOWMAN is Rick's 24th directing project for San Jose Stage Company. A founding member of the

Company, his previous credits include last season's THE GREAT AMERICAN TRAILER PARK MUSICAL, ALWAYS...PATSY CLINE, I AM MY OWN WIFE and THE TURN OF THE SCREW, the recent smash hits ALTAR BOYZ and BEEHIVE and the record-breaking runs of URINETOWN, THE MUSICAL and ANGRY HOUSEWIVES. He has also directed THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK, THE SUGAR BEAN SISTERS, THE WOMAN IN BLACK, UG: A STONE-AGE MUSICAL COMEDY and BUDDY: THE BUDDY HOLLY STORY.

Lighting designer **Michael Palumbo** has designed lighting for San Jose Stage Company's productions of THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK, the World Premiere of LIL' DARLIN', INCORRUPTIBLE and ANTON IN SHOW BUSINESS. Sound designer **Nion Dickson** returns to San Jose Stage Company, having previously designed sound for ALWAYS...PATSY CLINE and THE TURN OF THE SCREW.

This is set designer **Devin Bertsch's** first design with San Jose Stage Company. Costume Designer **Jean Cardinale** returns to San Jose Stage Company, having previously designed THE GREAT AMERICAN TRAILER PARK MUSICAL, ALWAYS...PATSY CLINE, EVERY CHRISTMAS STORY EVERY TOLD and ALTAR BOYZ.

**Members of Actors' Equity Association*

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ABOUT THE PLAY

Like most of Martin McDonagh's plays, *THE PILLOWMAN* divided critics. A *CurtainUp* review of the original production, which opened in 2003 at the National Theatre in London, called it "a disturbing but deserving, stimulating and original work." *The Guardian* took a much different view, calling it "a vanity project about Why Writers Are Very Important People by a Very Important Writer called Martin McDonagh."

The divide was just as wide when the black comedy opened on Broadway in 2005. Some critics were enthralled by the playwright's subversive take on "storytelling and the thrilling narrative potential of theatre itself" (*The New York Times*), while others were appalled by "the smirking authorial self-satisfaction the play gloatingly exudes" (*New York magazine*).

McDonagh would likely be fine with both those assessments, given his repeated assertions that the story is all. As Katurian, the playwright's surrogate in *THE PILLOWMAN*, says, "It isn't about being or not being dead; it's about what you leave behind."

Katurian has left behind a massive body of hugely disturbing children's stories, which, as another character puts it, read like "101 ways to skewer a 5-year-old." When he's arrested in connection with a series of murders mimicking those in his largely unpublished works, Katurian must defend himself and his mentally disabled brother — the only other person to have read most of his stories — against what passes for justice in an unnamed totalitarian state.

While the play touches on themes of censorship and an artist's complicity in the response of his audience to his work, Katurian's stories — several of which he narrates during the course of play — have no apparent social value. Unlike most fairy tales, the children in his stories do not meet their horrific ends to illustrate some moral; they die violently for violence's sake. Perhaps this is because McDonagh wrote the tales in his late teens, long before he decided to wrap a play around them.

“He must have had that urge as a teenager to rattle somebody, to wake them up, you know,” said Billy Crudup, who played Katurian in the Broadway production. “That’s one of the tenets of those stories, to wickedly twist people.”

The effect of this twisting, Crudup told *Scene4 Magazine*, was to leave New York audiences feeling a bit roughed up and trying to sort out what they’ve just seen.

“Night after night the response was utter stupefaction,” Crudup said. “I don’t get left in the place that the audience does. For my character, too, there’s a complete event. I’m able to finish the emotional through-line that my character starts. The audience doesn’t get to finish. They are provoked by this ending.”

Theatrical communities on both sides of the pond apparently appreciated the thought-provoking non-message of THE PILLOWMAN. The London production won the Olivier Award for Best New Play, while the Broadway production racked up Tony Award nominations for Best Play, Best Direction, Best Leading Actor (Crudup) and Best Featured Actor (Michael Stuhlbarg as Katurian’s brother, Michal), and won Tony Awards for its scenic and lighting designs.

While THE PILLOWMAN is highly and gruesomely visual, the dialogue is also morbidly funny, as characters reveal more about themselves by saying what they think others want to hear rather than by telling the truth. For all Katurian’s – and McDonagh’s – protestations that they’re “not trying to say anything at all” with their work, questions of truth, invention and trust simmer just below the play’s darkly comic surface. Some of the most disturbing stories Katurian relates are not from his imagination but from his past, although he blurs the line between fiction and reality to suit his own purposes.

When the curtain falls on THE PILLOWMAN, the havoc wrought in and by Katurian’s stories might keep you up at night, but more than likely, you’ll be laying awake pondering larger issues of artistic and familial responsibility once you’ve checked for monsters under the bed.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Martin McDonagh

Theatre was not Martin McDonagh's first love. In fact, the playwright has maintained a love-hate relationship with the medium that first brought him fame, saying, "To be in this position is strange because I'm coming to theatre with a disrespect for it. I'm coming from a film fan's perspective."

The theatre has not returned McDonagh's scorn but has instead showered him with accolades and awards for more than a decade, the latest being a Tony nomination for Best Play for *THE PILLOWMAN*. In 1997, at age 27, McDonagh became the first playwright since Shakespeare to have four different plays performed simultaneously in London. Since then, he has been garlanded with honors in Britain, Ireland and the United States and is considered, at least in Britain, an A-list celebrity, where his matinee-idol looks and punk-playwright attitude have enthralled tabloid and broadsheet readers alike.

This meteoric rise is remarkable given that McDonagh has little formal education and is singularly unenthusiastic about the whole theatre-going experience. In an interview with the *The Guardian*, McDonagh said, "I went to Mamet because Pacino was in it, but mostly the whole theatre thing just makes me intensely uncomfortable to the point where I react just like my parents, you know — 'Theatre's not for the likes of us.'"

McDonagh's "likes" are working-class Brits. Born in the Elephant and Castle (a colorfully named but bleak district of Southeast London) and raised in gray working-class Camberwell in South London, he left school at age 16. He spent the next few years, by his own account, living the life of a couch potato in a basement flat where he and his brother John lived off welfare and the occasional casual job, spending most of their time watching television and videos.

He also wrote prolifically—mostly strange, haunting short stories, which years later he was to recycle in *THE PILLOWMAN*. But McDonagh's first love was film, and by age 20 he had written four full-length film scripts and sketches for another half-dozen. When studios ignored his work, he turned his hand

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to writing plays for radio and television, with little more success. His first 22 efforts were rejected by form letter by the BBC. He claims to have received six rejection slips in one day.

Undaunted, McDonagh changed tack and began writing for the stage. He had little inclination for straight theatre, being more influenced by the films of Martin Scorsese, Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone alongside the raw music of the Sex Pistols and, tellingly, the Pogues.

Like Shane McGowan, leader of the punk-Celtic Pogues, McDonagh is a second-generation Irishman dragged-up in London. Although he never actually lived in Ireland, McDonagh's mother is from county Sligo and his father from Galway. So while he spent his early childhood in and around the ugly residential tower blocks along the Old and New Kent Roads in London, his cultural life was steeped in Ireland. His parents' living room was adorned with pictures of the Pope and that peculiar Irish phenomenon of the Sacred Heart, while Irish Rebel songs, sung by his parents and uncles, were the music of his childhood. He spent his summer holidays in Easkey and Connemara, living with cousins.

McDonagh's upbringing gave rise to his early theatrical success via what became known as "The Leenane Trilogy" of plays: He wrote THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE in 1996, followed closely by THE LONESOME WEST and A SKULL IN CONNEMARA, both written in 1997. Through his background he channeled the dialect of the characters in these plays, where the rhythms of Gaelic can still be heard under the English text. He also watched a rural culture disappear under the weight of Australian television soap operas, American movies and all the other banalities of the global village.

Like Mamet, he has a keen ear for earthy language and can turn the casual profanity of everyday speech into poetry. It is this hybrid, this blending of traditional, almost old-fashioned Irish storytelling and language with a modern, gritty, dissonant realism that has created a unique theatrical voice.

That voice is being heard with greater frequency through his original medium of choice —film — where it is being greeted with the same enthusiasm as his plays. He wrote and directed *Six Shooter*,

which won an Oscar for Best Short Subject in 2006, and in 2009 garnered an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay for *In Bruges*, a full-length feature starring Colin Farrell and Ralph Fiennes.

McDonagh is set to return to Broadway next year with the world premiere of *A BEHANDING IN SPOKANE*, his first play to originate on the Great White Way and his first to be set in the United States. As of this writing, Chris Rock and Sam Rockwell are said to eyeing roles in the play. His success on stage and screen has earned him the unwieldy title of “Academy Award-winning playwright.”

Along the way, McDonagh has managed to offend luminaries of both stage and screen, who’ve taken umbrage not only to his work but to his public antics.

In 1996, at the Evening Standard Awards, host and then editor Max Hastings proposed a toast to the Queen. McDonagh, who was to win the award for Most Promising Young Playwright, began heckling the stage, prompting Sean Connery to loom over him, place a hand on his shoulder and demand, in his distinctive 007 sibilant burr, that McDonagh “shut up or leave!” McDonagh initially apologized then thought again, faced Connery and told him very loudly to “f*** off.” As McDonagh describes it, “The room fell utterly silent and everybody turned to look at me.” Hours later, a tabloid journalist interviewed the writer, and McDonagh, unshaken but stirred, abused Connery again. It all made great newspaper copy and the unrepentant McDonagh a household name. But, he said later, “My mother was mortified and wouldn’t speak to me for a month.”

McDonagh hit the headlines again over *THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE*, a 2001 play that mocked the Irish National Liberation Army and involved—in no particular order of outrage — a trussed-up man hanging upside down who has his toenails torn out, a blinding of three characters with a BB gun, the dismemberment of a corpse and the painting of a cat with boot polish. Trevor Nunn, former director of Britain’s National Theater, thought the play so inflammatory that he refused to stage it, saying that its production might threaten the peace process in Northern Ireland and put the actors at serious personal

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risk. McDonagh argued that terrorists didn't really go to the theatre that much. The play, of course, was a comedy and a huge success in London's West End.

What drives McDonagh, though, is not the desire to shock but the thought of bringing new stories into the world, an idea central to *THE PILLOWMAN*. "We're all here and we have our time on Earth," he told the *Irish Times*. "The Brothers Grimm had their time, and they left stories behind them. Leaving little things behind that nobody else could is much more interesting than saying things in general about human nature, which most people can do if they try. I hope I can just continue with the stories, rather than achieve some kind of position where you feel you have to say something."