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Lipkin Wins Oregon Book Award

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Diverse cultures enrich life

My life has been richer for having known so many people around the world. I have lived as a member of a minority in the world of Islam and the Jewish community in Israel. I have studied, traveled and taught in Europe. I am working with students at Africa University from 21 African countries, with 26 tribal languages. And it all began on that street in northern Michigan.

Fewer American children nowadays grow up amid the kind of diversity that my childhood playmates and I took for granted. This makes it all the more important for them to be exposed to diversity later on and to learn to value it. We are living in a diverse world and it is imperative that we encourage our students to learn and explore other countries and other cultures. We need to help them appreciate the importance of living and learning in a multicultural environment.

If we can teach our students those lessons, they in turn can help others view the color of one's skin, the accent in one's voice, the religious practices of one's parents, the native languages, and the diversity that is becoming a part of our everyday lives.

Not everyone on our street was Swedish.

In fact, in the small mining and lumber town in northern Michigan where I grew up, within our block we had families who were Greek, Orthodox, German, Swedish, Finnish, Orthodox Jewish and Polish. Most of the parents spoke their native languages, and for the first-generation Americans tried to learn the languages, mostly so we could understand what our parents were saying to each other.

Our hero was Adam Meliss from Poland, who grew up on a street where I lived, within our block. He and his parents were first-generation Americans. Adam was Swedish.

In college in the early 1950s, I had my first opportunity to study abroad. Much to the chagrin of my parents, I traveled to Norway to study for a term, and that began my life-long love of travel and the various cultures!

Student Profile

Shelly Lipkin ’05 made a few good friends as he penned his recent award-winning play.

Lipkin, of Lake Oswego, earned a 2004 Oregon Book Award for Vitriol and Violets, a play he co-authored with Louanne Moldovan and Sherry Lamoreaux.

“You kind of live it,” said Lipkin, of the story. “The characters become your best friends, in a way.”

Lipkin was co-artistic director of Cygnet Productions from 2000 to 2003 and served as co-artistic director of West Coast Ensemble Theatre. In addition to his theatrical work, he is an adjunct professor at Marylhurst University and teaches drama for Lakewood Community College.

Shelly Lipkin ’05

Vitriol and Violets is set in the 1920s at Manhattan’s Algonquin Hotel, where a group of writers—future Pulitzer Prize and Academy Award winners—gathered each day for lunch. The group, known as the Algonquin Round Table, included writers like Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woollcott, Robert Benchley, Edna Ferber, Harold Ross and Harpo Marx. They played poker and extreme croquet, and even bought a vacation island together.

“They were wild people who had lunch together every day in the Algonquin Hotel,” said Lipkin, who also co-produced and acted in the play. “At the time, none of them were famous. They were broke, the Algonquin was a pit, but they were brilliant writers. This was the beginning of Broadway.”

It took a year to write the play, which initially opened in 2002. Editing from early performances resulted in the current version.

Lipkin, who is working toward a humanities degree through Linfield’s Adult Degree Program, recently finished writing a second play, Sylver Beach’s [sic], which has doubled as his Linfield senior thesis. He is now writing a third play, a comedy, focusing on how a man deals with his brother’s suicide.

“Literature has to entertain people, hold their interest and capture their imagination,” he said. “That’s what I think of when I write.”

With Vitriol finished, another play newly completed and a third in the works, Lipkin is making his mark as a playwright. He has been involved in theater since age 20, when he took to the stage as a student at the College of Marin and then performed with the Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Shelly Lipkin ’05, left, as Robert Benchley and Jane Ferguson as Dorothy Parker in a scene from the award-winning play Vitriol and Violets, which he co-authored.

U.S. International University School of Performing Arts. He put school on the back burner after being accepted to perform with the Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

He spent the next 20 years in Los Angeles as a television and film actor, appearing in numerous movies, commercials and sitcoms, before moving to Oregon in 1998. Most recently, he appeared in the Sundance Festival award-winning film Moon Creek.

Lipkin is co-artistic director of Cygnet Productions from 2000 to 2003 and served as co-artistic director of West Coast Ensemble Theatre. In addition to his theatrical work, he is an adjunct professor at Marylhurst University and teaches drama for Lakewood Theatre Company. He is also a teacher and consultant at New Horizons Computer Center.

Lipkin said he returned to school “for my soul. I wanted to have a degree,” and found a good fit with Linfield’s flexible schedule, weekend classes and top-notch faculty.

“I’d heard great things about Linfield,” he said. “I’ve been able to fit it into my schedule. That’s the best thing about it. It’s a great tool for people trying to do two things at once.”

Barbara Drake, professor of English, remembers teaching Lipkin during a creative nonfiction workshop.

“Here was this guy who could act and write and had all kinds of theatrical experience,” Drake said. “He had such a knack for making his stories come alive. When he gave a reading in class it was a performance, often a very funny one. He really knows how to use voice, on and off the page.”

— Laura Davis