

# Isabella: Small Rain upon the Tender Grass

## The Play



L-R: Jenn Shammass as Karen,  
Victoria Ezikovich as Isabella, Rudy  
Rudacious as Eddie from *Isabella*.  
(Photo: CPTC)

The quality of poetry is not strained. We first meet 16-year-old Isabella (Victoria Ezikovich) scribbling in a notebook, living homeless in an alley. Her mother Karen (Jenn Shammass) sleeps nearby, a junkie whose criminal boyfriend Eddie (Rudy Rudacious) soon arrives. In due course, the poems in Isabella's notebooks become her lifeline to her lost childhood: The poems drop as the rain and distill as the dew.

Playwright David J. Valentin has written and directed a small masterpiece in *Isabella*, selling out the opening night of its world premiere performance run from Counter-Productions Theatre Company (CPTC) at the AS220 Black Box in Downtown PVD. With only five characters - the other two are Martin (Jay Walker) and Katherine (MJ Daly) - he unwinds their interlocking pasts to show how they got where they are, each touched by loss and transformation. There are echoes of *Hamlet* as Eddie usurps the role of Isabella's dead father, a writer who taught her the craft and who has become the ghostly silent, unresponding, sole audience for her poems that her mother refuses to read.

Julia Egan is the "Troubadour," an on-stage (but not in scene) singer and guitarist who quietly covers a number of popular songs, notably "Hurt" by Trent Reznor that repeatedly meshes with the plot. Egan has a beautiful, clear voice that suits the sparse set ideally.

The play is full of surprising contradictions. It uses a non-linear narrative, a technique that rarely works well, but in this case fits perfectly; indeed, it is difficult to imagine how it could be done otherwise. There is enough foreshadowing that I had a fairly good idea where the plot was heading, but there is also enough complex ambiguity that I was never quite sure I was right. With the exception of one plausible coincidence - the chance meeting of Martin and Isabella - all of the events are logical

consequences driven inexorably by the choices and decisions of the characters. There is no *deus ex machina* here.

The acting is uniformly excellent, with Jay Walker bringing a quiet, subdued dignity to Martin as conflict swirls around him and MJ Daly showing empathy as an outsider well aware of her status. Jenn Shammass is uncomfortably convincing as a guilt-ridden junkie whose drug habit has resulted in the loss of her job as a nurse, the loss of her home, the loss of her independence, the loss of her dignity and the loss of her ability to provide for and protect her daughter.



Victoria Ezikovich as  
Isabella  
(Photo: CPTC)



Victoria Ezikovich as Isabella  
(Photo: CPTC)

Victoria Ezikovich, creating the title role, brilliantly carries much of the burden of the play: a grieving

teenager whose last thread of connection to a lost world that was not trying to hurt her is the poetry she writes to her late father. [I once described Ezikovich](#) as “statuesque, lithe and near-feline” in her performance as Columbia in *The Rocky Horror Show* at CCRI, but for Isabella she often manages to fold herself into a crumbled ball on the floor. Whether sitting in an outdoor alley in thrift-store clothes with old sneakers or on indoor carpet in a new dress with bare feet, Ezikovich projects just the right contrast of childish vulnerability and innocence against the precocious adult duty to reverse roles and care for her own mother who has reverted to infantile dependency.

Yet it is Rudy Rudacious creating Eddie who carries the rest of the burden of the play: a larger-than-life character devoid of conscience who will stop at nothing to get what he wants, justifying it all by his need for survival. At first we see Eddie snatching purses from old ladies at ATMs and then robbing Girl Scouts selling cookies, but our understanding of the depth of his evil expands as we see him pressing drugs on Karen as his means of controlling her, despite her protests that she wants to quit and has stayed clean for a week. What raises Eddie from petty gangsta to near-Shakesperean villain is his moral delusion that he is in the right, taking whatever he can by any means he can – because he deserves it and is therefore entitled to it. Not for Eddie are the constraints of mere mortals: the fact that he can get away with it, to him, is proof of his entitlement. Rudacious’s unremitting and unrestrained Eddie truly puts the thug into the thug life.

## The Playwright



L-R: Victoria Ezikovich, David J. Valentin,  
Jenn Shammass at *Isabella*  
(Photo: CPTC)

Valentin said that he started writing plays in 2011 with *Neighbors* at Artists’ Exchange in Cranston, revised in 2013 at Stadium Theatre in Woonsocket. He also wrote a package of 10 short plays bundled under the title *Flux 13*, 15 – 20 minutes each, touching on his family, his daughters, his relationship with his father, his home life and his work. *Isabella* is his second full-length play, originally written in three months in 2015 before doing a staged reading that fall with the CCRI Players and, after several revisions, another staged reading in 2017 with CPTC. The final product on stage is the 7th major revision, he said.

Valentin said he acted in [Topdog/Underdog](#) by Suzan-Lori Parks and “read that script a million times even after, far long after, I memorized my lines because of the style she wrote in. That featured two characters and what I found profound about it was there was a lot of this strong, vulgar language but it

all came from truth, so it wasn't swearing for shock value. It was swearing because some people from certain cultures who grew up in certain neighborhoods, that's their vocabulary." *Topdog/Underdog* in 2002 won the Pulitzer Prize for drama and was nominated for the Tony Award for best play. "I read something that said that one of her professors told her that she would never make it as a playwright unless she changed her style and she didn't, and then *Topdog/Underdog* went on to Broadway... That guided me away from trying to watch videos on how to write a play or read books on how to write a play or take a class on how to write a play." (Valentin slightly misremembered this: The discouragement Parks received was in high school, and her college professors encouraged her toward the theater instead of an academic career in English and German literature, introducing her to [James Baldwin](#) who would become her mentor as a playwright.)

Valentin said he does not write from outline, but rather his writing process depends upon iterations of creation and revision. "Some people have it all mapped out; I didn't... One of my favorite authors is [\[R.A.\] Salvatore](#). I have his tattoos on my arms, and prior to writing [*Isabella*] I had read an article where he said he doesn't write stories, he creates characters and he follows the characters around." (Fantasy author Salvatore's Rhode Island connection is that [he was stiffed for his \\$2 million fee](#) designing the creative content for the only video game actually released by bankrupt 38 Studios.) Valentin said he would often "transcribe" the dialogue of his characters as if hearing them talking in his head, only later going back and filling in the details of which character was speaking and the other circumstances of the scene. "I never took a class on playwriting. I bought the 'Dummies' book for screenwriting; never read it. I've read screenplays for fun and, as far as I'm concerned, if you can write you can act it out. I don't read too many scripts."

Asked to explain why he wrote *Isabella*, Valentin said, "It was literally the same reasons why *Isabella* is writing. I wrote to try to make sense of what had gone on around me: She did it through poems, I just chose to do it in a play format. The other characters were emotions with names, and I figured if I was able to write it down, watch how they interact with each other, I'd be able to make sense of how my emotions interact with each other. When I got done reading the play, I just felt those emotions that had been eating up at me were finally gone..."

"It was one of those plays that wasn't originally meant to be a play. It was meant as a reflective journal for myself. It could have been a private thing, but I decided it would probably be more right to share it with the rest of the world in case somebody else is going through what I'm going through, and maybe they won't feel alone." Valentin said he experiences alternating "manic" and "crash" periods during the creative process.

"There were times where different people in my life would call me a shitty writer. There were times where I believed that, but *Isabella's* own words were my words - that it's my writing that gets me through from one day to the next, so whether it's shitty writing or not, it's mine. A lot of the words in the play were words that have been echoed in my life, I just happened to give them to characters to now say out loud." When he began writing *Isabella* in 2015, he said, "The very first thing that I wrote was *Isabella* sitting down, writing in her notebook. *Isabella* was basically me because I was sitting down writing at my laptop. One of the first lines that somebody tells *Isabella* is, 'Put down that dumb-ass notebook and do something productive.' Like I said, words that have been told to me... and that was the founding basis for the whole, entire play. You have one person who has a creative outlet and another person who sees no value in it, and then the play spawned from that."

"One of the other big things I was thinking as I was writing was, 'What's my legacy? What happens if I

die today? What do I leave behind? How would I be remembered? What's important of what I didn't say?' And I knew that if that was to happen, the only thing that I have to show that would outlive me is things that I've written and things that I drew... just creative things that I've made on this planet that would outlast me...



L-R: Rudy Rudacious as Eddie, Victoria Ezikovich as Isabella, Jenn Shammass as Karen, from *Isabella*.

(Photo: CPTC)

"Some people refer to him as a rapper and some as an actor: I have Tupac Shakur [tattooed] right across my chest. He's been dead over 20 years but everybody still listens to his music. You write something down, it stays forever - that is literally my favorite line in the whole play and it's the line that Izzy says that her father used to say. That to me was one of the driving forces: my kids, 20 years from now, if they wanted to know a little bit about me, they can read this play."

The uncommonly honest and self-effacing Valentin, who makes an uncredited and non-speaking cameo at the end of his own play, told me that he has only recently started becoming familiar with Shakespeare and has neither read nor seen *Hamlet*, leading me to surmise that he became familiar with it indirectly. Of course, *Hamlet* has been redone in all sorts of alternative versions, ranging from Disney's *The Lion King* to television's *Sons of Anarchy*. Tupac Shakur [told \*The Los Angeles Times\*](#) in 1995 about a year before his death, "And I love Shakespeare. He wrote some of the rawest stories, man. I mean look at *Romeo and Juliet*. That's some serious ghetto shit. You got this guy Romeo from the Bloods who falls for Juliet, a female from the Crips, and everybody in both gangs are against them. So they have to sneak out and they end up dead for nothing. Real tragic stuff. And look how Shakespeare busts it up with *Macbeth*. He creates a tale about this king's wife [sic] who convinces a happy man to chase after her and kill her husband so he can take over the country. After he commits the murder, the dude starts having delusions just like in a [Scarface song](#). I mean the king's wife just screws this guy's whole life up for nothing. Now that's what I call a bitch."

### **The Playwright's Family**

"It was a conscious choice to make *Isabella* a female. I live with my two daughters and mom. Our cat is a female cat, we have a female rabbit. I'm the only male in the house. My favorite person, who inspired me to write, is my mom. As far as I'm concerned, it's a woman's world and I'm just living in it," Valentin said. "Something that literally came from me: In the play when *Isabella* gets asked who in her opinion is the world's greatest writer, she says her father. In my case, it's my mom."

David's mother, Myrna, attended opening night and spoke with me. "When they were growing up, I used to write a lot of poems and [David] always 'got' my poems. That kind of inspired him to write." Both agreed that she writes about "pain and struggle." David said, "I would rather read her stuff than anything else because it's her stuff that makes the most sense to me, that's most personal to me. I remember the first time that I read one of her notebooks: I was seven years old and I remember crying... right there I knew I was going to be a writer because I wanted to do what this magical thing that this writing just made me do, it made me cry and I'd never experienced anything like that. Not no movie, not no game, her writing made me experience something I'd never experienced before at that age."

David's daughter Jazzlynn, also at opening night, humorously objected: "I think I'm the best writer. He inspired me with him writing every year, so I decided to start writing stuff in the middle of school during any subject, I just picked up my Chromebook and started to write." She writes, she said, "fairy tales that don't have true endings" where "there's not a 'happy-ever-after.'" Jazzlynn said she is currently up to six chapters working on a story "about a girl who's trapped in a cabin in the middle of the woods and she can't find her parents, and there's this force that seems like it's never-ending no matter how far she runs."

David's mother Myrna said she has never published or planned to publish. "When I used to write [poems], people used to read them, and they always told me that I could make them into cards." Most are short, about a paragraph. "I wrote a book one time about my life, but I never did anything with it," she said, "about 300 pages" - but has never let anyone read it, not even David. "Very amazing, very talented, he has a gift. I'm very proud of him."

Valentin is a nursing student who expects to receive his BSN degree in Dec 2019 from Rhode Island College, he said, and many of his family members are also in nursing. The message he wants people to take away from *Isabella* is, he said, "What you do matters. Choices you make matter whether they're small choices or big choices. What you decide to do today will put you on a path tomorrow; if you decide to do something else it will put you on a different path tomorrow. Be consciously aware of what it is that you're doing. Love those that are around, don't take them for granted because tomorrow is never promised... Appreciate every day because we as humans think we're going to live forever, but we don't. I'm going to school to become a nurse. I work in a nursing home and take care of the elderly. Most of the people that I take care of are 5 to 10 years from passing away, 80 to 90 years old, and there are two types that I take care of: ones happy with their life and are content, and the other ones are filled with regrets and wish that they would have asked that girl out or maybe went to a museum that they've never visited or visited a country from their ancestry origins - just regrets. So do what it is that you want to do - for me it's writing, so that's what I want to continue to do - and do it today because you might not have tomorrow to do it."

*Isabella* (world premiere), written and directed by David J. Valentin, performed by Counter-Productions Theatre Company, at AS220 Black Box, 95 Empire St, PVD. Through Apr 29. About 2h20m including intermission. Telephone: 401-419-2205 E-mail: [counterp2012@gmail.com](mailto:counterp2012@gmail.com) Web: [www.cptcri.com](http://www.cptcri.com) Facebook: [facebook.com/events/199735263959260](https://facebook.com/events/199735263959260) Tickets: [brownpapertickets.com/event/3389348](http://brownpapertickets.com/event/3389348)