

# Three Shoeboxes — A World Premiere



Best-selling and award-winning local author Steven Manchester delivered the world premiere of his first ever stage play, *Three Shoeboxes*. Put on by Footlights Repertory Co. at The Grange in Swansea, the play opened February 25 and details a man's struggles with PTSD and the devastating consequences his illness has on his family. The lead character, Dennis Anderson (Chris Mac), refuses to ask for help until after he loses everything and is forced into treatment. Only then is he set on a path toward redemption.

The story originally began as a screenplay for Manchester, who, much like the play's lead actor, is a Desert Storm vet all too familiar with how PTSD attacks the mind. While Manchester's daughter was acting in Footlights' Junior Division, he got to know Susan Nader, the president and founder of Footlights Repertory Co. She read the script and suggested paring it down to a size suitable for the stage. After eight weeks of intensive sessions, the story was converted into stage form and the production gradually came together.

"It was really strange in a way. I'm so used to writing, and as a writer I spend all of my time and energy up here," Manchester said, gesturing to his head. "So to do something like this was just a phenomenal experience. So different from what I'm used to, but really exciting at the same time. Sue and even the actors — everybody adds their own little piece to the story."

*Three Shoeboxes* is a heartfelt and intensely relatable story with a quality core group of actors in all the leading roles. Chris Mac, a 40-year veteran to the stage and Navy veteran to boot, brings Dennis' anxiety to bear with vivid detail. Dennis suffers from frequent panic attacks, and Mac thrives with these on stage, triggering the audience's anxiety as well. The building rage and frustration at his disease culminates in an inevitable meltdown. While smashing apart a set, Mac sent two cups flying into the audience. Though undoubtedly unintentional and entirely harmless, the small breach in the fourth wall made the experience that much more visceral.

Dennis is a loving father and husband who works hard to support his family, but he loses his way. Although he and his wife Tracy (Jennifer Morin) live comfortably on just Dennis' salary while she's stayed home to care for the kids, she longs to restart her career in journalism. Deep down, Dennis seems to support her on some level, but his traditional approach to family structure interprets her ambition as an emasculating attack that only exacerbates his anxiety.

Though at its core *Three Shoeboxes* is about how PTSD affects the lives of not only those afflicted with the illness but also those around them, the play grapples with domestic violence in the family dynamic.

Rather than simplify that narrative into the far-too-common story of the female victim and the abusive husband, Manchester opts for conveying human complexity. Dennis isn't a bad man. He is just a sick man. "If you had diabetes, you'd take your insulin wouldn't you?" a therapist asks Dennis at some point. It's so important for society to recognize mental illness as just that: an illness. The openness with which Manchester approaches that idea is immensely important for any audience.

Though Tracy's character takes a back seat in the play's second half, Jennifer Morin does a wonderful job conveying all the complexity of being a modern mother. Balancing an ambitious career with home life is never easy, especially while trying to wrangle three children. Much of her relationship issues with Dennis stem from misaligned expectations and a lack of communication. Dennis wants to be the provider and expects his wife to be content as a stay-at-home mother, whereas Tracy longs for a more balanced sharing of household responsibilities so that they can both thrive professionally.

It's understandable, particularly in this day and age that Tracy could want that. She's a strong woman who isn't afraid to stick up for herself and, particularly in the first act, it's clear that she will stop at nothing to protect her children. Morin does a fantastic job at conveying all this and given the timing of this play, her performance echoed Patricia Arquette's Olivia Evans in *Boyhood*. Stories with room for roles like these are proving to be incredibly important in today's world as motherhood becomes more complex.

The rest of the cast in *Three Shoeboxes* is serviceable and effective, with the other standout performances coming from the actors playing the three Anderson children. The young Brady Couto was a delight as the youngest, Tyler. It's not common to find an 8-year-old with the acting chops to carry such a strong, emotional portrayal. Steven Manchester's own daughter, Isabella, played the middle Anderson child with a kind of sweet-hearted sass that could bounce deftly from warmth to hilarity in a beat.

Manchester is perhaps best known for his #1 bestsellers *Twelve Months* and *The Rockin' Chair*, but his prolific career also includes the award-winning *Goodnight, Brian*, several other novels, and three short stories that were included in "101 Best" for the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series.