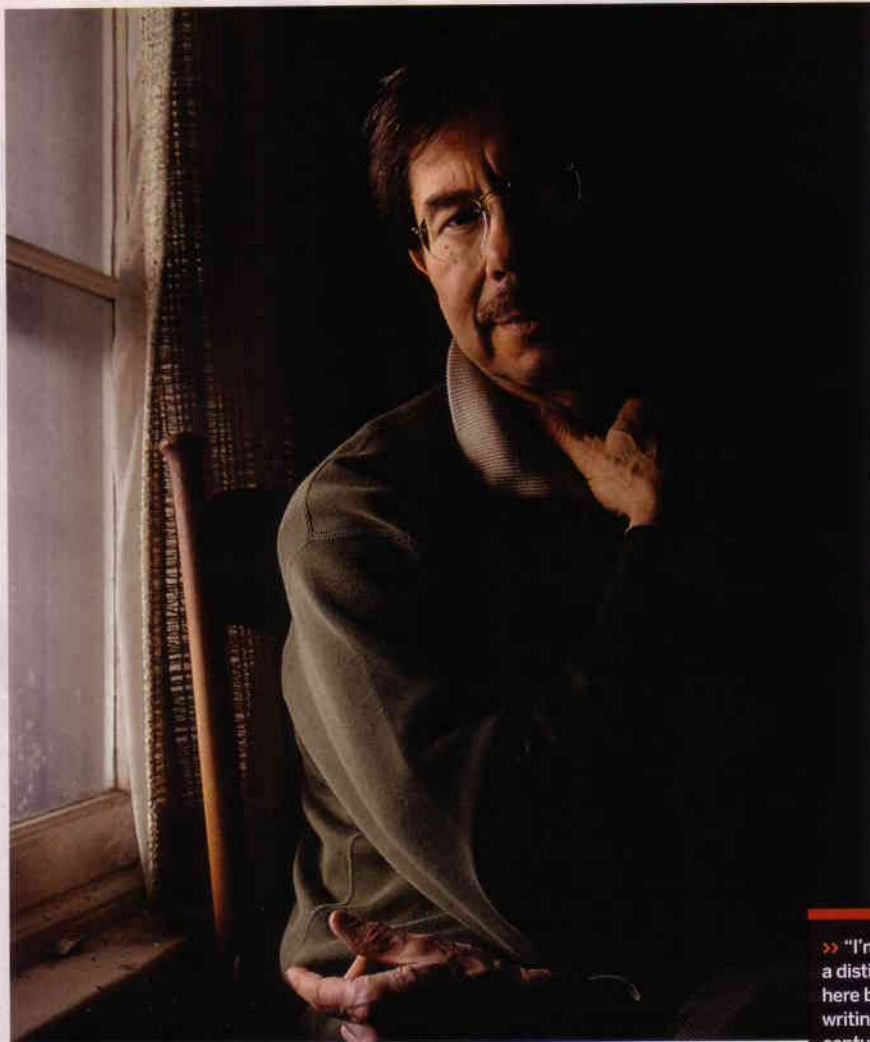


The Memory Catcher

Stuart Dybek's acclaimed short stories draw heavily on his experiences growing up in Little Village. Now his vivid characters are finding new life onstage at Victory Gardens Theater



>> "I'm making a distinction here between writing that captures a sentiment and writing that is sentimental," Dybek says.

not only is he a fabulous writer but he's writing about my neighborhood, and I could even be a character in his book," recalls Zacek, himself a slightly older native of Little Village (and, like Dybek, a graduate of St. Rita High School).

When the two finally spoke by phone, they shared recollections. Zacek asked if Dybek remembered the graystone.

"Oh, my God," Dybek gasped. "The one with the tulips?"

Zacek told him that he had bought it and now lived there. He had fixated on the house since he was 10 or 11, and even has a picture of himself at that age standing in front of it in an Easter suit. "My dad said to me, 'Well, Son, maybe someday it will be yours,'" Zacek recalls. Years later, Zacek was living in Evanston with his wife, Marcelle McVay, the managing director of Victory Gardens. His father called to report that the heirs of the house's eccentric occupants were now ready to sell. Zacek's father said that he was going over with \$1,000 in earnest money.

What Zacek got was an unaltered dream with original chandeliers and wallpaper, push-button light switches, wood that had never been painted, and beveled glass. "My uncle Casimir used to say to me, 'For what you paid for that house, you should go to confession three times a week,'" Zacek recalls with a laugh.

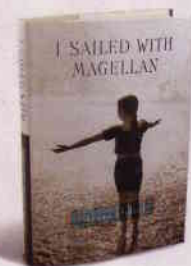
The house loomed so large in Dybek's memory that when he accepted Zacek's lunch invitation, he apologized for being presumptuous and asked if they could meet there and eat in the neighborhood.

They did, and a friendship with a definite nostalgic edge commenced. "Since that phone call, we've been making up for lost time," says Zacek.

In one of their chats, Zacek asked, "Do you remember the empty lot where the billboard was?" Dybek recalls, already start

WHEN THE WRITER Stuart Dybek was growing up in the Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods, he used to wander down the Boulevard past a big 19th-century graystone, a mansion compared with the surrounding apartment buildings. The local kids imagined that the house was haunted.

Dybek eventually moved away and made a name for himself as a writer, known for his linked midcentury stories that lovingly chronicled his youth in the neighborhoods. When *I Sailed with Magellan*, his most recent story collection, came out, Dennis Zacek, the artistic director of the Victory Gardens Theater, bought a copy. "I said, Well, now I see why I was supposed to read this stuff, because



>> An adaptation of Dybek's latest collection (above) makes its debut in June.

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ing to laugh. "And I said, 'Dennis, I wrote a whole poem about that.' And he said, 'Well, I bought it so your poem is mine.' So I had to dedicate it to him."

That connection has led to an intriguing outcome. This June, Dybek's vivid fictional characters, who for decades have spirited readers back to the old neighborhoods, will leap into action again when the playwright Claudia Allen's adaptation of *I Sailed with Magellan* opens at the Victory Gardens Theater. The 11-story collection, published in 2003, follows Perry Katzek from childhood to maturity and is also the story of his family and neighborhood. Along the way we meet his brother Mick, who shares his love of exploration; his working-class father, whose nickname "Sir" pays homage to 1950s sitcom family perfection; and his rapsallicon Uncle Lefty, a Korean War veteran and saxophonist. We also discover friends and acquaintances from their Polish/Mexican Little Village neighborhood in bizarre situations: a young couple encounter a corpse on the shore of Lake Michigan; the pursuit of a woman sampling perfume at Marshall Field's leads to a surprise.

CLAUDIA ALLEN'S REACTION TO *I Sailed with Magellan* was as intense as Zacek's. "I was up here, ass-deep in snow," she says in a phone interview from her home in the Michigan town where she grew up and now lives in what she calls her family's working-class compound. Before she had finished the luminous first story she realized that she would love to see a theatrical production of the book. Allen compares Dybek to the moviemaker Federico Fellini. "I really did want it to be a Chicago story, almost so that you have the whole neighborhood burst at you. There's a grittiness to his writing. It's a tough part of the city that Stu grew up in, so I wanted to see that onstage."

Dybek has given Allen lots of space to create her own adaptation, and she appreciates that. "I don't even want it to be mine," Dybek says. "I want these artists to employ all their magic and tools and do something with it." But Zacek is encouraging his friend to increase his involvement with the adaptation. "Stuart is inclined to be hands off," Zacek notes. "I say to him, 'This is your story. These are your people, and you should be involved.'"




It remains to be seen if theatregoers will be drawn in as deeply as Dybek's readers. Will contemporary Chicago audiences connect with a world that has largely disappeared? Those familiar with Dybek's work

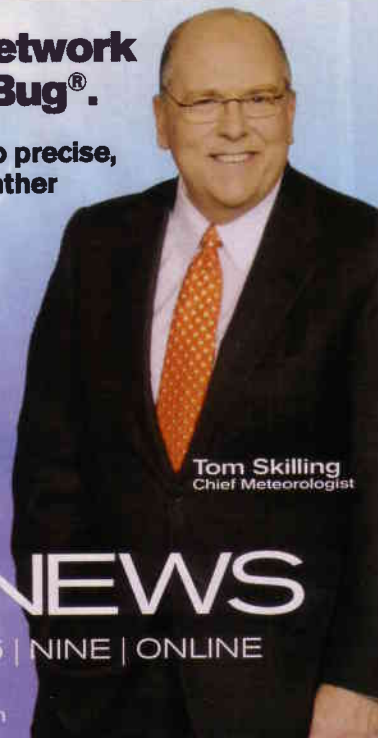
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believe that the universal nature of immigration and the continuing fascination with family history will be enough of a pull.

FAMILY TIES AND HOME ARE TRE-mendously important to Dybek, so it is no small irony that he has spent most of his adult life away from the urban neighborhoods he loves. The man many consider the quintessential Chicago writer did not move back to the city that has informed his short stories and poems until last fall, when he was 64. He is now teaching at Northwestern University, where he is its first distinguished writer in residence, a continuing appointment.

Dybek's Chicago roots go back to an extended Polish family. His grandparents and father—the latter, a foreman for International Harvester—were immigrants. His mother worked on and off as a truck dispatcher. One of his younger brothers is a waiter; the other, a counselor in a methadone clinic.

Writing entered Dybek's life early in a fourth-grade experience at the St. Roman Elementary School. The assignment was "to write one side of a loose-leaf sheet on Africa," Dybek recalls. To describe African trees, he

wrote the line "The trees scraped the skies."

"I had single-handedly discovered metaphor," Dybek says now with a laugh. "I knew something had happened on that page that just absolutely amazed me, and writing ceased to be a subject. It wasn't school anymore."

What happened next made all the difference: his teacher read Dybek's Africa paper aloud, validating his epiphany. "The confirmation," Dybek notes, "meant that it wasn't just a fantasy in my mind that something on the page could have that effect."

The memory amuses him because it occurred the same year that he became a bad boy. Dybek was the class comic, a cutup. "Everything seemed funny to me," he recalls. "School seemed hilarious." And he stopped doing most of his homework.

But Dybek went on to graduate from Loyola University in the 1960s with bachelor's and master's degrees in English, and spent part of that time near his old neighborhood as a caseworker for the Cook County Department of Public Aid. Then he took off with his wife, Caren, whom he met in Chicago, and their infant daughter to teach junior high and high school for two years in the Virgin

Islands. Again, his life was altered—in this instance, when a Caribbean student admitted that he could not read and asked for help. "Everything that I'd always hoped would happen in different kinds of social agencies I'd worked for," Dybek says, "actually was happening in the classroom."

He applied to the University of Iowa's Ph.D program in English education with the

"Writing, or art in general, does have an aspect of recapturing something," Dybek says.

idea of someday having his own inner-city school, recalls Dybek. Iowa was also known for its famed Writers' Workshop, and Dybek was soon hooked. "Writing became so seductive," he says.

After earning his MFA from the Writers' Workshop in the mid-1970s, he headed to Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo

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for a first—and he thought temporary—teaching job. “I ended up staying on,” he says of his 30-year stint there. “It was a place without pretension, and remains so, and there was just a generosity about it toward a young writer that made it a good place to work.” Dybek was also instrumental in building a strong writing program at the university. His wife taught high-school English in Kalamazoo, and the couple reared their children in that city. Their son, born there, also graduated from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

Dybek made his name in the literary world writing stories and poems about Chicago living at that distance. “I’ve always had a fondness for novels and linked stories, books like *Dubliners*; *Winesburg, Ohio*; and particularly Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry* and Odessa stories,” says Dybek, “but I also think people in my generation were influenced by jazz-concept albums—*Kind of Blue*, *Sketches of Spain*—and music plays a big role in the way I think about writing. It becomes a subject for me. In a way, a linked-story collection was a kind of homage to those old jazz albums.”

Dybek’s work also features tension between rich and poor. Many of his characters are immigrants for whom the American dream is not working. They seek identity elsewhere, searching for something to hang onto. “These characters tend to drift through rubbled neighborhoods that are in a constant state of urban renewal,” he explains, “and they have only these fragmented, half-digested, not particularly valued family histories—a lot of times because family members are incarcerated or have fallen prey to an illness such as alcoholism. They’re caught in a popular culture that is being piped at them from every electronic orifice, from supermarkets to elevators to radios. It’s one kind of a made-up McCulture, and they don’t have the antidote of a more authentic cultural memory to raise against it. Yet there are these vague feelings that something else must have existed...”

“Writing, or art in general,” Dybek argues, “does have an aspect of recapturing something.”

SUSAN FIRESTONE HAHN, A FRIEND and the editor of *TriQuarterly*, Northwestern University’s literary magazine, has published a number of Dybek’s stories, and she believes that in his fiction “the power of memory is always coupled with an other-worldliness that gives his stories a mythic



» Taking *I Sailed with Magellan* from the page to the stage: playwright Claudia Allen (left) and artistic director Dennis Zacek

intensity.” His poems offer “an intertwining of a rich inner life with the outer one,” says Hahn, a fellow poet. “He always finds the extraordinary in the ordinary.”

After reading *The Coast of Chicago*, Dybek’s second collection of stories, when it was published in 1990, Bill Savage immediately incorporated it into the courses he has taught on Chicago literature at Northwestern and at the Newberry Library since the late 1980s. “He was clearly writing about the same sorts of places and people that writers like Nelson Algren and Carl Sandburg and Gwendolyn Brooks had,” Savage explains, “but he was doing it from a fresher perspective. So much of the Chicago tradition is a grim death march. But in ‘Blight’—the best story ever written about the city—Chicago is a landscape of possibilities.”

“Song,” the first story in *I Sailed with Magellan*, starts with a charlatan uncle lifting his unnaturally deep-voiced young nephew onto neighborhood bars to sing “Old Man River” for drinks. It ends with the motley parade of a band, led by a drunk so focused on impressing the mother of one of the musicians that he marches his charges through racial and ethnic divides and into inhospitable neighborhoods. Chaos breaks out. The players flee, losing their instruments and sheet music. The nephew eventually finds himself facing a Spanish-speaking girl, playing with her friends in the relentless relief of an open fire hydrant on a hot summer day. The story’s culminating lines are: “‘Hey, Clarinet Boy,’ she singsonged, and I stopped and stood, catching my breath. ‘Play something,’ she said and gestured for me to come through a curtain of spray. And, as if I belonged there, I stepped to the shelter of where she waited beneath a cascading canopy of water. ‘What do you want to hear?’ I asked, as if I could play anything.” It is perhaps Dybek’s most optimistic ending.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (RIGHT) MICHAEL BROSILOW; (BOTH) COURTESY OF VICTORY GARDENS THEATER

"Art brings these people together," Savage explains. "It doesn't eliminate the divisions between them, but it suggests these divisions can be overcome." Unlike Algren, James T. Farrell, and Richard Wright, he notes, Dybek "is writing about postindustrial Chicago, seeing the city as a space you can move through and make your own."

Clearly, sentiment doesn't scare Dybek. Rather, he sees it as part of the risk any writer takes. "If you're not taking a risk on the page, it's probably a pretty sorry piece of work," he notes. "If you're writing about violence, that comes with the risk of sensation. If you're writing about sex, it comes with the risk of cheesiness. If you're writing about childhood or animals, that comes with the risk of sentiment. You want to capture the sentiment. I'm making a real distinction here between writing that captures sentiment and writing that is sentimental."

"I don't know of another short-story writer I'd rather read," says the writer Tracy Kidder, a close friend of Dybek's, "and I really want to see a novel from him."

"Well, I haven't given up on the notion that there will be one," Dybek responds. He

is working on a number of manuscripts, but superstition prevents him from revealing much, although he will admit that two of the projects are novel length.

Kidder and Dybek spend an annual month in the Florida Keys, writing in the morning, spearfishing together in the afternoon, and critiquing each other's work at night. "It's pretty easygoing," says Kidder of what they jokingly call the Mangrove Institute, a tropical re-creation of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where they met. Dybek's critiques have been invaluable to Kidder. "He doesn't seem to be envious of anybody, and that's rare in writers," Kidder says. "Also, he is immune to criticism." Kidder attributes that to Dybek's understanding that his work is good, but it may also stem from his lack of envy. "It makes him really calm, too," Kidder says. "He doesn't have those ties, which I find completely understandable in writers, of tremendous insecurity." Kidder has only one concern about his friend and colleague: "My main complaint is I want to see more writing from him," he says. "I think one of the reasons he's been so nonprolific is the teaching. Students sort of glom onto him."

DYBEK'S RETURN TO CHICAGO, WHERE many of his readers and colleagues thought he belonged, was oddly without fanfare. He quietly slipped into Evanston and started teaching. In the near future, the spotlight is on the Victory Gardens stage, and Dybek seems unconcerned about whether Chicago audiences will connect with his world. Readers often tell him, "You got it right," he says. "And I thank them and feel duly flattered and think to myself, I've got a guy in an elephant suit wrecking a church. You mean you saw that elephant, too?"

The situations in the stories may seem odd, Dennis Zacek agrees, but they are familiar. More important, he says, Dybek's themes—relationships with brothers, the pursuit of young women when the seasons change—are universal, "so there are a number of things you identify with even though you may not have grown up in Little Village." What Dybek captures, and what made Zacek want to see his work onstage, is the sense of growing up in an urban area when you are young and impressionable, when the spell of a mysterious house takes hold and remains magical. ■