

New Jersey native salutes blue-collar characters with Hard Four Productions

Sean and Brian.JPG

Sean J. Quinn and Brian Cichocki of Hard Four Productions

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New York--Coming from Trenton, Hasbrouck Heights, and the Bronx, the team behind the upcoming play "Money Grubbin' Whores" would never have expected to find themselves working on the stage.

"In the neighborhood I grew up in," says director Brian Cichocki, who hails from New Jersey's capital, "it was one of these deals where nobody went to college, and as long as you had a job - it didn't matter what it was - and could pay your bills, that's all that's expected of you, and eventually, that's all you really expect."

"Theater? That's something that other people do. In Princeton they go to the theater, not in Trenton."

Cichocki takes a stab at that idea as co-founder of a new company Hard Four Productions, which he has created with writer Sean Quinn of the Bronx. Their goal is to present stories of blue-collar America that they believe are underrepresented in drama, both to illuminate unseen lives and perhaps to encourage new audiences from their home towns and places like them.

Quinn says the company's name comes from a term used in craps. "When you place a bet on a hard four then you're hoping for both dice you roll to show a 2. Such is the game of life when you roll the dice - you aim high and hope for the best."

For their first outing, they are offering Quinn's serio-comic "Money Grubbin' Whores" at the Lion Theatre at Theatre Row off-Broadway. Adam Mucci of Hasbrouck Heights stars as New York plumber Matt on the brink of divorcing his beautiful Israeli wife Aviva. They decide to cut out lawyers to save cash and instead, Matt enlists his friend Frankie as counsel and Aviva calls her cousin Moshe. They try to hash out a deal in the run-down basement of a North Jersey pizzeria.

(It's not based on a particular joint, but for the record, Mucci is a fan of Lovey's in Hasbrouck Heights and Cichocki of DeLorenzo's tomato pies in Trenton.)

The title isn't, as it might seem, a dig at the one woman in the cast.

"It's kind of a commentary on who we've all become," Quinn says.

Cichocki and Quinn have known each other for 10 years through the New York theater community. For 16 years, Quinn was a house electrician at Broadway's Richard Rodgers Theater, and Cichocki is known for stand-up comedy in addition to directing. About two years ago, Quinn told Cichocki that he was a writer. Cichocki happened to be looking for a script, and the company was born.

On Broadway, they asserted, the very rich and very poor are often shown, but the in-between - the largest population in the country, many of whom are suffering - get missed.

"When I read his stuff, the characters in the play were those rough-and-tumble guys that I knew from my neighborhood and clearly he knew from his neighborhood," Cichocki says, referencing the firemen, policemen and factory workers around whom he was raised.

"Money Grubbin' Whores" is an ensemble play featuring four characters that unfolds in real time, but Cichocki says the key journey is Matt's.

"It's funny, because he's being advised by a guy from his neighborhood who's coming with his own loaded sense of men and women and relationships and so forth.

"At the end of the day we realize that this guy who on the surface seems like a brawler with an anger issue is actually a guy with a huge heart," Cichocki says.

"It's a play that starts in hate and ends in love," Mucci says.

Learning how to listen to one another and talk about their difficulties is key for Matt and Aviva.

"They don't necessarily have the communication skills that they need to be white-collar people and maybe to navigate their own lives," Mucci says of Hard Four Production's typical characters. "But they're good people. They're give-you-the-shirt-off-their-back type of people."

"In my family, for instance, nobody went to college," Cichocki says. "My father was a factory worker for 37 years, my mother was a secretary and so forth."

Mucci, too, was the first in his family to go to college. After initially going to school to play football, after a coach was fired, he went to Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts. It was a move little understood by his community.

Right after graduation, he used to wait at the bus stop to travel to New York for auditions. A friend's uncle would pull up every morning next to him.

"You goin' to an audition? Why don't you get a real job?"

Mucci has now been working in the theater for 20 years.

"I have people to this day that say to me, 'you still doin' that?'" he says.

Quinn says, "My parents were immigrants from Ireland and you went into the fire department, the police department, Con Edison. That's what you did. So...I'm attracted to stories that come from working guys, I can relate to them much more."

Cichocki, Mucci and Quinn cite Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Stephen Adly-Guirgis and Martin McDonagh as playwrights who have touched on the kinds of neighborhoods they want to explore - and all three are also fans of New Jersey's bard of the working class.

"When you listen to a Bruce Springsteen song you can relate to whatever he's talking about," Mucci says. "I'd love for him to come see the show."

There is more than the idea of seeing people like themselves onstage, however, that drives Hard Four Productions.

"In an area like Trenton, families tend to be forgotten," Cichocki says. "We know they're there but we don't really talk about them and these are the people that built this city. That built the Brooklyn Bridge. How many people died while building the tunnels? But we don't really talk about that. Why did it take 9/11 for people to acknowledge firemen and the NYFD?"

"Why don't we acknowledge these guys now?" he adds. "What are their lives like? What happens when they go home at night?"

These are questions Cichocki hopes to address, even if he is unsure that those represented will be in attendance. hopes to address, even if he is unsure that those represented will be in attendance.

"We might end up at the end of the day here, two of the characters in this play are from working class backgrounds but 80 percent of the audience might not be," Cichocki says. "But we're hoping it bridges a little bit of a gap."

Money Grubbin' Whores

Where: The Lion Theatre at Theatre Row, 410 W. 42nd St., New York

When: In previews, opens Sept. 30. Tuesdays at 7 p.m., Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m.

How much: \$51.25, call (212) 239-6200 or visit telecharge.com

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