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Brian Copeland talks of depression, bouncing back

Robert Hurwitt

Sunday, February 26, 2012

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Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Brian Copeland is working on "The Waiting Period," about the mandatory 10-day delay in purchasing a handgun.

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Brian Copeland has been deeply depressed, and that could be very good news for anyone who's suffered from depression or known others who have. Which includes a lot of us.

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As anyone knows who's seen Copeland's long-running and widely traveled 2004 solo "Not a Genuine Black Man," the longtime stand-up comic, KGO Radio ("The Brian Copeland Show") and TV ("7Live") talk show host has a gift for making touchy topics entertaining and thought-provoking. His "The Waiting Period" - which had a workshop run at the Marsh last fall, and opened Saturday after weeks of previews - is about the mandatory 10-day waiting period after purchasing a gun with which he intended to kill himself.

Q: You're a single father of three, correct?

A: Yes, two sons, Adam the oldest and my youngest, Casey, just turned 17. My daughter Caroline is at San Francisco State

in journalism. She sold a piece to The Chronicle, pitched it and everything herself. My Father's Day present from her three years ago was this piece, a full page in the Sunday paper about how fathers get short shrift on Father's Day. Everybody runs out and picks up a tie, doesn't give it any thought until the last minute.

She handed it to me and said, "Here's your Father's Day present." I read it. I cried. Then I said, "Wait a minute! You got paid for a present that you gave me?"

Q: You do a Sunday radio talk show and your TV show is live every weekday afternoon, and you're performing Fridays and Saturdays at the Marsh. Each of those gigs involves some serious prep time.

A: Yeah, all day Sundays. I'm in for "7Live" from 9 to 5 every day. Actually, before that I'm looking for topics at home, doing Web searches and all that. And radio, I'm constantly pulling topics out of everywhere, taking notes. And "Waiting," I've been in

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rehearsals for a long time and previews and we're still working on it. When I get off the phone with you I'm going back to work on the script.

Q: How do you manage it all?

A: I compartmentalize very, very well. If I had to stop and think about everything I'm doing it would be overwhelming, but I compartmentalize. Well, with the exception of the play, because I'm thinking about it all the time now, and the book I'm planning to write based on it.

So I'm always taking notes in my head, riding down the street, taking a shower. Just this evening, shopping for groceries, I had an idea for a line that wasn't working right and how to fix it.

Q: You also turned "Genuine" into a book, which covers more ground than the play.

A: Yes, a lot of detail I couldn't fit into the stage presentation. This is the same thing. There are a lot of things that don't fit into the play, because they slow it down or get it off track - for whatever reasons.

Q: Were you surprised at how well "Genuine" was received?

A: Oh God, yes. That completely bowled me over. That was going to be a six-week run and that was it, and I'd be on to something else. And after opening night it just kept running and I've been taking it all over. Off-Broadway. We finally closed it at the Marsh last September, but that's not the end of it. I keep getting requests, like I'll be doing it for this fair-housing group in Grand Rapids in the fall. I had no idea.

Q: You developed that show with director David Ford.

A: Same with this one, the same team. I wrote it. David and I developed it together, he directed it and David Hines on lights and sound.

Q: How does that work?

A: He's a great editor. When you're in the middle of something, you need someone who can stand outside and say, we don't want to evoke that emotion right there or maybe this line undermines something that could have a stronger effect. It's a true story but you have to make it work dramatically.

He's a genius at this. He calls himself the midwife but he's also part therapist. He'll pick up something in a scene I wrote that I didn't even know about myself but that I'd written for a reason. It's very exciting.

Q: Is this your coming out as a man who suffers from depression?

A: Yeah, but there are a couple of things. First of all, our real challenge all along was to do a show about depression that's not depressing, just like "Genuine" is funny but not funny. When I wrote "Genuine" I took the rhythms of Norman Lear from watching episodes of "All in the Family," and how he mixed it up, funny, heavy.

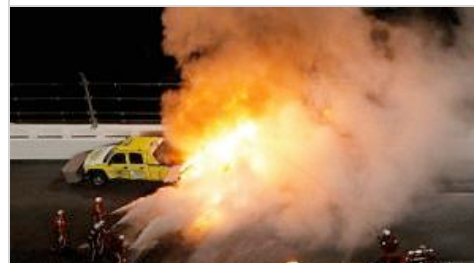
Now with depression, I've suffered from it since I was a kid, but I went through a horrible bout where I was contemplating suicide, when my wife took off and my grandmother, the woman who raised me, died. And I had a major car accident and almost ended up paraplegic. I thought about that after I came out of it and started to make some notes for a piece, but what really made me push ahead was a 15-year-old kid whose family I knew well - he was the nephew of longtime friends of mine - and last January he laid down on railroad tracks in front of a train. That's when I knew I had to go through with this. The play is dedicated to him.



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So I have an agenda here. I have to tell you to tell somebody. If you hurt that much and you don't tell somebody, there's a real good chance you're going to die. I'm doing this with humor and I'm doing it with pathos, but that's my motivation. {sbox}

The Waiting Period: Through March 24. The Marsh, 1062 Valencia St., S.F. (415) 826-5750. www.themarsh.org.

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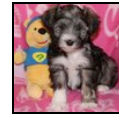
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It requires real strength of character to speak openly on subjects that most people try to conceal and/or consider taboo. Bravo to you, Brian - keep up the good work.

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bdemon 10:40 AM on February 27, 2012

Been listening to Brian for years on KGO. One of my favorite hosts, great talker, funny.

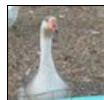
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I want this man to show me how to "compartmentalize." I marvel at his productivity.

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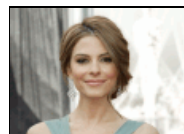
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