

Out on a limb



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Matt Fotis plays with his son, Nils, in his office in 2009.

By [AARIK DANIELSEN](#)

Sunday, September 5, 2010

When everything goes right, a family photo can be a sweet, steadfast visual document of togetherness and the ties that bind. When things go wrong, however, such a portrait can be one of the most unflattering, unholy phenomena known to man. A perfect storm of stilted smiles, dreadful matching sweaters and unnatural backdrops can result in something so awkward and unintentionally funny that entire websites — such as the painfully brilliant sensation Awkward Family Photos — have been created to recycle the worst possible attempts at preserving a family’s features.

Who knows what manner of old or odd 8-by-10s hang in homes inhabited by members of the Fotis family? No matter what’s framed on the walls, the most authentic, endearing and intentionally humorous portrait the family could ever hope for has been provided by son Matt. A doctoral student at the University of Missouri, the young yet already well-esteemed playwright

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Sept. 16-19: “My Fragile Family Tree,” written and performed by Matthew Fotis. Corner Playhouse.

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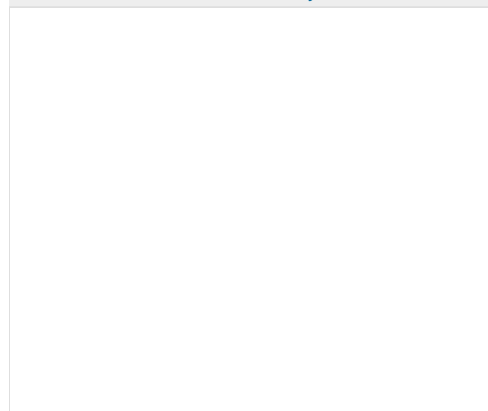
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Sept. 23-26: "Booby Trap: A Hair Raising Experience," written and performed by Heather Carver. Carver's show promises humor and heart as she presents "a one-woman tour de force about battling breast cancer with the power of laughter," according to promotional materials. Corner Playhouse.

Oct. 5-10: "Side By Side by Sondheim," music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, directed by James Miller.

Having premiered in 1976, this Sondheim revue plumbs the greatness of the composer's works and gives viewers the notes behind the notes and rhythms through narration exploring the stories behind many of his signature songs. Musical numbers include "Comedy Tonight," "Love is in the Air," "Send in the Clowns" and "Losing My Mind." Rhynsburger Theatre.

Oct. 21-23 and 28-31: "How I Learned To Drive," written by Paula Vogel, directed by David Crespy. This Pulitzer Prize-winning work explores very disconcerting situations involving incest and pedophilia while somehow managing to retain a heartfelt and often humorous through line. Corner Playhouse.

Nov. 11-14 and 16-18: "Arcadia," written by Tom Stoppard, directed by Kevin Brown. From the Academy Award- and Tony-winning writer of "Shakespeare in Love" and "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" comes this work that maintains a setting — an English country home — but shifts back and forth between the 19th and 20th centuries, examining how chaos theory, love and a variety of intangibles come to bear in similar ways on the lives of the house's past and present residents. Rhynsburger Theatre.

Feb. 3-5 and 10-13: "Dog Sees God," written by Bert V. Royal, directed by Bryan Vandevender. The "Peanuts" characters we all came to know and love on the comic strip page come to the stage, now in their teens and facing situations far more troublesome than kicking a pesky football. Deemed an "unauthorized parody," the characters bear different names but also vestiges of very familiar personas. In Royal's paradigm-bending world, Linus is now on drugs, Pigpen is an abrasive homophobe, Lucy is a pyromaniac, Charlie Brown is finally popular but with a few secrets, and Snoopy is no longer with us, having succumbed to rabies. Corner Playhouse.

Feb. 24-26 and March 3-6: "Fences," written by August Wilson, directed by Clyde Ruffin. Wilson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American gem, delves here into the various relationships — between father and son, old lovers and residents of different races — that mark a working-class section of Pittsburgh in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Rhynsburger Theatre.

March 17-20 and 22-24: "Proof," written by David Auburn, directed by Emily Rollie. Romantic equations, long-standing divisions and theories on the

poses as all the characters in a one-man show, "My Fragile Family Tree," which opens the University of Missouri Department of Theatre's 2010-2011 season, showing at the Corner Playhouse on campus Sept. 16 through 19. Fotis' often hilarious, decidedly poignant production draws on situations steeped in personal history yet proves that when it comes to family matters, we all bear a little resemblance to each other.

A SHOT OF ARTISTIC ADRENALINE

A typical young male growing up in suburban Chicago, Fotis was a sports enthusiast who played baseball and basketball, rarely flexing any artistic muscles save writing a few short stories and launching a nascent saxophone career silenced, he said, by a mixture of boredom and buck teeth. It wasn't until setting foot at Monmouth College that the arts became true north and the play became the thing. A friend directing a 10-minute Samuel Beckett work asked Fotis to make up half the two-man cast. The esoteric difficulty of the piece weighed on the actors — "I still couldn't really tell you what it was about," he said — and as of opening night, they had yet to get through it or get it right once. The rush of finishing and actually flourishing in the performance was something Fotis will never forget.

"It was probably the most heartfelt embrace I've ever had with anyone when the curtain came down — that we had done it," Fotis said. "... I've really just been, ever since then, searching for that feeling again."


Fotis' search for that artistic adrenaline led him to write his first play, when in a subsequent directing class, he struggled to find a one-act he could feel enthusiastic about. His quest continued with graduate study at Illinois State University; there, he broke through a field with little scholarly research to date — the academic study of improv. Fotis began to immerse himself in all things improv, working with campus companies and, later, independent theaters in Minnesota; he developed a highly improvisational style of writing. In an e-mail, Heather Carver, associate professor of playwriting at MU and something of a mentor to Fotis, said the style he's developed "varies from subtle sarcasm to loud, gesticular exclamations and everything in between. Audiences connect with him very quickly" because of the "huge emotional impact" of his narratives.

Upon moving back to sweet home Chicago, Fotis balanced founding and running the Shantz Theatre — a troupe whose work has been praised in the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times, Kansas City Star and a wealth of other publications — with work as a temporary accountant for a public relations firm. During that period, two very contrasting experiences caused Fotis to take stock of where his life, and the life of his loved ones, was headed; his father was diagnosed with cancer around the same time Fotis and his wife, Jeanette, learned they were pregnant with their first son, Nils, now 2½. Sensing the ever-changing, temporal nature of life, Fotis asked himself, "Do you want to be a temporary accountant for the rest of your life?" The answer prompted a migration to Columbia, where he's now in the third year of his Ph.D. program.

MAD MEN VS. MR. MOM

Those seminal, life-shaping moments not only inspired Fotis to use

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By Jim Robertson




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Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
29	30	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9

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impermanence of life and sanity are among the elements at play in Auburn's enduring work. Converted into celluloid for a 2005 Anthony Hopkins-Gwyneth Paltrow vehicle, the original stage version, featuring Mary-Louise Parker, won a Pulitzer Prize and Tony award for best play in 2001. Corner Playhouse.

April 4-10: "Life and Literature Series/Mizzou New Play Series." Springing from the school's playwriting courses, this series gives viewers the opportunity to watch new works birthed right before their eyes. Corner Playhouse.

April 21-23 and April 28-May 1: "Pride and Prejudice," adapted and directed by Cheryl Black from the novel by Jane Austen. The beloved tale of the fated connection between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy remains an eternal wellspring of inspiration and satisfaction for theater companies and audiences alike.

Rhynsburger Theatre.

both feet to leap into the theater world — they also informed the writing of "My Fragile Family Tree," which he termed an investigation of "masculinity in the 21st century and what it means now to be a man." Four short stories and one mezzo piece are chained together, their common link Fotis' reflections on fathers: his own, his wife's and himself as he's now in the middle of an existence that is part real-life situation comedy and part strange and beautiful reversal of fortune. Fotis splits his days between schoolwork and giving his offspring, which now includes 8-month-old Hank, lessons on sharing. Jeanette has become the family's primary breadwinner, and Fotis has found himself in a world of plays and play dates.

"I never anticipated that I would be essentially a stay-at-home dad ... dealing with all the things that come" with it, Fotis said, pointing to the spectrum of reactions he receives from mothers at the park as an example; some think "if you keep your kid alive, you're the greatest dad that's ever happened," but others "keep their kids away from you," he said, only half-joking. Throughout the play, Fotis uses the stoic, suit-and-tie persona of Don Draper as a point of reference, a representation of a once-held ideal of manhood he could not achieve even if he wanted to because his life is more "Mr. Mom" than "Mad Men." Carver said Fotis' material comes

across as "fresh and edgy" because of his ability to span generations.

Fotis structured his creative process to be more inclusive than insular, allowing maximum levels of feedback to avoid the temptation to create a final product funny only to him; he's sought constructive criticism from Carver, director and fellow doctoral candidate Noah Lelek, other playwriting students and even an MU creative writing class, which analyzed his work on a textual level. After performing the work at festivals in Minneapolis and Kansas City and reading audience reactions, Fotis revisited and reworked one section rather significantly.

Fotis said the most significant hurdle to keep in view is sustaining his energy and holding audience attention for 75 minutes; he has labored over keeping his ruminations relevant and ensuring the most minute details of his family's interaction ring out and ring true with a universal appeal. Cultivating characterization comes completely natural: "Over the course of our childhood, my brother and I developed characters for my mother and father that then over time sort of blended with my actual mother and father, so now they are kind of one and the same," Fotis said. "Even my parents use their character voices all the time now." Each re-creation is a loving one; Fotis speaks of having "a pretty swell upbringing" and said he'd be proud to be the same father to his own boys that his very dedicated, faithful father has been to him.

REVELATIONS AND REALIZATIONS

Ultimately, "My Fragile Family Tree" is an external, comedic representation of truths Fotis has internalized over the last several years. He's come to terms not only with new roles and responsibilities as a father but also has learned much from witnessing the way his wife has navigated the societal expectations and emotional struggles accompanying her eight-hour-a-day excursion outside the home. Fotis has gained even more appreciation for his father — who has since recovered from his illness — and, recognizing his sons will have little to no memory of this time in their young lives, reflected on the care his parents invested in him long before he was truly aware of their efforts. He's taken great encouragement from musing on his father's experience and that tangible reminder he's not the first dad to struggle, be surprised, question what he's doing or be in awe of his children.

The play gives flesh and bone, text and breath to these "slow realizations"; Fotis said some of the most striking instances in the work have been harder to get through emotionally than the life experience that inspired them as time and distance have allowed him the ability to process emotions he was unable to in the moment.


"My Fragile Family Tree" comes along as Fotis' career continues to soar; he's already received grants from organizations such as the Illinois Arts Council and won awards at venues such as the Minnesota Shorts Play Festival and Pittsburgh New Works Festival among others. On his website, Fotis describes his career with a trademark tongue firmly in cheek: "He has won numerous awards in various fields and pursuits but balances these accolades with his social awkwardness."

As audiences take a look into his life, Fotis hopes they'll understand the tone and tenor of the work. Even

though he might joke about the gravity of situations, such as those involving cancer, it's not that he's being flippant; it's just that he believes, often, "comedy can take things more seriously" than drama could ever dream. "My Fragile Family Tree," he hopes, will simply underscore the truth that sometimes we have to laugh before we truly get a sense of what and who is important.

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