

# The Star-Ledger

## For director Daniel Swern, the plays are the thing

Peter Filichia, *Star Ledger*

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### **New Jersey Stage**

365 Plays/365 Days

Where: Cabaret Theatre, Rutgers University, Douglass College campus, Nichol and Suydam streets, New Brunswick, as well as other locations on the New Brunswick and Piscataway campuses

When: Monday through Feb. 4. Monday through Feb. 3 at noon at various Rutgers locations, and 8 p.m. at the Cabaret Theatre. Special matinee on Feb. 4 at a location TBA.

How much: Free. Call (732) 846-2134 or visit [www.cabarettheatre.org](http://www.cabarettheatre.org).

Five years ago, he was a high school slacker, cutting classes and terribly depressed.

Now Daniel Swern is finishing his senior year at Rutgers University, is helping to direct an off-Broadway show and is the go-to guy for nabbing VIP seats to New York's Public Theater.

If that weren't enough, he's also giving New Jersey its one chance to see some of "365 Days/365 Plays," the new work by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks ("Topdog/Underdog").

From Nov. 13, 2002 to Nov. 12, 2003, Parks wrote a play a day, then offered them to professional and university theaters, split into 52 different groups, each to be presented in a week's block. Theaters from Zietgeist Stage Company in Boston to Baba Yaga Productions in Seattle have done or will do some of the plays.

"When I learned that no one in New Jersey had applied to do them," says Swern, "I asked if I could do a week's worth with my company."

The 22-year-old director says he's been getting three to six hours of sleep a night in his New Brunswick apartment. He didn't mean to grow that modest red beard — he just had little time to shave.

"But I promise I'll have all 12 plays ready," he says.

They'll be presented Monday through Feb. 3, at noon and 8 p.m., and Feb. 4 at 3 p.m. The matinees will be at various spots around the Rutgers campus, while the evening performances will be at the university's Cabaret Theatre.

All performances will include three plays: "Remember Who You Are," about two people preparing for sleep; "Action in Inaction," about a person dressed in mourning, and "Inaction in Action," about a person who's multi-tasking.

The other plays, which vary day to day says Swern, "are about waking up in the morning, going to lunch, being in a classroom, and a college party. Each show will only be an hour long."

## For director Daniel Swern, the plays are the thing (continued)

Philippe Garcesto, a Rutgers senior who's in "365," says, "Daniel has been amazing at organizing this. He's also getting local artists to create some live art on stage during one of the plays."

Swern was interning at the Public Theater last year when he overheard that "365 Days/365 Plays" would debut at that theater that Nov. 13. Swern thought it was an ideal project for the Lab Theater, the New Brunswick troupe he started with a dozen friends last spring. Their first production was "The Body in Pain," a series of monologues about fears and phobias, composed by company members and directed by Swern.

"I was really skeptical," says cast member James Herrera. "I went with him, though, because he gives you a freedom and confidence to try different things better than any director I've had here on campus. Sitting around and discussing our fears really led to me feeling better about myself."

In 2003 Swern had to get over his own fears when his parents divorced, which he says was hardly amicable and cast a terrible pall over his senior year at Teaneck High School. He was accepted at Rutgers, where he planned to major in political and Middle Eastern studies. "Theater wasn't a part of my life at all," he says.

It entered accidentally. Swern applied for an internship in the office of Rep. Steven Rothman (D-9th Dist.) and learned he would need a recommendation from every one of his teachers. All agreed except for English teacher Alice Twombly.

"She made me meet with her at 7:30 in the morning, every day for two months, and made me read a lot of things, including Eugene O'Neill's play 'Long Day's Journey Into Night,'" he recalls.

Because Swern responded to the material, Twombly gave him the recommendation. "As a reward," says Swern, "my mother took me to see the final performance of the Broadway revival of 'Long Day's Journey.'"

His eyes widen as he remembers the experience. "I was completely blown away. I left the theater in tears. I'd seen some theater before — musicals like 'How to Succeed in Business' in high school — but I never knew how powerful theater could really be."

Soon after Swern entered Rutgers, he started acting and directing on campus. "That turned out to be all that I wanted to do," he says. "One day, while I was studying Arabic, I did a 180 and realized theater was it."

In his spare time, Swern also volunteers at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick. "I work load-in and set-strikes," he says. "They let me take whatever I want when a show closes. I got some nice trees from a recent production."

Last fall he directed "An Adult Evening of Shel Silverstein" at the Cabaret Theatre. "My grandparents came up to me afterwards and said, 'We were really worried about you, but now we see that you're doing what you were meant to do,'" he says, beaming.

They weren't the only ones impressed. An executive from the Public Theater saw the show, then recommended Swern to Joe Tantalò, artistic director of the Godlight Theatre Company in Manhattan. Swern is his assistant director on "Blindness," an adaptation of José Saramago's Nobel Prize winning novel, which opens off-Broadway on March 1.

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But first comes "365 Plays/365 Days." Swern knows he'll also be putting up posters and distributing fliers. "It's a big campus, so I've got to get the word out so everyone will know where we are and what's happening," he says.

He has no illusions about fame and fortune. "I know I'll never be rich," he says, shrugging, "because Broadway isn't a goal. I don't hate it, or anything, but I'm trying to find a different mode of expression.

"Wesley Broulik, one of my teachers at Rutgers, once said, 'All I want to do is make art,' and that's stuck with me. I want to do it, too, no matter in what capacity — acting, directing, producing — just anything so I don't wind up being stagnant."