

# HOME NEWS TRIBUNE

## Theater of the absurd

Laurie Granieri, *Home News Tribune*

Published: November 26, 2006

### AN ADULT EVENING WITH SHEL SILVERSTEIN

Thursday through Dec. 9

Cabaret Theatre, Nichol Avenue and Suydam Street, Douglass College campus, Rutgers University, New Brunswick

\$5 to \$10, (732) 846-2134, [www.cabaretttheatre.org](http://www.cabaretttheatre.org)

Is it possible that the guy who wrote, " 'I cannot go to school today, /Said little Peggy Ann McKay./' 'I have the measles and the mumps, /My mouth is wet, my throat is dry, /I'm going blind in my right eye' " also published perversely funny ditties about prostitutes and mafiosi?

Sure, why not? After all, this is Shel Silverstein we're talking about. The author, cartoonist, composer and poet of beloved children's books such as "The Giving Tree" and "'Where the Sidewalk Ends" also contributed to Playboy magazine and penned Johnny Cash's smash 1969 country hit "A Boy Named Sue." Silverstein died in 1999 at age 68.

And if you think about it, his children's fare was never treacly. There's something sly, if not slightly subversive, about his absurdist romps. After all, Peggy Ann McKay's litany of complaints from 1974's "Where the Sidewalk Ends" concludes thusly: "I have a hangnail, and my heart is ... what?/What's that? What's that you say?/You say today is ... Saturday?/G'bye, I'm going out to play!"

Of course, Peggy Ann faking fevers and backaches isn't the same as Silverstein getting cheeky about the Oldest Profession. But Rutgers College senior Daniel Swern, who is directing a collection of 10 comedic short plays titled "An Adult Evening with Shel Silverstein," seems to believe Silverstein's "adult" work will resonate with the over-10 crowd. The show begins its run on Thursday at the Cabaret Theatre on the Douglass College campus.

Swern, 21, says he first encountered Silverstein's adult plays earlier this year at the Drama Book Shop in New York City.

"I was laughing aloud as I read it," Swern says. "... He thrives on absurdity."

Silverstein's twisted sense of humor ... in one skit, mafia types attempt to off the graphic artist who came up with such bland phrases as "have a good day"; in another, a pair of hookers named Merrilee and Sherilee remind us that when it comes to them, the customer can "Buy One Get One Free" ... appeals to Swern.

"Many scenes are realistic situations, but the things that occur within them are jarring," Swern explains. "Dark situations are told in a way that you would break it down for a child." Irony, double entendres, nudge-nudge, wink-wink ... those of us who were raised on "Seinfeld" or "The Daily Show" are intimate with that brand of humor.

## Theater of the absurd (continued)

And like a lot of people, Swern says he's been a Silverstein fan since encountering "The Giving Tree" as a kid. The 1964 publication about the relationship between a generous tree and a little boy has become something of a modern-day classic.

"The dynamic between the tree and the child rang true for me," Swern says, "specifically with my relationship with my parents. I didn't appreciate their sacrifices."

He does appreciate Silverstein's coy word play.

"In one instance, it emphasizes the importance of language as communication," Swern says, "and at the same time, it invalidates language. He makes us re-evaluate the use of semantics."

And he makes us laugh.

The Cabaret Theatre will be accepting donations for Elijah's Promise soup kitchen. Those who donate will have their names placed on the "giving tree" onstage.