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After the sidewalk ends

Beyond the kids' books of Shel Silverstein are his very funny — and very adult — one-act plays

by Kevin Kirby

Is there an American citizen between the ages of 5 and 75 who's not familiar with Shel Silverstein? The children's author and illustrator whose startling bald and bearded visage has grinned at us for decades from the back covers of such classics as "Where the Sidewalk Ends," "The Giving Tree" and "A Light in the Attic" died in 1999, but his books — still alive with Silverstein's scribbly line drawings and skewed, iconoclastic humor — are likely to be beloved Kid Lit standards for decades to come.

Some readers may know that Silverstein was also a songwriter; his songs have been recorded by the likes of Johnny Cash, Belinda Carlisle, Judy Collins, the Irish Rovers, Kris Kristofferson, and Dr. Hook and the Medicine Show. Others may recall that he was an occasional contributor to Playboy, having worked as a cartoonist and travel writer for the magazine in its early years.

What fewer people know is that Silverstein was also a playwright, with more than 100 one-act plays to his credit. Fans of Uncle Shelby's work may want to hurry down to Dragon Theatre, where several of these short plays are currently being staged under the umbrella title "An Adult Evening of Shel Silverstein."

Do, however, note the word "Adult" in the title. Those who know the playwright only from his three volumes of children's verse may be in for a bit of a surprise, for this is where "Where the Sidewalk Ends" ends. The quirky worldview that has made Silverstein such a hit with kids — a sort of macabre *joie de vivre* — is very much in evidence here, but the subject matter in several of the plays is decidedly un-kid-friendly.

The most obvious example is "Buy One, Get One Free," in which a pair of cut-rate hookers haggle (in verse, yet) with a potential customer. The evening also features a game of Russian roulette, a woman who forces her husband to throw his own mother out of a sinking (albeit hypothetical) lifeboat, and a discussion of the crusty residue — "It could be rubber cement" — on a woman's unwashed sheets.

The folks at Dragon do their best to prepare the audience for this saltier side of Silverstein, piping in Dr. Hook's recording of "Freaking at the Freaker's Ball" as pre-show music. (If lyrics like "Come on babies, grease your lips / Grab your hats and swing your hips / Don't forget to bring your whips" don't get the point across, nothing will.)

Ron Gasparinetti's black-and-white set, on the other hand, does all it can to recall the Silverstein of our collective childhood. Iconic images from Silverstein's books are painted and projected on the walls, and a chunk of rickety wooden scaffolding — like part of a crumbling roller coaster — invokes the cantilevered end of that famous sidewalk. Other simple set elements come and go: a mattress, a counter, a stool ... a dead pony wrapped in a tarp.

Also coming and going are six very young, very energetic actors (three men and three women), all of whom seem to be having the time of their lives. Each actor appears in multiple roles, and each has moments of comic brilliance.

Norman Luce is memorable as the tortured husband in "The Lifeboat Is Sinking" but does his best work in the quieter "One Tennis Shoe," in which he must save his rubbish-scavenging wife from turning into an actual bag lady. Claire Slattery has a nice character arc in the latter piece: You can see the inner struggle as her packrat instincts fight back against the dawning realization that collecting "perfectly good" picture frames and hubcaps from dumpsters may not be a suitable lifestyle for a middle-class housewife.

William J. Brown III is wonderful in "The Best Daddy" (playing a father who gives his little girl a dead pony for her birthday) and in other roles, though perhaps a bit lackadaisical as the potential suicide in "Click." His 9-year-old daughter in "The Best Daddy" is played with subtle genius by Caitlin Dissinger, who also puts Luce through the ringer in "Lifeboat."

In "Smile," Drew Jones plays a slogan writer taken captive by hostile culture-war commandos who've identified him as the creative mind behind the "Have a nice day" and the ubiquitous yellow smiley face. In "No Skronking," he faces off against Joey Sandin as a waitress intent on enforcing a policy that she refuses to explain.

Director Kathleen Normington has shaped the scenes nicely, helping the actors to discover the natural ebb and flow of the action as their characters grapple with frequently absurd circumstances.

If there is a systemic flaw in the evening's entertainment, it is that most of the actors, at one time or another, fall into the trap of playing the Big Comic Moment for its own sake, rather than rooting themselves in the twisted reality of their characters' dilemmas. They rely on the audience to understand that the time has come to "put on" a tantrum, instead of letting the tantrum bubble up organically from within. But this is a largely academic complaint: With such imaginative writing and such charismatic actors, the tantrums turn out to be pretty funny anyway.

If you grew up reading Shel Silverstein, or if you read his poems and stories to your own kids, you'll enjoy Dragon Productions' high-spirited romp through some of the less familiar corners of his copious mind. Just don't bring the children.

What: "An Adult Evening of Shel Silverstein," a collection of plays presented by Dragon Productions

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through Feb. 14

Cost: \$20 general admission, \$16 for students and seniors