

Renaissance Man James Ingagiola

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Brass Tacks doesn't build enormous sets or bedeck its actors in highly detailed costumes. Instead, the troupe goes back to the art form's roots and takes a more representational approach to theater: A yellow piece of cardboard is the sun, while a hat stand becomes a tree.

"It's all about the actors, the text and the audience," the playwright continued. "It's a physical thing to me: Film is visual, radio is audio but theater is physical."

It's all in the words

"A Work in Progress" is Brass Tacks' fourth production chosen to participate in the TreeTown Performance Festival, now in its fifth year.

"That means we weren't selected last year," Sulewski wryly pointed out.

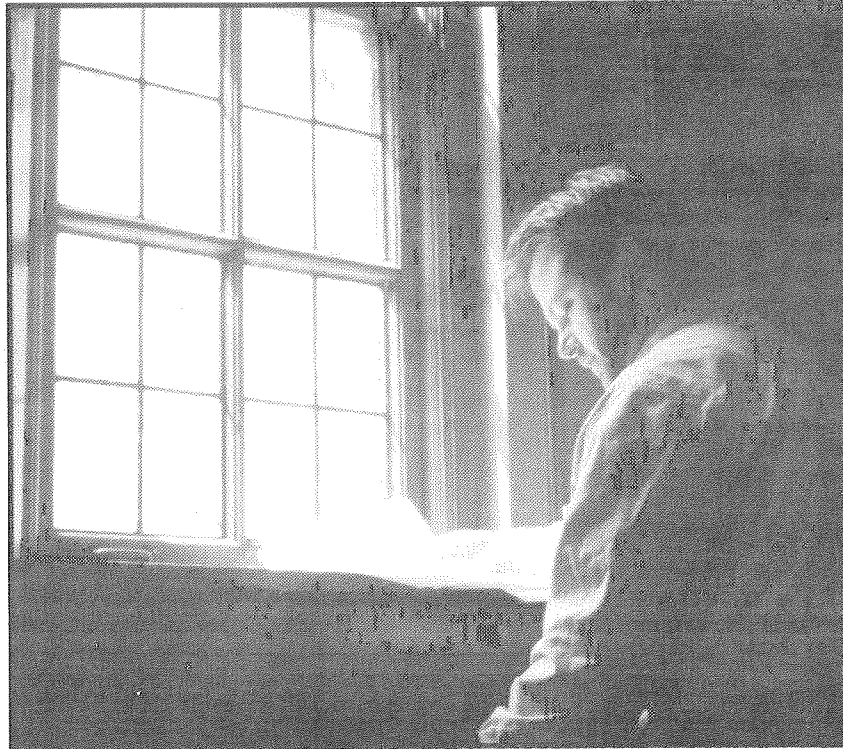
It's also Ingagiola's first attempt at writing a full-length play for adults.

The Ann Arbor resident, who has a degree in Drama from the University of Michigan, has previously written three plays for young audiences that toured throughout the area by the Children's Theatre Network.

"I'm very much into the Harold Pinter/David Mamet mode of sparse language and silence, except I put it on a farce-like structure," Ingagiola stated. "It's a mixture of styles, but whenever I got stuck, I'd go back to the simple line: 'show, not tell.' So if people come in expecting the back-story and all the exposition, they're not going to get it. People shouldn't focus on what happened before; let's see what's happening to these people now."

And just what IS happening to Ingagiola's characters? Well, it's not very easy to explain!

Jake - played by Ingagiola - is a wannabe author who has written a lot of material, but doesn't think it's very good. Most of it, in fact, is scattered about his small and seriously untidy apartment. His best friend, Richard, had submitted some of Jake's earlier work to a publisher - only to have it rejected. Or so Jake was led to believe. See what happens when you don't read your best buddy's latest book? Then there's this half-dressed woman under the covers of his bed; a concerned landlord - Rhodes - and her rather earthy husband: a German



James Ingagiola and Rob Sulewski rehearse a scene from "A Work in Progress." Photo by Gulshirin Dubash.

identity," Ingagiola said.

All of which begs the question: How much of this is autobiographical?

"Like Jake, I really don't have a life," the playwright laughed. "The events aren't biographical, but certainly the character is largely based on me. I do find myself altering my character depending on who I'm with, but I think a lot of us do, anyway. That's one of the universal themes I was going for: the existential idea that what we do create who we are, and how we live our lives creates our identities."

It's also about how people use what they know about each other against each other, and the tactics they use to control one another.

"That's the meat of the play: It's the way people play with each other; sometimes it's serious, and sometimes it's not."

He's not insane; he's a thespian

Although Ingagiola has appeared in all but one of the shows Brass Tacks has staged since its inception in 1999, it's not always by choice.

"Partly it was because of the lack of actors," he recalled.

Productions staged at the TreeTown Performance Festival are not governed

accomplished male actors.

"I frequently cast women in men's roles because it's a shame to let so many good actresses go away with nothing. It's kind of in keeping with what Shakespeare used to do...but in reverse."

Complicating matters is this: He also directs Brass Tacks' shows.

"There is one advantage to being in a show you direct: If ever you can't get across the style you'd like the show to have, you can demonstrate it by your acting," Ingagiola the director said.

Ingagiola's philosophy has seemingly attracted numerous likeminded thespians to the troupe. And, like the Renaissance Man, they all have lives outside of Brass Tacks: Rhoades is a producer for the Children's Theatre Network, while Sulewski holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and has many creative outlets. Ingagiola works for Zingerman's.

Each agrees that producing only one show a year doesn't quite satisfy their creative lusts. Eventually, they'd like to see Brass Tacks become a non-profit corporation and have a facility of its own. And if they could pull together their rather informal repertory company of players, they'd also like to add additional shows to their schedule.

"I'd be interested in doing more!" Sulewski grinned.

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