

Simon Denver

MAN OF STEEL: Simon Denver



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by Natalie Brown

Maleny will host "Songs From The Tavern" by playwright and hinterland resident, Simon Denver. But who knew this culture champion has written one of the most popular plays in the country, all in one day?

WHEN IT COMES to talking, Simon Denver usually has quite a lot to say; and will say it quite readily to anyone who will listen. For all his 42 years of success, both as a playwright, director and actor, he would have to be one of the least noisy hinterland residents when it comes to talking about his own successes.

Simon was recently recognised as a Queensland Culture Champion by Arts Queensland, and has received numerous awards for his theatrical work over the years. Having started writing when he was 13, Simon followed in the footsteps of his mother, prolific playwright, Jo Denver.

He seems to be one writer who doesn't suffer from 'writers block', and says it gets easier the longer he does it. "I look back and think, well in my 20's a play would take 3 or 4 months, or 3 or 4 years to get it right. In my 30's it would take half the time, in my forties half again."

He recently wrote a play in 2 days! It went on to be quite successful and won a number of awards, and he was asked how he wrote it in such a short amount of time. "I did write it in 2 days, but it took me 40 years to learn how to write it in two days," he said, with his trademark razor sharp wit.

Apart from writing and acting, Simon is a veteran director and says it is the 'easiest job in the world' because all it requires is the ability to tell people what to do, and he is not shy about saying what he means. Despite the rumours of him being a scary director, for those who have had the privilege to work with him, he is a master at his craft. He knows that different strokes work for different folks and manages his actors with minimal direction.

Oscar Wilde once said 'If you want to tell people the truth, you'd better make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you.' Simon achieves this balance perfectly, both in his directing,

and in the hilarious plays that he churns out so easily when he puts ink to paper, giving life to the ideas that he has stewing in his mind for years.

Simon's most popular play to date; one of the most performed plays in the country, and most likely showing at a high school near you; is *Man of Steel*. He wrote it in one night, on a typewriter, which he says was achieved simply by throwing together all the corny jokes that he could think of. He says he has never been able to repeat *Man of Steel*; it was just a fluke that he caught at the right moment.

Simon says, "Someone said 'let's write a musical of Superman' and I said 'oh yeah!'...He didn't think it would lend itself to comedy." But it did. Simon wrote it, and the rest is history, as they say.

Simon has enjoyed an illustrious career that has taken him all the way from La Boite, to the Short and Sweet Film Festival where his one act play won a number of awards, and more recently to his many years at the helm of the Suncoast Repertory Theatre alongside stage giants Joan Bensen and Joy Marshall.

For the last five years the Suncoast Repertory Theatre have been the folks behind the gruelling theatre season that is the Woodford Folk Festival's Mystery Bus tour. It's a place where thirty folk festival punters jump on board the bus for band performances in an intimate setting. While audiences line up, actors set the scene with street performances and other hijinks, to get them in the mood for what awaits them when they step aboard.

The Mystery Bus is a place where anything can happen, and generally does. Their cast of fifteen performers, who work eight hours and four shows a day, make the experience one to remember. This year the theme was MIB and the cast were dressed up in black suits with sunglasses, pretending to be members of the 'Woodfordia Homebrand Insecurity' branch, complete with water guns and business cards.

The Suncoast thespians latest play is what Simon calls a "multi-fusion cabaret, with songs from the tavern". He chose this theme because it can draw on anything from the last 4 to 500 years, and is left wide open to reveal a multitude of hilarious stories by those who are under the influence of in vino veritas (spilling their truths while in their cups).

The performance will be a fundraiser for the SRT's patron, veteran actor/director and voice coach, Joan Bensen, known in theatre circles as Joan Whalley. Joan revolutionised theatre in Australia in 1971, when she and the cast of 'Norm and Ahmed' were arrested and thrown into jail for the use of the 'F' word. They went to court and won, which set a precedent for people to stay out of the arts.

Simon also takes his arts seriously, and is one of few in the game who has achieved consistent success. He is always working, and generally has several projects underway at once. These include a recent 2 day acting gig for a STEPS training video, directing a number of plays, a mini-series in the works, a TV pilot for an apocalyptic, end-of-the-world scenario, set in the hinterland and a new project that it will revolutionise the high school musical genre.

When it comes to a man like Simon Denver it pays to 'watch this space', because you never know where he is going to pop up next! To see him and the SRT in action check out *Songs From The Tavern* at the Maleny Community Centre on Thursday the 3rd, with a second show on Friday the 4th of April.



Opposite page: Local Simon Denver has achieved consistent success as a playwright, director and actor

Above: Some of the shenanigans at the Woodford Folk Festival's Mystery Bus tour (photo courtesy El Tampling)

Top: On board the Mystery Bus (photo Clayton Storey)