

ON STAGE

ENTERTAINMENT

WORLD PREMIERE OF 'WALKING IN SPACE' IS AFFECTIONATE, TRUE STORY OF ONE FAMILY'S STRUGGLE TO BE HAPPY

By Contributing Writer

"When I was in high school, my mother was a drug addict," writer Garry Michael Kluger says matter-of-factly. "She was hiding it, but we all knew. The doctors gave her morphine when my oldest brother was born. After that, there was an endless supply of barbiturates. By the time I was a teenager, we were four kids under the age of 21 with no support. Our coping mechanism was humor."

The prolific writer's latest work, a comedy drama entitled *Walking in Space*, will premiere with a five-week run at Theatre West beginning September 8. The story centers on a family in crisis with a drug-addicted single mother needing the assistance of her children to overcome her demons. Inspired by true events in the playwright's life, this fictionalized, often humorous, autobiographical play will undoubtedly speak to others who have had to endure this heartbreaking reality in their own lives, one that is often hidden from even the closest of friends.

Set in 1972, a decade before the advent of the Betty Ford Clinic, *Walking in Space* provides a look into the lives of an upper-middle class Jewish family in suburban Baltimore when their prescription drug-addicted, twice-divorced single mother Francine finally hits rock-bottom. As it falls to her children to take control, the four siblings arm themselves with fierce tenacity, good humor, and their love for one another to save their mother — and themselves. "These kids are smart, funny and highly competitive, and that's how they survive," says director Arden Teresa Lewis. "Self-deprecation, zingers and repartee carry them through."

When asked how much of the story is based in truth, Kluger responded, "Truman

Capote used to refer to his book, *In Cold Blood*, as a 'non-fiction novel.' In that same vein, I like to call *Walking In Space* my fictionalized autobiography, in the sense that many of the elements are 100% true, but other elements are not." While Kluger fictionalized elements of the story in order to better tailor it for the stage, he strove to keep the relationships between the characters authentic to his own experiences. "What I really tried to keep totally true was the relationship amongst the siblings. How they talked with each other, dealt with each other, and loved each other was drawn completely from the realities of the relationships amongst my brothers and me."

The play takes its name from a song in Act II of the musical *Hair*. Kluger says that the song, which takes place during an LSD trip, always reminded him of his mother's barbiturate-dazed wanderings around the family home. "She would sort of float around the house, no real destination, sort of 'walking in space.' The name just seemed... correct to me."

Asked what he hopes audiences will take away from the play, Kluger replied that, in addition to an enjoyable artistic experience, he hopes audience members will come away with a greater understanding of just how common such experiences are — that "situations like this go on all the time. My story is not an anomaly. How we handled it at the time was unique. But the story, unfortunately, is more common than most people know."

Additionally, Kluger hopes that the play will encourage those currently impacted by addiction to reach out. "Addiction is a disease and can be beaten, but not on its own. People need to reach out for help for themselves or someone they care for... Si-



lence helps no one."

Walking in Space runs from September 8 through October 8, with performances on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. The performance on Friday, Sept.

29 will be ASL interpreted, and the performance on Sunday, Oct. 1 will be sensory-friendly. For reservations and information, call (323) 851-7977 or go to TheatreWest.org.