

SWARTZ

From page 1

The subject of fathers and sons is potent, Swartz says, because his own father died a little over two years ago.

"He and I had come to an understanding at the end," Swartz says. "We had a very complicated relationship, as a lot of kids do with their parents. Sometimes fathers and sons are less able than mothers and daughters to work things through with each other. But with fathers and sons, no one's taught them how to speak...at least about what's going on inside."

Because his own father's death was fairly recent and is still fresh to Swartz, he's able to channel those emotions into his acting.

"Those feelings are pretty accessible, they're on the surface for me," he says. "It's easy to draw from them. So it's pretty charged."

The play is both dramatic and funny, Swartz says.

"It's actually a very funny comedy, but families are funny," he reasons. "Everyone has one, they all recognize them. Everybody's got issues. So the laughter of recognition is really fun to hear every night."

"Visiting Mr. Green," which opened at the Florida Repertory Theatre in downtown Fort Myers last week, runs through May 18.

The two characters are polar opposites. Swartz describes Mr. Green as an elderly man who lives in the past, while Ross is a modern young man who knows nothing about history.

The play's "a series of reveals for the two," Swartz says, "a series of curtains that keep going up as they get to know each other. Near the end of the first act, Ross opens up the curtains in Mr. Green's apartment, and for me, that's a perfect metaphor — when you think you know someone, and a curtain opens, and you realize you had incomplete information, and you really don't



COURTESY PHOTO

David S. Howard, left, and Kraig Swartz star in "Visiting Mr. Green," on stage now at the Florida Repertory Theatre in downtown Fort Myers.

know them at all."

This isn't the first time Swartz has played the role. He did a production in summer stock with the Peterborough Players in New Hampshire. Playwright Jeff Baron was visiting a friend in the area and went to see the production. He liked Swartz's performance so much he asked him to debut in the world premiere of his new show, "Brothers-In-Law" at Act II Playhouse in Philadelphia.

The show closed April 6; Swartz started rehearsals at Florida Rep for "Visiting Mr. Green" two days later.

Swartz sees certain recurring themes in Baron's plays.

"He's fascinated by miscommunication, by people talking to each other, and they both speak English, but they

might as well be speaking Greek," Swartz says. "He's also fascinated with telephones...and with intergenerational misunderstanding. He's a young man, but his heart is clearly with the older generation...because his older characters always seem to get the better of the younger generation. Younger people haven't lived as long; they don't know as much," he reasons.

Baron has said that he based the character of Mr. Green on his grandmother, who was in her 90's, and the role of Ross on himself. According to Baron, he was the only person in her family that she still had contact with at that point in her life.

Swartz, who was raised in Minneapolis, began acting professionally when he

was 12. He's performed in over 100 productions, he estimates, performing off-Broadway in New York City, at BAM in Brooklyn, and at the Goodman Theatre and Victory Garden in Chicago, to name a few.

He enjoys playing against David S. Howard, who portrays Mr. Green.

"There are times on stage something will strike him funny, and he'll giggle like an eight year old," he says. "His eyes get all twinkly; he's like a little Jewish Santa."

"I like this play. Every night you're waiting backstage to go on. The lights go down, the pre-show music plays. After being in this business all these years, your stomach starts doing little excited somersaults...For me, it's energizing." ■

HOWARD

From page 1

where he's a member. The production then ran in Cape Cod. Howard recently reprised the role this spring for the Peterborough Players in New Hampshire.

"It was very successful," he says.

But each time you play a character, it's different, even if you've played him before, Howard says. Your director or co-star may be different. But even with the same director (Howard's worked with director Howard Millman before) or the same co-star (Kraig Swartz acted with Howard in New Hampshire), the experience is never exactly the same.

"You can draw on experiences you've had over the years that will give you a fresh look at your character," Howard says. "I think it's very valuable for an actor to do this; you look at it a second or third time, and give it a new look."

"And there are other factors. Though the director is the same, I'm playing against a different actor. This is as good as it gets; working with Kraig [Swartz] gives me something different that shapes what you do. You respond to what they're giving you."

His character, Mr. Green, is a defensive, reclusive man who lives in the past and is struggling with loss.

"There are certain characteristics of him in a lot of men I knew when I was growing up," Howard says. "He's an engaging character. He's not recognizable to most people, but I hope to

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—David S. Howard

make him recognizable. I hope that for people who have nothing in common with him, it'll resonate with them. It's hard to explain what attracts an actor to a character. It's a uniqueness, but also something you can make universal to people, or at least recognizable.

"But beyond that, I found the relationship between the two characters, who are so different, interesting. They're two very different characters with two very different ages, who are thrown together by a strange circumstance. Their journey together through the play fascinates me."

What also attracts him to "Visiting Mr. Green" is that in addition to being a serious and thoughtful play, it's also fun.

"People have difficulty with that," he says. "Is this a comedy? Is this a serious play?" I've found that life is a combination of the two — and why shouldn't a play be the same? I don't

know why people want it to be one or the other. They want to label it. A serious play should have comic elements; that helps engage the audience.

"The play is very funny, but it's not played that way. We don't try to be funny. The humor comes from things that happen, and they say funny things. It doesn't take away from the seriousness of the characters. It's just the way life is."

Howard has had an impressive acting career. On Broadway, he played Nat in "I'm Not Rappaport" and has acted Off-Broadway and on TV daytime and evening dramas.

You've likely seen him on the big screen, too. He was Irv in "Moonstruck" and Anthony Hopkins's friend Eddie Sloan in "Meet Joe Black." Howard also appeared in two Woody Allen movies: "Crimes and Misdemeanors" and "Deconstructing Harry."

"[Woody Allen] doesn't tell you much about what's going on in the movie," Howard says, "But there's an upside to that. He leaves you to your own creative impulses and gives you a lot of leeway."

Howard saw Allen do stand-up in Greenwich Village before the comedian started making films.

"I thought he was one of the funniest guys I've seen. I've always been a fan of his," Howard says.

Allen may be funny on-stage and on-screen, but as a director, he's deadly serious.

"He doesn't fool around and is totally dedicated to his work, to filmmak-

ing," Howard says.

But, he adds, Allen's not overly protective of his words. If you paraphrase something because it sounds better to you, it's no big deal, he says, as long as you get the essence of what he'd written.

"It's not forced," Howard says. "He has a way of getting performances out of people. He casts very well."

Howard played the father of Martin Landau and Jerry Orbach in "Crimes and Misdemeanors," which he considers one of Allen's top five films. And in "Deconstructing Harry," he played Robin Williams's doctor.

"It was fun working with Robin, a wild experience," Howard says. "He was always on. But when the red light goes on, on the camera, he's all business."

Audiences may remember Howard's portrayal of Morrie in Florida Rep's production of "Tuesdays With Morrie" in 2006.

Howard's glad to be back at the Florida Rep, and happy to be working with Millman again, who's directed him in 15 or 20 shows over the past 33 years, Howard estimates.

"He's a very good director," he says. "He has a good eye, a good way of communicating. We can almost finish each other's sentences."

And as far as "Visiting Mr. Green," "This is a positive and beautiful and serious play," Howard says. "That fact that we're able to help each other to heal. This, I think it what audiences will respond to." ■