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High on life

The playwright and star of TheaterWorks' new play about addiction have overcome their own demons – and, in the process, gained a new appreciation for living

by Joel Samberg, Photo by Brian Ambrose

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Without missing a beat – without even a trace of irony – playwright Matthew Lombardo, who spent more years than he cares to remember in that living death known as drug addiction, smiles broadly and says he is higher than he's ever been before. High on the joys and possibilities of life, that is, now that he's been clean for several years.

"Since I got sober, I'm much more content. I took a challenge and turned it into an art," adds the 45-year-old writer who was born and raised in Wethersfield and considers Hartford in many ways to be his cultural home.

Which, of course, is one of the reasons he is so high: his new play, a searing three-character drama about a drug addict and the nun who becomes his rehabilitation counselor, is having its world premiere at TheaterWorks, part of downtown Hartford's cultural epicenter – City Arts on Pearl. The play, which stars award-winning actress Kathleen Turner, runs through August 22

before moving on to the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park and the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. It's called High.

As much as the title refers to the state of existence of one of the play's most troubled characters, no one will argue (not even Lombardo himself) that it might also refer to his state of mind after having extricated himself from crystal meth and all the damage it may have done over the course of seven years – personally and professionally, mentally and physically, even spiritually – although much of that damage has already been reversed.

"On the afternoon of June 2, 2007, I woke up in a filthy and disreputable home on 43rd Street in Manhattan. The lower half of my body was lying on a floor mattress while my upper torso and head were face down on the soiled, multi-cigarette-burned carpet," he wrote in a chronicle of his addiction, which appears in the program for the play. He follows that sordid preamble with a description of a secondary though no less important character – a man he describes as both a drug dealer and a boyfriend: "a man as tortured as he was beautiful, a trail of bloody syringes, matches, and some empty crack baggies separating the two of us in bed."

This bit of exposition for TheaterWorks patrons is a sort of playwright's manifesto on his return from hell, "a testament to the Power of Faith and the Belief in Miracles." Lombardo calls it "Coming Clean," and it's harrowing.

Even when revisiting those nightmare days, Lombardo's stock in trade is the power of words, and that may be, at least in part, what saved him.

"There are moments in life that we wish we could do over," he says. "That we could wave some miraculous wand over a messy situation and it will suddenly become clean again. So we are free to make another choice. A better choice."

Lombardo finally did make a better choice. A recovery program specifically geared for crystal meth addiction has been, he proudly asserts, enormously effective; he recently passed his third full year of sobriety. In addition to health professionals, family, friends and colleagues were also there to try to help him see what he had been missing when he was displaced by drugs. Similarly, his gift with words was always there to try to help him describe that displacement for those who were curious about it. And now, finally, a new play has debuted in Hartford to try to help him explore with the rest of us some of the dramatic twists and turns that come along on such a messy ride.

"Although there's no way I could have written this play without that horrific journey, I did see from an early age what addiction can do to a family, the pain it causes," reveals Lombardo, whose brother was an alcoholic.

He has been writing professionally now for more than 20 years, much of it for the theater, beginning with the off-Broadway plays *Mother and Child* and *Guilty Innocence*. He followed that as a staff writer for *Another World* and other soap operas.

Subsequent plays, including *Tea at Five* about Katharine Hepburn, which debuted at Hartford Stage, and *Looped* about Tallulah Bankhead, which starred Valerie Harper and ran on Broadway, helped him climb to literary heights that thousands of playwrights only dream about. Yet crystal meth nearly made him stumble from that hallowed perch. He even implied not long ago that he's surprised that he's been able to move forward with such robust theatrical alliances, given his troubling behavior during the run of *Tea at Five*. He had been fairly convinced that he'd burned some professional bridges – but he also knows that he has the skill, fervor, attitude and personal appeal that can help build them up again.

He's done that in Hartford.

Coming out on some very personal issues in a play, which requires a number of literary licenses for all sorts of dramatic effects, cannot be easy for anyone. But Lombardo may not have had any other choice, and he used those licenses to good effect.

"I think my addiction offered me an experience that has allowed me to create a deeper exploration of the subject matter," he says.

"Like any idea for a play, it came organically and with time, and revealed itself in stages." Lombardo is quick to disclose that the play is not autobiographical. "Although in certain ways," he adds pointedly, "the story of addiction is always the same. You rarely see a happy ending. In my own case, the real drama was in the fact that I was so anti-drug for the first 36 years of my life. But then, as sometimes happens, you meet someone, you're vulnerable, you're insecure, and then..."

He trails off, dramatically. It is likely still a somewhat raw memory, and perhaps the less he has to relive it, real-life scene by real-life scene, the better. But by using his imagination and his pen, he's been blessed with the ability to face it, fictionalized scene by fictionalized scene – and in some way, that must help.

The play, which Lombardo began writing about three years ago, was completed some time ago, but he revised and modified it all during the rehearsal process and will likely tweak it throughout the run of the show.

"I'm still learning about the characters as we go," he says. "In order for a good play to become a great play, I need feedback from the actors and the director. I listen to their ideas and concerns and peel away at it all until we get to the core, like an onion." And like an onion, it can still make him cry, because even though High is not a re-creation of his own specific experience, it's close enough in sentiment and sensation to give him pause every time the house lights go down and the stage lights go up.

"The play really tells me what it wants to be and what it needs from me as its interpreter," he explains.

Lombardo has been blessed not just with an instinct for survival and a talent to share it with audiences, but also with the good fortune of having Kathleen Turner star in his play as Sister Jamison Connelly.

In High, Sister Jamison is a rehabilitation counselor who finds herself questioning her own beliefs and convictions as she tries to help an 19-year-old addict climb out of the hell into which he has sunk, a hell not unlike Lombardo's.

Turner says with the characteristic intensity for which she is known that she loves playing this nun. This, of course, is the actress whose 2007 autobiography has a four-letter expletive in the very first sentence and who, 10 pages later, explains how eager she is to have sex more often.

But what her role in High really represents is not irony, but just the latest mile marker in a distinguished and often unpredictable career that includes 27 captivating film roles (and counting) and more than a dozen passionate characters on stage, on Broadway and beyond – from Maggie in Cat on a Hot Roof, to Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? to Mrs. Robinson in The Graduate.

Like many of her characters, she's a fighter. Among other challenges, she fought alcohol addiction, continually battles rheumatoid arthritis, rebuilt a personal life after divorcing her husband of 23 years, and summarily dispensed with a cruel Hollywood culture that labels women over 35 past their prime. Turner, who is now 56, made half of her movies after she turned 35.

In many ways, Turner is Lombardo's comrade in arms, based on her courageous personal combats. She had received the script for High about a year ago, nearly a decade after coming to terms with her own addiction, and says it moved her immediately. She also acknowledges that she probably would not have been able to take it on back then, and certainly not earlier.

"The issues would have been as compelling, but I don't think I would have appreciated them as much back then," she admits.

When Turner was rehearsing The Graduate on Broadway, she found herself collapsed (or more accurately, other people found her) in the bathroom of a restaurant after doing some Christmas shopping and downing a few vodkas. The media picked up on it. Having to reveal her problem to her family and theater coworkers, and then being scrutinized in print, was, perhaps, the wake-up call she needed.

"There's a line in High about having a need to believe that people can change," she says, "and that resonated with me very much."

Turner has changed.

Turner seems to have resonated with Lombardo, as well. She's touched and amazed by his journey.

"Matthew said to me once that the doctors told him it would take at least five years for his brain to get back to the shape it was in before his addiction began," she said during a rehearsal break, clearly moved by the playwright's unambiguous desire to move on, personally and artistically, regardless of the personal wounds already inflicted.

Although the two are very different – she is often unpredictable and relaxed, while he is somewhat measured and always alert – there is an abiding respect between the playwright and the star, and that made the demanding rehearsal process easier to handle.

In addition to Turner as Sister Jamison, High also features Michael Berresse as Father Michael Delpapp, who becomes somewhat of an adversary to Sister Jamison, and Evan Jonigkeit as Cody, the hustler whose drug addiction sets the story in motion. Berresse last appeared in the Tony Award-winning *The Light at the Piazza* on Broadway in 2005, and followed that up with a turn as Zach in the 2006 Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line*. Jonigkeit has worked in regional theater (Philadelphia Weekly dubbed him “Philly’s Sexiest Actor”) and appeared in the 2008 film, *Calendar Girls*.

The entire cast jumped into the TheaterWorks project with all of the energy and enthusiasm required to take a new and demanding script and turn it into riveting live theater. Turner makes it a point to tell all guests in private and at press conferences how pleased, proud and excited she is to be working with such skilled professionals as the two actors with whom she shares the stage in High. It is both the play and the players that moves her, she says, and as much as she works on finding the emotional core of her own character, she is also an ensemble player who gives time and attention to her costars so that all three of the emotional cores can be found and synchronized.

“Doing eight shows a week requires the stamina of an Olympus athlete,” Turner acknowledges. She and her fellow athletes started preparing many weeks before opening with a rehearsal schedule as arduous as performing the play itself.

Last year, Lombardo’s play *Looped* premiered at the Pasadena Playhouse (prior to its Broadway run) under the direction of Rob Ruggiero, who is TheaterWorks’ senior artistic director. That relationship led to this current collaboration, which has brought Lombardo back home.

“There’s something very special about opening in Hartford for me,” Lombardo says. “When I was a kid, my parents took me to the ballet, the symphony orchestra, the theater... so it’s nice to be able to give back a little. Plus, I have overwhelming support from my family and friends. All of that makes it great to work right here at home.”

Whereas Lombardo quite obviously relishes his time in Hartford, Turner from time to time expresses a little bit of melancholy for her friends and family elsewhere. She wants to spend as much time as possible with her 23-year-old daughter, and has on occasion lamented that downtown Hartford does not seem as vibrant as some of the other cities in which she’s worked. Still, she adds, it is easier being away from home now than it used to be. “For one thing, I’m not responsible for my daughter’s daily care anymore, and I’m divorced. So I no longer have to worry if I left milk in the fridge before I hit the road. After 22 years of taking care of people, I’m glorying in my freedom.”

Turner has also had plenty of freedom to explore this exciting new character. Lombardo has developed a reputation for writing strong female characterizations – Katharine Hepburn and Tallulah Bankhead among them – and Sister Jamison is no exception. Turner has been quoted in the past as saying that she often plays women who are not essentially likeable, or even good, and that she usually goes through a period of time when she hates those characters.

“And then,” she adds, “I find the reasons they are the way they are, and end up liking and defending them.”

And Sister Jamison Connelly?

“I like her! Though I must say that for several weeks, I did explore why she became a nun, and I still think about it. I have no real attachment to Catholicism, but I can see how her way of life can be a safe haven.”

Given the severity of the play and the raw emotions that the playwright and cast will revisit eight times a week, TheaterWorks might be anything but a safe haven for the performers or for the audiences.

“When people hear the title, *High*, I’m not certain their first impression will be that it’s about substance abuse. Perhaps some will think it’s an upbeat sort of thing. It might make some people a little uncomfortable,” Turner says. “It might be a shocker.”

But for her, it’s a license to continue to learn, grow and explore as an actress.

“That kind of freedom simply comes out of the process of doing live theater. It’s always been that way. Performance energy is a real rush. And yes, a real high.” HM

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- Peggy Sue Got Married – Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations
- War of the Roses – Golden Globe nomination
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- The Perfect Family
- The Man with Two Brains
- Californication
- Jewel of the Nile
- Crimes of Passion
- The Accidental Tourist
- V.I. Warshawski
- Serial Mom
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THEATER

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- Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? – Tony Award nomination for Best Actress in a Play
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