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David M. Reiss, M.D. Psychiatry

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Direct Phone: 262.477.9242
(262 4PSYCH2)
San Diego Office:
619.280.3422
Fax: 619.280.3406

DMREISS@GMAIL.COM

www.DMRDynamics.COM

Mailing Address:
P.O. Box 9684
Rancho Santa Fe, CA
92067-4684

Street Delivery Address:
12707 High Bluff Drive, #200
San Diego, CA 92130

Media Representative
(for interviews, articles, seminars):
Marc Kruskol, MJK Public Relations
[\(661\) 538-1789](tel:6615381789) marc@mjkpr.com

“CHAD DEITY” – Professional Wrestling is Real Life

David M. Reiss, M.D.

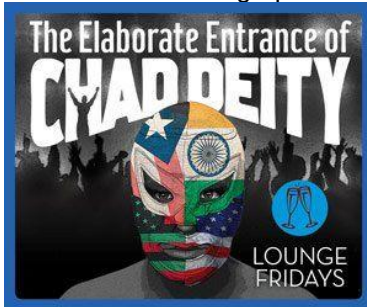
THE ELABORATE ENTRANCE OF CHAD DEITY

Written by Kristoffer Diaz

Directed by Edward Torres

Currently being performed at The Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles,
www.geffenplayhouse.com/more_info.php?show_id=134 through October 9, 2011

Kristoffer Diaz – biographical data: <http://kristofferdiaz.wordpress.com/about/>



An actor portraying a fictional pro wrestler is Real Life??? The voices of characters in Pulitzer Prize finalist “The Elaborate Entrance of CHAD DEITY” by Kristoffer Diaz the drama, pathos, humor, and conflict of life powerfully and effectively. “Chad Deity” is a story about professional wrestling. There is not one character in the show who is not “in the industry.” Yet the story affects every one of us, wrestling fan or not, regardless of identity or social position; as timely as headlines scrolling by right now on the Internet pertaining to politics, racism, business and the economy, and personal integrity.

Those of us with connections to professional wrestling as an art form understand that for a wrestling show to reach the fans there must be more than violence or acrobatics or a simplistic “good-trumps-evil” depiction of morality. A good match tells a story. Wrestlers pride themselves in their ability to convey a story through action in the ring. Professional Wrestling does not connect with fans by providing a competitive athletic exhibition with the primary focus upon determining “who is #1!” The dynamic

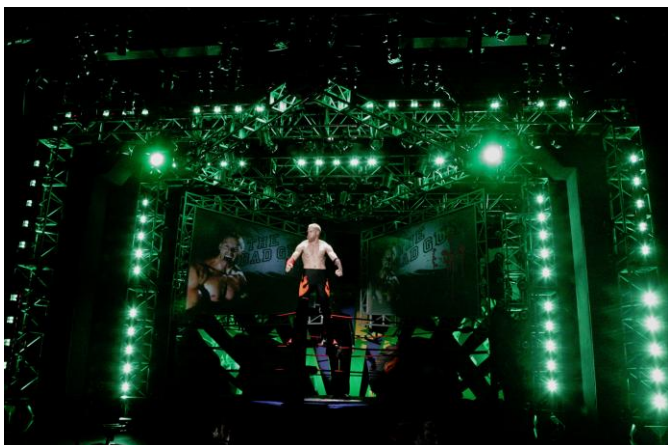
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interactions between wrestlers and their fans go far beyond rooting for the home team or simply “rooting for the good guy and hating the bad guy” (or visa versa). Intense emotions and psychological complexes are being activated by the implicit story that occurs within the match even more than by the explicit “storyline” developed by the promoter.¹



Justin Leeper in the west coast premiere of Kristoffer Diaz's "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity" at the Geffen Playhouse

“Chad Deity” is the story of story-tellers. Social, political, racial, psychological and ethical conflicts impact those who write the stories, the larger-than-life characters telling the stories, and the lives of the real people who inhabit those characters.



Desmin Borges and Steve Valentine

Terence Archie and Desmin Borges

The cast of “Chad Deity” is small – a wrestling promoter (EKO); his main star (Chad Deity); a journeyman “mid-level” wrestler (Mace); the protégé “discovered” by the journeyman (V.P.); and in smaller roles, a couple of valiant ring opponents. The play interweaves dialogue between the characters and monologues by Mace directly with the audience. As discussed within Performance Magazine, “when a character acknowledges their fictionality by either indirectly or directly addressing the audience... some people love it. Some people hate it.”² This device is essential to “Chad Deity” as

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a way of educating an audience – most of whom probably are not wrestling fans. In that regard, kayfabe [the wrestling term for always staying in character when in the presence of fans] is dead, the “secrets” of professional wrestling are revealed. At the same time, the direct communication of Mace with the audience could not provide a higher honor to kayfabe in that Mace never breaks character. Mace does not address the audience as an actor within a play; Mace directly communicates to the theater *the story of Mace*, as if he were chatting with a friend.

Mace explains that the “headliner” – the wrestler who wears the Championship Belt – must have the persona, the talent and the charisma to captivate the audience. However, it is very often the “lesser” character who actually does the “heavy-lifting.” The wrestler in the supporting role (in wrestling parlance, the “jobber”) must maintain and “sell” the story. He or she frequently take more of the brunt of the physicality, both in absorbing significant punishment and making the acrobatic aspects of the “spots” (dramatic wrestling moves) “work” – while at the same time, actually protecting the headliner. The headliner may be less physically talented but is the more valuable “commodity” to the promoter. The headliner who has “it” cannot be easily replaced; the “heavy-lifter” – even if more experienced, more talented and holding a greater understanding of the process – is more easily replaceable. One might think this scenario is unique to professional wrestling.

“Aye, there’s the rub.” As writer Diaz told me, in discussing the involvement of audience members who may have no interest in (or a negative attitude towards) professional wrestling, “You don’t have to be fan of Danish Royalty to like Hamlet...” and you don’t have to be wrestling afficiando to enjoy “Chad Deity.” Neither do you have to be a professional wrestling “jobber” to understand the conflicts of the “worker bees” who are the back-bone of business enterprises, who do the “heavy-lifting,” who may understand the product better than the CEO or CFO – but who must suffer indignities related to class, race, level of education, etc. while desperately needing to keep their job to support their family. Job security arises from “protecting” the boss, the Company, the CEO. Every successful wrestling promoter, boss, Company, and CEO understands that the “it” factor makes or breaks your endeavor. It is simply a matter of demographics that the “heavy-lifters” are more expendable and replaceable and will never individually have the power to challenge the status quo.

In this regard, professional wrestling is a depiction of our society in “pure culture.” Professional wrestlers do not have unions; very few have any employment benefits; there is constant very real competition for who will be the “headliner” and which “jobbers” will be retained. Even for those who rise to the very top, success may be fleeting. Unlike other industries or even professional sports, the ladder of competition is extremely steep – lose your place with a major promotion and it is almost impossible to support yourself in the “minor leagues” without a “day job.”

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Most industries claim to seek a color-blind diversity while within professional wrestling, issues of class, ethnicity and race are overtly exploited. Persons of different ethnicities and people of color may “make it to the top” and become valued and beloved wrestling heroes (or equally valued and hated “heels”), not infrequently, that occurs at the expense of the wrestler allowing the promoter to exploit the most base racial and ethnic stereotypes in the service of the development of the “character” and “storyline.”

“Chad Deity” addresses these very complex and tortuous issues with humor and grace. Mace is a Puerto Rican New Yorker. “Chad Deity” is African-American. V.P. is Vingneshwar Paduar, of Indian heritage. EKO is Caucasian. Diaz questions the ethics of exploitation, both on the level of the manifest characters and storylines involved, as well as, more subtly, vis-à-vis the treatment of the “talent” by the promoter. Diaz presents the dilemma of both the “heavy-lifter” and headliner in accepting their designating roles, as dictated by the promoter. Yet while as the promoter in “Chad Deity”, EKO, is presented as quite insensitive and clueless, it is recognized that it is EKO’s primary responsibility to satisfy the fans to ensure profitability, rather than to “give a damn” about the personal feelings of his talent (if he even had the capacity for doing so).

“Chad Deity” depicts aspects of both sides of the paradoxical debate regarding “class warfare” that is invading the media on a daily basis. Through the metaphor of professional wrestling, “Chad Deity” is relevant to the recent quote in the Star Tribune by Myles Spicer, *“The fact is, “class warfare” has been an essential part of American history for more than a century. As the industrial revolution gained traction, and as America became less of an agrarian society, wealth and capital began to be accumulated and concentrated on a severely uneven basis... This tension has been part of our culture (indeed of virtually all societies) forever... Obviously, this condition creates precisely the kind “tension and antagonism” that constitutes “class warfare.” Those who deny it are disingenuous; those who decry it are insincere.”*³ At the same time, there is implicit recognition of the opposing point of view, as discussed by in “The Myth of Class Warfare in America” written by J Wesley Fox, *“The interconnectedness of the U.S. economy links the fortunes and opportunities of all classes. Economic growth benefits all classes, creating greater opportunity for upward mobility and allowing successful and productive individuals to accumulate wealth. Wealth accumulation creates capital for investment, a catalyst for job creation. If class warfare were real, this would be impossible.”*⁴

The production of “Chad Deity” makes it clear that Diaz’ sympathies lie with those who are used and considered expendable and subjected to unreasonable indignities, overt or cover bigotry and the absence of compassion. At the same time, Diaz does not hide his love of professional wrestling and his respect for the meaningful storytelling that underlies the stereotypes and (at times) poor scripts, “my first artistic love just happens to have been professional wrestling. I remember watching the original Wrestlemania on

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closed circuit television (and crying about how the US Express was cheated out of their tag team titles). In college, a friend of mine said ‘You’re a smart guy. How can you watch that crap?’ And from there, this play was born. *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* attempts to experiment with form and content, mixing monologue, spectacle, and traditional narrative to explore what I think is a truly unique and often underutilized American art form.”⁵ The play seamlessly includes brief moments of actual “action” in the wrestling ring (installed in the center of the stage). Mace clearly loves what he does, notwithstanding the sacrifices he is aware that he must make, physically and emotionally. His passion for what wrestling is – and what wrestling could be – remains undiminished. Diaz discussed with me the fact that the physical pain and likely eventual destruction of health that Mace must endure is not very different from that faced by dancers, such as depicted in “Black Swan.” Yet professional wrestling is different from other sports where injuries may be inevitable. Other athletes try to avoid pain (and injury); in professional wrestling, the acceptance and embrace of being intentionally subjected to pain is inherent and necessary to the story you are depicting (“scripted” or not, try getting body-slammed without feeling it and without gradually destroying your hip joints). In other sports, one may have a humanitarian interest in the opponent, (players will kneel and pray on the field for a seriously injured athlete on the other team) but within the field of play, inflicting “reasonable” but significant injury upon an opponent may also be intentional and rewarded (e.g., MMA, boxing, “taking out the quarterback”), or at least unambiguously tolerated as long as the injury was not due to a “dirty hit”. In professional wrestling, “opponents” are all employed by the same promoter rather than opposing team owners and all share the same locker room. It is the responsibility of the participants to protect their adversary from serious injury. The promoters do not want their valuable “property” put out of action – and the fans do not want to see the opponent truly destroyed, they want to see the story continue to the next chapter, and the next chapter, and the next chapter. In order to convince the fans, the wrestler must reach inside and connect with a level of rage and aggression and yet channel this into the story and action in as safe a manner as possible.



Terence Archie and Justin Leeper

Of great significance, as poignantly voiced by Mace, is the willingness to suffer and even invite pain – or abuse – for a perceived “higher purpose.” Whether due to a desire for fame and fortune, the need to support a family, or for the sake of art, there is a willingness to suffer. Consequently, not infrequently this leads to use or abuse of licit or illicit substances to escape chronic pain. Clearly, this is a social issue that goes far beyond professional wrestling, even if it is the wrestlers and entertainers who “get into trouble” or meet tragedy who show up in the mass media. The willingness to suffer pain (or the mirror image phobic avoidance of pain) is deep-seated in all of us. It is my position as a psychiatrist that in ways that few appreciate, fans of professional wrestling fans look to the ring action to give expression to inner conflicts. Depiction of aggressive impulses is obvious. More subtly, wrestlers demonstrate coping with the need to embrace pain and to maintain a “protective” relationship with the person inflicting the pain. Wrestling storylines are not always healthy or effective ways of “working through” these issues. On the deepest level, the emotional conflicts that lead to the “masochistic” acceptance of pain relates to experiences that occur during the childhood of every person. Usually this does occur to an overtly pathological level (as we commonly define psychological disturbance and inappropriate behaviors). Nonetheless, embrace of pain is present in everyday life and impacts personal relationships, family relationships, workplace relationships, social relationships, business dealings, politics and even international relations. It has been argued that the embrace of pain relates back to childhood experiences of helplessness that occur even in the most healthy of families (and of course more perniciously in dysfunctional/abusive families or in social situations of deprivation, oppression, violence, war, etc.) Primary to the embrace of pain is the desire to stay connected to a source of comfort who is at times perceived as hostile (as will occur in every child’s life, even under the best of circumstances), *“The child will tolerate physical and mental suffering to remain attached to the needed [person]... If the child is not attached, he/she feels helpless and fears [for] survival... Eventually, what is observed is a person who is sensitive to others, but unable to be sensitive to him/herself.”*⁶ One need only look to standard fairy tales and “acceptable” interactions between adults and children to appreciate the significant fact that, *“games that adults initiate with children involving threatening, frightening, teasing, and a final reconciliation... show the child that ‘it’s all in fun.’ The children, in turn, initiate the games with mixtures of fear and excitement, followed by relief and pleasure...”*

Thus, the wrestler is not a freak of nature, regardless of his or her “character” or costume. The wrestler is truly “everyman.” The strength and beauty of “Chad Deity” is that Diaz has gone beyond the powerful story of personal conflict and weakness (as depicted in the movie “The Wrestler”). Diaz has exposed the wrestler as the unsung point-man in depicting life’s struggles, fears, joys, successes and tragedies. While typically perceived as “common” or in even less complimentary terms, Diaz reveals pro wrestling as high art. Professional wrestling demands passion and sacrifice from the

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participants. While lacking in subtlety and eloquence, pro wrestling comes close to the social impact of Shakespearean productions as they occurred in Shakespeare’s time. Shakespeare’s audiences crossed all classes, and the milieu of the theater included a similar need for the willing participation of the audience. As occurs in a wrestling arena (but not in a sports stadium or a darkened theater), *“The time of day [plays could not be produced at night] means sunlight would have provided a well lit space where the audience was very aware of their surroundings. This means the theater depended much more upon the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief...”*⁸ *“You were not expected to be still and silent throughout the performance like you are today. Rather, it was the modern equivalent of going to see a popular band.”*⁹ There is an analogy between the wrestler and the Shakespearean actor. Traditionally, the promoter would give the professional wrestler a basic storyline and the intended “finish”, but the wrestler would be expected to spontaneously work with his/her adversary to “call” the action within the match in response to audience reactions. This not very different from the historical fact that, *“Elizabethan audiences loved elaborate sword-play, and a stage direction such as ‘they fight’ tells little of what might have been very continual and complex stage action.”*⁹

Within the constraints of a two act play, Chad Deity presents a tour-de-force of current society. The play leads me to enjoy imagining a Diaz sequel that delves further into issues of gender, sexuality and sexual identity as well as conflicts between persons functioning on the same “level” with society (i.e., conflicts between “the elites”, conflicts between “heavy-lifters”, conflicts within ethnic groups); and even addressing aspects of international relations – in the continuing story of Mace and Chad Deity.

In the entertaining, challenging and often humorous stage production of “The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Diaz”, Kristoffer Diaz has shown us that the realities of personal/family dramas (Mace often refers to his relationship with his brother), racial and ethnic bigotry and stereotyping, and economic realities ranging from small business to multinational corporations. In directly confronting aspects of high-brow elitism by utilizing professional wrestling as a metaphor for life, Diaz demonstrates that whether one is or is not a wrestling fan, looking beyond pre-conceived ideas and prejudices, Professional Wrestling *is* Real Life.



Following the production in Los Angeles, “Chad Deity” will next be produced in early 2012 in Louisville, KY.

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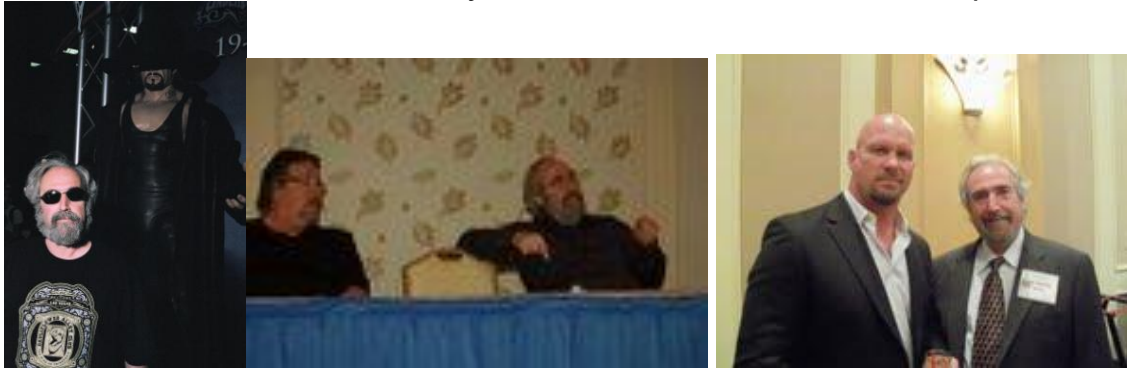
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Seminar with Ted DiBiase, Sr.
Cauliflower Alley Club 04/11

with Stone Cold Steve Austin
CAC April, 2010



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