

## MEDIA RELEASE

### *Soulpepper presents David French's Jitters*

Toronto, ON – June 2, 2010 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's production of David French's *Jitters* will run June 24 - July 24, 2010, at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.

Inspired by the nerves and mishaps of playwright David French's own opening night experiences, *Jitters* is one of the funniest backstage comedies ever written. With a cast that includes a fading Broadway star who can't get along with her leading man to a novice playwright trying to make a name for himself, this play-within-a-play of comic catastrophes considers the state of Canadian culture and the lives of its frontline practitioners with raucous humour and humanity. *Jitters* premiered at Tarragon Theatre in 1979 and since then has been produced around the world in over 100 productions.

Soulpepper Founding member **Ted Dykstra** directs **Kevin Bundy, Diane D'Aquila, Oliver Dennis, C. David Johnson, Abena Malika, Jordan Pettle, Noah Reid, Mike Ross, and Sarah Wilson** in this laugh-out-loud comedy. Due to an injury, **Kenneth Welsh** is unable to perform as previously announced.

*Jitters* previews June 24, 2010, opens June 30, and runs until July 24, 2010 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$29 - \$70 and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting [soulpepper.ca](http://soulpepper.ca). \$20 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at [stageplay.ca](http://stageplay.ca). StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group. Ticket prices to performances on and after July 1st will increase by 8% due to the implementation of the HST.

*Jitters* is sponsored by Herzig Eye Institute. 2010 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

*Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access program*

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**MEDIA CONTACT:**

Sarah Mackie, Publicist

416.203.6264 x146 /[sarah@soulpepper.ca](mailto:sarah@soulpepper.ca)

**Soulpepper's Production images for Jitters are available to download @:**

[http://www.soulpepper.ca/media/media\\_gallery.aspx](http://www.soulpepper.ca/media/media_gallery.aspx)

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## BACKGROUND NOTES

The entry for *Jitters* in the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia lists the cast of the original production and fully three members of that first gang of farceurs have graced the Soulpepper stage: David Calderisi (*Nathan the Wise*, 2004), Charmion King (*The Maids*, 2002, and *Three Sisters*, 2007), and Miles Potter (director, *Awake and Sing*, 2009). The play premiered more than thirty years ago in 1979, and if you count David French (and why wouldn't you?) that's four people who have made a life in the theatre in this country. Four people who are still working!

While it remains a demanding life that requires great resourcefulness, there is no question today that one can survive, and even thrive in Canada as an artist. For our early pioneers – people like Charmion King – to choose that life was an act of crazy optimism. In her day that choice required, as Ntozake Shange so memorably put it: an unfathomable commitment to a cosmic whimsy.

*Jitters* examines the nearly insane dedication and forbearance needed for a small theatre company to produce a new play. It gazes unflinchingly at all the impediments, from egos to finances, that stand in the way of reaching opening night and beyond that, of living through the run. The play is a raucous comedy but as with any comedy worth its salt, its concerns are deadly serious. In the midst of its comic catastrophes, David French considers the state of Canadian culture, and the lives of its frontline practitioners. He never forgets that these are real people with hopes and longings, so they never descend into caricature. They are always trying their hardest in a difficult situation, and because the writer never looks down on them, we never do either. This play has lasted because its humour comes from the characters rather than from the jokes.

That humanity comes directly from life: *Jitters* was inspired – at least in part – by David French's earliest experiences as an aspiring playwright at the then-fledgling Tarragon Theatre. Now, he breezily describes the process of bringing his first play (*Leaving Home*) to the stage as "the most cathartic experience of my life." At the time it must have felt cataclysmic.

Mind you, not all the things that go wrong in this production of the play-within-a-play happen on every professional show. Not even half of those things regularly occur. But all of us who work in the theatre have at least one story of a train wreck production in which we helplessly participated. Give us a couple of drinks and we'll tell you all about it. *Jitters* may have autobiographical roots, but it seems clear that David French listened at the bar when those war stories were being told and filed away the most awful bits to use for his own comic purposes in this play.

## BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED ...

The juicy pleasure of *Jitters* is watching a collection of volatile elements collide. So long as you don't have to live through it yourself, there is nothing more wonderful than watching a group of people behave really badly, and nothing more entertaining than standing by as everything that can go wrong – for those other people – does go wrong. So buckle your seat belts: it's going to be a bumpy night.

### Tidbits

- *Jitters* was a huge hit in the United States. It had a six-month run at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut in the early 80's.
- Critic Clive Barnes said of it: "*Jitters* is the happiest case of stage fright I have ever encountered."
- New York Times critic Mel Gussow said: "*Jitters* is an almost perfect comedy of its kind."
- *Jitters* has been produced at nearly every regional theatre in Canada. It was published by Talonbooks in 1979 and remains in print to this day.
- The fictional play-within-a-play is called *The Care and Treatment of Roses*. Some say French is parodying his own (somewhat obscure) play title, *Of the Fields, Lately*. It could also be a reference to a 1964 Frank Gilroy play called *The Subject was Roses*, which won the Pulitzer Prize.

*Notes by*

*Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing*

## ARTIST PROFILE

Diane D'Aquila takes time out of rehearsals for *Jitters* to talk about the writing of David French, the legacy of Canadian playwrights, and why (hundreds of productions later) *Jitters* is one of the most produced Canadian plays of all time.

**Soulpepper:** This is your third play at Soulpepper and your third David French play. What is it about David's characters that draws you to his writing?

**Diane D'Aquila:** Well, he is a national treasure, and I think the theatre in Canada is just beginning to realize that we have Canadian classics that exist. Because I started off in the early seventies in Canada when these playwrights – of which one of them was David French – were beginning to write, I grew up with these writers and I did many of those plays. Unfortunately when I was younger I never did a David French play, because I was always at the Toronto Free Theatre – I wasn't over with Bill Glassco at Tarragon where they were premiering. But I certainly saw them, and they are classics. To see these plays remounted, because not only do we have David French, we have James Reaney, we've got early George F. Walker, Soulpepper is doing *Doc* in the summer and Sharron Pollock is a fantastic playwright. It's time to bring it back.

**SP:** It seems like there is a whole generation that has never seen some of these Canadian classics on stage before.

**DD:** It's wild. Because these plays are Canadian, they tend to be discarded. But now that some of these plays are way past the 30 year mark, like an antique, people are looking at them again and thinking they might be worth something. Now people are starting to look at these plays and realize that they're fantastic.

**SP:** I know for *Jitters*, David French drew on his experiences from his own early opening nights. Has he discussed that at all in rehearsal?

**DD:** Not yet, but I remember him talking about it when we did *Leaving Home*. I certainly knew or have acted with many of the actors that these characters were based on – because in his mind he did have images for all of these men and women. And that's kind of exciting that I actually knew them and worked with all of them. So that's kind of fun, and I have my own image now of a character like Jessica Logan who I play in *Jitters*. I was talking with my daughter who herself just graduated from the University of Windsor in the Drama department and she made me laugh because she said, "Mom, you don't need an image; you are Jessica Logan – you're that age now. We all look at you a think 'oh there's that diva middle-aged actress.'" (Laughter) So I guess I don't need an image – I'll just be myself!

## ARTIST PROFILE CONTINUED...

**SP:** Do you think that there is a reason that this play in particular keeps being revived?

**DD:** Well, we all like a comedy and in this day and age we certainly want to laugh and be entertained – that’s important. But also I think what’s lovely is if you have a huge love of theatre, if you really, really adore theatre, it is a very good, spot on the money backstage look of theatre – the vulnerabilities of actors, how difficult it is to produce anything, it’s a wonder anything ever gets accomplished. I think when we sit out front in the audience, if the actors and the director have done their jobs right then they make it look easy – everything just looks like they threw it together. We go 'isn't that fantastic, how easy it is?' Well in actual fact it's nearly impossible to get that effortless look going. How many times have I been in a show where, as in Jitters, we almost don't have an actor for opening night, an actor comes in hurt or sick, the chaos, the people wanting to quit – it happens all the time! So I think he's very true but he does it in a loving way, he doesn't send it up.

**SP:** As opposed to Noises Off, which is often compared to Jitters?

**DD:** Yes, I definitely prefer Jitters to Noises Off, which is very funny – it's hysterical, but it doesn't have the truth that Jitters has. There are moments in Jitters that aren't funny, just very, very real and spot on. And I think audiences love that. It's immediate, it's real, and it's very vulnerable. All these people you just fall in love with.

## DAVID FRENCH BIOGRAPHY

**1939** – David Benson French is born on January 18th in the small outport of Coley's Point, Newfoundland – the middle child of five boys.

**1940** – His father Garfield joins the Eastern Command in Canada during the war, which separates him from his family.

**1946** – Edith French brings her boys to Toronto to rejoin their father, but the culture, rhythms, and stories of Newfoundland are forever imprinted on young David.

**1951** – The future playwright is an indifferent student in grade 8. When told by his teacher to read a book (as a punishment) he randomly selects *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. By the time he's finished the book he's not only transformed into a reader, he knows he wants to be a writer.

**1956** – David trains as an actor, studying at Pasadena Playhouse, and various studios around Toronto.

**1960's** – He appears in many roles on stage and in CBC television dramas. During these years he begins writing, at first for television. Some of his teleplays include: *The Tender Branch*, *A Ring for Florie*, *Beckons the Dark River*, *Sparrow on a Monday Morning*, and *The Willow Harp*. He is also an infrequent contributor to the children's program, *Razzle Dazzle*.

**1971** – He sees David Freeman's play *Creeps* at the then-fledgling Tarragon Theatre. Impressed, he calls Artistic Director Bill Glassco and asks him to read a play he's been working on. The play in question is *Leaving Home* (Soulpepper 2007). Glassco is so impressed he appoints himself as dramturge and the following year directs the first production, a pattern that will be repeated with every single new French play for more than thirty years.

**1972** – For the final show of their inaugural season, Tarragon premieres *Leaving Home*, to near-universal acclaim. It goes on to be produced across the country, the first Canadian play ever to be so nationally embraced.

**1973** – People keep asking what happened to the Mercer family after Ben leaves home, pushing its writer to create *Of the Fields, Lately* (Soulpepper 2009). Once more, it premieres at Tarragon. This play wins a Chalmers Award and is adapted for CBC television. National recognition comes as well but this play has an impact that reaches beyond our borders. It settles in for a long and successful run in Spanish translation in Argentina, as well as an acclaimed Broadway production.

**1979** – His backstage comedy *Jitters* launches – where else? – at Tarragon and finds many national and international productions afterward, including a six-month stay at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut.

## DAVID FRENCH BIO CONTINUED...

**Mid-1980's** – Jacob and Mary Mercer return in *Salt Water Moon* (Soulpepper 2008). In this prequel to the first two "Mercer" plays, Jacob returns to Newfoundland (from Toronto) one fateful night in 1926, determined to win the hand of Mary Snow. Perhaps French's most beloved play, it has garnered numerous awards over the years, and had hundreds of productions internationally, including an annual outdoor airing in Newfoundland.

**1989** – French's play 1949 premieres at Centrestage (now Canadian Stage). It focuses once again on the Mercer family during the historic year that Newfoundland joins Confederation.

**1990's** – French's plays are produced widely, he writes new works for the Blyth Festival as well as translations of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, Ostrovsky's *The Forest*, and Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which stars Laura Linney and Ethan Hawke.

**2001** – The last Mercer play, *Solider's Heart*, is produced at Tarragon.

**2004** – Bill Glassco dies of cancer.

**2008** – French is writer-in-residence at the University of Windsor. They produce his most popular plays during his tenure.

**2009** – All five Mercer plays are seen in rep at Gros Morne Theatre Festival in Newfoundland in July and August.