

# Port Chester playwright uses the stage to address societal mental health issues

*Original play about loss, honor and Vietnam premieres this weekend*

BY SARAH WOLPOFF

Richard Cirulli has always had an existential view on life—an archetypal quality of playwrights who ponder the meaning and phenomena of the human experience.

However, as a young adult he had responsibilities. Cirulli married his high school sweetheart young and had children shortly thereafter. Therefore, making a living had to be his priority. In the decades after high school, Cirulli developed a successful career in engineering, architecture and teaching college courses. In that time, he obtained several degrees and doctorates—becoming an aficionado in engineering, theology, social sciences and business.

“My goal was always to get back into the arts,” Cirulli explained over coffee at McShane’s Bar & Restaurant. “I’m a creative person, I think I’m a good writer, and I’m an excellent observer of life. So, in 2016, I decided to write a play.”

Happy in retirement, Cirulli wrote his first play almost as a means to simply check an item off his bucket list. He would have been happy if it was showcased for an audience of 10 people at a high school. With a premiere at the White Plains Performing Arts Center, “Via Delarosa” turned out to be wildly successful. Now, the

Westchester Avenue resident is preparing to debut his fourth show with his troupe, The Demitasse Players, in under three years.

“Thoughts for a Lost Friend” will be performed on Sunday, June 30, at the Whippoorwill Theater in Armonk. The show begins at 2 p.m. and tickets can be purchased at the door for \$20.

Though Cirulli is a jokester—the Port Chester High School class of ’71 graduate laughed while claiming Moses was in his graduating class—all of his productions thus far have worn the mask of tragedy. Through the stage, he aims to tell realistic stories that shine light on mental health issues.

“Government statistics say only 17% of adults in America qualify as having optimum mental health, which is really sad. And that doesn’t even account for the prejudice and bias associated with disorders,” Cirulli said. “Over the years, I’ve lost people and friends to mental illnesses. I know one person who committed suicide, and I’ve lost many others who just fell down the rabbit hole. A lot of them would try to cover it up by self-medicating—drinking or doing drugs.”

Because of natural denial instincts and the stigmas associated with mental illnesses, trying to help his friends proved to be



**Westchester Avenue resident Richard Cirulli, a playwright, stands on North Main Street on Saturday, June 22, after discussing his theatrical ambitions and upcoming debut of “Thoughts for a Lost Friend,” an original show he wrote about Vietnam veterans and mental illness.**

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a conundrum. While watching loved ones go through the same self-destructive patterns, Cirulli said he faced difficult decisions torn between wanting to help by addressing the problems while recognizing that bringing it up could cost him friendships.

“I eventually said to myself, maybe I can take to the stage and let the stage be the third person doing this,” he explained. To varying extents, the plays he would continue to write and produce have been inspired by his personal experiences and interactions.

“Via Delarosa” revolved around a child growing up in the 1960s with strong-minded parents in a contentious household. The show aimed to address how to navigate through life with mental health issues that stem from generational conflicts.

When that show sold well, Cirulli felt an urging for a follow-up. “Roundelay” premiered in early 2018 to tell the story of a baby-boomer couple and their struggles with the wife suffering from dissociative identity disorder.

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With a typical protagonist/antagonist story structure, the play portrays the wife as an antagonist with whom Cirulli said the audience ultimately feels a deep empathy as a victim—which was intentional.

The upcoming play, “Thoughts for a Lost Friend,” begs the question “what is the cost of honor” while tackling mental illness from a more behavioral standpoint, Cirulli said. The multimedia show, featuring live music and digital cinematography, follows a Vietnam veteran who has suffered with emotional pain in solitude for 40 years because he is burdened with a secret about a friend who died in the war.

Cirulli describes it as an existential theatrical experience.

“It’s a very depressing play. But, depending on the judgment, it can actually be a refreshing play

because it shows there is hope after loss,” Cirulli said. “I want to dedicate it to the veterans and I’m offering a 50% discount to them. I’m not a veteran, but I realize the sacrifices they made. The world today is so egocentric, we tend to forget that people sacrificed their lives for somebody else’s benefit and that’s something that should be remembered.”

Cirulli grew up in Port Chester, spent decades residing in Poughkeepsie and White Plains, and just recently returned to the Village just before New Year’s this year.

The inspiration to come home manifested after attending a party with former friends, where he was jarred by derogatory language in reference to the diverse population in town. The disheartening conversation reminded him of the diversity he loved growing up with.

During his childhood on Clark Place, Cirulli said he greatly valued the mixture of cultures, heritages and professions that were encompassed by his neighborhood.

In fact, he’s written many short stories about his reflections on adolescence and the rites of passage growing up. Actors in his troupe performed and recorded those stories, and they can be heard at their website demitasseplayers.com.

“I had the best education possible in Port Chester. I learned math, physics, music and philosophy, but I also learned street smarts from an ethnic community which taught me how to navigate life well,” Cirulli said. “Port Chester has always been a transitioning capital. It’s a chance for people who are coming into America to establish a foothold and grow. Because of that,

you see a real community here, Ma and Pop shops throughout the streets. There’s actual interaction here, which you don’t see in many other places, and that’s frightening to me.”

Soon after that party, Cirulli packed up everything he needed—his colossal collection of books and his guitar—and moved into his new home on Westchester Avenue. However, it didn’t take long for him to get bored; within a few weeks he started looking for ways to get more involved with the community.

After contacting the Village, Cirulli was appointed to the Architectural Review Board in May where he hopes the established careers from his “past life” can benefit Port Chester. However, his vision for involvement doesn’t stop there.

“I’m actually looking for a

home for my troupe now, and it would be great to stage a couple of plays here; bring artists into Port Chester. We want to start doing experimental plays, maybe partner with a business or other non-profits and become a repertory theater with a set of core actors.”

Ideally, with a troupe in the Village, Cirulli envisions Friday night performances that step away from his mental health themes to delve into other common issues—such as dealing with divorce, dating in your 50s or dealing with teens and drug use.

He wants to take a deep dive into human behavior and show the world the true hypocrisies associated with priorities, desire and actions. Of course, Cirulli smiled, these plays will wear the mask of comedy. After all, what’s funnier than the tragic irony of life?