

Interview: John Michael is the One-Man Show in ‘Dementia Me’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on August 15, 2016 - 11:28am

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CHICAGO – No one would call talented one-man-show artist John Michael conventional, at least if they are in their right mind. So ironically, after tackling sexually transmitted disease in his last solo performance, he takes on the vagrancies of old age and caring for elderly patients in his truly heartfelt “Dementia Me.”

“Dementia Me” will run at the Den Theatre within the Wicker Park neighborhood in Chicago from August 15th through September 12th, 2016, on consecutive Mondays at 8pm (details below). This solo performance is a tour de force, using mostly balloons and party favors for props – Michael even invites everyone to a “birthday party” for one of the patients before the show. The emotions in the show will affect anyone who has known the heartbreak of seeing loved ones become less of themselves as they age (which is practically everybody), and how that state of being leads the main character himself to other revelations.



The Swoon is a Balloon in John Michael’s ‘Dementia Me’

Photo credit: Paul Clark for JohnMichaelPlays.com

The solo showman from Texas was first introduced to Chicago audiences with his outrageous “[John Michael & the Order of the Penix.](#)” [15] which combined Harry Potter images with the difficulties of STDs. Since then, the talented performer has made a significant splash in the Chicago theater world. HollywoodChicago.com caught up with John Michael on the day before the first show.

HollywoodChicago.com: Doing a one person show requires some deep introspection. Since this show starts out about one thing and morphs into another topic, what depths do you believe you reached in your own soul to get you there?

John Michael: I know it’s going to be introspection, otherwise why do it? But the introspection won’t happen until the audience gets there. It’s the process of writing to know, rather than what I know. In other words, writing about something that bothers me, in the retrospect of what has happened to me. How do I get there with humor, what makes this subject easy to talk about at first? That’s where the balloon props came

in, I wanted to do something goofy and out there.

When I talk about the show, one out of ten people often have negative reactions. How can I make fun of dementia patients, since they are portrayed as balloons? I reply that I'm not making fun of them because they have dementia, but because they are breathing. We have sacred approaches to disabilities, the mentally challenged and the disease of memory impairment. But I think we're being so careful to protect them, that we don't include them in the conversation. Sometimes we care so much that it can be destructive.

HollywoodChicago.com: What struck me about the show is that it affects all levels of how we think about our own consciousness. What specifically did you learn about the way we think when observing the dementia patients under your care?

Michael: It struck me as far as how different our perspectives are, and how good that can be. The people in that care facility thought I was their mother and other people in their lives, because their worlds are shrinking, they're losing their most recent memories. But in their heads, they don't know that. It's all about the moments.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the role of the director, in this case Randi Wallace, in a one person show? How does she edit what you're doing to keep the narrative and reaction cohesive?

Michael: She acts as a mirror. She reflects what I'm doing and asks if that is the choices I want to make. We all work differently. I've talked to other solo performers, and mostly they worked with one person. I work with several people to develop a show.

For this show, I started with a dramaturg [theater researchist], and now the current director is making sure my choices are specific, the timing is crisp, the story is clear and the beats are sharp. She calls me out on whether something fits as a believable part of the story. As my old mentor used to say, 'this part belongs in another show. Cut!' [laughs]



John Michael Makes a Point in 'Dementia Me'

Photo credit: Paul Clark for JohnMichaelPlays.com

HollywoodChicago.com: You seem to want to impart life lessons in your shows. What kind of reaction did you get from 'John Michael and the Order of the Penix' in regard to the message you were sending?

Michael: I don't want to be preachy at all. My technique is to tell what I did wrong, and in 'Penix' it was about what happens when you don't practice safe sex, and are too scared to get tested. Instead of telling someone what they should do, it explores what happens when they do something they shouldn't do. In that show, the audience saw the resolution before the main character did, and so they root for the main character to get tested.

Funny note about that show. I've been doing it for three years and I've never thought to add the Harry Potter music to it. I'm going to do an excerpt for the 'Abbie Hoffman Died for Our Sins' theater festival marathon at the Den Theatre this Friday night [August 19th] at 1:30am. I'm finally adding the music!

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what is your one paragraph pitch to your audience, in regard to how you believe the show will communicate your life and lessons to them?

Michael: The technique of the show is to make something that is really difficult to talk about easier to bring out into the open. By creating a festive atmosphere, at a birthday party with all the characters as balloons, the audience has some distance from something that is intense.

And with that distance they actually get closer to the subject. They bypass their anxieties regarding the magnitude of the issue, and connect to it. Basically, it's about my rise and fall during my two year career in the assisted living industry. [laughs]

"Dementia Me" runs on consecutive Mondays, August 15th through September 12th, 2016, at 8pm in the Den Theatre – 1333 North Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago. For more information, [click here](#). [16] Written and performed by John Michael. Directed by Randi Wallace.



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