

'Marty's Back in Town' cuts close to the bone for Moorestown attorney

By NAILA FRANCIS Staff Writer

It can be daunting for any actor to step into a role created by a living playwright, especially in a work making its world premiere.

But when that playwright has penned a character based upon his own life, as Moorestown's Norman Shabel has done in writing the role of Ronald Tobin, the stakes can seem even higher.

And so Kenneth McGregor acknowledges some pressure in portraying Ronald, a successful lawyer confronting the unexpected return of his older brother, the black sheep of the family, in "Marty's Back in Town," a new autobiographical play by the 75-year-old Shabel.

Yet for McGregor, any qualms he may have about doing the character justice seem small when compared to Shabel's bravery in sharing his life story with such transparency.

"To write from the deepest, most-painful, most-flawed, most-difficult, most-beautiful, most-trying and dangerous parts of yourself, that takes courage," says the accomplished veteran actor whose credits span both film and stage, from appearances in "The Hurricane" with Denzel Washington and "Cocktail" with Tom Cruise to acclaimed performances as Tennessee Williams in "Tennessee Williams: The Final Curtain" and Roy Cohn in "Angels in America." "To be able to dive into someone's life like that, it's really something."

Shabel, a prominent class-action attorney with offices in Marlton, admits to drawing on his own family dynamics and in particular his brutal relationship with his brother to write his story of a dysfunctional Jewish clan floundering and thriving amid years of animosity and love. That he wrote the play some 20 years ago has given him needed distance from some of its more harrowing moments, but even so, some of its events still loom large and painfully.

"Marty's really done things the family didn't like in his 30-40 years. He used to beat the hell out of his younger brother, and now he thinks he's dying, so he arrives with his Welsh wife ... and it's about how the family reacts. That's the fire under this play - his return," says Shabel, who made his debut as a playwright by processing another of his family's struggles, his daughter's diagnosis with breast cancer, in "Are the Lights Still On In Paris?," which was produced at Plays and Players Theatre in 2007.

He'd almost forgotten about "Marty's Back in Town," which opens Wednesday at the Skybox at The Adrienne in Philadelphia, until he and his wife Arleen were moving from one house in Moorestown to another, and she found the script in a box.

"I was overwhelmed," he says of reading through it. "I was crying at the end. Now, when I see it (in rehearsals), it's like I close my eyes and I can see everything happening all over again.

"That it's about a family is as close to real life as any play can ever be. Yet it's not just a Jewish family. This could be any family. It's a miasma of the bad and good and how it winds up with all these people who've had their troubles."

In addition to Ronald and Marty (who is being played by Princeton's Todd Lewis), the cast-of-nine play features several larger-than-life personalities, including the family matriarch, the feisty and old-fashioned Mama, played by Philadelphia icon Sylvia Kauders, long celebrated for her roles in film, TV and on and off-Broadway; and Ronald's sister Susan (Philadelphia native Kirsten Quinn), a cynic who makes \$200,000 a year but always cries poverty.

"I think it's about disappointment," says McGregor, of the play. "We are taught that nothing is more sacred than the family. In the Quran, in the Bible, it's everywhere.....But then we suffer, we suffer from our families, and that's a tenet in this But through all that, because we're tangled since birth, we fight and scratch to keep it safe or make it work, to somehow make the root of our being secure."

Even though the play takes place in posh 1980s Manhattan, where Ronald and his wife live on Park Avenue, Brownsville, Brooklyn, the Jewish ghetto where the Tobins grew up - and where Shabel was also reared - remains an influence.

"(Mama) is an immigrant woman who came to America from a small village in Russia with her father who was abusive and he threw her out on her own when she was a young teenager," says Kauders, who made her Broadway debut in "Torch Song Trilogy" and also is known for creating the award-winning role of Bubbie in "Crossing Delancey" and appearing with the original New York cast of "Tale of the Allergist's Wife," among her numerous roles in commercials and films like "The Wrestler" and "Analyze That."

"But the ethic of the Jewish people is to educate and to work, and this permeates the whole play," she says. "(Mama) talks about how she raised four kids alone and they all went to college ... and now it's like they've just tossed her aside. There's a deep bitterness in her but the other side of that is humor."

For director Barry Brait, who last teamed with Shabel for "Are the Lights Still on in Paris?," the play is as much about the American dream, which this family has embraced and enjoyed, as it is about Marty's return.

"It's really family-sliced. It's not a comedy. It's not a dramedy. It's sort of a biography of the people Norman knew," says Brait, a longtime director and original founder of Philadelphia's Brick Playhouse. "But it is funny because that is part of the Jewish experience. Jews have always found humor as a method of survival."

For Shabel, who cites Neil Simon as an influence, the humor in the play is rooted in his Brownsville days, living with his family in a two-room house on Amboy Street, in a neighborhood rampant with polio and rats, and bookie joints on every corner and yentas on every stoop.

"Brownsville has a sense of humor, which is dying, a sense of humor which arises out of tragedy, and that's the funniest humor of all," says Shabel. "Comedy today is more clownish than verbal. This is bringing back to the world a comedic avenue you can chew on."

Though his law career keeps him busy, the former assistant prosecutor has been a writer for as long as he can remember. But it wasn't until he started practicing law that he began to take the craft seriously - first, to break up the boredom of routine, and then with a relish that has generated six legal mystery novels, including "God Knows No Heroes," based on the murder case of former Cherry Hill rabbi Fred Neulander, and his most recent, "Four Women." He also is co-authoring a nonfiction comedy, "Under Paris Rooftops" - about a Bucks County couple who decides to buy a house in Paris - with his wife and has three more plays he'd like to produce.

"When I write, it's like I'm not even doing anything. It just flows off the pen," says Shabel, who hand-writes all of his work, admitting to being a poor typist. "Writing, for me, it's like talking, and I'm a good talker. I'm very good with dialogue. That's why I love plays: There's not a lot of description, and as my wife says, I'm not a great describer."

It doesn't take much to strike a balance between life in the courtroom and his creativity.

"When you're presenting to a judge or a jury, the one thing you can't be is boring," says Shabel. "You have to verbally hypnotize the jury or they'll turn you off. You're also forced to organize all your thoughts into one treatise, to channel the facts, the dialogue and the characters involved."

But unlike in the courtroom, as an author and playwright, he's always guaranteed a win.

"The good thing about writing is you create your own world. You can make things happen that don't happen in your own life," says Shabel, "and I always believe in redemption at the end."