

Parenting People

BY DONNA J. URSILLO

Binder Spins Yarns About the Ocean State and Beyond

This is no tall tale: Storyteller Mark Binder gives his audiences a good time. When the 40-year-old performer steps on stage and into the stories he writes, he's having fun. And that energy serves his audiences well.

"I really want people to enjoy themselves; that's first on my list," says the Providence-based author and storyteller, whose dry and wacky wit works its way easily into the tales he tells.

Binder is relatively new to storytelling; but four years into this professional career, his plate is pretty full. "I used to be a real Rhode Islander for awhile about driving," he quips, referring to many residents' disdain for being on the road for more than 15 minutes. "Now I don't mind driving to and fro for story gigs."

In fact, now he travels to festivals, schools, libraries, churches, synagogues and camps with a hidden agenda: "I believe that storytelling is a great literacy tool. It makes a difference to hear a story, to see pictures in your mind and to have words evoke characters and settings."

While some days are easier than others for Binder to crank up to perform, he seems to have found a fulfilling niche where he combines his loves of writing, acting and telling tall tales. He grew into his job in that order.

"I've been writing for 20 years," says the Columbia University graduate who turned down acceptance to Columbia's graduate schools of theater and journalism for study at Trinity Rep Conservatory. For two years, from 8 in the morning until 10 at night, he acted, directed and wrote plays. The conservatory, he says, was "intensive, fun, like boot camp for theater:"



Mark Binder's new CD, *Beyond the Ocean State*, features "Rhode Island-ese" of all sorts. PHOTO BY MARK REA

Intensity works for Binder. About 12 years ago, he founded the Real Fun Theater Company in Providence, where he was determined to produce one play per month. The company performed seven shows in eight months, and Binder "burnt out." Barely breaking even, he quelled the company that thrived for a while above the Columbus Theater and began to freelance.

Binder had worked his way around the local newspaper and magazine industries and had continued writing fiction when he was invited to a storytelling group. There he read parts of the *Brothers Schlemiel*, a serialized novel about twin brothers confused from birth that ran in 100 newspaper installments in the Texas *Jewish Herald Voice*.

At some point during the evening, he wondered, "Can I do that?" He could, and did. Binder, who studied with Spalding Gray, parlayed his writing and theater experience into storytelling gigs and decided initially never to tell the same story twice. "I broke that idea quickly," he laughs. He writes about 80 percent of his tales and changes them slightly with each gig. Depending on the pulse of his listeners, he'll happily tell the story of "Bad Breath Bill," or the "PI (poison ivy) Kid," neither of which is autobiographical, he says.

Although he says it's "scary to give up on my current repertoire," Binder is giving his latest batch of stories, the "Great Rhode Island Clam Shake," a go in Boston and other communities.

Among other tales, he's telling a story of Digga Dan, a Rhode Islander who trains the errant Cyril the seagull to dig clams for him. Binder hopes his latest CD, *Beyond the Ocean State*, featuring Digga Dan, will be ready in time for his performance this month at the Jonny-cake Storytelling Festival in Peace Dale.

Binder says he's constantly looking for ways to improve his craft. "If you've seen me perform three years ago, I'm better now. If you see me three years ahead, I'll be even better then. But," he deadpans, "I don't suggest waiting that long."

Learn more about Binder and his CDs and books by visiting www.markbinder.com or calling 272-8707.

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