

# The Mercury News

The Newspaper of Silicon Valley  
MercuryNews.com

Lifestyle Section  
Sunday, April 3, 2011

## Playwright On A Roll

**With multiple projects (*Lolita Roadtrip*, *Zoo Logic*) in the works, San Jose native Trevor Allen thrives on creative chaos**

**By Karen D'Souza**

Take a wild ride through the teeming brain of Trevor Allen.

The fast-rising playwright is busy fine-tuning his new Nabokov adventure “*Lolita Roadtrip*” for its world premiere at San Jose Stage. He’s workshopping his wild farce “*Zoo Logic*” at Berkeley’s Aurora Theatre. He’s brainstorming his high-tech drama “*Valley of Sand*,” commissioned by San Jose Rep and San Francisco’s PlayGround.

Oh, and in his spare time, he’s also running San Francisco’s edgy Black Box Theatre and cranking out a book version of his play “*Working for the Mouse*,” a savage Disney lampoon.

“I have become accustomed to having a chorus of voices in my head,” says Allen during a break in rehearsals at San Jose Stage, “because working on one play at a time is a luxury I can’t afford. You’ve got to follow your instincts with the things that stick in your subconscious, so I’m comfortable living in a very nebulous and anarchic state.

“The cacophony is home to me.”

As it happens, after years of flying just under the radar, the hardworking Allen has come to despise the term “emerging” playwright.

“It’s taken me 15 years to become an overnight success,” he jokes. “I don’t want to jinx it, but right now everything is coming together.”

Indeed, although he lives in San Francisco with his wife Karen and their cat Old

Mr. Sophocles, his upcoming South Bay projects represent a dream come true.

Born and raised in San Jose, he grew up yearning to see his name in lights on the Rep marquee. “Having a play at the Rep would be like grabbing the brass ring for me,” says the chatty, down-to-earth playwright. “My parents would take me there when I was little. I didn’t know Broadway existed back then; for me, the Rep was the big theater on the hill.

“And I am very grateful to the Stage for being willing to take a chance on an unknown writer with an unknown play (the Stage debuted his “Tenders in the Fog” in 2005).”

Now in his early 40s, he first fell for theater at Oak Grove High School, where the arts drew him like a magnet. “If I hadn’t had access to theater at that point in my life, I’m not sure that I would have made it through high school. Sports were really big ..., and I wasn’t.”

Funny and approachable on the page and off, Allen is at long last establishing himself as a wit to be reckoned with. His idiosyncratic and densely textured works include the Frankenstein homage “The Creature” and the ghostly chiller “Tenders,” which was shaped by the old Celtic fables he heard as a child.

“The thing that has most impressed me working with Trevor is the confidence he has in his impulses. He writes not from a cerebral place but somewhere more instinctual, maybe below the level of consciousness; but he has great faith in the rightness of his instincts and in how the parts contribute to the integrity of the whole,” says actor Julian López-Morillas, who stars in “Lolita.”

“On ‘Lolita,’ it’s not always initially clear how things connect together; some elements seem disparate; and it’s not immediately apparent how they relate to one another. But as you work more on them and go deeper, the relationships and thematic connections begin to reveal themselves in unexpected ways.”

Allen is not just a nimble writer; he’s also fast, and he bangs out plays as furiously as some people update their Facebook status. (For the record, he’s also a social media junkie, and all of his plays have their own walls on Facebook.)

Taking risks is par for the course for him.

“He’s first and foremost an experimenter,” says director Kent Nicholson, former head of new works at TheatreWorks. “He plays with form and structure in a way that only works onstage, mostly from a sound and rhythm standpoint. He tells stories through the repetition of lines and phrases, often shedding light on different characters’ perspectives as these repetitions take place.”

Allen draws inspiration from eclectic sources. His comedy “Working for the

Mouse” depicts the inside story of life as Disneyland mascot (he logged four years in a furry suit at the happiest place on Earth). “Zoo Logic,” which spins around the annual Valentine’s Day sex tour at the San Francisco Zoo, was inspired by his days working there.

“I have had a lot of odd jobs in my life,” he notes wryly. “But rather than consider them aborted attempts at one career or another, I prefer to think of them as research. Now I have a lot of material for plays, books and perhaps even a couple of movies.”

In “Lolita,” he riffs on Nabokov’s actual 1941 road trip from New York to Stanford, where he taught literature. Allen traces the high jinks of a saucy Stanford grad student named Julia looking to re-create the novelist’s journey, during which he stopped at the Grand Canyon and discovered a butterfly (which he dubbed *Cyllópsis pertepída dorotheá*). Apparently, the writer was fascinated by lepidopterology (the study of butterflies) as well as lechery.

“The impulse was to do an inversion of ‘Lolita.’ I wanted to play with the gender dynamics,” Allen says. “Basically, I wanted to put the gun in Lolita’s hand.”

In “Valley of Sand,” Allen plans to entwine a family drama around the history of Silicon Valley, from the days of orchards to the high-tech era.

“It’s personal and comes from my experiences growing up in the valley, but it’s also about much bigger ideas like planned and unplanned obsolescence and the forces that drive our information age economy,” says Allen, whose family still lives in San Jose. “It’s also the story of the iPad generation — where does this technology come from? Also, we know about the people who come here with nothing and become multibillionaires, but what happens to the families who don’t strike it rich?”

Certainly he’s no stranger to the realities of scraping by. Being artistic director of a low-budget company like Black Box means he’s the big-picture guy, but he’s also the guy who moves the set in and out of storage. He knows how to write grants, produce podcasts and negotiate contracts. If no one wants to produce one of his plays, he just does it himself.

“Coming from a poor theater background ..., I know what to do when you can only use a few crayons out of the box,” he says.

That’s why actors give him high marks for being resourceful and open-minded.

Where some playwrights cling to control, Allen knows when to let actors have their say.

“He has a great deal of trust in us, which I think enables him to come to the

process with a minimum of nerves and fear,” says actress Stacy Ross, who stars in “Lolita.” “He also has a great sense of humor, very smart with a certain gentleness to it that is sweet somehow, without being the least bit sappy or wimpy.”

These days, that combination of laid-back personality and 24/7 work ethic makes Allen the kind of playwright who always has another gig lined up.

“Trevor has a wonderful theatrical imagination,” says Rick Lombardo, artistic director of San Jose Rep. “He is one of our Bay Area writers that we need to support ... a very talented and thoughtful local playwright.”

**‘Lolita Roadtrip’**

By Trevor Allen **When:** April 6-May 1

**Where:** San Jose Stage Company, 490 S. First St.

**Tickets:** \$20-\$45; 408-283-7142, [www.thestage.org](http://www.thestage.org)