

**A** REFRESHING BREEZE IS WAFTING through the Zephyr Theatre. Nearly 30 years ago the elegant little courtyard theatre was purchased by director-producer Lee Sankowich, who thought at the time that owning a small venue would be highly profitable. He soon learned that was hardly the case but couldn't bear to part with the little gem in the midst of grungy Melrose chic. Although he still owns the theatre he hasn't directed in Los Angeles since 1986.

Venice Beach. You think at first she's just a flighty ditz but you realize after awhile she is a lot sharper than you think. She ends up being the catalyst for things to change in the family dynamic due in part to the revelation of a dark family secret."

His cast in LA consists of Roy Abramsohn, Tim Cummings, Steffany Huckaby, Valerie Perri, Alan Safier and Pamela Walker. Sankowich Productions is presenting it in association with Harry Cymer and Deborah Taylor.

## Lee Sankowich Returns to the Zephyr

By Tom Provenzano  
Photo by Chris Kane

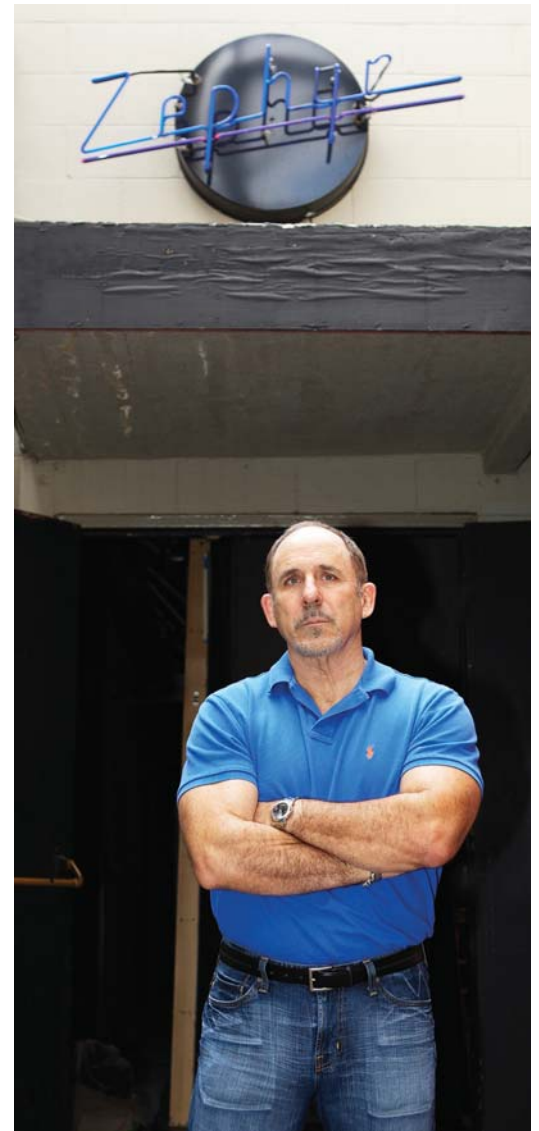
Now Sankowich is back and passionate about reinventing himself as, at least, a part-time Angelino. The first step in this direction in a long and highly successful theatrical career is his current production of Deborah Zoe Laufer's critical and popular hit comedy *The Last Schwartz*, which was a record breaker in both Florida and the San Francisco Bay Area, the latter being during Sankowich's tenure as Artistic Director of the Marin Theatre Company.

He originally chose the play as a vehicle for television stars Michael Tucker and Jill Eikenberry, who had moved to Marin and were looking for a show to do with Sankowich. A close friend at Florida Stage told him it was the biggest hit of their season. The same was to occur at Marin, where it became the greatest audience-pleaser in the company's four decades.

The director recalls, "The show took off at the beginning because of Michael and Jill but after awhile people were calling and asking, 'Is this where that Jewish play is?' It brought in a huge Jewish audience; it was impossible to get tickets."

They tried to arrange a Broadway production but the author had already sold the New York rights for a production that never came to fruition. Sankowich will be watching reaction to this production carefully to see if he can revive the idea of a New York move.

The play is a raucous comedy, with a serious side. Sankowich describes the play, "A year after their father's death, his children come back for the Yartzheit and the traditional unveiling of the tombstone. They were a very Jewish family and the oldest sister has kept the traditions. She is now divorced. Her son has left. One brother is a Hollywood director and brings this young gal who was in a commercial he had directed. She was brought up on Venice Beach; I mean literally on



Sankowich was thrust into directing as a young actor. "I was a member of a Jewish charity organization singles group. They wanted to do a play and I was the only one in the group who had any experience. Being young and naive I said, 'Let's do *Fiddler on the Roof*.' It was the first thing I ever directed. We didn't get the rights to it; didn't even think about it. It was a huge success. As an actor, every time I'd gone on stage I was only responsible for myself. I realized on opening night of *Fiddler*, sitting out there in the audience, that I

During a stint at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, Mel Shapiro, then chair of theatre at Carnegie-Mellon, drafted him to be an Associate Professor where he stayed for four years until he was offered the position of Artistic Director at the rapidly rising Marin Theatre Company, which had become a 265-seat regional Equity house.

Sankowich was given complete control and his taste and skills kept the company strong for 16 years. "I was sole decider of the season. I'm pretty eclectic although I didn't do a lot of classics.

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On a visit to LA in the late '60s he saw a production of a play that had flopped on Broadway a few years before, Dale Wasserman's adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He was hooked and spent years trying to get small theatres around the San Francisco area to produce it with him as director.

He finally convinced a tiny upstart theatre located on a Marin County golf course to do the play. It was the company he would ultimately take over as artistic director years later. There was a problem with the rights so Sankowich gave up and moved to New York for a job. The Marin theatre finally produced the play without him and it was a modest success.

Sankowich moved back to the Bay Area, determined to produce and direct *Cuckoo's Nest* in a larger venue if he managed to raise enough money. Finally in 1970 he opened at San Francisco's Little Fox Theatre. It was an instant hit and ran for five years.

Sankowich remembers, "Around 1971 we opened it in New York where it played for two and a half years; Danny DeVito and William Devane starred. It only closed because the building fell down! It was a 100-year-old hotel whose ballrooms had been turned into a multimillion dollar five-theatre complex. One day the subway under it collapsed. The building began to rumble and people were running through the building, shouting 'Get out! Get out!'"

He staged another production in Boston in 1972 which ran for a year and a half. Ultimately he produced and directed 11 productions, including one in Israel. *Cuckoo's Nest* made Sankowich a huge name of the international theatre scene.

But I was always mindful of my audience. They loved musicals but were sharp and enjoyed challenging plays. The last season I did *Killer Joe* by Tracy Letts. He's very hot right now."

He also had the great fortune to produce and direct two world premieres of Tennessee Williams' plays. Lyle Leverich, who wrote the Williams biography *Tom*, saw Sankowich's production of Williams' *This Is (an Entertainment)* and was so impressed he decided Sankowich was the one to finally produce some very early Williams work.

Sankowich laughs, "One night Lyle came to me after a show and said, 'Lee how'd you like to do a play by a young unknown playwright.' I thought, 'oh god....' But I respected Lyle and agreed to read it. The next day he sent me a script called *Spring Storm*, by Thomas Lanier Williams, not even Tennessee yet. The Williams estate gave permission and it was a great success."

His first thought was to do the Williams play for his return to the Zephyr but decided *The Last Schwartz* would be a more exciting move. He is happy with the choice and is very pleased with this return to Los Angeles.

"I started out with the idea of just visiting here. I was thinking of building a theatre in San Francisco but knew I probably couldn't afford to without selling the Zephyr. I love this place; I have had it so many years. So I started thinking I should at least do a couple of shows a year down here. I will hold onto it and with that decision I will put some money into it."

Sankowich realizes the LA theatre scene has become incredibly vibrant since 1986 and he wants to spend a great deal of time in this world. But wherever he goes, it will be to direct. ■

#### THE LAST SCHWARTZ

Plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;  
Sun., 2 and 7 pm;  
through Dec. 9  
Tickets: \$25-\$30  
Zephyr Theatre  
7456 Melrose Ave.,  
West Hollywood  
323.960.7789 or  
[www.plays411.com/schwartz](http://www.plays411.com/schwartz)