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Striking "Oil," and at corruption

Begley Jr. extols Fort Collins world premiere

By John Moore
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Ed Begley Jr. is no technophobe, but his life philosophy can be summed up in one sentence: "Live simply so that others may simply live."

"I'm no Luddite," the veteran actor said last week from his home in Los Angeles. "I don't live in a tepee in Topanga, and I don't live in a yurt in North Hollywood. I live in a two-bedroom house that by world standards is a palace, but by Hollywood standards is a shack. It's 1,700 square feet, which means a lot of people here wouldn't even want to put their groundskeeper where I live."

Begley is so passionate when it comes to the wasting of the Earth's resources, he travels cross-country in a hybrid car that burns methane and gets 60 miles to the gallon. On this day he is passionate about a one-man comic play called "Oil," written and performed by his friend and acting coach Gary Austin, co-founder of the legendary Los Angeles improvisational comedy troupe the Groundlings.

"Oil" opens in its world premiere Thursday at the Bas Bleu Theatre in Fort Collins. It's a semi-autobiographical account of Austin's life growing up in Texas oil camps as the son of a Halliburton employee. Begley has read "Oil" and opined, "I can envision it jumping off the page and onto the stage quite effectively."

Oil itself isn't the enemy

Austin's story is "about the fact that corporations run the world now," he told The Denver Post earlier this year. "It's about the exploitation of the planet and of human beings by oil. And you could apply that to the whole corporate world."

Begley, like Austin, never has thought of oil as inherently bad. "Oil is no worse than copper or sodium or zinc," said Begley. "It's made up of elements. Crude oil is used in all these various things we all use, and I'm not in this lifetime going to stop using any of them. I have a computer and glasses made from petroleum. Oil is a wonderful resource we should use wisely."

"The problem is when you add corruption and waste."

Enter Austin, who in his comedy creates several comic characters who walk the audience down a muddy path of oil tycoons, corporate roustabouts, Bushes ... and his own parents.

Austin's mother was born in 1919 in Oilton, Okla., which was then home to the biggest oil field in the world. "Back then, there was absolutely no concern about the environmental exploitation caused by the oil industry," Austin said. "Children would come home from school covered in oil because it was in the mist from the derricks that were spilling oil into the air."

Begley, who has acted in 75 films and appears on TV's "Six Feet Under" and "Seventh Heaven," is the son of another famous Ed Begley, winner of the 1956 Tony Award for "Inherit the Wind." Though Junior grew up far from the derricks, he can relate to Austin.

"I've always had an interest in oil, because I grew up in smoggy L.A.," he said. "We bore the brunt of a waste of a precious resource, oil, just by having so much of it escape into the atmosphere."

"Show me pollution and I will show you waste. The proof of that waste was right before me - I was breathing with my lungs. It's waste. It's inefficiency. It's like with food. I believe there is enough food to go around. We just have to stop wasting it. We also have to stop wasting land, wasting energy."

Begley never performed with the Groundlings, but four years ago, at his wife's suggestion, he took a two-day acting class from Austin, whose students have included Helen Hunt, Lisa Kudrow and Paul "Pee-wee Herman" Reubens. Begley's roots in improv comedy go back to 1969, when his partner was Michael Richards, Kramer on "Seinfeld."

"Gary teaches with Carol Fox Prescott, and their big thing is breathing," Begley said. "We all have a tendency when we are in danger, whether onstage or in other situations, to hold our breath. And when an actor finds himself in the most emotional and stressful situations, there is a tendency to change your breathing for the worse. You tend to hold your breath. One of the things Gary and Carol do best is they get you to simply continue breathing."

Begley tested his newfound technique at a supermarket a week after his class, when he spotted a woman screaming for help

because she had a small child stuck inside her car.

"I found myself having an emotional response, and right away I thought, 'Well how am I breathing?'" Begley said with a laugh. "And I realized, I was not holding my breath at all. Oh, by the way, the kid was fine. But it was a great eye-opener for me!"

Humor leavens intensity

Austin will be offering improv workshops during his stay in Fort Collins, but his primary focus will be on his deeply personal comedy, which he sent to Begley because Austin was aware of his intense interest in solar energy and oil drilling.

"What knocked me out is that while anyone can talk about these issues, Gary really lived it," Begley said. "He talks about issues of waste and corruption, and that's a problem that jumps across both sides of the aisle.

"When I read the script, I was just knocked out, because it's also very funny. He talks about some weighty matters quite effectively, but it's laced with humor, and that's a great way to tell a story."

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