

a writer for the people

Rusty told me once, "I write the way I do because I drove dump trucks." That may be Rusty's way of explaining his, what you might call, "aw shucks" way of going about things. Don't be fooled. Under that bumpkin disguise hides a serious thinker, a tender, sensitive man, and a true writer. Rusty observes, he listens, he watches, and he does all of it with a caring, passionate and compassionate heart. For proof, read the piece about eight-year-old Molly visiting Rusty's 92-year-old father in the nursing home or read the touching, gentle story about Rusty killing a snake with his weed whacker. Rusty is a master at generating powerful emotions. On stage, Rusty can tear your heart out with a look. He does the same thing here on the page. Get your box of tissues.

And Rusty can move from the sublime and touching to the hilariously ridiculous, like the one about Rusty gettin' contacts for his cat whats got Anal Glaucoma.

Somehow Rusty can combine in a short page and a half apparently divergent ideas and images about the class structure in Vermont, cancer, natives and imports, stroke, zucchinis and the love of picking blueberries, and they all fit nicely in Rusty's big hand. Such little essays have the compression and intensity of poetry.

Furthermore Rusty is a master of a number of local dialects. What makes a good writer of dialect is not how they spell the words; it's the rhythm of the sentences. The dialect is in the rhythm, the timing. So, like Rusty's impeccable timing on stage as an actor, here it is again in his dialect writing.

Which brings up Rusty the Actor. The thing that unites Rusty's acting and his writing is timing. I first got to know Rusty in 1986 when he was 25 years old and in my play *Judevine*. I have worked with a lot of actors over the years but never with anyone whose timing, be it for comedy or tragedy, is so flawless.

Rusty's writing is straightforward, self-effacing and blunt. Take for example the one about flirtin' with the cute bank teller in which he reveals his own fears and weaknesses, or in another piece where his comments on marriage are painfully perceptive.

Rusty's self-deprecating honesty, his good humor and his infectious enthusiasm enable him to say things others can't, like, for example, his comments on sexual harassment.

Some people who read this collection may think it verges on the sentimental; after all, this is an age of cynicism, irony and sarcasm, three attitudes, by the way, that Rusty uses only on the cynical, ironic and sarcastic. Rusty knows who he is and where he is and he doesn't pretend to be somebody or somewhere he isn't. That kind of self-awareness doesn't come along every day.

It just doesn't seem fair that one person should be so talented in so many areas. Rusty is a wonderful actor, both as a stand-up comic and a tragic actor. And he's a drummer too and a weight lifter, just an all around amazing guy. Who else do you know who is six foot four, weighs 200 pounds, is forty-six years old and can still do a split—while playing a snare drum?

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David Budbill is a poet and a playwright. His most recent book of poems is *While We've Still Got Feet* (Copper Canyon Press, 2005). His new play, a work in progress, is called *A Song for My Father*. His Web site is at: www.davidbudbill.com.