

Calling Tech Support

Business writer-turned-playwright premieres his Fringe Festival musical, *Grindr Help Desk*.

WORDS BY ISABELLE WATTENBERG

Who among us hasn't longed to chuck their phone across the room and have a real live person emerge and answer our questions without telling us to press pound? And whomst among us hasn't wanted some help navigating the dating world?

Minnesota Fringe Festival selection *Grindr Help Desk*, as the name suggests, takes a stab at fulfilling this fantasy. The one-person musical—playwright David Stillman's debut work—stars Candice, a long-suffering and awkward-interaction-saving operator for Grindr. The story idea arose from Stillman's real-life lament to friends that he needed a help desk to help navigate the experience. Stillman came out in his fifties following a decades-long marriage; facing the culture and interface of apps was a whole new world.

For Stillman, fiction also presented a whole new world. He's built his career researching, writing, and speaking about how generational differences impact the workplace, including three nonfiction books on the topic. Writing fiction, however, was an itch he'd long been wanting to scratch.

"I've always been interested in fiction, but a little daunted by it, because with fiction, it's whatever you want to be. There's no limits," Stillman says.

The Fringe Festival, Stillman says, offered a supportive and uplifting community for new-to-the-scene playwrights and writers.

"The Fringe Festival is all about nurturing people who are new to playwriting," he says. "I loved the workshops, I love the Council. The Mixed Blood Theater's been amazing mentoring me."

Stillman put together a collaborative team that both helped him navigate the demands of the stage and gave them the

chance to explore new directions. Kyle Weiler, fresh from performing in Theater Latte Da's *Next to Normal*, is directing; actor Jeremy Johnson is making his drag debut, and costume designer Ellie Savitz is serving as lead designer for the first time. (She's also none other than Stillman's daughter.)

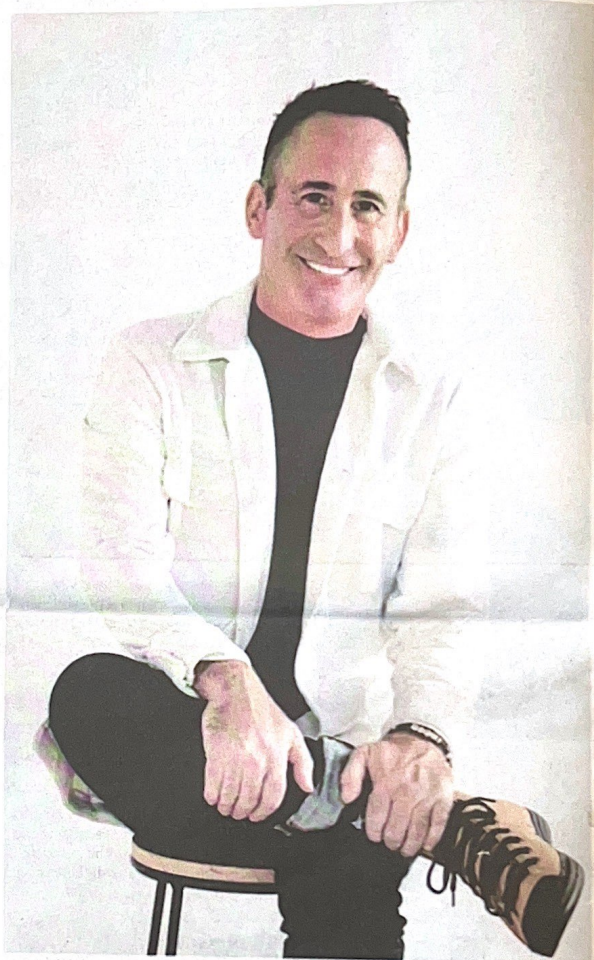
"I came out later in life, and to be able to do this project that clearly has a gay theme with my daughter has been celebratory for us," Stillman says. "To be able to talk to my daughter about how we make Candice love her femininity...was such a fun journey."

The play peeks into Candice's journey in drag, while also looking in as she answers app users' frantic questions, which include everything from dating to profile help. And being a one-person show, the audience only ever gets to listen in on Candice's responses.

"I then really loved the writing challenge because the audience has to understand what the caller is saying, but we never hear the caller," Stillman says. "I loved the challenge of [figuring out] how do I make sure the audience understands what's asked of Candice?"

Stillman wrote *Grindr Help Desk* first and foremost to entertain and make people laugh. But he acknowledges the topic is inherently political, especially with the recent barrage of anti-drag legislation and protests.

"What I didn't anticipate when the story was coming out was we would have some states trying to ban drag," Stillman says. "I can't say I did that with this issue in mind, but I'm happy it's coming out at a time when the art form is being questioned." A portion of the play's proceeds will be given to the Drag Defense Fund, an ACLU organization that advocates for LGBTQIA+ education and gives resources to battle legislation and



lawsuits that seek to infringe on the rights of the queer community.

True to his entrepreneurial spirit, Stillman envisions the play expanding to other stages and environments—"I think it'd do really well on a cruise ship," he says—but he also hopes his journey will open up avenues for others.

"I'm really lucky that I've been able to do a lot in my career," he says. "I would love to be able to inspire people to step outside their comfort zone and just go for it." ●

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