



Four Beers

A comedy by David VanVleck, Jr.

February 13-16, 2014 • Town Hall Theater, Middlebury, Vermont

The creator of Four Beers, David Van Vleck, Jr. is an MUHS alumnus, as is Kevin Commins, who plays Mel in the play. Both ended up writing for the stage and motion pictures. They recently chatted about the play and how David came to write it.

Kevin: You were two years behind me in high school, which means I didn't really know you.

David: Right. A two-year difference in high school is like a whole different generation.

Kevin: And were you a writer then?

David: I guess. Actually I did win the English Prize at graduation, probably because I was the only senior writing creatively. Louis Megyesi was the head of the English department and the one responsible for giving that prize, I remember it was for a fiction story I'd written. But I vaguely remember that I did write a play in senior year. There was some sort of evening recital where seniors presented their creative projects. I'm embarrassed to say that I don't even remember what the play was about, something about knitting needles, and that the play was very existential and angst-filled. And I remember that Sue Grant shed real tears on stage in her role and I was very impressed with that.

Kevin: I remember your mother Eunice was very active in the Middlebury Community Players. I did several shows with her.

David: Yes, she was always acting in something. Joyce, the director of *Four Beers*, directed her quite a number of times. My mom, the beautiful actress, and she was very very good.

Kevin: And you weren't interested in joining her on stage?

David: No way. I had no interest in theatre then. I wanted to be a photographer artist, and after high school to make a living I had my own business in Middlebury, weddings and high school senior pictures. One day I gave that up, and went to New York to go to acting school, enrolling in the Strasberg Institute. I wanted to write my own scenes for class but they wouldn't allow that. On my own I wrote a play and a screenplay, both incredibly bad. But for some odd reason I kept writing. Sometimes I think I became a writer because the only thing I ever knew how to do was type. When I was twelve my father promised to buy me an electric typewriter if I taught myself how to touch type, which I did.

Kevin: I worked in script development for a long time and met a lot of writers who had that as their sole qualification. So then what?

David: One of my teachers in the school was Al Pacino's closest and oldest friend Charlie Laughton. One day in class he asked if anyone would like a part-time job, and I was the only one who raised my hand, and it was to be the office boy in Al's little production office. I did that for six months, then started driving Charlie who had multiple sclerosis. Charlie was one of my two mentors in my life, the other being the great

photographer Aaron Siskind, one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. Then one of Al's drivers banged up Al's Jeep, so I started driving Al, which I did for the next three years, being a waiter at the same time.

Kevin: Of course. Can't work in show business without being a waiter at some point.

David: Right.

Kevin: What did you learn around Pacino?

David: I read some of the scripts sitting around in the back seat and concluded there was room at the top in screenwriting, if those scripts were the best out there, which they were since they were being offered to Al.

Kevin: I heard you hooked up with one of the great names in theater and the movies. Katharine Hepburn.

David: "Hooked up"? [laughs] I was like her grandson. I had written a movie script about an elderly woman, who was living with her son and his family then one day is taken by him to visit a friend of hers in a rest home for an afternoon, but her son doesn't come back to pick her and turns out he checked her into the rest home but was too chicken to tell her. That really happened to a girlfriend of mine's grandmother. But in my story, the old lady escapes from the rest home in the back of a laundry truck, eventually meets an old man living in his car, and they end up taking a road trip across the entire country, mostly hitchhiking. Katharine Hepburn being one of the two elderly woman stars at the time, I sent it to her off the street to her accountant, the only contact for her I could find. A year later, the phone rang and it was her. She wanted to do the script, she and I went out with it, but Hollywood didn't want her in a feature lead anymore. But we became very good friends, I was always going to dinner at her NYC house (took my Dad once) and went to her Connecticut shore house I suppose a hundred times. It was in her house up there I discovered orchids. She was from West Hartford, where both my parents came from. We'd go swimming in the cold ocean outside her house, then come in and have drinks at five, and I'd say, "My mom is having her cocktail right now, in Vermont," and Kate would say, "Call her." So I'd dial, hand her the phone, and she'd say, "Are you David's mother?" That happened many many times, Mom got to chat with her a lot. She was my friend, and we never talked about movies, we both weren't particularly interested in that.

Kevin: About *Four Beers*. It's about five men in the early 1980s, the middle of the Reagan years, who meet every week to watch Monday night football at a local bar. But this Monday the television's broken.

David: Yeah, and they're forced to talk to each other for the first time.

Kevin: It's a very funny play. I really enjoy the interplay between the characters.

David: Thank you.

Kevin: Okay, the question everybody always asks. Are the characters based on real people?

David: You're a writer, so you know the answer to that: Not really. Characters are mostly based on the people you meet and observe. I have a folder of ideas and in this case just a scene of a few random lines of dialogue. I thought up the bar setting and then started writing with these guys sitting down and talking and it eventually evolved into the play. I believe in evolution, you see.

Kevin: One of the things I'm enjoying most in rehearsal is that the characters are constantly discovering things about their friends.

David: I guess they consider themselves friends because of the activity they share every week -- watching Monday night football -- but in reality they don't know much about each other at all. The television has shielded them and created this illusion of camaraderie. And when they realize that the television is broken and that the distraction is gone, the discoveries they make about one another are both funny and devastating.

Kevin: I would say hilarious rather than funny, but anyway. The play is set toward the end of Reagan's first term. It's a little disconcerting to realize that I'm old enough to live through history, but birth certificates don't lie. Why the early 1980s?

David: The dynamic of this play wouldn't work in the Carter or Clinton era. The Reagan time was supposedly an era of prosperity, or at least until the market crash in 1987. The emphasis on materialism and success and a man's self-worth in that era was pegged to how much money he had, I think more than even today. And these guys have done everything right during their lives, but are coming to the realization that the promised prosperity -- at least in their case -- has been an illusion. And so they begin to wonder how many of the other things they've been led to believe aren't real.

Kevin: And the physical setting of the play?

David: I see it as a town the size of -- surprise -- Middlebury. These guys know, or think they know, their New Jersey town like the backs of their hands, which is what makes the revelation at the end of the play such a shock.

Kevin: A big revelation. But of course, we're not going to talk about the big revelation.

David: No. You have to come see the play.

Kevin: When I first read it a few months ago, I realized that, even though the cast is five men, the play is really about women. Women dominate their conversations. A couple of these men seem very chauvinistic to me but also unaware of how much the course of their lives is dictated by the opposite sex.

David: You're exactly right. Thank you for seeing all that. But then you're an MUHS graduate, which makes you special.

Kevin: Definitely. Well, thanks for your time. I think you'll be very happy with the production. I know we're all excited to be working on it.

David: See you in February. Break a leg.

The cast of *Four Beers* includes Richard Reed, Peter Dempewolf, Tim Franklin, Ark Lemal, and Kevin Commins. Directed by Joyce E. Huff, with producer Algy Layden and stage manager Kate Tilton.

Due to strong language and adult themes, *Four Beers* is not recommended for anyone under the age of 16.

Performances:

Thursday – Saturday, February 13-15, 8:00 p.m.

Matinee: Sunday, February 16, 2:00 p.m.

Town Hall Theater in Middlebury

Tickets \$17 at the Town Hall Theater Box Office

www.townhalltheater.org or call 802-382-9222 or visit noon to 5pm Monday-Saturday

Information at www.middleburycommunityplayers.org

