

# Staging His Life

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI



Courtesy Josh Kornbluth

American playwright and actor Josh Kornbluth toured India with *Citizen Josh* in August.

Inspiration strikes Josh Kornbluth at unexpected moments. The idea for a play on Benjamin Franklin came to the California-based playwright and actor when he was shaving one morning and “almost mystically the steam parted and I saw myself in the mirror and had a realization: I looked like Ben Franklin!”

In a similar vein, the idea for *Citizen Josh*, the autobiographical monologue Kornbluth brought to India in August, grew out of thoughts running through his mind as he walked home from the polling booth in Berkeley, California on Election Day in 2004.

“*Citizen Josh* grew out of my...nagging suspicion that our society’s political health depends on the active participation of all its citizens, even ones as habitually passive as myself,” says Kornbluth, who toured India at the U.S. Embassy’s invitation.

The play was presented at the Hindu MetroPlus Theatre Festival in Chennai before traveling to Kochi, Bangalore, Mumbai, Kolkata and New Delhi. It shows Kornbluth’s exploration of democratic ideals and how he realizes it’s not enough to just vote. He gradually turns into Citizen Josh, a proactive person at the center of grassroots movements involving his local playground, state education funding and global warming.

Narrated through vignettes from his life, the play has “stories that loop and twist through what seem like hopelessly overextended digressions only to pull themselves together into beautiful, perfect knots...” Scott Rosenberg, co-founder of *salon.com*, blogged after watching the premiere of *Citizen Josh* in San Francisco in 2007.

Kornbluth modified the play a bit for India. In Chennai, he cited Tamil epic heroine Kannagi as an example of citizen activism. In each city, he used local references so that audiences could connect with his story. Kornbluth also held workshops focusing on the monologue format for students, actors and playwrights in the cities where he performed.

*Citizen Josh* works on two levels. Besides a play on democracy, it is also serving as Kornbluth’s long-overdue senior thesis for Princeton University in New Jersey. A political science major in 1980, Kornbluth wanted to write a “transcendentally brilliant” thesis to impress his adviser, Sheldon S. Wolin. But as the deadline to submit the paper neared, Kornbluth kept procrastinating. He started doubting whether he actually had anything original to say about his topic—Marxism and The City—and whether he had chosen this topic just to please his parents, both communists. He knew he could come up with a decent paper but felt that would disappoint the erudite Wolin, who had made such an impact on his students. In the end, he did not submit his paper and did not graduate.

More than two decades later, on U.S. Election Day in 2004, Kornbluth started thinking about Wolin and his courses in political theory. In a rush of inspiration, he quickly Googled Wolin’s phone number, called him and announced that he was finally ready to complete his thesis. To Kornbluth’s surprise, Wolin agreed to advise him again.

“As I describe over the course of the monologue, I kept calling my adviser with

updates about the progress of my thesis or lack of same and he finally suggested that since I was a monologist, why didn’t I make this monologue I was working on (*Citizen Josh*) my thesis?” says Kornbluth.

“So that’s how, at my adviser’s suggestion, this latest monologue of mine was officially submitted to Princeton’s politics department both in written form and on DVD as my long-overdue senior thesis. My adviser has already graded it. He gave it a nice grade! Now I’m just waiting on the politics department to grade it as well. After that I will finally graduate!”

Kornbluth says that audiences usually respond warmly and connect with the story of *Citizen Josh*. “I am often surprised at what the audience finds funny: often, I’m just describing how I typically act, and people find that absurd. I guess my own absurdity is not always fully evident to me.”

He started performing stage pieces in 1989, when he was 30. “I used to work as a newspaper editor, and enjoyed that job. But in my mid-20s, my dear father passed away—and I believe that my beginning to perform was part of my way to reconnect with his memory,” he says.

Kornbluth starts with a basic idea like math, taxes or democracy and begins improvising in front of small audiences. “Each time I create a new show, it feels as though I’m reaching down into my innermost self and pulling out all the most embarrassing experiences to show to everyone,” he says.

His first piece was titled *Josh Kornbluth’s Daily World* and he performed it in a tiny basement theater in San Francisco. Audience numbers were pretty low and once he went to a neighboring bookshop and requested half a dozen customers, including two “German tourists who spoke no English,” to come watch him perform.

Kornbluth mostly draws on his personal experiences for his comic monologues. *Haiku Tunnel* featured a fictionalized version of the firm where he had worked as a secretary. *The Mathematics of Change* was based on Kornbluth’s apparent failure to grasp calculus as a freshman at Princeton. *Pumping Copy* was about his experience as a copy editor in his early 20s. *Love & Taxes* grew out of a tax problem he had a few years ago.

Kornbluth’s latest show and his first commissioned piece, *Andy Warhol: Good for the Jews?*, debuted at San Francisco’s Contemporary Jewish Museum in January. Based on the museum’s exhibit “Warhol’s Jews: Ten Portraits Reconsidered,” it offers a humorous take on luminaries such as Albert Einstein, George Gershwin, Golda Meir, the Marx Brothers and Gertrude Stein painted by Warhol in his 1980 series of portraits.

In a profession where audience appreciation is vital to keep the show running, how does he deal with criticism? “Every piece of criticism, small or large, shakes me to my core. I must be very thin-skinned. But the criticism is absolutely necessary for me to develop as an artist. So I try to take a deep breath, perhaps a nap, sip some coffee, and then seek to learn from each critique.”

#### For more information:

Josh Kornbluth  
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