

The writer: David Wiltse

David Wiltse recently took some time to speak with Gabriel Davis, Education Associate, about his latest play, *Sedition* – currently receiving its world premiere on our stage.

Gabriel Davis: Our audience may be interested to learn that Andrew Schrag – the central character in *Sedition* – is actually based on your grandfather. How has your take on his story evolved from when you first heard it to the play form it now inhabits?

David Wiltse – Playwright in Residence at Westport Country Playhouse – is a playwright, novelist, and screenwriter who has written 12 novels, 11 plays, and more than 50 screenplays and series pilots for film and television. His playwriting credits include a Drama Desk Award for his first play, *Suggs*, a Broadway run for his second play, *Doubles*, and regional productions of *A Grand Romance*, *A Dance Lesson*, *Temporary Help*, and *Crazy Horse and Three Stars*, all of which premiered at New Haven's Long Wharf Theater. Two of his plays were given world premieres at the Playhouse: *Triangles for Two* in 2000 and *The Good German* in 2003. *A Marriage Minuet* was produced at the Playhouse in 2006, following its premiere performance at Florida Stage in 2005. His farce *Hatchetman*, which premiered last season at Florida Stage, will be produced as *Scramble!* in the Playhouse's 2008 season.

The New York Times selected his first novel, *The Wedding Guest*, as one of the 100 Notable Books of the Year in 1982. *Prayer for the Dead* was similarly chosen as a book-of-the-year in 1991 by *Time Out Magazine* in London and another novel, *Into the Fire*, was made a main selection by the Literary Guild.

His work for the screen includes the CBS television series *Ladies Man*, the Edgar Allan Poe Award-winning television film *Revenge of the Stepford Wives*, and the feature film *Ascent*.

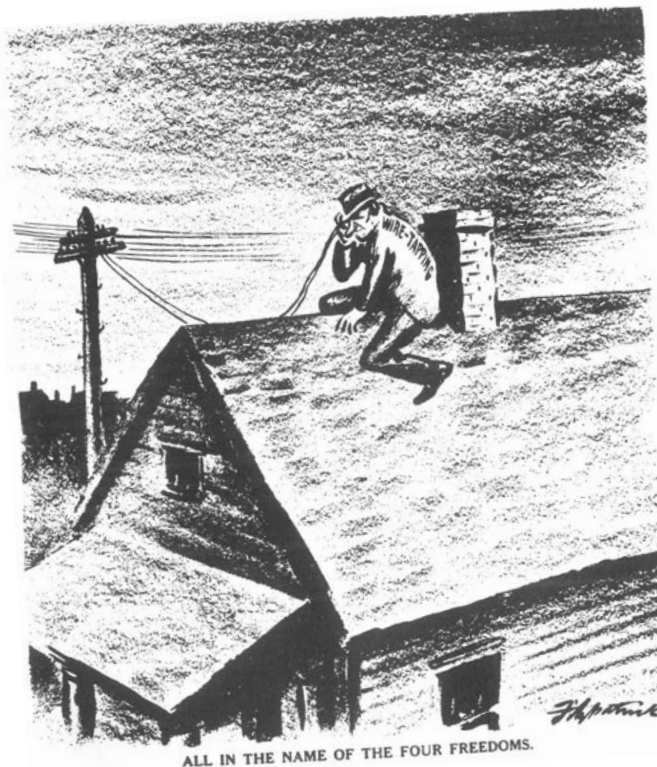
Other honors include the Nebraska Sower Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts and the Westport Arts Achievement Award for Literature. Mr. Wiltse has also been awarded three grants from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts for his work for the theatre.

Nowadays, David Wiltse considers himself a playwright first.

David Wiltse: I think I was first told the story when I was in college. Had I written it then – not that I knew how – I would simply have made my grandfather an out-and-out hero. During the intervening decades, I not only gained awareness of the complex historical and political situation in place in America during the WWI period, but I also became interested, as a writer, in the character issues that might cause someone to put himself in peril the way my grandfather did – why some few people don't keep their heads safely down when everyone else is doing so. At the same time, just by virtue of living, I became acutely aware of the mixed nature of human motives, and frequency with which the baser ones hold more influence upon actions than the positive. From my current perspective, I realize that my grandfather's ego was probably very much involved in his acts of courage. So, basically, I guess that my view of this particular story has undergone as much transformation as practically every other view I had when I was a college student.

G.D.: Being a writer who works in multiple forms, what was it about Schrag's story that spoke to your aesthetic as a playwright rather than as a novelist or screenwriter?

D.W.: I never considered doing it in other forms. One of the reasons I love writing for the stage is that it seems to me the only venue in which intelligence and language are the most important aspects. Movies are about pictures. Television is – well, television. The theater is the only place where you can use lyrical, rhetorical language, continuing in some fashion (in some very imperfect fashion, perhaps) the tradition of the Greeks and Shakespeare and all of the many subsequent playwrights who performed dramatic miracles just with what they had to say – and how they said it. This is a play that, in addition to being about characters and situation, is about ideas – very specific ideas that shape our lives. If you're interested in ideas, there's really no choice but the living stage.



One of the reasons I love writing for the stage is that it seems to me the only venue in which intelligence and language are the most important aspects. Movies are about pictures. Television is – well, television. The theater is the only place where you can use lyrical, rhetorical language, continuing in some fashion (in some very imperfect fashion, perhaps) the tradition of the Greeks and Shakespeare and all of the many subsequent playwrights who performed dramatic miracles just with what they had to say – and how they said it. This is a play that, in addition to being about characters and situation, is about ideas – very specific ideas that shape our lives. If you're interested in ideas, there's really no choice but the living stage.

continued on the next page...

Art by cartoonist Daniel R. Fitzpatrick.

Interview with David Wiltse

continued from previous page...

G.D.: In terms of the timelessness or universality of the play, just looking at the brief span of U.S. History, it seems like this pattern recurs over and over again.

D.W.: There was no period in history, as far as I know, when the people with power did not try to increase their power. There were periods in history in which the populace had very little option but to yield to their power and some few when they could – and did – actively resist. Going back to the Greeks and Romans, which is as far back as I'm aware of things, this story could have happened absolutely any time. As I mention in the play, Socrates was essentially forced to commit suicide because he asked people to think for themselves and to question things, because he was a skeptic and a thorn in the side of people who wanted things to go their way. That's a long time ago and things haven't changed all that much, even though hemlock is out of style. And it probably was the same way long before Socrates. In American history, the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed just after the country was born and we weren't even at war at the time. The right to habeas corpus has been denied – I think Lincoln did it, others have done it. And there is of course the fact, the unforgivable fact, that leaders can take us to war whenever they feel like it for reasons of their own, which is one of the issues in the play, of course. And we generally go along fairly happily for a while, until people wake up and realize their sons are dying and their treasures are wasted and society is being transformed in a negative way. This awakening almost always comes much too late.

G.D.: To take the tack that the character of Megrim does in the play, what are the dangers of freedom of speech? Can this ideal be taken too far and become harmful to a society?

D.W.: That's the question that's posed. I did my best to give Megrim – the advocate for restricting speech – a point of view that sounds plausible and is not unlike the one that is generally used to support his position. If you make an argument too lopsided, an audience – even one in favor of your general thesis – can shrug it off and say you're being a bully. The villain is usually the most important character in any play, so treat him well...I think I gave him a fair shake. It's a complicated issue, after all.

G.D.: Hopefully *Sedition* will have people debating and discussing it afterwards.

D.W.: One of the ways I measured the success of *The Good German* was the amount of discussion that it encouraged. I know it was considerable here and everywhere else it has been produced. It intrigues people to see things slightly differently and consider that horrendous situation from a different point of view. And I'd like to think that in some cases it made permanent alterations in the way they think. I love when that happens. Let's not forget it has to be entertaining; if it isn't, you're wasting everybody's time. And that's why it's difficult. Also, in the theater itself – especially if we want to attract the next generation of audiences – we should not be afraid to cause some contention. Complacency is comforting, but it's not interesting and it's not stimulating. Theater should be both of those things.

The First Challenge to the First Amendment:

The Bill of Rights – passed by Congress on September 25, 1789 – was first challenged by the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Rumors of a French invasion and enemy spies frightened many Americans; President Adams warned of the danger of foreign influence within America, saying that it must be “exterminated.” A Federalist majority in Congress passed four laws:



Poster art by David Wilson. 1914-1918.