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Gina Rickicki, Andrew Benator, and Tom Key in "The White Chip," a coproduction of Dad's Garage and Theatrical Outfit. (Photo by Casey Gardner)

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How Sean Daniels Stages Recovery, One Show at a Time

The writer-director, who now helms Florida Studio Theatre's Recovery Project, is taking a multi-pronged approach to fighting the stigma of addiction with theatre.

BY ALEXIS HAUK

It was mid-afternoon at Ascensa Health, an addiction treatment center in midtown Atlanta. A crowd of about 50 people, mostly men in early recovery, some of whom had recently been through detox, gathered to see the Atlanta cast of *The White Chip*. The play, whose title alludes to the medallion given to those starting or recommitting to their sobriety, is acclaimed director Sean Daniels's autobiographical play about the harrowing series of ever-lower rock bottoms he hit before he could finally quit drinking and make it stick—which he's managed for more than 11 years now.

Unlike the fully realized show across town at Dad’s Garage, an award-winning improv comedy theatre that Daniels co-founded in 1995, where *The White Chip* recently had a scale production, the “set” for this offsite performance was significantly pared down. Chairs were assembled around a cafeteria-like space, just like for a 12-step meeting. But even without the frills of costumes, sound, and scenic design, the audience watched with rapt attention.

At the Dad’s Garage-hosted co-production with Theatrical Outfit just a week earlier, there were frequent gasps of shock from the audience. But at Ascensa Health, the crowd leaned in, craning to catch every word and often nodding empathetically. There were knowing smiles at some of the funniest and/or most horrible moments (which, as told with Daniels’s self-effacingly dry humor, can be one and the same). There were constantly affirming nods and “mm-hmms.”

That’s because this crowd knows authenticity when they see it. They know the main character Steven like they know themselves, especially as he does backflips to keep normalizing his increasingly destructive behavior. (“Does this sound like someone who’s fucking it up?” is a recurring line that becomes increasingly desperate as things fall apart.)

Since getting sober on Oct. 12, 2011, Daniels has not only been up front about the perils he encountered as an artist with substance use disorder—especially a highly successful one—whose alcohol use was escalating but who felt that drinking was a prerequisite of being a creative person, and a necessary aid in charming donors and award bestowers. He has also made it part of his theatremaking, not only with *The White Chip*, which had a successful run Off-Broadway in 2019, but with his new job at Florida Studio Theatre as director of a venture called “The Recovery Project,” whose mission is to eliminate stigma by developing new plays, theatre education programs, and outreach to “change the narrative of the public health crisis that is addiction in our country.” Though the Atlanta production of *The White Chip*, and the special performance at Ascensa Health, are not officially part of his new gig, these are among the kinds of things he plans to do with the Recovery Project.

During his time of imbibing, he directed shows just about everywhere and received many glowing appraisals of his work. These days, though, if you ask Sean about the best review he’s ever gotten, he’ll point you to the heap of direct messages he’s accrued—emails and texts, an average of at least one a week for the last three years—from addicts and their loved ones

who've come to see his story, or have heard about what he went through, and said it got them thinking differently about the disease.

At the beginning of 2023, Daniels and his family moved back east after his four years as artistic director of [Arizona Theatre Company](#), to Florida, the state where he went to college (FSU in Tallahassee) and rehab (Jacksonville). His new leadership role with [the Recovery Project](#) at Sarasota's Florida Studio Theatre combines his two most salient talents: rendering stories onstage with immediacy, poignancy, and humor, and being a visible and vociferous advocate for artists with substance use disorder. Daniels said he hopes that the project's theatrical efforts will eventually provide a springboard to other mediums, including television and film, even music and publishing.

It's a calling that Sean traces back to some early advice from one of his first AA sponsors: that the best way to maintain and protect one's own recovery is to be of service to anyone still struggling. "At the end of the day, it wasn't so long ago that I thought the world would be better off without me," Daniels said. As they say in AA, you've got to give your sobriety away in order to keep it.

What exactly does it look like to bring recovery fully onstage and create an entirely new way of thinking about artists and addiction? After all, the American theatre canon, to some, is synonymous with the booze-drenched world of well-known alcoholic geniuses such as Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams.



Genesis Oliver, Joe Tapper, and Finnerty Steeves in "The White Chip" Off-Broadway.
(Photo by Carol Rosegg)

Los Angeles-based actor Joe Tapper admitted that many of his theatre heroes were alcoholics. Folks like Laurette Taylor, who originated the role of Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945, a performance that won a New York Drama Critics Award and remains the stuff of legend, but in which Taylor was so debilitated by advanced alcoholism that she wasn't always able to take a curtain call, and sometimes had her understudy finish the second half of the play in her stead. "I remember thinking that was so cool," Tapper said of Taylor's lauded but troubled run.

In a twist of fate, Tapper, a Yale School of Drama MFA graduate, played Steven in *The White Chip*'s original Off-Broadway production in 2019. He was already in recovery at the time, having gotten sober at age 32, but he found the play to be a tough experience night after night. Some friends who saw the show thought it was literally about him.

His own harrowing stories could fill another play. As an addict in New York City, he drank before going onstage as Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, a dangerous endeavor not least because of the show's famous sword fight. Immediately after Romeo's doomed BFF put a plague on both those houses, Tapper said he would sneak out of the theatre to drink some more, come back for curtain, then return to the bar right after taking a bow.

Revisiting such lows while embodying Steven in *The White Chip* brought back gut-wrenching memories, Tapper said, but the experience overall was cathartic, because by the end there was redemption and relief for his character.

Tapper's dad came to see the 2019 run, too, shortly before he died of throat cancer in late 2020, and "was really moved by the show," said Tapper. "He lost his ability to speak, but one of the last conversations we had, he said he needed to get a white chip. That's a blessing. At his end, I believe he was ready to take that step. There are so few times that you can go and do something artistic and really have a chance to grapple with this," he said.

The White Chip has been working its magic again, becoming a hit with audiences and critics during what has been a post-pandemic audience drought for many theatres. Matt Torney, artistic director of Theatrical Outfit and co-director of the Atlanta production, observed that many people leaving the show report a "different understanding of the disease."

"The standout thing is its humor," said Torney. "It's so rare to see a thigh-slapping-hilarious slapstick comedy about addiction and recovery. We see his life and disease in a real way that isn't all about personal weakness but about the silence of it and the insanity of it. Stories of addiction often deal with the tragedy. But comedy allows you in."

When discussing the magnitude of the problem, it's important to emphasize how common and deadly substance use disorder is. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 46.3 million people ages 12 or older, or 16.5 percent of the population, met the applicable diagnostic criteria for having a substance use disorder in the last year. Per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 140,000 people die from excessive alcohol use in the U.S. each year.

And, in the continuing spiral of opioid crisis upon crisis, a report published by the Stanford-Lancet Commission last year estimated that more than 600,000 people had died of opioid overdoses since 1999 and warned that, without intervention, 1.2 million more people could die of opioid overdose by 2029.

Daniels finds it mind-boggling that the stigma around addiction persists, even in the face of mountains of documented evidence about how prevalent and perilous the disease is. Compare the way addiction is handled with, say, the way folks with severe peanut allergies are accommodated—reasonably so, because they can go into anaphylactic shock if exposed.

“We’ve tackled peanuts, but we have yet to do it with this thing that’s killing so many people,” Daniels said. “How do we shift it from a moral failing to a medical condition? That stigma is deep, and even people in recovery are like, ‘Jesus, pull it together. Don’t show up drunk to the meeting.’”

Heidi Ginter, M.D., knows how high the hurdles are set when it comes to changing perceptions. One of several professional health advisers with the Recovery Project, Ginter has worked for two decades in the addiction treatment field and was immediately drawn to Daniels’s mission.

“There’s no other disease entity where patients die for preventable reasons and there isn’t an enormous outcry,” she said. “There’s been so much media, but the sensationalization of death is almost like opioid overdose porn. I’m done with people losing whole generations of their families. We have an obligation to keep people alive.”

Like Daniels, Ginter wants to focus on what practical steps it will take to blanket artists who have substance use disorder with support, while simultaneously encouraging wider representation of the disease as a treatable chronic condition, like heart disease or diabetes, where death is not a foregone conclusion.

Where can we begin right away? By using better words. For example, if one of Ginter’s patients is in “remission,” it means their substance use disorder is under control. But we should stop calling someone who returns to using alcohol or drugs a “relapse,” she said, which puts the onus on the patient. Instead, she will describe what’s happening to her patient in more standard medical terms: i.e., that their disease is flaring up, requiring more aggressive treatment. And always, the disorder is around substance use, not “abuse.”

Ginter added that many people still aren’t aware of the vast array of treatment options for substance use disorder. These include inpatient and outpatient treatments and peer support, which extends not only to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous but Recovery Dharma, SMART Recovery, and one-on-one peer recovery coaching. And then there’s a wide range of mental health treatment options as well.

“It’s like any disease—it’s about early detection, early conversations. My grandfather died of skin cancer, so we talked about skin cancer my whole life,” Daniels said. “My family also has alcoholism all through it, but we didn’t talk about that.”



Sean Daniels in Florida with his wife, Veronika Duerr, and their daughter.

Now, as he raises a young daughter with his wife, Veronika Duerr, who is also an artist, Daniels has been thinking about things like inheritability of illness a lot. “My daughter may or may not be an addict when she grows up,” he said. “We’re not going to make it so she can’t drink—she’ll have to decide on her own, but she’ll know all the information. My hope is that she would have the ability to know all the things that run in her family and then try to make the best choices.”

Part of changing the narrative, Daniels said, is about lifting the shroud of silence and shame. He cites one of Prior’s final lines in Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer winning *Angels in America*: “We won’t die secret deaths anymore.”

“I’m never going to out anyone else’s sobriety, but I’m going to share about my own sobriety,” Daniels said. “I had thought I was the only person in the American theatre who couldn’t hold their liquor, because everyone else was partying but I didn’t know who to turn to.”

To cover all its bases, the Recovery Project’s still-expanding advisory committee includes representatives from across the creative fields, from Canada to the U.K., from Chicago, New

York, and Los Angeles, and everywhere in between. The committee also includes prominent playwrights and filmmakers alongside medical groups and nonprofits.

Community partners run the gamut of treatment centers from Florida to New England and include the Opioid Response Network and the Voices Project. New York Stage & Film has asked the Recovery Project to be among its artists-in-residence for the summer.

Daniels even spoke last December with Dr. Stephen Patrick, who has served as a policy advisor for the Office of National Drug Control Policy under both Obama and Biden. Patrick introduced Daniels and crew to Jacqueline E. Hackett, current Deputy Chief of Staff for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. The momentum of these crucial connections has continued.

The arts are in many ways the perfect place to start something like the Recovery Project, in part because it's a field in which addiction is all too likely to thrive. For one, there's the fact that many artists travel from gig to gig, meaning that their insurance and the resources available to them are often transient. And then there's that whole ethos around how artistic brilliance and self-destructive tendencies are somehow part of the same package.

Jeremy Cohen, producing artistic director for the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, Recovery Project advisor and a long-time friend and colleague of Daniels, has been sober for almost three decades. "I think in the arts in particular, you are expected to be brilliant and charming, especially with donors," Cohen said. "If you're like me, it's the sweet, fertile stew of untreated alcoholism where the disease can really flourish."

This is something Daniels has been thinking about, personally and professionally—the role that alcohol played early in his life and career, and how it initially did make him more comfortable around people and eased his panic around taking creative risks. As he puts it, booze can "make you a less anxious person for a long period of your life before it kills you."

This seeming contradiction "was a hard thing to wrap my head around in rehab," Daniels continued. "All the great things that happened when you were using were true: You really did make friends, have crazy stories that bonded you with people for the rest of your life. That's the problem with the 'Just Say No' campaign; you kind of dismiss the whole thing. That's why harm reduction is so important to have in the conversation."

Along those lines, both Daniels and Cohen know from personal experience that there's an urgent need to help managers and others who work with artists. It's time to standardize and teach specific steps for what to do if someone in your cast, crew or staff has substance use disorder.

Thinking back to when he saw Daniels hit his final rock bottom over a decade ago, Cohen said, "In the best-case scenario, some very compassionate people who loved an alcoholic said, 'I don't know what I'm supposed to do in this moment. Do we keep him? Do we let him go? Do we do an intervention?'"

Part of the Recovery Project's vision is to create a centralized training for managers and other operators of theatres nationwide so they have some tools—a metaphorical "break in case of emergency" as should they observe a colleague who may have substance use disorder. The educational content would be like other HR-type trainings, but since it'll be done by theatre pros, Daniels quipped, "We'd make it more fun."

Another piece of this will be creating environments where abstaining from alcohol or drugs is, at the very least, just as easy and "the norm" as getting high or drunk.

At Florida Studio Theatre, Daniels said he wants to begin by leveraging already existing programs—outreach to schools, development of new plays, etc.—and build on what's already working. The Recovery Project is also in the midst of a major fundraising push so that they can launch a "warm" line (i.e., not quite a hotline) that folks can call any time, from anywhere in the U.S., for support and resources specifically catered to artists with substance use disorder.

Clint Ramos, a Tony-winning designer based in New York, also on the advisory committee of the Recovery Project, has been sober for almost 23 years. Similar to Cohen and Daniels, Ramos said he wrestled mightily with "the myth around the suffering artist." For the first few years after he got sober, he was terrified of what might remain "when the fog cleared." What was he capable of—indeed, who even was he without the endless angst and turmoil?

He can remember a specific moment back in 2008 when he finally began to feel like he was not only a person in remission from his disease but a whole, sober artist, fully able to pour himself into his craft again. It was while working on the costume and scenic design for *Equus* at Asolo Repertory Theatre in Sarasota.

“There was this realization that kind of washed over me of, ‘God, this feels so good.’ I felt so complete, so aware,” Ramos recalled. “Although it sounds intangible and esoteric, it felt like a moment where I was looking around me, and I was seeing people being moved by the work, and somehow, I put it all together that, ‘Oh, this is because I’m actually sober that I have clarity to fully take it all in.’ And it felt abundant. People always say, ‘You are enough,’ and I never really believed that. But at that moment, everything was working, and I was in tears at the intensity of that realization.”

Now, through his advisory role with the Recovery Project, Ramos said he’s eager to focus on intersectionality within recovery and addiction. After all, bias is infinitely compounded when you’re contending not only with substance use disorder but with institutional discrimination as well.

“If you’re a person of color or a woman or a queer, non-binary person, or from any marginalized group, and you’re also suffering from addiction, you are the first ones to get written off,” Ramos said. “White men always have second, third, fourth chances—look at Robert Downey Jr. I want to speak to that, because there is such a huge intersection between societal oppression and recovery and addiction.”

As for *The White Chip*’s ongoing curtain call, there’s a potential return to New York and a probable tour of Scotland in its future. Theatrical Outfit’s Matt Torney shared that the addiction treatment centers they connected with have expressed interest in more collaboration. He and Dad’s Garage Artistic Director Tim Stoltenberg are working closely with Daniels now “to create a sustainable model” in Atlanta that could bring a playwriting and performance curriculum to recovery groups.

Ultimately, Daniels envisions a future where artists who live with the disease of addiction, from all backgrounds, get to write not just about pain but also joy; where they are supported



Clint Ramos at the 2021 Tony Awards.

in treating their substance use disorder; where they feel safe sharing what's happening with their illness and asking for help; and where there are lots of stories that reflect their lived reality. Stories that don't all feel like afterschool specials and don't all entail shakily clasped coffee cups in church basements.

In its early days, the Recovery Project has already proved to be an ever-expanding and evolving process. "The thing that's cool about this is that it's kind of endless," Daniels said.

Incidentally, there's one other person involved in this story who has been dramatically helped by Daniels and his example. That person is me; in February, I celebrated nine years sober. Back when I was trying to stop drinking in 2014, I had the good fortune of connecting with Sean, who gave me all kinds of tips—practical, amusing, existential—for how to compose myself, what to do with my hands at social gatherings, how to not slip up.

One of the tools he sent me was a very early draft of *The White Chip*, which was unlike anything I'd ever seen or read about substance use disorder at the time. I hung onto it and revisited it frequently in some of my darkest moments.

So, yes, I buried the lede, but thankfully, that's the only thing I've had to bury in almost a decade.

If you urgently need help, you can call these national resources for immediate support: SAMSHA: 1-800-662-HELP; Recovery Centers of America (RCA): 1-800-RECOVERY; Aware Recovery Care: 844-292-7372.

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