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'Shining City': Sensing a Presence

By Wendi Kaufman
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Edward Gero believes in ghosts, which came in handy while preparing for his role as John in "Shining City," the Irish drama that opened this week at Studio Theatre.

At its heart, "Shining City" is a ghost story. Gero, 53, plays a widower who seeks help from a therapist after he begins to see his wife's ghost. He and his therapist (Donald Carrier), a former priest who takes on John as his first patient, both face troubling issues of faith and loss. Written by Irish playwright [Conor McPherson](#) ("The Weir," "This Lime Tree Bower"), the story delves into the realm of the supernatural and the psychological.

Gero, a four-time recipient of the [Helen Hayes Award](#), is recognizable to many Washington theatergoers: He has been a member of the [Shakespeare Theatre Company](#) for 20 years, appearing in more than 55 productions. He also has worked with other local troupes, including Theater of the First Amendment, Studio Theatre, Round House Theatre and [Olney Theatre Center](#).

The veteran actor explains his process when preparing for a role: "You draw on your own experiences to find a way into the character, and you build on that."

With John, Gero was off to a good start: He and his character are the same age, are Catholic and have felt the presence of ghosts.

For Gero, his brush with the afterlife occurred shortly after his father's death in 1995:

"We had just bought our house in [Bethesda](#), and I was putting up a light fixture and I couldn't get it flush with the wall." Gero's father had been a handyman who knew his way around carpentry, and it was his voice that came to Gero, loud and clear, instructing him to get a grommet, which Gero was unfamiliar with.

"There was no mistaking that voice," says Gero, who describes the experience as "bizarre but comforting."

That comforting feeling is where Gero and his character differ; John finds little comfort in the visage of his dead wife.

"In [Shakespeare's](#) time, ghosts were considered very real issues. In 'Shining City,' my character sees a vision of his dead wife, and it sends him to the psychiatrist. This is clearly a psychological event for him."

"Shining City" is set in the therapist's office, with the stark silhouettes of [Dublin's](#) church steeples peeking through the windows. The spare setting contributes to the play's haunting mood, though Gero says that it's more than a spooky story -- it's a moving drama with serious themes and a ghostly element.

Advertisement "Yes, it's supernatural," he says. "It captures that feeling that we're all searching for some sense that there's something out there, something larger than ourselves, but at the same time it centers on the relationship between the characters, on the connection between people."

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In "Shining City," the sight of a ghost sends John (Edward Gero, right) to a therapist (Donald Carrier). (By Richard A. Lipski -- The Washington Post)

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In his own life, Gero says, he has felt there was an alignment in the universe that led to his career in the theater. "I guess we all want to feel that way. It's a comforting feeling. As human beings we search for that; we need it," he says. And McPherson, Gero says, understands that search only too well:

"He's trying to figure out how being sensitive to a spiritual life works and what it all means in our fast-paced, temporal world."

Shining City Studio Theatre, 1501 14th St. NW 202-332-3300 Through Dec. 16.

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