

# THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH

By David Auburn | Adapted from the novel by Saul Bellow |  
Directed by Charles Newell



*Photo: Sebastian Arboleda, Chaon Cross, Stef Tovar, John Judd, Patrick Mulvey, Kai Ealy, Marilyn Dodds Frank, Neil Friedman, BrittneyLove Smith, Luigi Sottile (Michael Brosilow).*

**COURT** THEATRE

## **SYNOPSIS**

Young Augie March is a product of the Great Depression: plucky, resourceful, searching for love, and striving to grow up and away from home. Through odd jobs and encounters with unique characters, Augie explores what it takes to succeed in the world as a true individual. The Adventures of Augie March is an epic coming-of-age story that bridges continents and stages of life, exuding the endearing confidence of a boy taking in a complex world.

## **TIME, PLACE & SETTING**

The main setting is Chicago in the 1930s. Augie travels from Chicago to Mexico, Italy and even shipwrecked in the Atlantic Ocean.

## **CHARACTERS**

The novel has more than 35 characters. The adaptation remains true to the book's epic form by keeping a large number of characters, as well.

- BASTESHAW: A ship's carpenter.
- REBECCA MARCH: Augie's blind mother.
- GEORGE (GEORGIE) MARCH: Augie's younger brother, born with a mental disability. It is an open question whether George understands what his family members are saying about him. He is affectionate, gentle and easily frightened.
- SIMON MARCH: Augie's older brother.
- GRANDMA LAUSCH: An imperious and formidable Russian-Jewish émigré from Odessa, Grandma Lausch boards with the March family and tyrannizes over them.
- KREINDL: A shrewd and enterprising Austro-Hungarian veteran of World War I. Kreindl works as a street vendor, matchmaker, a purveyor of stolen goods and sells rum for bootleggers.
- FIVE PROPERTIES: A Russian Jewish immigrant to Chicago, Five Properties served in World War I with the American forces, driving transport wagons for the U.S. Army in Poland and fighting at the Battle of Chateau Thierry.
- CLEM TAMBOW: Clem is Augie's high school classmate. The son of a Russian Jewish local political fixer, Clem prefers not to work or attend class. Unemployed, addicted to cigars, and fond of spending the day in bed, he entertains himself by strolling with a cane through the streets of Humboldt Park, speaking in a plummy British accent and affecting an aristocratic manner. (Tambow means 'abyss' or 'deep pool' in Russian.)
- STEVE "THE SAILOR" BULBA: Bulba is Augie's beefy, dangerous and untrustworthy high school classmate. When not in school menacing his physically smaller peers, Bulba is a denizen of Einhorn's poolroom, where he likes to sit in a shoeshine chair and watch the older men play games of snooker.
- WILLIAM EINHORN: Wheelchair-bound William Einhorn is a teacher and mentor to Augie.
- TILLIE EINHORN: Tillie is a benignly self-satisfied, unperturbable, uncomplicated person. Bellow describes her well-coiffed head as being "mostly physically endowed"; in other words, she has more hair than wit.

- **DINGBAT:** Dingbat is William Einhorn's younger brother. Dingbat is a poolroom hanger-on, an aspiring fight promoter and boxing trainer, and his family's chauffeur.
- **NAILS NAGEL:** An auto mechanic of German and Dutch ancestry, "Nails" Nagel is aging, ungraceful and slow of speech. Physically strong, he is psychologically battered.
- **STONEY:** Trying to catch a free ride back to Chicago, Augie hops aboard a gondola car filled with coal in a Cleveland railroad yard. There are stowaways in the rail car, hoping the train will carry them express to Toledo. One of the stowaways is a young boy, Stoney.
- **MANNY PADILLA:** Padilla is a classmate of Augie's at a public college in Chicago. He is an immigrant from Chihuahua, Mexico, and Augie describes Padilla as a mathematical genius whose "godlike" facility with numbers is on par with the founders of early branches of mathematics.
- **MIMI VILLARS:** A practiced clothes thief who is dating Hooker Frazer.
- **HOOKER FRAZER:** Frazer is a native of Tennessee, tall, patrician, scornful of others and obsessed with radical political theory. He is a graduate student in Political Science at the University of Chicago, married to one woman, but romantically involved with Mimi Villars.
- **CHARLOTTE MAGNUS AND LUCY MAGNUS:** Charlotte and Lucy Magnus are cousins, both daughters of prosperous West Side businessmen. Charlotte's father owns blocks of real estate, several hotels and a chain of five-and-dime stores in Chicago; Lucy's father, "Uncle Charlie," is even more successful, owning and operating a series of massive coal yards in the city.
- **UNCLE CHARLIE MAGNUS:** A successful businessman who owns coal yards.
- **HAPPY KELLERMAN:** He is the yard manager and weighmaster at Simon March's coal yard on the West Side of Chicago. The yard has one spur of trolley rails, to carry coal in for weighing and redistribution, and a large, marshy loading area for coal trucks.
- **THEA and ESTHER FENCHEL:** The Fenchel sisters are society girls, debutantes, who have grown up under the care of their fabulously wealthy German-born uncle, a mineral-water tycoon. Augie falls hard for both sisters, first for Esther, and later for Thea.
- **MOULTON, IGGY, TALAVERA, OLIVER, STELLA:** Augie meets a circle of ex-patriot writers and artists, and a collection of local residents, at Hilario's Bar in Acatla. To Augie's Chicago eyes, this social group contains the oddest assortment of characters he has ever met. The bar is perched above an 18th-century town square where a band constantly plays and couples stroll.

## **ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT'S APPROACH TO ADAPTING THE BOOK**

### **In Conversation: Playwright David Auburn and Director Charles Newell**

*Marilyn F. Vitale Artistic Director Charles Newell sat down with Pulitzer Prize-winner David Auburn to discuss what drew him to Saul Bellow's novel. The following discussion is curated from their conversation, detailing Auburn's approach to adapting this towering American classic for the stage.*

CHARLES NEWELL: When did you first encounter Saul Bellow's work, particularly this novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*?

DAVID AUBURN: I think *Seize the Day* was the first Bellow I ever read. I read *Herzog* before *Augie March*, but *Augie* was the one I connected to most strongly, at least as a 20-something person. It's an accessible novel for a young person; it's a picaresque tale of a young kid coming-of-age in Chicago, and it traces his life until, very roughly, the time of the book's publication, which is the early 50s. It's *Augie* telling his story, and he encounters seemingly everyone in Chicago—it's the great Chicago novel in many ways, and it's a very easy book to sort of get lost in, to be swept up in. There's this vast canvas, and it's immensely likeable and loveable.

CN: Can you explain what it is about the novel that you first thought about when adapting it?

DA: Before I proposed it to you, I had a number of impulses. One, just love of the work, and also the feeling that it was overflowing with great roles for actors. There are hundreds of characters in the book, and they're all indelible, and the language with which they speak is both realistic and earthy and sort of magical and poetic. I think that the idea of that language in actors' mouths was what excited me.

CN: And you've chosen select characters from the hundreds that *Augie* encounters. How did you make the choice of which characters, and how does that help tell the story that you want to tell in the play?

DA: One of the hardest things about this has been having to forego using so much wonderful stuff, and I have a feeling that a lot of people will say "Why didn't you include...?" because there are so many wonderful characters. It ultimately became a question of selecting the ones that I thought served the point of each individual episode with the most narrative or dramatic force, and occasionally combining characters in the book into single figures, elements of them into single figures, but I still lie awake at night wondering if I've made a mistake in leaving out this episode or wondering how we can get this other bit in, because there are so many wonderful pieces.

CN: Let's talk about the Bellow language. You can spend so much time on a single page just digesting it and understanding it. How did you bring the heightened language into characters' voices?

DA: There are a number of mute or semi- mute characters in the book. So I thought, let's let these characters very occasionally and strategically voice the insights or the descriptions that *Augie* is coming to but doesn't quite have the language to say himself, because he's young, he's still in formation. His brother *Georgie*, for example, who's all but mute, can suddenly speak with the eloquence that *Augie* himself is kind of reaching for, aspiring to. It's a device that I'm really excited about. I think it will be thrilling because you feel the complexity of the language, it incorporates it in a way that doesn't make it a roadblock to the dramatic action, and it helps us see how *Augie* is understanding his circumstances.

CN: Going back to the early drafts that you first sent us, take us through a little bit of that journey. Were there moments when the adaptation seemed either unlocked or locked up?

DA: It was very hard to begin, because there are no scenes as such in the book. There are countless incidents, but you might have what amounts to a full scene or episode spread out across a hundred pages. If you go looking for a discreet scene that defines the relationship between Simon and Augie, for example, you're not going to find one. It took a while, but I eventually got a sense of at least the kinds of pieces that should be in the play. I wanted a big piece about Augie's childhood, a big piece that takes place when he's in this sort of young adult period and hanging out with students, you want a big piece in Mexico, you want a big piece post-Mexico. At a certain point, having a mental map of what the play could become helped a lot.

CN: How about the journey you took to understand Bellow the man, and Bellow the writer?

DA: I saw Bellow occasionally when I was in school here, I would see him working around campus. There's a new biography by Zachery Leader, which is very comprehensive. The material about his childhood is especially useful, since many of the characters in Augie are based at least in some part on people that he knew, and it's illuminating to know a bit about the real people he supposedly drew from. The book keeps pitting Augie, who is a kind of searcher, against these people of great certainty, these characters who have these sort of monumental worldviews, and are convinced of the direction that their life and other people's lives should take. Bellow's real brother was the prototype for the character Simon. The energy in that figure, and Augie's relationship to him, informs the dynamic of the whole book, and of the play—that dilemma of a questing, questioning person being drawn into and resisting, or not, the pull of a very powerful personality.

CN: If you could ask Bellow a question when adapting, what would you want to ask him?

DA: What does there have to be an eagle for? [Laughs] I'm joking. That's a line from the book. I love the eagle, the outrageousness and craziness and power of that whole sequence. It's key to the book and we wanted to make certain it was central to the play.

CN: How do you think Bellow would respond to the stage adaptation of his novel?

DA: Bellow did write a play and he liked the theatre, so my hope is he'd be receptive to what we've done. I've certainly done it with every intention of being true to his sensibility as I understand it.

To watch a video about hearing the playwright talk about the adaptation, visit this link:

<https://youtu.be/PDMO6C--670>.

## **THEATRICAL ADAPTATION**

**The Oregonian: From page to stage: tricks of the trade in adapting theater from books**

By Marty Hughley | Link: <https://bit.ly/2B05rJ4>

“We express who we are not just by telling stories but by re-telling the stories of others, emphasizing different details, putting our own spin on things,” says writer/director Aaron Posner. “The re-telling of stories is a basic human need.”

But one particular way of re-telling stories, turning literature into theater, is especially tricky. In some ways, classic and popular novels provide ideal source material for plays — familiar titles, characters and settings, thoroughly developed stories, proven appeal. But the two forms work by different rules and reach us in different ways. The love a reader has for a book quickly can turn bitter if the stage version doesn’t fit the version in her imagination.

Such are the promises and pitfalls in a project such as Seattle playwright Kevin McKeon’s adaptation of Leo Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina,” which has its world premiere Wednesday at Portland Center Stage.

“You have a starting point that you don’t have when you’re creating something new,” says former Portlander Marc Acito, whose musical adaptation of E.M. Forster’s “A Room With a View” (with composer/lyricist Jeffrey Stock) premiered last month at the Old Globe in San Diego. “On the other hand, you have a lot of work in deciding what to change and what not to change. One issue is that you have to consider audience expectations — what you absolutely have to deliver and then what’s up for grabs.”

McKeon’s task with “Anna Karenina” included finding ways to tell a story that’s several hundred pages long in a comfortable sitting. “I have to read the book like the worst editor in the world, with the idea of cutting it severely to fit it into 2-1/2 hours of stage time,” he says.

Posner, who grew up in Eugene and now lives in Maryland, had to beat the clock when adapting Ken Kesey’s “Sometimes a Great Notion” for Portland Center Stage in 2008. “I remember the pain,” says Mead Hunter, who was the theater’s literary manager at the time. “Aaron would actually groan whenever he had to cut something else out.”

Acito says an adapter always has to ask, “How do you get from point A to B to C in the fewest moves? “You look for hot spots, the fence-post moments. And you steal the best of what’s in there already.”

Retaining original dialogue or description doesn’t necessarily mean just retyping the book, though. “A technique a lot of writers use is to cut and paste from different parts of the novel, so the effect is of skidding across the surface of events,” Hunter says.

Portlander Louanne Moldovan, whose Cygnet Productions staged literary adaptations regularly from about 1993 to 2005, says she “never short-shrifted the text” but to that end tended to choose short stories or episodic, epistolary source material. She also frequently used a device that McKeon relies on in “Anna Karenina,” in which actors speak explanation and commentary directly to the audience, between lines of dialogue.

“I always liked the way that provided another layer for the actor to inhabit the character, another way to get at subtext and intention,” she says.

Actors, designers, musicians and so on share the weight in carrying a story from page to stage.

“That’s the beautiful part — you are not adapting the book alone,” Acito says. “As a novelist, I have to create the field of flowers, the streets full of people. If I’m writing a play, that can be three lines – haiku for the stage designer to take off from.”

Acito also points out that most novels deal at length with the internal states of their characters, whereas theater is external, relying on action, or at least dialogue. “And what’s fascinating on the page can be inactive and boring on the stage.”

But that’s one of the places where the real writerly art of adaptation comes in.

“You have to ask: What is at the core of this story, what makes it operate, and how do I put that onstage,” says Posner, who’ll be back in Portland later this year to stage “And So It Goes,” his adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut short stories, at Artists Repertory Theatre. “If there’s something in the story that has to be expressed, you have to find the best possible way for that to live onstage, whether that involves music, poetry, projection, narration.”

It’s important, too, to recognize that trying to recreate a book onstage is a fool’s game. “Anyone who says they can adapt a novel without losing nuance and texture and detail is just lying to you,” Posner says. ‘You can’t come close to it.’”

On the other hand, a theatrical adaptation opens a story up to other ways of telling, other sensations, other ways of layering emotions and ideas.

“It’s successful,” Hunter says, “if it delivers the story that the audience expects to hear, but at the same time brings something fresh to it and helps you see it anew.”

(from OregonLive.com)

## **ABOUT THE BOOK’S AUTHOR**

### **First to Knock, First Admitted: The Adventures of Saul Bellow**

*Court Theatre’s Resident Dramaturg Nora Titone shares how author Saul Bellow’s upbringing as a Jewish Russian immigrant in Chicago influenced the writing of his novel, THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH.*

#### **1. Immigrant**

Saul Bellow arrived with his family in Chicago on July 4, 1924, smuggled by bootleggers across the border from Canada. He was nine years old. He would remain an “illegal alien”—we would now say, “undocumented immigrant”—until the age of 27.

Bellow was born in 1915 in Lachine, Quebec. His parents were Russian Jews. They had originally come to Canada to flee anti-Semitic violence and political persecution in their home city of St. Petersburg, Russia.

The Bellow family arrived on American soil two short months after the U. S. Congress passed the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, a drastic and sweeping revision of federal immigration policy. The new law slammed the door on a tide of humanity that had been flowing to America since the late 19th-century, ending the greatest era of mass migration to the United States in its history. From 1880 to 1924, waves of newcomers, primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe powered the rapid growth of Chicago. The city's population quadrupled in thirty years' time, growing from 500,000 residents in 1880 to over 2 million in 1910. By 1924, when Bellow took up residence with his family in the Russian Jewish enclave of Humboldt Park, 70% of Chicago residents were foreign-born or the children of foreign-born parents.

His whole life, Bellow retained a vivid impression of the first day he spent in America: July 4, 1924. He recalled his nine-year-old self thinking the fireworks, flags, bunting and parades of Independence Day were for him, meant to hail the promise of his new life in America.

But the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act told a less welcoming story. The law was informed by the burgeoning eugenics movement, which maintained that peoples from Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa were genetically inferior to those from Northern and Western Europe. The 1924 Act accordingly slashed immigration rates from targeted nations by 98%, barring admission to Russian Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Italians, Greeks, Chinese, Turks, Armenians, Lithuanians and Africans, among many others. Conspicuously, the 1924 Act left the door open to migrants from Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark, Germany, Sweden and Norway.

Eugenicists celebrated the 1924 Act as a measure that would "preserve the purity of American stock" by welcoming immigrants only "of higher intelligence," who thus presented "the best material for American citizenship". The now-excluded categories of people, it was believed, had "made an excessive contribution to our feeble-minded, insane, criminal and other socially inadequate classes." A related federal act prohibited entry to "epileptics, and insane persons; paupers; professional beggars; persons likely to become a public charge; persons afflicted with a loathsome or dangerous disease; and persons who have committed a felony or other crime involving moral turpitude." Polygamists, prostitutes and those with "mental or physical defects which might affect their ability to earn a living" were also banned.

A natural reading of *The Adventures of Augie March* views it as Bellow's artistic response to the contradictions inherent to the historical moment of his arrival in this country.

The story Bellow scrawled, beginning in 1947, in a succession of battered notebooks—notebooks now housed in the University of Chicago archives—charts the coming of age of a young undocumented immigrant amidst the foreign-born multitudes of Chicago. Augie, Bellow's narrator, struggles amongst the plenty and poverty of the city toward self-knowledge. He achieves it at last in discovering his identity as an American writer.



Bellow's novel offers a rejoinder to the premise that a person's country of origin, physical form or natural endowments determine their fitness for American life. . The characters peopling *The Adventures of Augie March* hail from the countries of origin marked for exclusion by the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act: they are Russian Jews, they are Mexican, they are Hungarian and Polish, they are Czech and Italian. They may be paralyzed, blind, physically disabled, or "insane". They are relegated to the poverty-stricken and criminal margins of the city's teeming social world. Invariably they are the "socially inferior." But they are unmistakably American, and they contribute to the vibrant day-to-day of an unmistakably American city.

## 2. Writer

Augie is not quite Bellow's alter ego. But his life echoes aspects of Bellow's life, and his impressions and experiences are often artful silhouettes of Bellow's own. Above all, the language Bellow uses to recount Augie's adventures bears the unique and unmistakable stamp of the city that shaped him.

As a child coming of age on the streets of Chicago, Bellow absorbed a rich inheritance. His earliest spoken languages were Russian and Yiddish. He picked up English on Chicago's West Side, where he played alongside the children of recently-arrived Poles, Italians, Swedes, Greeks, Hungarians, Czechs and Romanians. Bellow remembered these immigrant youths being as eager as he was to talk about distinctly American things: "baseball, prizefights, speakeasies, graft, jazz, crap games, gang wars." As an adolescent, Bellow drew inspiration from soapbox preachers on Division Street, vendors hawking wares in the Maxwell Street Market, and speeches by orators, labor leaders and poets who assembled for debates in Bughouse Square, the park beside the Newberry Library. He haunted the stacks of multiple branches of the Chicago Public Library, where classic texts of world literature were freely available to him, the son of a low-wage employee at a kosher bakery on Augusta Avenue.

These multitudinous influences are evident in the language Augie March uses to tell his story. Inflected with Yiddish rhythms, salted with slang and idiomatic speech, packed with interludes of heightened poetic phrasing and allusions to high culture, Augie's narrative voice immerses readers in the colloquial language of the Chicago streets. One of the signal achievements of *The Adventures of Augie March*, according to the writer Philip Roth, was how the novel raised "the language you spoke, the American argot you heard on the street," to the level of high literature.

Augie's narrative voice even keeps pace with the evolution of Chicago street speech over three decades. As the chapters proceed the music of the language shifts from the rhythms of the Prohibition-era vernacular, to the minor key changes of the Great Depression in the 1930s, to the grander tones of the 1940s heralding the post-war economic boom.

The idea for the novel came to Bellow when he was living in Paris in 1947. Watching city workers opening the valves of hydrants to allow gushing water to sweep clean the pavements, he asked himself, "why not have as much freedom of movement as this running water?" The flowing hydrants conjured the sudden memory, Bellow said, of "a handsome, freewheeling kid from childhood whose surname was August, and who used to yell when we were playing, 'I got a scheme!'" Recreating the exuberance and brio of this long-ago Chicago friend was the start of *Augie March*: "Subject and language appeared at the same moment—I was enriched with words," Bellow recalled. "I found myself with magical suddenness writing the first paragraph. It

rushed out of me.” The novel’s language came to his mind so swiftly, he remembered, “All I had to do was be there with buckets to catch it.”

### **3. Mythologist**

While Bellow transmuted the phrasings and cadences of Chicago’s immigrant residents into a new kind of heightened literary language, he also likened their personhood to figures of myth and history. The cast of characters populating Augie’s street-level world are compared to gods and heroes of Greek mythology, or heroes from the annals of world history.

Simon, Augie’s body-building older brother, is afflicted with bouts of insanity like his mythological correlate, Hercules. The orating, wheelchair-using real estate broker William Einhorn is at once equated with Hephaestus, the blacksmith God of Invention, and President Franklin Roosevelt. Grandma Lausch, physically infirm but ruthlessly tyrannical, is compared to Emperor Timur, the 14th-century conqueror of Asia and heir to Genghis Khan. Rebecca March, Augie’s blind, incapacitated mother stands with the many mortal women in Greek mythology who, seduced and abandoned by Zeus, give birth to demigods. Augie himself is likened to Alcibiades, legendary orator of 5th-century B.C.E. Athens, beloved by the gods for his charisma and gift of self-expression.

Bellow suggests gods and geniuses walk the streets of Chicago, reincarnated as immigrants and workers. With immigrants from the “old world” no longer free to enter America, this promise is forestalled. Bellow begins the novel with a quote from Heraclitus, the 5th-century B.C.E. philosopher: Heraclitus says that “a man’s character is his fate”— not race, ethnicity or physical endowments.

The publication of *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953, when he was 38 years old, launched Saul Bellow’s reputation as a novelist and established the future Nobel Laureate’s literary renown. Congress, meanwhile, would not end the exclusionary quota system imposed by the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act until 1965. The opening lines of *Augie March* —*I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, freestyle, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent—*stand as Bellow’s testament to the city that shaped him as a writer, and to the liberating potential of the American immigrant experience.

### **ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT**

David Auburn is an American playwright, stage director and screenwriter who lives in New York City. His plays include: *The Adventures of Augie March*, based on the Bellow novel (Court Theatre 2019), *Lost Lake* (Manhattan Theatre Club 2014), *The Columnist* (MTC/Broadway 2012), and *Proof* (2001 Pulitzer Prize, Tony Award, New York Drama Critics Circle Award). Films include *The Girl in the Park* (writer/director), *Georgetown*, and *The Lake House*. Stage directing credits include *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (Court Theatre, Chicago); *The Petrified Forest*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Anna Christie*, *A Delicate Balance*, *Period of Adjustment*, *Sick* (all Berkshire Theatre Group); and the Off-Broadway world premiere of Michael Weller’s *Side Effects* (MCC).

David Auburn's play *Proof* premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club in May 2000, and opened at Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre on October 24, 2000. *Proof* won the 2001 Tony Award for Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. He is also the recipient of the Guggenheim Foundation Grant, Helen Merrill Playwriting Award, and Joseph Kesselring Prize for Drama.