

Harry's Friendly Service

The Spirit of Youngstown Inspires Rob Zellers' New Play

By Heather Helinsky



Downtown Youngstown in 1930.



A billboard for a Youngstown amusement park.

It is no accident that the word “friend” is in the title of this brand new play set in Youngstown, Ohio. Think about it. What gets us through tough times? A good laugh, a shared memory, and a listening ear all offer comfort when facing a crisis.

During the peak of industrialization, Youngstown was a city where friendship and loyalty were essential. In the mills, making steel was a team effort. Outside of work, the local bars did brisk business. In the summers, Idora Park, an amusement park built in 1899, provided good times with roller coaster rides, minor league baseball games, and an exciting midway. Company picnics held from May through September encouraged co-workers to bond. Ethnic festivals helped second and third generation immigrants to celebrate their common heritage. And like Pittsburghers, those who settled in Youngstown had tremendous pride.

Residents found a good, middle-class life in this “City of Homes.” Prior to the 1970s, Youngstown had the highest rate of home ownership in the United States. Families could enjoy a bustling Downtown, which featured new public libraries, art museums, and theaters. This promise of the American Dream drew hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe in both the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The community of Youngstown faced a crisis on “Black Monday,” September 19, 1977, when the Lykes Corporation, a Southern-based conglomerate, pulled out of Youngstown and left the workers stranded. This started a chain reaction that toppled all industry in the region. Without jobs the community dispersed. This is the world in which Rob Zellers has set his play, *Harry's Friendly Service*. Within Harry's gas station a dynamic coterie of card-playing rascals is determined to stick together and keep afloat.

Harry's Friendly Service recalls the friendships that existed in shows like “Taxi” or “Cheers,” which interestingly were created during the late 70s when so many cities across America were experiencing massive industrial layoffs. Jobs may have been sparse, but at night audiences laughed at the strange assortment of characters that hung out at a Boston bar or sat around a New York City garage. We felt like they were our friends. The characters in those television series made us care about their problems, from the mundane to major life-decisions.

Zellers, who Pittsburgh audiences know well as co-author of the mega-hit *The Chief*, found his hometown of Youngstown to be the perfect place for a story about family,

Polaroids from 1977

Where were you when the lights went out? This is the question everyone was asking in 1977, the year of the big New York City blackout that left millions of people without electricity for 25 hours. It's also the year in which *Harry's Friendly Service* is set, so here's a look at some news and pop culture that surrounded Harry and his friends in 1977.



Woody Allen's romantic comedy *Annie Hall* received the Academy Award for Best Picture, with star Diane Keaton winning Best Actress and Allen taking home Oscars for Best Direction and Screenplay. On Broadway, another *Annie* was given the Tony for Best Musical and Michael Cristofer's *The Shadow Box* was named Best Play.



In New York, the July blackout resulted in looting and violence, but by fall the city bounced back and the **New York Yankees** won the World Series after six games against the **Los Angeles Dodgers**. Although **Jimmy Carter** was the new president, it was **Richard Nixon** who stunned America by going on TV with **David Frost** to talk about his part in the Watergate burglary and cover-up.

Fleetwood Mac released *Rumours* and **Stevie Nicks'** song “Dreams” (*Thunder only happens when it's raining, players only love you when they're playing*) went to number one. Also hugely popular was **Jimmy Buffett's** song about wastin' away again in “Margaritaville.” Thirty-two years later, people are still searching for that lost shaker of salt.





The implosion of US Steel's Ohio Works.

friendship, and community. And as many of us in the Pittsburgh community know, Zellers is a good friend and has been a Public Theater company member for over 20 years. As The Public's Director of Education & Outreach, he has garnered the respect and affection of thousands of students and teachers. While in his first produced play he put his heart into telling the story of Pittsburgh's beloved Steelers, he now asks audiences to take a journey with him as *Harry's Friendly Service* captures the vibrancy of another tough, blue-collar city.

Harry and his friends are part of a community which thought they had it all, and knew it all, and were blindsided when the steel industry shut down. "What happened to Youngstown is not what happened to Pittsburgh," Zellers says. "Pittsburgh was diversified enough that it was able to transform itself. Unfortunately, after the precipitous fall of the steel industry, the city of Youngstown has struggled. Attempts to transform have been many and on-going. But the spirit is there. Hope still exists."

*Heather Helinsky is the Resident Dramaturg for Pittsburgh Public Theater.
Photos courtesy of The Mahoning Valley Historical Society. www.mahoninghistory.org*

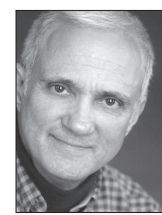
Harry's Cast

In the world of the play, Harry has seen a lot of cars come into his gas station. Below, the cast members say a few words about their own first or favorite cars.

Brooks Almy

Tina

My first car that I bought myself was a 1967 cherry red Mustang convertible. The engine had been converted so it was really fast and I blew up the engine racing a Porche over a mountain road. I was VERY young.



Alex Coleman

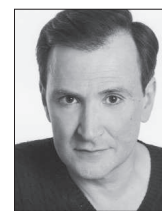
Carmine

Sports cars are great! My first was an Austin-Healey Sprite, which I paid for with a part-time job selling boy's clothing when I was 16. My current car is a Mini Cooper S and I love it! But I have to admit, the best ride I've ever had is aboard my motorcycle: a Honda Shadow 750 cc, American Classic Edition. She's two-tone, black and red, gets 60 miles to the gallon, and represents to me, and I'm sure to many others who ride on two wheels, a complete aesthetic of "casual independence." FYI: I took up motorcycling when I was 60!

Tressa Glover

Emily

My first car was a dark green soft-top Geo Tracker that "locked" at the back with a long strip of velcro and a huge zipper.



Daryll Heysham

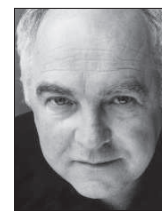
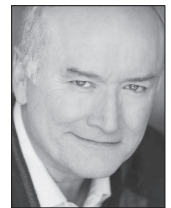
Sammy

On a trip to the South of France, between acting jobs, my wife and I got our rental car upgraded (for free) to a beautiful, brand new, black Mercedes Benz. Driving along the coast I said to her: "I'm probably the only unemployed actor, smoking a Cuban cigar, cruising along the French Riviera in a new Mercedes!"

Edward James Hyland

Harry

I've owned many cars in my lifetime but I think my most favorite was a car that I never owned. I was just 17 years old and I always, it seemed, had the use of my father's 1958 four-door, 283 horsepower, automatic, two-toned blue Chevrolet Bel Air. It was a very big car. It was great on gas, too, it got almost 16mpg! I loved that car, as did all my friends. It also had huge bench seats... remember those? A great car!



Larry John Meyers

Skiddie

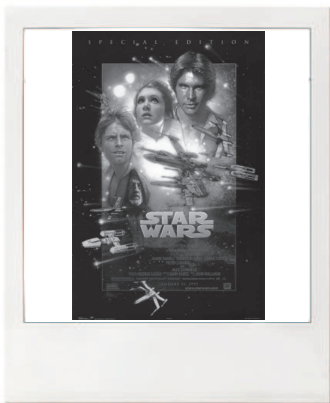
My first car also happens to have been my favorite, though oddly enough I'm not certain of the model or year. I know it was a product of Chrysler Motors. We got a good deal on it from a neighbor during the summer of 1969. The car was over 10 years old then, and had sat in my neighbor's garage for some time, as she was unable to drive it any longer. What I remember most is that it was huge, pink and white (with charcoal gray interior), and had large, impressive tail fins and an unusual (though now famous) torque-plate 3-speed push-button transmission. It was a beaut and sure looked an awful lot like this '57 New Yorker.



Joel Ripka

John

I confess to knowing very little about cars. So, when I saw "steam" gently seeping through the hood of my 1995 Silver Dodge Stratus, I dismissed it and went to work. Minutes later, I received a frantic page from the front desk and was immediately connected to the Pittsburgh fire department. Flames had begun to spit from under the hood. By the time I ran back, the fire truck was replaced by a tow truck, and I waved goodbye to my first car. Lesson learned: "smoke" and "steam" have very different meanings.



In order to get his new movie made, **George Lucas** waived his director's fee and negotiated to own the licensing rights, which were thought to be worthless by the studio. The movie, released in May, was **Star Wars**, and Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Darth Vader, C-3PO and the rest of the gang from the galaxy far, far became the biggest thing on Earth.

Elvis Presley died in August at age 42 but a new king in a flashy white suit took his place: **John Travolta** in **Saturday Night Fever**, the movie with music by the **Bee Gees** that spread Disco dancing around the world.

Donna Summer, with her hit song "I Feel Love," became the Disco queen and the brand-new Studio 54 was her palace. The culture of celebrity that began at the infamous discotheque still goes on today.

