

Interview with Ivan Zizek
Actor
July 22, 2016 – Okoboji, Iowa

Ivan Zizek has performed in such theatres as the Folger Theatre, Arena Stage, The Kennedy Centre, The Globe Theatre (London), The Orange Tree Theatre, the Flashpoint, and the Source Theatre as well as a number of festivals such as the Maryland Shakespeare Festival, Capital Fringe, Edingburg Fringe (Scotland) and more. As fellow guest actors of the Okoboji Summer Theatre (Ivan was portraying Otto Frank in *The Dairy of Anne Frank*), we sat on the porch of his cabin on a beautiful day to briefly discuss his career.

STEVE TAFT: Let's begin by introducing yourself and telling us where you are from originally, where you reside now and your educational background.

IVAN ZIZEK: I was born and raised in Frankfurt, Germany. My parents were guest workers from the former Yugoslavia (Croatia and Slovenia), and I now live in Washington, D.C. Educationally, I have a B.A. in Theatre Arts (which I received in the U.S. at Oregon State University), and an MFA in Staging Shakespeare from the University of Exeter in England and I've got an MPhil in Performance Practice which I based on Elizabethan performance practices and which I also got from the University of Exeter and currently I'm almost done with my M.A. in Elementary Education.

ST: Tell us about your entry into the theatre world and of any specific roles or experiences you found particularly encouraging.

IZ: I had my first exposure to performing in theatre in first grade where I played a very typical German folk tale character, Till Ullenspiegel, which was a prankster and I really loved it. However, in public school where I went in Frankfurt, Germany drama was not one of the classes that they would provide. And since my parents were guest workers, I had to go off to regular school, to Slovenian School. The German government wanted to make sure that the guest workers children would be ready to integrate into their own culture after their parents moved to Germany and at the Slovenian School my teacher was really into drama and she put me into a drama (play) every semester (a Slovenian drama, not a German drama). Once I got into my early teens one of the other kids told me about a professional youth theatre program for that was in Frankfurt and I auditioned and got in and I started performing professionally because I got paid. I was about 13 or 14 with the youth theatre and I graduated high school when I was 16 and auditioned to go to the conservatory in Vienna and got accepted but my father wouldn't let me. I dropped theatre until I was about 27. When I got into it after a five-year career in the fashion world. I ended up living in NYC my final year and I thought I wanted to start into theatre again. A gentlemen by the name of Vic Parillo, was a casting agent in L.A. among other things

and had studied at the Actor's Studio in NYC. He encouraged me to leave the fashion world to pursue acting because he thought I had a future in that. Since I was living in the states I was looking for a program I could afford and perhaps live amongst friends and rent cheaply and that was in Oregon. So, I did my undergraduate studies at Oregon State and afterwards I decided to go back to England . . .

ST: . . . and you studied at The Globe?

IZ: I did. I was introduced to The Globe when I was working on my MFA (Master of Fine Arts degree) and was introduced to their program where we did a two-week stint at The Globe in our final year and that's where I met the Master of Movement and the Master of Combat and also the Artistic Director, who at the time was Marc Rylance. I began researching, working and teaching for both the Master of Movement and Master of Combat and I also ended up performing on The Globe stage.

ST: You are now also an educator at a very selective preparatory school in Washington, D.C. and sharing your knowledge and talents with young people. What grades do you teach and if you would highlight the unique arts curriculum this school embraced.

IZ: The school where I am working now is an independent school called Georgetown Day School and for short, GDS. It's a social justice school founded in 1945 by a number of families that were African- American and Jewish to be the first school to integrate African-American and white children which they did. One of the things that happened when they started their curriculum which was mostly by artists, which is why the arts are pushed so hard – actors, visual artists, etc., but once they started the curriculum they noticed there was still a wall for children of color with the adults, you know when you have to say "maam" or "sir" or whatever, so they figured they would drop that so we're all on a first-name basis and that's part of the culture of the school. Because the school was started with such a strong element of the arts they decided to make that part of the core curriculum. Our students have to do music, visual arts and drama. Music and visual arts start in pre-K whereas drama starts in 1st grade and dance comes in about 6th grade.

ST: What grades do you teach?

IZ: I teach 4th, 5th, 7th and 8th grade and do some training with 1st, 2nd and all the other grades that I don't teach to prepare them for assemblies for which they do performances.

ST: What kind of training or skills do your students get exposed to and what are expectations do you have for your students?

IZ: Well, my expectation for my students first of all is that they are having fun. It's been my experience that if I'm not enjoying it, it's not sticking with me. If I have to force it I have a harder time remembering it. Number two is discipline.

(Suddenly a large plane flies overhead and we divert from the topic for a moment.)

ST: Let's take a moment to explain where you are working and what you are doing at this time.

IZ: I've never ever been truly in the mid-west. So now, first the first time in my life I am in Iowa, in Okoboji or the Lakes I guess they call it and I'm at the Okoboji Summer Theatre which is part of Stephen's College (in Columbia, Missouri) and I have been hired to play the role of Otto Frank in *The Diary of Anne Frank* and they are doing a wonderful job of flying us out, housing us and feeding us and basically our whole day is about rehearsal and performance.

ST: The cast consists of rising senior BFA's students from Stephen's College (a private women's college) and various professional guest artists.

IZ: Yes, and since Stephen's College is a women's college all of the female roles are obviously played by the students and their male counterparts are played by professionals. It's a wonderful way to have their students exposed to what is expected as a professional in the field, but also to bring their skills up to par by having someone they may look up to or respect for their work ethic, work and their resume I suppose, makes them (the students) work even harder. The young women we are working with in *Anne Frank* are unbelievable.

ST: As we do this interview there are a variety of students that are either in rehearsal for another show or in the scenic or costume shop building for a show.

IZ: What's really amazing is the hours the students work during the day and then perform at night. I couldn't do it. I'm also not twenty-years old anymore. I've paid my dues just as they are doing when I was younger in Europe where it's like that and where it was hands-on and you're working all the time. The Okoboji Summer Theatre produces nine main stage shows in ten weeks plus four children's productions in another theatre. It's unbelievable. They build these large sets and train the tech crew, the lighting, the sound and stage hands and each show is different each week in terms of casting so one week a student may be in a show and the next they may be an usher or on a crew. It's really unbelievable.

ST: Let's chat a bit about the theatre scene on the East Coast, particularly, Washington D.C.

IZ: Sure. When I first came to D.C. at the end of 2009 I knew nothing of the city theatrically. My partner and I moved there from Maine and I had no expectations. I'd never been there and it wasn't on my map theatrically. Having been there for the past seven years, there's more than eighty professional theatre companies. I'm not talking union houses, but houses that are professional and that will pay you. It's not a lot of money, but you are making something. I find when I compare it to New York I find it more interesting to go to D.C. because you can find more theatre that you could not put on in New York because of the cost of it, meaning that if it's not going to make a lot of money you can't put it on Broadway, Off-Broadway or even Off-Off-Broadway, you have to put it on somewhere, . . . in Queens or somewhere where no one is going to, whereas in D.C. you can and you find support in the community. And we have a few

union houses, large houses and I've been fortunate enough to work with some of the established houses for instance, the Folger (Shakespeare Theatre) especially since Shakespeare is one of the things I've specialized in. The Folger is really nice, to have that. For the budding actor first coming arriving onto the scene D.C. is a much better place to penetrate the market than to go to a place like NYC for instance. There are many more opportunities.

ST: What advice do you have for university theatre students pursuing a career a theatrical career?

IZ: Get as high a degree as you can so you can fall back on something that is a bit more secure than theatre. I think theatre nowadays has become so complicated because you haven't got real ensemble companies that hire you for three years or something, so you know for three years you're set. Nowadays it's from production to production and it's really difficult to keep working and pay the rent. So, I would say just get as high a degree as you can and have something to fall back on. I now teach during the day and can do theatre at night which I love because now I am not desperate to get theatre work and I can even turn it down if it's not interesting. And I enjoy the freedom to do that whereas before I would have taken anything I could possibly get whether I liked it or not to get the work and the money.

ST: For the new student just out of college and coming to Washington D.C., what can they expect in terms of audition format?

IZ: Generally what you get is about 90 seconds and for a musical you might do a one-minute monologue and 16 bars of a song. I've been to auditions where you may be asked to do two contrasting monologues and you may have three minutes for that (approximately 90 seconds for each) but you don't have to use the full three minutes. If you have a one-minute monologue that is really crisp and good that is better than a minute-and-a-half that is not really tight or polished. I've been to some castings that are just cold readings especially for some of the TV channels, like the Discovery Channel (which is in D.C.), so you're likely to get a casting call from them or things like *House of Cards*, and I've been to auditions I think you could have even recited a poem as long as they could get a sense of who you are, but I would always suggest having two contrasting monologues and never ever show the same monologue twice to the same person.

Usually to break in, especially the big houses, the first casting you will never, ever, ever get cast. Second casting you won't ever, ever get cast. Third, maybe, and I'm talking about the third year because they have a casting call about once-a-year. If they're really interested they might call you in for something specific, but I'm talking about the cattle-call, and every time you go you need to show them a different side of you. I always say to my students: "If you're not spilling your cuts and leaving a piece of your soul there with them to really give them a sense of who you are, you're wasting your and their time.
