

Starved to Make a Difference

Eric Schaeffer discusses his Eating Disorder and his New Comedy Series



Eric Schaeffer is the man behind the new FX comedy *Starved*. The show features four New York friends dealing with the struggles of their eating disorders. Schaeffer spent nine years driving a New York City taxi, while writing 20 screenplays. In 1992, one of his screenplays, *My life in Turnaround*, was made into a movie, allowing Schaeffer to turn in the keys to the taxi and focus on his movie career. The writer/producer/director/actor of *Starved* spoke with *OH Magazine* staff writer Ronda Einbinder about the new hit series via telephone from his home state of New York.



How did you get the idea for all of the quirky characters in *Starved*?

All their quiriness comes from my own quiriness. My mom laughed at the show, so my own quiriness comes from my mom and my dad. A lot is from my imagination but a lot is also from my life.

What are your food issues and where did you come up with this idea?

I always wanted to write something in the area of addiction. I have been recovering from alcohol and drug abuse for 23 years and I have been battling food addiction for the same 23 years. My recovery has been very up and down, so I thought that drug and alcohol would be a more specific disease that many people would not be able to relate with as well as food. I thought food would be something that most Americans could relate to, since Americans seem to have some sort of challenge in the eating and body image area; it is near to my own heart, as well, so that is why I decided to write the show.

Were you ever anorexic like Sam, the character you play?

Yes. I suffered from anorexia and compulsive eating disorder. At this point I have never been hospitalized or have been super thin, but I still have an unhealthy and sort of restrictive mental thinking about food, which is anorexic thinking. The fact that I have never been on a potassium drip, or near death, does not change the fact that I am still battling an eating disorder. It is like an alcoholic—once an alcoholic you are always an alcoholic.

What have you done to help yourself with your eating disorder?

I have like-minded friends who function as a support group. I also have developed an eating plan that I try to stick to each day. It is a daily battle. I get help from God and people who are in the same battle that I am in.

Have you ever reached an unhealthy weight?

Technically, by medical standards for my height, I have gone 20 pounds over my ideal weight, but I

have never been underweight. Again, it is deceiving. It is hard to detect the disease in someone like me because I was never hospitalized and I have never been 100 pounds overweight; but I have a complete mental obsession that at times runs my life.

Can you elaborate on the scene when Sam took cake out of the trashcan and ate it?

Well, taking cake out of a trashcan and eating it is something that I have done in my life. Many of the stories you see in the show are actually written from episodes in my life.

Sam is in constant pursuit of a female companion on the show. Is that the same or different from your (Eric's) life?

Sam is a less involved person than Eric in how he treats women and how he treats the world. I have had times in my life when I thought like Sam, but for the most part he is Eric twenty years ago. Hopefully, if the series gets a long life, Sam will be able to catch up to Eric when I have my finer moments, but the rest is the search for love and romance and the confusion in how to do that; this refers to all the characters not just Sam. The show portrays the confusion of intimacy and how the characters deal with that confusion.

Are you in a relationship now?

No. I have never been married but have had serious girlfriends.

The character Dan is considering weight loss surgery. He decides against surgery in the first episode. Why does he keep canceling the surgery?

He cancels the surgery because he is scared. We see in that episode that he is frightened and that he realizes that he can die from weight loss surgery, which is a reality. People do die from this surgery. Another reason for changing his mind is that there is a level of comfort in keeping his weight. People who have a lot of weight create a girth between themselves and the rest of the world. There are also psychological issues behind the comfort level of his having surgery. He is frightened spiritually, emotionally and physically.

Do you have any plans to write episodes that deal with Dan experiencing the process of weight loss surgery in order to educate the public?

I am not trying to educate. I am setting out to just write truthful stories. My goal is not to be evan-

gelical or educational. I guess ultimately my goal is to be a service to the public for sure. But I do not want to preach to people or make them think they are watching a documentary. I think through identification they will get the most inspiration and hope. Throughout the shows, Dan will try to help himself lose weight. I don't want to give the show away. He will continue to take strides and [weight loss surgery] may be a particular avenue that he will take.

Why do you think food issues are funny to the general public? Will the show help people laugh at themselves?

I don't think there is anything funny about any eating disorder, but I think that an integral part of recovery is the ability to have laughter. If you have objectivity, then you are able to laugh in a grotesque way at the stuff that happens in your life because then it means that you are not totally drowning in the emotion of the disease. Do I think bulimia is funny? Of course not. Do I think that the officer in the show on the first episode who is vomiting on the homeless man was funny? I think a lot of people laughed, even if they don't want to admit it. It does not make you an evil person because you laughed at something that was disgusting.

Do you normally write about offbeat, quirky characters as you did in your film "Never Again" and are currently doing in "Starved"?

I don't set out to be quirky; I just set out to be truthful. That is my sensibility. That is how I live my life through those characters. That is just how my mind works.

What can we look forward to seeing in the future with these characters?

I don't want to give too much away, but it will be much of the same. It will be the struggles of developing healthy eating habits and finding relationships that work for them, along with finding jobs that they feel good about.



Starved airs Thursday nights at 10 p.m. on FX. Please check your local TV listings.

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