

Comedian Adam Cayton-Holland brings one-man show to TACA

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Denver stand-up Adam Cayton-Holland reflects on sister's death by suicide in new show.

When the Denver-based stand-up comedian Adam Cayton-Holland published his memoir "Tragedy Plus Time" in 2018, he thought it might be the beginning and the end of him reckoning publicly with his sister Lydia's death by suicide.

Five years earlier he had found her body in her Denver apartment, just as his comedy career was taking off with a big break at the Montreal Just for Laughs festival, soon to be followed by national TV spots, the formation of his troupe The Grawlix and the launch of their TruTV sit-com "Those Who Can't."

"I sort of thought that writing the book would purge me of the desire to talk about this onstage," Cayton-Holland said in a recent phone interview from Denver. "But it's weird. If anything, I learned I want to talk about it more onstage, like I opened the can of worms."

Cayton-Holland is now bringing his one-man show



Adam Cayton-Holland will perform his one-man show "Happy Place" on Friday at TACA. (Courtesy photo)

about it, "Happy Place," to the Arts Campus at Willits on Friday night, one of a handful of recent national performances.

Soon after he published the book, Cayton-Holland found himself writing a stage show — something different than his usual brand of smart and cynical stand-up — revolving around Lydia's depression and his own mental-health struggles with a dose of humor.

He was compelled to write the book, Cayton-Holland said, because he hadn't found a way to talk about Lydia yet onstage.

"It was such a gut punch, that it just sort of knocked me off my axis," he said of her death. "I got back into stand-up, but

after awhile it just felt like I was not talking about what was on my mind."

The book and now the one-man show have underscored how many people have similar stories to his and how much people do want to hear those stories.

Adam Cayton-Holland wrote about his sister's death by suicide in the 2018 memoir "Tragedy Plus Time." He has loosely based his new one-man show, "Happy Place," on the book. (Courtesy Touchstone Books)

"When it comes to mental illness, there's no six degrees (of separation)," Cayton-Holland said. "It's one degree. Everybody knows somebody

who has battled this stuff. But regardless, I didn't want it to just be some sort of self-help therapy show. I wanted it to be funny."

In part that's because Lydia herself was so funny and he wanted it to live up to her high standards.

"I would hate this show if it was just like, 'Oh, here's my sob story for an hour,'" he said.

The memoir proved to be an invaluable read, with endearingly funny and self-deprecating but unsparing honesty, chronicling the emotional upheavals of loving someone with depression. It didn't offer any easy answers or platitudes, but felt necessary. If the one-man show can follow that lead, it could be in step with the pandemic's fraught and often grim historical moment as mental-health struggles hit every corner of society.

Cayton-Holland hasn't done a one-man show before. And, though it's still him talking onstage for about as long as he does in a feature stand-up set, the form is different.

He started kicking around the "Happy Place" material in 2019, he recalled.

"It's such a whole different endeavor than stand up, you have their attention longer and it doesn't have to be as joke-heavy," he said. "But you still want them to be laughing."

Unlike stand-up, it didn't start



Denver-based comedian Adam Cayton-Holland has performed regularly in Colorado's mountain towns. (Aspen Times archive/Chris Cohen)

with informal gigs where he was working out material from notes onstage, steadily sharpening it and seeing it take shape. Instead it started as a long-form essay-like piece of writing. He started performing an early version of it around Denver in 2019.

"It was really kind of humming in 2020," Cayton-Holland recalled.

He hit several comedy festivals with the material and booked an international premiere at the prestigious Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Then, of course, the pandemic hit, shut down comedy clubs everywhere and the live event industry, canceled Edinburgh and kept Cayton-Holland off-stage.

As he slowly returned to stand-up in past year — including opening the new TACAW venue for comedy with Ben Roy and Andrew Overdahl of the Grawlix in September — he hit the stage but left the one-man show material behind. (With

two toddler sons at home in Denver, Cayton-Holland is "pretty into the dad thing" and not touring much, but remains a committed regular onstage at TACAW: "It's a very free creative space and so artist-friendly. I really love what they're doing up there.")

In late 2021, Cayton-Holland kicked the dust off and revived it. Looking at it for the first time in almost two years was an odd bit of time travel.

"It's interesting to be really working on something and then stop for two years — and two years that are some of the most F-ed up of any of our lives," he said.

He revised it, found many places to add jokes, and found a version of "Happy Place" that he now hopes to sell as a comedy special.

"It feels like it's ready to me," Cayton-Holland said.

The TACAW show will be the third performance this month, coming on the heels of a performance for an audience at Union Hall in Brooklyn, which included representatives from several networks and prospective buyers for the special.

While it's cathartic to perform, Cayton-Holland is cognizant of the show's emotional toll on him. He's hoping to record it, find a larger viewing audience, and move on.

"It takes a lot out of me and I don't want to just keep doing it ad nauseam with no goal in mind," he said. "You just create the thing and hope it resonates — and certainly it is resonating with audiences and a lot of people tell me it's helped them. So I'm really proud of it."