

Doug Moe: Laureate Tuschen lives on in son's film



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The car, a 1964 Mustang, was parked on a hill next to a cemetery.

Given what was transpiring in the back seat, he began to worry whether he and the woman had set the emergency brake.

He imagined the car cascading backward, into the cemetery, the two of them in a stage of undress, the car rolling over the

tombstone of someone's Uncle Harry.

The wild ride that was John Tuschen's life produced many memorable images.

Tuschen, who died in Madison in 2005, at 55, was the city's first poet laureate, appointed in 1977 by his friend, Mayor Paul Soglin.

Tuschen — never John — was my friend, too. Late in his life, we had drinks once in a while at Nick's on State Street.

I first met him not long after his poet laureate designation, at a writing seminar at a Madison high school.

I later wrote that I liked him immediately, in part because he looked like I thought a poet should look:

"Tuschen was thin, angular, unkempt, shy, complicated, gentle in person but fierce on the page, wry, contrary, a reader, a drinker — a man never to be gentrified. The students revered him."

I always enjoyed hearing from him, even the phone calls and emails when Tuschen felt obliged to rant about a humorless bureaucrat or bill collector who had come into his orbit.

Late in 2003, Tuschen sent a note along that mentioned "a sweaty night in July" of that year when Tuschen's son, Jordan Caylor, had taped his father reading his poems aloud. It was after midnight in Tuschen's State Street apartment.

"We recorded about 12 of his favorite poems," Caylor recalled recently. One of them was "Uncle Harry's Tombstone."

Earlier this year, Caylor, 35, who lives in Spain, spent several months putting together a short film that combines a jazz score and animated images with Tuschen's reading of "Uncle Harry's Tombstone."

The brief film, which I love — it reminds me of the opening of a David Lynch movie — was recently accepted into the Zebra Poetry Film Festival, which will be held in October in Berlin, Germany.

Caylor wants to attend, but at this point is short of funds to do so. He is living in Cadiz, in southwest Spain, married to a Spanish woman, and working as a freelance videographer. Given Spain's staggering unemployment, work hasn't been easy to find.

Karin Wolf, arts program administrator for the city of Madison and an admirer of Tuschen's poetry, encouraged Caylor to set up an account on IndieGoGo, a web funding platform, which Jordan has done.

If you visit www.indiegogo.com/gettingtuschentoberlin, you can view the film and contribute to Caylor's effort to raise \$1,000 to finance the trip. Mayor Soglin was among the early contributors.

When I spoke recently with Jordan, by phone from Spain, I was struck by how similar he sounded to his dad.

"People say that a lot," he said.

Jordan's parents, Tuschen and Suni L. Caylor, never married, and Jordan took his mother's name. He considers Madison his hometown but he was in and out of the city growing up. He recalled living near Beloit for a time when he was maybe 8 years old and listening to his dad read poetry on Madison radio.

"My relationship with my dad was kind of tricky," Jordan said. "We're extremely similar, though he was smarter than me. He always seemed to know when something was happening in my life before I did. It was a strong relationship on a deep level, but not much on a superficial level, if that makes sense."

Talking to Jordan, memories of his dad rushed back to me. I remembered the day in 2002 when Tuschen called to say he had been in a used book store on the West Side — not his usual turf — and found one of his poetry collections for sale for \$250. When he asked about the price, he was told the author was a local poet who had recently died.

I remembered the story of his first reading in Madison, in the early 1970s, when he was so scared he offered a stranger \$10 to read for him. The man declined. Tuschen read. Someone in the mesmerized audience remarked, "Now there's a poet."

I asked Jordan what he thought his dad might think of the "Uncle Harry's Tombstone" film.

"I have a feeling he would really dig it," Jordan said.

Me, too.

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Doug Moe writes about Madison and the people who make it a unique place. His column runs Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays in the State Journal.