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## T. Ryder Smith on Playing the Corpse in 'Dead Man's Cell Phone'



Photo: Joan Marcus

On Friday, February 8, T. Ryder Smith was heading into a five-show closing weekend of *In This Corner* at San Diego's Old Globe when director Anne Bogart called him from New York and asked him to take the role of the titular carcass in Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, opposite Mary-Louise Parker. (Actor Bill Camp had a scheduling conflict.) "They said, 'Can you be here Tuesday?'" says Smith, who ditched his plans — and an already-leased car — in L.A. to do just that. He spoke with Vulture about learning lines under pressure and playing dead onstage. *Cell Phone* opens tonight from Playwrights Horizons.

### **What was it like stepping into the role midway through previews?**

Like taking over the wheel of a truck on the highway. Years ago I had done

*Underneath the Lintel* downtown under rather grim circumstances — it was right after 9/11, and it was in a frozen zone. There was a complication with the theater rental, and the producer said, “Here’s the situation. We’ve lost rehearsal weeks so you’d have to start tomorrow morning, you would rehearse six days, and you would open for press on the seventh. Are you willing to do it?” It was a one-person show, 60 pages of single-spaced text, and we did it. And I thought, *Surely that now fixes some sort of mark. It will never be that stressful again.* Till this came along. I don’t know what my possible encore could be after this in terms of pressure.

**Maybe a day next time?**

I think I will memorize, rehearse, and perform a one-man *Coriolanus*. I’ll do it in three hours.

**You do have quite a monologue in the second act. Is that something you just keep going over and over?**

I’ve done a lot of one-person shows, and I’ve found that just in order to have some sort of psychic ease, you need to run through the entire show twice before you do it each day. So when I did *Thom Pain*, I recited that entire hour-and-twenty-minute piece twice a day before I walked onstage. I do this one a couple of times when I wake up, I do it while riding the subway — I probably do the monologue eight times a day.

**Whereas in the first act you’re essentially just playing dead. Mary-Louise Parker pokes you a little, but you’re really not moving. How do you sit so still?**

Yes, it’s bizarre. It seems like a simple assignment: Don’t swallow, don’t move, don’t blink for seven or ten minutes of the scene. But I guess it makes you aware of how much instinctive nervous movement the human body has when you try to prevent it from doing any of those things. I’ve never gotten through a performance yet where I didn’t blink once, and on one particularly bad matinee — the heat in the theater must have been dry — I was actually crying. Tears were just streaming down my cheeks because I was trying so hard to keep my lids up. I can often hear sort of a running narration about my character down there in the first couple of rows: “Is he dead?” “Oh, he didn’t move,” “Is that his phone ringing?”

**You can hear people saying that?**

Oh, I can hear them, yeah. And of course you’re aware of every sound backstage, and the things you have to guard against are instinctive blinking when someone gets close to you. When she touches the spoon to my nostrils to see if I am breathing, it sometimes sends a static-electricity spark up my nose. I feel I can now have a second career as one of those people on the subway who stands there not moving, make a couple of dollars on the way home.

**Do you think you’ll get a break after this one?**

A break? I don’t know what that word means! I have to look that up. —*Lori Fradkin*

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