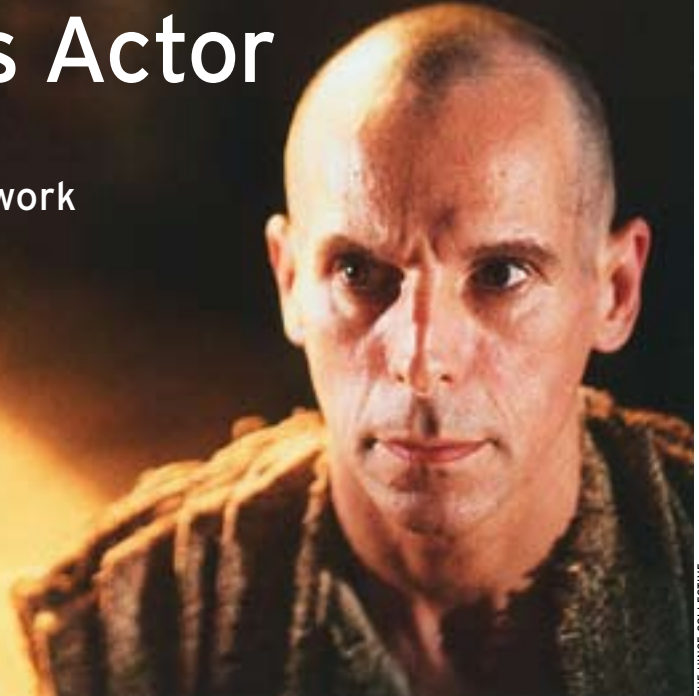


T. Ryder Smith: Thinking Man's Actor

An abundance of ideas fuels
the prolific downtown artist's work

BY SARAH HART



THE HINGE COLLECTIVE

T. Ryder Smith in Anne Washburn's *I Have Loved Strangers*, produced by New York City's Clubbed Thumb.

T Ryder Smith never meant to become an actor. “I agree with whoever it was who said, ‘You don’t *become* an actor as much as you realize you *are* one,’” he says. “It’s a mystery to me that I act at all because I’m an intensely shy and solitary person.”

Luckily, the 48-year-old artist—who claims, however ironically, that he considers himself a film director, an as-yet-unformed career he plans to pursue “eventually”—persists in confronting the tension between his dread of entering a theatre full of people and his compulsion to perform for them. He has been a fixture of New York’s downtown theatre scene since the mid 1980s and, in the past several years, has seemingly materialized everywhere at once—most recently in the Old Globe’s premiere of *Lincolnesque* in San Diego, Calif., which runs through Sept. 10.

Smith possesses extraordinary tools as an actor, gifts that belie his modesty and introversion in their ability to sear his performances into the memories of audiences. He pushes his angular frame to dominate the stage—writhing in spiritual paroxysms before virtually melting into the floor, as in Anne Washburn’s *I Have Loved Strangers*, produced by New York City’s Clubbed Thumb this past June, or striding, booted and bewigged, across Richard Foreman’s playground of a set in *The Gods Are Pounding My Head!* (AKA *Lumberjack Messiah*) last year. *New York Magazine* deemed his the best voice of 2005, “beamed forward in time from a Gothic novel.” He nimbly handles the linguistic gymnastics of hyper-literate playwrights like Glen Berger (*Underneath the Lintel* and *The Wooden Brecks*), Will Eno (*Thom Pain*) and David Greenspan

(*She Stoops to Comedy*). Even without uttering a word, his eyes impart both an absolute compassion for humanity as well as recognition of all its colossal failure.

But more than any of these, Smith’s collaborators cite his brain. “I like actors who you can always see thinking,” says Foreman, who also directed Smith in *King Cowboy Rufus Rules the Universe!* “He’s not just smart intellectually,” adds playwright Barbara Wiechmann, who is developing a full-length monologue, *Robinson Awake*, with Smith. “He has great instincts not just about acting, but about directing and all the visual elements. He has fabulous ideas about sound and light. He sees all sorts of angles and brings all that to bear on what he does.”

In *The Wooden Brecks*, produced by MCC Theater this past winter, Smith played Jarl van Hooter, playwright Berger’s gender flip on the damsel in distress. Hooter has never left his lighthouse where he devours mail-order encyclopedias, learning the world he can’t bring himself to occupy down to its tiniest minutia (or, in the play’s Scots-inflected vernacular, “every twitch, every flap of every feather in this Wide Winking World”). The image is an apt one for Smith, who opted out of college to sit alone in a room reading for several years. “I realized in high school that I wasn’t getting an education,” he says, “and I wanted one.” (“Of all the actors I’ve worked with, as far as I can tell, he’s the most widely read,” Foreman notes.)

Smith still mistrusts many aspects of formal education, especially in the form of actor training. “I think you learn to act by acting,” he says. “I was never interested in studying it. If you

institutionalize a standard—if actors are being taught what is ‘allowed’ in terms of technique and style, they’re also being sculpted to express a certain psychology. And that lends a sameness to the work.” He did attend film school for a while—albeit in the guise of a woman. While taking a continuing education course in film technique, Smith met—and fell for—a woman with little interest in finishing her film degree, much to the dismay of her parents. So Smith went to school for her, illegally, for a couple of years. “She graduated and her parents were happy,” says Smith. “Now she works in the film industry. And I got kind of a film-school education.”

Smith’s mind operates in overdrive. His conversation is a blitzkrieg of ideas—ranging from politics (“bad theatre”) to plants (his sister is a horticulturist, and both his parents and two elder brothers are avid gardeners) to molecular biology (“Is the fundamental interaction of cells symbiotic or antagonistic?”). He feeds off the intelligence of those around him, including audiences. “The most terrifying body of people I have ever faced was the audience for a Foreman play,” he says. “They’re just stacked up to the ceiling

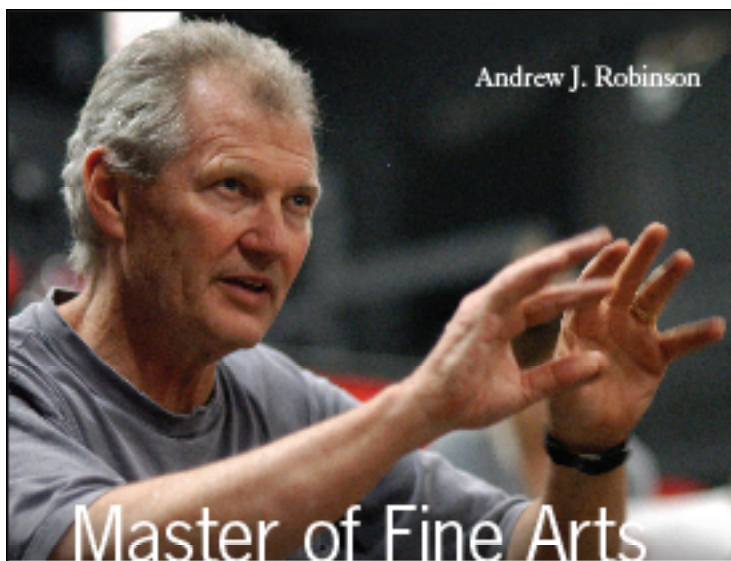
Smith rattles off a short list of performances—not productions, but individual nights—when he believes he actually acted well.

in front of you, fully lit, this wall of the most intelligent, disillusioned, articulate, impatient people in the world—all watching you with their arms folded. It’s brilliant—I mean, to try to rise to that.”

ACTING, FOR SMITH, IS ABOUT ASKING what it means to have feelings, to have thoughts, to exist. “What the actor brings,” he posits, “is the visceral, grunting, thumping-the-chest gravity, the sweat and pathetic nakedness of the possibly more intellectualized task of the playwright, and the possibly more theoretical mission of the director. The actor adds the human.” He is also concerned with the psychology of the person watching. “T. is an incredibly sensitive actor, sensitive

to what is happening externally,” notes Hal Brooks, who directed Smith in *Thom Pain*. “Sometimes I’d get the feeling that if a person in the back shifted in their seat, T. would feel it.” Smith says, “You look at the palpable lives of the audience before you, and you can only respond with compassion.”

In *Robinson Awake* the character exists uncertainly in the space between waking and sleeping. Appearing in and out of the light, Robinson urgently communicates his (possible) encounter with an unseen girl upstairs, even as his reverie is broken up by stumbling memory and muted sounds coming from somewhere outside. “He’s asking implicitly for a confirmation that you saw and heard it all too,” Smith thinks. “It implicates the audience in that same dreamlike flux.” Smith and Wiechmann have worked on the piece for several years, bit by bit, and they hope to produce it in the next year. “We’re both at points where work isn’t worth doing if you’re not going to do it full out,” says Wiechmann. “I have to emphasize how hard T. works. He memorized the whole thing in a week. He stays up all night. He’s sort of ruthless about wanting his own work to be excellent.” ▶



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Those high standards accompany Smith in all his endeavors. He relishes the labor of making theatre, and far prefers rehearsals to performances in their potential for discovery. "I imagine notebooks filled with graphs, charts, diagrams, equations, etc.," says Brooks. "I think he enjoys the indirect approach between two points, and this in a way shapes his performances." Washburn, in whose macabre *Apparition* Smith also appeared (as a baby-eating demon, among other specters) last year, concurs: "His rehearsal methods are meticulous and mysterious. He can be deeply exasperating, but I've never seen him turn in a performance that was less than astonishing."

Smith himself rattles off a very short list of performances—not productions, but individual nights—when he believes he actually acted well. But rather than frustrate him, that small tally stirs him on. He recounts with wonder one such moment, a two-and-a-half-minute pause he took during a rehearsal for *The Seagull*, directed by David Herskovits at Target Margin Theatre in 1999. "I was simultaneously the character, thinking and living and breathing as Trigorin; the actor, thinking about how to play Trigorin; and a



CAROL ROSEGG

Smith in Glen Berger's *The Wooden Brecks*, produced by MCC Theater.

human being on the planet looking at another human being. And I lived in those three worlds simultaneously."

Then he leavens his marvel, deadpanning: "David said afterwards, 'That was

interesting. You might want to shorten the pause a bit.' But I remember walking home that night and thinking that if I never acted again, at least I would have known for that one moment something of what it was."

Since then, Smith has tried to conjure those three worlds in each of his roles. He hypothesizes that they are, perhaps, the modern, the postmodern and the ancient. "The irreducible human experience would be the ancient; the modern would be the characterization; and the postmodern would be the self-awareness," he says, then asks if we can play back the tape to see if that sounds right.

SMITH ALSO CARRIES AN AWARENESS of fragility. "If there are engines to what I do as an actor, one of them is my shyness," he says. "And the other is what I learned from being sick." It was on Jan. 4, 2000, between 9 and 10 p.m., Smith says, that he became "instantaneously and mysteriously ill." For the next six weeks the symptoms piled on—he lost 25 pounds, his hair began to fall out, his teeth were abscessing, his fingernails turned black, his heart skipped beats. After literally collapsing in a state of feverish nausea (he

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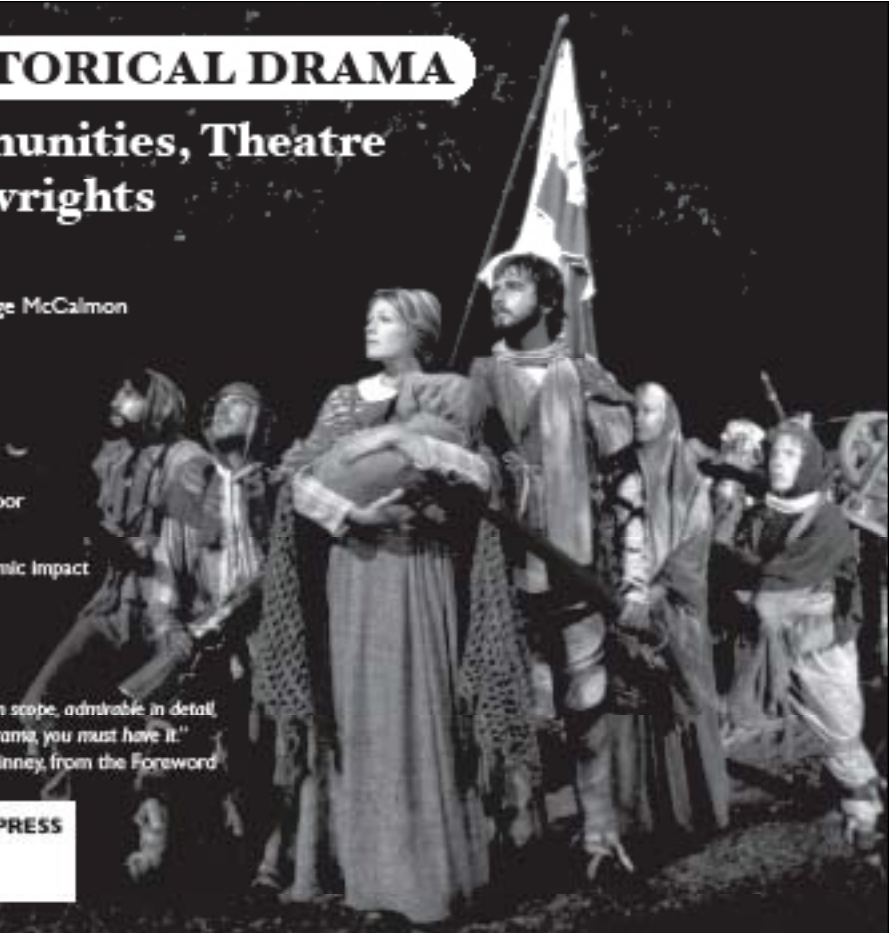
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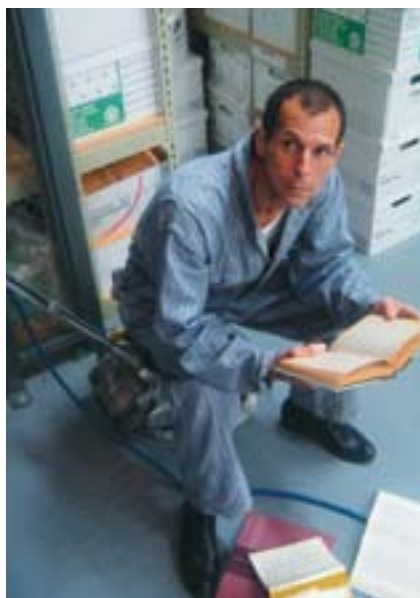
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believes it was a sort of heart attack), Smith made a decision: "If I was going to die, I was going to die on stage." So he willed himself to stand and walk the 50 blocks to the theatre to perform that night. "I started saying yes to every job. Of course, as chance would have it, it was at that time that I started to get offered the shows that I had always wanted with the directors and playwrights that I had dreamed of working with."

Over the next two years, Smith saw 11 doctors. Eventually, he was diagnosed with Celiac Disease, in which the body has a toxic reaction to gluten—"And as a person who'd been a vegetarian for a quarter of a century, I was virtually made of the stuff." But he's performed consistently since, remaining true to his oath to work, and his health has vastly improved.

A *New Yorker* by birth and trade, Smith is presently ensconced in "beatific" San Diego. "It is warm, but never hot, and cascades everywhere with the most astonishing array of trees and flowers. The ocean is bottle-green and frothy white. Cars wait for you to cross the street. People say hello as they pass you *on the sidewalk*. I'm confused," he says. Prior



Smith in John Strand's *Lincolnesque* at the Old Globe in San Diego, Calif.

to his illness, Smith made a living doing one or two regional shows a year, but this stint at the Old Globe marks his first job out of town since then, a change he is enjoying both atmospherically and professionally.

Smith admires *Lincolnesque*—a dark political comedy in which he plays a janitor who thinks he's Abraham Lincoln—for its rule-breaking. "John Strand has a lot of different life experiences that he uses as a playwright. This is not a play that has been workshopped or overdeveloped, so it has the messiness of life without being at all a realistic play. It's exciting to work with that sort of raw energy and anarchic structure." And Smith feels a kinship with director Joe Calarco. "The paradox that I've come late to realize," muses Smith, "is that the absence of a method is in fact how to approach a play—a kind of *not* knowing where you might make your discoveries. Joe's approach is predicated on everyone not knowing *yet*. And he encourages that kind of recklessness in rehearsal."

That messiness and unknowing serve easily as life metaphors for Smith, who delights most in the unearthing of new possibilities, both on stage and off. "I seem to be in no hurry in life," he says as he considers future paths. "I've recognized that we do things as we're able to do them, and we receive what we're able to receive." ❧

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