

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 23 May 2006 23:33

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**"I think my forte is storytelling. I just like to pretend. And any experience that I have where I believe the actor or actors are as close to pretending as possible? That's what gets me off, man. To me, that's what acting's all about." -- Tom Walljasper**

*Tom Walljasper is a professional pretender. After graduating from Davenport West High School and studying film acting at Los Angeles' prestigious Strasberg Institute, he returned to Davenport in 1986 to major in theatre at the city's now-defunct Marycrest College. ("I never planned on going to college whatsoever," he says. "I came back because everyone there said, 'You need a degree. Get a college degree. We've all got 'em.'") Upon returning, Tom was immediately introduced to his future wife, Shelley – "Shelley and I met in late August, we started goin' out in September, and I believe it was March or April we found out we were gonna be Mom and Dad." Tom and Shelley married, graduated, raised a family – Bristy, 18, Myka, 12, and Krianna, 3 – and, from 1994 to 1999, ran a performing-arts studio for students called Ta Da. ("We were really proud of the stuff that we did," he says. "We really pushed the envelope.") While Shelley currently teaches music at Jordan Catholic School, Tom has forged a life as both "a stay-at-home dad" and a professional actor for the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse ... unsteady though a full-time performing career can be. ("Shelley deserves all of the credit in my life," he says. "Without her, we'd be homeless, obviously.") Tom is nearly legendary for his loose-limbed performance as the Scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz, but he has also, since 1992, appeared in more than 40 other productions at Circa '21, and will be seen there again this summer in On Golden Pond (opening June 30), in addition to co-starring in My Verona Productions' The Pillowman, premiering at Rock Island's ComedySportz venue this Friday.*

*Tom isn't just an actor in the Quad Cities. He happens to be the finest actor in the Quad Cities. And while Tom explains his craft, allow others who've worked with him over the years to explain why.*

**"He does everything with such ease on stage. You know, a lot of actors have to put on a character. Tom doesn't. You don't really have to direct Tom. You're like, 'Okay, we got**

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**Tom. There’s one less person to worry about.”**

– Paul Bernier, director, performer (*Catch Me If You Can, Who’s Under Where?, Father of the Bride*)

Freshman year, I was doing *The Lion in Winter*. I came to rehearsal – like, the second or third rehearsal – and I made the mistake of going up to [director Leslie Shimmelfinnig] and going, “What are we doing at rehearsal today?” And he said, “You don’t know what we’re doing?” I was like, “Well ... no.” He was like, “Then you need to go. And you come back tomorrow when you know what we’re doing. You’re not prepared.” And I got that pit in my stomach, like ... he’s right

Now, to this day, I want to know what we’re doing at rehearsal tomorrow, because I will be somewhat prepared – look over the pages, the music, whatever it is that is called for tomorrow is my *homework*. I need to know what we’re doing at rehearsal. ‘Cause if I show up unprepared, then I’m gonna let people down.

**“Tom sets the bar, and you quickly realize you haven’t set your own bar nearly high enough. He is what a Method actor should be – professional, always bringing something to the table, always open, and always nice**

**. That’s something you don’t see in a profession full of egos and suck-ups.”**

– Adam Lewis, performer (*The Pillowman, On Golden Pond, Grease*)

It was kicked into my head very, very early about what you do and what you don’t when you’re working. You gotta practice hard, man, and you just have to give everything you have. You have to leave exhausted. If you leave singin’ and f---in’ dancing, you haven’t worked, man. You need to be ready to sit down, have a beer, smoke a cigarette, and say, “Jesus, man, I’m *exhausted*.” Emotionally, physically... and I don’t work with a lot of people who see

it that way. My college professor, Peggy [Brinkoft], said to me that everybody exhausts and exhumes the same amount of spirit and physical energy during the show, whether they’re on stage every minute, or they have a walk-on. Everybody should – when the curtain goes down and everybody bows – everybody should feel the same.

*Drained*

. And I’ve always said, “Yeah. That’s right.”

**“I have worked all over the country, and Tom Walljasper is one of the most giving, versatile, and utterly professional actors I have ever had the pleasure of working with. We all love working with actors that make us look good. Tom is one of those actors.”**

– Kimberly Kurtenbach, performer (*On Golden Pond, The King & I, The Three Little Pigs*)

One of the things they taught us [at Strasberg] was, “You cannot be a true actor until you let all the walls down and feel free to do whatever needs to be done.” And so I kinda bought into that. No matter what it is. If a character needs to do it, it needs to be done. It needs to be said. As an

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actor, I feel you gotta get that embarrassment feeling *out*. You’ll never be able to try anything, you’ll never be able to pretend with somebody, if you feel embarrassed about it.

**“I directed him in *Whose Wife Is It Anyway?*, and unfortunately, I’ve been acting with him ever since. I will *never work with him again. He’s never prepared*  
. ... It’s like pulling *teeth* to work with that guy. ... What can I say? He’s a joy. He stayed on-stage for that whole intermission. Did he tell you about that?”**

– Michael Oberfield, director, performer (*Almighty Bob, Aesop’s Dynamic Duo, A Christmas Carol*)

The first main-stage show that I did at Circa was *Whose Wife Is It Anyway?* I was playing a dead body. And Denny [Hitchcock, the show’s co-director] was like, “Hmmm ... how do we get you out of there without people seeing?” And I was like, “Well, I’ll just *stay* there.” He was like, “*Really*?” “Well, why not?” “You don’t want to take a break?” It’s like, “Take a *break* ? I don’t want the audience to *see* me!” I didn’t want to break that illusion. So, for the whole intermission, every show, I stayed there in the window, trying to do the breathing exercises they taught us sophomore year. Breathe in, breathe out, through the nose, relax myself. ... To me, it wasn’t a big deal. In my head, that’s what you’re *supposed* to do.

**“Tom and I have a resemblance. And when he’s in a show, customers will always tell me what I great job I’m doing up there, thinking I’m him. I always say, ‘Thank you.’ I’ve always been happy to take credit for his work.”**

– Brad Hauskins, performing waiter, performer (*Who’s Under Where?, Sing Hallelujah, Stuart Little*)

[In *The Wizard of Oz*] my thought was, “It’s a dude made of straw.” So, to me, that meant there’s no balance, and there’s always movement, all the time, because there’s nothing there to sustain him. I figured he can’t *stand* there. He’s a *straw dude*!

**“During our run of *Annie*, Tom and I shared a dressing room. Every night, Tom would sit at his station, in costume, staring at himself in the mirror ... and I always wondered, even into the 10th and 11th week of the run, why he was still doing this. But as an actor, you tell the story with your eyes. And with Tom, you can make that eye connection and know he’s giving back more than you’ll ever need. He’s just f---ing brilliant.”**

## The Pretender: Things You Should Know About – and From – the Area’s Best Actor, Tom Walljasper

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– Jonathan Goodman, performer (*Joseph & the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Annie*, *Cinderella*)

I believe that with musicals, the story is most important. That’s what I love about musicals. I love trying to figure out, you know, why this scene is important to the musical. Why this song is important to the musical. It’s not about looking good and flashy and singin’ the right notes. It’s about what it does for the *story*.

[In *Jesus Christ Superstar*] I was very intimidated musically. They were all f---in’ singers – they were *rock-band* singers, they sounded great – and here I am an *actor*

But what happened by the end of the run was that I had a lot of the cast coming up to me and telling me that they could always count on me

*being*

there. And I didn’t understand, at first, what they were talking about, until

*Jesus*

said to me one night, “I can look into everybody’s eyes, but when I look in

*your*

eyes, I know that we’re

*there*

. I am Jesus. And you’re there.” And I’m like, “All right, dude.”

**“Tom Walljasper brings a naturalism to the stage that is impossible to teach. His instincts and ease on the stage make him the kind of actor every director clamors to have.”**

– Corinne Johnson, St. Ambrose University theatre professor, director, performer (*Never Too Late*, *The Three Little Pigs*)

It’s really hard to *teach* somebody how to be an actor. I think you can teach somebody how to sing. And I think you can probably teach somebody to move, too. But to pretend and to communicate and be a *character*? Be somebody else and really make somebody believe it? You can’t teach it, man. You either got it or you don’t. You can either be a storyteller or you can’t. I just don’t think there’s any in-between.

**“I remember being in one of his original musicals that was to preview on September 11, 2001, and open the next day. I thought for sure we were going to close the show, or at the very least postpone the preview, but Tom made it very clear that what we are doing is an escape from what is happening outside. It was our job to do the show as planned, and let the 30, 40 people that were there get away from all of it. That was one of the ‘wow’ moments, you know? One of those moments where I learned that what I do is so important, not only to myself but to others.”**

– Tristan Layne Tapscott, former Ta Da student, performer (*The Pillowman*)

I never really liked to consider myself a teacher. I always told ’em I was a *coach*. But I was kind of a hard-ass, too, at times. I just tried to make them

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*respect*

theatre, and the etiquette of it. This is something that Peggy Brinkoft taught me. Before you walk in the theatre door, there’s a rug there. No matter what theatre you go to. New York, Alabama, f---in’ Hawaii ... there’s a rug at the theatre door, and you take your shoes and you wipe the shit off. ‘Cause when you walk into the theatre? Nothing else exists except the show. The world, the characters, the relationships ... that’s all there is. Anything else has nothing to do with it. Leave it outside.

**“I’ve always admired Tom’s ability. In every show I’ve seen him in, regardless of how large or small the part, he’s always made an excellent impression.”**

– Sean Leary, *The Pillowman* director, *Rock Island Argus / Dispatch* arts editor

I saw an interview with Meg Ryan, and she said, “I used to read reviews but I don’t anymore. Because when they would be positive, I would think, ‘Wow, I’m really good,’ and I wouldn’t work as hard. And when they were negative, I would think, ‘God, they’re *right*,’ and I would *push*, and it wouldn’t be good.” And I started to think, “You know what? I’m the same way. I’m

*exactly*

the same way.” So I don’t read ‘em. I think they’re probably more for the producers and the audience than they are for the actors. Actors wanna hear great things said about ‘em. They don’t want to hear that they suck.

**“More than one director with Broadway experience who has worked with him at Circa ’21 has said he should be acting on Broadway. I certainly agree. I know when Tom is in a show that his work will be impeccable, his discipline beyond reproach, and his performance will be spectacular.”**

– Dennis Hitchcock, Circa ’21 producer/director

To tell you the truth, I’m not a theatre-goer. F---in’ *hate* it. If you would say to me, “I have front-row tickets for you for a Broadway play, a Broadway musical of your choice, or the state championship of the Idaho high-school football team. Which would you choose?” There’s no choice for me, man. No decision whatsoever. I’m goin’ to the football game. I cannot

*stand*

to go to the theatre.

I’m envious. That’s what I feel the most. I sit there the whole time wishing I was up there.

“Yeah, you guys are doing great, you look like you’re having a great time, but I don’t want to be out *here!* I want to be up there with *you!* You guys get to have all the fun and I get to sit out here and *applaud? Come on!*”

**“He is the Fred Astaire of actors. He’s the gold standard.”**

– Ann Nieman, director (*Grease, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, Jesus Christ Superstar*)

I’ve never found the perfect performance. But I sure damn well *try* every time.

*For tickets to both The Pillowman and On Golden Pond, call (309)786-7733, extension 2.*