Written by Mike Schulz
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Five minutes into our interview, local actor Eddie Staver III says something that I can't quite believe: "Comedy scares me."

He does, however, quickly amend the statement: "Comedy scares the *hell* out of me."

Given the actor's last two area performances - and *only* two area performances - in The Green Room's *The Glass Menagerie* and *Car ousel,* this comes as a surprise. Neither Tennessee Williams' memory play nor Rodgers & Hammerstein's musical is considered a knee-slapper, of course, but within their earnest

contexts, Staver was as comedically inspired as he was dramatically forceful; his throwaway wit (and drunken stumbling) as
Menagerie
's narrator, Tom, was subtly hilarious, and in
Carousel
's early scenes, Staver's brazen egomania as Billy Bigelow earned numerous (and
appropriate)
laughs - not an easy feat when your production is set in a German concentration camp.

Staver, however, insists that he still doesn't feel entirely comfortable with comedy. "I just haven't *done* it," says the actor whose résumé includes dramatic roles in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* an d Martin McDonagh's
The Pillowman.
"I really haven't been in a show that required a lot of comedy. Until
this
."

"This" is *Fully Committed*, Staver's latest Green Room endeavor, in which the performer not only has to be funny, but be funny all *alone*, and be funny some 35 times over. Becky Mode's one-act farce (running January 25 through 27) concerns Sam, an unemployed actor who takes reservations in the basement of a swanky New York eatery, and the solo production finds Staver's character also portraying the nearly three dozen figures Sam has contact with - callers, customers, and fellow employees.

Like many actors, Staver is acquainted with the behind-the-scenes goings-on in restaurants, having worked as a waiter in Soho, New York, and locally at Johnny's Italian Steakhouse. He also understands that, substituting applause for tips, the two jobs are closely connected; in waiting tables, as in acting, "You get that immediate gratification for a good job done."

Yet aside from its setting, says Staver of *Fully Committed*, "it's like nothing I've ever done before," adding that rehearsals are "kind of like chaos. I work for maybe half an hour and I'm panting and sweating. It's kind of like ... schizophrenia. It's like having a conversation with yourself, and then being interrupted by your
third
self."

For a 25-year-old performer, Staver's introduction to the chaos of theatre was a relatively recent one, as his only acting experience prior to college was, as he says, "in sixth-grade plays. I played *sports* my whole life."

But after enrolling at the University of Illinois at Chicago with the intention of pursuing a business degree, Staver says that "the excitement, the thrill, just wasn't there anymore" in regard to the golf, tennis, and basketball he played in high school. "And then I found theatre."

Staver took Introduction to Theatre and Fundamentals of Acting while at UIC, and after transferring to Bloomington's Illinois State University, found himself so taken by the art form that he changed his major to acting. "Theatre just became my life mission," he says. "And then all these things started *connecting*.

"At ISU," Staver continues, "I fell in love with [playwright] Eugene O'Neill. We did *Moon for the Misbegotten* , but I mean I just read *everything* - *The Hairy Ape, The Great God Brown* ... just the way he was writing, I felt connected to him somehow. And it's really ironic because of my grandmother. I'd never met her, and I knew nothing about her involvement in theatre, but one day I had this talk with my mom about her, and she pulled out these old papers - she wrote her college *thesis* on Eugene O'Neill. It's eerie, you know? It seemed like that was a kind of a sign."

He appeared in numerous productions at ISU - all dramas, among them *Morning Star* and *The Retreat from Moscow* - and continued his theatrical education through intensive reading, which proved necessary because, as Staver freely admits, he didn't *attend* a lot of theatre.

"Still, to this day, that's something that I strive to do," he says. "I mean, honestly, I've never seen a professional play. I've never seen a play on Broadway, I've never seen a play off-Broadway or in Chicago ... . It's really sad. I *need* to."

After graduating from ISU in 2005, Staver spent another year in Bloomington before relocating to New York City for several months, and returned to the Quad Cities - and his mother's house in Rock Island - last summer. "The plan was to just save money to get to Chicago with," says Staver. "And then *The Glass Menagerie* comes my way."

The actor says he learned of the audition purely by accident. "I did this independent Civil War movie, like, three years ago in Pennsylvania, and one of my friends, if we're in a bar, he's always like, ‘Hey, this guy's been in a *movie*!' So he would just clip out anything about auditions coming up and give 'em to me, just as a *joke*."

One day, Staver's friend presented him with audition information on The Green Room's forthcoming drama. "He didn't know what it was," says the actor, "but I said, ‘*Glass Menagerie*? Oh my *God*.'

Though familiar with individual scenes through collegiate acting classes, where he'd played Williams' Gentleman Caller, Staver had never seen or read *Menagerie* in full, and admits that he "didn't really know the role of Tom at all."

Yet after securing a copy of the script, and studying the role of the playwright's alter ego, the

actor says, "I found so many parallels with my life. You know, I lived with my mom and my sister my whole life, pretty much; my mom and dad are divorced, so I grew up with two women. And now I'm back here and, you know, I love *being* here, but at the same time I want to break away. That paralleled Tom so closely."

Previously unfamiliar with The Green Room, Staver says he immediately felt at home in the intimate, 50-seat venue ("I *love* it," he stresses), and he especially relishes the close proximity between actor and audience. "That kind of thing can be intimidating, or it can, like, *feed* you, you know? And I kind of let it feed me. To hear a gasp, or a shuffle if someone's shuffling their feet - to be that *connected* with the audience - that's that immediate gratification. That's that *feedback*. Having that to work off makes it alive and new each night, and you're *not* performing - I always say I'm not acting, you know, I'm *living*. Living on stage. And it's easier to live with an audience that's that close."

After *The Glass Menagerie*, The Green Room's next offering was *Carousel* and, having nearly as little musical experience as comedic experience, Staver says simply, "I wasn't going to audition."

He had, though, appeared in productions of *Gypsy* and *A Chrorus Line* ("I played the director, so I didn't really *sing*."),

and admits that "I'd always liked the *idea* of musicals." So the actor prepared a song - *Oklahoma!* 's "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" - and, with no prior knowledge of *Carousel* or its score, "went in pretty much blind. I was *embarrassed* , but I auditioned. And then I got the lead.

"It was *very* scary," says Staver of rehearsals. "I mean, other than I can hit a *note* here or there, I didn't know *a nything,* and I don't read music. I'd look at it, and it's literally like a foreign language, you know, and everyone's speaking it around you and you're *not* . It'd be like, ‘Pick up at [measure] 54 and *go* !' and I'm like, ‘Fifty- *four* ... ?' That's like the easiest *thing* !"

He credits *Carousel* director Derek Bertelsen and music director Tyson Danner for his eventual confidence - and success - in the role. "Tyson basically taught me how to sing," he says. "He kind of instilled into me to just be *Billy* during the songs, and not worry about singing perfect notes. And that was great for me, because," he says with a laugh, "I've been trained how to *act,* you know?"

That training is being much-employed in Staver's current role(s). "It's a lot of voices," he says of the 35 individuals *Fully Committed* requires him to perform, "and some of the characters are pretty defined. I mean, you've got a French maitre d', so you put a little French accent on it, or you have a Mafia guy coming in, or the British hostess. That stuff's easy - pretty cut and dried. But what gets hard is when you're talking to your *brother,* yo u know? He's a contemporary, he's doing well, he's got a family. ... How do you create *him* ?"

Staver says he finds inspiration by "watching a lot of movies - just anything, really, whatever's on HBO - just to pick up, like, dialects. And I watch a lot of *Simpsons*. I can actually see Hank Azaria, or even someone like Robin Williams, taking on this role. It's *them*. It's like stand-up. But for me, this isn't really my thing. It's one of the scariest things I've ever done."

He's grateful, then, for the continued encouragement of his family ("My mom is really supportive," he says, "because I'm doing theatre, but you know, it doesn't *pay* anything here"), and those he's working with locally; following *Fully Committed*, Staver will appear in the Prenzie Players' productions of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and - in what he calls "the role of a lifetime" - Pedro Calderon de la Barca's *Life's a Dream*.

"I haven't had, like, an insane amount of stage time in my ‘career' or whatever," he says. "I was in a lot of plays in college, but I've probably done 12 or 13 shows in my *life*. So this is all really helping me as an actor, and I could not have asked for more from this community.

"You know, if I wasn't being challenged, I wouldn't want to stay around here, but what I'm doing is like ... you know, it's challenging the *hell* out of me."

Fully Committed *will be performed January 25 through 27 at The Green Room in the District of Rock Island. For tickets and more information, call (309) 786-5660.*