

HE'LL SEE YOU IN HELL

ACTOR BILL CAMP NEGOTIATES A RISKY CURVE IN HIS HIGH-CALIBER CAREER

BY KATHRYN WALAT

IT'S HARD TO PINPOINT BILL CAMP'S career-defining roles. The actor left strong impressions early on, shifting comfortably from the slacker Prince Hal to a dashing, capable King Henry at American Repertory Theatre of Cambridge, Mass., in the early '90s. Playing a tormented, forceful Macbeth (opposite his now wife Elizabeth Marvel at New York City's Theatre for a New Audience in 1999), the decision to kill the king came as he and Lady Macbeth were intertwined lustily on the floor. For his role as a common seaman in Naomi Wallace's plague-era *One Flea Spare* at New York City's Public Theater in 1997, he learned to tie knots like a sailor, and nightly swung from pissing in the corner to working his hands up Dianne Wiest's legs in a moment of audience-squirming, steamy transgression.

More recently Camp seethed sadness and desperation as the heroin-addicted Quango Twistleton in Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, first at New York Theatre Workshop in late 2001, then for Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum and Brooklyn Academy of Music. In Ivo van Hove's reimagined *Misanthrope* at NYTW in 2007, Camp plunged his Alceste to new levels of shock and baseness, smearing himself with chocolate sauce and rolling around in trash brought in from the actual East Village street. And though he had to leave the Playwrights Horizons production of Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* last year due to scheduling conflicts, for a handful of preview performances he harnessed the power of containment, shifting almost imperceptibly from one foot to another while delivering a five-page monologue describing his own death.

Camp, though, doesn't count the breakthrough roles so much as the connections they've given him, enabling him to deliver high-caliber performances for such powerhouse directors as Robert Woodruff, Anne Bogart, Ron Daniels, Frank Galati, Mark Wing-Davey and Garland Wright. In conversation, Camp always comes back to the privilege that he feels working on top projects with top people—a sentiment that his collaborators must echo when they find themselves in the playground and laboratory of a rehearsal room with him. "Ninety-five percent of what we do is about screwing it up," Camp reasons, "all that time that nobody sees."

In all his roles, it's clear that Camp is an actor who loves language.



Bill Camp and Zofia Goszczynska in *Olly's Prison* at American Repertory Theatre.

RICHARD FELDMAN

His extraordinary immersion in dramatic texts—both in his depth of understanding and his Juilliard-trained delivery—makes him a master at new plays as well as Shakespeare, Restoration comedy, even linguistically sensitive projects such as the staging of Robert Pinsky's translation of Dante's *Inferno*, presented by the 92nd Street Y Unterberg Poetry Center and the National Literary Audience Development Project in 1998.

Currently, he and director Woodruff—Camp calls him “a hero of mine”—have descended upon a massive, meaty project that is sending Camp back to a literary hell, of sorts. The pair is co-adapting Dostoevsky's short novel *Notes from Underground*—a project weighted with such risk potential that the embarking philosophy became: “This will work. Or it won't.” *Notes* makes its much-anticipated debut at Connecticut's Yale Repertory Theatre later this month. Camp will portray the obsessive antihero of what many consider the world's first existentialist novel. The bitter ramblings of a passionately tormented, retired government official in St. Petersburg, *Notes* was a pivotal work for Sartre and Nietzsche and an inspiration for Paul Schrader's *Taxi Driver* screenplay and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. The production at Yale will feature jazz saxophonist Michaël Attias performing live on stage, weaving his original music into the piece.

I caught up with Camp before the collaborators had plunged into rehearsals, while he was still in the midst of working on his portion of the adaptation—experiencing the language in his mouth, feeling out the rhythms of the text, and listening with a judicious ear and a

DAVID COOPER



Bill Camp:
"It always has
to start with the text
you've been given."

theatrical sixth sense. Camp, who lives in Brooklyn with Marvel and their son Silas, spoke thoughtfully about his craft and his career—including the couple of years that he stopped acting, followed by his return to the stage with a new sense of identity, depth and fun.

KATHRYN WALAT: How did you get interested in the Dostoevsky project?

BILL CAMP: I first read *Notes from Underground* at Juilliard. My roommate and I would pass books back and forth. But I didn't have any idea, consciously, about adapting it. Then, four years ago, a former speech teacher of mine, Tim Monich, was in Boston while I was at ART doing *The Provok'd Wife*. He gave me a copy of the new Pevear-Volokhonsky translation of *Notes*, and said, "Here, I thought of you." I read that translation—then I went back and read it again.

Robert Woodruff and I had done Edward Bond's *Olly's Prison*, and it kind of blew my mind. We did *Richard II*, also at ART. Working with Robert is always a learning experience for me, an opportunity to discover, through the challenge and the rigor of what he asks, more about what I'm capable of doing—and also what I'm incapable of doing. We were trying to figure out something else to do together, and that book was on my mind. He read this translation and was very excited.

The two of you are co-writing the adaptation. What's that process been like?

I'm working on the first part, and he's working on the second and third. We'd like to do it in one huge movement. At first, I would just read it aloud—in my bed, or while I was sitting in the living room, and Silas and Elizabeth were asleep. I wanted to free my mouth. It seemed very clear to me that I needed to be recording myself. I get to go back and take further steps away from it, by listening. The reading changes, because my understanding of the text changes. I get to experiment. That first part is so psychological, but it's also a very conversational thing. The reader is so important to the *Underground Man*—well, he does say, "I'm not writing this for you," but he is, right? I need to bring it to myself; but I also need to preserve what's there as a piece of literature. We need to honor that.

Did you always know you wanted to do theatre?

No. I went to the University of Vermont as a classics major, but my work-study job was working as a technician in the theatre. With a couple of friends—who also weren't theatre majors but technicians, so we had the keys to the place—we started doing our own stuff. We would rehearse from one o'clock until four in the morning. We were acting, directing, building it, designing it, lighting it. It was

really exciting; it's kind of a feeling that I get now, working on *Notes*.

Then I took a performance class in the art department. Our professor brought us to New York, to the Wooster Group's Performing Garage. I saw Spalding Gray do *Swimming to Cambodia*. It completely blew me away—one of those things that changes your whole landscape.

"I can be extremely big—frenetic, histrionic, what have you—so containment is not something I always work with."

We came back a year later and saw Stephenwolf's *Balm in Gilead* over at the Minetta Lane, and it completely tore my heart out. I went right back the next night and saw it again. I was in that theatre recently, seeing



Camp and Maggie Gyllenhaal in *Homebody/Kabul* at the Mark Taper Forum, 2003.



From left, Jan Maxwell, Angela Lin, Camp and Brad Fleischer in *Coram Boy* on Broadway, 2007.

a Martha Clarke piece, and every time I go in, I think: "Wow, it's so small." In my memories, it seemed huge. Something they did transformed that space.

Then my art professor said, "You should get out of here." I took that to mean: Go to New York. I went to Juilliard. I got to do scene work and to learn what that muscle was. And I got to fail an awful lot. The privilege was to play all these parts that I probably will never get to play again.

One of my best experiences at school was working with the playwright and actor Ellen McLaughlin. She wrote a play for my class called *Infinity's House*, a brilliant play about human beings in crisis, individually and communally. Richard Feldman directed it. I've spoken to some artistic directors about doing it, but they're as intimidated as fuck—they're afraid of it.

You do a lot of classical work. Did that come out of your Juilliard training, or is it personal preference?

Both. I love language. I think that's what attracted me to Latin translation, during high school and college. At Juilliard, learning how to approach a text like Shakespeare or Marlowe really excited me.

One of your most memorable recent roles was Alceste in

CONTINUED ON PAGE 71

Ivo van Hove's *The Misanthrope*—especially the food part, that was really disgusting. How did that moment come about?

I knew that something was going to happen with the food, something messy—there was a hose on stage. Célimène is having a party, and all these folks have shown up. They were actually eating, but they had their cell phones, and it was not so much about communal gathering as it was about the gossip and performance and upping each other. So, Alceste comes into the party, and somehow he arrests the evening. How do you do that? I had to top them.

What they were doing was represented in the action that I was doing, and it became more violent as I was doing it. I came in and I lay down on the table—that was my first gesture. Then I started to slide into their way. Without even saying anything, I was joining the conversation, covering myself sort of elegantly with chocolate sauce. I poured it all over me and smeared it—it changed who I was. By putting on this false mask, I

was free to get even more nasty with them. Ultimately, I made a sculpture out of myself: this foul man.

You stopped acting for two years. Why? I wanted to step away—not so much to re-evaluate, but to spend a little more time with the outside world. I needed to draw a new perspective being an actor in New York who was always trying to get a job.

What brought you back?

Tony [Kushner] called me. Working with Tony is amazing, and Frank Galati [who directed Camp in *Homebody/Kabul* for BAM and the Mark Taper Forum] is someone that everyone wants to work with. I realized that there was a lot more that I could probably learn about Quango Twistleton and the journey of that play. I was curious about it—that had just started to happen again. So I stepped back into it and started to enjoy myself. I was kind of re-charged by that experience.

Then Mark Wing-Davey called me and said, “Do you want to do a play?” I said,

“Yeah, I think so, as long as it’s fun.”

What play was that?

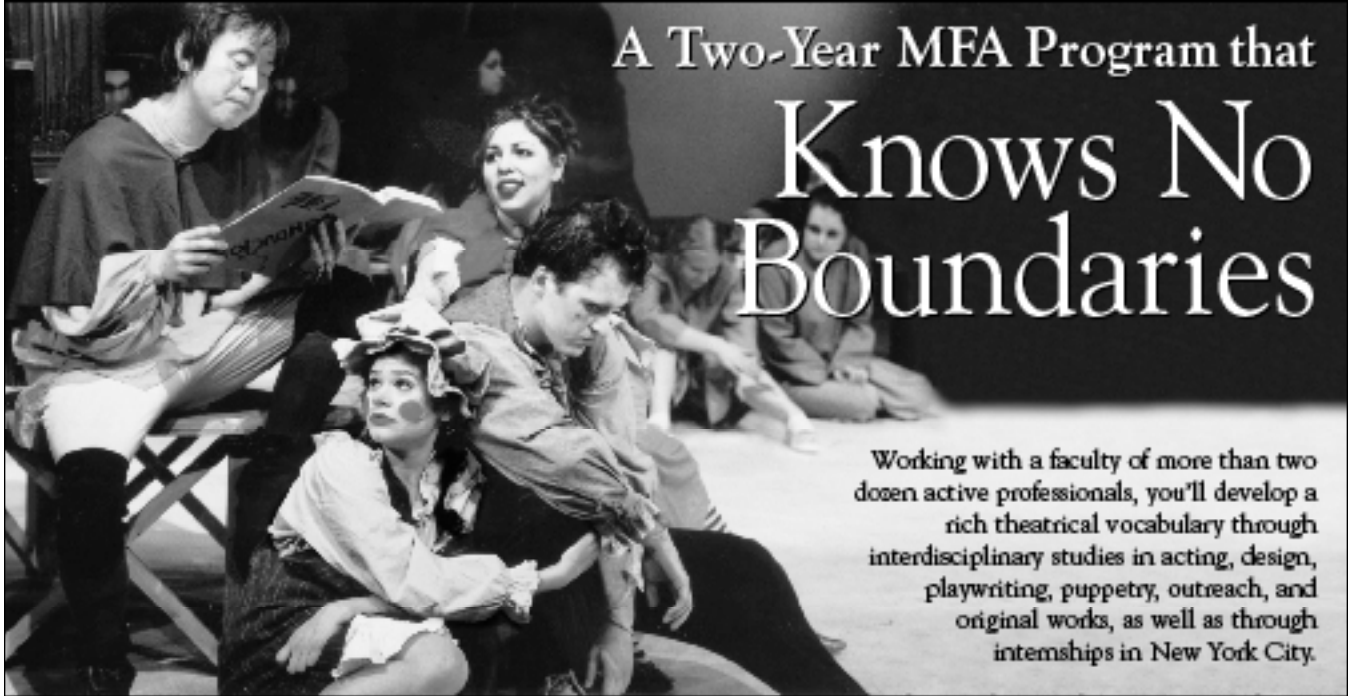
The Provok'd Wife. It was just a blast. Mark is another director I love, because I learn so much from him. While we were at ART, Robert gave me the script for the Edward Bond play. I still hadn't fully decided [about my acting career]. I wanted to reserve the right to say, “I want to do something else.”

What did you do when you weren't acting?

I cooked in restaurants. I waited tables, of course. I worked as a landscaper. I worked in a garage, so I learned some stuff about cars, which I didn't know anything about. That was valuable for me. I was no longer Bill the Actor. It's so narrow, and that had been me for so long—15 years, almost.

Did that feed the work, stepping away from it, and then coming back to it?

I think it's made me better at what I do. I was able to rediscover a sense of fun. And I think



THEATRE AT SARAH LAWRENCE

A Two-Year MFA Program that

Knows No Boundaries

Working with a faculty of more than two dozen active professionals, you'll develop a rich theatrical vocabulary through interdisciplinary studies in acting, design, playwriting, puppetry, outreach, and original works, as well as through internships in New York City.

Sarah Lawrence College Graduate Studies, 1 Mead Way, Bronxville, NY 10708
(914) 395-2371, e-mail: grad@slc.edu, www.sarahlawrence.edu/theatre
A Distinctive Coeducational College of the Liberal Arts and Sciences

it's expanded my belief in what I can bring to it. It's about failing: This line doesn't work, but these two words work. I'll keep those two words.

You talk about language as your way into theatre. Where does it go from there?

It always has to start with the text, because that's what you're given. But I don't like sitting around the table talking, and I'm frustrated by the fact that we're usually given four weeks to rehearse a play. My first responsibility is to learn my words, so that I'm not spending all this intellectual time and energy that could be used doing—failing, and then realizing, this isn't going to work, go this way instead. That questioning and dialogue is happening on its feet, in space, and then it evolves, becomes a dialogue with the director.

I don't do work where I make exterior physical choices, and put them on. But the way someone walks—that's crucial. I learned that, actually, at Juilliard; I didn't know what to make of it at first. So that's an outside thing that I do consider a lot.

I did *Dead Man's Cell Phone* recently with Anne Bogart; I only got to do a week of previews, and then I had to leave. Working with Anne was a good experience because she required me to do very, very little. We had to figure out: This guy's dead, and also he's talking. How do you communicate that? What's the difference between that and when he was in his real life? How do we create this thing without anything except these words and your body and tone and energy? I would start with my weight on one foot, and then slowly move to the other, and that was the biggest gesture that I had in the whole monologue.

What did that shift mean to you?


It was an awesome test for me to be able to do that. I can be extremely big—frenetic, histrionic, what have you—so containment is not something that I always work with. What did that mean, just shifting from one side to another, almost imperceptibly? Yet, every night it meant something to me. I won't tell you what. But that movement was

motivated by something that meant a lot for me, so it was real.


What's in store for you in the future, more projects like *Notes*?

Yes. Of course, I need to make money. I'm doing other things that aren't that profitable, and yet they're incredibly exciting. I participate in the Philoctetes Project with Bryan Doerries, a Greek classicist. We've done readings of scenes from *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* at conferences for the marines and the army, and for military medical personnel. We've done it at Juilliard for plebes from West Point, and for homeless veterans at a shelter in Queens.

There is a belief that Sophocles wrote those plays as a general himself, to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder that existed in ancient Greece. For 80 years of the century in which he lived, they were at war. So there would be a lot of violent death trauma amongst those men, and those women and children. One of the things Sophocles writes about in *Ajax* is his relationship with his wife. There have been wives of military men that have come to the readings, along with the veterans themselves. It's been remarkable, the response.

And it's a way that I can be of service. Normally, I use my skills for entertainment purposes: People come in and buy tickets, and it's two or three hours watching a play. But this is an opportunity to do something completely different with those skills. There's a huge gap between the world that you and I live in and the military world, and this is a great opportunity to bridge that. It's an honor, regardless of what my political beliefs are. 

Kathryn Walat is a New York-based playwright whose work includes *Victoria Martin*: *Math Team Queen*, *Bleeding Kansas* and her latest play, *Smile*.



The Premiere School
for Professional Actor Training
in the Pacific Northwest.

Interviews: in Portland (ongoing) Chicago (March 28 and 29, 2009)
Call 503-274-1717 for appointment
Visit us on line www.actorsconservatory.com
Portland Actors Conservatory • 1436 SW Montgomery St. • Portland, Oregon 97201

Check out
**AMERICAN
THEATRE**
ONLINE
www.tcg.org/americantheatre