

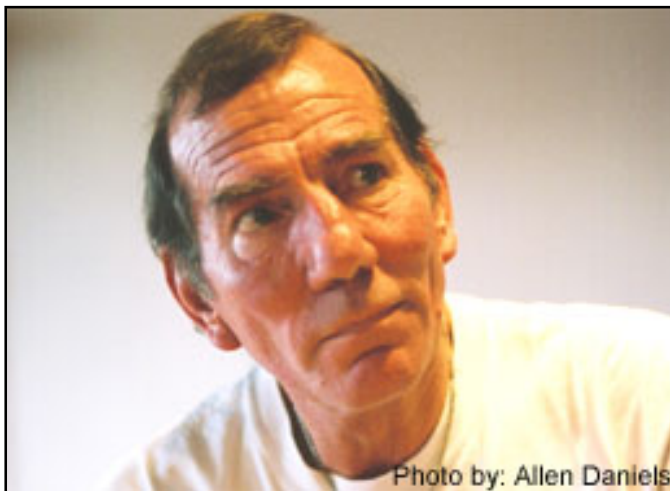
STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO PETE POSTLETHWAITE

In Baz Lurhmann's *Romeo And Juliet* with Clare Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio, **Pete Postlethwaite** was Friar Laurence, in *The Usual Suspects* he was Kobayashi, and you've also seen him in Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (as Holabird) and *Jurassic Park* (as Roland Tembo). He was recently seen with Sophia Loren in *Between Strangers*, and doing imitation Canadian in *The Shipping News*. His role as Giuseppe Conlon opposite Daniel Day-Lewis in *In The Name Of The Father* earned him an Oscar nomination.



Now Postlethwaite is here in Toronto, continuing until early December what is turning into one of this year's hottest tickets: his one-man triumph as *Scaramouche Jones*. The British actor's stage credits are as vast and impressive as his screen accomplishments. He's appeared numerous times for the Royal Shakespeare Company, and toured in 1997 the title role of *Macbeth*. The Toronto leg of *Scaramouche Jones* is part of a world tour; Postlethwaite has already played it throughout the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand.

Go see this show - especially if you're tired of theatrical experiences that leave you flat - it is nothing short of astounding. *Scaramouche Jones* is a 100-year old circus clown, born a white-faced bastard child of a gypsy whore in Trinidad, New Year's Eve 1899. We meet Scaramouche New Year's Eve 1999 at the end of his last circus performance, his birthday, and the night he expects and intends to die. As Scaramouche shares his life story (he is orphaned, kidnapped, and sold into slavery to a snake charmer all within the first few years of his life), he also sheds light on the last 100 years of humanity. When he is sent to a concentration camp in World War II as a gravedigger, he discovers his talent for comedy, making funny faces at children in an attempt to offer final delight before they are machine gunned-down and tossed into a pit. The 20th century was often a house of horrors, and, hearing and seeing it from this clown's perspective, you are taken on an emotional voyage, one that leaves you astonished and examining your own humanity here and now at the earliest part of the 21st century.

I spoke to the warm and modest actor on the phone from his temporary condo downtown, still on a high from the reception to his first three performances at The Winter Garden Theatre. We discussed the message of humanity in *Scaramouche Jones*, moving people with honesty in a hypocritical world, turning down Martin Scorsese, and staying true to your own path.



What is it about *Scaramouche Jones* that makes you willing to commit to the intensity of the schedule and the travel and the inevitable exhaustion of carrying a show of such magnitude?



Compassion. There's a big plea for humanity for that show. Not to overstate – but can we just take a rain check about how we deal with each other? Across the world we don't know whether to bless same sex marriages – what's going on? We're supposed to be enlightened. We're not. When I first read that script I got the subliminal cry: 'can we let each other alone for a bit?' It's very personal. I have no reason to aggrandize myself at all. But if it affects me, I think it must say something to this horrendous world we live in. Even in Toronto at this minute: where is Cecilia (Zhang)? Where is Cecilia? And this is the world we live in. So I endorse that and am proud and privileged to use the art of acting to say well, how about this? Do we have to be so nasty? We become our own Scaramouche Jones; hold up a mirror to the audience, that's all we can do.



You've dismissed Steven Spielberg's praise that you are 'the best actor in the world', recently saying 'what the fuck does that matter'? If that's the case, as an actor, what the fuck does matter to you?



The problem isn't if Pete thinks he's the best actor. The fact that matters is the first night in Toronto, when under a great deal of pressure, we were received with great delight by an audience who were respectful, raucous, who gave us the whole thing. Press, friends, first fucking night people - three disparate groups you have to please. Best opening we've ever had, and I hope it continues like that. We're having a ball here and I didn't say that in New Zealand or anywhere else we've been. (Laughs.) Shaun, that's what the fuck matters.



People, media especially, seek actor's opinions on things, and you've been dismissive of that as well, saying your opinion is of no more importance than a guy on the subway's. But as a storyteller, don't you become a magnet for people based on that alone?



Yes, I suppose that's right. But if you're not telling the story people are determined to hear you'll get people opening their candies. This show as an actor lets me discover that every night. If it ever gets to a point where I'm rattling a series of facts Little Scaramouche is discovering who he is, his sexuality, where he's going, and I go on that journey every night. Sometimes I'm emotional sometimes I'm not, but people want to see honesty. It's amazing in this world of hypocrisy that honesty moves people – they've been touched by their own humanity. I have a lovely letter in my dressing room on the middle of my mirror, from a gentlemen who wrote 'you will stay with me forever' after seeing *Scaramouche Jones*. That's more important than my opinion on anything.



You turned down working with Martin Scorsese in *Gangs Of New York* when you found out everyone was working for reduced pay just to work with him. You felt that was a bit of a scam and so it didn't wash with you. Even though you've always wanted to work with him, it just became a matter of principal.



I'd loved to have worked with him: my hero. But this was a bum deal. You can't say it's not a bum deal just because it's Martin. I'm 57 years old, I can't be doing that business about being careful with what I say and don't say, who will I hurt who won't I. I'm too long in the tooth for that. This business is nonsense, a lie, but a beautiful lie I endorse. 'We've only got this wooden stage here, but just imagine...'. That's beautiful, but still I won't be seduced by the whole situation like with Martin Scorsese.



It strikes me this is the in-born attitude of a working-class lad. When your first agent told you to change your name, you changed agents. You won't think twice about having press pictures taken wearing just your undershirt and trousers. When Steven Spielberg wanted you for *Jurassic Park*, you said no without seeing the script, which no one ever does with a Spielberg project. You then said no to him a second time when you declined appearing opposite Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan* to do a play.



Indeed I suppose I did. I think it's got to come from my Mum and Dad. I work in the world of cheats. I work in the false world: film theatre, television - it's false. I've been fortunate to have my own faith about things and about what is true and what isn't, rightly or wrongly. And I've been lucky. I had someone call me to warn me the *Gangs Of New York* deal was going south. I didn't know what that meant. 'It means it's going out the window,' I was told. 'Then let it,' I said. The most important thing is being able to live with yourself the next day.



Would you call that a secret to success? Have you ever noticed that sometimes the best things in life happen to those who just don't care so hard?



If you've not got your own life, Shaun, forget it. Particularly in that world of shimmer and illusion, which is what it is. You have to follow your own bent. A voice teacher I had from the Royal Shakespeare Company wrote a book called *The Voice And The Actor*, and put in a T.S. Elliot quote: teach me to care, and not to care. And I thought what's all that crap, and asked. She said: during rehearsals you care, you ask all the questions you can, you make silly mistakes. But when you walk out on stage you can't care. It's too late. And you fly. That's life, too.



You are playing a clown about to die at the start of the new millennium; in real life your own mother died as the start of this one.



It's funny you mention that. Opening night here in Toronto would have been her birthday. Scaramouche Jones' mother was the gypsy whore; my mum was anything but. She coped with an awful lot: a strict Catholic with children starting to live together and have kids out of wedlock. An amazing lady.



You've always thought of acting as a legitimate profession but it took until your Mum saw you speaking with the Queen of England before she bought that.



(Laughs and imitates his mother.) 'Man! He's talking to! God! He's talking to Betty Windsor. It must be a good job then?' God bless her.



Scaramouche Jones is born into a circus-like atmosphere and finally ends up in one – do you believe in destiny?



Completely. You're going on the path you're going on. It's how you travel it and how you treat people on their own paths. Be mindful of how you go with strangers, because they too are fighting an enormous battle. We don't know what people are going through, Shaun, but we're there judging them. (Sighs.) You know what that's like, and I know your mates all do. And that's got to end.