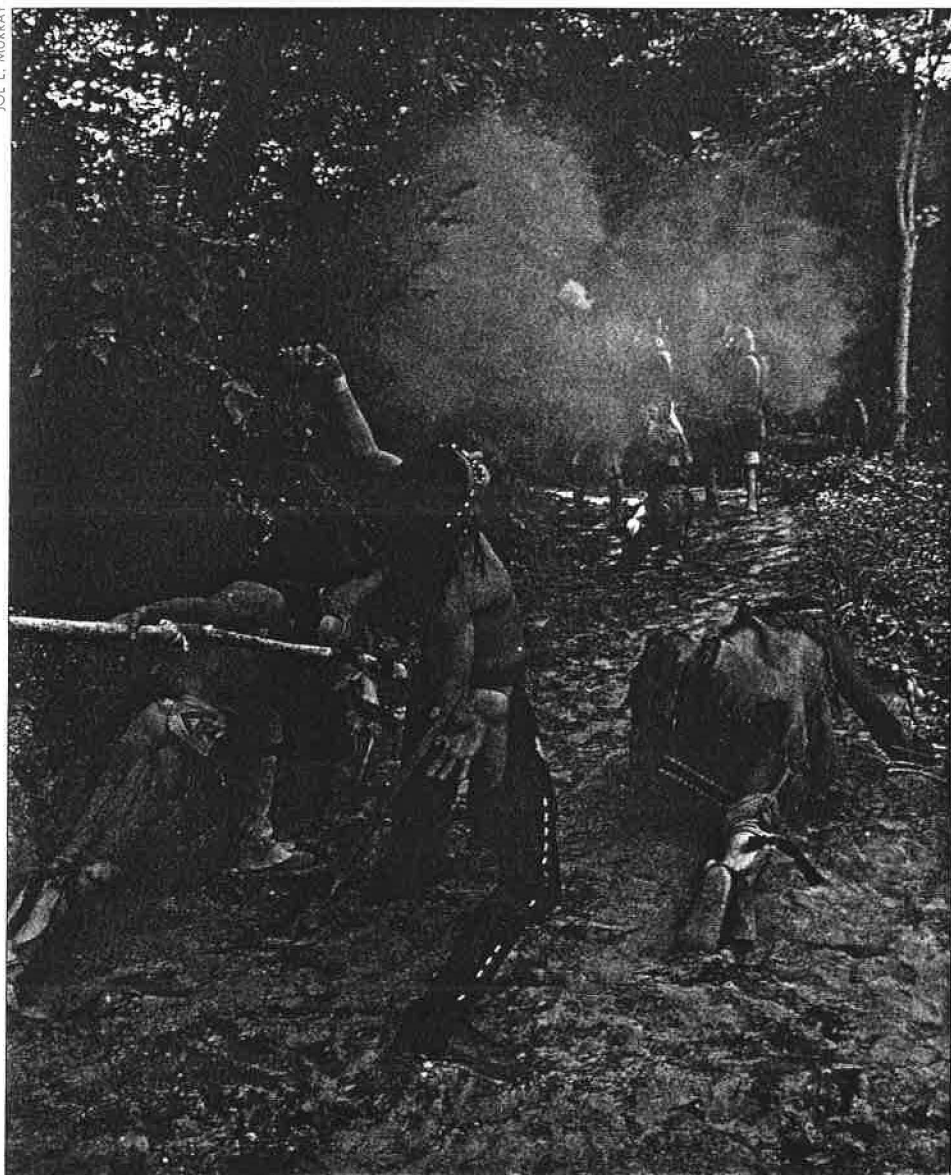


FIT FOR THE STAGE

Actors must be healthy

By Orla Swift

JOE E. MURRAY



THE SCRIPT required her to bleat like a dolphin, but long rehearsals of *Let Me Hear You Whisper* made Jeaneal Guy feel more like whimpering.

The twenty-year-old aspiring actress had nabbed a puppeteering role in Paul Zindel's animal rights play at North Carolina's Peace College, where she is a junior. The life-sized dolphin puppet weighed thirty pounds, which doesn't sound like much until you think about trying to suspend it through hours of rehearsals and performances. Even with two classmates operating the torso and tail, Guy felt the burn of screaming muscles.

Actors have to be in good shape to handle the physical demands of shows like the outdoor drama Tecumseh! in Chillicothe, Ohio.



Members of the SITI company warming up before a rehearsal.

It could have been far worse, though, and for her puppeteering cohorts, it was. Guy was stronger than most. She practices yoga.

"It's not only mental conditioning, it's physical conditioning," says Guy, who originally turned to yoga for relaxation and focus but now credits it for her lithe body and strong arms. "It's very challenging."

No matter what your dramatic aspirations are, whether you want to be a singer, a clown, an ingenue, a puppeteer, or the brightest star on Broadway, a three-octave vocal range and a monologue that could bring a pit bull to tears may not be enough to nab the role you've dreamed of or to keep it once you've got it. Physical fitness is an integral part of a serious actor's toolbox.

"You never know when a role is going to happen, so it's almost like you've al-

ways got to be in training because your instrument is your body, whether you're a singer or an actor or a dancer, or all of the above," says Dani Davis, who is all of the above, as well as coproducer of the forthcoming Broadway musical *Little Women*. "God forbid something terrific comes up and you're not in a position stamina-wise to actually make it happen."

Davis was thankful she'd stayed in shape when an opportunity came up last winter to understudy two lead roles in Broadway's *Jekyll and Hyde*. She needed the work to continue qualifying for health insurance for herself and her four-year-old son. This gig was crucial. But it was also demanding, with heavy costumes and fast changes, plus scenes in which she had to run up and down stairs without losing the breath control she needed to sing. She had kept in shape through her performing hiatus

with regular dance and exercise, and her diligence paid off with a steady job in *Jekyll* for three months.

Even more exhausting was Davis's role in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 1995 and '96. She was on stage singing and dancing almost constantly, and even when she was offstage changing costumes, she still had to sing. "That was outrageous," she recalls. "It was totally rigorous, and there are a lot of shows like that."

She keeps in mind the physical demands upon actors when sitting in the producer's seat as well. The *Little Women* casting calls drew many bedraggled hopefuls who may as well have stayed home. "A lot of singers are just not treating themselves well," says Davis, who scrutinizes hair, eyes, and posture for telltale signs of poor nutrition and lethargy. "They come in for an audition

for a show that's on its way to Broadway, and their voices are raspy, and it's not because they've just gotten over being sick, it's that they've decided that smoking and being out in bars until four in the morning is more important than keeping their instrument neutral and ready to go."

Sure, an actor can vow to crack down and firm up just as soon as that sweet role is granted to him, Davis says. But if he can't shape up for himself, why would she believe he'll shape up for her? She doesn't. "The discipline has to come from inside themselves," says Davis, thirty-five, who dances and does yoga regularly. "We can't motivate that kind of discipline."

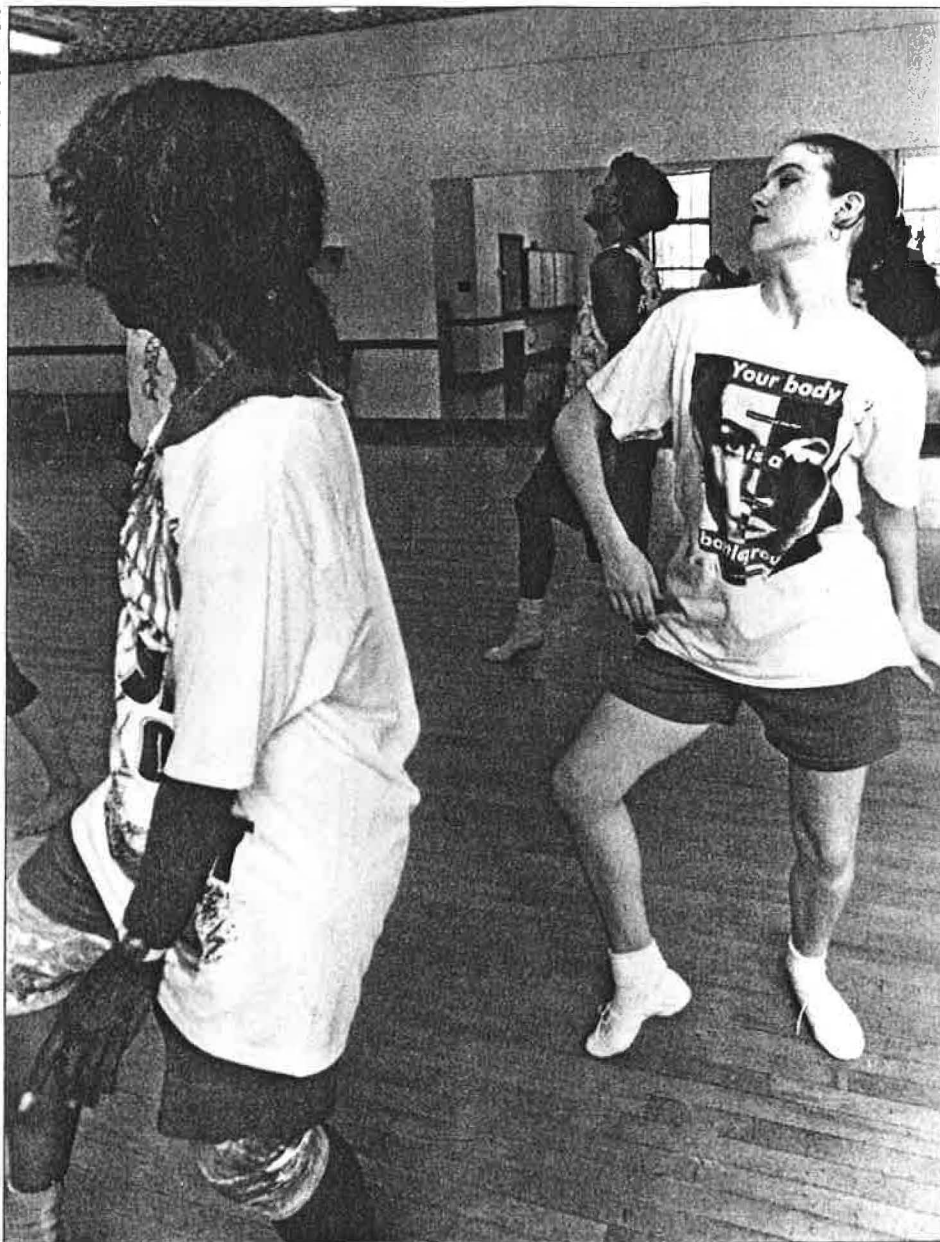
When fitness dwindles, so, too, will the résumé. "There are a few people who have reputations for not being able to do eight shows a week on Broadway," Davis says. "Those people don't necessarily get hired for the next job. And that's not because they're not terrifically talented, it's because they haven't created the discipline for themselves with regard to their bodies that allows them to do the job they've been contracted to do. If you've got people in your principal roles in that position, that's costing us money every week. And that kind of word gets around."

Ouch!

At outdoor dramas, where many college students get their first paid acting jobs, sluggishness or a penchant for partying quickly separates the chaff from the wheat. David Zum Brunnen saw several young party animals pay for their transgressions during his stint with *Tecumseh!* fifteen years ago.

"I completely understand when people say you need to be in a top level of physical shape to do an outdoor drama. You really do," says Zum Brunnen, thirty-seven, who lived in tents and cabins at the drama's site in the Scioto River Valley in southern Ohio, and juggled rehearsals with grueling lessons in stage combat. "That summer, I saw people who weren't in top shape suffer immensely because of it. They couldn't do combat, so they were

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A dance workshop at the Thespian Festival.

assigned different roles. Their muscles were constantly sore and aggravated."

Even a former member of the armed forces who'd joined the cast complained that rehearsals were as taxing as anything he'd endured in military training. Zum Brunnen was in fairly good shape and was selected to stay with the show into the fall. He eventually suffered an injury during a combat scene and had to adapt his performance to lessen his pain for the remainder of the run. The injury plagues him still. His fitness regimen now includes running, push-ups and sit-ups, stretching, yoga, and good nutrition.

Michael McElroy recalls his first weeks performing in *The Who's Tommy* on Broadway. It was move, move, move, all

the time. "I lost five pounds during the previews, and I never gained it back," says the thirty-three-year-old. "I would be soaked after that show."

His most recent gig was *Rent*, which didn't feature a lot of dancing but did require taxing moves like a leap from a six-foot scaffold. Once is fine, but try it night after night in combat boots. "We're not machines," he says. "Any time you're doing the same motion with your body eight times a week, you're going to add wear and tear to your body."

Alison Dennis thought she was fit when she nabbed a role in Off Broadway's raucous gymnastic spectacle *De La Guarda*. But it would be months of grueling rehearsals and performances before she attained the kind of superhuman con-

ditioning that show demands. After she'd been in it a year, there wasn't an ounce of flab on her.

"You can't really prepare enough to be in shape for this show," says Dennis, whose role required that she jump, stomp, pummel drums, yell, sprint up walls, and swoop through the air suspended by harnesses. "You can have a level of physical fitness, but you come to this show and it will break you. No matter what, you will be broken. I was broken for five months. I never stopped being sore."

Had she stuck with her college habits of workouts woven with late-night parties and crazy diets, Dennis's big Off Broadway break would have crumbled for sure. But she prioritized early; commitment to performing overcame the whims of youth.

"I was already eating well when I started," says the twenty-six-year-old, who eats only wholefoods (which are all-natural and unprocessed), and no dairy or sugar. "But it forced me to change a lot of sleeping patterns. There was no more going out, no more of any of that kind of stuff. There was a lot of staying home and drinking tea and taking baths."

Dennis finally succumbed to injury after she took a relaxing four-month hiatus from the show and then had to forego retraining because the cast was shorthanded. Now she's out on worker's comp for a few months, doing physical therapy to regain her health.

Tone your voice

Rent's McElroy complements his onstage workouts with an exercise regimen that includes a low-impact cardiovascular routine on an elliptical treadmill and lots of stretching to prevent cramps and keep him limber. A pre-audition workout is especially good for tuning up the body, he says.

"If I have a singing audition, I'll go to the gym and do cardio first before I warm up," he says. "There's something good about sweating and getting the body moving. It gets my circulation going, so whatever crud is hanging back there in my throat, this gets it moving."

Indeed, a strong voice for speaking or singing on stage requires diligent atten-

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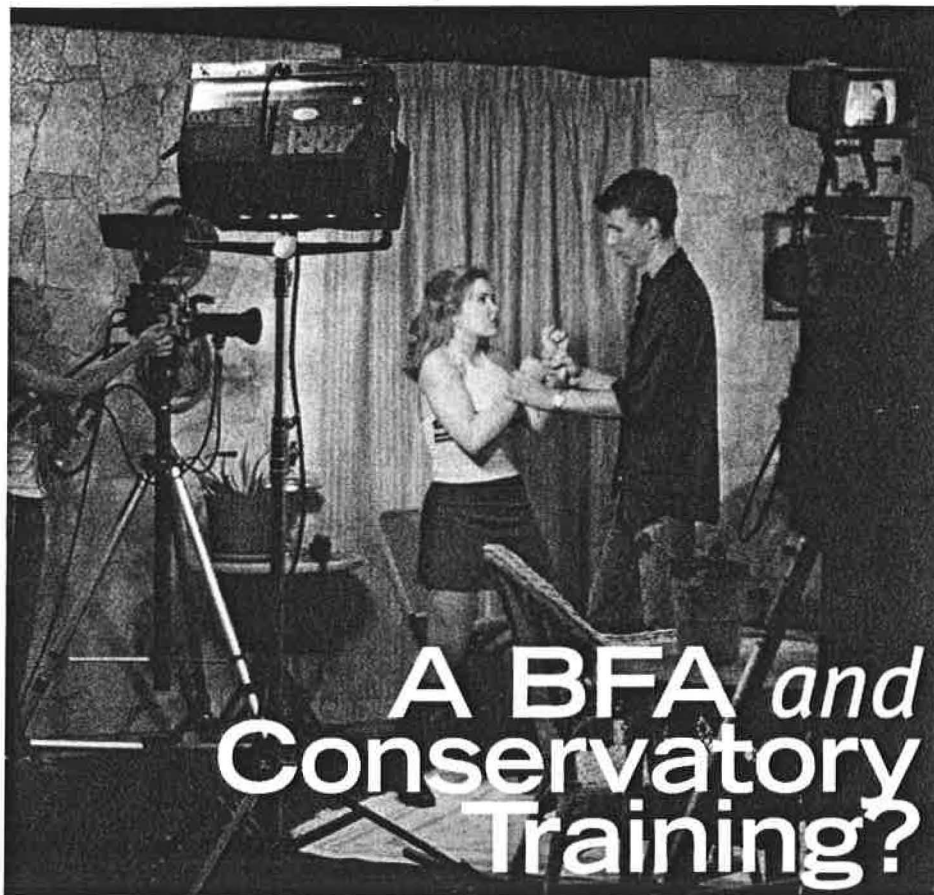
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tion to lungs and vocal cords. Practice is mandatory, but proper diet and exercise will also build vocal strength. Kenny Gannon, forty-eight, who heads the Peace College theatre program, began running two years ago. Last summer, he played Archibald in the musical version of *The Secret Garden* at the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre, and his running paid off. He even increased his regimen during the show.

"It's a very demanding role with lots of high notes and long phrases requiring lots of stamina night after night," he says. "I found that my running had enabled me to sing longer phrases and more intensely than I had before I started running. I know for sure that I could never have done it without running."

Stage and movie actor Anthony Rapp, who recently starred in Broadway's *Rent* and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, prefers walking and in-line skating to stay in shape. But exercise can't do its magic efficiently without proper sleep, diet, and lots and lots of water, notes the twenty-nine-year-old vegetarian. During *Rent*, he upped his protein intake with lots of fish and drank three or four liters of water daily. Just wetting one's whistle is not enough, he says; hydration of the vocal cords comes from a fully hydrated body, not from a quick sip of water. And don't think any old liquid will suffice, Rapp notes. It won't. For instance, caffeinated drinks like soda or coffee are dehydrating. Plus, water costs nothing, and a struggling actor can't ask for a better deal than that. (Today, Rapp is on a film set, where he says it's harder to stay fit because of an abundance of food and a dearth of exercise opportunities.)

Invest in yourself

Speaking of money, exorbitant gym membership fees are no excuse for a broke actor to sit around eating Pringles and staring in defeat at his protruding gut. For your next birthday, ask Aunt Mildred to forego the cardigan and buy you walking shoes instead. If you have a few bucks, invest in a bicycle or some in-line skates—but don't neglect the helmet or knee, wrist, and elbow guards or you'll risk ending up in worse shape

than when you started. If you're in the city, Davis suggests, skip the subway and walk. Go to the park and jog. Climb a steep set of stairs. Use that imaginative flair that got you into acting in the first place.

And if you do have some bucks to spare, says Davis, shame on you if you don't spend it on an acting or dance class. "If you're spending money on clothes or CDs, perhaps you should be investing money instead in your own instrument," she says. "You have to release your materialistic mind; your investment is yourself. You are tied to your body in this industry."

McElroy likes the sense of accomplishment that exercise gives him. If a disappointing audition dents his ego, exercise can build it up again. "I find that if I keep my body strong, it keeps my voice strong and keeps my spirits up, and I feel better about myself. I feel good."

Being in shape does not simply mean being thin, either. Plenty of thin actors are weak, plenty of heavy actors are strong. Fitness is a matter of stamina, not pounds per inch. And there is great beauty in a glowing demeanor, no matter the shape of one's face or belly.

"I know a lot of thin people who are unfit. Their food intake is insane. They just won't eat," says Dennis of *De La Guarda*, who is a careful but hearty eater. "Thin becomes like a prized possession, so that it's not about being fit, it's about being thin."

"People need to be careful about being obsessed with body image," Rapp agrees. "There's so much evidence that body types, including how many fat cells the body retains, are all genetic. No matter how much they exercise, it's hard for some people to get rid of that entirely. It's just your body. It doesn't mean you can't have a good cardiovascular system and be really strong. You can be more fit, or healthier, but you'll always look like you."

Orla Swift is the theatre critic at the News & Observer in Raleigh, North Carolina. She was a recipient of the National Arts Journalism Program fellowship, administered by the Pew Charitable Trusts.



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