

Theater



Heroes and heroin



Clockwise from left:
Thad Anzur, Jenny
Lamb, Rian Jarell,
Shane Kenyon,
Cameron Johnson
and Jay Cullen

Renton, Spud, Begbie, Sick Boy and the rest of the strung-out, iconic characters are back—with Midwestern accents—in a stage adaptation of *Trainspotting*.

By **Kris Vire** Photographs by **Drew Reynolds**

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"WE'RE GONNA DO SOMETHING TONIGHT"

that probably most theater professionals would say, "Can't do it," director Tom Mullen tells his cast one evening in early September. The six young actors, recognizable faces in Chicago's storefront theater scene, are gathered around a table in a Skokie rehearsal space, where Mullen has been showing them renderings of a set design.

"We're going to try to stage Spud's 'accident' in real time," he continues, to an eruption of laughs from the cast. "I had a four-and-a-half-hour designer meeting last night where we talked about spraying shit onstage. There's something truly iconic about this moment where I feel like if we don't try it, *Trainspotting* fans will be like, 'They just didn't go for it.'"

Yes, *Trainspotting*, Irvine Welsh's 1993 novel about heroin addicts in Edinburgh, made into a memorable 1996 film by Danny Boyle. Soon, Mullen (the director of Bailiwick Chicago's recent *Fucking Men* and *Departure Lounge* as well as the Off Broadway musical *Tomorrow Morning*) has actors Cameron Johnson, Jenny Lamb and Thad Anzur on their feet. They stumble through possible ways of staging the sequence in which luckless Spud wakes up after a night of carousing to find he's shat his girlfriend's bed and, in trying to remove the evidence, ends up... let's just say ruining breakfast.

There's no guarantee this scene will make it into the final version of the new adaptation, beginning previews Saturday 13 at Theater Wit in an independent commercial production bankrolled by Mullen and a handful of investors. As of tonight's workshop, six weeks out, the script is still very much in flux.

Yet the most surprising thing about watching the scene unfold isn't the prospect of simulated projectile feces, nor even the idea of *Trainspotting* onstage at all, considering the film's indelible, wholly unstageable scenes of withdrawal-induced hallucinations and whimsical squalor. It's that the actors are reading their lines with Midwestern American accents.

Mullen, with Welsh's blessing (and help), is transporting the novelist's harrowing, heroin-fueled heist tale from Edinburgh to Kansas City, Missouri. Welcome to *Trainspotting USA*.

On a sunny August afternoon a few weeks before the workshop, Mullen and Welsh give me a primer on the project at a Lakeview coffeeshop.

"I actually was watching an A&E *Intervention* one night," Mullen says, sipping an iced coffee. The soft-spoken Welsh, nursing a cup of hot tea, smiles wryly. The episode's report on the resurgence of heroin use in the U.S., tied to an increase in poppy cultivation in the Middle East after the toppling of the Taliban, Mullen explains, called to mind *Trainspotting*.

The story follows protagonist Mark Renton (Shane Kenyon) in his attempt to give up heroin—which means escaping the influence of his friends Spud (Johnson) and Sick Boy (Rian Jarell), while clean-cut Tommy (Jay Cullen) gets drawn in. The group's violent sociopath, Begbie,

and fellow addict Allison are respectively played by Anzur and Lamb, who also fill other roles.

Mullen had read Welsh's book, seen the film and been one of the few Americans to see the previous stage adaptation, a monologue-heavy version by Harry Gibson that had been a hit in its 1994 British premiere, winning the *Sunday Times* award for best new play, but lasted just a few weeks in its 1998 Off Broadway run. "It was so dark," Mullen says of Gibson's staging. "There was really no light to it whatsoever. I thought it would be interesting to see if the themes and characters were universal enough that it could translate to a new location."

Mullen set off on a path to get approval from Welsh to transfer *Trainspotting* to the States, without realizing that Welsh was right under his nose. The Scottish writer, whose wife is from Chicago, relocated here a few years ago.

The proposition of Kansas City as an analogue for Edinburgh makes sense, Welsh says—just as the former is overlooked as a major city in the U.S., many Scots feel Edinburgh lives in the shadow of London.

"Kansas City is kind of the best of all worlds for the play," Mullen says. "When it needed to be kind of savvy and cultured, it could be, but when it needed to be sort of rural and desolate, it could be that as well."

Welsh has revisited his own characters more than once. His 2002 novel, *Porno*, follows Spud, Renton, Sick Boy and Begbie years after the action of *Trainspotting*. His newest work, *Skagboys*, serves as a prequel. Released in April in Britain, where it hit the top of the best-sellers list, and published in the U.S. last month, the book looks at the same group in their teens.

"These characters are very much a part of me, a part of my life and my friends," the writer says.

But though he's working with Mullen on revisions of the script, including writing a new ending, he's kept out of the rehearsal room. "I've been trying to stay away as much as possible. I think you've just got to let [the actors] get on with it and get comfortable with what they're doing before I start showing my face."

The cast members, who've each read all three of Welsh's books over several months of workshops with Mullen, acknowledge the work's import.

"I mean, just growing up in the '90s, *Trainspotting* was such a pop-culture phenomenon," says Johnson, 27. "Even in college, all the cool kids had the *Trainspotting* poster up."

But despite the story's indelible connections to Edinburgh and the 1990s, Cullen says, the relocation works remarkably well. "I think it comes out the other side almost a stand-alone piece," he says. "It's still very faithful to the themes and ideas of the book, but it comes across as uniquely American—there's a deep heart to it."

In contrast to the trippy, visuals-heavy style of Boyle's film (think the baby crawling on the ceiling or Ewan McGregor's Renton diving down "the worst toilet in Scotland"), Mullen says to expect a more physically kinetic story onstage.

"The great thing about doing this play in Chicago," the director says, "is that Chicago actors tend to love to just throw themselves right in it on a physical level as well as an emotional level. They're not afraid to get bumped and bruised." Or track-marked, for that matter.

Trainspotting USA begins previews Saturday 13 and opens October 18. See Theater, Resident companies.



KANSAS CITY CHIEFS
Trainspotting author Irvine Welsh, left, and director Tom Mullen have collaborated on a new version of the story, set in the Midwest.