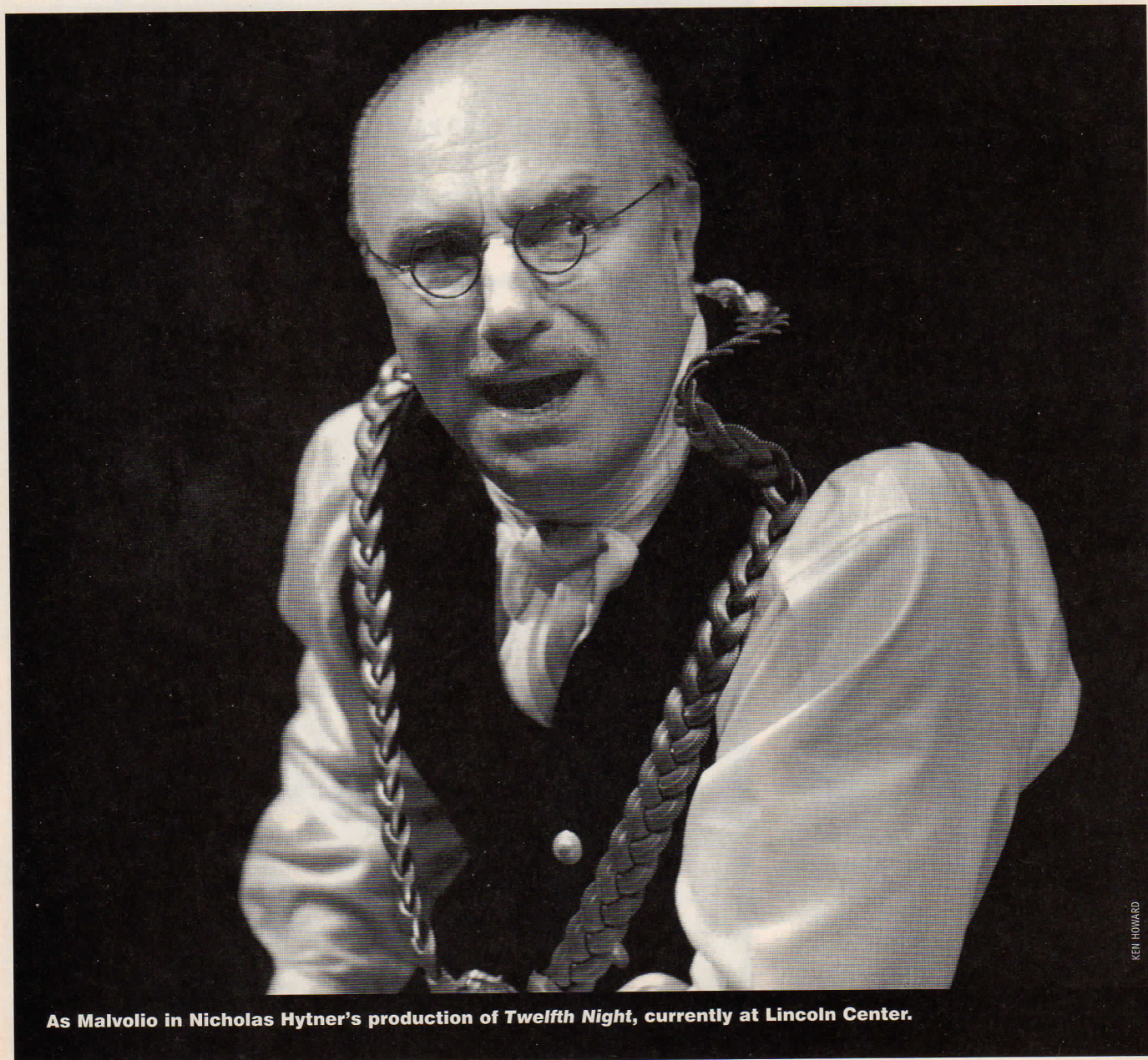


BOSCO UNCENSORED

PACINO, LUDWIG, MAMET, AND THE METHOD —
PHILIP BOSCO'S GOT AN OPINION ABOUT ALL OF THEM,
AND IT'S NOT ALWAYS PRETTY.

BY GERARD RAYMOND



KEN HOWARD

As Malvolio in Nicholas Hytner's production of *Twelfth Night*, currently at Lincoln Center.

With an acting career that has spanned 45 years and garnered four Tony nominations (including a Best Actor award for *Lend Me a Tenor*), it should come as no big surprise that Philip Bosco doesn't mince words when he talks about the business. If you saw *Moon Over Broadway*, the backstage documentary about Ken Ludwig's play *Moon Over Buffalo*, you know that he doesn't suffer fools gladly, either. When *InTheater* spoke to Bosco a few weeks ago — just prior to the opening of *Twelfth Night*, in which he plays the steward Malvolio — the 68-year-old veteran of both classics and popular Broadway comedies shared his thoughts on a variety of theatrical topics.

How did you embark on a career on the stage?

I owe a great deal to James Marr, a retired professional actor who was the drama coach at the Jesuit High School in Jersey City, where I was born and raised. I was 14 when I started. He took me under his wing and recommended that I enroll in the theater program at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Did going into the theater seem a natural step, considering that your father was a carnival operator?

However much of a case you can make for carnivals being show business, my father and mother were both very astonished [at my choice]. Whenever my mother would see me in a play — she thought she was doing the right thing — she'd tell me, "I don't think you are going to be successful because you are not good-looking enough; your nose is too big." She wanted to spare me the hurt of trying to do something [that I would regret]. Perhaps there was some merit to her argument, as I discovered later, but it probably prompted me [to do] the reverse. Maybe I wanted to show her I could succeed.

I understand that when the director Alan Schneider invited you to New York — to play Angelo in the 1960 New York Shakespeare Festival production of *Measure for Measure* — producer Joe Papp didn't want to cast you.

I was a fairly well known young actor in Washington by then, and had

been directed in several shows at the Arena Stage by Alan. He liked me and wanted me to play the role. Joe Papp immediately turned me down. Alan insisted that I audition a second time, and Papp turned me down again. In essence, he said to me, "You sound too phony." His theme always was that I represented to him what he loathed in the English theater, what he suspected was bad acting. Now, this isn't to say that I may not have been a little phony; I am not defending myself against any of those charges. But Joe was intimidated by good speech. I just think he wasn't schooled in that. He loved Shakespeare, but he didn't understand acting. I was a good friend of his; he was wonderful as an administrator and a genius as a producer, but with all due respect — and God rest his soul — he didn't know shit about Shakespeare. Anyway, Alan was insistent and was determined to have me. After that show, I got a lot of attention. I got agents out of it, and a Broadway show [*The Rape of the Belt*, for which he received his first Tony nomination] immediately after.

You have performed in many British plays, including Shaw's *Heartbreak House* (1984) and *You Never Can Tell* (1987) both of which brought you Tony nominations; yet off-stage, you have traces of your native New Jersey accent. What is important to you about speech?

There is a tradition of English theater which, if you are a serious actor, you should include in your scope. When I was studying speech, I'd listen to recordings a lot. I used to get teased about it. One of the directors down at school used to say to me, "You are listening to those fucking Gielgud records again, for Chrissakes." I can do British accents, but I don't fool any English people. What I try to do now in Shakespeare or in Shaw is a decent blend, what they laughingly call a mid-Atlantic accent.

I think the voice is paramount in an actor's makeup. It's almost like singing. That's why I loathe the Actors' Studio and all of that drivel that they put out, because they minimize and essentially demean it as a technique. I mean, you know what it takes to be an opera

singer, a ballet dancer, or a musician — these artists achieve their prominence and status through the painful learning process and experience. But in the theater — and I'm not using this show as an example; you can use just about any show to make this case — anybody who decides to do a play, Shakespeare, or whatever, can do it without having done the groundwork. You just don't fall out of bed and play Macbeth. I am not crazy about Brando as an actor. He got lucky with a play, and he is regarded as America's greatest actor — but hasn't been on the stage, anywhere, in 45 years. I think it's disgraceful. Now Pacino is going to play Iago or something. Come on, he has trouble playing Al Pacino. Take voice lessons, learn how to speak! Fame doesn't give you talent.

It was announced last year that you were going to star in *King Lear*. What happened to those plans?

I think it's Shakespeare's greatest play, and I'd love to play Lear. I've been asked to do it a number of times and one almost came to fruition through Circle in the Square and Michael Kahn at the Folger Theater in Washington. I said that since it would take a lot of time and effort on my part, I would like to have some input into the casting. We came to a point when we were about to start; each of us submitted our casts for consideration, and Michael had a black girl playing Cordelia. Now, I'm not a great believer in this so-called non-traditional casting. I mean, I have no prejudice or bias in my body, but I think that it's social engineering in art, and it is totally without merit as far as I am concerned. I told Michael that it didn't fit in with my concept. I said I understand all the reasons for it, and I don't agree with them. But he came back and said that he had to cast a black actor because he was getting a lot of money from some group, which required him to satisfy certain criteria. So they did *Lear* without me.

What about your current role as Malvolio? What's your take on the character?

I agree with the concept that Nick [director Nicholas Hytner] has of Malvolio as a complex character. He has to be mean and pompous so that the machinations of the letter scene



JOAN MARCUS

With Carol Burnett in *Moon Over Buffalo*, a play he now calls "wretched."



MARC BRYAN-BROWN

Above: Bosco and his *Lend Me a Tenor* co-star Victor Garber posed with Lady Bird Johnson after a performance. Below: With Rosemary Harris and Jane Adams in *An Inspector Calls*, a production he "loathed."



JOAN MARCUS

[work]. He becomes a dupe, and I can understand the audience's reaction — good that he's getting his comeuppance. And then they lock him up, and that's too disproportionate; the crime doesn't warrant what they did, so at the end, he's a figure of pity. I like that.

I understand you don't have too high an opinion of what is known as director's theater. How did you feel about the recent Broadway revival of *An Inspector Calls*, in which you co-starred with Rosemary Harris?

I loathed the production. I think it's a very compelling play, when it's done more or less traditionally — as the playwright intended. When you weigh the play with that ridiculous concept of the house [which collapses] — Peter Sellars' kind of theater — I think it's destructive. I believe you can make a case for the director in that you need a guiding hand for apprentices or young people learning, but when you get experienced actors and you get a play — all you really need is a traffic manager, in a sense. If it is a complex play, you need someone to illustrate and explain the points of view so that the whole may work. The problem is, when you have done Shakespeare or any of these classics endlessly and it is your lot to [direct] one of them, you have a choice of either not doing it or coming up with some new gimmick. It throws you into this kind of artificial construct that may be fascinating to you and the designer, and maybe even the producer, maybe even the critics, but certainly not to the actors. However, there are people who are not swayed by anything. Rosemary Harris, whom I admire, glories in anything to do with the theater. She reveled in that production — the more she groveled, the better she felt. I don't have that sanguine a view about it.

Speaking of productions you weren't happy with, let's talk about *Moon Over Buffalo*. Would you like to comment on that time you lost your temper during rehearsal, which was captured in the Pennebaker documentary about the production?

I liked the film; it showed how things really were. I had worked before with Ken Ludwig and was grateful for [his previous play] *Lend Me a Tenor*. [Bosco won his 1989 Tony in the play.]

But it was successful primarily because of the director, Jerry Zaks, who has a sense of fast comedy that Tom Moore [director of *Moon Over Buffalo*] claims he has but doesn't. In any case, *Moon Over Buffalo* was a wretched play. Ken, because of the success of *Lend Me a Tenor* and, strangely enough, of *Crazy for You* — for which he wrote the book, which was wretched — had gotten an inflated sense of himself. When we came to rehearsal, they wouldn't listen to us. And it got to the point, after a week and half, that I began to say, "Why did you choose us?" Carol [Burnett] felt this way, too. It was very frustrating because I personally, and I think most actors in general, adore the rehearsal period. That's when you are really creative, your mind is ablaze with ideas and readings — you try this and try that and examine, you dissect. But there was none of that. "Just say my words." It was as if it were David Mamet, that trickster who I loathe. I suffered all through that, but I tried my best. I would have quit if I was that kind of person. But I couldn't mask my unhappiness. I am not that kind of a hypocrite.

You seem to go from one play to another with hardly any breaks in between. What keeps you going?

I love to work on the stage, although the older you get, the harder it gets. It's not just the time you spend in the theater, it's in your head. You are working all the time. You take the job, and if it's a substantial role like a lead in Shaw, for instance, that play is with you from the time you sign that contract. You are going over it in your mind, because you have to get the words. You do it willingly, but it is still a lot of work.

Until *Lend Me a Tenor* made you a Broadway star, you had a reputation as a sterling classical actor, mostly in resident theaters. Did you consciously seek this kind of work, and did your specialty in the classics affect your career adversely?

I knew I wanted to be an actor on the stage. I knew enough about TV and wanted nothing to do with it. And actors are almost unimportant in film — that's a director's medium. I think you can act in the movies, but it's not required. So I accepted jobs that fulfilled a kind of ideal. I worked in reper-

tory companies for about 13 years: three years at Arena Stage, four years at the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, CT, and seven years with the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center. Then I did 13 shows at Circle in the Square and 14 at the Roundabout. It's an actor's dream. I was content. But my wife, I must confess, was not happy. [Bosco married his college sweetheart in 1957 and is the father of seven children.] She thought I was being cheated of the fame I should have had. Because little by little, when you become a member of a company, you are out of the pool in producers' minds.

It must have been difficult relying on that kind of theater for a living. I understand you have strong feelings against actors supplementing their incomes by doing commercials.

Yes, I still think it demeans the profession. How can you play Hamlet or Macbeth and be respected as an artist when they see you selling toilet paper? If you want to be a salesman, fine — but don't be an actor and a salesman. You are not practicing your craft when you are selling products. When Laurence Olivier did it, it broke my heart, although his commercials weren't shown in England. But after a lot of soul-searching, I said that I would do it because my family deserves it. And then it was no dog food or women's sanitary napkins. I became the spokesperson for MCI, and in four years, I made more money in that gig — almost a million dollars — than I made in my entire career as an actor on the stage.

You've done eight Shaw plays in New York. Do you have a special affinity for his work?

I do have a feel for it, and it all has to do with language. You've got to give the language its due; that's what Shaw is all about. Agree or disagree with his ideas, but they're all beautifully phrased. If only you could do this in life! To do Shaw or Shakespeare and Wilde, of course, it's the ability to say things that you can't conceivably think of saying yourself. It's really the best way to make believe. ■

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