

TheaterWeek

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KEVIN BACON'S SASS APPEAL

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From *Footloose* to *Spike Heels*

Kevin Bacon sizzles Off-Broadway.

by Gerard Raymond

HALFWAY THROUGH THE FIRST ACT OF Theresa Rebeck's new comedy, *Spike Heels*, Edward, a slick lawyer, makes his appearance. We've just been told that he is an arrogant sleazeball who has

threatened to rape his secretary—clearly a villain for our time. But the moment this cad steps on stage, he becomes the most likeable of the four characters in the play. And no wonder—Kevin Bacon plays the part.

"We needed the positive qualities of the character to come through—his wit, intelligence, charm, his ease, and really his sense of fun," explains the director, Michael Greif. Bacon, of course, has these qualities in spades. Thirty-four-years-old, but looking a decade younger, he is master of the cheeky grin, sharp repartée, super-cool demeanor, but, above all, he is a man with the most disarming charm in the business.

As he greets me at the door of his Upper West Side apartment, accompanied by Travis, his three-year-old son, and Jane, his friendly black labrador, Bacon is polite and professional—ready to talk seriously and candidly about his life and his career.

"I don't think I would be able to play somebody who was evil, or confused, or crazy without some kind of semblance of charm in their personality," Bacon explains. "I almost can't avoid it. I tend to want to find what is interesting or likeable about those characters." His gallery of charming rogues includes that quintessential Joe Orton bad boy Dennis, the amoral undertaker in Manhattan Theater Club's 1986 production of *Loot*, and a saucy hustler in Oliver Stone's *JFK*.

Bacon's thoughts turn to his childhood, and his early interest in acting. "I always wanted to dress up when I was a little kid, and whenever I saw a movie or a play I wanted to be in it," Bacon recalls. By the time he was thirteen, he knew he wanted to be an actor. His father was a prominent Philadelphia city planner, but Bacon

says his parents were "very relaxed" about his decision to come to New York and pursue an acting career instead of going to college. He arrived in the city in 1975, at the age of seventeen, and enrolled in Circle in the Square's summer program for high school kids. That fall, he joined the

school proper where, coincidentally, Michael Greif was also a student.

Bacon describes his climb up the show-biz ladder as "very traditional, textbook stuff." He got his Equity card doing a children's theater tour in Massachusetts, and an agent after a showcase at Equity Library Theater. Then he began the "long haul, sling-ing burgers and going to cattle calls." He originally intended to become a movie star, "a famous teen idol like Mark Lester, David Cassidy, or Bobby Sherman." But his focus soon



Susan Cook

Sandra Santiago and Kevin Bacon in *Spike Heels*.



Left: Bacon in *Footloose*; Top: A scene from *Road*. Right: Kevin Bacon and Larry Fishburne in *Quicksilver*.

changed and he discovered that he had absolutely no interest and no respect for the "fast track, television side" of the entertainment industry. His new idols were actors like William Hurt and John Heard, who played Shakespeare and were beginning to develop stage careers in New York.

While still at Circle in the Square, Bacon landed his first movie job, a part in *Animal House*, but he still dreamed of being a New York actor. "I could very easily have been typed as an all-American-boy-next-door and probably could have had a long and fruitful soap-opera career, but I wanted so desperately to fight against that." Consequently, he took roles like the 42nd Street hustler in Alan Bowne's *Forty Deuce* (later recreating the role for Paul Morrissey's film) and the working class paintmixer, opposite Sean Penn, in John Byrne's *Slab Boys*, which transferred to Broadway in 1983. Both roles required dialects, the latter a Scottish burr.

"I would love to be thought of as a versatile actor," Bacon says. "But there is not that much I can do to alter myself physically, I can't even grow a beard," he adds. Hence, his fascination for accents and dialects. In

Jim Cartwright's *Road*, his last New York stage appearance, he played three different characters who inhabit a dead-end road in an economically depressed Northern English town.

As Bacon developed into a versatile young stage actor, Hollywood took notice. His 1982 portrait of the rich, alcoholic underachiever in Barry Levinson's *Diner* is one of his most memorable screen roles. In *Footloose*, the big hit of 1984, he played a rebel in a strait-laced town, and became the movie star he dreamed of being as a kid. But Bacon's stardom was short-lived. "It was mostly downs after that," the actor remembers. Flops like *Quicksilver*, *End of the*

Line, and *White Water Summer* buried his film career fast. "It is an incredibly difficult thing to have been a movie star and then be associated with a string of unsuccessful films. In some ways you are worse off than if you were just coming up," Bacon explains. In retrospect, he believes that he subconsciously sabotaged his own career. "I was uncomfortable with it and I pushed it away; I deliberately resisted it."

It is only in the past year, with the enormous success of *JFK*, that Bacon has finally found a successful movie. And advance word on *A Few Good Men* suggests that his next film may be one of 1992's Christmas hits. He plays the prosecuting attorney in Rob Reiner's film version of Aaron Sorkin's Broadway play, which features



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an all-star cast headed by Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise. Still, Bacon is not certain he is over the hump yet and describes this phase of his film career as "reconstructive." But he also believes that the lean years have made him a better actor and taught him a valuable lesson. "What is so fantastic is that it made me realize that they didn't get my ass. I can still get a job. I know now that I will have a certain kind of longevity in my career."

A few years ago, Bacon and his agent made a conscious decision regarding his film career to wait for the right kind of job rather than to work for the sake of working. "It is a frightening thing to do sometimes," he says, "because, as an actor, you think if you turn something down you will never get another job." He has also developed a pragmatic approach to the projects he does get. "Recently, I've been getting things where a director knows that I am the person he wants. We have a meeting and over the next day or so, they offer it to me."

Little Travis comes running into the room, his face covered with green paint. "Hi buddy! Come here, little green man," his immediately attentive father calls out. But Travis is off to play on his own, and Bacon resumes the interview.

Family responsibilities play a large part in Bacon's reconstructed career. He married actress Kyra Sedgwick, whom he met on the set of the American Playhouse television movie version of Lanford Wilson's *Lemon Sky* in 1986, almost four years ago. She is best known for her performances in the 1988 Yale Rep/Broadway production of Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*, Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, and the 1990 Merchant Ivory film, *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*. In addition to their son, the Bacons have a three-month-old daughter, and plan their careers so that they never work at the same time. They live in Connecticut, where they intend to send their children to school.

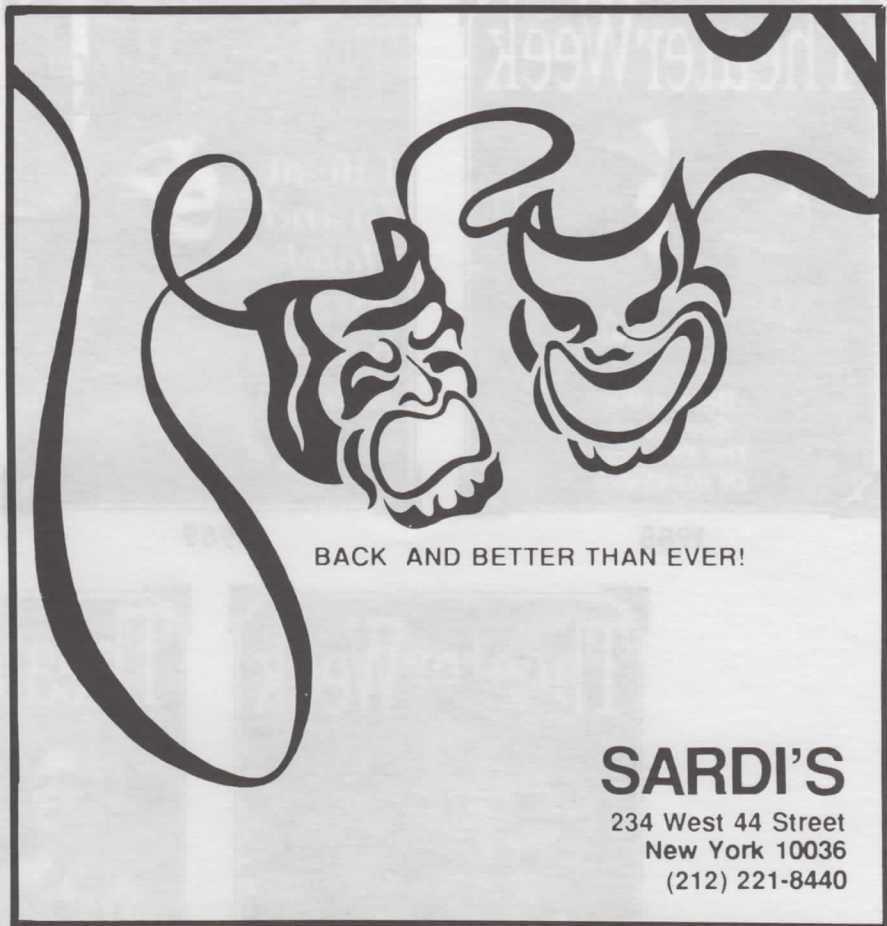
The happily married father of two is a side of Bacon that you don't often see in those charmers, misfits, and off-beat characters he plays so well on stage and film. "Fatherhood is an indescribably awesome, profound feel-

"Spike Heels has lots of twists and turns in terms of men, women, and sexual harassment."

ing. It becomes almost everything that you are," he says earnestly. "It becomes about your children and it has incredible rewards and dividends, daily and hourly." There are times, he acknowledges, that he and his wife think it would be nice if it were just the two of them; but, he adds, "the positive sides of it so greatly outweigh any kind of complaints you have about things not being convenient or not getting enough sleep."


Though it has been three years since Bacon appeared in the Lincoln Center/La MaMa Etc. co-production of *Road*, he returned to the stage because he believes that a stint in the theater improves his craft. *Spike Heels* interested him because it is "provocative" with "lots of surprises and twists and turns in terms of what positions it takes on men and women, sexuality, feminism, and sexual harassment." But Bacon acknowledges that he has a hard time reading a play or a film script and judging whether it is any good or not. "A lot of times I find I am wrong," he states candidly. "I say to myself, I am not the writer or director, so let me see if I can do something fun with this guy. I heard Edward's voice and I pictured him. I thought there were a lot of fun possibilities, dramatically, comedically."

For Bacon, the best parts of stage work are the rehearsal period and the previews. Greif notes that Bacon enjoys experimenting and tinkering in front of an audience, but he always stays within a given framework. "Kevin is very solid in terms of who the character is, what his actions are and what the beats of the play are. Then he brings a little freshness and a little idiosyncrasy to it every evening." Bacon describes his view of comedy as a dance between the actors and the audience. "You start by teaching each other the steps and when you start whirling around inside that space, that is the most fantastic thing in the world." □



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