

Veteran English actor Brian Bedford — who made his Broadway debut almost four decades ago — is no stranger to the New York stage. In recent years, he has delighted audiences with his exuberant theatrical presence in the Roundabout Theatre Company's *London Assurance* and *The Molière Comedies*. Now he returns to New York with Canada's Stratford Festival; and in a somewhat unusual turn of casting, the 63-year-old actor plays Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* opposite another Stratford veteran, Canadian actress Martha Henry. This production, along with Molière's *The Miser*, featuring another seasoned Canadian star, William Hutt (both directed by Stratford Festival artistic director Richard Monette), marks the inaugural season of the Festival at City Center. (The two plays will be performed in repertory Nov. 12–Nov. 29.) *InTheater* caught up with Bedford when he was performing in *Much Ado* in Ontario.

You seem to have made the Stratford Festival and Ontario your base. What took you to Canada?

You're right, this is my base. I came here in 1975 and this is my 17th season. I have a home here, and I have a theatrical home here too. You see, I always wanted to live in North America. After coming to New York [from London] in 1959 with Peter Shaffer's play *Five Finger Exercise*, I knew right

away that this was where I wanted to spend the rest of my life. But I also wanted to have a traditional English actor's career. One of the most disappointing aspects of American culture is that there is no national theater. I've worked at Lincoln Center in

what it is. We have an extensive season, three theaters, and a \$30 million budget. We don't get much financial support from the Canadian government, but in size and scope, it is on a par with the British National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. So I consider myself jolly lucky to be one of the big cheeses here.

Is this the first time that a production from Stratford has transferred to New York?

It's the first time in my memory that we are coming *en masse*. I've brought plays to New York that have originated at Stratford — *Timon of Athens*, which was done at the National Actors Theater, and *The Molière Comedies*, which I did at the Roundabout. But in both cases, I was the only actor who came to New York and these were pre-determined New York projects. Many, many years ago, when Maggie Smith was here at Stratford, we were going to bring a couple of plays to New York; I can't remember why it never happened. It would have been very exciting.

Before you joined the Stratford company and built up a reputation doing the classics, didn't you have a different sort of career in New York?

Yes. I was pretty much exclusively a commercial actor in New York. And I enjoyed that very much. New York was a very exciting place, both theatrically and socially — I had a beautiful apartment and a house in the country and all that kind of thing. It

was a good life. But I did miss Shakespeare and Molière. The seeds of a classical career had been planted in England. When I was 21 years old, straight out of theater school, I played Hamlet at the Liverpool

Life of Brian

Much Ado about
**Brian Bedford, who's back in
New York with the Stratford
Festival and shares memories
of Gielgud, the classics,
and a full theatrical life.**

By Gerard Raymond

New York and at the Kennedy Center in D.C., but there is nothing that has the size and the scope of the Stratford Festival in Ontario. And although it is not called the National Theater of Canada, that is, in fact,

Repertory Company, and the following year I went to Stratford-on-Avon and worked with Peter Brook and John Gielgud on *The Tempest*. I did get to do some classical work in America before I came to Canada — *Hamlet* and *The Three Sisters* at Stratford, Connecticut, and Molière and T.S. Eliot with ATA Repertory Company. And of course, one of the great feathers in my cap was that I had done *School for Wives*, which started as a limited run production at the Lyceum Theater [on Broadway] and, thanks to my winning a Tony Award, turned into a big commercial success. I'm sure that was the only reason, for instance, that we could take it on the road. I was very proud of that because it is not easy, in this day and age, to turn a 17th-century play written in rhyming couplets into a commercial success.

It was Robin Phillips [director of the Stratford Festival from 1975-1980] who asked me to become a member of the company. For my first season, I played Angelo in *Measure for Measure* and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Robin Phillips was responsible for my really taking myself seriously as a classical actor — not too seriously. He encouraged me to find out what was unique about myself and to commit myself to that. I have a show called *The Lunatic, the Lover and the Poet* — a sort of impressionist, dramatic portrait of Shakespeare through his own texts — which I have dedicated to John Gielgud and Robin Phillips because they were the great influences on my

development as a Shakespearean actor.

I understand it was Gielgud who helped you with your first performance as Hamlet. Would you care to talk a little about your friendship?

that I could meet him. We got on like a house on fire. I remember talking about Tennessee Williams' short stories, *One Arm and Other Stories*, which had just been published and were sensational. We had both read and enjoyed them tremendously. I

think he was rather surprised that a 20-year-old neophyte had read these sophisticated things. Anyway, John said, "If you are going to do anything interesting, let me know." About a week later, I found out I was going to play Hamlet. I wrote to him immediately, and by return mail came this package — a 14-page letter written on both sides with this unfamiliar minute handwriting, which I now know very well. It was all advice about Hamlet. I still have the letter, of course. I found out that this was absolutely typical of John Gielgud's generosity towards his fellow actors and young, inexperienced people.

Then, about a year later, I was in the first production of *A View From the Bridge* in London. I played the blond Italian immigrant. In those days it was considered a scandalous and outrageous play. Peter Brook, who directed it, asked me to go to Stratford-on-Avon to join him and Gielgud in *The Tempest*, where I was to play Ariel. When I was doing *View*, John was also playing in the West End in Noël Coward's *Nude With Violin*. So after my matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays,

I used to trot over to Gielgud's dressing room and he gave me verse-speaking lessons. Can you imagine the luck of a young actor? In 1971, when I won the Tony Award, one of my competitors was Gielgud. In my acceptance speech,



With Martha Henry in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1998).



Broadway debut: With Juliet Mills in *Five Finger Exercise*, directed by John Gielgud (1959).

John Gielgud was touring, strangely enough, with *Much Ado About Nothing* when I was at the Liverpool Rep. I managed to persuade the artistic director of the company to give a dinner party so

I said, "Many, many years ago, John Gielgud taught me verse speaking lessons. I hope he doesn't regret it too much this evening." They cut to John, and he was beaming; he was so pleased that I had been such an apt pupil. By this time, we were great friends.

Wasn't it Gielgud who brought you to New York in the first place?

Yes, he directed *Five Finger Exercise*. One night when we were doing *The Tempest*, we were having supper and he had this script with him. He said, "I have just been sent this play written by a new author I have never heard of called Peter Shaffer. It seems rather a suburban play to me; maybe you'll like

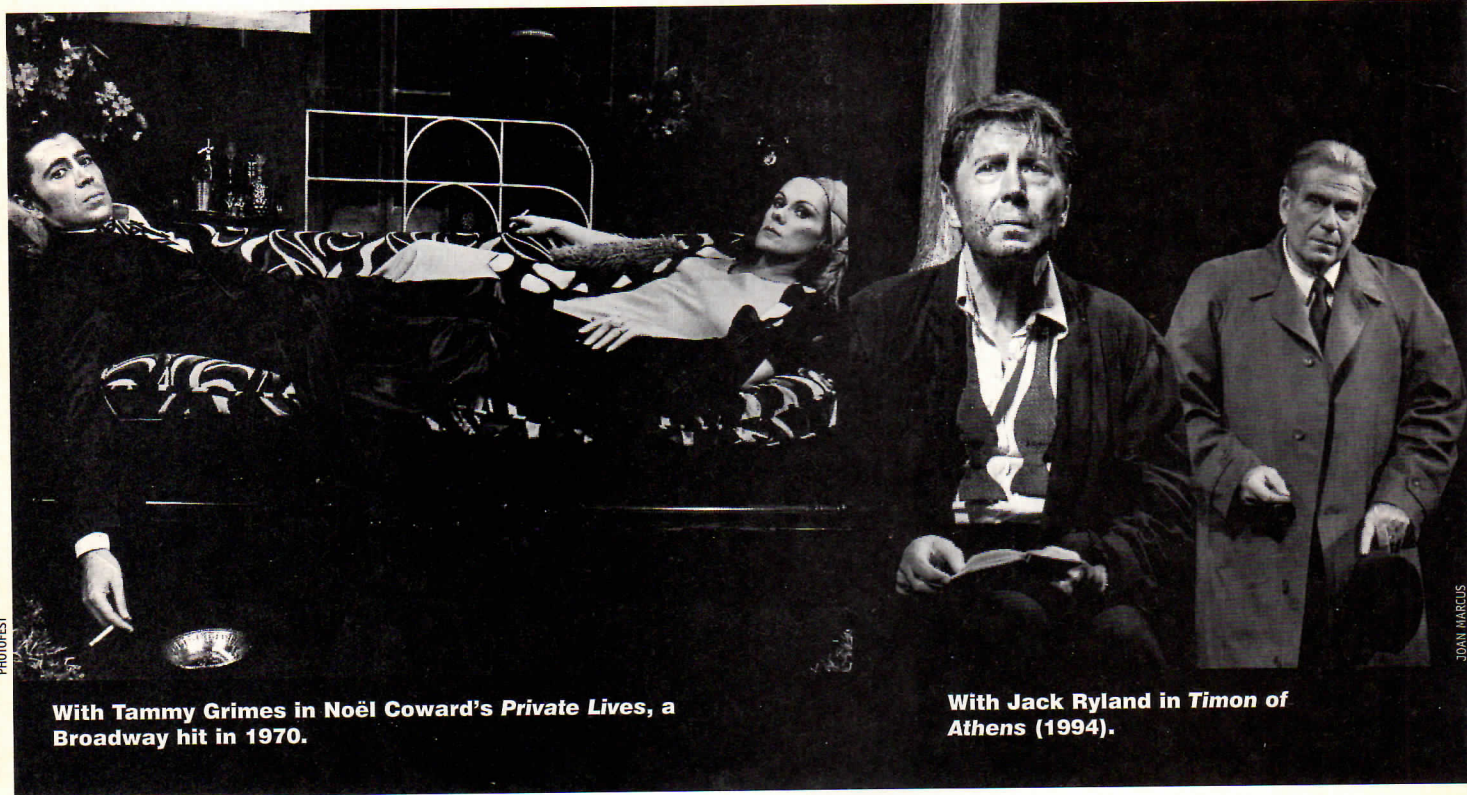
in London to build up a career there — like, for instance, Michael Bryant, one of your co-stars in *Five Finger Exercise*, who has developed a long career at the National?

No I don't. I wanted to be in the States. What I'm very glad about is that in the last few years, I have managed to resuscitate my career in New York. That all happened because Greg Mosher [former artistic director of Lincoln Center Theater] saw my Shakespeare show, which I did for the Juilliard students. He was just about to do *Two Shakespearean Actors* and he sent [playwright] Richard Nelson down to see it. That's how I

ful play, and Benedick is the perfect role whatever age you are. I can't imagine a better part.

One thing that's different about this production is the fact that you and Martha Henry, who is playing Beatrice, are both well over 50.

We might be considered way too old, but one of the reasons why I thought Martha Henry and I could do it is because I saw that dazzling production with John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft. They were about our age, and it worked beautifully. I think it probably is about the only Shakespearean romantic comedy



With Tammy Grimes in Noël Coward's *Private Lives*, a Broadway hit in 1970.

With Jack Ryland in *Timon of Athens* (1994).

it." I went home and read it immediately and saw there was the most wonderful part for me in it. The next day I said to John, "Oh it's a fabulous play, you have to do it." And I ended up doing that play for three years — one year in England, another year on Broadway, and another on the road in the States. Just to finish the John Gielgud stories, I called him on his 93rd birthday last year and wished him a happy birthday and asked how he was. "I'm okay," he said. "I just changed my agent and I'm getting a lot more work."

Do you regret not having stayed

got to play [British actor William Charles] Macready. Then all the other stuff followed.

Which brings us to your current New York appearance as Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. You have done the play several times before, but haven't tired of it.

I did it with Maggie Smith at the Stratford Festival years ago, and the last time they did it here, I played Dogberry. I also directed it at the Old Globe in San Diego, so I know it pretty well. It's just the most wonder-

where the protagonists can be older. It actually adds a bit more dimension that they are not young. There's something very touching about them being older, it being sort of their last chance. For instance, a woman stopped me on the street here the other day, and said, "It's so wonderful to see people over the age of 20 in love." I said, "Yeah, right on!"

It also reminds me of another friend of mine — the actress Margaret Leighton. She eventually married Michael Wilding (who had previously been married to Elizabeth

Taylor) and they were about this age when they met. Maggie, of course, had had a very busy emotional life with gentlemen, but it wasn't until she met Michael Wilding in her late 50s that her life became fulfilled and genuinely romantic. They were very, very happy — though, unfortunately, it didn't last terribly long because they both got ill. I just suddenly thought about that. As a matter of fact, it was she who did *Much Ado* with Gielgud when he brought the production that I saw to New York.

Playing the romantic lead in a show in New York is also a bit of a change for you, isn't it?



With Cheryl Gaysunas in *The Molière Comedies* (1995).

This is quite rare. There wasn't anything romantic about any of the stuff I have done in New York recently! I usually am happiest playing character parts. For instance, I had a wonderful time doing *London Assurance*. So it's a nice change for me to come to New York in a sort of straight part. I hope it's going to be a nice change for audiences to see me in something different, as well. ■

GERARD RAYMOND most recently profiled the Hartford Stage Company for *InTheater*.

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