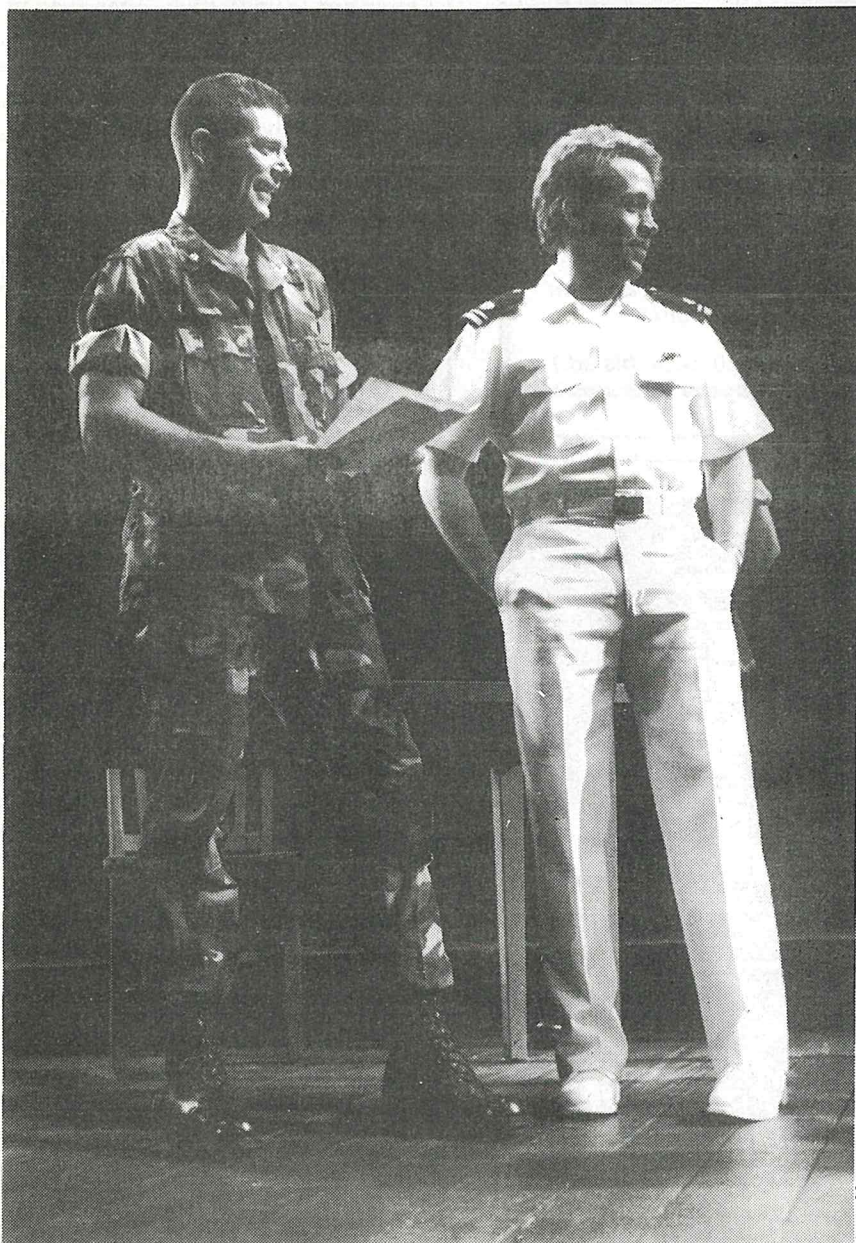


# An Officer and a Gentleman

*After a fifteen year absence, Tom Hulce returns to Broadway in A Few Good Men.*

by Gerard Raymond



(l. to r.) Stephen Lang and Tom Hulce in a scene from *A Few Good Men*, now playing at the Music Box on Broadway.

**A** *Few Good Men*, which opens on November 15 at the Music Box Theater, has the potential to become one of this season's critical and popular hits. It is a courtroom-drama (the best example of its kind since Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*), and marks the auspicious debut of playwright Aaron Sorkin. Focussing on the trial of two marines who have confessed to murdering a fellow marine, *A Few Good Men* examines the unwritten code of honor and the absolute belief system of the Marine Corps. The production is distinguished by sharp, witty dialogue, Don Scardino's expert staging and an excellent cast led by Tom Hulce.

Hulce plays Lt. j.g. Daniel Kaffee, a wise-cracking, seemingly irresponsible, lawyer who is assigned to defend the accused marines. Hulce gives an adroitly modulated performance, charting his character's development from a hack plea-bargainer to a brilliant lawyer.

"The bigger the journey, the more fun it is, because then you really get to run a race every performance," explains the thirty-five year-old actor who was last seen on Broadway fifteen years ago when he made his debut in *Equus*.

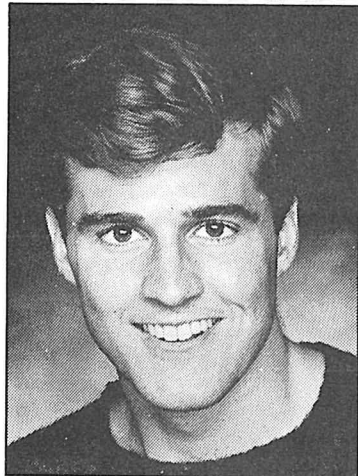
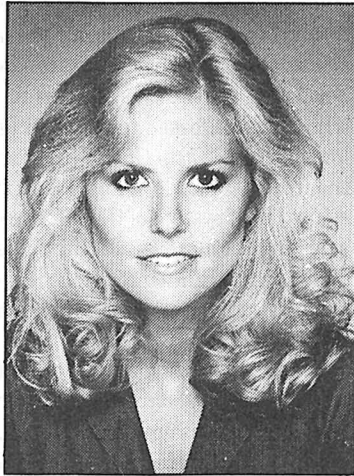
Because Hulce selects parts for "the writing or the people involved [in the production]" rather than roles that would give him a high profile, his career has taken several unusual turns. The last time he worked in New York, for example, was when he played Lewis Carroll in the 1987 off-off Broadway production of David del Tredici and David Warren's *Haddock's Eyes*. After receiving an Oscar nomination in 1985 for his performance as Mozart in *Amadeus*, he chose to act in such non-mainstream films as Wayne Wang's *Slam Dance* and the critically acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful *Dominick and Eugene*.

"Theater is my home base and it's where all of my fantasies as a kid were," says Hulce. Born in Wisconsin and raised in Michigan, he arrived in New York in his late teens determined to be an actor. He wanted to play Rimbaud in Christopher Hampton's *Total Eclipse* produced by the Chelsea Theater Company, and secured an audition through a friend. But, he says, "they neglected to hire me." Actress Polly Holliday helped him get a non-acting job at the New York Shakespeare Festival and a summer

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## PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN HAVILAND

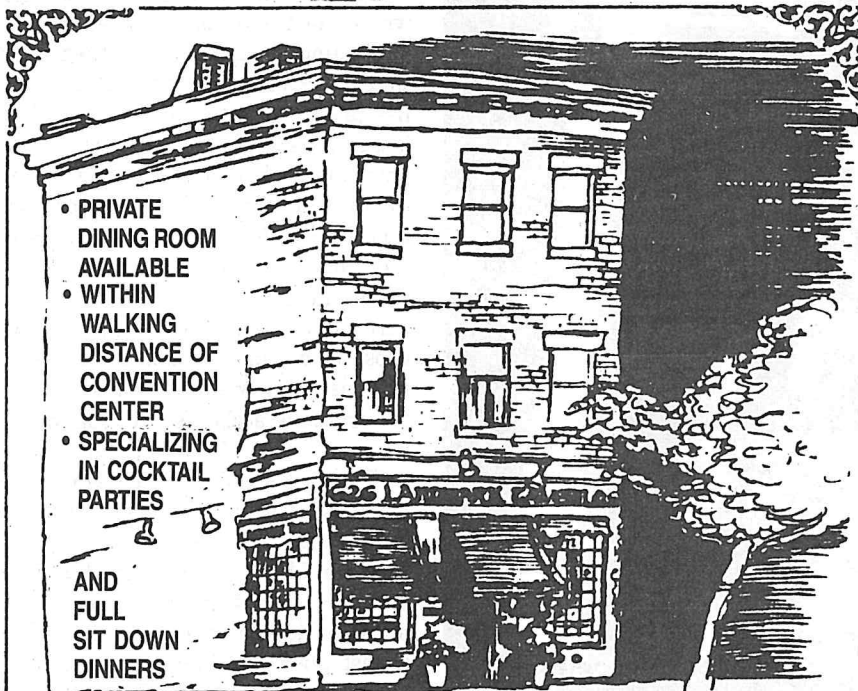


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stock job in Maine.

While working in Maine, a fellow company member suggested that Hulce audition for Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, a new play that was coming to New York from London. At the risk of losing his union membership, the actor gave his Equity card to Hulce, and told him to sit very close so that the name would not have to be called out too loud.

Armed with false identification and very little knowledge of the play, Hulce was determined to prove that he was right for the part. Director John Dexter noticed him in the crowd and called him back for a series of six auditions. Dexter hired him to understudy Peter Firth in the part of Alan Strang, the boy who blinds six horses.

"It was an extraordinary education for me. It was thrilling to work with all those people," recalls Hulce. He too has a John Dexter story that illustrates how harsh the director can be with actors. "We were in the middle of the first scene, I am acting with Tony Hopkins and I hear from the back of the theater [he imitates Dexter's English accent]: '*Boring dear!*' I had seen him being really tough on all the people during the first week of rehearsal so luckily, instead of getting freaked, I just said to myself, if he didn't think you could do this job he wouldn't treat you like he's treating Tony Hopkins. He obviously knows that you can do the thing that needs to be done! So I just took it as a challenge to come up to the potential that he saw." Hulce later played the part opposite Anthony Perkins on Broadway and in Los Angeles with Hopkins.

When Peter Shaffer's next hit play, *Amadeus* came to Broadway, Hulce wanted to play the role of Mozart but that didn't work out. He won the coveted part in Milos Forman's film version, however, beating out Mikhail Baryshnikov and David Bowie.

Along with Mozart in *Amadeus*, Hulce rates his performance as Ned Weeks, the gay activist in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, as "one of the all-time great experiences for me as an actor." He first played the role at Long Wharf under Arvin Brown's direction. In 1986 when the London production, directed by David Hayman, transferred from the Royal Court to the West End, Hulce

made his West End debut, replacing Martin Sheen in the lead role. The play had a great impact on Hulce when he saw it for the first time in New York. "I had no idea what was going on. I was living in New York at the time and to be assaulted with facts about what was going on ten blocks from where we were sitting was just astonishing."

In the States, Hulce has worked extensively in the regional theater where he has been associated with a number of new plays. He played Drew, the cynical gay painter in Richard Greenberg's *Eastern Standard* at Seattle Repertory Theater. At the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, he played Basarov, the anti-hero of *Nothing Sacred*, George F. Walker's adaptation of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*.

When *Eastern Standard* was scheduled to come to New York (at Manhattan Theater Club and then subsequently on Broadway), Hulce turned down the offer to repeat the role he created in Seattle partly because of "a financial obligation which made it difficult," but also because "New York just wasn't a source of excitement" for him. He asked himself what New York was that Seattle wasn't, and came up with the answer "bigger, dirtier and noisier."

This attitude had changed, however, by the time he attended a benefit for the Acting Company last year. "People made speeches about their lives in the theater and I was very moved because they were talking about what I had always dreamed of. I thought, why is this so foreign to me now? Why am I not doing everything I can to be working in New York and fulfilling my first fantasy?"

**A** *Few Good Men* provided the opportunity to work again in New York but it called for making a nine-month commitment. "That is a long time when, in a sense, it's a blind date and I made the commitment without hearing the play out loud. That's a really hard thing to do." Hulce, nevertheless, had great confidence in playwright Aaron Sorkin. He was familiar with Sorkin's first (unproduced) play *Removing All Doubt*, and had even discussed working on it. "I was really excited because it was clear he could write."

He eventually decided that he was too old to play any of the 20-year old char-

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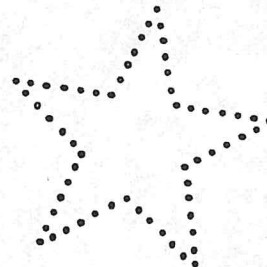
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**“A lot of stuff just kept getting reworked. Words would appear in different places in the sentence. So you started to get a little schizoid.”**

acters in that play but was interested in following Sorkin's writing career. He obtained a copy of the current play from a friend last spring. He liked the play and brought it to his agent's attention making various suggestions for casting. For some reason, Hulce says, he never considered himself for the lead role. He changed his mind later, however, when his agent, Sorkin and director Don Scardino persuaded him to re-read the play.

Hulce began work on the play a week after a gruelling shoot (“16-hour days, 6 days a week, 90 percent humidity and 100 degree weather”) in Georgia. He had just completed *The Murders in Mississippi*, a forthcoming TV movie which tells the story (ignored by the film *Mississippi Burning*) of the three civil rights workers who were murdered in 1964. “I was a wreck” after the movie, explains Hulce, saying that everyone started rehearsal “very much with the understanding that it would be a long process. I was really impressed with Don and Aaron and the producers; they didn't panic when we were in Charlottesville, [the University of Virginia where the play had its first try-out], and I was only saying the words.”

Apparently the play went through something between twenty to thirty rewrites. The script Hulce received two days before rehearsal was very different from the first one he had read. “Then it changed in rehearsal. Many characters got stronger, things came and things went. A lot of stuff just kept getting reworked which was the hardest part in the process because you would be saying basically the same things but the words would be in different places in the sentence. So you started to get a little schizoid.” This process went on all through the pre-Broadway run in Washington, so much so, Hulce jokes, that they will need till St. Valentine's Day to “have it all together.”

If *A Few Good Men* settles into a long

run, Hulce will be able to continue work on a project which he hopes can go in front of the cameras next spring. He optioned Jacqui Banaszynski's *AIDS in the Heartland*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning series of articles that was published two years ago in Minnesota. The series describes the life of a gay couple coping with AIDS and the reaction of a St. Paul community to their predicament. Hulce is more interested in developing a project to the point “where someone else will direct it.” He once directed a musical, *Sleep Around Town*, for Playwright's Horizons, and realized that creative development, not directing, excited him.

Clearly, Hulce does not work with an eye on the box-office. His most recent film, *Parenthood*, in which he played Steve Martin's ne'er-do-well younger brother, is, nevertheless, a major popular success. A production deal for a film version of *A Few Good Men* has already been signed but according to rumor, Tom Cruise has his eye on Hulce's part. Hulce is unperturbed by this development, noting that “theater is not a second-class citizen to film.

“If my eyes were on the movie,” he points out, “I don't know why I would want to do the play for a year. I get the pleasure of living in it and I am thrilled to have that opportunity. The rest will take care of itself.”

Hulce acknowledges that he is “not uninterested” in accepting work that will advance his career, but, he says, “it's very hard to make decisions based on where I think it will get me. If I get run over right after I finish this, where would it have gotten me but in wasting the opportunity that I had at the time to do something that I believed in. I was in a big hurry when I started. I am not in that same kind of hurry now. I figure if I am in for the long run then it's a matter of making up my own rules, hopefully being given the opportunities, to do what I want to do. □