

Who's That?!

by Gerard Raymond

FROM JULLIARD TO PROFESSIONAL theater via the New York Shakespeare Festival, John Benjamin Hickey and Jake Weber have followed the route of many distinguished New York actors. In the past six months, the two young men have established themselves as actors to watch. Hickey is currently in the Lincoln Center production of *The Substance of Fire* at the Mitzi E. Newhouse, and Weber is appearing in the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of *As You Like It*.

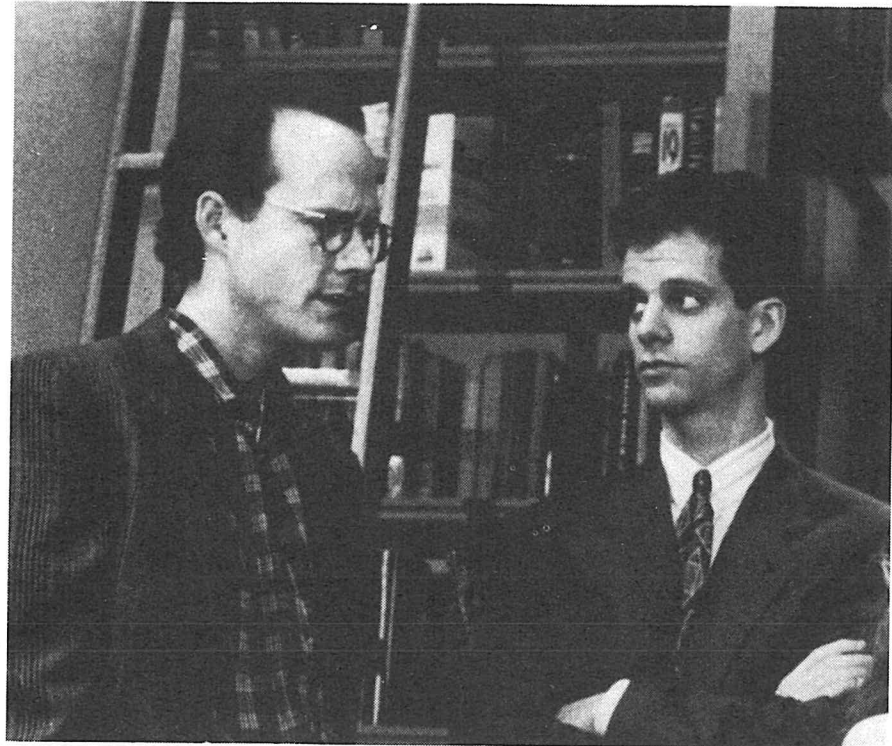
John Benjamin Hickey

Two days after John Benjamin Hickey completed the run of John Robin Baitz's *The End of the Day* at Playwrights Horizons, he moved into *The Substance of Fire*, also written by Baitz. In the role of an angry gay man who may or may not have AIDS in *The End of the Day*, Hickey made such a strong impression on Baitz that the author recommended him for the part of the youngest son in *The Substance of Fire*. "I feel like the luckiest actor in the world," Hickey exclaims at the opportunity to work on both plays.

Hickey was born on a small farm in Texas 28 years ago. He came to New York in 1983 to complete his BA in English at Fordham University and then spent the next four years at Julliard's associate artistic director Rosemary Tischler, who taught a master class at Julliard, he got his first job carrying a spear in the NYSF production of *Twelfth Night* in Central Park. Actually, he carried a cocktail tray in this modern dress production, which starred Michelle Pfeiffer, Jeff Goldblum, and Gregory Hines.

He next worked in various regional theaters, but his big break came with *The End of the Day*. He almost didn't get the role. Bruce Norris got it instead, but when Norris accepted another job in Chicago, Hickey was called for a second audition, and clinched it. "Every now and then, if you allow yourself to want something, maybe you'll get it," he says.

The angry homosexual in *The End of the Day* was no "saintly, going gent-



Martha Swopa

John Benjamin Hickey and Patrick Breen in *The Substance of Fire*.

ly into the night kind of sick person," Hickey explains. But the role, in fact, did start out that way. It was during rehearsals that the character underwent a drastic change, turning into an unscrupulous, not always pleasant young man. "The role had this marvelous negative metamorphosis, and I thought it made a wonderful statement about taking control of your life," says Hickey.

Hickey says he would have done the show in Timbuktoo, just for the chance to work with Baitz, the director Mark Lamos, and everyone involved with *The End of the Day*. "I know that sounds gushy, but hell, that's the way I feel," he says, adding that the experience made a great difference in the way he now approaches his work. "The pressure of opening a new show in New York and seeing what grace-under-pressure people like Nancy Marchand have, teaches you the lesson that what is really important is getting up there and doing it every night," he says.

Jake Weber

Jake Weber was one year behind John Benjamin Hickey at Julliard and also began his professional career

through the Rosemary Tischler connection at the New York Shakespeare Festival. He too began with a bit part in *Twelfth Night* in the park. "After that, they kept giving me more, from nothing to small to slightly larger than small," Weber quips. He played Catesby in *Richard III* and Roderigo in *Othello* before his first big part, Orlando, in the current *As You Like It*.

Weber, 28, grew up in Europe. His father is English; his mother, Danish. He came to the United States (California, to be exact) in his early teens. Initially, he considered a career in law, but, eventually decided to become an actor. Shortly after his Shakespeare in the Park roles, Weber played the lead in John Patrick Shanley's *The Big Funk*, which he says was a terrifying experience. "I came out buck naked at the end of the play, and it was sub-zero temperature in the theater, because it was a fucking comedy," he says. He tried to avoid playing the role, hoping that he would get another job offer before the rehearsals began. "At the eleventh hour, I did get another offer, but then I thought I was just chickening out, and I greatly admire Shanley, who had trusted me with the lead in his

show.”

In the production, a naked Weber had to walk up to audience members and talk to them—with the house lights on. “If you thought I was scared,” he says, “you should have seen the people I linked eyes with!” Although most of the audience was trying to pretend they weren’t looking, Weber was conscious of their scrutiny. “We men all have that fear

Martha Swope



Jeanne Tripplehorn and Jake Weber in *The Big Funk*.

of scrutiny, especially under adverse circumstances, that’s the bottom line, isn’t it? These people were looking at my penis, and my penis was scared!” Weber says he eventually got over his fear, but adds: “Who wants to be comfortable being naked in front of 250 people every night. That’s not very healthy either.”

Since last December, Weber has been working non-stop. He played Radu, a Romanian revolutionary, in Carol Churchill’s *Mad Forest* at the New York Theater Workshop; and, most recently, he made his Broadway debut playing five Italian brothers in Alan Ayckbourn’s *A Small Family Business*.

In Orlando, Weber has found a role that doesn’t require him to use an accent or drop trou. “I think when you are doing Shakespeare, you have to approach the roles with considerable humility because they are all so much greater than your contribution can ever be. But,” he adds with a grin, “I love this guy Orlando.” □

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