

The Actor's Metamorphosis

Rene Auberjonois's wide-ranging career has led through stage, television, and film—and now to Metamorphosis

by Gerard Raymond

“I’ve always loved caricature, not in the derogatory sense of the word but in its purest sense, which means distilling the essence of a personality,” says Rene Auberjonois. He currently plays Mr. Samsa, whose son Gregor (played by Mikhail Baryshnikov) wakes up one morning to discover he has turned into a dung beetle, in Steven Berkoff’s adaptation of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Auberjonois’s role—part narrator, part tyrannical father, sometimes realistic, often stylized—is the latest in an extraordinary gallery of eccentric characters that makes up his acting career.

“I think we tend to get a little bogged down with feeling that something has to be ‘real,’ explains Auberjonois. “I don’t know what real is. If it’s the kind of real that I think most people imagine, then you don’t need to go to the theater—you can get that at home. I feel more comfortable with the word ‘true.’ You can take audiences to outrageous places as long as they recognize that their roots are in the truth. They are comfortable with that. It’s like a kite; you can get the kite as high as you want, as long as the string is grounded. If the audience senses that it is still holding the string and it has a visceral connection, you can go anywhere.”

Auberjonois describes his role as Mr.

Samsa in *Metamorphosis* as “incredibly challenging, both physically and vocally.” It marks the first time he’s worked with director Steven Berkoff: “I’ve known him and admired him as an actor and as a theater artist. He has his own very particular vision of the theater. When I read the script, my initial reaction was, why does he want me to play this? The character is really older and bigger than I am. But on contemplating it, I realized that—and this is patting myself on the back, perhaps—I am the kind of actor that Steven likes to work with: actors who are comfortable making large physical choices, maybe going too far and who can then be pulled back.”

It was, perhaps, because of this capacity to go all the way in his acting, that Auberjonois became part of filmmaker Robert Altman’s stock company in the early 1970s. In *Brewster McCloud*, Auberjonois played an ornithologist who gives an extended lecture on the feeding and mating habits of different avian species through the course of the film. He played Father Mulcahy (a/k/a Dago Red) in *M*A*S*H* and a seedy saloon-keeper in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. “I love it that people still connect me with Robert Altman’s work,” he says, diffidently. “The fact is that the last film

impart, "all our shows have eventually had their opening numbers changed..."

It is, after all, a hard job being God—and even harder evaluating a script. How would any of us do reading "Beedle-dee-deet-dee-dee, two ladies, beedle-dee-deet-dee-dee, two ladies, beedle-dee-deet-dee-DEE!" Would we know we were in the middle of a Tony-award winner that would become a classic Hollywood film? (For the uninitiated, the lyrics come from *Cabaret*.)

But read and listen is what the MTW folks do. "And," says Stimac, "in addition to the four mainstage productions, we mount 10-12 staged readings a year, which are attended by members of the organization, friends of the cast, and professionals. They're not backers auditions—we just want some audience reaction to tell us more about the piece. Then the more successful ones go into development and production.

"But," adds Herko. "sometimes I think we need a Phase Four, where we remount a production.

"Every author," explains Stimac, "who's midway through the three-week run says, 'Now, if I could just close down, make the rewrites I need and do it again, I'd have a great show.'"

And that's why *Cradle Song*, the aforementioned musical in which MTW greatly believes, is getting another shot. The musical, with book and lyrics by Mary Bracken Phillips and music by Jan Mullaney, has been seen at Goodspeed, under the title of *Kaleidoscope*, but now returns to its original title in its second MTW incarnation. Stimac directs the production, which plays March 8 through April 2. To follow: *Young Rube* (April 12-30), about the life of gee-whiz-gizmo king Rube Goldberg. The author is no less than the subject's son, George W. George, who's been a producer of *Any Wednesday*, *Ben Franklin in Paris*, and *Dylan*, among others.

As we walk down the hall, past the rehearsal studios, Stimac recalls the long MTW journey from its previous Second Avenue space to its Lafayette Street digs and the use of the hand-

some St. Peter's Church Theater at Citicorp. "My wife," he recalls, "typed the proposal for MTW the day she was in labor with my daughter. Only after she finished did she go to the hospital and have the baby." (Seems like the family is full of troupers—including older daughter Nicola, who appeared as a chorus member in the recent *Kiss Me Quick, Before the Lava Reaches the Village*.)

And are there plans to expand into another area of the musical theater industry? "Well," Stimac says, rubbing the back of his neck, "Philip Morris did an arts survey and discovered that 77 percent of the people polled would buy musicals on video if they were available. It seems that this is a \$2-billion business waiting to happen, and it's staggering to think about tapping into that. I hope we can do it someday, but we'll have to walk before we can run."

Don't be surprised if they start running soon. These guys are in it for the whole marathon, and the musical theater is the luckier for their perseverance. □

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Above: L.R. Stephen Bogardus, Don Amendola, R. Brooks Alm, Yamil Borges, Timothy Landfield in the La Jolla Playhouse production of *80 DAYS*. Music & Lyrics by Ray Davies. Book by Snoc Wilson. Directed by Des McNuff.

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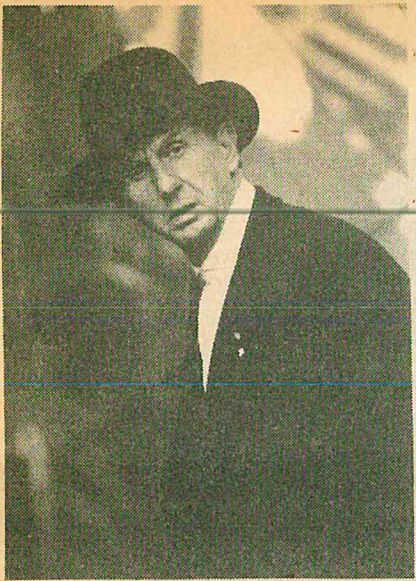
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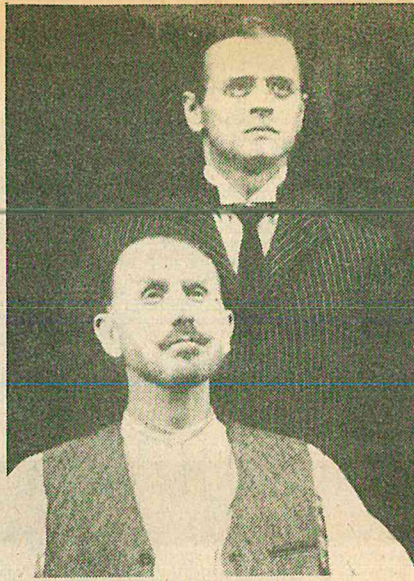




In the upcoming film *The Feud*

I made for Altman, *Images*, was 17 years ago." Although he is only 48 now, Altman then cast him in roles calling for older men: "I am now probably the age that I looked in those films. Sometimes I think I'm like Margaret Hamilton. She played the witch in *The Wizard of Oz* when she was very young and spent her entire life growing to the age that people imagined she was back then!"

Does the consistent eccentricity of the parts he's offered bother him? "If I'm typecast as larger than life characters, that's fine. There is a certain segment of the industry that would typecast me in effete, officious,

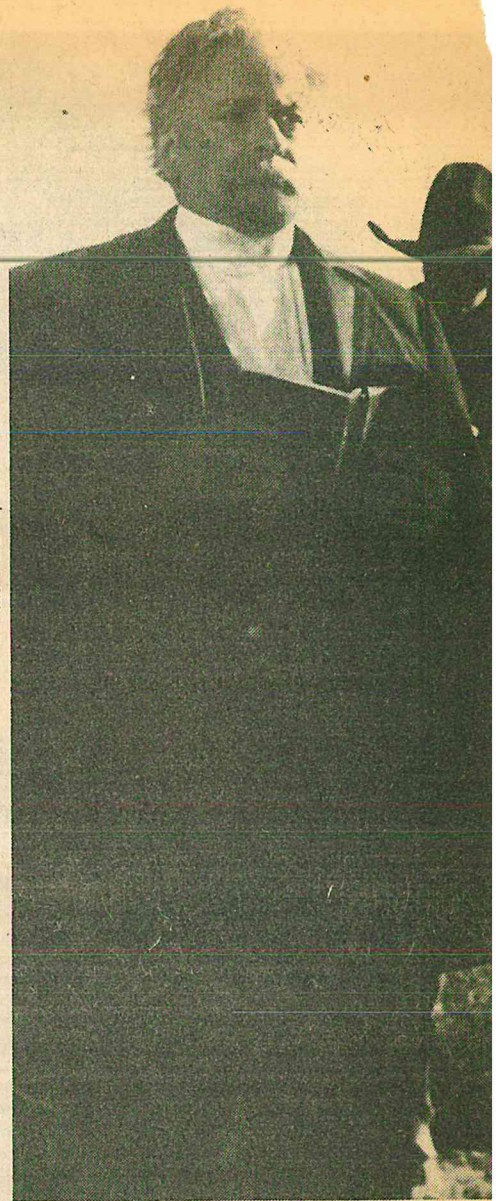


With Mikahil Baryshnikov in *Metamorphosis*

aristocratic, or possibly-gay-possibly-not-gay kind of characters. That also has never bothered me. I don't mean to protest too much, but I'm a monogamous heterosexual male who has been married for 25 years and has two children.

"My feeling about typecasting is that we are in a marketplace. You may have a lot of different things to sell, but if you have apples among them, and apples are what they want in the marketplace, don't bother to come if you aren't willing to sell them. I am happy when someone is interested in buying other aspects of things that I can do. I think this particular role in

Martha Swope



As *Richard III* at the Mark Taper Forum. Paddi Edwards plays Queen Margaret.



Metamorphosis is very different in that sense."

Indeed, this current role will come as a surprise to those audiences in New York who have come to regard Auberjonois as primarily a musical comedy actor. He won a Tony Award in 1970 for his role as Katharine Hepburn's nemesis, a flamboyant dress designer, in *Coco* and a Drama Desk Award and Tony nomination for his role as a con man (teamed with Bob Gunton) in *Big River* in 1985. He also played the lead in *Tricks*, the short-lived musical version of Molière's *Scapin*. "It's funny," he remarks, "because outside of New York no one will ever think of me as a musical comedy actor. In the regional repertory theater scene—what I call the

Jay Thompson



On the television series *Benson*

With Gore Vidal in the television film *Gore Vidal's The Kid*

real theater—I have done everything from King Lear to Richard III. I have done as much Shakespeare as most American actors hope to do.”

Auberjonois played two seasons with the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater (notably as the Fool opposite Lee J. Cobb’s King Lear in 1968), Brutus in *Julius Caesar* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Edgar to James Earl Jones’s Lear at the New York Shakespeare Festival. But his reputation as a classical actor was established at Washington’s Arena Stage, where he began his career after graduating from Carnegie Mellon University. He then worked with San Francisco’s American Conservatory

Theater (ACT), of which he is a founding member. The title role in Molière’s *Tartuffe* was a highlight of his stay with ACT. He is also a founder-member of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, where his 1984 *Richard III* was extremely well-received. This was the role that first brought him to the attention of director Steven Berkoff.

“In Hollywood,” Auberjonois points out, “they think of me as a television actor.” In fact, from 1980-86 he played Clayton, chief of staff to James Noble’s none-too-bright governor in the long-running series *Benson* (which spun off Robert Guillaume’s character from an earlier series, *Soap*). “*Benson* came along at a perfect time in my personal life. By 1980, my children were at an

age when we really couldn’t move around as much and so, for six years, it gave us a solid base and gave me a schedule which most actors dream they want. I don’t know if I really do want that all the time, but I did want it from the time my son was six until he was 12.”

Benson was in production for only six months each year, which gave Auberjonois time to work extensively in West Coast repertory theater. Still, he missed working in New York, especially for the New York Shakespeare Festival: “It’s very hard to work for a limited amount of money when you have to come all the way across the country and set up housekeeping. Your phone calls back home to your family eat up the entire salary!” Nevertheless, he admits, “The lazy part of me likes film and television, but the artist in me knows that working on the stage is really where I belong, ultimately. If I had to choose, I would choose the stage. It’s harder work, though.”

On stage, particularly on Broadway, Auberjonois has had his share of flops. His Broadway debut was in John Roc’s allegorical *Fire!*, which lasted five days in 1968. “Of all the shows I have done on Broadway, it’s sort of half and half—they either run, or they run a week. Only one, Ira Levin’s *Break a Leg*, [Ira Levin’s turn of the century Middle European show business farce] with Julie Harris and Jack Weston, lasted one night at the Palace.

Erik Heimila



With Laura Esterman, T.J. Meyers, Madeleine Potter, and Mikhail Baryshnikov in *Metamorphosis*

It had a fabulously funny first act and a troubled second act. It was a classic Broadway disaster. The others that didn't run, like *Tricks* and *Fire*, weren't disasters; they were kind of noble failures."

While most actors would find this insecurity devastating, Auberjonois remains pragmatic: "By the time I had done my first Broadway show, I had been in repertory theater for many years. When you do a show on Broadway you always have a long preview period anyway, so for me that's the run of the show. I must admit that I find it hard to play in a show for a very long time. There is a certain point of diminishing return, where you are no longer able to grow without breaking the structure that you worked on in rehearsal—which, of course, you can't do. At a certain point, I find that you cease to create and start recreating. I find that probably four months is enough. I did *Tartuffe* at ACT over a three-year period but it

was in repertory—we brought it in and out. But doing the same play every night, eight performances a week—it is pretty tough to keep it alive."

Auberjonois's pet project is one that was started by his wife, Judith, two years ago: L.A. Classic Theater. An actor's company which currently consists of 48 high-profile names—Richard Dreyfus, Amy Irving, John Lithgow, Julie Harris, Stacey Keach, Ed Asner, among others—it was formed in order to give classically-trained Los Angeles actors a chance to work on the great plays. Following a suggestion by Dreyfus, they began working for radio, in the manner of Orson Welles's famed Mercury Theater Players. So far, the company has produced an adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt* for National Public Radio, and Eric Bentley's transcription of the HUAC—Hollywood Ten hearings, *Are*

You Now, Or Have You Ever Been, and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* for the BBC. "We have not performed anything on the stage yet," says Auberjonois. "But that is very much part of what we want to do. We have all these amazing people thanks to my wife, who is this amazing force who just keeps going in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds."

Auberjonois has recently completed two movies. One is *Gore Vidal's The Kid*, a television film which will premiere on Turner Network Television in May. Scripted by Vidal, the story is based on the life of the legendary Billy the Kid (played by Val Kilmer). Auberjonois plays a character simply known as the Drunk. "A wonderful, wonderful character," he enthuses, "a seedy Eastern poetic man on the downside—a very satisfying role to play. He's a man who romanticizes and idolizes Billy the Kid and then, in the classic Judas sense, turns him in

Martha Swope



for the reward at the end." Next comes *The Feud*, a wacky and satirical look at American life in the 1950s, scheduled for theatrical release in the spring. "I have high hopes for this small independent film," he says. "It's based on a book by Thomas Berger [author of *Little Big Man* and *Neighbors*] to which Robert Altman had the rights for a number of years. It's a black comedy and it's a very different character for me."

In the meantime, what will Auberjonois do after *Metamorphosis*? "I wait for someone to say—like Steven did—'You should play this part.' And the minute I question why I should play a part, I tend to say, 'That's a good idea; we should do it.' Whenever I look at a part and I think, I must play this part, it tends to be not what I hoped. When you can't quite figure out why someone wants you to play a role, it's usually worth doing, because you learn a lot about yourself as you do it and it really does open you up." □

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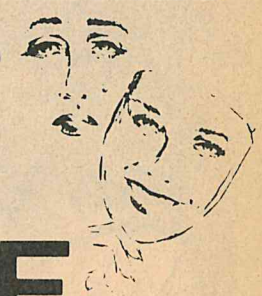
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