

Reflections from Brian Dennehy

Fall 2003

“Another saving factor was Brian Dennis (ne Dennehy) who showed remarkable stage presence and talent as Mr. Addams, a very dapper witch (or is it warlock?). Known more for his exploits on the gridiron, Dennis charmed the audience with his dancing, singing and acting prowess—a veritable triple threat.”

—*Stephen C. Lerner '60CC reviewing The Girl From Salem, Columbia Spectator, March 5, 1959.*

“Dennehy, a powerhouse with a matinee idol’s rugged profile, makes James’s bog-Irish roots immediately credible, and his burly and bombastic presence—the unsettling drizzle of his sentimentality and sarcasm—anchors the play in its climate of disappointment.”

—*John Lahr reviewing Long Day’s Journey Into Night, The New Yorker, May 19, 2003.*

After years of working at jobs from cab driver to bartender to stockbroker and picking up more than 100 television and movie roles, Brian Dennehy '60CC is where he really wants to be—performing on stage. In the last four years, he’s won two Tony Awards for Best Actor—one for his performance as Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and one earlier this year for his portrayal of James Tyrone in Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, both directed by Robert Falls.

Dennehy, who majored in history at the College and played football for the Columbia Lions, says his stage career really took off when he met Falls in Chicago 20 years ago. The two have also collaborated in Goodman Theatre productions of *A Touch of the Poet*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Galileo*, and a 1992 remounting of *The Iceman Cometh* at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Dennehy has also appeared in dozens of feature films, including *Presumed Innocent*, *Best Seller*, *Twice in a Lifetime*, *F/X*, *Cocoon*, *Silverado*, *Gorky Park*, *10*, *Legal Eagles*, and *First Blood*.

Fortunately for Columbia, his credits also include the role of narrator in Ric Burns’s new documentary *Columbia: A Celebration*, scheduled to air on WNET-13 in the New

York City area on October 13.

On the following page are some reflections Dennehy shared with *Columbia* magazine on acting, the theatre, and how his time at Columbia influenced his aspirations.

Dennehy on...

Acting at Columbia

I was a football player at Columbia and that was my real enthusiasm. They would periodically announce auditions for the Columbia Players in the *Spectator*. This was in the late 50s so it was very avant-garde. Every time I went over there people looked at me like a skunk had just walked into the room because I was, of course, a well-known athlete. But when I was a junior a great group of women at Barnard got together and wrote a musical and put it on. I actually got a great review in the *Spectator*. Unfortunately, I had to bill myself as Brian Dennis in order to hide myself from the dean's office because I was on academic probation at the time.

Theatre Studies

There was no theatre department at Columbia when I went and there was no theatre studies. I'm not so sure I'm in favor of programs like that to be honest with you. It's great to look at great plays, but to me it's much more important for actors to learn history and literature and languages.

The Life of the Mind

My interest in doing great stage roles is hooked up to my original experiences with some amazing people at Columbia. It all started with a perception that there was more to life than having, say, a hit TV series on the air for eight years. That would be nice and it would probably buy you a hell of a lot of distractions. But I knew there was something else that I wanted to do and I knew it because I went to Columbia and learned something by listening to people like Mark Van Doren and Quentin Anderson and C. Wright Mills and Lionel Trilling—their intelligence, their enthusiasms, and their appetites for life and understanding and study. That seems to be the essential function of the university—the experience of listening to someone who knows and has learned tell you why it is important to try to learn. The thing that impressed me most was their calmness, their sense of quiet observation and patience. The world could be looked at and partially understood, partially rationalized in some way, and it was worth that observation and it was worth that patience. To abuse an overused term, there was a life of the mind. I hope that's

continuing at Columbia.

Underground Culture in the 50s

The thing about Columbia that was so great was that wherever you turned a corner there was somebody who had a life going on that was completely different and unusual. Kerouac and Ginsberg would hang out at the West End—this was now in the mid 50s. Kerouac was there a lot and he had this book, this horrible manuscript. He was kind of a bum; he'd kind of hang around cadging drinks. But of course, he also had this amazing life going on. I also remember getting on the subway and going down to the Village Vanguard to listen to Bill Evans. He would do Sunday morning concerts—of course he hadn't been to bed for two days.

Playing Great Roles

If you're old enough and mature enough and sensible enough you realize that it's a privilege to be given the opportunity to play a role like Willy Loman or James Tyrone. After all I've done over the years to make money, to be given a part like this is like being handed this polished, beautifully cut jewel and your job is to take that wonderful piece of art and shine it up some more. It's a responsibility and a privilege and I understand that. I love to go to the theatre every night—love it. Every night I go saying to myself: "Just let whatever happens happen out there and see if you can make it better and see if you can find something different—see if you can find something more real, something that the audience will respond to"—which is obviously something you can't do in the movies or on television.

Retiring from the Stage

It's like having a license to be 12 years old—why would you want to retire?



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