

FRESH PRINCE

Why Liev Schreiber is ready to play Hamlet.

BY JOHN LAHR



IN 1997, the director Tony Goldwyn was casting “A Walk on the Moon” and he was stuck for an actor to play Marty—the cuckolded blue-collar husband who is more intelligent than his circumstances would indicate—when he got a call from one of his producers, Dustin Hoffman. “There’s this kid I’m working with,” Hoffman told Goldwyn. “You gotta see him. He’s special. He reminds me of me when I was his age.” The actor in question was Liev Schreiber, who was on location with Hoffman in “Sphere.” Schreiber, who got the job, and turned in one of his subtlest performances to date, is thirty-two and has been out of Yale School of Drama for only seven years. He has so far appeared in twenty-five films and sixteen stage plays. His is not a face familiar from gossip columns or talk

shows; but he has a way of impressing the grandees of his craft.

“He has a kind of wisdom about human contradictions that is beyond his years,” Hoffman says, comparing Schreiber with his peers in the new generation of actors. “He’s very perceptive. He watches and observes, and he’s amused by what he observes. It’s an intrinsic part of him to transform what he sees into some kind of irony.” For the American première of Harold Pinter’s “Moonlight,” the veteran British film and theatre director Karel Reisz hired Schreiber to play Jake, the older of two brothers, who defends himself against his father’s dying messages through a series of private mocking games. “Dazzling,” Reisz says was his thought after Schreiber’s audition. “This boy can do anything. He’s a mixture of urbane and

rough. With that mixture, you can cook up a lot of meals.”

Schreiber is the fetching transvestite in “Mixed Nuts”; the dithering nerd in “Walking and Talking”; the pretentious, humiliated would-be novelist in “Daytrippers”; one of the slashers in “Scream 2”; and the tattooed kidnapper in “Ransom.” Last month, he was the young Orson Welles in HBO’s “RKO 281,” a bio-pic about the making of “Citizen Kane.” This month, as if answering the plea at the end of the *Times* review of his 1998 performance in “Cymbeline”—“more Shakespeare, Mr. Schreiber”—he makes the leap from character actor to leading man: he is playing Hamlet in Andrei Serban’s new production, at the Public Theatre.

ON a bright November day, Schreiber scurried, ten minutes late, into a Serban rehearsal. “Sorry,” he said, taking his seat in the semicircle around the handsome Romanian director, who was wearing chinos and a T-shirt and wire-rimmed glasses. Serban looked up briefly. “Never again,” he said to Schreiber, and then continued analyzing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “They’re like K.G.B. police dogs sniffing around,” he said.

Schreiber and Serban have a creatively contentious relationship. “We fight well,” Schreiber says. “He explodes the play and makes me take risks. He takes the play away from me.” Serban sees Schreiber as a weird hybrid of the classical and the experimental actor. “Any time he tries a monologue, he will resist my idea, which is always to be different,” Serban told me later. “He’s continuously fighting, resisting, because there’s a very classical actor in him. The classical actor is fighting the one that wants to break the rules. Something in him wants to break the rules to find other rules.”

In this production, which veers from the visual grotesque to transparent realism, Serban combines various theatrical styles—a mélange of Brechtian artifice and the fairground stylization of Meyerhold—in order to break down conventional expectations and let an audience reexperience the play. Serban’s “Hamlet” begins with the ghost onstage, along with the smoke machine that’s producing the ghostly vapors; placards with the faces of other great

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“The classical actor in Schreiber is fighting the one that wants to break the rules.” Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

stage Hamlets are paraded around when Hamlet is lecturing the players about how to perform; he wears a pig's mask and plays the flute when he tests Ophelia's truthfulness. ("He should be played like a Zen master in madness," Serban told his actors. "We should not be worried for him.") Serban's protean approach is intended to mirror the play's central issue of seeming versus being with a style that is equally elusive. "It's so slippery," says Serban. "Everybody's a director of 'Hamlet,' everybody knows how 'Hamlet' should be done. It may be deeply controversial, but it will not be boring for one second."

Schreiber, who has an intelligent, round face, with pudgy cheeks and a somewhat weak chin—not the angular heroic outline of conventional leading men—is just right for Serban's atypical Hamlet. At six feet three, he has the muscular athleticism of a tight end, the position he played at Brooklyn Tech, where he was the captain of both the junior varsity and the varsity teams in the early eighties. ("I was really quite committed to hitting people," he says.) Serban sees the Prince of Denmark as "a big man with Prometheus-like qualities. It's somebody who cannot live with compromise. A positive version of the Misanthrope. The standards of his quest are so high he cannot fit into the world."

In the scene they ran through that morning, Hamlet has disposed of Polonius's body under the stairs ("Safely stow'd"). Dressed in a bloodstained butcher's apron, Schreiber popped up and down around the stage like a Grand Guignol jack-in-the-box, wielding a prop butcher knife and taunting the courtiers. At one point, he improvised cutting off his own finger, and this, after a good laugh from the assembled company, instantly became part of his character. "He's this volcano of a man who's clowning, who's sensitive, who's intelligent," Serban says of Schreiber. "Suddenly he does something like an animal, something that is so dangerous and so fresh."

All afternoon, Schreiber was happy playing the giddy goat, but at a rehearsal a week later, pressed for time at a run-through and balking at the rationale for wearing the pig's mask in the Ophelia scene, Schreiber had a real knockdown fight with Serban, and stormed out. "He just wouldn't do it with the mask," Serban said when he called me the next

day to talk about what happened. "Then we both started to scream at each other. Finally, he did it, but it was humiliating for me and for him, because he had to just do it and shut up. Then, when he did the scene in the afternoon, in the run-through, although he was not at all sure that I was right, he did it with such candid innocence. It was fantastic." He adds, "Liev is uncorrupted in his feelings. He has lived life as a tough kid and has been bruised by life, and yet what he retained, which is remarkable, is a certain purity."

SCHREIBER lives about a two-minute walk from the Public, in a large south-facing one-bedroom apartment that looks out onto the Lower East Side, where he grew up in dingier circumstances. He bought the apartment two and a half years ago, but he has logged in only six months there. The place, like the man, feels in transition. The large main room, which is dominated by a whitewashed fireplace and a behemoth TV, tries to be adult, but the bric-a-brac of Schreiber's youth is everywhere: diplomas on the wall, fencing trophies on the mantel, a mountain bike propped in the hall.

Schreiber is about Hamlet's age, and he sees the Prince's concerns—even issues of family betrayal and personal humiliation—as part of a shared journey. The totems of his own spiritual quest are mixed with the childhood memorabilia around him: a gold Buddha sits stoically on the window ledge; Shakespeare glossaries and concordances clutter the glass dining-room table; on the kitchen counter is a collection of Shakespeare's sonnets; Shakespeare's influences—Seneca and Montaigne—are on the coffee table. Hamlet may be the most observed of all observers, but for him, and for Schreiber, growth lies in refusing the definitions of others. "The death of Hamlet's father creates a crisis for him—an identity crisis," Schreiber says. "He removes himself from the position of seeing himself through other people's eyes—Hamlet the Dane, Prince of Denmark, loved of Ophelia, the analytical whiz kid of Wittenberg, doted on by his mother. He tries to really understand what they're seeing and how much truth is in it."

The questions the play raises—What is real? What is truth? What is the difference between seeming and being?—



"We're about ready to play 'Meet Your Maker,' but, first, let's meet the recently deceased."

are questions that Schreiber is trying to answer in his life and career. He started analysis a year ago and is just coming to see his profession as a form of spiritual inquiry and not merely as an exercise in narcissism and money-making. "This is the beginning of something different for me. A huge step," Schreiber says. "Hamlet's the biggest thing that's ever happened to me. I need to address my life the way that Hamlet addresses his."

SCHREIBER still answers to his infant nickname of Huggy. His father, Tell, who taught acting, came from a wealthy society family; he graduated from Dartmouth and was a wrestling and football star and an aspiring actor. His mother, Heather, who was born into a Brooklyn working-class household of Jewish Communists, is a highly cultured eccentric, with a firm knowledge of classical music and Russian literature (Liev is named after Tolstoy). But for many years she had a shaky grip on reality. "I was kind of strange," she says. "I think I liked silence and not being connected to the world." Heather, who has lived for the past fifteen years in an ashram in Virginia, was seven years older than her husband when they took up with each other in the mid-sixties, and was already the mother of three sons. When Heather was twelve, her own mother was lobotomized. As a result, Tell says, "Heather was a mother almost by compulsion. A somewhat peculiar mother, but I think a good

mother." According to Tell, at the beginning of their marriage, in San Francisco, Heather had a bad experience on LSD and subsequently, over the next four years, was repeatedly admitted to hospitals and underwent therapy. The family moved to a ten-acre farm in British Columbia, which Tell thought would be "therapeutic." But, feeling herself held captive and threatened by Tell with being put in a mental institution, Heather bolted. As Tell pursued his AWOL wife, Liev and his mother were trailed by private detectives in various states; when he was three, he was kidnapped by his father from an upstate New York commune where Heather had decamped. By the time Liev was four, he was living with her on the fourth floor of a dilapidated walkup at First Avenue and First Street (his half brothers from her first marriage were parked with their father in a duplex on Central Park West), and he was the object of a fierce custody battle, which bankrupted his beloved maternal grandfather, Alex Milgram. (Milgram was the significant male of Schreiber's youth. He played the cello and owned Renoir etchings, and made his living by delivering meat to restaurants.)

Even in a strict geographical sense, Schreiber grew up in a sort of no man's land: the Hasidic community lay to the south, the Polish and Ukrainian communities to the north; to the east were Puerto Ricans; the Bowery lay to the west. According to his mother, Liev

“was the only white kid on the block.” “I spent an awful lot of time in the window,” says Schreiber, who was a walking projection of Heather’s hippie-Hindu fantasy: she dressed him in yoga shirts, overalls, and sneakers from the A. & P., which were “very, very uncool” among his Puerto Rican peers. “There was a pretty deep sense of shame,” Schreiber told me. Until he was ten, Liev was forced by his mother to wear his blond hair down to his shoulders. “I looked like a girl,” Schreiber says.

“I can’t imagine how I could have been so stupid,” Heather says of those days, when she was supporting them by driving a cab and making papier-mâché puppets. “I loved his hair. He looked like an angel and acted like a devil. Ladies would come over, and they would fawn over him. He would say things like ‘Fuck you, lady.’ He was a horrible kid, really horrible, but he looked exquisite.”

“I took a kind of a beating,” Schreiber says. “I was one of those ‘Can I play?’ kids, whom people didn’t want in the group. They would run away from me. And when I did get to participate I was kind of awkward and hyper. I would go into my head a lot. I was very good at making up stories.”

Schreiber’s isolation and humiliation were compounded by his mother’s apartment—a railroad flat, with a bathtub in the kitchen, that had no hot water, no electricity, no beds, no chairs, no tables. “Heather was a garbage-picker,” Schreiber says. She and her son sat on boxes and slept on mattresses on the floor, both in the same room. A gutted piano leaned up against one wall. The apartment was lit by candles stuck into the bricks. “I loved poverty,” says Heather. “I thought rich people were kind of stupid. I know that sounds insane. I thought it was bohemian and romantic. I was really kind of silly. It was fun, but probably not for him.”

Although Liev says he “fought her like crazy”—boycotting dance and piano lessons, refusing to read, doing poorly at school—he was also an accessory to Heather’s wacky regime: he ate vegetarian, took the Hindu names of Sivadas and Ayappa, meditated, and attended only black-and-white movies. (“You can imagine the resentment that I felt when I saw my first color movie, which was ‘Star Wars,’ in 1977,” Schreiber says.) “Once, he brought a little boy to the house, but

the boy had to go home," Heather recalls. "He didn't like to be in the dark. Huggy found all this mortifying. Why couldn't we be just regular straight folks who wore polyester? Why couldn't we just eat Thomas' English Muffins? He was very anti-me. In the second grade, they asked the children to write biographies of themselves. He wrote that he lived in this terrible situation with his mother, who was an alcoholic prostitute. The teachers felt terribly sorry for him. They would give him all sorts of things to eat that I didn't approve of—like peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches."

According to Heather, probably because she cast him in an adult role, Schreiber as a boy "didn't see any difference between adults and children. He hit two teachers." Their relationship was—and is—stormy but intimate. "My temper is incredible with my mother," says Schreiber, who, like all dutiful sons, pays a high emotional price for his faithfulness. "He's very protective of me, and very nasty," Heather says. "He'll yell at me, 'Oh! It's all about you! It's all about you!' He thinks I'm very self-centered. I think I'm self-centered, but compared to other people? Nah, I'm a bargain." She goes on, "He says I don't deserve any credit. He always says that. 'Neither you nor Tell.' He thinks we're both losers. I just think it's amusing. Because he so doesn't get it."

To a large extent, Schreiber's professional shape-shifting and his uncanny instinct for isolating the frightened, frail, goofy parts of his characters are a result of being forced to adapt to

his mother's eccentricities. It's both his grief and his gift. Schreiber, who in his newly acquired psychotherapeutic lingo refers to himself as "an empathic personality," learned early to be sensitive to the needs of others and to decipher their motivation. "I could understand anybody," he says. "I was incredibly good at analyzing behavior. I knew what people were after. I loved to give them what they wanted. I loved to live up to expectations."

Once, at Yale, Schreiber was asked to perform an autobiography in movement. He played a child holding his mother's hand. "He just held the hand up high walking in a circle," his Yale movement teacher and friend Wesley Fata says. "Slowly that hand came down to where he became the adult and the parent became the child." Although Heather was compassionate, imaginative, and resourceful—and she encouraged those qualities in her son (she bought him a motorcycle at sixteen, to promote fearlessness)—she had some paranoid episodes in those years. "She would think that there were demons in the house," Schreiber says. He became her champion and protector. It was an impossible position, at once empowering and undermining. Heather saw him as her "miracle boy." "Not a day passed but she figured out three times to say, 'You're brilliant,'" Tell Schreiber recalls. "Oh, my God, it was insufferable." The message that Schreiber received from his mother and learned to transmit back to her was "We are king. We are two fish in a bowl. The rest

of the world will never understand us."

Between the ages of eight and thirteen, Schreiber stole things. "Anything," he says. "Money, mostly." The rationale was that he needed money to "buy sneakers and be like the other kids." But in stealing he was also acting out his anger at being a kind of psychological hostage to what he calls his mother's "daffy bliss." He pinched coins from his grandfather's laundry-change bowl, and he stole from the Integral Yoga Institute, where Heather worked, which eventually got her "in a lot of trouble." Having memorized the combination to the institute's safe, Schreiber shinnied three floors down a drainpipe, climbed in the window, and cracked the safe. "I was role-playing," he says. "The whole cat-burglar thing was 'To Catch a Thief.' It wasn't real money. It didn't belong to anybody. It was a movie. If I could be daring enough to go down the side of this building and get in her office, that money was mine." Over a period of years—Schreiber stole at judicious intervals—he took about five thousand dollars. He bought Polaroid cameras and meals for the kids in his neighborhood. But it didn't bring him closer to anyone. "Just made them think I was weirder," he says. At the age of eight, he treated himself to a helicopter ride around Manhattan with some of his stolen money. "I recently asked him, 'How did you do that?'" Heather says. "He said, 'Well, I told the pilot that my dad was just up the street and he was coming in a minute.' Then after a while—this is so creative!—he went to get his dad. He came back and said, 'My dad's busy. He can't come, but he gave me the money and said you should take me.'" She adds, "He was a wonderful con artist."

It took the institute a number of years to figure out who the thief was. When he was caught, at the age of twelve, Schreiber was packed off for a few lonely semesters to an ashram school in Pomfret, Connecticut. He took care of ponies and studied religion and philosophy, which, when he returned to junior high school at New York's I.S. 70, only qualified him for seeming "weird again." "He wasn't cool," says the TV actress Nadia Dajani, who was at I.S. 70 with Schreiber and still teases him about being a "hoodlum." "If you were in Catholic school, and you wanted to date a rebel,



"We're still a damn good race when it comes to catching a cab."

then you dated Huggy. But otherwise, no." She adds, "He was just a street punk from my neighborhood. He could have ended up like all these other idiots that we grew up with. In jail. I think Huggy was headed for that."

What turned things around for Schreiber was a football injury—a fractured ankle—at Brooklyn Tech, in 1984, which ended his sports career and led to his theatrical one. At the time, Heather approached Tell to pay for a good surgeon. He was happy to be invited back into his son's life; he paid for the doctor and also for private school. Liev ended up downtown at the exclusive Friends Seminary. Having learned how to be a ballplayer and a homeboy at Brooklyn Tech, he was now thrown in with the children of the upper-middle class, whom he'd been taught since childhood to despise. When he played Nick Bottom in the school production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"—"I made a complete ass out of myself in the best way"—he found not just popularity but also his calling. Acting replaced stolen money as Schreiber's social currency; it provided a full, articulated sense of humor, true pathos, and a mask for admitting his fears. Schreiber considers the characters in plays his "peers": "Hamlet. Nick Bottom. Suddenly, there were people who were like me, who had been shamed worse than I had ever been shamed. Suddenly I could create a context for my life through characters. People would appreciate me through my characters, which validated my own experience. Plus at the same time—this is even more important to me—validated their experience."

This commonality was brought home to Schreiber in his first solo performance, at the age of eighteen, at Hampshire College, where he got his B.A. He was doing scenes from Eric Bogosian's "Drinking in America." Schreiber has a video of himself strutting and fuming in a startlingly assured streetwise imitation of "a total maniac that I hung out with," he says. "The monologues were all very hostile, very harsh. I was sort of saying, 'You think you know me, you bunch of rich kids from Hampshire College. This is where I come from.'" To Schreiber's amazement, the audience loved it. "I realized that we had a common bond," he

says. "And the recognition of that bond was incredibly comforting, because I was afraid for a very long time that I had no bond." He adds, "It's very encouraging to know that your journey—as painful as it may be or as confusing as it may be—is not that different from the guy you're sitting across from. The more bizarre it gets, the more painful it gets, the more people seem to embrace it."

IN mid-November, at a private screening of "RKO 281" at the Sutton Theatre, the head of HBO, Jeff Bewkes, called out the names of the distinguished cast members—including Brenda Blethyn, James Cromwell, and Roy Scheider—and asked them to stand. When he got to Schreiber, he said, "Finally, an actor of great range and talent, who will soon portray another quirky guy, Hamlet." Later, at the Waldorf, where HBO was throwing a party, Schreiber, dressed in a sharp designer jacket with a gray tie and a black shirt, cupped a Martini glass in both hands and assessed his performance as the boy genius Orson Welles. "It's complex. It's ambiguous, but it's human. That's the most you can hope for," he said.

Schreiber's career has been unusual for the ease with which he's moved between independent films, big-budget Hollywood films, TV films, and theatre. "I don't know that I want to be an actor for the rest of my life," he says. He is developing films to produce and perhaps direct, among them an adaptation

of "The Merchant of Venice," for Dustin Hoffman. He has a deep, serious understanding of his craft. On the Orson Welles film, for instance, in many scenes he persuaded the director to use reaction shots instead of lines. "When he doesn't speak is when the truth kind of seeps out of him," Schreiber says. "That's what I'm interested in trying to find. The inexpressible. What's behind a guy who is twenty-four years old and has been thought a genius since he was eight."

I asked Schreiber what he thought *was* behind Welles. He answered without missing a beat. "A tremendous amount of deep, deep fear and insecurity," he said. "And a desire to know who he was—hoping that somehow by working he was going to define himself." ♦

