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Actor Speaks at Stellarcon

BY MARK MARCH, Staff Writer

The names of the teachers, the places, the roles and the shows, are some of the best and most familiar: Performing Arts High School, The Neighborhood Playhouse, Stella Adler, Harold Clurman, Rex Harrison, Martha Graham, and more recently, The Actors' Theatre of Louisville, *Simon and Simon*, Made-for-TV movies, the *Buck Rogers* TV series. These are only a few of the stops on Thom Christopher's journey through his career as an actor. These represent some high points, certainly, but they are only the tip of the iceberg that is his career.

If Thom Christopher's name isn't terribly familiar, his face probably isn't either. Thom Christopher is what the world sees as its most rare species—a working actor. And he is always working, it seems. Just as only a small percentage of the people in the world who call themselves actors are actually working, only a small percentage of the working actors are so famous or so well-marketed that they are familiar.

Forget about the real stars, the household names like Burt Reynolds, Robert Redford, Sally Field; those in other words, who routinely command several million dollars for a film appearance. Think instead about the number of actors and actresses you recognize more than once. The ones who turn up in small roles here and there, a few times a month on TV, two or three times a year in the movies, working off-Broadway or regional theatre in between. For every Harrison Ford or Meryl Streep there is an army of "supporting actors" or "character actors", or "cameo actors" (pick your category) working in theatre and film. Through their efforts, their talent, and their reliability, directors create a spine around which successful theatre and film works are built.

This is where Thom Christopher fits into the scheme of things. Yet to affix him with any one of those titles is inaccurate. Like all performers who work regularly, he is a master of so many trades he defies categorization. In the very cold, very cruel world of performing arts, the people you know can be a great deal more valuable than the tricks you can do. That may be because everyone in the business knows some tricks. In order to be successful, you must make yourself more valuable to the people you know. Thom Christopher's talents, interests, and knowledge seem to be limitless. As an actor and as a human being he is a man of process. At the same time, he attributes his success to his adaptability and flexibility.

Thom Christopher began to develop his acting process at a young age and in a very good place. He entered New York's Performing Arts High School at the age of fourteen. Although it is now the home of the TV show *Fame*, Christopher says things haven't changed drastically. "We didn't dance on cars, but we did it in the halls, classrooms, wherever. We had just as much fun at lunch as the kids in the movie." Some things have

changed for the better. "We were in an old Revolutionary War hospital. We had classes sitting on garbage cans. Now they're in Lincoln Center." From P.A. he went to Ithaca College where his acting ability kept him so busy he hardly attended class. He did not finish Ithaca, but went to the Neighborhood Playhouse, a New York theater which at the turn of the century was one of the avant-garde theaters in America. By the time Christopher was there, it was a hot-bed of "The Method", which Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Harold Clurman, among others, helped refine in this country in the late '30's.

By some stroke of great fortune, his first Broadway role came when he was a "spear carrier and understudying everyone" in Pirandello's *Henry IV*, which also starred Rex Harrison. Pirandello was an Italian writer and director who came to this country in the '20's. Because of his talent and foresight, he is regarded as extremely influential.

If it seems that Christopher's life has been all major productions with the biggest stars, the picture is wrong. It hasn't. This is the thing he cautions young performers about most strongly: "I looked around when I was twenty-three, I had all this experience. I said, 'Why am I not making a million a week?' It's common for young actors to feel that way." He addresses his remarks both to the young actor interviewing him, and to the business as a whole: "Striving for the instant gratification is deadly. Performing requires process and the process requires time and patience." He has heard rumors that the Broadway stage is in its worst slump this century. This he attributes to that desire for instant gratification. "They're trying to make Broadway into television, and that's wrong. The stage must have a life of its own." Christopher does not intend to condemn television or film for the sake of the stage. On this point he is once again most emphatic. "It is the responsibility of the performer to do the work, whatever it is, and to give it 150 per cent. 2000 percent, if necessary."

In fact it is television that has given him the exposure that makes him a hot item for things like UNCG's Stellarcon, where he was a featured speaker. More specifically, it was his role as The Hawk on the *Buck Rogers* TV series which made him attractive to that unusual collection of Dungeon-masters, Trekkies and Sci-Fi aficionados. Does the process change for television? "No. The process must be flexible enough to be used wherever needed. You must always do research, learn your lines, be prepared." It is a welcome experience to find someone so much in love with his work. "I feel sorry for civilians, they miss out on the best part - researching the character. They only see the end product of all the work."

Thom Christopher is not a throwback to an earlier time, he is a man who has taken the lessons of those before him and learned to apply them to his own circumstances. This is something everyone can benefit from, in or out of theatre. His enthusiasm is contagious, as is his sincerity. We were very fortunate to have him here and hope he will return.

Most recently, Thorn appeared on Simon and Simon. He will soon to be appearing in a couple of feature films. Watch for him.