

An Interview with Christopher McGuire, Professional Actor

Chris McGuire is a professional actor in New York. He starred as Sgt. John Brown in *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats* (published in this issue). He is a New York actor that has appeared in theater, TV, and film. He is also a director, writer, and producer, and has much experience in performance arts. The questions are from M. Stefan Strozier, who directed Chris in one of the highly successful productions of *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, and believes strongly in Chris' talent and future potential success in the entertainment industry.

Strozier: Can you tell us about yourself?

McGuire: I was born and raised in Long Island, NY. I permanently left that beautiful waste land behind upon graduating from high school and began the first 3 years, of my (6 year) college career, at the University of Maryland. While immersed in a competitive business program, I woke up one day and recognized that I was on a fast track to corporate indentured servitude. So I hopped in my trusty old Buick and skipped the light fantastic to sunny California. Three years later, I had a BA in Psychology from San Diego State University. Though I also had a new found passion for acting and filmmaking. I felt like something in me was calling me to head back east, you know give the "less evolved" coast another try. But this time around I would approach it with a fresh perspective. So me and my future wife moved to Brooklyn, and I spent a 2 year stint in the belly of the beast itself– the Big Apple. After dealing with the hardships of urban survival, we decided to relocate to a calmer environment and now live in the country/burbs of Northern New Jersey. I operate out of a home office/studio and frequently visit the city.

Strozier: What kind of professional or other training do you have?

McGuire: My training (which has been ongoing since 2002 (though in reality probably began the first time I ever watched a series of moving images)), has been an ever-evolving journey, leading me to cross paths with diverse teachers, books, performances, and countless other experiences that have shaped my educational background. I do

not separate “my life” from “my work”. Both things stem from the same source: my unconscious mind. I believe that in order to be an effective artist, that one must completely devote themselves to their respective art form. It’s as if you’re committing yourself to this important spiritual quest. You must travel deep with your internal landscape if you want to have anything of value to say. Because no matter what their form, an artist is at base a revealer of the human condition. And the only way one can reveal anything about life is through experience and experience alone. That is why the artist is in a position to teach, because he has learned to tread the murky waters of human consciousness. And as a result of such beliefs, my education has been directed towards techniques and philosophies that lend themselves to opening up the fantastic powers of the creative imagination. I could ramble on for hours on the subject, but I would say my most influential Master teachers are Chekhov [Stella] Adler, [Uta] Hagen, and other big dogs like them. My studies have bounced around a lot of different studios; I piece together my artist’s training as it unfolds. I have worked with a lot of wonderful people and would like to pay props to JB actors and Michael Chekhov Studios in New York.

Strozier: What did you think about playing the lead role of Sgt. John Brown in *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*?

McGuire: Good old, Sgt. John Brown...poor bastard. Here is the story of a young man who bought into the middle class value system and decided to go off to war to fight for his country. Naturally, as a result of the horrors of war he is pushed into a crippling mental state which is full of fear, paranoia, anger, and lucid hallucinations. Fueled by alcohol he spirals down a slippery slope of domestic violence, mental hospitals, and finally suicide. Needless to say, it was not the same as the world of Comedy that I am more familiar with. Then again, my sense of humor is pretty twisted and dark, so I guess they are both up the same alley. This role was a great experience for me. I learned so much about my process and my self as I entered into this man’s world. Let me tell you, it was a pretty bleak existence. So much pain, and so much rage. His military experience awoken and empowered his “inner killer,” and he was forced to bring this powerful and darkly chaotic energy back to the world of everyday civilization. I feel that the themes of this piece are so very relevant to our country and the current/future situations that our military faces in the Middle East “Clone Wars”. In order to justly portray this man’s

life, I really felt it necessary to “go there” and enter into hellish realms. Where everyone and everything is out to get you and violence is the only tool you have to cope with the world. While performing the role each night, I felt like I was on some kind of “bad trip.” I was in a hell, and I was doing all that I could to get myself out, but things always got worse. It was a great role to expel a lot of pent up emotion that was trapped inside me. This is one of the best parts of being an actor, the ability to sublimate powerful emotions and achieve a therapeutic release/reorganization of psychic energy. As John Brown would say “God Bless the USA”.

Strozier: What are your goals as an actor/ artist?

McGuire: My goals are vague yet at the same time quite distinct. How they will happen is anyone’s guess. When, only the lord knows. Why...because I work my ass off. Alright, my dream future would be: I write/act/direct my own feature films with complete creative control. Sounds vain, right? Well, yes and no. Well, yes, because I am vain. And no, because those three areas are my unrelenting passions in life. Each one is intricately linked to the other and each equate with playing the role of modern mythmaker. That is what I am, a storyteller. I tell stories because I have to. There is something in me that needs to communicate to the world at large. And the world at large is always in need of incoming communications. The problem is that we are falling way short of actualizing the potential of our modern art forms. The greatest teachers of man could be helping him to evolve out of the “lower ego” states that he is presently trapped within. But we, as the masses, are stuck with his commercial bullshit programming. Everything is an advertisement, and everything is programming people into a warped sense of reality. If you ask me, it is a pretty god damn scary world to live in. I believe it is the mission of the artist to help change this. So in answering any questions about my career goals, I felt it necessary to preface it with my opinions on commercialism and art. It is a nasty catch 22. If you want to eat, you have to play ball. It’s alright to play ball a little, but if you get caught up in the game, you have become part of the problem and are no longer performing the function of an artist. So ultimately, I hope to never sell out and be able to develop works of art that speak to and influence people. Or at the very least get into a good Budweiser commercial.

Strozier: What have you been working on lately?

McGuire: I worked on a whole lot of roles this last year. Many were

for short films, which is a completely different experience than theater. In theater, you have a lot of time to prepare and develop your role. In a short film, you come up with something and you kinda make it work to your best ability given the circumstances of time. The theater experience is a lot more romantic in that you get to really immerse yourself in the role. I imagine feature film to be of a similar nature to theater. I worked on one feature last year and played the role of a psychopathic, yet charming murderer. The role shot over the course of 6 days. So my preparation for that role was a lot closer to the theater experience. For me preparation is the name of the game. Mix that with listening and responding in the moment, and that is the bare bones of my acting process. Though I hope this next year I will get to play a normal person for once. If I had to describe the current climate of the professional acting world, I would say hazy, hot, and humid. Good luck to you, and may you get to quit your day job.

Strozier: What do you think about directing?

McGuire: Directing is a hugely important task. A director that works with actors must be open to collaboration. If he has some fixed image in his head that he is trying to force upon his cast, then he is setting himself up for failure. Each human being is such a genius and they don't even know it. So I think a good director sees the value in what each person is bringing to the table and finds a way to help mold the production by incorporating all of the separate elements. A good director brings it all together. He creates a safe working environment and encourages the actors to explore. Trust is at the foundation of it all. If one can trust, one can play. If one can play, the imagination takes over and the rest takes care of itself. Also, I think all directors should train as an actor at some point early in their career so that they truly understand what they are asking of us fragile beings.

Strozier: What do you like the different kinds of work in entertainment: TV, theater, and film?

McGuire: I grew up in front of TV and film. Theater was a neglected part of my life. And so the pattern continues to this day. Though I have a huge respect for the theater, I wish people putting up plays these days would cut back on the musicals. Each medium is different. Theatre is truly the actor's medium. The medium where the actor is the center of the production. Film and TV are different. Film is all about the director's vision and TV belongs to the writers.

In terms of dealing with the challenges of each, the key is to adapt. Each medium has its own technical requirements and dictate different ways of preparing for a role. At the core of it acting is acting, and that is what I love to do regardless of the venue. I currently write and direct my own short films. I have considered working as a director in the theatre. I have a broad knowledge of acting techniques and a natural gift of being able to relate well with people. I have the ability to encourage the best in people. So in the years to come I am sure I will find my self in some dusty old theatre helping a motley crew of actors find ways to bring their characters to life. In my film experiences, I have found that most directors do not understand the actor or his process. So when I direct actors in films, I always try to be the kind of director that I would hope to have as an actor. I find that when people realize I am an actor as well, they have an easier time opening up to me and giving me what I am asking of them.

Strozier: Describe your take on acting.

McGuire: We could be here all night with that question. Acting is a highly personal art form that develops in tandem with an individual's psycho-spiritual development. You must create your performances with every fiber of your being. You must be very brave; in that to portray most dramatic characters you must search the dark corridors of your soul and allow the contents of your Shadow to live and breath inside of you. Art is a fundamental expression of the creative principle in man. I believe it to be inspired by the gods and serve the function of transforming human consciousness. Man is but a microcosm of the universe at large. And art is the tool by which man reveals his divine nature.

Strozier: What is your favorite role?

McGuire: The favorite role I ever played was a character named Barry. Barry began for me as a simple Halloween costume one year. But eventually turned into a sort of alter ego. Barry was born in Brooklyn, but lives in Miami. He is a gambler, a partier, and nightclub operator. He bets greyhounds, is a bit of a womanizer, and is known for his powder diet. Need I say more!? I just have way too much fun with characters like this. Though Barry has yet to be a part of any actual production, I do hope one day to turn his story into a film. My least favorite role is the one I play a few nights a week. And that is the role of a Waiter in a local restaurant. Now there is a role that makes me cringe. The part of acting that I don't like is its complexity. Though at the same time this is one of the elements that

I love about acting, but it sure can create a lot of heartache. Every one wants to be good at what they do, and acting is no different. You want to accomplish the monumental task of realistically portraying another human being. And well it is not always easy. It takes a lot of blood, sweat, and tears sometimes. And even after you put in hours upon hours of work, there is a little critic that sits on your shoulders and tells you that you are shit. A fraud who is kidding himself. But one has to ignore such a voice and instead focus on the work at hand. The ironic part is that the roles that are the hardest for you to discover in yourself, are the very roles that help you grow most as an individual. Your average non-actor typically doesn't realize the process work that an actor goes through while preparing for a role. It isn't all fun and games. At the core of it, it is all about hard work.

Strozier: What are your strengths/weaknesses as an actor?

McGuire: I possess a strong stage presence. When I am focused and my entire being is concentrated on the task at hand, I command people's attention. I have been told that I have this strange mysterious quality about me. Something that makes people interested in me and leaving them wanting to learn more about me. I am very aware of my physical body and have the ability to transform and embody a wide range of characters. I am a naturally funny person and have been blessed with the gift of comedic timing. Also, I have been told that I play "crazy people" very well. Which is interesting to me, because I like to think of myself as quite sane (but then again, what crazy person doesn't). My weaknesses are accents, voice production, and classical actor poise. I am trapped in the role of a modern man. Though I have a physical demeanor that lends itself well to period pieces, I have trouble depicting characters from the past. I don't why, most likely a self imposed limitation of sorts, but Shakespeare and proper diction are just beyond me.

Strozier: What do you think about theater in New York in 2008?

McGuire: Broadway has become some sort of sad, Disney-inspired debauchery. All cock, no balls. Off Broadway, off-Off Broadway, and all types of "Indie Theater" are on the rise. I feel that the content that is being produced is falling a little short of the mark, but the heart is there. There are a lot of great artists out there, making sacrifices and living the cliché starving existence. God bless them. They are the ones who are going to be responsible for bringing spirit back into the New York Theatre scene. I don't think the audiences are strong enough at the moment, but as new blood circulates the

city, perhaps a new form of audience will evolve as well – one that values theatrical productions and is willing to come out more frequently. People used to go to the theatre in New York so that they could learn about life. Now it seems to be more of a passive hobby, rather than a means of having a life changing experience. So let's keep our fingers crossed that everything will come together (Soon!!). I am one of those guys that does not audition enough. Part of my problem is that I have rejected many aspects of the hierarchy created by the commercial entertainment infrastructure. Part of me just won't commit to taking the steps to "make it." Because my idea of "making it" is probably a lot different than most other actors. I dedicated my life to this pursuit and want my career to unfold on my terms. The acting establishment wants you to play by their rules. And well, that's probably why I don't get out on as many auditions as I should. In terms of the auditioning itself, it can be a little demeaning: Laying yourself on the line, looking for approval and validation. Actors take rejection very personally and sadly 9 times out of 10 the answer is no – 19 times out of 20 sometimes. At the same time, I find auditioning very fun. I get an opportunity to stretch my acting muscles, and you get to do it all in front of an audience. It can be a little unnerving at times, but the key is to utilize that nervous energy and let it heighten the stakes of the moment. And if you don't get the part, but you can impress them with your skills, you are setting yourself up for future opportunities. Opportunities that would have never come about if you hadn't been guaranteed the chance to audition. I know I am destined to join [Actors'] Equity someday; it is just a matter of when. Feel free to check me out at www.chrismcguire.net.