

A Talk with Tony Torn

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By Kirk Wood Bromley

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Tony Torn, son of actors Rip Torn and Geraldine Page, has plenty of theater in his genes. And now that he's appearing as The Large Gentleman in Ionesco's <I>The Picture</I>, one might say he has it in his pants. The man <I>Time Out</I> called a "downtown Zero Mostel" is currently appearing in this rarely produced absurdist classic at CHA at 135 W. 42nd St. through a joint production of Sanctuary Theater Workshop and chashama theatre collective. The new translation is by Abigail Sanders, directed by Ian Belton. After a performance recently, I sat down with Tony Torn and talked the talk.

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Who chose this play and why did they choose it?

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It's a combination of things. The director, Ian Belton, discovered this play when he was studying at Juilliard, and he realized that the English translation had very little to do with what the French was about. So, his friend, Abigail Sanders, did the translation, and it's a version of the text that really restores what the play's about. We've been trying for years to get a production going, and it was my father who finally said "I will back this show," because he really wanted to see it happen.

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What is your dad's relationship to chashama?

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It's just through me. A lot of the folks at chashama, including Anita Durst, the associate producer, are friends of mine, and Anita has been producing off and on in CHA for a long time. Right before this show started, she raised some money to renovate the space to make it nice, and this is the first production in the newly cleaned up space. It's really exciting, since the space is so fantastic.

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It all sounds so incestuous.

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It is. A while ago, I was speaking to Anita, and she said "Why don't we bring your family and my family together to do something," and this is the result.

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You've worked with Foreman, Maxwell, and now Ionesco. What's the thread that twists through Tony Torn?

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A lot of the thread comes from many of us in this show working with Reza Abdoh, who was the great theater director who died in the mid-90's. Much of the subsequent work I've done has been because people have seen me in Reza's work. So Reza was for me like a cauldron of creativity. Where I'm coming from is that wild avant garde experience that I learned there, and yet I also grew up in a household with two of the major figures in American theater. So, it's a really complex thread, especially since Reza was more traditional and my folks were more experimental than you might expect, though it's all the same thing as far as I'm concerned.

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After tonight's performance, one might describe you as a gestural actor. Who taught Tony Torn this theatrical technique?

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It's funny. When we were in rehearsals we wanted to have a column in the back of the program that would say "Ian's ideas...Tony's ideas...Tom's ideas..." We even thought we'd have a column for David, the stage manager. But most of it is from the director, Ian. He wanted to get me to be as expressive as possible, which is a style we developed only for this play.

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Why this play?

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The gesturalism in this show has to do with the fact that my character, the Large Gentleman, is such a dominant figure that he takes up space not only with his voice and presence but also by expanding. Many of the gestures are also from Ionesco's text, such as the wide sweeping hands and the constant picking of my teeth and nose.

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What's tomorrow for Tony Torn?

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The thing with me is that I've worked with some of the greatest geniuses in theater over the last ten years...Abdoh, Foreman, Ian, and Maxwell, and though I can't work with Reza anymore (though I can carry his flag until I die), I hope to work with them all again. But I'm also trying to figure out what I can do about creating my own work.

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Tony Torn typing tomes?

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No, but I'm also a director. I'm very honored to have been chosen by the Blue Print Series at the Ontological, and I'm working on a play by Julianna Francis, who was in Reza's company and <I>Paradise Hotel</I> with me. I just tried hosting a thing called Fat Tuesdays, which was a performance party, but I don't naturally gravitate toward the confessional, so I don't see myself writing solo pieces or becoming a monologist. But there's always been a division in my life between my performing side and my directing side, and I'd like some way to push that together.

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Did <I>Chasing Amy</I> titillate Tony Torn?

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Yah, I wanna do more film! I had a great time. Kevin Smith is great. We shot this one scene at 6 a.m., and once we were done, they announced that they'd just finished the hundredth roll of film, and they opened up a case of champagne, and that's how I want all my film experiences to be.

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How did Tony Torn take to Tinseltown?

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The problem with LA is that when I was out there in the late 80's, they held the Olympic Arts Festival, and all these amazing international theater artists hit LA. So, for about 6 or 7 years, it was like a bomb went off, and some incredible things were happening...Reza, John Fleck, Tim Miller, David Schweizer, Rachel Rosenthal, and so it was a very exciting place to be. But then, the sense of hubris developed into a fault. As I was thinking of moving back to New York, everyone was telling me "You can't do that. The center of human intelligence is constantly moving westward. It's here now." And so I knew something bad was going to happen. The

second after I left there were earthquakes, fires, riots, OJ, everything hit it, and now LA has been a little humbled.

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Where's the Torn townhouse?

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I've lived with my family in the same house in Chelsea for 35 years.

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What non-thespian thrills turn on Tony Torn?

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I like to go to the movies, I like to read Dostoyevsky novels, and I like to dance.

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Where does Tony Torn tear it up?

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If there's a party with electronic music, I dance til I drop.

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What tickles Tony Torn's tastebuds?

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The Milk Bar. When I was in Poland, we just went crazy in all the authentic milk bars, where they served like full meals for under a dollar.

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Now, about Tony Torn's time with ERS and the Wooster Group...

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Actually, I need to clear that up. I've never performed with them, though we've played some poker games.