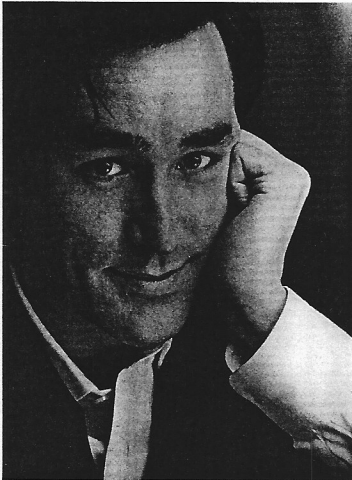




'Brute Force and Stupidity'

BY KEVIN GRANDFIELD '82

"Brute force and stupidity," Phil Smith '83 answers when asked why he chose and still chooses a life in theater. It's advice SAS rowing coach Dave Washburn gave him on what could make him a better rower. Phil took the advice and worked his way up from the JV crew to the first boat of 1983, which took second to Eton in the Henley. "Watching them pull ahead at the end is one of my more painful memories. We had already rowed five races in two days and had no reserves left. I learned then that it's not always best to finish first and you have to keep striving."



Phil Smith '83

That kind of drive has also helped Phil in the competitive and often thankless field of theater. Phil is a member of Chicago's Lookingglass theater company, which spawned David Schwimmer of TV's *Friends* and director Mary Zimmerman, who this year won a MacArthur "genius" grant. Lookingglass is a group of graduates of Northwestern University's theater program committed to producing shows using a communal, democratic method of working rather than having a director cast from outside and dictate the form of the production. Phil appeared in their recent adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, starring Schwimmer. "I played Granya, whose name means 'gray,' and he's an Everyman who aims low and hits lower." His background in English at SAS and elsewhere helped him with the classic text. "It's nice to be able to do slapstick, but it's also nice to be able to do the more intellectual stuff, too." Before that, he played in New York City in Lookingglass's production of *Arabian Nights*.

Company members kid Phil about his boarding school experience, elongating his name in the program to "Philip R. Rayburn S. Smith" and putting on fake pretentious accents. "Of course the inevitable equation with *Dead Poets Society* also rears its ugly head. Everybody thinks if you were an actor coming from the same school, that you had the same experience. In fact, my parents were very supportive."

Phil's dad was a successful businessman and his mother, who passed away just last year, was more artistic. "She had a way of engaging people in earnest conversation no matter what their walk of life. You would think she was the bigger influence, but it was my dad who really supported me in pursuing theater. Maybe because she knew some of the hardships of that life better, she tried to steer me away from them. You sacrifice so much: your personal relationships, money—you have to get a day job, rehearse all night. I was also lucky to have a lot of creative friends at SAS; I got a lot of support from them, too."

After SAS, Phil went to St. Andrew's in Scotland to decide

whether to be a doctor or an actor. His first night there he was greeted in a local pub with more brute force and stupidity. A "Scottish kiss," a headbutt, broke his nose. "That helped me decide. But also I learned I really didn't do well with my head stuck inside a book all day."

Another big influence was his SAS director, Hoover Sutton. "When I showed up at SAS, I was mostly a shy guy. Then that first show I did [*Hello Dolly*] with Hoover really brought me out of my shell. I knew then I wanted to be a serious actor. We all wanted to do *Jesus Christ Superstar* as the musical our senior year. We figured it was winter term, we should do something dark, but Hoover suggested doing something fun instead and got all of us to have a great time doing *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*."

Phil and Schwimmer and another ensemble member, David Catlin, recently formed a movie development company called Dark Harbor. "All three of us have to believe strongly in a project before we will commit to it. Luckily, we admire each other and share a common vision. The more trust you put into a project, the more successful it's going to turn out."

They start filming their first project in January and hope to start work in May on a project with Zimmerman. Meanwhile, she will direct an adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Zimmerman, known for her image-rich direction, has set the production in a foot of water.

Schwimmer will bring to the company experience he gained directing the movie *Since You've Been Gone*, in which he used all the Lookingglass members. "The studio really wanted someone with a 'name' to be my role," says Phil, "which they considered a lead, but David took a cut of \$750,000 so that I could play that part. That's the kind of faith you have to have in projects to make them work."

That role led to more offers for higher-profile and better-paying work. "I once did a shot with James Woods. It was a very small scene, but when he showed up, he already had ten different ideas he wanted to work through with me about how to play the scene. The actors who are good, and love what they do, take it seriously. Here in Chicago, everyone is so industrious; there's always some show to be working on. Whenever I go out to L.A. it's hard to adjust. You do a lot of sitting around there waiting for the phone to ring.

"Luckily the audience in film never gets to see your failures. People should realize that actors, like everyone else, fail a lot of the time. I've blown auditions so bad that I've left saying 'sorry'—something you're never supposed to do. But it's like that commercial where Michael Jordan talks about all the times he had the ball at the end of the game and didn't make the shot. People only remember the good things." He laughs heartily now over the first time he told a girl he loved her. She laughed at him and said, "No you don't," then broke up with him the next day. Years later they met again and made up. "You just have to keep going on," he says. "If you believe in what you are doing, then all the rest falls into place. Breaking the rules is also important. If you play it safe, you'll never make it."

If all else fails, Phil can get by on brute force and stupidity. ☞