

'Played Dead' in NYC & lived to tell the tale

By Cathy DeDe

Chronicle Managing Editor

The *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, even *Vanity Fair Magazine* — all have paid significant attention to *Play Dead*, the theatrical scare-fest playing in the West Village of New York City. It's a one-man show, starring magician-celebrity sideshow performer Todd Robbins, but its several ghoulish supporting actors, include Glens Falls' own 23-year-old actress Charlotte Pines.

So it was, a couple of weeks ago, that I found myself in a small off-Broadway theater, a couple of blocks off Bleecker Street in the trendy West Village, nervous as heck, awaiting the moment when the lights would go out. And the lights do go out.

"You're never so alive as when you're scared to death" is just one of the wry, knowing, creepy, enticing and weirdly titillating aphorisms Mr. Robbins bandies as he chats, seemingly off-handedly, with his audience, all the while

providing the fodder that does, quite skillfully, scare us at least *half* to death.

Not knowing is the other half of the fun, but know this: Blood is in long supply, and Mr. Robbins' natty white suit is rather stained with the stuff by the end of the show (not to mention his face and hands).

Warnings in the tiny theater lobby are straightforward: If you are afraid of the dark, claustrophobic or recently bereaved, this is not the show for you. That certainly gets the blood pumping, and they no doubt mean it to. But they're also not kidding.

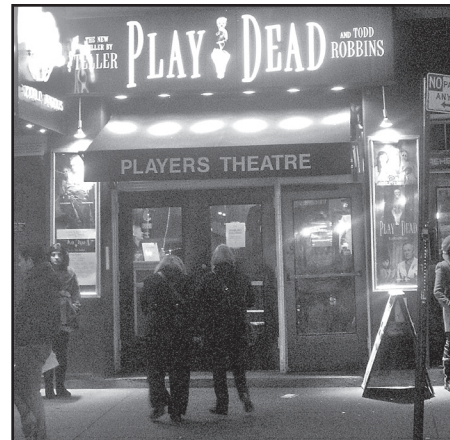
Mr. Robbins' plan is to bring out the dead, ours and his own. While all the while denouncing in very certain terms those who do this to take advantage of guileless victims (and apologizing quite convincingly, in dulcet tones, "for what

Unique new show features Charlotte Pines of Glens Falls

I am about to do") Mr. Robbins does exactly that which he denounces. This is his diabolical joke. We are paying Mr. Robbins to bring out

our dead, to manipulate our emotions and wreak gruesome havoc on the fellow seated in the row one-over.

Righteous indignation aside, he gets his graveyard cake, and he eats it too: Greedily, leaving only bits of blood-drenched crumbs lingering around the mouth. (He also eats a lightbulb as



The Players Theater on MacDougal Street in New York City. Chronicle photo/Cathy DeDe

warm-up.)

Mr. Robbins opens by announcing that some of the evening will be performed in the dark — then he shuts off the lights, leaving his audience in near-total darkness, brightened only by the legally required exit signs.

Then he turns those off too.

A Disney haunted house, this is not. Mayhem ensues, prickly fear, things that go bump in the dark, strange whispers and shouts, not all of them obviously of this world.

There's also intelligence here, and good writing that is interspersed with Mr. Robbins' witty ad-libbed responses to the often surprising responses of his "victims," all of them pulled from the audience (beware!).

The show, co-written by Teller (of Penn and Teller fame) is both so new you couldn't have imagined it before, but so right you can't think why it took someone so long to come up with it. Its only precursor: Apparently, after-hours "Midnight Spook Shows" were once common in movie theaters and popular with young couples who enjoyed the opportunity to grasp each other in fear, in the dark. More of the same happens there (though this audience member ad-

monished her escort early to keep his clammy hands off! Yikes!).

Afterwards, the company is perfectly willing to break the spell: Mr. Robbins and his cast come out to pose for pictures with audience members and chat about the show. They're friendly, welcoming, and appreciative of the audience support.

Our Charlotte Pines, nearly unrecognizable beneath piles of gory makeup, is still her warm and friendly self — She's clearly thrilled to see folks from home at the show. It's also clear that Mr. Robbins holds her in the highest regard — but we already know she warrants his esteem.

Be aware, the show is R-rated. Besides the gore...let's just say, on her Facebook site last month, daring Charlotte posted a list of "celebrities who have seen me naked," from Rob Schneider to Stephen Sondheim.

Who knows how long this spell will last? Charlotte tells us her contract is open-ended. I'm hoping the gig goes on for a good long time.

I should say, I never felt endangered in any way, though my heart did race throughout, the theme is dark and things do come flying out of nowhere most disconcertingly. I'm an analytical gal who kept trying to figure out how they do that (sometimes while ducking). Mostly it was campy good fun, if with dead-serious intent. Exactly as Mr. Robbins predicts, you might not leave this show with a song to hum, but you'll likely leave with your nerves all a-buzz.

Reach for the Quality!

The Chronicle

Locally owned, locally committed

'Play Dead' tix & info

Play Dead, written by Teller and Todd Robbins, and directed by Teller, is performed in one act, no intermission, at the Players Theatre, 115 MacDougal Street in New York City. It stars Mr. Robbins, with Charlotte Pines, Geri Berman, Don Meehan and Drea Lorraine. Box office: 800-982-2787 or at www.playdeadnyc.com.

Published Dec. 9, 2010 • The Chronicle, Glens Falls, NY