

## THEATER

## Superfreak

In his first Off Broadway show, Todd Robbins indulges his odd appetites— for swords and lightbulbs By Alexis Soloski

In the lobby of the SoHo Playhouse hangs an immense illustration by sideshow-banner king Johnny Meah, depicting “The Coney Island Wonder Worker” surrounded by the instruments of his trade: animal trap, lightbulb, sword, mallet, insect. At the center of the portrait is Todd Robbins, who smiles angelically and—a neat trick, this—delicately walks on water. Robbins performs just as neat a trick in his Off Broadway show, *Carnival Knowledge*. He walks not on water but on broken glass, which he doesn’t so much walk as stomp and grind between his toes—without drawing a drop of blood. Men have been worshiped—or, depending on the spirit of the times, killed—for less, but this is, by Robbins’s admission, the easiest act he performs onstage. Swords-wallowing, pounding nails into his skull and snacking on a lightbulb (minus the filament) are all more difficult. *Monday Night Magic* impresario Michael Chaut, a man not easily daunted, recalls that the first time he saw Robbins: “I was so intimidated by his performance ability that I actually ran away.”

The lanky, sardonic Robbins began his magic career as a child. Growing up in the ‘60s in the suburban paradise of Long Beach, Cali-

“Magic was all tricks,” Robbins says. “I wanted something real.”

fornia, “bored the daylight out of me,” draws Robbins, sitting in the downstairs lobby of the SoHo, which doubles as a mini-midway proffering games, cotton candy, fun-house mirrors and mechanical fortune-tellers before each show. The young Robbins found temporary succor when a magic shop opened in his neighborhood, where he began taking Saturday-afternoon classes. “It was great,” he recalls, “except it was all tricks, all deception. I wanted something more—something real.”



**CANE AND ABLE** The spectacular, shocking, unbelievable Robbins shows off the tools of the trade.

The real arrived a few years later in the form of a church-sponsored carnival featuring a sideshow, including fire-eating, sword-swallowing and walking over broken bottles. A 12-year-old Robbins was entranced: “There was no deception,” he says. “It was extraordinary ability. That was the closest definition to real magic I’ve ever

come to.” Desperate to learn, Robbins pestered a carny for instruction until the man relented, saying, “You wanna learn how to do the dangerous stuff, eh? Just don’t tell your parents.” Robbins has done the dangerous stuff ever since, first at comedy clubs, then on the college circuit, at L.A.’s Magic Castle, the Coney Island sideshow, the Big Apple Circus and the 2000 Fringe Festival, where he deservedly won a solo-performance award.

“The Fringe was a great experience,” Robbins says. “It gave me

a chance to play with the long form and try out things for a theatergoing audience.” On the night producer Dana Matthew attended the show, an illuminated neon tube that Robbins had swallowed broke inside him. “The neon light went out,” he recalls, “and the lights were already out onstage, and I thought that either the neon broke, something happened with the electricity or, I’m dead. Fortunately, my wife wasn’t there that night, because she would have

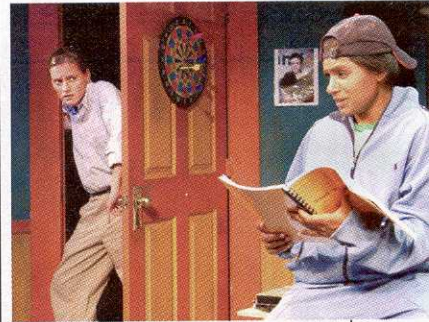
freaked out. She hates sword-swallowing.”

One man’s near-death experience was a producer’s selling point. Matthew picked the show up for a stint Off Broadway, and while the new incarnation no longer features the neon tube, it includes dangerous acts, such as the blockhead routine, wherein Robbins pounds a two-inch railroad spike into his skull. Robbins uses the hammer and hat of blockhead-act pioneer Melvin Burkhart, whose ashes Robbins received after Burkhart’s death. Indeed, Burkhart is given credit and homage during the show, as Robbins insists on interlacing his feats of skill with a history of the sideshow in America. Though hundreds of such shows used to crisscross the country or winter at dime museums each year, the proud tradition has dwindled to the Coney Island entry and occasional itinerant shows produced by veteran operator Ward Hall.

To ensure that the genre doesn’t disappear, Robbins helped found a sideshow school at Coney Island. It offers beginner’s instruction and master classes in human pincushion, rope twirling and knife throwing. Unfortunately, no one is offering a tutorial in swallowing and full regurgitation—of watches, insects, white mice—the skill Robbins most wishes he possessed, like his idol, the Great Waldo. But mice aside, there’s plenty in Robbins’s act the squeamish may find hard to swallow. “It’s not only amazing,” says Robbins with his impeccable showman’s grin, “some of it is vile and disgusting.”

**Carnival Knowledge is playing at the SoHo Playhouse.**

## Reviews



**DUDE AWAKENING** Withers and Kaling discover themselves in *Matt & Ben*.

**Matt & Ben**

Written and performed by Mindy Kaling and Brenda Withers. Dir. David Warren. P.S. 122 (see Off Broadway).

Way before he became the Luckiest Guy on Earth, Ben Affleck dreamed of meeting Daisy Fuentes. “I like Latin women,” he tells his best pal Matt Damon. “God, I really like Latin women.” Things, of course, worked out better than expected for Ben—which is part of the joke in the irresistible high-gloss goof *Matt & Ben*. Mindy Kaling and Brenda Withers, who wrote and starred in the onetime Fringe hit, imagine Matt as the serious high-achiever who resents the talentless Ben for effortlessly getting ahead on charm and good looks. In high school, the hard-working types envy the charmers, who usually fall flat in the real world. Not so with Affleck, who, you might argue, avoided the real world by entering the only social system more callow and cliquy than high school: Hollywood.

Kaling (Ben) and Withers (Matt) have said their play is about friendship and the artistic process, but anyone who buys that must also believe that *Gigli* is an exploration of homosexuality. The show’s appeal is seeing two humongous stars when they were postcollegiate schmoes. These dudes are so relentlessly average and their success so random (the script for *Good Will Hunting* literally falls from the sky) that it’s hard not to feel a little hopeful about the prospects for pitiful noncelebs like you and me. In this respect, *Matt & Ben*—fun, disposable and full of gossipy gibes—is perfect for today’s celebrity culture. It worships fame, while also making it seem as accessible as an issue of *Us Weekly*.—Jason Zinoman

## THEATER

- 135 Don’t miss...
- 137 Jessica Grace Wing: R. I. P.
- 137 Broadway
- 138 Seats for a song
- 139 Here today...gone tomorrow
- 139 Off Broadway
- 141 Shakespeare alfresco
- 143 Off-Off Broadway
- 144 Fringe Festival venues