



Billy's private parts

By KEVIN SESSUMS

Billy Crudup will talk about his son, but he won't talk about his girlfriend. What *The Pillowman* star will discuss—and what he won't—keeps the focus on his stunning work. But heaven help you if you cross the line...

Billy Crudup shuffles into Shubert Alley on a brisk spring afternoon for our rendezvous at the stage door of the Booth Theatre. Only three days before, he had opened on Broadway in Martin McDonagh's garrulously macabre melodrama *The Pillowman*. Crudup wears a wrinkled T-shirt, his hair mussed just enough to evoke the tired bemusement below it. He appears either to have only recently awakened from a nap or to be in desperate need of one. Indeed, he possesses that slightly dazed countenance that actors achieve when they find themselves in a big buzz-worthy hit after weeks of hard work in rehearsal rooms, rewarded—as in Crudup's case—with a Tony nod and another round of raves he refuses to read.

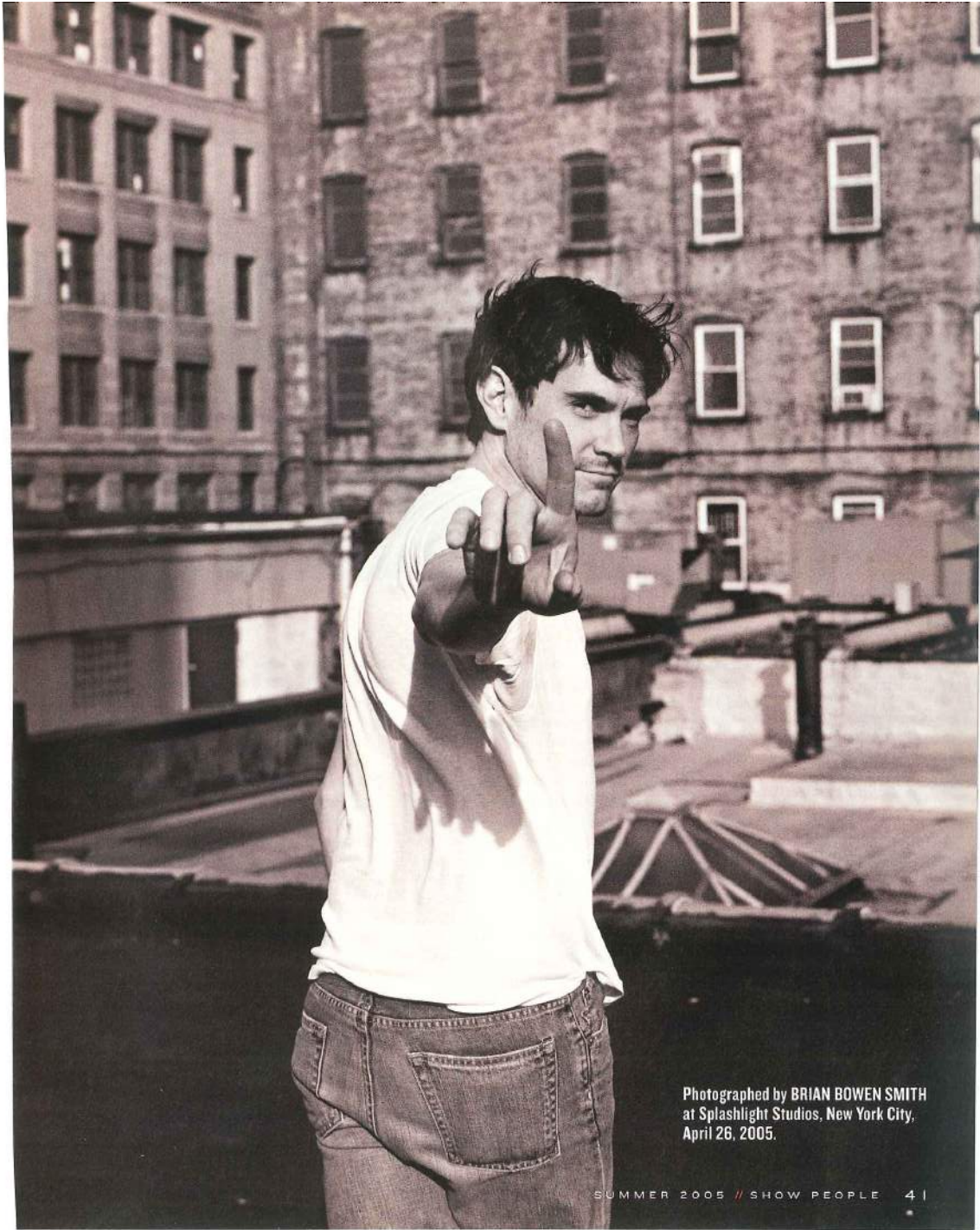
"This production is making me older by the day," he says when we settle in across the street in a corner booth at Sardi's. "There is an incredible speed and energy with which a Broadway show drives toward opening night," he explains after taking a few needed sips of coffee. "You sort of drive off the cliff after opening. Because of the emotional trajectory I take each night and the amount of time I spend onstage, I wake up the next morning and feel like I've been to a funeral—you know, like when you've grieved all day and you're emotionally hung over. It takes a while to recover."

In *The Pillowman*, Crudup portrays the author of dozens of truly grim fairy tales that read like how-to manuals on the torture and murder of children. He is arrested in an unnamed totalitarian state and questioned for a series of murders that mimic his writings. The drama is a visually and poetically multi-layered treatise on the origins of art and its disquieting implications. "I think Martin would say first and foremost it is a piece of entertainment," says Crudup. "It's meant simply to transport you to another world for a little while and dump you back into your own life a little shaken, a little stirred, a little thrilled."

Crudup had to audition for director John Crowley, who helmed the award-winning London production last year. "What appeals to me about Billy as an actor," Crowley says by phone from his home in London, "is his speed of thought and his facility within that to find such truthful notes... I will admit that as a director you have to shove him emotionally at times. He has a tendency to resist any hint of sentimentality, which can make him shy away from sentiment itself. I'd just have to say 'Get over it' and push him into that deep end of the pool."

Crudup's first big break came in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* at Lincoln Center in 1995, soon after he received his MFA from New York University. (Subsequently, he

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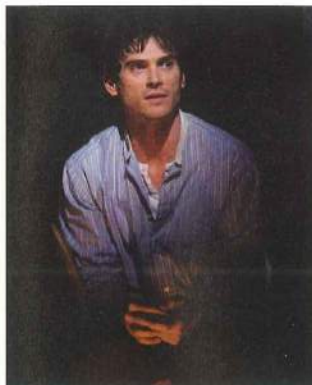


Photographed by BRIAN BOWEN SMITH
at Splashlight Studios, New York City,
April 26, 2005.



RANGE ROVER

Crudup distinguished himself in the period production of Stoppard's *Arcadia* (1995, with Jennifer Dundas); as the unapologetic yarn-spinner Katurian in this year's *The Pillowman*; playing the deformed John Merrick—without prosthetics—in *The Elephant Man* on Broadway (2002).



was seen at Circle in the Square in *Bus Stop* and gave impressive performances in a number of films, including *Without Limits*, *Jesus' Son*, *Almost Famous* and *Big Fish*.) In *Arcadia* he played Septimus Hodge, a 19th-century English tutor who has to answer questions from his young female charge not only about Fermat's Last Theorem but also about the definition of a "carnal embrace." Could Crudup—the thinking-man's performer—ever consider acting itself a carnal embrace? "Sure. I think you have to include every possible quality in your work," he says. "Maybe I do think things through too much. But I like to think of it as being considerate in the truest sense of the word: I like to consider things. Some directors don't engage in the conversation as much, but I've never had a director say to me, 'Stop thinking!' Also I wouldn't go for that. I would say, 'You know what? I'm going to continue thinking. You go get some coffee,'" he says as he finishes up his own cup, laughing even louder and making tourists' heads turn as the room begins to fill.

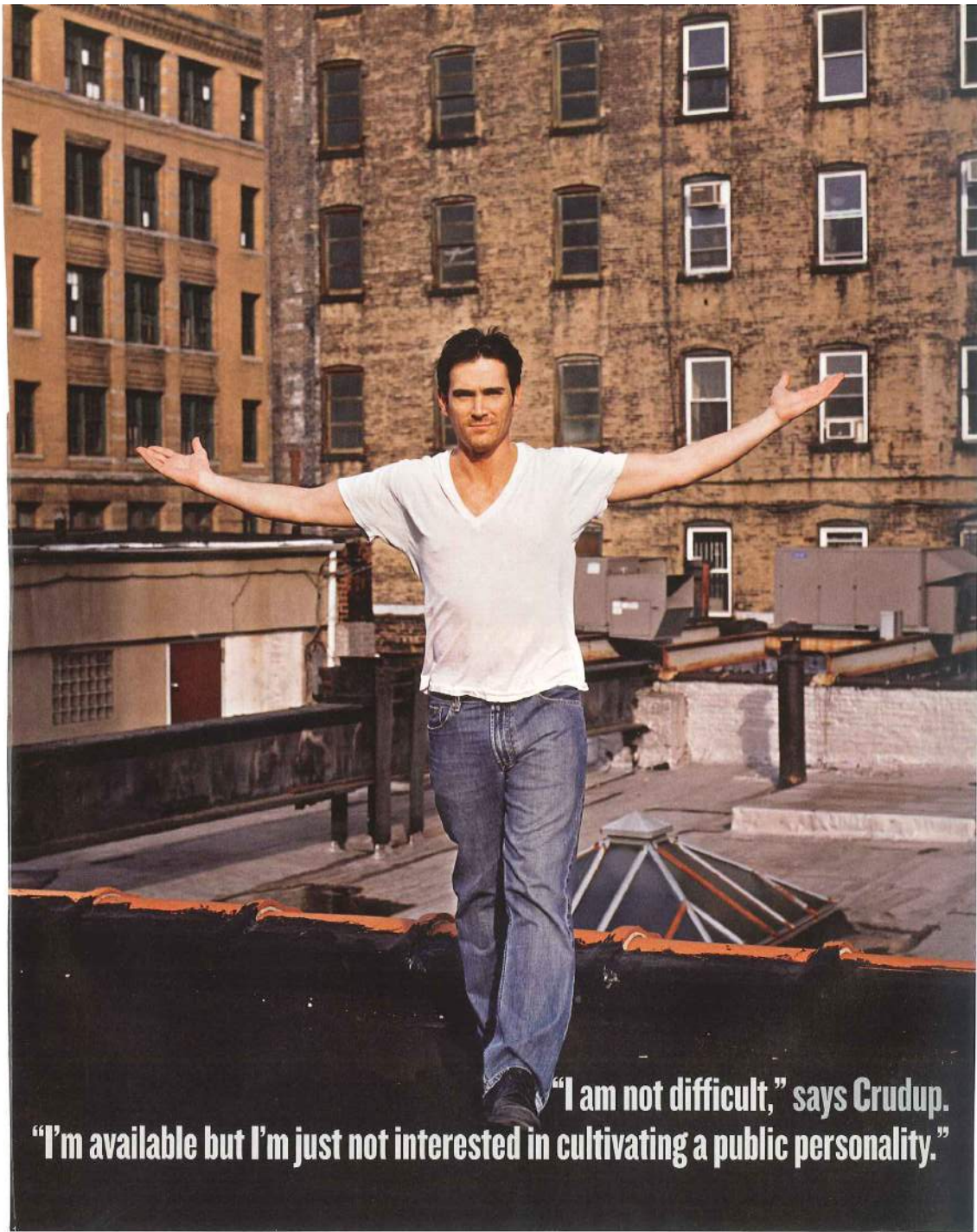
There was speculation last year that one director he did not get along with was Jack O'Brien, who cast him as Prince Hal in a much praised Lincoln Center production of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Crudup walked

away after one week of rehearsal. "No. No. No. I left that production for completely personal reasons," he says. "I had just worked for four months over in London on *Stage Beauty* and was completely exhausted in every way," he says, alluding perhaps to the strenuous physical toll taken by the part of Ned Kynaston, the corset wearing 17th-century actor who made a name for himself playing female roles—as well as to the emotional turmoil he suffered when his private life was used as tabloid fodder when he began to date his costar, Claire Danes (yes, they're still dating), and left actress Mary-Louise Parker two months before the birth of their son, Atticus. "I adore Jack O'Brien," he says, clearing up the lingering rumors. "He is my kind of director."

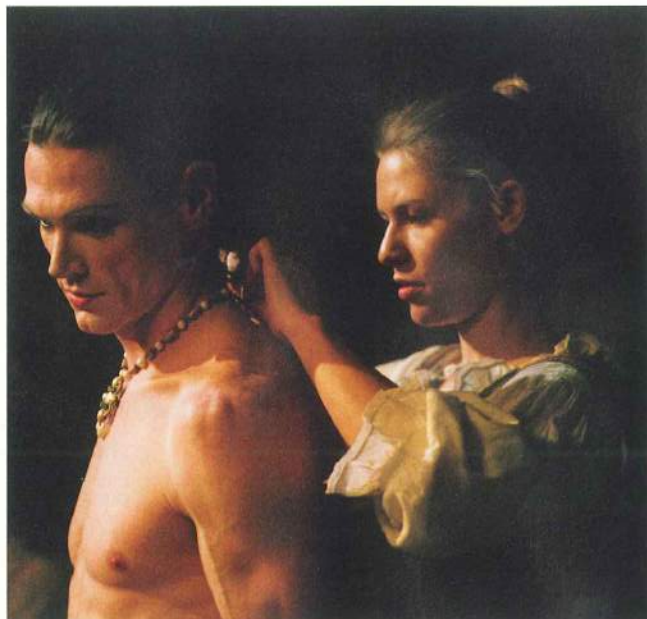
Crudup is considered by his colleagues to be a serious artist in a business that tends to elevate the most handsome of hucksters in its midst. Yet for the last eight years he has made millions as the voice of the "Priceless" MasterCard commercials. Does he ever feel as if he is just taking the money off the bedside table when doing those commercials? "What are you saying?" he asks. "I'm calling you a whore," I tell him. "Do you mind my calling you a whore?"

His laughter again fills Sardi's. "Yeah, sure I'm

JOAN MARCUS (2)



**"I am not difficult," says Crudup.
"I'm available but I'm just not interested in cultivating a public personality."**



aware of the whole aspect of the business. As a public artist, you have to be aware of making yourself either more effective or ineffective. But for me, a voice-over—which is different than being a spokesperson—was a way of giving myself some financial security that wasn't destructive to my ability to make people think I could be someone else."

So what's priceless in Crudup's own life? "Atticus," he says softly and without hesitation. "I think anybody who still has a relationship with their parents and has a child will tell you that it almost always immediately gives you more empathy for your parents," he continues. "And more patience. Suddenly they get a lot more credit."

As a boy himself, Crudup had a peripatetic upbringing while watching his mother and father divorce, remarry each other, then divorce again. He was born on Long Island in 1968, the second of three boys. Most of his childhood was spent in Dallas, where he was a devoted Boy Scout. As a teenager, he moved with his family to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, before attending the University of North Carolina as an undergrad. His step-grandfather was a bishop in the Epis-

copal church, the religion in which he was raised. Does he still believe in God? Still pray? "Over the course of my adult life I've searched for different..." He pauses. "I'm not sure where I am right now with it. Searching. I'm sort of a humanist, I guess. I think we're all best off if we pay attention to what's happening around us."

That could be just as apt a description of the way Crudup approaches his work: He insists that his powers of observation, combined with good material and his rich imagination, are the tools of his artistic trade. He denies that he uses any of his own personal history as emotional reinforcement for a character's sense of reality. "Oh, please," says Crowley when I run this by him. "Of course he draws on his own life's experiences and the emotions that they've engendered in him. Who's he kidding?"

Crudup certainly doesn't seem to be kidding when we get into a heated back-and-forth about an actor's right to privacy. "I am not difficult," he says when I tell him he has the reputation of being harder to interview than Garbo from her grave. "I'm available but I'm just not interested in cultivating a public personality."

CLIVE COOTE: PHOTOGRAPH



WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Crudup collaborated with Claire Danes in the 2004 film *Stage Beauty* (left), and with Mary-Louise Parker in the 1996 revival of *Bus Stop*.

This set off the following exchange:

Kevin Sessums: But isn't part of accepting the fact of wanting to succeed as an actor on a grand scale—on the Broadway stage, starring in films—that you have to cop to that part of your job that has to do with the fame that results?

Billy Crudup: There is an industry that thrives on personality. That industry sustains itself by insisting that fame is a mandate of acting, I totally disagree. I think I can be successful in my work if people don't know shit about me. I think the thing about fame being an inherent aspect of artistic success is bullshit! I think the only way to stop it is to demand that it is bullshit!"

KS: But don't you give it power by hating it so much and making it such an issue?

BC [*with increasing volume*]: This is what gets me angry! You're predisposed to think that because I don't want to participate in it, then I hate it. What the infrastructure does to the people who reject them is to say they hate us. So they give me this reputation that I'm anti-fame, that I'm anti-celebrity, which is not true at all.

KS: When you're at the checkout at the grocery do you glance at the tabloids?

BC: I'm much more interested in science so I'm flipping through *Popular Mechanics*. I think tabloids are exploitative and perverse and built on suffering and I try not to encourage things that encourage suffering. I know there is this refrain, 'Oh, poor celebrities. They're paid millions of dollars. Blah, blah, blah.' But a person in pain is a person in pain.

KS: It's finally not very generous of you to be so stubbornly withholding of a few hints for your fans of what it was in your life that made you into such a talented actor as well as a success.

BC: But I'm not sharing myself with them. I'm sharing my art. There's a big difference. If you don't think my performances are an act of generosity then I can't convince you of something else. But I don't have to give you the genesis of why I'm an actor as a trade-off for being able to act.

KS: But I'm not asking you what you do naked once you close your bedroom door—unless, of course, you want to tell me. [*Crudup laughs.*] Aren't there deeper emotions, for example, that have come into your life since Atticus was born, that you can tap into, that you never had before?

BC: Yes. But I don't pervert my personal life in that way. The material in *The Pillowman* is about as far removed from my personal experience as you can get. It is a celebration of the possibility of imagination. That's one of the

main reasons I wanted to be in it.

KS: Wouldn't it be easier to make these arguments if you didn't date famous actresses? Date a nurse instead.

BC: Are you f—ing kidding me? That's crazy! That's crazy! People were as interested in me and my private life before I dated actresses.

KS: I remember telling Claire during an interview in the fall of 2004 that I was rather touched watching *Stage Beauty* because there was a sweet tension going on between you that played on a whole other level.

BC [*suddenly furious*]: That f—ing sucks! Because you know what, man? That was a creative exercise between Claire and me. That was f—ing rehearsed. There was nothing in that film—nothing—that wasn't described, articulated, and then enacted. It was a f—ing performance!

KS: Even the strings of saliva you shared when you finished kissing?

BC: Of course, the f—ing saliva! There's saliva in life! That really hurts, man. This is a difficult thing to cope with. I kissed Ben Chaplin in that movie. We did a very good job in building a relationship between the two of us but that somehow has less excitement and enthusiasm...

KS: Believe me, if you had had a real-life relationship with Ben Chaplin I would have been excited and enthused.

BC: [*laughs*]: But what if I did? Would it have made the stuff between Claire and me less effective? As an artist who gets his paycheck from imagining things and sparking the imagination I don't want the responsibility of having to live everything in order to make it successful. I am constantly rebelling against the instinct within people to supplant their own imaginations with the desire to have something real. We do that with reality TV. This whole idea of reality TV is so perverse because nobody is real. They're all—we're all—acting.

Crudup takes a deep breath, calms down and reverts to the gentlemanly pro that he is. He politely excuses himself and rushes off to the Booth for his half-hour call. The tourists who are finishing up their desserts all around us have been eavesdropping. It's clear that Crudup's private passion has left them all a little shaken, a little stirred, a little thrilled. I would love to be in the audience when he takes the stage tonight and transforms such passion into a public display of his dynamism, his art. I'm certain he's going to give one hell of a performance.

The Pillowman is now playing at the Booth Theatre (212-239-6200).