

Itching to get back on the boards

After crossing the Pond to tackle *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, **Christian Slater** starred in his very own health drama. Here's his exclusive first-person account.

A few weeks into rehearsals this summer, I noticed some spots on my forehead. I thought at first that they might be pimples. How annoying. How embarrassing. How I tried to ignore the fact that only two weeks before, my castmate Felix Dexter had come down with the chicken pox. He'd been away from rehearsal since being diagnosed, and although I'd never had the chicken pox, I didn't give it a second thought.

So I optimistically headed to rehearsal. It was a Friday, and I felt a bit under the weather, slightly fluish and tired. I thought (hoped?) that maybe I was just run down. But later in the day, just to be safe—because after a certain age, chicken pox can become life threatening—I saw a doctor. He advised me to take it easy over the weekend, and prescribed some antibiotics to reduce an outbreak should it occur.

That night, I went home and got some sleep. When I woke up on Saturday, bam: The pox was upon me. It was a disaster. Spots were pretty much everywhere. I immediately took the antibiotics and trimmed my nails, which the doctor had told me to do just in case I started scratching. I dabbed the spots with calamine lotion, which helped the itching. It was a great look. It's pink, then it turns chalky on your skin. Very kabuki.

I wasn't well enough to go out and I certainly didn't want to spread the pox, so I stayed quarantined in my hotel room for eight long days. I ate only room service and the chicken soup that a visiting buddy from L.A. brought in for me. He was like my Nurse unRatched. He took great care of me.

I watched movies and a lot of episodes of *The Office*. I ran lines by myself. Meanwhile, the cast was rehearsing without me, since we were supposed to open at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in just a matter of days.

The cast is composed mainly of stand-up comedians, so of course they couldn't resist a joke. A couple of days after I took ill, they showed up at rehearsal with red lipstick dots all over their faces, telling the producer, "Uh oh, we're in a lot of trouble."

By the eighth day, I was feeling a little better, so I took the four-hour train ride to Edinburgh to join the company

for tech rehearsals. But when I got there, I had a relapse, so the opening of the show was postponed by four days. I rallied just in time to step back into the show—on opening night, no less. Somehow I managed to pop right into this surprisingly well-oiled machine.

It would seem that overcoming the chicken pox would be enough health drama for one production. But, see, after the play transferred to the West End, I had this little idea to add a bit at the moment I'm told that Nurse Ratched controls my release from the institution, where I would go offstage and smash some things. You know, to beef up the drama. I told the director Tamara Harvey about my idea and she said, "Let's rehearse it to make sure it's safe when you do it." Which is good advice, of course.

But that night I just got inspired to try it, to surprise the other actors and see how it went. So I went offstage and began beating the heck out of this metal-framed chair, and really loving the moment—until all of a sudden I punched the chair and felt something go very wrong in my hand. It immediately started to swell and ache, but I had enough adrenaline to finish the show. Immediately after, I went to the hospital and had it X-rayed. The bad news: I'd broken a bone. The good news: The doctor described it as a "sexy break" and likened it to "a boxer's break." Weirdly, I'd already been taping up that hand as part of my costume, based on the descriptions in Ken Kesey's book of my character McMurphy's bandaged hands. Maybe I'm subconsciously Method. After that, the show was smooth sailing. The chicken pox left a couple of marks on my forehead. When I see them, I'll always think of the wild experience I had with the West End. The way I see it is, some people have scrapbooks. Me, I have scars.

BIG BREAK

Slater's McMurphy certainly deserved a hand—but did it have to be a broken one?

