



BALDWIN & PAL: UNPLUGGED AND ELECTRIC



Alec Baldwin and Michael Cumpsty (right) join Two River Theater artistic director John Dias (left) for an "unscripted and unrehearsed" UNPLUGGED fundraiser at the Bridge Avenue artspace Monday night.

By TOM CHESEK

According to **Alec Baldwin**, there's a certain comfort to be found in the eight-shows-a-week Broadway grind, in that "at 8pm I know exactly where I'll be, who I'll be with, and what I'll say."

As for an admittedly “confessional” **Michael Cumpsty**, the British-born actor allowed that “I feel more myself when I’m playing someone else.”

The two stage veterans were in a casually confessional mood on Monday night — with several hundred eavesdroppers listening in on the unscripted and unrehearsed conversation — as **Two River Theater** hosted a full house for an intimate evening of scenes and stories presented under the name **Baldwin. Cumpsty. Unplugged.**

The one-nighter — a fundraiser for Two River Theater Company and its various educational and community outreach endeavors — was moderated by TRTC artistic director **John Dias**, who took the stage and introduced the guests of honor as “two extraordinary artists... these two guys are big fans of each other.”

Dias, who shares a Middletown home with Cumpsty, recalled having first seen the Tony nominated star of Broadway’s **1776**, **42nd Street** and **Sunday in the Park with George** in a production of **The Heiress** — and reminisced about working closely with Baldwin at NYC’s Public Theater, where the producer and star collaborated on a staging of what could only be referred to as “[The Scottish Play](#)” (the three onstage principals remained mostly mindful of the longstanding theatrical superstition regarding the name-checking of that bloody Shakespearean tragedy).

“Alec changed my world when he played [Stanley](#),” said Dias, referring to Baldwin’s Tony-lauded turn in the 1990s revival of **A Streetcar Named Desire** — a topic that produced some vivid recollections from the instantly recognizable star of films, TV shows and Capital One commercials.

Appearing sans necktie or neatly combed hair, Baldwin (who previously starred in a 2009 fundraiser for the nonprofit [Junior League of Monmouth County](#) at Two River) brought his comic people skills to the fore, regaling the crowd with often hilarious anecdotes on his many Hollywood and Broadway projects, mock-dismissing questions on his political aspirations, and bringing down the house with his impressions of Al Pacino and a dead-on Tony Bennett.

While professing his love for falling-over-the-couch slapstick comedy, an initially reserved Cumpsty (“I’ve never done this before”) soon got into the rhythm of the occasion, exchanging fun stories with Baldwin on projects ranging from soap operas to *Star Trek* to *Saturday Night Live* — although Cumpsty remains “sworn to secrecy” regarding his role in the current season of **Boardwalk Empire**.

The guests shared some serious insights as well on the subject of stage acting, a craft about which Shakespeare specialist Cumpsty opined, "it's brand new every time you do it — just electric."

"It's like hockey," said Baldwin of the importance of learning Shakespeare, "where you have to master one skill — being a world-class skater — FIRST, before you play the game."

"First, the play is doing YOU," Baldwin continued. "Then there's a chiropractic shift, and YOU are doing the play."

Although the actors — who kept the stories and audience Q&A going long past the event's scheduled running time — didn't get to as many of the scene readings as were initially planned, Cumpsty (who starred in the TRTC season opener production of ***Much Ado About Nothing***) illuminated a pair of favorite soliloquies from ***Hamlet***, the role for which he won an Obie award, and which he called "the top of the mountain... the best role, in the best play, and very daunting."

Revisiting the work of Tennessee Williams, Baldwin (whose most famous character speech remains [this](#) David Mamet quotable classic) presented an unusual choice — a moving monologue on death, delivered by the female character Hannah in ***Night of the Iguana***.

The 8pm presentation, which was preceded by a VIP meet-and-greet reception in the theater lobby, was adjourned as it approached the two hour mark by Dias — with Baldwin contributing an all-kidding-aside closing statement on the importance of supporting cultural institutions like TRTC and its branded Bridge Avenue artspace.

The Two River stage lights up again in December, for the company's annual holiday season family show, ***HONK! The Musical***. Take it [here](#) to reserve tix for this and other season offerings (as well as a recently added concert by ***Aimee Mann*** on January 13, 2012).