

FRASER'S EDGE

Brendan Fraser | Theater '90

BY LISA HALPERN

Behind closed doors at the new downtown campus of Cornish College of the Arts, a large audience of Acting students wait with nervous anticipation for Alumnus and celebrity guest speaker, Brendan Fraser.

Undeniably tall, dark and handsome, Brendan strides in and the classroom grows hushed — then the students break out into warm applause. Brendan's friendly, relaxed demeanor resonates with energy more akin to a tall puppy than a Hollywood movie star.

Refreshing to see such humility from a man whose notable and diverse films include *George of the Jungle*, *Bedazzled* and *The Mummy* franchise to the more thought provoking *School Ties*, *Gods & Monsters* and *The Quiet American*. Coming up this spring is Oscar-nominee Paul Haggis' (screenwriter for *Million Dollar Baby*) ensemble cast film *Crash*, an unflinching look at race relations in Los Angeles.

Brendan grins as he looks out over a sea of faces. "Is this a room full of actors?" he asks the crowd. A barely audible mumble escapes a few brave lips. "Can I ask again — is this a room full of actors?" The room erupts with laughter and this time the students react with a decisive "YES!" He replies, "I just want to make sure I know who I am talking to."

"I arrived at Cornish last century." (LAUGHTER) "I want you to know that I understand intimately how challenging it is to be here and how dedicated you need to be as individuals to accomplish your goals. I gather most of you are living hand to mouth, holding down night jobs in addition to being in classes all day, rehearsing in the afternoon and performing at night. Sleeping and eating become an abstract notion. Many of you may wonder why you're here or if you're making progress or what will become of you when you leave! If you can put those thoughts aside and trust that you have made a wise



PHOTO: BRENDAN FRASER

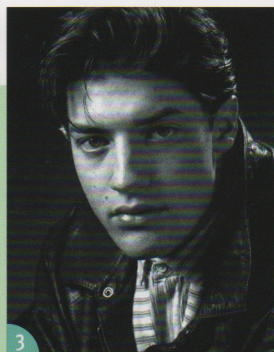
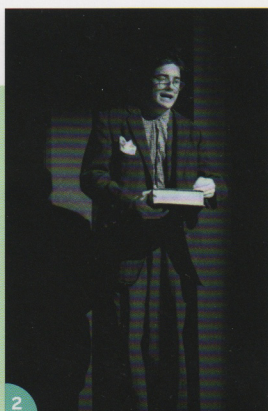
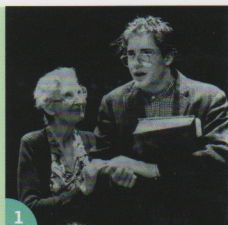
choice to study your craft, then you will have succeeded. Talent is indelible. If you didn't have some measure of it — you wouldn't be at Cornish. During my training, I struggled, I grappled with instructors, I was critiqued as 'undisciplined' which I now wear as a badge of honor. I was told not to rely on what I felt were my strengths, but to identify and work harder on my weaknesses."

"You've got a bumpy road ahead of you. You're walking into an industry that can't make up its mind. Which is the reason I'm looking for a job right now." (LAUGHTER) "You're laughing, but that's not false modesty, it's true. It's a competitive environment. So while you're here be strong for each other. You're in a safe environment."

Fraser's charm and natural comic timing instantly puts the students at ease. Straining forward in their seats, no one wants to miss a word.

"Since I left Cornish, I've been around the world and what I can tell you is that Cornish is unique. The education you're getting here exceeds that of most masters programs."

"There are times when something I learned at Cornish is the key thing that gets me through the day. For instance, I'm standing on set in the pouring fake rain at 5AM with the Assistant Director yelling at everyone because the sun is about to rise and we'll lose the shot if the herd of yak are not reset back to their mark. I'm ankle deep in muck with a huge camera that keeps jamming, mounted on a crane and pointed at my face.



1 + 2) BRENDAN FRASER PERFORMING
IN *DOÑA ROSITA* AT CORNISH 1990.
3) BRENDAN FRASER 1980

You are on the spot to perform, and do it properly. You gotta know the words, take direction, stay cool under pressure and to top it all off, act a scene as if it were the first and last time you will ever do this. On those occasions I do like this." (Brendan demonstrates a hand/forearm stretching exercise that he learned in a movement class at Cornish.) "See? It works. I feel better already." (LAUGHTER)

Brendan opens it up to questions and many eager hands shoot up.

Q. YOU DID SOME THEATER RECENTLY, (PLAYING 'BRICK' IN CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF). HOW DID IT FEEL TO DEPART FROM FILM AFTER SO LONG?

B.F. It was both a return to my roots and the fulfillment of an aspiration to tread the boards in London's West End. It was also appropriately terrifying. The reward is that you have the privilege of telling the audience the playwright's story for a night. It's ephemeral, which makes it special.

Q. WHAT WAS YOUR PROCESS AFTER CORNISH?

B.F. After graduation, I watched a lot of bad movies, ate a lot of Subway sandwiches, drank beer – all really unproductive. I was selected to do an internship at Intiman Theatre. The highlight was a Russian theater company that came to perform Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. That production was so damn good. Even though you didn't comprehend the language, you understood everything. The acting was exceptional. The week before I left Seattle, I auditioned to play a 'tough' guy of Latino heritage jailed for gang affiliation. I played 'Bernardo' in my high school production of *WEST SIDE STORY*, so I thought I could do it. After the audition, the casting agent wanted me to read for the director in LA. Upon

my arrival in Tinsel Town I promptly got lost on my way to Hollywood and Vine. I got out of my car and noticed a star beneath my feet on the sidewalk – it was for *The Three Stooges*... I took that as a good sign. In the waiting room at the audition, there were three of us – a genuinely tough looking dude, some guy I recognized as the TV flavor of the month and me, just wetting my pants. When it was my turn to read, the director Taylor Hackford was getting off the phone, yelling "Well that just leaves you smelling like a f_ _ _ing rose! (Slam!) He turns to me and asks, "Who are you?" (LAUGHTER) Right. I did not land the job. However, my audition tape was circulated and created a snowball effect which led to meetings with agencies, more auditions and ultimately – some work.

"Since I left Cornish I've been around the world, and what I want to tell you is that Cornish is unique."

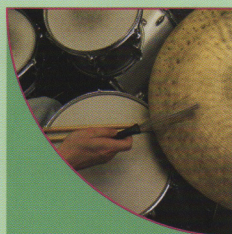
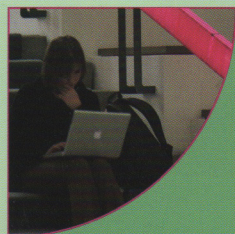
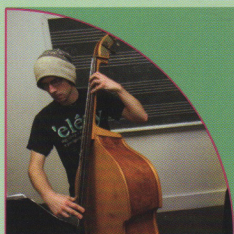
– BRENDAN FRASER

Q. HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THE FICKLENESS OF THIS BUSINESS?

B.F. It takes a leap of faith. Deep breaths, be patient. I recommend you find something to keep you grounded. Me? I pick up a camera. Snapping photos gives me satisfaction.

Q. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE GRADUATES GOING TO LA?

B.F. I could easily say, "Don't do it!" but that's nonsense. If you want a career in film and television, Los Angeles is where you go. You'll have to hustle. Look everyone in the



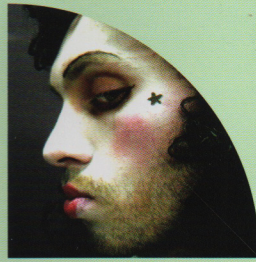


PHOTO: BRENDAN FRASER

eyes. Keep notes. Remember names. Skip the whole party-for-work scene and get your beauty rest; you have to look good in the morning. With the training you got from Cornish you're head and shoulders above most everyone else. Why? Because filmmakers, producers etc., need talent. Real talent. Hang on to that. Guard it.

Q. DO YOU NEED A SCREEN CREDIT TO GET AN AGENT?

B.F. Nope, but I recommend you start by working with a local casting agent. It's challenging. In Hollywood, they often think of actors as talking props. But hey, if you want respect, be a doctor. The rules are mercurial. Don't expect a lot too soon. Someone once said to me "collect the word no." I say just let 'no' roll off your back – then go back and find a YES! Don't stop until you do.

Q. HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH ACTING IN FRONT OF A BLUE SCREEN?

B.F. Green is the new blue screen, by the way. Pay attention to your craft while you're at Cornish. If you believe what you're doing, your audience will. If you know what you're saying, your audience will. You gotta believe that there's a six foot mummy about to rip your head off... cuz there ain't nothin' there! The things that I learned at Cornish help me fall back on my acting skills, no matter what happens.

Q. HOW MUCH IS THE PIECE OF PAPER YOU GET FROM HERE WORTH?

B.F. That "piece of paper" is your Bachelor of Fine Arts. It's an affirmation that you stuck with it.

With that, Fraser draws himself up to his full 6'3" and grins. "Thanks for spending some time with me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."



One student shakes Brendan's hand and says, "Thanks for coming to speak with us. I'm not nervous anymore." Brendan smiles knowingly.

After many years in the business, international exposure and press junkets around the world, one would think that a celebrity of Brendan Fraser's stature might not be interested in giving back to the community in this way. But this talented actor, capable of heartbreaking drama and a master of physical comedy, defies stereotype. His genuine interest in connecting with these students and the heartfelt encouragement he's given them, reveals a natural mentor.

A great teacher once said that talent is more than the ability to do one's craft well, that to be truly talented one must also be a decent and generous human being. Brendan Fraser fits the bill — and that's the kind of edge with staying power. ▲

This article is a result of Brendan Fraser's visit to the Cornish Theater Department, February 9 + 10, 2005. Photos were taken by Brendan Fraser during Professor Hal Ryder's class, ACTING CLASSICAL TEXTS.