

UNSCRIPTED ACT RENOWNED ACTOR JEREMY GEIDT, RECENTLY DIAGNOSED AND TREATED FOR PROSTATE CANCER, IS DETERMINED TO CARRY ON The Boston Globe January 18, 2001, Thursday

Maureen Dezell

Two Boston Globe profile stories (w/health themes); WBUR Arts Online story

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TREATED FOR PROSTATE CANCER, IS DETERMINED TO CARRY ON**

By Maureen Dezell, Globe Staff

As cancers go, Jeremy Geidt's isn't "terribly exotic."

"Everybody has prostate cancer," the actor observes wryly. "I almost wish it were something a little more showy." A flashier form of the disease would be more insidious, of course, he says. And it might well be harder to regard with "the contempt it deserves."

Geidt's verve in the face of illness wouldn't surprise those who know him, or audiences familiar with his singular, energetic performances in dozens of roles at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge over the past 26 years.

Like many people, Geidt, until recently, was "terrified of the word" cancer, and did his best to avoid thinking about it. Since he was diagnosed and treated for the condition last year, he's become convinced that "people should know about it, men should be tested for it, and people should know that you can go on working" while living with the disease.

The 70-year-old actor underwent radiation therapy for seven weeks last fall, then plunged into 10-hour-a-day technical rehearsals for Robert Brustein's adaptation of "Three Farces and a Funeral," which closed last week at the American Repertory Theatre. Later this month, he opens in George Bernard Shaw's "The Doctor's Dilemma."

"I'm playing a nice old man in 'Doctor's Dilemma,' which is swell, because I get to sit down," he says. "And I only [had] two small bits in the Chekhov."

"Small bits" is a relative description. A founding member of the Yale Repertory Company and of the ART, where he's appeared in 86 productions, the British-born Geidt has been performing and teaching since he started training at the Old Vic Theatre School in London 55 years ago. He brings energy and elan to a remarkable range of roles: Alonso in "The Tempest"; the devil in "Man and Superman"; Sir Toby Belch in "Twelfth Night"; Gayev in "The Cherry Orchard"; Pantalone in "The Servant of Two Masters"; Vladimir in "Waiting for Godot"; Dodge in "Buried Child."

Things left undone

"I haven't taught this year because of this bloody cancer thing," says Geidt, who teaches dramatic arts at Harvard College, Shakespeare in the Harvard Extension and Summer schools, and acting at the American Repertory Institute for Advanced Theatre Training. "As those who do the three things - teaching, rehearsal, and performing - will tell you, teaching is the most tiring."

"Radiation tires you. I come home, have something to eat and half a glass of wine, and boom, I'm out. The other day, I slept 15 hours, and I can sleep 12 hours a day easily."

Cancer diagnosis and treatment "put the kibosh on going to India" last summer to deliver a series of lectures on Shakespeare, which he had done the year before. He and his wife, Jan Geidt,

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director of development at the ART, travel widely most summers. During the theater season, they are out and about a lot on the Greater Boston arts scene; regulars at gallery openings, parties and benefits, and strong supporters of local small theaters.

"I've tried to cut down [some of the community and social activity], because I don't think it's fair to the work," says Geidt. He did keep one of his outside-the-job commitments this month: coaching the sometimes tongue-twisted Mayor Thomas M. Menino before his State of the City address.

"I rehearse with him, and do some exercises to help him speak a little better," says the actor, whose own cadence and inflection resonate with years of Shakespearean training.

"I'll say: 'You must say "mothers in Roxbury," not "mamas in Roxbury." I give him a bit of a pep talk, saying 'You're sexy,' things like that. I sometimes help write the speeches. He's got some very bright guys working for him. Mayor Mumbles, as they call him, is getting better."

A common cancer

Geidt found out he had cancer of the prostate following an annual checkup, when a routine blood test showed he had elevated levels of prostate-specific antigen (PSA). As his internist told him, "Some people's PSA shoots up, and it means nothing. This was on Jan's birthday - June 22d - and I got an appointment with a guy called Ken Wishnow, at Beth Israel Deaconess, who I've subsequently found out is the best [urologist] there is. And he sent me to a wonderful woman called Clare Beard," an oncologist.

Prostate cancer is the most common nonskin cancer in men. An estimated 180,000 cases are diagnosed in the United States each year, and approximately 37,000 men died of the disease in 1999. If it is detected early, the cancer can often be cured with surgery, radiation, or some combination of those treatments, chemotherapy, and hormone therapy.

"When you're young, it can be much more aggressive," notes Geidt. "That is why it's important to get tested. When you're elderly, like me, it's not so aggressive."

As Geidt's doctors explained it to him, "You can have the operation, which means they cut out the prostate - I'm still not sure I know what the prostate is. Or you can have a thing called the implant, which is what the mayor of New York has." In this treatment, radioactive seeds are implanted in the prostate gland, where they remain until they become inactive, usually after about 10 months.

Many men experience incontinence after surgery, "and it can mess you up terribly sexually if they cut the wrong thing," Geidt says. "The implants can upset the bladder, and I thought that wasn't a very sensible thing, when I'm acting." Given his age, robustness, and relatively good health, Geidt and his physicians decided the best course was radiation.

"They do it with what I call the Woody Allen thing: they come around you with these tubes," he says, referring to the futuristic hospital scene in "Sleeper," then elaborates with a sound effect: "Mnowwwwwwwww! And they mark you up with tattoos and X-ray you a lot. You feel a little wonky."

On the up side, "It was a rather nice fall. I was up early, for me, and driving down Memorial Drive with all the trees and the water. . . . The people at Beth Israel were wonderful, wonderful people, and couldn't be sweeter."

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Geidt went for treatment every weekday. "Cancer appears to take a holiday on weekends and days like George Washington's birthday," he observes drolly.

Many of the patients who were in treatment at the same time were far sicker than he. "It was terribly pathetic. You'd see these people with walkers, and smell the cigarette smoke - they couldn't stop. And here I was, with this piddling prostate thing."

For all his levity and sense that the show of life must go on, Geidt at times feels overwhelmed by his cancer and treatment. The side effects of radiation are formidable. "Your nether regions, as it were, get very upset. Oh, boy, do they. And you're forever rushing to the bathroom. And you feel very weak. Sometimes your legs are like water. That's getting better.

"And I have these pills. They tell you 'these will make you dizzy,' and they don't mean Gillespie. They mean ga-ga. The trouble is, there's no measurement. You can't say I feel good today, which means I'll feel good tomorrow.

"I have good days, and I have bad days," he continues, paging through his desk diary from last fall. On the night before treatment ended last November, "I felt very depressed," he recalls, reading. "I had bad dreams. I don't usually write stuff like that. But I think it was because I knew I was coming to the end of the treatment. And when you think you're doing something about it - like being Woody Allened - you feel better than when you're sitting around, not doing anything.

"I don't know what the outcome will be. Presumably, this works." His doctors told him recently that things seem to be going well, and the exhaustion should ease within the next three months. "People are so sweet. They've e-mailed and sent me posted objects, he says. His grown daughters "call and e-mail all the time.

"I don't feel sorry for myself. The people I feel sorry for are the people I work with," says the performer. "They've all been so nice and I've bored the pants off them by telling them how I feel!"

Not to worry, say Geidt's fellow performers.

Jeremy's illness and treatment "have been virtually invisible," says Jerry Kissel, who played the would-be suitor to the daughter of Stephen Chubukov, Geidt's character in the farce, "The Proposal." "My dad went through radiation treatment, and it took a lot out of him. The treatment can be as debilitating as the disease.

"But we'd be in rehearsal, and Jeremy might say he was tired. Then we'd get on stage, and he'd start this shouting match, and I'd go back at him full gun. I'd say, 'Let's take a break,' and he'd say, 'Let's do it.' He's a career professional. An inspiration. A trouper."

SIDEBAR

A primer on prostate cancer

It is the second-most common cancer type among men; about 180,400 new cases - and 31,900 fatalities - were expected last year by the American Cancer Society.

Risk factors:

More than eight out of 10 cases come in men over the age of 65, but it can strike at any age.

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It's about twice as common among African-Americans as it is among white Americans.

About 10 percent of cases appear to have genetic links.

A diet high in fat may play a part.

Early detection: A biopsy is the only way to know for sure if you have prostate cancer. The cancer society recommends that, beginning at age 50, men who have at least a 10-year life expectancy be offered both the PSA blood test and a digital rectal exam. Men in high-risk groups should begin testing at 45.

Survival rates (in percent At least 5 years: 89

At least 10 years: 63

If the cancer is found before it has spread outside the prostate: * 100

If the cancer has spread to tissues near the prostate: * 94

If the cancer has spread to distant parts of the body: * 31

* For at least 5 years GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC/MICHAEL PRAGER

SOURCE: www.cancer.org, a Web site of the American Cancer Society

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PORTRAYING A LIFE - AND DEATH 'MORRIE' ROLE A CHALLENGE FOR VETERAN STAGE ACTOR

BYLINE: By Maureen Dezell, Globe Staff

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NEW YORK - Alvin Epstein has died 100 times onstage.

"But I've never played anybody who's died through the course of the whole play," said the 77-year-old actor, a longtime member of the American Repertory Theatre company.

Epstein has taken on that daunting task in the title role in "Tuesdays With Morrie," a stage adaptation of sportswriter Mitch Albom's phenomenally successful 1997 memoir of life lessons he learned at the deathbed of his former Brandeis professor Morrie Schwartz. The play, which began preview performances yesterday at the Minetta Lane Theatre, officially opens Nov. 19.

"It's a fascinating and complex role because Morrie's personality is very unusual," Epstein said recently, sipping coffee outside a Times Square rehearsal studio. "He's a man who finds out he's dying of an incurable disease, who decides to turn it into a teaching tool - and who wants to share it with as many people as he can.

"Morrie also died of what happens to be a devastating disease," Epstein said. The disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), is better known as Lou Gehrig's disease, a neuromuscular disorder that weakens and eventually paralyzes the muscle system.

The debilitating illness progresses quickly. In the opening scene of "Tuesdays With Morrie," the actor said, his character is dancing. "Then, over 90 minutes, he goes from using a cane to using a walker to a La-Z-Boy, a wheelchair, and then to a bed."

Conveying Morrie in life, and as a life force, is a singular challenge. "Playing a man who really lived - who really existed - is a big responsibility," Epstein said. "But then, every role is a big responsibility." What makes Morrie different is that he is a "national figure."

Indeed, he has become an American icon.

Three weeks before he died at his home in West Newton in 1995, Morrie - as he wanted everyone to call him - appeared on "Nightline" with Ted Koppel for the third and final time. "I'm going to die," the white-haired wise man told television viewers. "But I'm also going to live on."

That optimistic promise turned out to be an understatement.

Albom's book, which he and his former teacher collaborated on to help pay Morrie's medical bills, has sold more than 5 million hardcover copies since it was published in 1997. (Albom splits the royalties with Morrie's widow, Charlotte, and their sons. Released in paperback for the first time last month, "Tuesdays With Morrie" shot up the New York Times paperback bestseller list almost immediately. It's currently No. 4 on the list.

The story was made into a 1999 Emmy-winning TV movie starring Hank Azaria and Jack Lemmon, and public appetite for Morrie's homey aphorisms about living wisely and dying well ("Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth") has burgeoned since. The insights imparted by the simple-living, plainspoken elderly professor to a sophisticated, successful, but spiritually unsettled baby boomer have turned into touchstones in sermons, motivational speeches, the literature of death and dying, and the wider self-help movement.

"When you're playing a person who was alive, there is a responsibility to some sort of verisimilitude," said Epstein.

He has faced this responsibility before, when he performed the role of Lee Strasberg, the legendary proponent of Method acting and director of the Actors Theatre, in Robert Brustein's 1998 play "Nobody Dies on Friday," about Strasberg, the Method, and Marilyn Monroe. In that case, "I had the good fortune to have gone to the Actors Studio," said Epstein. "I knew Lee and observed him and watched him. It was very helpful in playing a figure who is a legend.

"I never knew Morrie, and I have studiously avoided watching the television tapes" of his appearances on "Nightline." "I don't want to hear them. I don't want to imitate in any way."

In creating the character, Epstein continued, "I am working from things in my own imagination and things that are told me by Mitch Albom.

I can't hope to become Morrie for people who knew him. What I can hope is to suggest inner qualities that he had."

Epstein's career, which spans nearly six decades, has been filled with the sort of episodes and experiences from which great theater memoirs are made. He is simply too busy working to write

about his lives on the stage.

A versatile ART regular known for his interpretations of Brecht and Beckett and for his evocative cabaret performances of the music of Kurt Weill, Epstein is also a singer, dancer, and director.

He studied with Martha Graham and performed with Marcel Marceau. He played the role of Lucky in the American premiere of "Waiting for Godot" and the Fool in a "King Lear" directed by Orson Welles. Epstein directed the ART's inaugural performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at the Loeb Drama Center and performed with Sting in "Threepenny Opera." He also taught at Yale and Harvard and did a brief stint as artistic director of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

In the summer of 2001, Epstein took part in a workshop production of "Tuesdays With Morrie" at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. Last summer, he appeared with Jon Tenney ("The Heiress") in a full-fledged production of the play, written by Albom and playwright Jeffrey Hatcher, at the New York Stage and Film Company at Vassar College.

The two-week run was so successful that producers David Singer and Liz McCann decided to take the show to New York. There was talk, according to Albom, of opening "Tuesdays With Morrie" on Broadway. In that case, "we would have had to have movie stars - at least that's what I was told," said Albom, who has written screenplays but had never worked before in theater.

"Every time they mentioned names of people [who could play the part], I said, 'I can't see them doing it better than Alvin.'

"We finally decided to do it off-Broadway because we didn't want to lose Alvin. Alvin's brilliant.

"He's just the right person, because you fall in love with him when you watch him onstage, just like you fell in love with Morrie when you walked into a room."