



# RICHARD THOMAS

## And *Unusual Acts of Devotion*



Richard Thomas was right in the middle of preparing dinner with his wife when he rang me from Manhattan to talk about his latest role in the upcoming La Jolla Playhouse production of *Unusual Acts of Devotion*. He was still rehearsing the play in New York at the time and had just finished for the day. The phenomenal playwright Terrence McNally known for writing such outstanding productions as *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Love, Valor, Compassion* is presenting the West Coast premiere of this new play on June 2 at The La Jolla Playhouse. Richard Thomas is, as he puts it, "kind of a McNally actor at this point."

**Rage:** This show has quite a great set of performers with Doris Roberts (*Everybody Loves Raymond*), Joe Manganiello (*One Tree Hill*) and Harriet Harris (*Frasier*).

Richard Thomas: And the fabulous Maria Dizzia is absolutely great. It's a great company. They are all terrific actors. Doris, I've known forever. We've never worked together before, but I've known her for many, many years. We're old friends. That's great. Harriet and I... it's like two degrees of separation with us. We know all the same people so everybody's told her, "Oh. You'll love Richard," and everybody has told me, "Oh, you'll love Harriet."

It's a terrific company and all new to me. I did the play in Philadelphia originally with a whole different company in a theatre production last fall. It's interesting for me to come to it again with a whole new configuration.

**Rage:** Terrence McNally has such a wonderful history as a playwright.

RT: This is the fifth production of a play of his that I've done. He and I go way, way back. I've known him since I was a teenager. The first thing I did of his was a beautiful production on public television called *Andre's Mother*, an exquisite piece. He won an Emmy for that teleplay. I also did a play of his in New York about five years ago called *The Stendhal Syndrome* which was a terrific success.

**Rage:** You did your first show on Broadway in 1958?

RT: Yes. My first job on Broadway was in a play called *Sunrise at Campobello*, which was a play about the Roosevelt's. That was a play in which James Earl Jones and I both made our Broadway debuts, which I thought was really cool.

**Rage:** You managed to have had quite a career in television, film and theatre.

RT: I've juggled the two my whole career. I've always done both. I have a picture coming out that I did last fall, an Ang Lee movie called *Taking Woodstock*. There's like 120 of us in the cast. It was a gas. I also have a picture in development at Hallmark to shoot this year. I do both, though the theatre is my first love.

**Rage:** Please tell me about the character of Chick Hogan in *Unusual Acts of Devotion*.

RT: Chick is a middle-aged tour guide for Grayline Bus Tours. The Grayline Bus Tours go all around New York City. That's what he does for a living. He's a gay man whose partner died five years before. He committed suicide. He was sick. Chick has been alone since then. He is a lonely, sweet man, really funny with a nice personality. He's a terrific character. He's a wonderful combination that Terrence does in his plays of people who can be both bitchy and endearing at the same time. Also, there is so much real feeling in Terrence's plays. It's very easy to identify with all his characters.

**Rage:** What has been the biggest challenge, if any, in doing this role?

RT: The challenge to Terrence's plays is always to... he writes very theatrically but also very realistically at the same time, so the challenge is to fully live and fully feel the pieces. He's not a minimalist at a writer, so you want to fully invest in the feeling, but you have to walk that line. It still has to be very real and true. That's always the challenge with his work. I love this part. I'm kind of a McNally actor at this point so I have a feeling about his voice.

**Rage:** What would you say is the message behind *Unusual Acts of Devotion*?

RT: The play is very much about each other. Death is waiting in the wings. It's how we treat each other that's really important. While we have life, the ability to be kind, we can make choices. We can make choices to be kind, or we can make choices to be cruel. We can make choices to hurt, or choices to help. Invariably we end up being cruel and hurtful... we are just human beings. But, whenever possible, if you can reach out and perform that act of kindness which is what I think he [Terrence McNally] means by "unusual acts of devotion." They may not always be the most obvious acts of kindness, it could be something that is challenging at the time, but it turns out to be a good deed. We've all had that happen to us. I think life is too short not to be kind. We do need each other. We all want to be accepted and all want to be, at some level, cared for. I think it's a beautiful theme. It's a terrific piece of writing.

### UNUSUAL ACTS OF DEVOTION

June 2 to June 28

La Jolla Playhouse

For tickets and more information call 858.550.1010