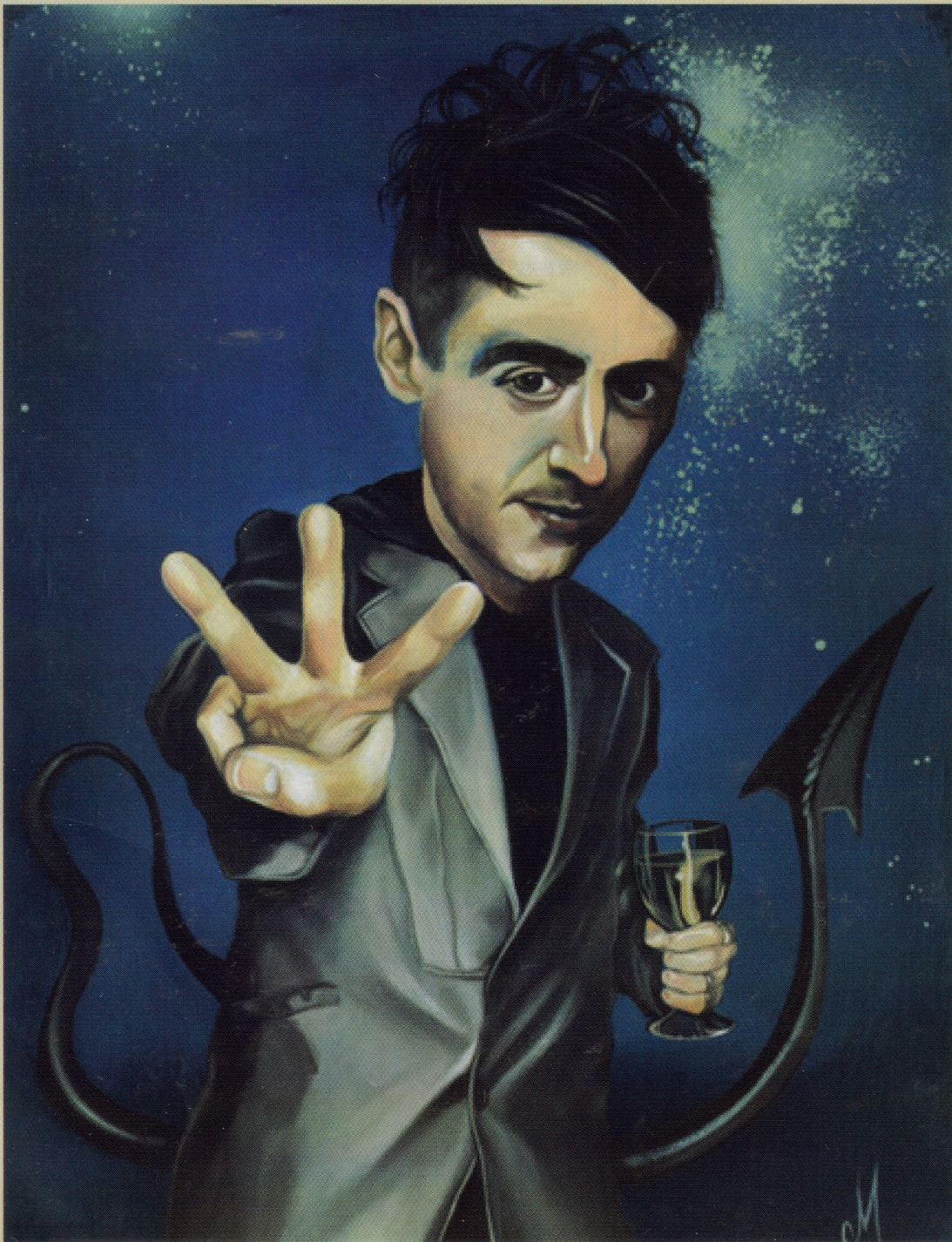


# ECCENTRIC



By Iris Wiener



# The ECLECTIC

## Alan Cumming Likes To “Jive” His Audiences

When Alan Cumming first stepped onto the stage at the famous Studio 54 for a rehearsal of *The Threepenny Opera*, he took a moment to reflect on the last time he stood in the very same place — during his run as the emcee in *Cabaret*, the role that brought a Tony Award in 1998. “It’s funny, it’s all sort of a blur,” he says. “What’s nice about it is that backstage I know my way around and it’s a lot of the same people. But being on the actual stage feels completely different.”

His most recent role as Mack the Knife in the recently ended *Opera* couldn’t be more different from his flamboyant, chilling portrayal of the Emcee in *Cabaret*. “I was just looking for something challenging to do in the theater. I can’t really describe why this role stuck out to me. To do a play, for me,

the show has to be something passionate because it takes up so much of my life. It has to be a big decision because it’s all so encompassing. I don’t take things lightly.”

Cumming considers the fact that he had to be on his toes for a huge portion of the show. “This part came along when I was really ready for a challenge. It’s a really insane piece, a really challenging and complicated role. So I just threw myself back in and waited to see what would happen.”

*The Threepenny Opera* turned heads when it opened in April. The “dark” satire of respectable society included dashing thieves, saucy prostitutes, enduring melodies, nudity, and a whole lot of flashiness. Although critics gave it mixed reviews, it enjoyed an extended run, ending June 25.

“In one way, the intention of a play

is to challenge people and make them reassess certain opinions, to challenge their preconceived notions and just to jive them a little bit and try and make them think. I think it’s definitely doing that,” he says about the mixed reactions to the show. “It’s different than anything that’s been on Broadway in years and I think that’s great. I like the fact that it’s so odd.”

Wallace Shawn gave Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s homage to the seedy side of life a provocative new translation for the production. “I think that people were jingled by it, and that’s how it should be. It’s not pleasant, it’s not fun. It’s meant to be provocative,” says Cumming.

The actor says that much of the challenge in making such a musical came in perfecting the physicality and dark humanism within his role. “I kind of let



the character seep into me. I sort of just gradually tried out different things. I found that I had a lot of tension because I've been holding myself stiffly and more erectly. Macheath/Mack the Knife is this kind of violent man and violent people tend to be on coil springs. I just tried to find the positions while being imposing. I'm not particularly big as a person. I found a way to physicalize his aggression and power."

In what at first seems to be a clear-cut question, Cumming considers the reliability of his character. "I tried to think that I am that person. Obviously I'm not a killer and rapist, but I understand passion and betrayal and addictions, and those things you can go for. I may not have killed anyone, but I can imagine killing someone. I think that even if someone's really evil or really not, people just walk around the world like me and you and can always find a way in."

All of the actors in *The Threepenny Opera* were obviously way out of their comfort zones. The cast included Tony and Grammy award winning Jim Dale, '80s pop sensation Cyndi Lauper, "Saturday Night Live" favorite Ana Gasteyer, and musician Nellie McKay. Could the ensemble be any more eccentric? "I doubt it," he laughs.

Cumming himself has tried his hand in many different entertainment mediums. He has made a name for himself in high profile roles in "X-Men 2," "Eyes Wide Shut," and "Spy Kids." His work covers television, directing, and producing as well. Upcoming films in which he will appear include "Sweet Land" and "Suffering Man's Charity" (which he also directed). Cumming gets tongue-tied over which craft he prefers. "I like to mix and match.

For a play, I'm much more picky, because there's just so much more of a commitment. I have to take six months out of my life and I agreed to do it a year and half ago. But you have very little money and you're exhausted and so it's huge.

"And it's a challenging thing because I don't want to worry if I'll get bored with it. It's easier to choose a film. It's less of a tight walk; it may be a long time, but you're probably going to be paid better, and your life is going to be less crazed and intense. I do a lot of crazy big films to make money and maintain a big name in Hollywood." He laughs about this when considering the way in which his younger fans are familiar with him. ■

