

Holiday Movies

Jester Who Came In From the Debauch

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Josh Haner/The New York Times

Sitting at a rehearsal across a plastic table from Alfred Molina, who plays his comic partner, Stefano, Mr. Brand is asked by an off-camera Julie Taymor, the film's director, simply to introduce himself as Trinculo. It's as if she had lighted a bottle rocket. Mr. Brand takes off, fully in character, long legs folding and unfolding under him as he unpacks a Shakespearean origins myth, riffing through a magpie's love of shiny things, the glow of a king's approbations, the jester's high-low perch and, of course, God and nature's destructive habits.

"That's one thing I learned from me dad: The world is a malevolent force, and it will destroy you," Mr. Brand says in the five-minute monologue. "The only people who survive in life are the people who refuse to fail. They refuse. They just clamber over any obstacle. They see obstacles, and they see opportunity. There is a staircase, and they will tread, they trudge, over any toil and mud and fifth and sludge and escape somehow with a gleaming jewel clutched in a clammy paw."

As he says this, he snatches an unseen morsel out of the air. This remarkably apt bit of self-description is either a parlor trick or one of the most bravura rehearsals in the history of the form. But then, it's always hard to tell with Mr. Brand.



Melinda Sue Gordon/Touchstone Pictures

Left, Mr. Brand as the jester Trinculo, with Alfred Molina, center, and Djimon Hounsou in Julie Taymor's film adaptation of "The Tempest."

Mr. Brand, 35, first won notice for turning his own life into a performance piece about the wages and splendors of addiction. Every drop and snort of those days is on lurid display in his first book, "My Booky Wook: A Memoir of Sex, Drugs, and Stand-up." This month he was in New York as part of a promotional tour for his follow-up, "Booky Wook 2: This Time It's Personal," which picks up where the first left off. And that means a Mr. Brand without mood-altering chemicals, as he has been happily sober for going on eight years. In the new book he speaks frankly about another more persistent addiction — fame — and addresses how he came to know, love (and, just last week, marry) the pop singer Katy Perry.

We met at the Villa Pacri restaurant and lounge, a monument to Roman excess in the meatpacking district. When we went downstairs, it seemed as if we had stepped onto the set of a well-financed porn movie. The low-slung couches are festooned with gold and silver metal finishes, there's a D.J. booth and lots of mirrors to reflect each evening's naughty proceedings. Given Mr. Brand's reputation for creating wreckage in rooms like this one — it is just a few Russian models and some Schedule 1 narcotics away from becoming a cave of bacchanal — it seems a little weird when he orders a single shot of espresso and then rummages around behind the bar to find a bottle of water for me.

So let's just get this out of the way: Russell Brand is a nice man. Yes, he has a bawdy, filthy personal history, and he owns every drug-soaked minute of it. But it's not what he features anymore. He loves his departed nan, answers questions with an earnestness that would be hard to fake, and is a close, careful listener.

As his new book reflects, Mr. Brand's plot to be famous since doing stand-up in 50-seat rooms in London is very much on schedule. But here's the thing about fame: In the wrong hands, it will land the seeker inside an episode of "Big Brother." Come to think of it Mr. Brand did host a few "Big Brother" specials in Britain, but something funny waylaid him on the way to a sad future on "Celebrity Rehab" with a bunch of D-listers. He sobered up, and landed some breakout gigs.

When he was given an unexpected slot hosting the 2008 MTV Video Music Awards, he killed. Cast as the louche rock star Aldous Snow in "Forgetting Sarah Marshall," he personified the music world's debauchery so convincingly that the comedy impresario Judd Apatow built an

entire movie around him: “Get Him to the Greek.” And in addition to larking about as Trinculo to Helen Mirren’s Prospera — her gender-bending take on Prospero — in Ms. Taymor’s “Tempest,” he and Ms. Mirren recently filmed a remake of “Arthur,” in which she primly attempts to keep Mr. Brand’s title character from acting like, well, the Russell Brand of old. (That film is to be released next year.)

“I was a person who grew up with the awareness of this commodity fame and seeking fulfillment through fame,” he said. “And now having achieved it realized, ‘Oh wow, it isn’t actually that valuable.’ Of course I enjoy giving interviews or having money or staying in nice hotels and these things, but ultimately it’s a very hollow, brittle experience if not nourished and underscored by something valuable.”

Like a lot of talented people who tried to motor along while the parking brake of addiction held them in check, Mr. Brand is now frankly ambitious and in a hurry. Doing “The Tempest” with a cast that included not just Ms. Mirren and Mr. Molina, but also Chris Cooper, Djimon Hounsou, David Strathairn and Alan Cumming, would seem like a reach, but it’s hardly Mr. Brand’s first encounter with Shakespeare. In 1995 he was accepted to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Drama Center in London. It did not go well.

“The school was all very serious, with lots of nudity, crying, Stanislavski and Strasberg,” he said. “I got thrown out because I was a junkie and a drunk, but not before I learned a thing or two. In Elizabethan theater, the places where Shakespeare was performed, they would do cock fighting and dog fighting and put a monkey on a horse’s back and sic dogs on it. That’s what it was competing with, so you had to be as viscerally entertaining.”

Ms. Taymor, whose films include “Across the Universe,” “Titus” and “Frida,” shares that visceral impulse. The first minute of her “Tempest” drops the moviegoer into a thunderous, raging storm, conjured by Prospera, the dispossessed “duke” who creates the storm to wash her tormentors ashore on the island where she has been living in exile. The trials that ensue would not be out of place on an episode of “Lost,” and Mr. Brand and Mr. Molina play comic connivers who are pushed about by mystical forces they can’t understand.

Ms. Taymor said she cast Mr. Brand quickly and impulsively, placing him among actors who had done Shakespeare in all its incarnations.

“He was in New York doing stand-up, and while the content was filthy, there was this persona, a kind of Commedia character that I was extremely drawn to,” she said in a recent phone interview. “We talked, and I mentioned playing Trinculo opposite Fred Molina, and he immediately said yes. I mentioned that he was very good looking, and I was thinking about giving him a set of rotten teeth, and he said that would be lovely.”

The movie was filmed mostly in Hawaii, and Ms. Taymor said Mr. Brand was very much about the work at hand.

“He is a dear person, lovely and sensitive,” she said. “When he wasn’t working, he’d be off on a cliff reading about shamanism or tricksters, anything he could get his hands on, that would inform his role. Both Helen and I felt that he is very much becoming an important actor. There is a level of self-consciousness that will have to disappear, but he can probably do all kinds of roles.”

Given that a film of a 400-year-old play is probably not going to open big with a teenage audience, the budget was relatively chaste, and the time on the rocky island of Lanai was not exactly luxe.

“Russell and I spent a lot of time together because we shared a trailer,” Mr. Molina said. “He’s outrageous, very funny, and when it came to the role, he didn’t have to get over all this reverence many of us have for Shakespeare, and I think it ended up in something very real, very present.”

Mr. Apatow laughed when he recalled how Mr. Brand chafed against his anonymity on his previous trip to Hawaii, for the making of “Forgetting Sarah Marshall.” “He hated that no one knew who he was,” Mr. Apatow said.

“Working with Russell is easy because he allowed us to strip-mine his past to build the character of Aldous Snow, but beyond that, he is meticulously professional,” he added. “He was on time for everything, fully prepared and completely committed.” In one of the scenes in “Get Him to the Greek,” Mr. Apatow said, Mr. Brand berated another character “and it was sort of shocking and scary — he’s a real actor.”

Mr. Brand said doing stand-up — his “Russell Brand: Scandalous” toured the United States, Britain and Australia last year — informed his work in films in many ways. (It also cranks up financing for Focus 12, an addiction recovery charity he ardently supports.)

“It takes incredible commitment and like most performing arts, an ability to cope with rejection and failure,” he said, leaning back against the silver couch at Villa Pacri. “You are dying in rooms of people booing and throwing stuff at you, particularly if you want to do anything unusual, peculiar, or you want to push boundaries. You have to figure it out or just take it.”

“A lot of it, both in film and in comedy, is knowing what will work,” he added. “You can be funny with your mates, but you have to figure out how can I make that work in front of a room of 50 people or in a theater with thousands of people.”

He said he had learned much working on two films with the Oscar-winning Ms. Mirren. In his book he admits to having a fairly elaborate sexual fantasy involving her and a bathtub, and describes how he said goodbye to her after making “The Tempest.” He was fleeing to the airport and had somehow been left clutching a pair of yellow underpants from his costume. A master of improv and always one to make the wrong move at the right time, he presented the panties to Ms. Mirren with a great deal of ceremony. Mr. Brand said he was certain that she treasured them.

“I know she does now because I’ve since become very close to her while we were making ‘Arthur,’ ” he said. “She speaks of them with great affection, which is a lot more than I can say for the teddy bear I gave her from F. A. O. Schwarz. It cost a bloody fortune, but she hates it. Says it’s something about the slipper look in his eye.”

Sitting here in this den of iniquities in abeyance, he keeps his gaze remarkably clear and direct. Still, there is a photo shoot to attend to, so out come the rock star sunglasses and a glint of mischief about the eyes. After all, he has an image to uphold.