Interviews: Tim Meadows, Scott Adsit, Kevin Dorff at 2013 'Just for Laughs'

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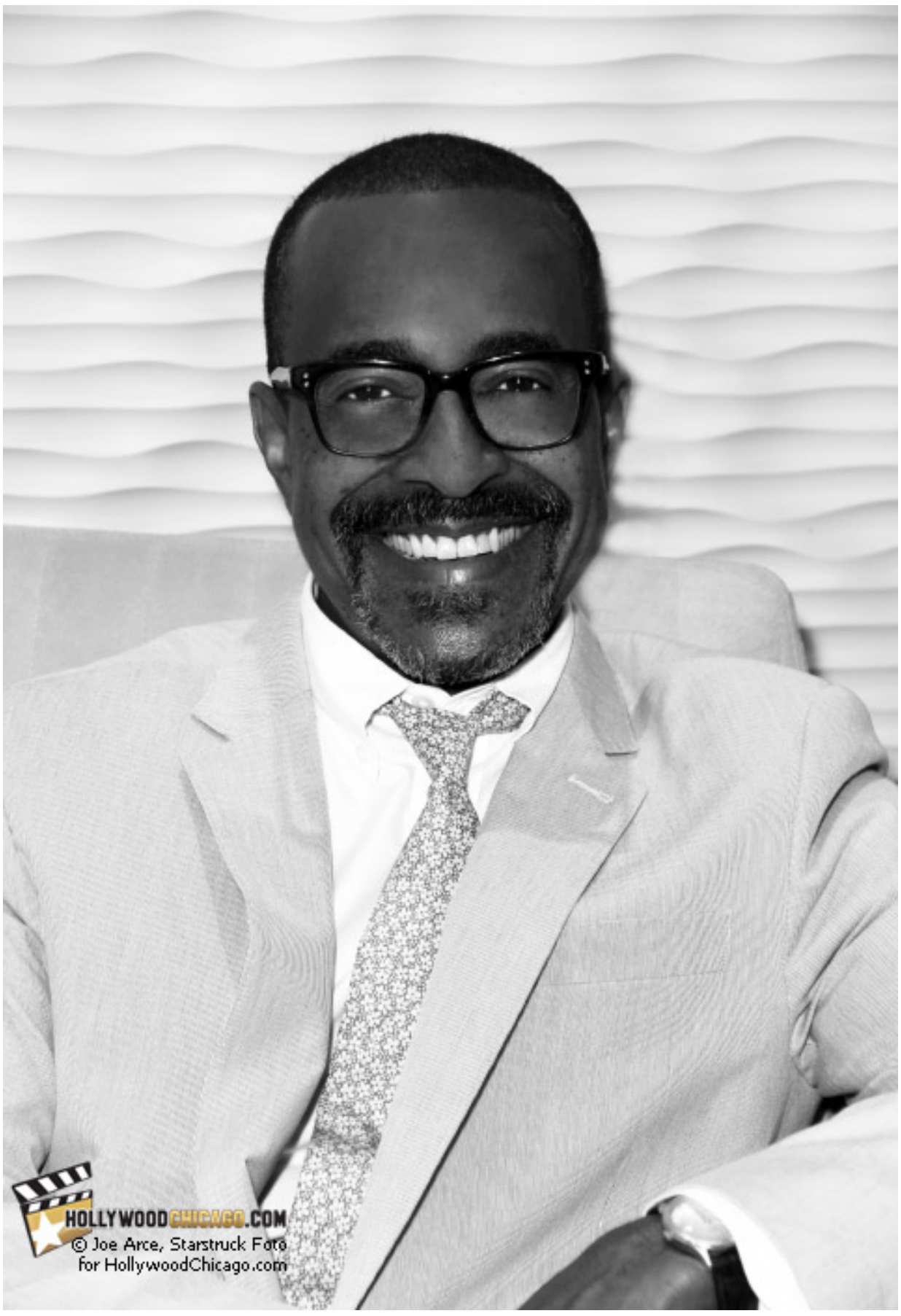
CHICAGO – A round-up of comic stars at the TBS "Just for Laughs Chicago" this year included three notable alumni from The Second City stage. Tim Meadows ("Saturday Night Live"), Scott Adsit ("30 Rock") and Kevin Dorff (writer/performer for "Late Night with Conan O'Brien") all were on The Second City main stage on Wells Street in Chicago during the beginning of their careers.

HollywoodChicago.com got the opportunity to sit down for interviews with all three of these Chicago comedy alumni, and they offered not only some memories, but perspectives on their journey beyond that stage.

Tim Meadows

Tim Meadows will always be associated with his long run on "Saturday Night Live" – the longest in the show's history until Darrell Hammond broke his record in 2005 – but he also is a seasoned improvisation veteran from The Second City (he shared a stage with Chris Farley in the early 1990s) and has starred in television, and movies. He appeared at "Just for Laughs Chicago" with local legend Susan Messing, in her improv show "Messing with a Friend."



Tim Meadows at the 2013 'Just for Laughs Chicago'
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What element of your training at The Second City has served you the best in your career?

Tim Meadows: Probably learning how to work with a group of people, and you get a feel for group dynamics, without necessarily having to be the star. It's just about learning to support other people.

HollywoodChicago.com: In going back to those days, what was the process for you in going from The Second City to the audition for 'Saturday Night Live'?

Chris Farley and Tim Meadows at The Second City
Photo credit: The Second City

Meadows: I didn't audition for 'Saturday Night Live.' They came and saw me perform at Second City in one of the shows. They first came back to hire Chris Farley, and since in a lot of the scenes that we did Farley and I improvised together, the producers came back a year later and asked me if I was interested in being a writer. I think the original idea was that I was going to help Farley write sketches, and help Chris Rock.

So when I got there, it wasn't about auditioning. I met Lorne Michaels and he asked me if I could contribute to the show. I said yes, and he replied, 'okay, nice to meet you.' A week later they called me and said that Lorne loved me, and I got the job.

HollywoodChicago.com: What moment during your nine year run on the show did you stop and think, 'this is the greatest ride of my life'?

Meadows: Watching Tina Turner perform was one for me, because I watched her when I was a kid, and here she was right in front of me, and I got to meet her. That was a surreal moment.

Also memorable was the first time a sketch of mine was performed. I wrote a sketch called 'Cyrano De Bergerac' for Alec Baldwin and Jan Hooks. I played Cyrano, except my nose was really wide instead of long. One the producers came in before the show and told me to come take a look at my set. I walked down to the studio and there it was, an old French villa style with ivy and a couple levels. I thought, 'wow, that was in my head three days ago,' and here it was in reality. Just a great moment.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the process of converting a sketch character – in your case 'The Ladies Man' Leon Phelps – into a full fledged movie? What was your input in it, as far as making it work?

Meadows: It's strange, because it always seemed like a test to me. The first thing the producers asked us – because I worked with Dennis McNicholas and Andrew Steele – did we think we could write a script for the character? And we said yeah, we could do it, so they told us to write it out and bring it to them. We wrote it, and then we were told they liked it. They then said, could we make the movie if they gave us the money? We thought yeah, we could do that. [laughs]

So every step along the way it seemed like a test. Even at the end, there was a cut of the film that the three of us didn't like. We begged them to allow us to do a version, and they let us. We felt better about that.

HollywoodChicago.com: That was the final release of the film?

Meadows: Yes. It was done and we were happy with it. It didn't kill at the box office, but it got decent numbers. It's been 13 years since the film, and I still see it every year on Comedy Central and people ask me about it all the time. In that respect, I'm proud of the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: We were born several months apart. What do you think was the biggest challenge of our generation?

Meadows: Man, I don't know. That's a big question. Not being able to land men on Mars? [laughs]

Scott Adsit

Scott Adsit graced the main stage of The Second City in the mid-1990s, sharing that stage with Tina Fey and Rachel Dratch, among others. He just finished a seven season run on "30 Rock," in which he portrayed the ever-vigilant TV producer Pete Hornberger. He is also known for creating animation shows on Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim," including the memorable "Moral Orel" and "Mary Shelley's Frankenhole."

Scott Adsit at 2013 'Just for Laughs Chicago'
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What distinguishes a Chicago-trained performer from anyone else in the country?

Adsit: I can only speak for myself, having trained at The Second City and Columbia College for improv and acting. I'm ensemble oriented, I'm here because I was taught in a very crunchy, hippie-type way that you are there to serve whoever you're on stage with, and make them look good. If everyone is doing that, then everyone looks good. You relieve yourself of having to be singularly funny, or grandstanding, or taking focus in a selfish way. You don't have to, because other people are giving that gift to you.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is going on in this famous Second City picture, with you and your fellow performers, what sketch is it?

Scott Adsit and Friends at The Second City
Photo credit: The Second City

Scott Adsit: This was in the show proper. It started as an improv scene, and it's me, Tina Fey, Kevin Dorff and Jenna Jolovitz in the picture, and Rachel Dratch was also in the sketch. The scene was that Tina was teaching a kindergarten class, that was established, and Rachel comes in with her nervous son for his first day of school. I am that son, I come in with this posture and face, and Rachel as Mom tells everyone I'm half gargoyle. Because I'm sad and miss my Mommy, I become more aggressive and dangerous. I don't have any dialogue, I'm just a creature. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Why do you think this particular picture is so representative of your time at The Second City?

Adsit: I think mostly because Tina is in it. Tina and I worked together a lot at Second City, we'd do two person scenes that had a lot of legs. We ended up working together, so much so that we actually had to take some scenes out, because there were too many Tina and Scott scenes. This whole cast was very close – Kevin Dorff is here with me today – for me it was a golden age.

HollywoodChicago.com: That was the philosophy on '30 Rock,' wasn't it?

Adsit: Yes, I think so, everyone was there to make everybody else look good. Outside of Chicago, they teach more of a method of 'this is how you get hired for things.' Here, it's about serving the group rather than your future.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you were growing up in the Chicago suburb of Northbrook, which television or movie personality did you watch, as if to say, 'I'd like to do what they're doing'?

Adsit: Dick Van Dyke. I know every episode of that show. There was no reason I would turn it off if it happened to come on. If I'd seen a particular episode multiple times, even if I stopped laughing at it, it didn't matter. It's almost like meditation to me. It's a great show, and he is amazing in it. He seemed like a nice guy, who was also really funny, and was on top of show business without being a jerk.

HollywoodChicago.com: How do you think the TV animation boom – since you're heavily involved in it – has changed comedy in general from 'The Simpsons' to now?

Adsit: I think it has made comedy more impatient. You need now to get to jokes faster, cut quickly to jokes and has fed our short attention spans. There is a little less breathing room for comedy.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you realized '30 Rock' was coming to an end, did you have a particular strategy as a performer as far as mapping out the time after the show?

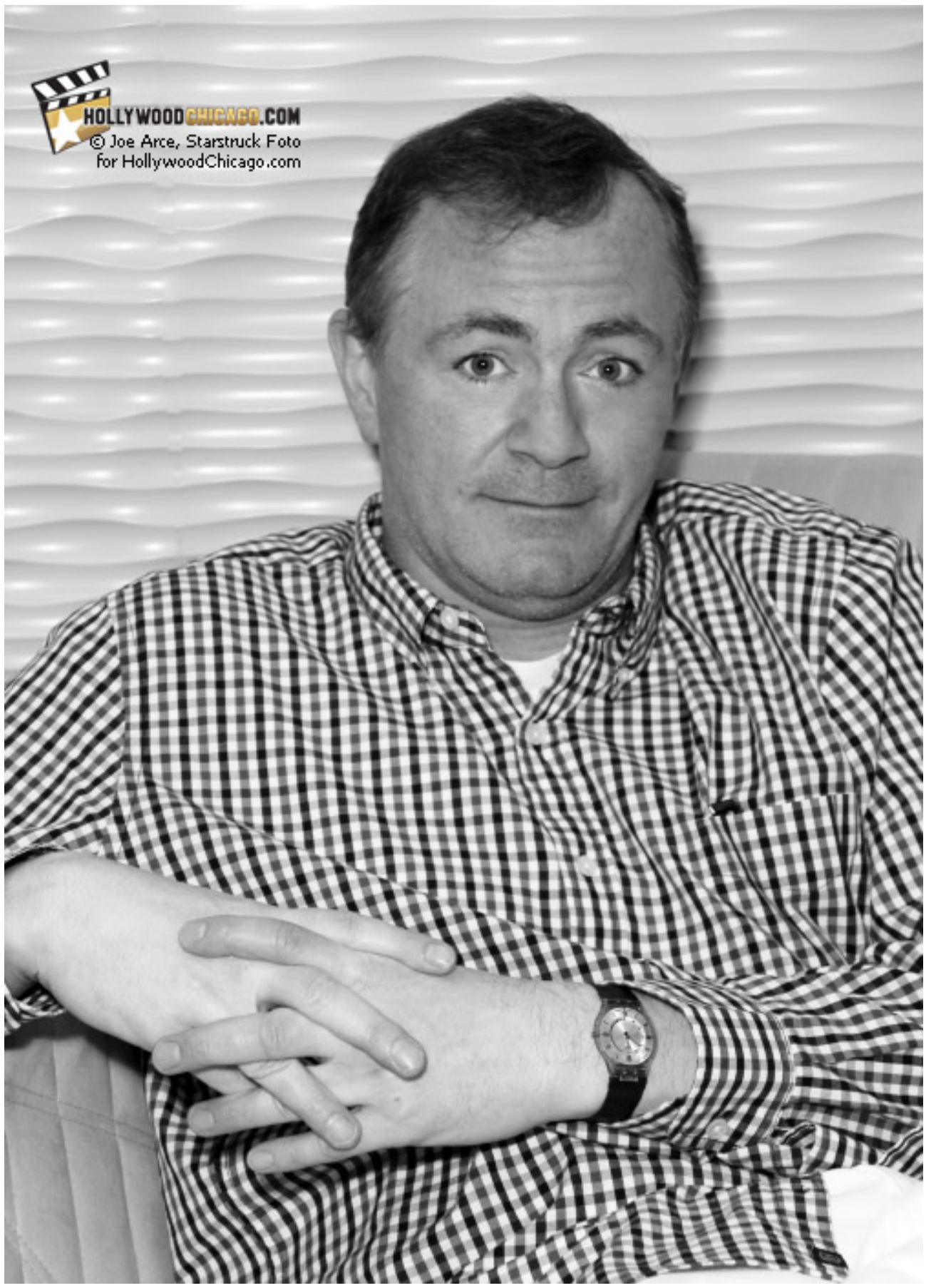
Adsit: I knew I wanted to stay in every aspect of media that I could. I enjoyed films, been involved in television and I love doing stage. I just wanted to keep a lot of irons in various fires. As a result, I'm preparing three different shows in New York City, besides performing improv there. It's two new plays, and a new form of improv that I'm doing with a bunch of Chicago people Off-Broadway. I'm doing more voice work for cartoons, I shot a pilot and a couple movies. Now that I'm unemployed, I have work. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Where do you picture your character Pete Hornberger to be in ten years?

Adsit: Just cycling through hope and regret. [laughs]

Kevin Dorff

As mentioned above, Kevin Dorff was part of the iconic mid-1990s main stage cast at The Second City which included Scott Adsit, Tina Fey and Rachel Dratch. He went on to write and perform on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" and followed Conan to the Los Angeles for 'The Tonight Show,' during that brief and tumultuous run (O'Brien was forced out of "The Tonight Show" because of contract obligations to Jay Leno). After leaving the Conan realm, he has worked on the Cartoon Network "Adult Swim" series "Delocated."



Kevin Dorff at 2013 'Just for Laughs Chicago'
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What is your history in Chicago comedy? For example, what was the journey you had to get to the main stage at The Second City?

Kevin Dorff: When I was performing at the Improv Olympic in the early 1990s, at the time we would get to audition for The Second City touring company about once every six months. In 1992, I got a shot at it, and six months after the first audition I got the nod to join that company. So in the Spring of 1993, I started touring.

HollywoodChicago.com: And you reached the main stage by when?

Dorff: Fall of 1995. It took two years, but I was fortunate to have some of my touring company also go along, like Rachel Dratch and Jon Glaser.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you connect with Conan O'Brien from there?

Dorff: The connection was performing. About the time I was auditioning for The Second City touring company, I was also auditioning for Conan. He was putting together the 'Late Night' show together in the summer of 1993. He came to see me perform at the Improv Olympics, and I met him and Robert Smiegel [O'Brien's then head writer] and watched a Bulls playoff game. We talked, and he ended hiring a couple guys from our show, and I never was too far away from the radar of 'Late Night.' When the exit point for my Second City run was approaching, I reached out to Conan again, and after he read my writing samples, he asked me to work there. I worked with him for nine years, even up to 'The Tonight Show.'

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the worst day for everyone involved, when the controversy of the Jay Leno incident really boiled over?

Dorff: I don't know specifically, but there were 120 people involved and they all felt like this fun thing we were trying to do was under attack,

especially with Conan, who had got us all there. That's what pissed me off the most. So it was the period of that time that was all upsetting, and we didn't understand why it had to happen to such a nice guy, who was also a great writer and performer.

Every day was equally bad during that time, but there was a best day. It was the day that Conan told us he was going to publish a letter in the New York Times, and after that letter he would probably lose the show. He called everyone together, told us the situation, and then said we'd all be taken care of, because he wouldn't do it any other way. That was a great day – because I saw him at his absolute best on a day when he had to walk away from his dream.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your favorite character to perform on the Conan shows?

Dorff: For me, my favorite were the oddest scenes, deepest in the show in Act Three. During the teeth of the Iraq War situation, we did a bit about a 'Sketch that Would Never End,' which for our show was about as political as we ever got. The sketch became a quagmire, and I played a disabled veteran of a previous bad sketch. It was really a stretch, but I loved it because I love that style.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what character of the City of Chicago do you miss most, when you travel to other cities or places around the country?

Dorff: There is a loyalty among Chicagoans that is hard to duplicate anywhere else. I've never encountered a fellow Chicagoan, in any of my travels, who wasn't proud of that loyalty. I've never heard anyone say, for example, 'I've just moved away from Chicago and boy am I glad to get out of that hellhole.' [laughs] There is a loyalty to that city flag, those tubular stripes and four stars, and loyalty to anyone else who is loyal to that flag.

See video, hear podcasts and check out all the fun from the 2013 TBS Network "Just For Laughs Chicago" by clicking here. *[18]*

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