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MOVIES

## 'Hey, Now!' Was Then-- This Is Now

Jeffrey Tambor shed 'Larry Sanders' and weight. Along the way, he landed a film lead and a series.

By SUSAN KING

No, Jeffrey Tambor isn't suffering from the Peter Pan syndrome, but it's important to him to keep his inner child alive and well. In fact, what he admired most about Hank Kingsley, the bombastic sidekick and talk show announcer he played on the acclaimed HBO series "The Larry Sanders Show," was the character's childlike sensibility.

"I understood this character," Tambor said during a recent interview. "People called him a buffoon and a jerk, and I would say, 'I don't think you are quite getting this guy. He was a consummate professional as an announcer and a complete amateur in life. He had a childlike quality that I loved and I am determined never to lose. I will never get so serious about things.'"

Jill Clayburgh, who plays his love interest in the romantic comedy "Never Again," opening Friday, has noticed that Tambor's spirit has lightened over the past few years. "He is a lighter person, an easier person to get to know," she says. "When I first knew him, he was harder to approach. His life is in a wonderful place."

Tambor, 57, seems very much at ease during lunch at a bustling Santa Monica Italian restaurant. In October, he married his longtime girlfriend, Kasia Ostlun, who plays the College Girl in "Never Again." He's excited about the film, which marks the character actor's first leading-man role. And he has a new TV series, "That Was Then," premiering this fall on ABC.

He also looks years younger, having recently lost 60 pounds. With his close-cropped beard and svelte figure, Tambor jokes that people are mistaking him for self-help guru Dr. Phil. During lunch, no one seems to recognize him.

"I come from a Hungarian Russian background," he says while perusing the menu for something low-fat. "Their way of showing love was food and the amount of food. The motto of our family was 'Did you eat? What did you eat? When are you going to eat?' It's that European culture. My lunches in school were enormous--mine were in shopping bags!"

Tambor decided it was time to lose weight after a friend congratulated him on his performance in the 2000 film "Pollock." "He said, 'It is just marvelous. And so risk-taking.' I said, 'What do you mean by that?' He said, 'To wear all that padding.' I said, 'Oh no. I have to cut down.'"

The heftier Tambor is on view in "Never Again," which was filmed in 2000, and written and directed by Eric Schaeffer ("If Lucy Fell"). Tambor plays Christopher, a fiftysomething exterminator-jazz musician who, because of his bad luck with women, begins to think he is gay--that is, until middle-aged divorcee Grace (Clayburgh) comes into his life. Both, though, had decided they would "never again" fall in love. When the two start to become romantically involved, their fears of intimacy and commitment almost put the kibosh on their relationship.

Making the low-budget comedy was a consuming experience for Tambor. "This was a beautifully difficult, hilariously complex shoot where you had 30 setups a day and you were just going all the time," he says. "I remember Eric saying, 'Are you ready for this? Do you really know what you are getting into?' I really didn't. It was tough."

Tambor is happy that in our youth-obsessed culture, "Never Again" dares to show "people of a certain age becoming sexy." Although neither Tambor nor Clayburgh does any nude scenes, there are several lovemaking scenes and frank sexual dialogue between the two.

"We found that old and young really respond to it," he says. "With its humor and its irreverence and drama, it gets to the point of that whole prospect of 'never again.' It is ridiculous. First of all, they are in love and they are afraid. And he's a jerk. Love is right in front of him, and all he has to do is cooperate."

Clayburgh recalls that although there wasn't much improvisation on the set, Tambor would add "flavor" or a line to certain scenes. "He's sort of a comic genius and a wonderful actor. I think he just comes off so vulnerable, and he's so sweet and adorable, which is not how we think of him."

Although he hasn't done any stage work in several years, Tambor does teach two advanced acting classes at the Santa Monica Playhouse. Clayburgh was recently one of his students. "He burrows into people and gets to the nugget," she says. "He's got an incredible nose for what's going on with someone in a scene or what's holding them. He's very instinctive."

Tambor finds himself learning from his students. "I don't know how to talk about it," he says, diving into a salad. "They teach me. I find it very informative in my growth. I love actors. I am quite emboldened by it, and it affects my whole life. It keeps me young."

Born and raised in San Francisco, Tambor fell in love with acting at a young age. He fondly recalls seeing Mary Martin in "South Pacific" and "Annie Get Your Gun" and "Kismet" with Alfred Drake when he was a youngster. "The very first play I saw was 'No Time for Sergeants.' I believe it was with Andy Griffith. I remember hearing the laughter, and I remember saying, 'My God, what is this?'"

Tambor began acting classes at 12. He received his bachelor's in theater arts from San Francisco State and his master's degree from Wayne State University in Detroit.

His first big break came in 1977 when he appeared on Broadway in the hit comedy "Sly Fox" with George C. Scott and Hector Elizondo. Tambor had a small part in the play and understudied Elizondo's part. A year later, he joined Scott and Elizondo for the Los Angeles production.

Scott, he says, had a profound influence on his life. "I think he was one of our greatest actors," Tambor said. "There was something about his dignity and integrity." He recalled Scott's generosity the first night he went on as understudy for Elizondo. "He treated me so beautifully. I remember on that big night, he pulled me out of the line during the curtain call, dragged me over and shushed the audience and said, 'This is his first time. This is his first night.' "

Appearing as Hank on "The Larry Sanders Show," for which he received four Emmy nominations, was a high point in his career. "I understood that character," he said.

For Tambor, Kingsley was an everyman. "We are all Hank Kingsley," he said. "I think that's why for some reason people liked him. It wasn't because they were laughing at him. It was because they said, 'I know the guy.' "

He still gets fans of the show shouting "Hey, now!"--Kingsley's trademark phrase--when they see him on the street. "I even get it when I am in Europe. It was very big in London and in France. I have been on a number of talk shows, and people have come up to me and said we were right on the money. It was a pretty wise show."

Tambor has high hopes for "That Was Then," a TV comedy-drama about a 30-year-old man who magically returns to his high school. Tambor plays his late father, a bookie.

Executive producer Jeff Kline said he and the two other executive producers pursued Tambor for the series not only because they loved him as Hank Kingsley, but also because they were impressed with his dramatic guest turn last season as a nasty loan shark on "The Practice." "Here is a guy who is seemingly naturally funny, but when you need him to be a little scary or very real you can get there," Kline said.

Kline recalled setting up a dinner for Tambor and Bess Armstrong, who plays his wife in the show, and the executive producers before they shot the pilot. "Jeffrey was like, 'I am kind of tired. I don't like to go out and socialize.' We had to drag him to the restaurant. But as soon as we got him there, he's in the kitchen, he's cooking and he's delivering things to people's tables. When you first meet him, he's a little dry and he's kind of taking you in and then boom, as soon as it is appropriate, he turns it on and with just a look, you are laughing on the floor."

Tambor relies on his intuition when it comes to acting. "You do a lot of work. You do your homework, but some of your best thoughts, you don't know where they come from," he said. "With acting the whole thing is get out there and do it. On 'The Larry Sanders Show' you didn't have time to think. You just went with it, and some of the imperfections became perfections."

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