

Behind the scenes of Du Toit's role as Hedwig

 By [Daniel Dercksen](#)

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Daniel Dercksen shares a few thoughts with Paul du Toit, who wowed us as the sexually charged Frank N Furter in 'The Rocky Horror Show' at Ratanga Junction, and now crawls under the skin of Hedwig, one of the most unique and divine iconic characters to ever hit the musical stage in 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch' at Gate 69 in Cape Town.



It's extremely easy to fall in love with Paul du Toit. When you see him in performance on stage, you're hooked. When you meet him in person, you are immediately addicted to his infectious personality, inviting smile and piercing gaze.

His talent knows no bounds, his humility and humbleness obliterates any sense of egotism.

He is a diagnosed adrenaline junkie and when not performing on stage, film or television, he can usually be found in, (on or under!) the water; surfing, diving or paddling a boat and has frequently courted divorce by completing numerous Dusi, Drakensberg and Fish River canoe marathons.

And in between all this madness, he is trying to be a husband and father too!

How does he cope?

"It's more the people around me that have to cope with me. I cope easily," he confesses. "I have adult ADD. I can't sit still for a second. I constantly need

new stimulus in my life. If I don't get exercise I literally go nuts. So I find myself on top of a roof, on a bridge, on a ship, on a skipping rope trying to get energy out of my body. Not a day goes by that I can't do some form of exercise, and my mind also needs similar stimulation."

Paul constantly needs new ideas and wants to try out new things.

"My secret is adult ADD, basically. But I think us ADD babies are drawn to this profession. It makes sense to us. We are working with our bodies. We are constantly looking for new ideas. And, we have to be completely comfortable with the idea of flux. No day is ever the same. No performance is ever the same. I can't reproduce. If you enjoyed last night's performance, don't expect me to do it again, because I can't, and I don't want to. Boring!"

Paul is just an all-round nice guy and when I first saw him in Offbeat Broadway 16-years ago, a mesmerising show he created with Anton Luitingh and Lindy Abromowitz, it was clear that he was going to become one of the greatest (and most versatile performers) in South Africa.

"I suppose it wouldn't be too twee to say that was a show about what we dreamed of for our careers and here I am today living that dream," says Paul. "But then again, in the words of Sondheim: "careful, the wish you make!"

The role of Hedwig

Paul's wishes have thankfully come true and he is now stepping into one of the most challenging roles in his career that of East German transgender singer called Hedwig, formerly known as Hansel, who assumes a female persona after a botched

sex change operation in the rock-musical Hedwig and the Angry Inch.

“Hedwig is very demanding, vocally, physically, and emotionally,” says Paul.

“Hedwig is a human being in its most painful and raw state. It’s the humanity of this character that makes him/her so deeply interesting and so deeply moving. For me, the interesting thing will be exploring the character’s pain, exploring the character’s search for identity, for acceptance, for healing.”

“It is, in a bizarre way, a much more serious role, a lot of the seriousness is sugar-coated by the juxtaposing comedy that lies on the surface, but deep down inside we are dealing with a very scarred and hurt human being, shouting, railing against the heavens to try and get acceptance, all against this beautiful background of punk rock from the 70s, and off course the history of East Germany, and the collapse of Communist Europe, this person finding herself in the America that she had always dreamt of, but the dream very soon turns to a nightmare. It’s a fascinating role to play, with so many complex layers.”

Staying true to oneself

Hedwig is a touching and heart-warming story of a gay man embracing his sexuality and poignantly shows how important it is to be true to yourself.

Hedwig is also an incredible sad journey into the heart and soul of a lonely and conflicted man who wants to be loved for who he is and not for what his image of a woman signifies.

“And, that is where Hedwig’s humanity lies, that’s where everyone can associate with this character. For me, the real substance of it isn’t about the transgenderism - obviously it plays a large role - but the place where it doesn’t matter who you are, where you can identify with this character, is it’s just a human being looking to be loved, and looking to find someone that will love them. The realisation that they come to, that the most important person that a person needs love from, is actually themselves. That’s a beautiful simple universal truth that somehow still rings true all these centuries later after Aristophanes philosophised about it. It’s amazing.”

How does Paul identify with the complexity and challenging sexual confusion of Hedwig?

“I think every single human being understands what it’s like to wonder about their sexual complexity. What makes them up as a sexual human being. I don’t believe in a gay and straight switch. I believe in just a huge big grey scale, from white to black. That as human beings at different times in our lives that we find ourselves at various positions on that scale, it’s just part of the crazy dance of being human. And, our sexuality is just one of the many aspects of who we are as human beings, and we’re constantly grappling with, and trying to make sense of that... We are all constantly trying to figure out who we are and exactly what the part is that we’re playing in this tragic comedy called life. And Hedwig just does it in such a beautiful and fabulous way, that her version is entertaining.”

We are living in a country that celebrates the freedom of sexual expression. Do you think the chastisement of sexual freedom is what catapulted Hedwig on his amazing journey.

“We live in a country sure, where on paper we are very liberal in terms of sexuality and in transgenderism I don’t think that’s necessarily true. Living in Cape Town you can be forgiven that thinking that things are easy, but, as we know, hate crimes are still perpetuated. There still is prejudice in terms of sexuality, in terms of transgenderism, in terms of race, in terms of so many things. The fact that there’s a document saying that it allows a status quo, doesn’t necessarily mean that the general populace will follow it. And I think a work like Hedwig and the Angry Inch will do a lot towards challenging people’s views, for showing people a side to a story they might have never known.”



"It prods uncomfortably at the things audience members aren't expecting from a normal bourgeois night out at the theatre. It truly is a brilliant work!"

We all adore Paul, the man fully invested in the characters he plays, but who is the man behind the diverse personalities?

"Who is Paul?" he sniggers. "Paul is a deeply private person and Paul is also not someone who considers himself to be particularly interesting. Part of what I enjoy about performing is that the me gets left behind in the dressing room, and when I walk out on to the stage, or out in front of a camera, I can be anything. Paul is almost not what my job is about. Paul is almost irrelevant. What I can become, and what of me I can bring to those roles, and how through those roles I can express myself. I find the characters to be a wonderful outlet for who I am, and a way to experience me."

Brilliantly innovative, heartbreaking, and wickedly funny, Hedwig and the Angry Inch - the iconic rock musical - is on at Gate69, Cape Town's newest theatre venue on Bree Street till the 30 November. For bookings and more info call the box office on 0715892915 or visit www.gate69.co.za

For the full interview, visit www.writingstudio.co.za

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za

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