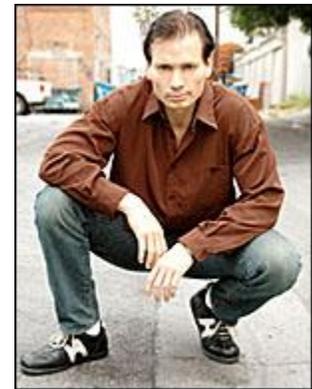


THEATRE

SIMONINI HEATS UP THE PILOT LIGHT THEATRE

Recently wrapping his latest production of Harry Segall's romantic comedy *Heaven Can Wait*, thespian Rico Simonini sits on his stage set overlooking the row of seats once occupied by a full house of theatre goers, friends and family. Exhausted from the three minute rope skipping, thirty or so pushups, and sparing routine he has incorporated into his latest character, Simonini reflects on the past several months and takes us through the process of what it was like to produce, cast, direct and star in the critically acclaimed stage production of *Heaven* on his own turf....the **Pilot Light Theatre**.

Launched in April 2004, Pilot Light is a bold new creative space between West Hollywood and "Theater Row" on Santa Monica Boulevard constructed from as Simonini puts it, " blood, sweat, and yes a few tears" in a time when other theaters in Hollywood have been sent packing due to merciless economics. The space currently features two stages beneath its cantilever hard wood "airplane-hangar" roof both with flexible seating. This includes the raised main stage on which the set of *Heaven* sits and a smaller intimate "black box" with a brick wall backing that adds a gritty urban feel to productions such as *Last Street Play* , *Savage in Limbo*, or the planned adaptation of *Reservoir Dogs* later this summer.



Rico Simonini

Heaven's run was a huge success but not always an easy undertaking when you are juggling a multitude of tasks as Simonini knows all too well. "Wearing the hats of producer, casting, director and performer is quite challenging to say the least. In this self-imposed schizophrenia (Quadrophenia?) you have to not only worry about your choices as an actor, but everyone else's choices, who's making the choices, choice of set, music, costumes and then set it all to the rhythm of the piece!" With the help of his cast and assistants Joanna Sanchez and Sherry Coon, he was up for the challenge and the result mesmerized and entertained audiences for six weeks watching Simonini star as lead actor, Joe Pendleton, surrounded by a cast of actors he hand picked. Simonini's direction extracted stellar performances from each of the actors which included both seasoned veterans of the silver screen, like Johnny "Roastbeef" Williams (*Goodfellas*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *State of Grace*), stage veterans (Traci Crouch, Amos Cowson & Kenn Woodward), as well as novice actors like Anne Touche and Christina DePasquale.

In the case of the latter, for Simonini it was "green money" finding raw talent who were "so present and alive on stage without even saying a word". In the case of Johnny "Roastbeef" there was a different kind of satisfaction for Simonini working with this fellow New Yorker. Although he had always been cast as the "mob guy", Simonini saw Johnny as the ideal comedic foil for Joe Pendleton; the character, Max Levene. "When I seriously thought of bringing *Heaven* to Hollywood I immediately thought of Johnny", says Simonini. He could not think of casting anyone else but the "Italian Jackie Gleason" (a moniker Simonini & others have given the actor) in the same role that earned James Gleason an Oscar for best supporting actor in the 1941 original screen adaptation of *Heaven* titled *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*.

Other credits for NYU graduate Rico Simonini include leading roles in The Petrified Forest, Glengarry Glen Ross, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest , thespian of the year awards 2004 and 2005, an Ovation award from 2000, television guest spots, an upcoming role in the animated feature Firedog (with heavyweights Lauren Bacall and Frank Gorshin as well as Burt Young, Tom Arnold and Tony Danza)

Stepping off his stage before shutting off the lights, Simonini reaches to put away yet another piece of Joe Pendleton's seven costumes. He mentions his upcoming productions for the season, 1000 Clowns which is scheduled to open in July and a return to the 1930's rhythm this fall with His Girl Friday.

In all its darkness the Pilot Light shines on!

Pilot Light Theatre is located at 6902 Santa Monica Blvd. in Hollywood, CA.

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