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Back on Broadway, with no apologies

By Tony Vellela, Special to The Christian Science Monitor / June 14, 2002

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After a dozen films and two stints on Broadway, Jack Noseworthy has finally learned never to say he's sorry.

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That lesson came courtesy of actor John Lithgow, who stars with Mr. Noseworthy in the musical "Sweet Smell of Success." Lithgow has just won a Tony for his role as a Walter Winchell-type gossip columnist.

"It was a big lesson," Noseworthy says in a quiet moment between shows. "You know, when you're in rehearsal, you make tons of mistakes. That's your job. If you're in the moment, experimenting, that's what you should be doing.... To constantly be saying 'I'm sorry' takes you off track. John doesn't apologize."

Like Lithgow, Noseworthy arrived back on Broadway after a stint in Hollywood. It was an unexpected detour. In fact, the young actor recalls his reaction when he was first offered a film role. "I do theater," he says, recalling the incident while stirring a hot cup of herb tea in his dressing room.

In "Sweet Smell," the energetic Noseworthy portrays Dallas, a talented, independent piano player at odds with the sleazy nightclub world of New York in the early '50s. "A lot of who my character is reflects who I'd like to be more like," Noseworthy says. "He believes in the integrity of his work."

The Massachusetts native began his acting career in the touring company of "Cats," which led to his first Broadway job, in the acclaimed "Jerome Robbins' Broadway." The show, a compilation of scenes and numbers directed by the legendary Robbins, allowed Noseworthy "to be Baby John in 'West Side Story,' along with other roles.... Working with that genius [Robbins] was the best creative experience you could imagine. It was magical."

A series of events brought him to Los Angeles, where he won the lead role in the 1994 MTV series, "Dead at 21."

"It was sort of like 'The Fugitive.' It was [MTV's] first scripted series, and ultimately successful," he says. Film projects followed, among them the just-released "Undercover Brother," as well as "U-571," "Breakdown," and "The Brady Bunch Movie."

"It's very alluring," the actor confesses of his time in Hollywood. "Opportunities are presented to you that seem great at the time, but are not the smartest choice."

When he realized, in 1999, that "I had done three movies back to back and that almost two years had gone by without doing any work on the stage, I got this call out of the blue." An old friend from his New York days had been hired to choreograph a revival of "Pippin," at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse. Would he like to play the title role?

"I jumped at it!" he grins. Because he can dance as well as sing, they tailored the role to feature his talents. Under consideration for a role in the workshop production of "Sweet Smell of Success," Noseworthy dragged himself into Manhattan for the the audition after grueling technical rehearsals and the opening night for "Pippin" – and scored a part.

Once the workshop production concluded, "Sweet Smell" was put on hold for a year, while Lithgow finished his TV series "Third Rock from the Sun." They resumed with a run at Chicago's Goodman Theatre before opening on Broadway in March. Despite Lithgow's Tony and six other nominations, the musical is closing tomorrow.