

# Hair Pieces



CARY TENNIS BOOKS, LLC  
San Francisco

## Acting With My Hair

*Brian Herrera*

MY ATTRACTION TO the stage arrived, like so many things in puberty do, with a perverse urgency, a mysterious desire to perform erupting from somewhere deep inside. Although I enjoyed a fairly apt intuition for oral interpretation, boasted a pleasantly versatile vocal quality, and possessed a certain degree of personal charisma, I was never an especially natural performer. Yet, somehow, I wobbled along through a decade or so of intensive involvement with the theatre, a phase roughly coinciding with my school years from about seventh grade through to the years just after college. I performed all kinds of roles in school, community and semi-professional productions, largely because I was a pleasant-voiced boy capable of simultaneously walking and talking as instructed. The gross preponderance of male speaking roles in school plays, especially, permitted me to acquire more than my fair share of good parts throughout my acting "career." But when I reflect on the seventy-plus roles I performed in that concentrated span of eleven or so years, one thing stands out: my hair rarely changed.

See, throughout high school, whether I was playing an accused evolutionist in *Inherit the Wind*, or a dapper country doctor in *The Children's Hour*, or mortality incarnate in *Death Takes a Holiday*, I never changed my hairstyle. Whatever the character, whatever the accent, whatever the outfit, my hair was always the same: a carefully feathered and moderately sized mid-1980s coif.

Every morning, shortly after I stepped from the shower, I would guide the semicircle of spiny bristles on my plastic brush to cleave a straightish part just to the left of center. This swift gesture would carve a precise but unremarkable feather, swooping my many fine dark brown hairs easily past the top of each ear. This mindless daily ritual sculpted a reliably pleasing, no-fuss-no-muss, basically masculine style, not unlike those worn by such swoon-inducers as *Risky Business's* Tom Cruise or *Pretty in Pink's*

Andrew McCarthy. A boy's hairdo, certainly, but with just enough softness to amplify a barely latent femininity. A style suitable for either a sensitive teen boy inclined to good grades, or a mildly severe (and possibly lesbian) librarian. I wore this chocolate brown crown of feathered hairs everywhere I went, even on stage.

That all changed when I met Marc, the older man who introduced me to the pleasures of acting with my hair. We met through a community theatre production of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which I was cast shortly after my sixteenth birthday. Benjamin, the flamboyantly theatrical director of the show, had scoured the city for young performers capable of inhabiting the roles in what he envisioned as an age-congruent production of the bard's romantic tragedy. Benjamin wanted the actor playing Romeo to be eighteen or nineteen, and Juliet to be fourteen or so. (I, at sixteen, had been recruited to play Tybalt, Juliet's murderous cousin.) The production rehearsed for several months, more than twice as long as the rehearsal periods to which I was accustomed. For the principal players, much of that time was dedicated to intensive scene work. My rehearsals, however, were mostly devoted to learning Tybalt's three sword fights and two court dances, the context for the handful of lines my character actually spoke. I spent week upon week at fight rehearsals among a gaggle of young men, most in their teens and very early twenties, playing with swords and practicing fake punches. As community theatre productions go, our *Romeo and Juliet* was uncharacteristically larded with testosterone and I thrilled at the unfamiliar sensation of being one of the guys as we worked through the tightly choreographed, creative athleticism of my variously elaborate fights.

As we neared the final week of rehearsal, however, Benjamin the director remained unsatisfied with my characterization of Tybalt. I too struggled, having landed in a rut early on. The arrival of my costume promised to help. First, my ruby red cotton leggings helped my Tybalt to feel his difference from the Montagues (who all wore deep blues and greens, the color contrast underscoring how vastly they outnumbered me on stage). Plus, the thick tights actually made it easier to perform the complex fight choreography. My Tybalt also wore a burgundy velveteen doublet, adorned with gold brocade and a Florentine puff at each shoulder. A long velvet cuff, extending from each wrist to just below the elbow, laced in a way that allowed my loose, scooped-neck muslin shirt to blouse around my upper arms. This created the flattering illusion of bicep size while also contributing a somewhat startling flounce to the whole ensemble. Combined, the doublet, tunic and tights

enhanced the lines of my teen physique in unexpectedly appealing ways. I looked good, in my velvet and my tights. It was only the final detail—a wool tam, in a deep shade of magenta—that really caused a problem.

The purple wool disc sat lamely atop the stubbornly swooping feathers of my hair. Complicating matters further, my hair was as long as it had ever been. Upon being cast months earlier, the male actors in the cast had been forbidden to get a haircut and, by dress rehearsal, most of the guys looked like Van Halen superfans. I, however, with each passing week, looked ever more like the captain of a women's rugby team. And with that magenta tam—or “my raspberry beret” as I came to call it—perched atop my feathered noggin ... well, the overall effect was a bit discombobulating. Benjamin the director seemed especially dissatisfied. “We'll see if Marc can do anything with,” he sighed, *that hair*.

Marc was the professional hairstylist Benjamin had tapped to design the women's hair for the production. Marc had a chair at My Son The Hairdresser, one of the hippest salons in Albuquerque circa 1985. Marc also, as it turned out, could do pretty much anything with pretty much anyone's hair. So, at Benjamin's request, Marc added my name to the list of actors assigned to his chair for an appointed set of minutes prior to curtain. Not only was I the only male actor so assigned, I was also the only member of the company to be assigned two slots, the very first and the very last before each evening's performance.

The first session began as I took my seat in the chair Marc had assembled in one corner of the chaotic backstage area in the tiny storefront theatre. Marc started by spritzing my hair with water until the feathers so carefully sculpted that morning disintegrated into shiny tendrils clinging to my cheeks and forehead. He then doused me with a quick gloss of gluey hairspray before flicking whatever water was left on his fingers toward the stem of a narrow curling iron. A quick hiss would inevitably confirm the iron's readiness for battle. Using a broad-toothed comb, Marc guided a length of my gummy hair outward to meet the curling iron where, upon contact, the hair and iron converged in an alarming sizzle. Then, with a deft twist of his wrist toward my forehead, Marc wrapped the hair into a crisp horizontal curl. Grabbing another stretch of my slimy hair, he repeated the action as necessary, until the iron had crept across my forehead, over my ears and around the nape of my neck. Once finished, Marc's iron left behind six or seven lengths of crisply curled hair, each hanging like a separate piece of burnished copper pipe, jaggedly framing the boundaries of my face. A final foggy blast of hairspray signaled the

end of this preliminary session as Marc scooted me from his chair to make room for the six-foot lesbian playing Lady Capulet and the comparably intricate procedure of affixing a waist-length fall to her asymmetrically cropped bob.

As I left Marc's chair, wearing only my cotton tights, muslin tunic and crown of jaggedly crisped curls, I went onstage to "mark" the choreography for each of my three sword fights. Both Marc and the actor playing Romeo (with whom I shared the most elaborate, demanding and gratifying fight sequence in the show) were remarkably similar, at least physically. Both men were moderately muscular and fair-haired (although Marc had amplified the yellows hiding in his light-brown locks). A smattering of freckles appeared as intermittent surprises on the skin of both men, and each man's arms and chest were thoroughly tufted with an even coating of dusty brown hair. And with both men, I shared an exhilarating connection, at once physical and emotional. Backstage, I silently thrilled as Marc tested me with stories rife with teasing sexual innuendo. I tried to remain calm as Marc's hand cradled my neck, as his crotch brushed against my elbow or my knee, as he bent this way, revealing the length of his collarbone, or that way, showing the ideal curve of his butt. Onstage, with the enthusiastically heterosexual actor playing Romeo, I reveled in our shared steadiness, a trust built over the previous months as we developed the choreography for our climactic fight. Each night before the house opened, we silently and swordlessly marked each movement of our fight in slow motion. Eyes locked, arms clenched, each familiar gesture confirmed the mutual commitment fortifying our seven-minute fight, a wordless eternity of sustained physical intimacy on stage.

As I marked the choreography, my body's moist heat caused Marc's meticulously crisped coils of curl to collapse. The tight pipes of hair separated into an erratic assemblage of loose ringlets, each landing along the edge of my face with a startlingly natural ease. I had entered the theatre looking like a potential recruit for the Sisters of Sappho Softball League and, in the alchemical space of the intervening hour, I had been transformed into one Botticelli's dream boys.

It was thus finally time for my tam. Where Marc's movements during our first session each evening were abrupt and businesslike—all spray and spritz and sizzle—a tender artistry emerged in our second. Marc first affixed the raspberry beret to the crown of my head, carefully concealing each aluminum clip so the woolen disc appeared to be resting naturally, even as it was imperceptibly protected from sliding or falling during any of my physically

rigorous scenes. Then, his face heart-stoppingly close to my own, Marc attentively applied delicate sprays of gloss to the ringlets curling about the edges of my face. When the apparatus of curls was to his liking, Marc patted me on the tam and sent me again on my way toward the stage.

I soon realized that these backstage rituals were as gratifying as anything I might do onstage. The mix of athletic aggression and princess-like primping also goosed my characterization of the play's pivotally impetuous hothead. At final dress rehearsal, just as the ritual of marking the fight choreography found its blend with the routine happening in Marc's chair, my Tybalt leapt to the stage with a palpable clarity. My Tybalt manifested as a strutting bully, a prissy prick who cared greatly about how he looked and how quickly he got his way. No one was more pleased than Benjamin the director who delighted as he wagged his finger at me and proclaimed, "That, my dear boy, is why you needed the tam!"

The distinct modes of masculinity mixed by my pre-show rituals—marking the fight and sitting in Marc's chair—stirred something pungent and profound within me. The combination both introduced me to the deeply personal pleasures of preparing a role and also initiated me into the peculiar mix of thrills that comprise gay masculinity. I carried the excitement of these discoveries each night, as I might a tumescent secret, invisible but for the marvelous transformation undergone by my hair before each night's show.

I have long joked that it was during *Romeo and Juliet* that my hair learned how to act, but the truth now feels somewhat deeper. In retrospect, I wonder whether Benjamin the director used the tam to elicit the kind of Tybalt he wanted or whether that raspberry beret was Benjamin's way of luring me toward the Tybalt he saw in me. Whatever his motives, the preshow rituals that found their way to me as I prepared to play Tybalt in that community theatre production radicalized my approach to acting a part. In the eight future years I would perform on stage, I would never again receive the star treatment I got sitting in Marc's chair. Nor would I ever tackle a role as physically demanding (and gratifying) as Tybalt. Yet after that show, each new role promised the encounter with a new part in myself. And a knowing observer might have discerned the depth of my discovery in each role by simply looking at how much I was acting with my hair.

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