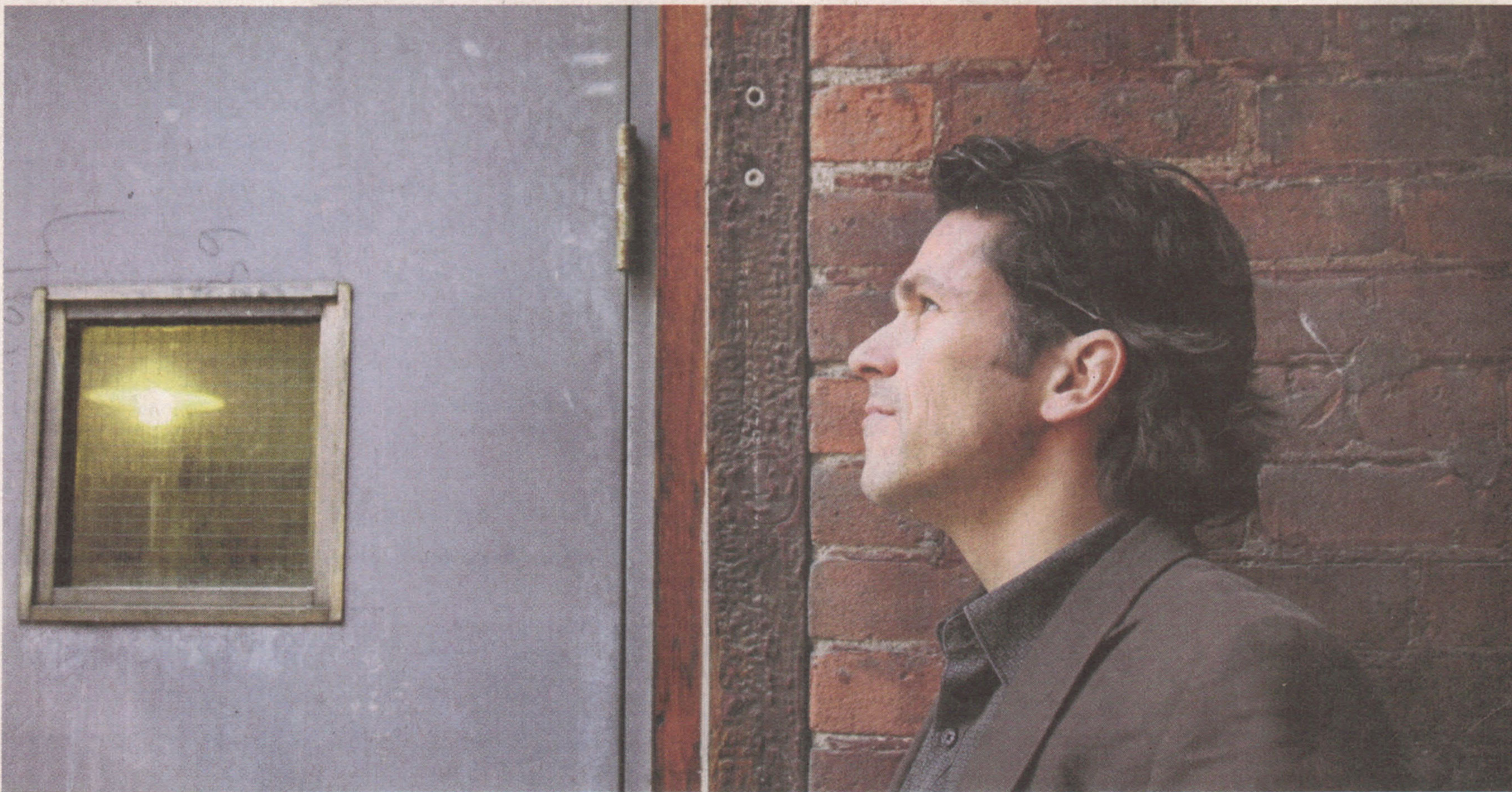


Globe Review

THEATRE » INTERVIEW » RICK MILLER



It's hard to determine what is true. There is always a spin, always an angle.

Comedian/actor Rick Miller

Can the guy who hosts TV's *Just for Laughs* convince us there's nothing in this world that isn't for sale? Rick Miller gives it a shot in his new one-man show, which asks pointed moral questions. At its heart, it's a comedy. Really. **Kate Taylor** reports

Giving us the Hardsell

When Canadian comedian Rick Miller was offered a spot hosting ABC's version of the candid-camera show *Just for Laughs* he thought about it for a grand total of 10 minutes before accepting. It was a nice gig, great exposure and good money for easy work. On the other hand, the American network is owned by the Walt Disney Company; and Miller dislikes Disney programming and doesn't let his two young daughters watch commercial

TV. So, what do you call that? Hypocrisy – or just real life?

And there is the dilemma at the centre of *Hardsell*, Miller's new one-man show created with director Daniel Brooks and opening at Canadian Stage in Toronto tomorrow.

"We pay taxes that pay for a war that we may not support. We are complicit. We drink Coke but we ignore what these corporations do ... Coke tastes good. We choose to ignore things because it is so tiring to think about them," Miller, 39,

said in a recent interview before heading into rehearsals.

The director and the performer had worked together previously creating Miller's 2003 hit show about Christianity, *Bigger Than Jesus*, and Miller said their starting point this time was Brooks's concern about how inescapable commercialization has become whether you're a parent picking suitable viewing or a theatre director accepting corporate sponsorship.

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Rick Miller's new one-man show, *Hardsell*, opens Thursday in Toronto. FERNANDO MORALES/
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Miller is a master of contradiction

» Brooks, the son of a Toronto ad man, and Miller, the son of a Montreal office-furniture salesman, figured that these days everything is a sell.

"We are so enmeshed in this culture of the sell that is partly based on lying, it's hard to determine what is true. There is always a spin, always an angle," Miller said, pointing to the current economic crisis as proof that people in positions of power lie.

But this is not an I-told-you-so show, nor a moral judgment on its audience. No, it's a comedy, with fart jokes no less.

To create it, Miller has fashioned an alter-ego for himself, one Arnie, an older and more cynical version of the comic, a stand-up who has spent his life on the road making people laugh as he ridicules anything and everything. This devil twin is contemptuous of "Rick Miller," that well-meaning family man who drives a Toyota Prius and gives money to the Stephen Lewis Foundation to help fight AIDS in Africa. Still, the all-knowing Arnie has nothing to show for his cynicism.

"His realization is that cynicism has a cost," Miller said.

And it's hardly a pure position itself because Arnie is a salesman too, just like Miller and Brooks and every other showman. "Every lighting cue, every word is a sell."

Straddling these contradic-



tions and self-contradictions might seem like a stretch, but Miller has always been a jack of all trades who can reach high or low or in both directions at once. He is the intellectual who studied architecture at McGill because it is, in the words of Frank Lloyd Wright, the mother art, and he is the guy who can do a great Bugs Bunny imitation.

He is the comic who is hosting a candid-camera show that generates laughs by tricking people, and the man whose wife works for Roots of Empathy, a charity that reduces aggression in children by teaching social skills. He is the comic impersonator who has toured internationally with *MacHomer*, his one-man version of Macbeth performed by

the voices of *The Simpsons*, and the trilingual actor who has collaborated with both Brooks and Robert Lepage, two of the most cerebral theatre directors in the country. He is the performer whose spring season includes touring *MacHomer* to Alberta and speaking no less than five languages in *Lipsynch*, Lepage's nine-hour show about the hu-

I'm a bit of a hack at many things, architecture and languages, and I have my cartoon voices.

Rick Miller as the all-knowing cynic Arnie, his alter ego in the one-man show. 'His realization is that cynicism has a cost,' says Miller. BRUCE MONK

man voice that makes its North American premiere in Toronto in June.

"I'm a bit of a hack at many things, architecture and languages, and I have my cartoon voices I do," said Miller, who is trilingual thanks to growing up in francophone Quebec with an Irish mother and Austrian father.

He met Brooks in 1999 on

the set of Lepage's film adaptation of the John Mighton play *Possible Worlds*, which Brooks had directed in Toronto, and the two hit it off, agreeing to collaborate on Miller's idea of a comedy about Jesus that would draw on the Catholic liturgy he had stored in his memory since childhood. Now, they turn, at least indirectly, to Brooks's Jewish roots with their tradition of moral questioning. How do you live a just life? By making theatre?

"Daniel was very interested in this idea, why are we doing this. Why aren't we working for Stephen Lewis?" he said, explaining that in *Hardsell*, the hour on the stage becomes a metaphor for action, for what we do with our lives, whether admirable or not. "Why am I ridiculing people on stage? The game is that this character asks us these questions."

His hope is that the audience will not feel judged by Arnie's uncomfortable questions but rather changed by them, emerging from the theatre in a different psychic spot than they entered. After all, every one of us lives on the same shifting moral sands that provide our contemporary world with its unstable foundation.

"You can't go live in a field somewhere," concludes Miller, the master of the contradiction.

» *Hardsell* opens tomorrow in Toronto at the Berkeley Street Theatre.