

Shopping With...Lee Tergesen

By Lauren David Peden

December 16, 2004 - New York

Stalking around the rustic Georgia stage set at the Roundabout's Laura Pels Theatre in the comedic play "The Foreigner" wearing torn jeans, a sleeveless plaid button-down, well-worn engineer boots, AC/DC belt buckle and multiple (faux) tattoos on his well-toned biceps, actor Lee Tergesen is the personification of Redneck (read: racist) menace.

Straight-backed and self-righteous, Tergesen's character, Owen Musser, spends much of his time plotting a Klan takeover of the fishing lodge owned by aptly-named widow Betty Meeks (played by legendary actress Frances Sternhagen) and populated by a motley assortment of guests, including British tourist Charlie Baker (Matthew Broderick).

In person, Tergesen is neither straight-backed nor self-righteous, and his engagingly goofy sense of humor is one you laugh *with*, not *at* (unlike his humorless character, who is the target of many well-timed jokes).

"He's an idiot. He's a fool," Tergesen opined when we caught up with him at Tekserve, his favorite Manhattan store (119 W. 23rd Street; 212-463-9280; www.tekserve.com). "The guy has to think he's smart but at the same time be a little paranoid, and there are times when it's a little uncomfortable. But it's fun to do, and at the end when I totally get foiled, it's great to go down in flames."

While we waited for FWD's photographer to arrive, Tergesen talked about the joys of performing in a straight-ahead comedy, something he hasn't done much of since his "Wayne's World" days. (His headbanging "WW" cameraman, Terry, is the guy we have to thank for adding the classic line, "I love you, man!" to America's cultural lexicon.) Since then, the actor has dallied in far more serious fare, from the long-running HBO series "Oz" (he played conflicted — and convicted — lawyer, Tobias Beecher) to "Monster" (playing Vincent Corey, the homicidal rapist who jump-started Aileen Wuornos' killing spree) to "The Forgotten" (where he got sucked into the ozone for telling Julianne Moore what was really going on). "It's so much fun to be doing something this light," Tergesen told FWD. "I haven't been in anything this much fun since high school! I'm having a blast. And to feel the laughter [from the audience] is really powerful."

When they can *hear* the lines to laugh at them, that is. "The Roundabout has this subscription thing, meaning the audience is generally older," he explained. "I have friends who came the other night, and they said the whole time the people behind them were discussing what was happening, but they were wrong throughout the whole play. That's a little unsettling."

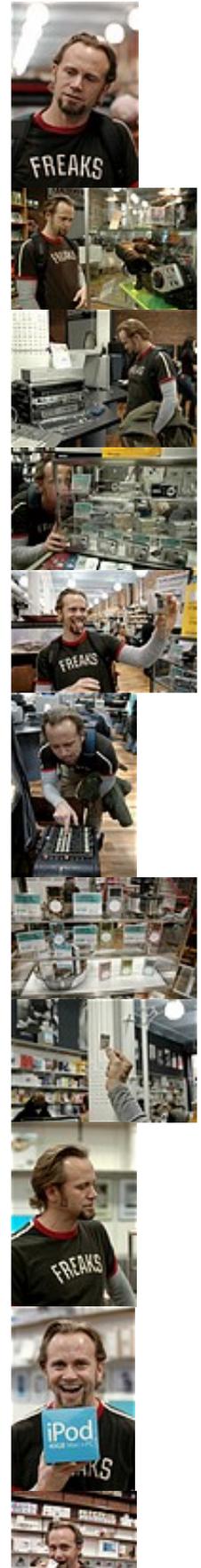
Just then, Tekserve owner Dick Demenus swung by to say hello, eager to show off the prototype of a foil-wrapped chocolate iPod that would be given away during the store's tongue-in-cheek "buy one, get one free" holiday special.

"I'm good at this," Tergesen exclaimed, holding the iPod next to his face and mugging for a nonexistent camera. After Demenus departed with the edible iPod (which he refused to let us hold on to for fear we'd melt — or nibble — the prototype), Tergesen launched into a series of puerile penis jokes. "Thanks, Dick. Very nice, Dick. That's perfect Dick," the Natural Born Wiseass said with a grin. "I had to fit that in, it was the perfect opportunity." Truer words were never spoken.

The photographer, Grant Lamos IV, arrived and introductions were made. "It's very clear that your time is more important than mine, Late Guy," deadpanned Tergesen. "It's understandable that you'd be late the first time coming into Manhattan from Brooklyn...." Lamos looked chagrined. "I'm *kidding*," said Tergesen as he broke into a big smile. "I'm one of those psychotic on-time guys — one minute late and I'm through the roof!"

"Why do I have a feeling now all the shots are going to be a little blurry," he added with a laugh as we gathered our belongings and got up to browse. "I think this is a good look for me," he said, sticking out his tongue and scrunching his boyish face into a Calvin and Hobbes grimace.

So why did Tergesen, who is the market for a new iPod (real, not confectionary) choose Tekserve rather than the Soho Apple Store for his "Shopping With" excursion? "Well, the Apple Store is way downtown and this is right near my house," said the Chelsea resident. "This is the place I come



and I do a lot of business here. It's convenient."

Convenient and helpful. To wit: Tekserve recently saved the actor's vacation photos after a digital camera snafu, for which he is eternally grateful. "I went to Rome and Tuscany for a couple of weeks and stayed in a villa with Tom [Fontana, creator of "Homicide" and "Oz"], Dean [Winters, an "Oz" cast mate] and some other friends," he said. "It was really nice; we did a bunch of little day trips. When I came back I did something to the scan disc thing for my camera so I couldn't get the pictures off it. I brought it here and they got my pictures for me."



Today, the self-proclaimed music junkie is looking to upgrade his iPod from a 10 gig to a 40 gig, which is how we've come to find ourselves at the bustling, loft-like emporium that bills itself as "The Old Reliable Mac Shop" on this Friday afternoon.

"I made this huge mistake; it was a rookie move," Tergesen told us while perusing an Epson all-in-one CX5400 printer/scanner/copier. "I went in without any forethought and bought the 10 gig, which only holds 2,500 songs, and almost immediately filled it up. For another \$100 I could have gotten a 20 gig that came with a dock and a case, all things I had to buy. It was so stupid. I look back and am like, 'What was I thinking?' I was crazy: 'I'VE GOT TO GET AN IPOD — GIVE ME THAT ONE! GIVE ME THAT ONE!' I have 600 or 700 CDs, and I haven't put anywhere near all my music on it. The other day I realized there are all these CDs I'm just not listening to."

Oy. Tragedy, thy name is Tergesen. "It's been a year," he agreed with an exaggerated sigh. "I don't know how I did it. I don't know how I'm living." Nor do we. Thankfully, FWD had swooped in (with \$100 cash) to help Tergesen right this egregious technological wrong and to allow him to play Uncle of the Year come Christmas. "My [old iPod] is going to my niece," he said. "She's 13. She'll be happy with 2,500 songs."

Before we grabbed a number and headed to the counter to pick up his new-and-improved iPod, Tergesen and Lamos ogled a Canon XL2 digital camcorder (the model reportedly used by director Spike Lee) and the actor stopped to admire a mini-printer that sat under a protective glass dome, looking like something from Woody Allen's "Sleeper."

"My friend Ivan Fonseca travels with a printer [like this] because he's got a baby, so he prints out pictures as he takes them. He brought it to Tuscany. I'm like, are you ever going to *live* with the kid? Just be with the kid, dude." The toddler's name, Tergesen informed us, is Axel Fonseca. "It's got a nice ring to it," he mused. "Ivan said [with a name like that] he could be a brain surgeon or an interior decorator."

While waiting on line, we discussed Tergesen's current musical leanings (Linkin Park, N.E.R.D., Red Hot Chili Peppers, old-school KISS), Tom Fontana's book project (the Jesuit student-turned-TV producer is writing an expose on bad popes) and asked the actor to give us a run-down on what he was wearing. "Shell-toed Adidas, a Lucky shirt that my friend Ivan had that I coveted [which, fittingly, spelled out the word "FREAKS"] and a pair of pants I stole from this show I did for PBS called 'Thief of Time,'" he recited.

So he's a Thief of Pants??! "Well, I didn't *steal* them," he corrected. "I asked for them and they said I could have them." Whew! (Note to Tekserve security: Tergesen did not swipe anything during our visit. We swear. Cross our hearts and hope to...arrghhhhh...sputter sputter.)

At the counter, the diehard metalhead broke into song at the sight of the salesgirl's Iron Maiden t-shirt ("Two minutes to midnight, to kill the unborn in the womb"), and charged the \$433.41 iPod to his credit card. "I'll take this at 19 percent interest!" he crowed, pocketing FWD's \$100 cash allowance.

While we waited for Demenus to reappear with the faux iPod, another round of Dick jokes ensued (hey, it was funny at the time!), and the newly-single Tergesen riffed on the store owner's enthusiasm for his non-mechanical sweet treat. "He's showing that chocolate around like he's going to get laid from it," he laughed. "You ain't going to get laid from no chocolate wrapped like an iPod, dude. That's *not* the way it works."

After Tergesen posed with the candy replica, we strolled West on 23rd Street. So what will the chameleon-like thespian be doing once "The Foreigner" ends its run in mid-January?

"I'm going to go out to LA to get into the warm weather and look for work," he replied. With a song in his heart and 10,000 songs in his pocket, thankyouverymuch.