

Big on Bluto

Elliott Lefko

He stands six-foot-four and holds a black belt in judo. He weighed 17 (?) pounds when he was born on a June 24 to a family of Russian extraction that included a seven-foot grandfather who weighed 450 pounds. He's Paul Smith, the biggest man this reporter has ever beamed at.

Smith was in Toronto recently to plug his role as Bluto in Robert Altman's screen version of *Popeye*. When Smith walked into the hotel suite however, he looked more like a grizzly than Bluto or Hamidou, the sadistic Turkish guard from *Midnight Express*. So the obvious first question to Paul was: just how much did you weigh in *Popeye*?

"Well, Bob Altman didn't tell me what to do as far as size or beard. I was glad to go from the military look in *Midnight Express*, which was very large, but very military, to a heavier, sort of ponderous block. And 50 or 60 pounds would do it. Whether it was 50, 60, or 70 I really don't know because the scales only go up to 350. So I was anywhere from 375 to 400 pounds. But that's one of the sacrifices one makes."

Okay, Paul, but for the benefit of my television-addicted friends, what was it like working with Robin Williams...uh, Mork...uh, Popeye?

Mork

"Well," says the beeg mon, "it was Robin's first feature, and there was the question in his mind of whether he'd be able to make the crossover between television and feature; very rarely can an actor make the crossover from the little box to the big screen. Robin absolutely can."

Sounds great. Now tell us how you prepared to play Bluto, a character that had been firmly entrenched in the minds of two generations of comic readers, a veritable institution?

"I made a choice. I decided that Bluto had to be a likeable villain. Likeable villains are hard to do, villain villains are easier."



"My first decision was that he was not so stupid. I played with the idea that he was a grown up boy who grew fat but didn't mature. And he believed that he had to be bad because he was in charge of the town. But he really wasn't, he sucked his thumb, and he loved Swee'pea."



Paul Smith as Popeye-masher and in a lighter mood as sadistic Turkish guard.

Speaking of Swee'pea, how did you feel playing second banana to the little guy?

"Can you imagine what Swee'pea is feeling right now? This is a baby that came on the movie set at nine months old, stayed till he was 15 months old, and the first word he ever said was 'Popeye'. But he was absolutely charming. He picked up on vibes. It was Robert Altman's grandson, so it's in the family."

One more question about films, Paul. You were in *Midnight Express*, a film which raised quite a

Midnight Express

furor for purportedly depicting Turks as pigs. What is your answer to the critics of that film?

"I ask them if they ever read *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which is the story of the attempted genocide of all the Americans by the Turks."

"*Midnight Express* changed a lot of things in this world. It got six people out of jail, and might very well have saved a thousand kids from going to jail who thought better about bringing drugs from one country into the next."

Movies aren't your whole life, though. You'll put your heart and 300-odd pounds where your mouth is when it comes to a situation that is bothering you. Tell us why you left your home in America in 1966.

"My situation at home was not pleasing me. There were the Pandora's Box riots, kids were being hit over the head with clubs

in Chicago...and at the time the problems were starting in Israel. I had been to Cuba and back fighting with Castro against Batista, and then went to Israel to fight in the 6-Day-War."

Do you feel you're still known as someone who fought with Castro?

"I'm absolutely sure that most people I was with there are dead. It's all very strange, and very sad. We really didn't gain anything; it was one group of heavies going down and another going up."

Why did you fight in Cuba?
"I was one who was committed from a very young age to always be the one to protect the little guy. I had a special commitment; I don't think we commit ourselves enough in this world, we don't take enough stands. And I take the stands that I believe in without hesitation."

Paul, I've really enjoyed talking to you, but tell me straight. Why do you act?

Like a diamond

"Acting is a thing which brings me to life; my lights go on when I'm doing it. I don't know what I can't do, maybe I can do it all...I don't know."

"I think the real answer came when I started acting and I said to Lee J. Cobb, 'Lee, lots of parts that are offered to me are as stage actors. What do I do?' And he said, 'Paul, an actor is like a diamond. Every part you do polishes another facet of the diamond, makes you that much better an actor, and that much finer a human being.' I want to see how many facets I have."

New wave dance Flying lamb

Ann Daly

"I love movement. My childhood nickname was The Maggot," recalls Rael Lamb, guest choreographer with Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal, "because I never kept still."

"I tried football. People were just out there cussin' me out. I tried graphic design at General Motors. They didn't like my dancing down the aisles or my not wearing ties. I tried business school. That was boring."

So Lamb pursued dance seriously and now is making his mark internationally. Besides his four-year tenure with Les Ballets Jazz, he is resident choreographer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and the San Francisco Opera.

He is also the artistic director of the Dance for the New World, a group which has been performing sporadically since 1973.

Lamb was born in Detroit. "But," he quickly adds, "I am from New York, San Francisco, Montreal and Boston." When was he born? "That's one thing I won't tell." Interviewing by telephone is a disadvantage here, but there's no doubt about it, he's young. In spirit and mind.

He was trained in classical ballet with the School of the American Ballet as well as the Joffrey and Harkness ballet companies. He turned to choreography early. "Out of frustration," Lamb says.

"At the North Carolina School of Arts, I was black, without the proper feet or the classical look for ballet, so I was sidetracked into modern dance. Then I took the rest of the misfits of the department and started choreographing community performances for us."

His current contribution to Les Ballets Jazz's repertoire, "Five New Waves", will premiere the 14th to the 17th at Ryerson Theatre. Last year the company used his "La Perfectly Swell", what he calls his version of the Ed Sullivan Show.

"Five New Waves" is fabulous," according to Lamb. "It's a stream of consciousness. I designed it as a three-dimensional motion picture. It's done like a vaudeville show, with the music and action interwoven. I used music by The Talking Heads, Bob James, The Stones, The Beatles and others."

"I used familiar music to get the

audience's brains working, to discover how the music related to what they were doing when it was popular. In my pieces, you can identify with the action like the oldtime hero."

One of the sections in "Five New Waves", "Boy Trying to Fly", was choreographed for, on and about Les Ballets dancer Kim Borin. Lamb categorizes Les Ballets Jazz with the Alvin Ailey company, calling them "the two most innovative companies on the planet." Both companies use today's music, and both receive the same overwhelmingly positive audience response. Lamb said he originally was attracted to Les Ballets Jazz because of its artistic director's determination to be an innovator.

Lamb himself is determined to become an innovator. He is nearly finished with working with ballet companies, he said. Now his energies are directed towards making inroads into the media. He is negotiating several deals for TV spots.

"I no longer want to do the college circuit. I am more ambitious. I want to do TV," he says. Lamb wants to use TV as an educational tool to bring dance to the mass public. *Saturday Night Fever* was popular," he explains, "and so was Fred Astaire, but *Swan Lake* just doesn't make it in the mass media."

Lamb explains that he wants to "put positive images back into the media." In "Boy Trying to Fly" the traditional story of Icarus is revamped. Whereas in the original story Icarus flies too close to the sun and falls to the ground, in "Five New Waves" Icarus achieves his ambition to reach heaven. He encounters beautiful, happy people. "This," says Lamb, "is what people should aspire to in their lives: peace and tranquility."

He maintains an almost guru-like philosophy involving "positive self-love" and a gestalt view of life. "When I was in school, no one said what was in the real world. No philosophy, religion, political science. I was not prepared. When I teach class, I incorporate philosophy into it. Everything is relevant, even the stock market."

"When I accept the Tony, the Oscar, the Globe, it will be because of truth, beauty, love and understanding."

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