

# Palisadian Martin Rayner's Triumphant Return to 'Freud'

By MATTHEW MEYER  
Reporter

Eight hundred performances and a near-death experience later, Martin Rayner still finds his role as Dr. Sigmund Freud as stimulating as ever.

The veteran Palisadian actor is once again bringing the titular character to life in productions of Mark St. Germain's off-Broadway hit, "Freud's Last Session" at the Odyssey Theatre through March.

Rayner was part of the original cast that launched the wordy, witty play to tremendous success in 2009.

After opening at the Barington Stage Company in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, "Freud" enjoyed a two-year, 775-performance run off-Broadway in New York that earned plaudits from critics and led to the play's replication in theaters across the country.

The wild popularity seems a bit improbable when you consider the tale's heady nature.

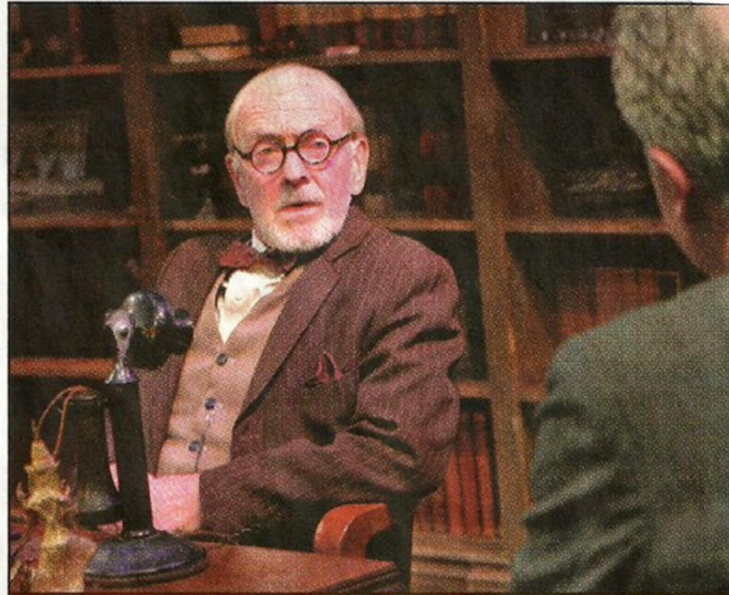
Inspired by the book "The Question of God" by Dr. Armand M. Nicholi, Jr., the play focuses exclusively on an imagined meeting between Freud and academic Christian author C.S. Lewis.

The two engage in a good-natured, intellectual sparring match over the subjects of love, sex and God. It's set in London on Sept. 3, 1939—the day that England entered World War II, and just two weeks before Freud took his own life.

So, not exactly "Hairspray."

Rayner actually turned down the role when he was cast for a three- or four-week run in the original production. "Too much talking to be successful," he told the *Palisadian-Post*.

And, he added with a chuckle, perhaps "too much vanity to



Rayner reprises a familiar role.

Photo courtesy of Enci Box

think I might look like Freud."

But he was ultimately persuaded to join, and quickly swept away by both the overwhelmingly positive reception and the role's depth.

"There was a tremendous reaction that we didn't expect," Rayner said. "They found it funny, and they were gripped."

The actor credited the witicism and careful structure—well-timed phone calls and radio announcements, the play's setting—of St. Germain's script for keeping audience members engrossed in what's ostensibly a discourse between two academics.

And as a performer, he said the play is a "smorgasbord of possibility."

"For an actor, this play is like going to the gym. There's so much in it to work on. There are so many levels—there's the level of the actual intellectual argument, there's the level of their age difference, there's the level of their personalities," he explained. "It's an amazing thing to cut your teeth on."

Across all of the original

run's performances, Rayner said, "We never got stale."

Changes as subtle as the inflection on a single line could give one actor's sparring partner a whole host of new reactions to explore. No two performances were ever quite the same.

Rayner's eagerness to return to the role with the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble is perhaps his greatest testament to the constant "freshness" of the play.

Especially considering it's how he's chosen to spend a new lease on life.

Rayner, who has also waged a battle with prostate cancer, nearly died last March after he was struck by a dull aching in the heart while digging a trench at his beloved Marin County cottage. He soon collapsed, and it took an airlift to Stanford and a complicated heart surgery by a renowned doctor to save Rayner.

He's bounced back remarkably, and the experience has encouraged him to focus on the things that truly matter to him.

That includes his craft as an actor and his role as Freud, this

time with a new "Lewis" (portrayed by Martyn Stanbridge, a fellow Brit) and a new director—award-winning film and television veteran Robert Mandel.

Rayner's new colleagues have revealed even more unexplored dimensions of his familiar role.

"They had whole new things. New chemistry, new ideas," Rayner told the *Post*.

And Rayner loves the play's new home, at the volunteer-run Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, which he calls a "remarkable place."

His own home is a rented unit off Porto Marina Way in Pacific Palisades, where he's stayed every time he's living in Los Angeles for more than a decade. It's a peculiar arrangement that started when Rayner went jogging along the beachfront near Gladstones, peering up at the Palisades and deciding, "I want to live up there."

He made fliers asking to rent an extra room or guest house and left them in mailboxes up and down nearby streets. He landed perfect accommodations; a cozy spot with views of PCH, right by the beach.

"Sometimes you just have to ask," he told the *Post*.

More Freud, please.

"Freud's Last Session" appears at the Odyssey Theatre, located at 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Jan. 13-March 4. For tickets and more information, visit [odysseytheatre.com](http://odysseytheatre.com).



Photo courtesy of Ron Sossi