

GARY

From page 1

motivated him to take an early retirement and move to a monastery in Kentucky, where he took a vow of silence.

But after almost a year, the man who'd interpreted others' words on stage realized he could never live a life of silence, and returned to acting, which he now views as an activity drenched in sacredness. From Sept. 25 to Nov. 15, he'll be starring in "Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" at the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre.

"It's been interesting for me," Kimble says. "It's been quite a journey."

Early in his career, he performed in "Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" in the first national tour, some 28 or 29 years ago, he estimates.

"In my youth, I was an Aggie, a dancing cowboy," he says. "I was dancing in my jockstrap."

His parents, he says, drove all the way from Ohio to New York City to see a dress rehearsal before the show went on the road. His father wouldn't talk to him for hours afterwards, Kimble recalls. Finally, he asked his father what was wrong.

"He said, 'I can't believe I drove 14 hours to look at your butt! What are you, a stripper? I can't believe you did that,'" Kimble says. "He was terribly upset about it."

Kimble graduated to playing Sheriff Ed Earl Dodd, a man in love with the madam of the Texas whorehouse.

"The national tour was a remarkable production," Kimble says. "We performed in 69 cities in the U.S. including Hollywood at the Kodak Theatre. We opened 10 days after the Oscars in 2005. I had Chris Rock's dressing room! My face was on billboards down Hollywood Boulevard. It was such a thrill to me."

"Now they pay me to put my clothes back on," he jokes.

But, he adds, the Aggies aren't naked when they dance, and some productions clean up the language.

"It's very tastefully done. It's just silly," he says.

During the national tour when he played the sheriff, he spent a year and a half on the road, playing in 38 states and a couple provinces in Canada.

"We were picketed in many places in the south," he says. "They would picket the theater, have signs that said 'Satan's whorehouse is in town.' People who had not seen the show decided to judge it ahead of time. Some people came to see the show who had picketed us. Some would come backstage afterwards and say, 'It was a lot of fun.' We had many experiences like that."

Kimble, a robust man who's 6-foot, 4 inches, says he's always cast as "an Alpha Male: Daddy Warbucks in 'Annie,' Harold Hill in 'The Music Man,' Henry Higgins in 'My Fair Lady' or the sheriff in 'Whorehouse,'" he lists. "They're the same guy, the same man: aggressive, pompous, arrogant alpha male, who's terribly lonely."

"And through the course of the play, some event happens which causes the man's heart to crack open, and when that happens, he becomes a more compassionate human being. He learns what real love is and is transformed, as well as the people around him."

"He's a good ol' boy. There are a lot of men just like this man, in this country. And what I like about my job is, I have the opportunity to show those men that you can be strong and stiff with your shoulders squared off and be tough and take care of business, and still, show them that it's OK to show their feelings and to show love. I get to illustrate that to them as an actor/priest: it's OK, you can be a big, tough man and still have a heart."

During performances, he says, he'll hear reactions from men in the audience:



COURTESY PHOTO

"The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" opens Thursday, Sept. 25 at the Broadway Palm.

"crude sounds, guttural, vocal sounds during the show, when they're having feelings."

"Talk about healing — what laughter can do is priceless," Kimble says. "This show is about love, it's totally a love story. The characters, on the surface, are prostitutes, corrupt law officials, corrupt politicians, and sleazy, self-serving TV evangelists. You see people who are really easy to judge and cast aside."

"As you get to know the people, your heart breaks whenever their hearts break. And you come to care for them in ways that will surprise you. You leave the theater not only a little happier, but you might think twice now before judging people who aren't quite like you."

"We all have value. And the ability to give and receive love."

Kimble says he always knew he wanted to act.

"I came out of the womb doing impersonations," he says. "As a kid, I'd imitate Jackie Gleason, I'd imitate Ed Sullivan and whoever came on his show."

When he was 12, his parents allowed him to pick where they would vacation. Kimble picked New York City, and the family went to Broadway shows, including "Pippin" with Ben Vereen, "Shenandoah" with John Cullum, "Equus" with Tom Hulce and "The Wiz" with Stephanie Mills.

"That was life-changing for me," he says.

Moving to New York City as a teen, he attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. But before he could finish his education, he was invited to perform at the Gateway Playhouse in Long Island. His first summer stock show with them was "Best Little Whorehouse in Texas."

"I worked ever since then, never stopped," he says. "Just did play after play after play."

He played Daddy Warbucks in "Annie" non-stop for over five years, he says. He played in a production with JoAnne Worley, he did two international tours, four national, and more than a dozen regional productions of the musical. He even purchased the original actor's costume from Act I — a three-piece suit. He had it retailed and wore it on stage. And in a Barbara Walters television special, "Finding Annie," Walters noted that Kimble had the distinction of performing the role more than any other actor.

But Kimble burned out.

"Things can be overwhelming," he says. "I had done 17 national and international tours which took me to 64 countries and 800 cities, and I was tired. I was worn out. I needed to take a break. I'd be gone for two, three years at a time when I was acting. I'd return, find out that friends had moved, died, gotten married, had kids. Some got bald, others had hair transplants. All this life is going by, and I wasn't making any connections. While touring, I'd be in a strange place, with nothing to do, in the middle of nowhere. I was feeling pretty overwhelmed. So I wanted to see what the 9 to 5 life was like."

He called his agent, and got out of the business. He got a 9 to 5 job, with a com-

pany that became TD Waterhouse. He worked his way through 11 departments, and became a licensed stockbroker.

But he soon discovered he was burning himself out in this new career too.

"I worked very hard, seven days a week," he says. "It was a highly stressful job."

He took 11 days off in September to visit his folks in Ohio, but broke out in shingles. Even his father, who had imbued him with a strong work ethic, told him that he needed to slow down, that the job would kill him. For some reason, Kimble says, he was compelled to return to New York early, and so was at the World Trade Center on 9/11 when terrorists flew planes into the buildings.

His office was on the 28th floor, but Kimble was on the Grand Concourse eating breakfast at Fine and Shapiro's Deli, when the first plane hit the north tower.

"My oatmeal flew off the table," he says. "All hell broke loose."

He started laughing nervously.

"People were coming in," he says. "I remember a man, the top of his head had come off, and his friend was holding him up, and trying to keep his brains in his head."

"They were chaining the doors closed because they wanted to protect the people. Through the bullhorn they were telling people that everything is fine, go back to your offices."

But Kimble and a friend ran down to the Path train, and took what turned out to be the last train to New Jersey.

"We watched the buildings fall down from Jersey," he says. "All that gray gunk, the big clouds, came right at us. We got down on our knees and prayed."

"It was like slow motion, everyone screaming and running. We were all confused and in shock."

An Episcopal priest who was a friend showed up, and took them to a sports bar in downtown Hoboken called God Save Our Planet. When they walked in, all 20 televisions were showing the same channel.

"A man with a long beard and turban was on the TV," Kimble recalled. "My friend Stephen said, 'This is like a Batman movie.' I was wanting to be of service. There is nothing more healing than giving of one's self in service to others."

Though neither one were priests, they were asked to help minister to people.

"It was set up: black tents for body parts and corpses," Kimble recalls. "Red tent for massive wounds. Yellow tent for slow-developing wounds. And the green tent for pastoral care. They put us in chemical suits: hood, mask, gray boots, gloves. It was a great day for me. I'll be grateful for that every day of my life. We were told to sit with them. Maybe hug them, pray with them. Ask them to tell you what happened to them; they find healing in that. They tell you and you listen. People were still coming the next day. Everyone was in so much grief."

"One guy said it was so dark and he couldn't see, and he said, 'Two of them big 8-footers came and flew me out.' He was talking about angels. The next evening I

if you go

>> **What:** "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas"
 >> **When:** Sept. 25 – Nov. 15
 >> **Where:** The Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre, 1380 Colonial Blvd.
 >> **Cost:** \$53 for adults, \$21 for children
 >> **Information:** Call 278-4422 or go to www.BroadwayPalm.com.

saw him on TV, telling his story."

Though it was physically painful for him, because his shingles would crack open and bleed, he would hug people.

"I probably hugged 20,000 people," he says.

After the second day, he found his way to a friend's apartment. He took his chemical suit off and took a shower. And as he washed, the scabs from his shingles fell off, and all that was left were little pink dots. Kimble was so excited, he ran out of the shower buck naked to show his friend.

His friend, a priest, said to him, "You have had a healing because you allowed yourself to be fully used by God as a vessel of healing for other people. It was about giving yourself."

After that day, Kimble says, he wanted to give his life in service.

He'd run food down to Ground Zero from St. John the Divine. Then he took an early retirement. He was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, so he went to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Bardston, Ky., and entered the contemplative life. He didn't feel safe at home, and, as he puts it, "a lot of guys on my speed dial were gone. A lot of friends died."

He took a vow of silence, and spent his days scrubbing floors and praying with the other monks every two hours.

"When you take a vow of silence, it's about getting past your ego, and the monkey chatter in your head," Kimble says, "trying to get to the still, small voice in your heart."

A friend who was a priest told him, "You're not called to be silent. You're called to be a ram's horn."

A naturally gregarious, talkative man, Kimble snuck away to try to call friends on his cell phone, but couldn't get a signal. At another time, he snuck into town early one morning, just to talk to people.

Before a year was up, he realized he needed to return to acting.

His life now is much more balanced. He takes yoga classes and meditation classes. He's not frantic about finding work.

"Most actors, as soon as you get a job, you look for another one," he says. "I trust the abundance, the benevolence. God is my agent now. I don't get frantic. I'm not career-driven. You're not given gifts and then not given the chance to use them. I relax between shows. I go see my mother. I take a month and have lunch with my friends for 30 days. My phone keeps ringing, people keep offering me jobs."

Doing musical theater is his ministry, he says.

"It might sound hokey, but at one time it was all about me and my career," he says. "Then after my experience on 9/11, having a sort of spiritual awakening, I realized it wasn't about me, it was about my service to the community."

"I see the job of an actor as the same job as a priest. The audience, or the congregation, all gather in a temple of sorts, and where an altar was, there's a stage. And the actor, just as the priest does, through the use of parable and song, tells stories about the human experience and holds a mirror up to the audience. As the actors and the chorus — the choir — can teach the story, and sing the songs, through this ritual and through identification, everyone comes together: one mind, one body, one spirit. And our hearts are lifted."

"And for two hours, there's an opportunity to escape from their burden of self, to find relief from the burden of self. And there's healing in that." ■