

## One of *Those* Families

By C. Carr

After Ron Vawter opened in *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* a year and a half ago, he happened to be sitting in the upstairs office at the Performing Garage one day when the show's producer, Marianne Weems, came in and told him she'd just reread one of her favorite books, *Queer and Alone*. And she'd decided to make a play out of it. "But that was *my* idea," Vawter replied, slightly indignant. He too was in the habit of rereading this out-of-print Jim Strahs novel every year. He'd even tried to portray its narrator once in a radio production, but the character hadn't come out of him comfortably. He'd concluded that it was actually the perfect role for his partner—and *Cohn/Smith's* director—Greg Mehrten. Weems immediately agreed. So, Vawter proposed, why not work together? This week, *Queer and Alone* will open at the Kitchen with Mehrten in the central role, codirected by Vawter and Weems.

They now call themselves the Pomodori Foundation. Mehrten and Vawter came up with the name last summer while touring *Cohn/Smith* through Europe. They'd detoured into Italy to get some advice on incorporation from Rosemary Quinn, an administrator at Artservices who became the fourth foundation member. *Pomodori* is the Italian word for tomatoes, but Vawter jokes

that he wants people to think they're one of *those* families—as in, "you don't mess with the Pomodoris." Weems says she thinks more of an audience throwing tomatoes at the stage. But they'd wanted an identity, a way to differentiate these projects from their other theater work. Vawter's been a member of the Wooster Group since 1975; Weems was its assistant

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director for six years. And Mehrten worked as coartistic director of Mabou Mines for nine years.

The still-unnamed Pomodori began developing *Queer and Alone* last winter, while Vawter was working in the Jonathan Demme film *Philadelphia*. Mehrten and Weems went to the set, and the three began distilling Strahs's 219-page novel into a 35-page script. The novel that so captivated them is a sort of travel diary narrated by one Desmond Farrquahr. Both book and performance ride on Desmond's eccentric voice and shifty persona. No one knows whether his sea-cruising stories are all lies, all truth, or somewhere along the spectrum.

Desmond uses what Weems describes as "a stereotypical clichéd voice—it's kind of queeny—but



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THE POMODORI FOUNDATION'S RON VAWTER, GREG MEHRTEN, AND MARIANNE WEEMS (CARR, P. 97)

his sexuality is very indeterminate. You spend a lot of the book guessing which mask he's wearing." Vawter adds that the character "donned this persona to get away with something, but you aren't sure what he's gotten away with." And Mehrten concludes that Desmond has "no redeeming qualities." But as Mehrten plays him, he's riveting to behold—both garrulous and misanthropic, dirty and flowery, vicious and victimized. Desmond spends much of the piece in a hospital bed, recovering from a beating suffered for indeterminate reasons.

Last March, the Pomodoris made a first stab at staging the piece, and it was one long Desmond monologue framed by a fictitious author or Desmondmaker (Lola Pashalinski) on video. Strahs, who also wrote *North Atlantic* for the Wooster Group and *Wrong Guys*, a novel adapted by Mabou Mines, came to see what the Pomodoris had wrought, and then felt inspired to do his own adaptation over the summer. Mehrten and Vawter returned from the *Cohn/Smith* tour (and Weems from hers, with the Wooster Group) to find that Strahs had written them a play based on the book, with 12 characters. Strahs didn't insist that they use the play, however, and they've incorporated just a few sections.

That meant adding three more performers. Eleven-year-old Jack Dafoe now appears on audiotape as Desmond's "inner voice." Young Dafoe (son of Wooster Groupers Liz LeCompte and Willem Dafoe) had helped the Pomodoris by reading sections of the play when they went to Maine to work on the script. "The arch sardonic tone is completely incorporated into his being," marvels Weems. There are also two more characters onstage now—played by Ann Rower and Elion Sacker. Neither are actors. Rower is a writer whose experiences as Timothy Leary's baby-sitter became a valuable piece of the Wooster Group's *LSD... Just the High Points*. Sacker was also in *LSD*, but works in the building trades and was, for years, Richard Foreman's master carpenter. "They're quite fascinating personalities, which is more what we wanted than polished actors," Vawter explains. "We were trying to guard against illustrating the book."

Sacker also appeared in the first section of *Cohn/Smith*, as one of the spectators at the banquet where Cohn is delivering his anti-

gay diatribe (written by Gary Indiana). Back in the '50s, Sacker was, he says, "a card-carrying person, if you know what I mean." Vawter found his presence "psychically important" to portraying Cohn. "Whenever I lost focus or found myself feeling a little weak, I just looked at him and thought, that's also what I'm doing up here. He's not just a fictive character."

*Cohn/Smith* juxtaposes the Cohn speech with a recreation of performance artist Jack Smith's piece "What's Underground About Marshmallows?" These men, extreme opposites, were both homosexuals who died of AIDS. Vawter precedes each show with a short talk to the audience, introducing the characters and telling them that he too is living with AIDS. Mehrten says the show was a somewhat unexpected hit in Europe. "People told me they had no idea who Roy Cohn or Jack Smith was, but they understood what kind of person each was through Ron's performance."

During their current residency at the Kitchen, the Pomodoris will finally get to make a film of the piece. Vawter, for one, alternates between excitement—the film's been on and off for over a year—and bemusement that he could have scheduled it as he did. He'll reopen in *Cohn/Smith* this Sunday for a limited run. So for a couple of days, he'll be acting on the Kitchen's first floor while Mehrten is acting on the second.

At some point in the film's development history, Jonathan Demme was going to direct. Still busy with postproduction on *Philadelphia*, however, Demme will now executive produce while Jill Godmillow directs. "I remember feeling that the piece was a little too easy in the sense that you hated Roy Cohn and loved Jack Smith," says Godmillow. "I'm looking for a production that makes the reception of those two pieces much more paradoxical." While there was once talk of Hollywood money for the movie, no one (including Demme) has been able to scare it up. Still, the film will get made, with a live Kitchen audience. "If worse comes to worse, we have a bottom-line totally deferred budget to do it on Betacam," Godmillow declares.

In the last part of the Pomodoris residency at the Kitchen, Susan Sontag will direct Vawter and Mehrten in a new work. Maybe Beckett's *Happy Days* (with Vawter as Winnie or the two of them alternating as Winnie). Or

maybe something like Strindberg's *The Stronger*, written for two women. Weems will be assistant director. "I'd like to find a two-character play, and I'm not committed to the gender-bending thing," said Sontag. One reason she wants to work with them is that Mehrten and Vawter have never performed together, though they've been a couple for about 12 years and have both won Obies for acting. It hardly counts that both appeared in Mabou Mines's *Lear*, Mehrten as the Fool and Vawter as Regan, since they were rarely onstage at the same time.

Vawter is also about to start rehearsing Frank Dell's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, a 1987 piece the Wooster Group is reviving; Vawter plays Frank Dell, and he's onstage for the whole play. But, he admits, "Compared to all this, *Saint Anthony* will feel like vacation." ■

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Weems, Mehrten, Vawter, and Quinn: the Pomodoris Foundation's top tomatoes



ALEX FORMAN