

# Time Out

New York

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**LUNATIC FRINGE**  
Gary Sinise takes  
over the asylum as  
*One Flew Over the  
Cuckoo's Nest*  
storms Broadway



Deep in the back of McCabe's Guitar Shop, a cavernous emporium in West L.A., Gary Sinise is noodling away on an acoustic guitar and reminiscing. Amid a dazzling array of instruments, amps, songbooks and a sign that proclaims, YES! WE HAVE SITARS, Sinise describes a late-night epiphany he had at age 19, which triggered his metamorphosis from devoted rock guitarist to improvisational jazz bassist. After picking up some free-form big-band music on his car radio one night, he became intrigued—enough to learn the bass and form a wedding quartet that played experimental jazz. Unfortunately, his free-jazz aesthetic didn't go over so well with nuptial guests. "They wanted 'The Look of Love' and 'Shadow of Your Smile,' really slow, so they could dance," he says. One night, an attendee stormed up to the bandstand. "He yelled, 'This is not a concert! This is a wedding! Play me some 'Girl from Ipanema,' will ya?'" Sinise laughs, shaking his head at the recollection.

Now, 27 years later, the urge to jump from the structured to the free-form has struck again. When most people hear the name Gary Sinise, they conjure the 46-year-old actor-director as one of the glowering, serious characters he's portrayed in films like *Forrest Gump*, *Mission to Mars*, *Ransom* and *Snake Eyes*, and in the made-for-TV movies *Truman* and *George Wallace*. These intense parts have won him Emmy and Golden Globe awards as well as an Oscar nomination (for his role as the amputee lieu-

spring. Sitting at a table in a coffee shop near McCabe's—where he'd treated himself to a bass amp, plus drum pads and brushes for his ten-year-old son—he bites into a turkey sandwich between spoonfuls of tortilla soup. McMurphy, he says, is "a big show-off. He likes to hear himself talk. It's fun to play somebody who is extroverted in that way."

Famously incarnated by Jack Nicholson in Milos Forman's many-Oscared 1975 movie, the character is an icon of the '60s, the outsider (i.e., the counterculture) who feigns insanity to avoid the requisite forced labor of prison, only to find himself shackled by the repressive policies of Nurse Ratched (i.e., establishment hypocrites) at the institution. It's a classic, mythically Western standoff. And it's one that both Sinise and his frequent collaborator Terry Kinney, an actor (*Save the Last Dance*, HBO's *Oz*) who is also the production's director, have wanted to put their spin on since the mid-'70s. After the successful run of Steppenwolf's *Streetcar* ended four years ago, the time seemed right to reopen the asylum.

McMurphy's freewheeling attitude is what Sinise has long been searching for in a role. Onstage, adorned with long sideburns and tattoos, the actor looks the modern cowboy, his leering drawl and aggressive swagger are those of a tough guy swooping into the saloon to stir up trouble. He tools around the set with rock & roll audacity, picking lewdly at his belly button, whooping without provocation. "McMurphy is a guy with—as my friend [and Steppenwolf

There's a structured side of me; I can get things together. But there's this total rebel side, too."

Sinise's director knows that side of him well. "We were never establishment," Kinney says. In 1974, he, Sinise and Perry, all unknowns acting in the basement of a Chicago Unitarian church that they'd rented for ten dollars a month, founded the now legendary Steppenwolf. But Sinise has come a long way since he lived in a group house with four stoners and two pet raccoons, working as a Neiman-Marcus shipping clerk. He's been married for 20 years to actor Moira Harris, with whom he has three children. And these days, his busy stage and film careers feed each other, both creatively and financially.

*Cuckoo's Nest's* terrific cast, which includes Steppenwolf's Amy Morton as icy Ratched and Tim Sampson as catatonic Chief Bromden (surprisingly, the actor's father, Will, played the role in the film), makes the play burst with new, raw energy. The production stays closer to the book than the Nicholson-dominated film did—like the novel, it's trippily narrated by the schizophrenic Chief. Last year in Chicago, and during a two-week run in London, audiences were so enthralled by McMurphy that they cheered spontaneously in support of the boisterous hero as he did battle, eventually sacrificing himself for his fellow inmates. "He's completely liberated and fearless," says Chris Stolte, the star's Chicago understudy. "The guy knows how to communicate something to an audience. The crowd just ate up everything he did."

# Fully committed

Gary Sinise busts loose from his "sinister" shackles with a freewheeling stage performance in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* By **Jay Fernandez** Photograph by **Stephen Danelian**

tenant, Dan Taylor, in *Gump*). A devoted stage actor and a founder of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company (which has fostered thespians like Joan Allen and John Malkovich), Sinise has applied his slow-burn persona to such roles as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*. But when they see him in Dale Wasserman's adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which Steppenwolf delivers to Broadway this month, audiences are in for a surprise. As Randle P. McMurphy, the great martyr of the oppressed from the reverberant 1962 novel by Ken Kesey, Sinise performs his high jinks with such gleeful abandon, it's as if he's been sprung from the confines of a straightjacket.

"It's very, very physical and flamboyant," Sinise says of the role, which he played for a packed Steppenwolf house for four months last

partner] Jeff Perry says—the loosest sphincter of any character in literature," Kinney says. "I encouraged Gary: 'Don't take yourself seriously; let the battle become serious on its own.'" What gives the part such appeal, Kinney continues, is that "at any moment, he has the license to fuck everything up."

In rousing the "acutes" and "chronics" around McMurphy, Sinise seems to have cracked his own inner rebel—though only to an extent. "I'm not mentally ill... I don't think," he says (adding that he *has* seen insanity at work: "Malkovich. Just with Malkovich"). Onstage, he looks like he hasn't had so much fun in years. "He's a character I can't get in the movies," he says. "People only see you as your work: George Wallace, Harry Truman, [the kidnapping detective in] *Ransom*—bad guys, intense stuff. What I like about McMurphy is, he's more *me*.

Next fall, Sinise will hit the screen once again in *Imposter*, a *Fugitive*-esque futuristic thriller that he coproduced. In the meantime, he'll be spending some time in the music studio. He's been enlisted by the composer of the Steppenwolf *Streetcar* score, Kimo Williams, to coproduce a big-band CD; they'll finish recording it in bits and pieces this summer, and Sinise is reviving his bass skills for a few tracks. All around, it seems, Gary Sinise is refinding his jazz.

"Not unlike discovering music again after putting it away for so long, what *Cuckoo's Nest* has allowed me to do is revive a part of me that had become dormant," he says. "Jeff Perry said it was like seeing something from the past."

Or, perhaps, something of the future. ***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* begins previews March 16 at the Royale Theatre.**

