



From tragedy, a comedian is born

Abusive father, broken marriages have made Tom Hanks' one-time sidekick a resilient actor with a gift for laughter – and the ideal star of Stage West's new show

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If, as it's often been said, that farce is just tragedy where the leading character doesn't give in, then you couldn't find a more perfect star than Peter Scolari for *Boeing-Boeing*, which opens at Stage West this Thursday night.



Peter Scolari stars in *Boeing-Boeing*, opening Sept. 25, 2008, at Stage West in Mississauga. SUPPLIED PHOTO

The man best known for his ongoing roles in TV series like *Bosom Buddies* and *Newhart* has all the right comic stuff to keep the laughter rolling in this story of a philanderer with too many stewardesses and too few bedrooms, but he's come to that mirthful finesse at a considerable personal cost.

A childhood spent with an abusive father, two painfully broken marriages – both with children attached – and a midlife diagnosis of bipolar disorder may not seem like the breeding ground for laughter, but then, you don't know Peter Scolari.

He shows up for lunch at Toronto's hippest new eatery, Nota Bene, in chic casual attire, looking a full decade younger than his 53 years and ready to discuss anything – especially himself – with a combination of wit and honesty that's rare in show business.

"My mom and dad? Oh, they were a fiery pair," he says, jumping in the deep end of the pool right from the start. "They stayed together for the kids and also because they were hopelessly in love with each other, but they were totally incompatible.

"Mom was a recovering alcoholic, still more than 40 years sober, while dad was a lawyer and a rageful man."

ESSENTIALS

1955 — Born Sept. 12 in New Rochelle, N.Y.

1971 — Appears in high school production of *How to Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*. Decides on career in the arts.

1974 — Began working with the Colonnades Theatre Lab in New York.

1980 — Cast opposite Tom Hanks in the sitcom *Bosom Buddies* as Henry ("Hildegarde") Desmond.

Scolari's opened the door to the dark side a bit too suddenly, and you can see him pause as the demons pour out. "Now that my siblings have children of our own, we don't see how a man could treat his children the way he treated us. We look on ourselves as the survivors of psychological abuse."

All of this happened in the New Rochelle-Scarsdale axis of suburban New York during the early 1960s. Vintage *Mad Men* country: heaven on the surface, hell underneath.

"I created a persona to deal with all of this," admits Scolari. "A sort of 'you can't find who I really am because I'm moving all over the place' kind of thing. I became a chess player. I anticipated the moves my father was going to make."

The teenage Scolari was – as usual in cases like this – an overachiever: star athlete, blue-ribbon scholar, model student. But the first thing that ever gave him real pleasure was when he starred as Finch in his high school production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* when he was 16.

"I did a scene," he recalls, "got some laughs, walked offstage, and then bam! I had a white-light experience. This is it, I thought. This is what I want to do with my life. I'm going to be an actor."

His parents surprisingly agreed, "as long as I went to college and had something to fall back on. I lied and said I would, but I knew full well even then there would be no falling back, ever."

While still a student at the City College of New York, Scolari joined a repertory group called the Colonnades Theatre Lab. When his father died during his third year of college ("He didn't save any money. All of us had to fend for ourselves."), Scolari quit school and just continued as an actor.

"A lot of wonderful people came out of that company," he recalls. "Jeff Goldblum, Danny DeVito, Rhea Pearlman, Michael O'Keefe. One by one, they went off to Los Angeles, but I said, 'Not me, never!'"

But he finally did and the fall of 1980 saw him starring in a sitcom called *Bosom Buddies* where he and another young unknown named Tom Hanks played two guys who dressed up in drag to find an affordable apartment. "Some Like It Lukewarm," sneered more than one critic, but the public loved the boys and the series ran 37 episodes until 1982.

He and Hanks became close friends on the show, but as Hanks' career soared in the '90s and Scolari's stood still, it got tough.

"Tom was always very sympathetic, of course. He's that kind of a guy. But the funny thing is that we always felt we were sparring partners, equals, and the vicissitudes of show business sent him up and me down. It's all just a lottery."

1984 — Joined the cast of *Newhart* for 142 episodes as Michael Harris.

1997 — Starred in the TV series *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*.

2004 — Appeared in *The Polar Express*.

2004 — Featured in the Broadway revival of *Sly Fox*.

2008 — Starring in the Stage West production of *Boeing-Boeing*.

GETTING PERSONAL WITH PETER SCOLARI

1. What was your first job?

I was what they called a "counsellor in training" at a summer camp in the great state of Maine when I was 15.

2. What would you be doing if you weren't an actor?

I'd be teaching. I spent about three years in my early 20s working in a program to improve literacy. I've never been as happy in all my life. That was a truly selfless journey.

3. What TV show must you watch every week?

Lost. I came to it late, but now I'm totally hooked.

That particular lottery sent Scolari next to *Newhart*, the hit sitcom, where a guest shot as the uptight Michael Harris eventually turned into a role that would last 142 episodes and win him three Emmy nominations.

"It started out as this broad comedy thing," he relates, imitating the voice he used on the show. "A wannabe Connecticut lockjaw, a would-be blue-blood guy."

And he played it that way for two seasons until one week, he seized what was supposed to be an aggressive scene and played it as an emotional breakdown, dissolving into tears.

Bob Newhart took him aside and asked "Is that what you really want to do?" and when Scolari told him yes, Newhart backed him up 100 per cent saying, "The kid gets to do it his way."

The character broke through that week and Scolari became a unique part of the Newhart family.

Then the series ended.

"Things were okay for about five years," he says quietly. "I kept losing major features, coming in second, but I got enough work at first to keep it all rolling. But then in the '90s, it got tight. The lifestyle was way up there, but the money was only coming in down here."

The second marriage ended, life started to fall apart and Scolari was finally diagnosed with bipolar disorder. But he came through and feels better now than he ever has before.

He loves *Boeing-Boeing* and is full of praise for his director, Jim Warren ("a genius") and his co-star Michael Lamport ("an inspired madman").

He talks about the teamwork necessary for the show. "We have to be like Hope and Crosby, Abbott and Costello. ..."

Hanks and Scolari?

"Yeah," Scolari says with a wistful smile that makes him seem 25 again for just a moment, "we could have managed it pretty handily."

4. What's on your iPod?

A pretty eclectic selection: Crosby, Stills and Nash, the Beatles, Counting Crows, the Ben Folds Five.

5. What's the last good movie you saw?

In Bruges was disturbing and touching and I finally saw *Judgement at Nuremberg*. I was astonished. Spencer Tracy, Monty Clift, what powerful performances!

- Richard Ouzounian