

## **Should We Laugh or Should We Cry?**

Dr. Jeffrey Galler

*(Our investigative reporter goes backstage at Broadway's Virginia Theater to meet Dr. Orin Scrivello, D.D.S., practice-limited-to "Little Shop of Horrors.")*

Many already know the story from having seen the 1960 cult horror movie spoof, or the long-running 1982 off-Broadway show, or the more recent film starring Steve Martin.

In its latest reincarnation, the musical comedy, *"Little Shop of Horrors,"* plays to sold out audiences nightly at the Virginia Theater, on Broadway, in New York City.

The plot involves the nerdy Seymour, an assistant in a florist shop, who finds fame and fortune by nurturing a strange, exotic, and very alien carnivorous plant that requires blood (human, that is) in order to thrive.

An important subplot in this offbeat comedy revolves around the character Orin Scrivello, who is one of the most egotistic, sadistic, and narcissistic characters to ever appear in modern drama. Actor Douglas Sill's depiction of this individual makes the audience howl with laughter.

Why should the New York State Dental Journal care?

This charming and gleeful sadist, Orin Scrivello, is a dentist. When we see such depictions of dentists, should we laugh or should we cry?

## **All the World's a stage**

Armed with tape recorder and camera, I, along with Texas dentist Dr. Jim Foster, our wives, and our children, interviewed actor Douglas Sills after a recent performance. Though clearly tired from his performance, Sills graciously spent an hour answering our questions backstage.

Douglas Sills, a highly-respected, award-winning stage veteran, has appeared in many plays, productions, and television shows, recently garnering Tony, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle nominations for his role in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. He turned out to be one of the most thoughtful and intelligent individuals that I have ever interviewed.

He seemed genuinely surprised at the notion that dentists might be offended by his portrayal of Dr. Scrivello. We reminded him of his signature song in Act I:

*When I was young and just a bad little kid,  
My Momma noticed funny things I did.  
Like shootin' puppies with a BB-gun.  
I'd poison guppies, and when I was done,  
I'd find a pussy-cat and bash in its head.  
That's when my momma said...  
(What did she say?)  
She said my boy I think someday  
You'll find a way  
To make your natural tendencies pay...*

*You'll be a dentist.  
You have a talent for causing things pain!  
Son, be a dentist!  
People will pay you to be inhumane!*

“I never really worried about how dentists would perceive this,” mused Sills, “because you have to understand that the portrayal of this dentist is a cartoonish one. It isn’t intended to be educational. The dentist is a cartoon, much like Sponge Bob, who clearly is not real and not taken seriously.”

The gifted actor went on to explain, that he likes to think of the show as, “Faust for the masses. It’s allegorical. It’s not about kitchen-sink realism.”

Sills pointed out that in the entire production, no one was ever interested in realism. “For example,” he illustrated, “the director, Jerry Zaks, insisted that, on stage, I laugh every time I sniff nitrous oxide (‘laughing gas’), even though we all know that’s not what happens, and that isn’t how it works. That is solely the director’s take on what would work best on stage, and is not intended to be a realistic portrayal.”

We were sitting on the darkened, empty, stage, tape recorder between us. “Look at the skid row houses depicted on the scenery of the set behind you,” he advised, “these houses don’t look real. They are ‘anthropomorphized’ so that they look like people: they have eyes, and they’re ‘leaning’ into the action. The houses are not portrayed as literal

houses. Nothing about the show, including the sadistic dentist, is meant to be taken realistically. All this adds to the cartoonish element.”

### **Mean, but charming**

We pointed out that his dentist-character abuses his girlfriend, Audrey, remorselessly, and sings:

*I am your dentist.  
And I enjoy the career that I picked.  
I'm your dentist.  
And I get off on the pain I inflict!*

Sills explained to us, patiently, that it was important for the dentist to appear mean, so that the Seymour character appears sympathetic by contrast, and so that the audience would not feel sorry to see the dentist become the plant's first victim.

“Nevertheless,” he pointed out, “Dr. Scrivello is still quite charming. My initial instinct was to make the character so very evil, that his attitude toward his patient in the dental scene would be one of, ‘Get over here! Do you have an appointment?! Your mouth is a mess! Get in that chair!’

“But,” he continued, “the director was very hands-on, and pointed out to me: ‘No. You're never going to get anyone in the dental chair like that. You're going to have to be charming. It's a much more interesting acting exercise if you can somehow convince him to get into the chair. Move

quickly, distract him, and convince him that it's important for you to get to that molar spot in his mouth.' ”

Sills went on to observe that dentists should not be offended by his portrayal of Dr. Orin Scrivello, not merely because the character is clearly a cartoon, and not merely because the play is not meant to be a reflection of reality, and not merely because the dentist is actually quite charming.

“I don't perceive dentistry to be a profession that is suffering image-wise, and dentists don't strike me as being a persecuted minority. Dentists don't fall into those categories, so the portrayal in *“Little Shop of Horrors”* is quite safe and poses no danger to dentists. So, don't worry about it,” he concluded.

### **Perception, perception, perception**

*“I'm sorry,” stammers a visibly terrified and shaken Audrey.*

*“You're sorry **WHAT?** barks the dentist with an icy stare.*

*Audrey corrects herself, “I'm sorry **doctah!**”*

*A smug Dr. Scrivello nods in satisfaction.*

Dr. Foster and I persisted in playing the devil's advocate. "Do you think that the public's perception of dentists and dentistry might suffer from such a caricature?" we asked.

"Quite the contrary," felt Sills, "This is very flattering to dentists, when audience members contrast Dr. Scrivello with their own gentle, caring, dentists.

"Today," the actor explained, "dentistry is nothing like it used to be. I recently had a root canal, and with the soft music, televisions on the ceiling, headphones, and videos that you can watch, I felt like I was on Pan Am, flying first class."

Sills, whose uncle is a prominent periodontist in Detroit, became analytical: "Dentists are aware of the 'power' that they do have, yet they use it judiciously, they are prudent, they are conscious of the psychodrama involved."

He concluded our interview by saying, "I admire how you can perceive if this is an anxious patient or relaxed patient, this is trouble or this is not trouble, would this individual patient do better in several shorter sessions or in one long three-to-four hour session. That's an incredible facility that you get over years of training, along with the bedside manner that grows over the years."

## Laugh or Cry?

Who said that flattery will get you nowhere? We emerged from our meeting with a new and profound respect for the intelligent analysis that a gifted actor like Sills puts into his roles.

We committed a faux pas by wishing him luck in the upcoming Tony nominations. Apparently actors consider such good wishes to be a form of bad luck, and much prefer hearing phrases like, “Break a leg.”

In conclusion then, should we laugh or should we cry?

Oh, let’s stop taking ourselves so very seriously. Along with the rest of the audience, let’s laugh until our sides split. Let’s sing along with Dr.

Orin Scrivello:

*And though it may cause my patients distress.  
Somewhere...somewhere in heaven above me...  
I know...I know that my momma’s proud of me.  
“Oh, Momma...”*

*‘Cause I’m a dentist...  
And a success!*

