

Inside the mind of a 'Psych' star

by **Katie Ulrich**

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"Under the violet umbrella, everyone's equal," actor James Roday said, referring to the Tisch School of the Arts. "It's talent that matters."



A lot of people don't consider Tisch a pure meritocracy. Roday thinks it is, and he's got the evidence to back it up.

Before Roday landed the starring role as Shawn Spencer on USA Network's "Psych," he was a freshman living in Rubin residence hall in a hot, messy, low-cost room. He came from Texas and just wanted to be in the city.

"I could've been living in a fridge box out on the street. None of that mattered," he said. "I was 18, living in New York, having the best possible undergrad experience."

But he remained focused despite that freshman excitement. With the high cost of tuition, he knew he couldn't screw up. Expectations gave him energy.

Indeed, those expectations are what his new off-Broadway play, "Extinction," is all about.

At Tisch, Roday attended the Experimental Theatre Wing, which he likened to a "giant supermarket."

"You get a taste of everything, you get exposed to a lot. But ultimately, you take out what you put in, and that's what's important," he said. This is how he talks: a little overreaching, but earnest. He gives credit where credit is due.

He takes his roles seriously. It's his personal duty to make the character feel as natural as possible. Though all actors strive to do that, Roday plays the carefree, irresponsible 30-something, Shawn Spencer, in such a nonchalant manner that his new role in "Extinction" is almost shocking. But Roday doesn't think his new role too much of a departure from "Psych."

It's "the believable transition of a man, from knowing what he wants to realizing he doesn't have any of it," Roday said. After all, there isn't anything much more common than a man whose life doesn't add up to what he expects it to be.

In the show, written by Gabe McKinley, Roday and fellow NYU alumnus Michael Weston play two old college friends (you can guess the college) who reunite after recent hardships for one blowout bash in Atlantic City. The whole play is set in one hotel room. It starts off normally: They poke fun at each other's appearances, talk about their mothers, and reminisce over old times. Alcohol and cocaine fuel the situation until, finally, it all blows up. They do things they didn't think they would — or could — and realize that, despite a decade's time elapsing, they're still quite capable of those childish mistakes they made in college.

Roday convincingly portrays the progression of a man struggling to give up his old ways for something more permanent and meaningful. As the play goes on, we discover that his character, Finn, is married with a kid on the way, and he wants to go back to school. But it's just not him. For all his noble intentions, there's no escaping his fearfully dark side. "Extinction" begins as a sharp, comedic commentary on friendship and familiarity and ends as a sobering account of the key roles money and power play in forming identity. It asks: Can we really ever change, or do outside forces keep us static?

Weston delivers his own very funny, powerful performance as an asshole who just

might not be so bad after all, but Roday has the more subversive role. He involves the audience compellingly, providing a well-timed stroke of the chin or running his hand through his hair to let us know that the character wishes this situation wasn't his. It's not his fault; it's all just circumstantial. Their hotel room is decorated simply, they name-drop common interests like the Pixies, and their clothes are basic and designer-free. They're the everymen. It makes you wonder if Roday feels a personal connection to the role, if he fears fading away with age.

"I mean, this is us," Roday explained. "As a man in my early thirties, we're all facing the same issues. I don't want it to be a play solely for people in their thirties, but it's the truth: These could be our problems too."

"Extinction" is playing at the Cherry Lane Theatre (38 Commerce St.) through March 14. Tickets (\$45) can be purchased at telecharge.com or by calling 212.239.6200.

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