

THEATER

# ON THE BALL

With his new play *All That I Will Ever Be*, a post-*Six Feet Under* Alan Ball proves there's life after death  
By Michael Giltz



**A**fter a death in the family, people sometimes throw themselves into work. Alan Ball insists it's a coincidence, but after ending his critically acclaimed landmark HBO series *Six Feet Under* he has plunged into three projects almost simultaneously.

He's editing his feature film debut, an adaptation of the best-selling novel *Towelhead*. He's prepping a new HBO series, this one set in the "Southern vampire" world of the best-selling novels by Charlaine Harris. And he's tweaking his new play, *All That I Will Ever Be*, which brings him back to the stage for the first time in nearly 15 years. Of course, it was the play *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress* that launched his career, as it caught the attention of TV producers Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner, thus introducing him to the network sitcoms *Grace Under Fire* and *Cybill*.

"It's a ridiculously absurd time," admits Ball, who returned to New York City last November with his partner of five years. "I have to laugh. I did the first workshop of this play a year and a half ago, and the movie was supposed to be happening four months earlier, and they all started happening at once."

Ball realizes it's an enviable position. "I'm at a place right now where I get to do everything that I want to try," he says without a hint of boast. "That's a great place to be in. I'm not sure how long that's going to last."

If his career is going great, rest assured that the characters Ball creates are as damaged and confused as ever. On *Six Feet Under* it sometimes seemed the only happy people were the dead people, and that trend continues with *All That I Will Ever Be*, running at the New York Theatre Workshop in New York City through March 11.

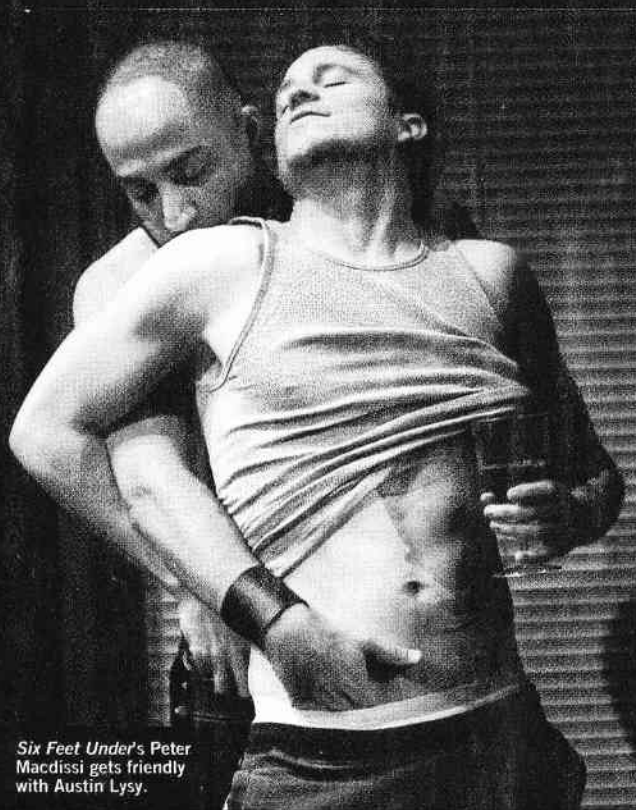
In *All That I Will Ever Be*, Dwight (Austin Lysy) is a morose young man living off his wealthy father and self-pity. His new boyfriend Omar (Peter Macdissi) is a Middle Eastern immigrant who works as a part-time prostitute and a full-time liar, ashamed of his ethnicity and desperate to find somewhere he belongs.

"I'm not particularly drawn to happy characters in general," admits Ball. "They're not that interesting. While I strive to be a happy person in life, I don't find

them interesting dramatically.

"I think it's a terrible thing to feel you're unworthy of love. And I think for a lot of people who don't fit a certain mold of race or sexuality or nationality or whatever, depending on what culture they're in, it's very easy to internalize that and turn it towards oneself. To me that is a very tragic state to be in and one that I certainly wrestled with earlier in my life. This is really a love story of two people who are like that, and unfortunately they are not at a point where they can move beyond that."

Dwight and Omar yearn for acceptance, just like 13-year-old protagonist Jasira in Alicia Erian's novel *Towelhead*. Jasira just



*Six Feet Under's* Peter Macdissi gets friendly with Austin Lysy.

wants someone to pay attention to her, whether it be her viciously stern Lebanese father, her racist predatory neighbor Mr. Vuoso (played in the film by Aaron Eckhart), her absent mother, or her cruel classmates. Ball optioned the book in 2005 even before it had been published to critical acclaim.

"I really identified with her in a way," says Ball, who discusses his childhood only obliquely. "As a kid I was very much left on my own. My parents were not abusive or total narcissists the way that her parents are. But there had been a big tragedy in my life, and they both got lost inside of themselves and depressed, and I was left on my own and didn't have any guidance. My

brothers were much older than me, so they weren't living at home at the time. In a lot of ways, I was like an only child.

"Certainly coming of age and coming into one's sexuality and being gay and the baggage that brings along with it—it was a very hard struggle. I empathized with this character who was having these feelings. I loved the mix in the book of harrowing things happening to this girl and yet at the same time maintaining a sense of the absurdity of her situation and never judging any of the characters."

Ball will finish the film in the next few months and then in June shoot the pilot for *True Blood*, his proposed new HBO series.

Like his other current projects, the show is about acceptance. Sookie Stackhouse is a waitress in a quiet Southern town who tries to keep her ability to read minds a secret from everyone around her so that she can fit in. But in a world where vampires have "come out" (synthetic blood means vampires don't have to prey on humans to feed), Sookie's abilities bring her an undead boyfriend and an uncomfortable prominence in the community of fantastical creatures (e.g., vampires and werewolves) who are tentatively merging into society.

"My intention is to keep all the mythological stuff but to treat it very matter-of-factly," says Ball, "to really take it from a character's perspective. What is it like to become an animal, to have a thirst for blood, to be alive for 300 years, to be able to hear other people's thoughts? How does that complicate your life? How does one respond to it in a way that makes sense and is entertaining and funny and scary and sexy?"

Ball turns 50 years old this May; he's relaxed about it, finding himself in perhaps the best period of his life.

"My life has gotten progressively better, so I've stopped being anxious about aging," says Ball. "I really enjoy the life that I have. I look at myself when I was younger, and it's horrifying how unformed and fucked-up I was. So it doesn't seem like that big a thing. Of course, I did go through a big thing when I turned 35, so that was probably my midlife crisis. That was pretty young for a midlife crisis, but maybe I'm an overachiever." ■

*Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.*

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