

The fountain of 'Youth'

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

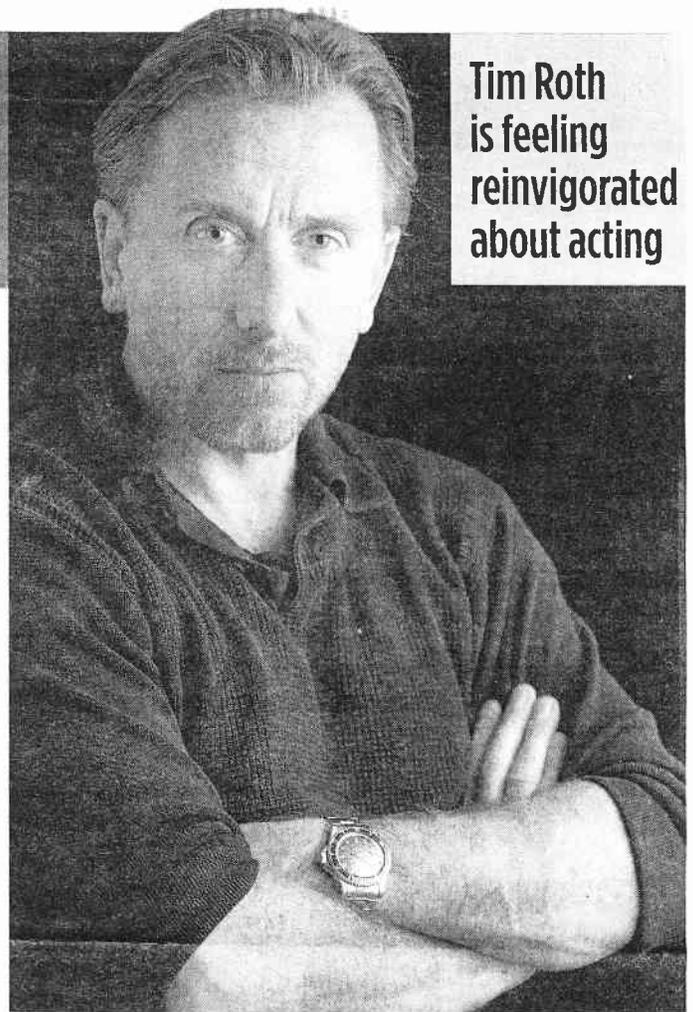
Director Francis Ford Coppola spent a decade wrestling with his long-gestating project "Megalopolis" before plunging instead into "Youth Without Youth," a romantic drama starring Tim Roth that opens Friday.

"When Francis talked about 'Megalopolis,' he said the script whipped him," says Roth, who plays an elderly linguistics

professor who is struck by lightning and miraculously finds himself getting younger and younger, and developing remarkable — even magical — mental and psychic powers. He even gets a second chance at choosing true love over his career.

But Coppola wasn't the only one rejuvenated by this fountain of "Youth." Roth says he shook off years of boredom and lethargy about acting thanks to this role, in which he ages from 20 to 101, as

Tim Roth is feeling reinvigorated about acting



COREY SIPKIN/DAILY NEWS

well as the adrenalin rush of playing the villain in next summer's "The Incredible Hulk."

"I'm interested in acting again," admits the 46-year-old father of two. "I lost my interest for a long time. I got bored."

Roth has made some 60 movies since breaking out via British TV in the mid-'80s and in 1990's Robert Altman-directed "Vincent & Theo." Since then, his career's been highlighted by collaborations with great directors like Altman, Quentin Tarantino (on "Reservoir Dogs" and "Pulp Fiction"), Woody Allen ("Everyone Says I Love You") and John Sayles ("Silver City"), and appearances in notable indies like "Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead," "Jumpin' at the Boneyard" and "Little Odessa."

He famously had to turn down the role of Snape in the "Harry Potter" movies because of a scheduling conflict with Tim Burton's "Planet of the Apes" remake, in which he played a sort-of simian version of Dick Cheney.

But doing "Youth," and playing a role so far out of his comfort zone for yet another esteemed filmmaker juiced Roth again.

"Playing someone who was not me and having Francis push me in all these different directions was very tantalizing," says Roth, a native of London. "That woke me up a bit. I'd spoken to Ray Winstone about it. It happened to him. He gave up acting years and years and years ago. He quit and went back to work in whatever he was doing. Then

he got his buzz back. He swore to me I would, too.

"And he was right. You just have to wait around long enough and then you'll get it back."

Roth relishes the challenges again, and says he had a blast playing an evil mutant, The Abomination, in the Marvel film "reboot" of "The Hulk" (which will star Edward Norton as Bruce Banner).

"It was crazy, crazy," says Roth of making the comic book blockbuster in Toronto and Brazil. "They did want to make a kid's action movie — grownup, but also for kids. My whole concern was that my kids would like it, because I made it for them."

One film of Roth's his kids won't be seeing anytime soon is German writer-director Michael Haneke's upcoming "Funny Games," a shot-by-shot remake of Haneke's own 1997 feature in which two psychotics hold a family hostage and torture them. Initially, Roth didn't want to do the film, which co-stars Naomi Watts, because he was disturbed by the idea it might be sheer exploitation. "I thought

it would be difficult, but a very worthwhile character to play," says Roth. He's no stranger to tuggish roles, most notably his diner robber in "Pulp Fiction."

"I'd been the torturer, the one that inflicts. And I thought it would be a very good thing for me to feel what it's like to be in a room and have that happen to me. And it was very good, it helped me as an actor no end. But I don't ever want to go back there. Not to that extreme ever again." ♦

A drama and a comic-book movie revved him up again.