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Film festival honors actor Brian Dennehy

By James J. Gillis/Daily News staff

NEWPORT - Give an actor an award at a film festival, and he speaks eloquently about the thrill of the theater.

The Newport International Film Festival honored Brian Dennehy at the Newport Blues Cafe Friday night with the Claiborne Pell Award for Lifetime Achievement. The 67-year-old actor touched on his film career but expounded on his love of the theater, considering himself more a stage actor at this point.

"The theater, to me, is what I'm supposed to do," Dennehy told the 50 or so people on hand. "Of course they're not breaking down my door to do movies, either. Maybe if I were Jack Nicholson ..."

In recent years, Dennehy has appeared as Willy Loman, for which he won a Tony Award, in "Death of a Salesman" in New York and in London, and starred in Eugene O'Neill's "Hughie" at Trinity Repertory Company in Providence. Dennehy jokingly said that he loves Newport because he is a sailor, though he can afford to sail less as a stage actor.

But Dennehy, whose film career started with "Looking for Mr. Goodbar" in 1977, said movies and television create a separation between actors and audiences while theater merges them. "When you leave the theater, something has changed," he said. "What happens there doesn't happen anywhere else."

Dennehy said he expects to play "King Lear" in Central Park next year. He has become known for his turn in "Death of a Salesman" as Loman, a role he's performed more than 600 times. Actors who think they can perform one role 40 or 50 times are kidding themselves, he said, adding, "You're not playing the play, the play is playing you. You can only do it when you do it a lot of times."

On hand were retired U.S. Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., his wife, Nuala and their daughter, Dallas, as well as Newport-bred actress Joanna Going. Actor Joe Pantoliano ("Memento", "The Sopranos") presented Dennehy with the Pell Award. Pantoliano, now filming the TV show "Waterfront" in Providence, and Dennehy are old friends. According to Pantoliano, Dennehy once told him, "If you couldn't act you'd be back in Hoboken, (N.J.), still asking if they want anchovies on the pizza."

Dennehy added, "The rest of it is that I'd still be driving a truck in Brooklyn, which I did."

Pantoliano said he first saw Dennehy 30 years ago in an off-Broadway role ("It was so off-Broadway that there were more actors on stage than people in the audience") and was impressed.

"He was magnificently talented, compelling and extremely handsome," Pantoliano said.

Dennehy's film career encompasses various styles. He appeared with Chris Farley in the comedy "Tommy Boy," in the art house movie "The Belly of An Architect," in courtroom dramas such as "Presumed Innocent," as well as playing the friendly alien in the science fiction hit "Cocoon."

But on Friday, his thoughts were on his current work, on stage, where he feels the electricity from the audience. "It's difficult doing something like that eight times a



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week," Dennehy said. "But it is so rewarding."

If not for a teacher chiding him, Dennehy might've ventured into a different line of work. "He told me, 'Mr. Dennehy, the way you play football, you should be on stage.'"

Coming attractions

Highlights at the Newport International Film Festival this weekend:

- 'Wordplay,' Jane Pickens Theater, today, 4:30 p.m. Do you like crossword puzzles? A lot of people do, and some even square off in competition. Jon Stewart, Bill Clinton and the Indigo Girls hold forth on their puzzling obsession.

- Closing night party, tonight at 9, Belcourt Castle.

- NIFF Open Call, Opera House 1, Sunday, 12:30 p.m. Area filmmakers get to show off their work.

- 'KZ,' Opera House 3, Sunday, 4 p.m. What happens when a concentration camp becomes a tourist attraction?

-'What Remains,' Sunday, 1:30 p.m. A look at the work of photographer Sally Mann.

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