

by Kim Acosta



# body language

For Jonna Tamases, triple diagnoses of cancer inspired a one-woman show in which her organs and appendages each weigh in with their opinions of the medical experience.

Facing “the big C” at 19 (... and 20 ... and 33) wasn’t exactly a laugh-out-loud experience for comedic actor Jonna Tamases. Luckily for audiences, her one-woman play — and now multiplayer movie — *Jonna’s Body, Please Hold*, about her medical history, *is*. Since the 46-minute film made its DVD debut, it has been circulating at film festivals and television networks, and viewers are discovering the startling ways that lymphoma and breast cancer have shaped Tamases’ career choices,

workouts and body image. (Ever longed to run away from everything and join the circus? She did.)

It all started with a much-anticipated breast reduction. Since puberty, Tamases, now 42, looked forward to the day she’d be old enough to go from the Rocky Mountains to something a little more, er, flatlands-like. Finally, after her freshman year at Columbia University in New York City, her parents and doctor acquiesced. “I was so excited,” she says.

Actor Jonna Tamases used her fight against cancer as the subject of a humorous performance piece.

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But something odd showed up on Tamases' pre-surgery chest X-ray — spots on her heart. Tests determined they were a form of cancer: stage 2 Hodgkin's disease.

Tamases stayed home in northern California for 11 weeks of radiation, which eradicated the cancer. "I went back to college feeling good," she says. "It was a minor speed bump, and now I had this badge of honor — I was a 'cancer survivor.'"

Little did the college sophomore know her battle with cancer had just begun.

### THE NEXT GO-ROUND

The following summer, routine blood work revealed large-cell lymphoma, unrelated to the bout of Hodgkin's. "This time, I was pissed off," says Tamases. "How dare my life be interrupted this way!" She received a strong dose of weekly chemotherapy for three months, which left her nauseous, weak and bald.

"For the most part, I was too angry to attend therapy groups," she says. "But at one session, I was supposed to come to terms with the possibility that I might die. But I couldn't grasp that at 20 years old. I always thought that I'd get through it."

And she did. But this time, she chose

not to pick up where she'd left off. "I took a step back and finished school at Stanford," she says. "I never went back to New York."

### AN UNPREDICTABLE LIFE

Tamases' dual experiences with cancer had irrevocably altered her life path. "It made me both fearful and brave," she says. "I learned what it's like to have the rug pulled out from under you, so that contributed to my anxiety. But without cancer I never would have had the guts to pursue acting — I would have gone for some sort of office job and chosen a more predictable life."

Instead, Tamases followed her passion: comedic acting, doing improv and sketch comedy in San Francisco. She performed monologues at open-mike nights and began thinking that the ins and outs of cancer treatment might make an interesting performance piece. "The side effects were so numerous and varied that I thought each body part would have a distinct point of view," she says. "I mean, my hair fell out and my feet got blistered, but my upper back was big and muscular because of the steroids. I thought that if you asked my back what it thought of cancer, it would probably say, 'It rocks!'"

## OFF TO CLOWN COLLEGE

The one-woman show evolved into a play that begins with the sassy receptionist for Jonna's body fielding calls from a parade of quirky body parts. When two nasty killers invade, the body parts work together to save her life.

While honing her monologue was gratifying, it didn't pay the bills. So to earn money, Tamases played characters at corporate gigs. "I realized my friends making the big bucks could walk on stilts and do other stunts," she says. After discovering they'd learned their skills at Ringling Brothers' Clown College, she applied and was accepted. "I hadn't been planning to join the circus, but it was so much fun and I had barely scratched the surface of physical comedy so I joined the show," she says. "I even met my husband there — the grumpy clown." After two years touring with the circus, however, Tamases had had enough of life on the road. She got married and moved to Los Angeles in 1996.

Then, 14 years after her first cancer was discovered, a mammogram revealed that Tamases had early-stage breast cancer, likely a result of the radiation she'd had to treat her

Hodgkin's lymphoma. She and her doctors discussed a variety of options, including close monitoring and a lumpectomy, but Tamases had had enough. "I told them, 'Let's take the boob off,'" she says. "And while you're at it, take the other one too.'"

## STAGE TO SCREEN

With that dramatic decision enacted, the one-woman play *Jonna's Body, Please Hold* had its seven-week premiere run at the prestigious **Odyssey Theatre** in Los Angeles in 2003, though Tamases had performed it at hospitals and cancer groups before that. She now does about 30–40 performances a year, nationwide. "Patients would hug me afterward, saying the show really spoke for them," she says. "And they loved the irreverence and humor." The response made Tamases want to reach a larger audience, so she began scouting corporate sponsors to support making it into a movie.

Tamases approached **Amgen**, a drug manufacturer in nearby Thousand Oaks, CA. The biotech giant makes a medication that treats neutropenia, an abnormally low white-blood-cell count resulting from



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chemotherapy. “I did the play for about 700 of their sales executives and they loved it,” she says. “Amgen signed on right away.”

The film took about a year to complete and involved more than 150 cast, crew and postproduction members. It has won several film festival awards.

### CHARACTER COUNTS

Tamases continues to perform her play worldwide while promoting the film here at home. Healthwise, she’s fine, “though everything is starting to loosen now that I’m in my 40s,” she says. Allowing her body the rest and recuperation it requires is a lesson that needs to be relearned every day,

she says. Yoga four times a week helps keep her feeling strong, less anxious and focused on the important things. “Having cancer has given me a huge appreciation for my body and for the moments we have,” she says. “I actively look for ways to be happy ... to play with my friends and laugh more.”

And what’s it like to finally sport that flat chest? “I’ve figured out that ultimately no one cares what your body looks like,” Tamases says. “What matters is your character, your ideas and your connections with other people.”

To order a DVD of *Jonna’s Body, Please Hold* or learn about touring play performances, visit [jonnasbodymovie.com](http://jonnasbodymovie.com).