

You don't plan to **slow down** when you retire.

LEARN MORE

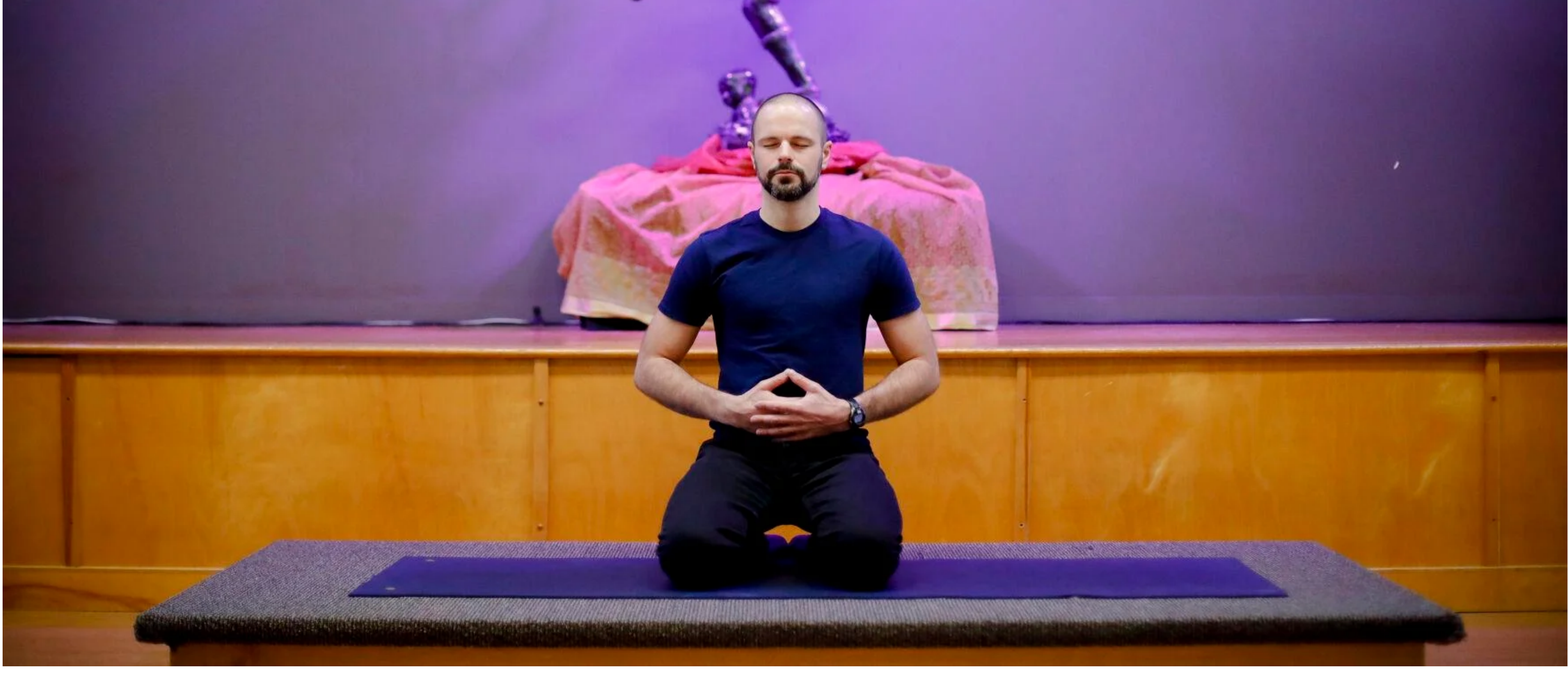
A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

Jonny Orsini was a rising star in the New York theater scene, then a book changed his life. Now, he's teaching breathwork at Kripalu

By Aaron Simon Gross, The Berkshire Eagle

47 mins ago

6 min to read



Jonny Orsini was the toast of Broadway, starring in "The Nance" with Nathan Lane and "Macbeth" with Ethan Hawke. Now, he's a breathwork and mindful outdoor guide at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

This story was made possible by contributions made to the Local Journalism Fund.

[Berkshireeagle.com/donate](#)

STOCKBRIDGE — "Awareness is so powerful," the breathwork instructor tells his class. "Simple awareness can change things."

Sitting on a thin black yoga mat, [Jonny Orsini](#) takes in his 20 students at Kripalu, a far smaller audience than those he performed for on Broadway.

"Allow sounds to come and go. Allow thoughts to come and go," Orsini, 37, tells them on a recent Tuesday morning. "See if simply by noticing, something starts to shift."

Two years ago, when Orsini was a new security office employee at [Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health](#), none of his coworkers knew of his acting career. They had no idea that he'd just filmed a movie with Robert DeNiro and John Malkovich, or that he'd starred in Broadway productions with Ethan Hawke ("Macbeth") and Larry David ("A Fish in the Dark"), among others.

All they knew was that when he'd arrived, he said he'd take any job at Kripalu just to learn from Micah Mortali, founding director of the School of Mindful Outdoor Leadership.

A few months before his arrival in the Berkshires, Orsini had never heard of Kripalu, let alone of Mortali. He had the kind of career that any young actor might dream of — in 2013, he'd won a Theater World Award for his performance in "The Nance," effectively being anointed "the next big thing" in New York theater. That award, for actors making particularly promising Broadway or off-Broadway debuts, had previously honored Philip Seymour Hoffman, Nicole Kidman, Marlon Brando and James Earl Jones. Orsini made good on its promise with a string of acclaimed performances in high-profile productions.

During the pandemic, Orsini moved to Los Angeles, where he booked television gigs, narrated audiobooks and spent more time outdoors. On one morning run in the California mountains, the word "rewild" suddenly came into his head.

"I felt something was coming through me, going, 'Rewild, rewild,'" Orsini said during a recent interview with The Eagle.

He got home, searched the word online and ordered a copy of a book, "[Rewilding: Meditations, Practices and Skills for Awakening in Nature](#)."

"Who wrote this? I want to learn from this person," Orsini thought. He learned that the author, Mortali, worked at a yoga center in Western Massachusetts. "I called my agents, told them I was taking time off, packed up my car, drove across the country and showed up at Kripalu."

Kripalu, reopening from pandemic shutdowns, needed to hire in all departments including — on the day Orsini arrived — the security office. He was fine with that.

"Anything just to get in the door and be steeped in the culture of Kripalu," he said.

Orsini took daily classes, getting to know the faculty, developing a relationship with Mortali.

"When are you coming back?" his agent asked him. He didn't have an answer.

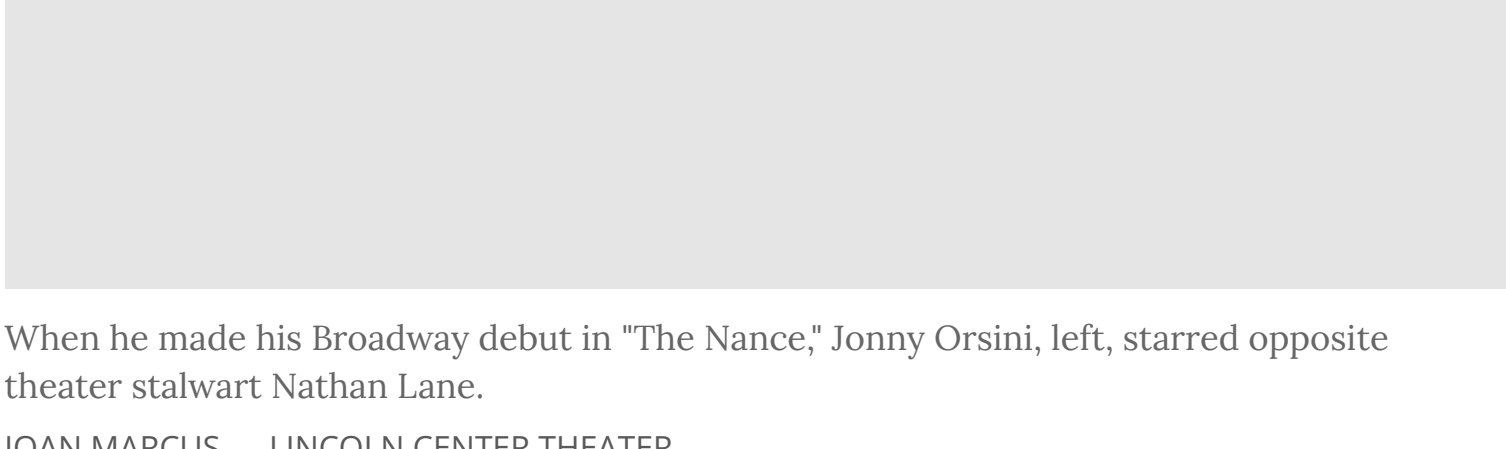
"Three months turned into six months turned into we stopped working with each other," Orsini said. "I'd still get calls because I had built relationships over 14 years." But he was all in on his new vocation, eventually leading programs in mindfulness, meditation, breathwork and archery.

Still, going tunnel vision into a new passion was nothing new for Orsini.

ONSTAGE

When he was cast in a play as an undergraduate at Suffolk University, he'd never stepped on stage before. He was hooked and committed full-throttle.

He read dozens of books on the craft. He took multiple acting classes at a time. He auditioned, and saw lots of professional productions, in Boston, including those produced by Company One, where he booked the lead in the play "After Ashley" while still an undergraduate.



When he made his Broadway debut in "The Nance," Jonny Orsini, left, starred opposite theater stalwart Nathan Lane.

JOAN MARCUS — LINCOLN CENTER THEATER

remembers Orsini's final callback: "He just threw himself into the part as if there was no exit. He made us laugh, cry. He was extraordinary."

The night before rehearsals began, Orsini's co-star, Nathan Lane, invited him out for dinner. During dinner, Orsini says Lane told him, "I may be more nervous than you are because you've probably played love interests before. This isn't something I've had a chance to do."

Orsini saw this as an act of extreme generosity.

"He put us on the same level, two actors who are going to work on this play together," he said.

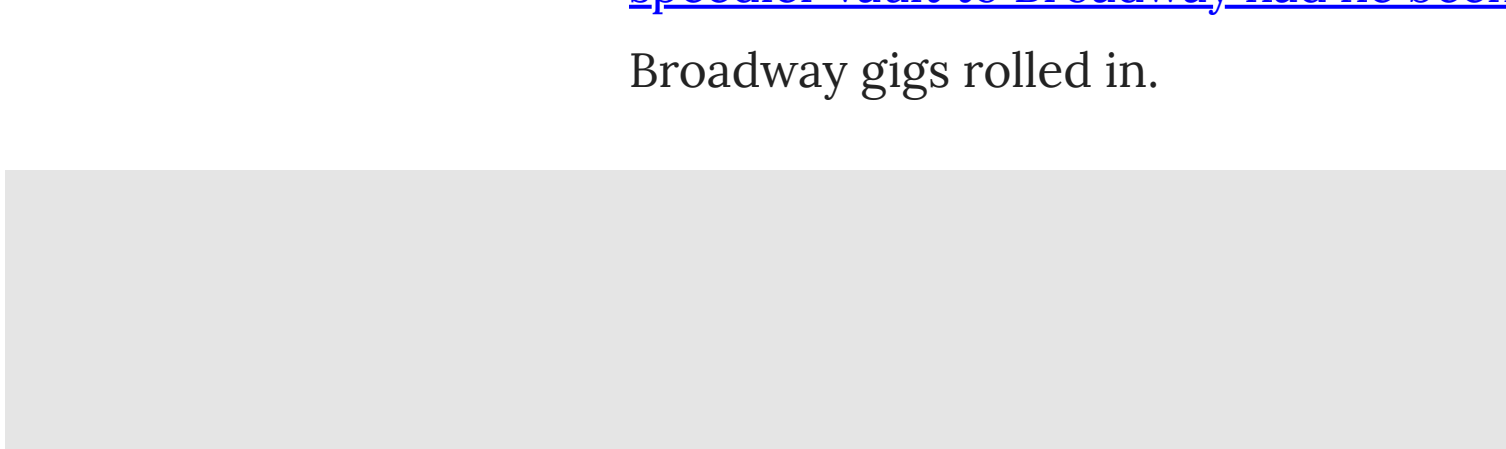
Lane introduced Orsini to his acting teacher Larry Moss, whose students have included Leonardo DiCaprio and Hilary Swank. The two developed a friendship, and Moss suggested Orsini study somatic breathing.

"I brought it up, as I do with all actors," Moss said. "Is their breath free? Are they breathing from their diaphragm? Everyone breathes differently and that has to do with how a character breathes. And Jonny became fascinated by that."

Orsini, who'd developed an extensive breathwork regiment to address intense anxiety and panic attacks as a teenager, felt cracked open by it.

"I was able to expand my capacity for feeling, and therefore for expression. It helped me so much as a person and an artist and an actor," he said.

When "The Nance" opened, Orsini got awards attention and was profiled in The New York Times (Sandy MacDonald wrote he "[couldn't have planned a speedier vault to Broadway had he been a ruthless careerist](#)"). From there, the Broadway gigs rolled in.



In both acting and wellness, Orsini, seen here on the Kripalu grounds, says he wants to let people know they're not alone and create spaces where they can come together to experience shared humanity."

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

"Oh my gosh, it was like a dream," he said.

THE BEST VERSION

Today, previous collaborators admire Orsini's unexpected path.

"I'm not surprised that he has found a way to share his positive outlook, his peace. I really adore him and am rooting for him," O'Brien said. "I don't think he chose it so much as it chose him."

Moss agrees, "I think Jon is finding other parts of himself that he didn't know needed fulfilling. He's most interested in growing to be the best version of himself and when you're of service to people, their lives improve. It makes you feel connected to why you're alive."

In addition to his work at Kripalu, Orsini teaches courses both online and in person, in New York City, Boston and Kingston, N.Y. He offers free meditations on his website and encourages interested parties to reach out about individual work.

"If people are interested in this type of healing modality, it means a lot to me to share it," Orsini said. "That's what this new chapter — and this transition, which I didn't even know would be a transition — is all about."

Kripalu's Executive Director Robert Mulhall said, "He does a lot of great work and there's great feedback about Jon from our guests."

Orsini's also gained the respect of the man who sparked his coming to the area in the first place.

"The way he facilitates breathwork, his tone, his pacing, the safety he creates — it's really skillful," Mortali said. "Breathwork is powerful but it takes somebody who knows his stuff. That's Jon."

Orsini hasn't attended the theater in a long time. But this summer, when a casting director who's an old friend reached out about acting in a short film shooting in the Hudson Valley, Orsini surprised himself by saying yes.

"Wow. This is definitely still a part of my life," he said of his time on set. "It's bringing me alive in a way that only storytelling can."

Now, Orsini's wondering what it could mean to balance the two passions, a new frontier for a guy used to single minded commitment.

"I don't know exactly how it all plays out. Even if I suddenly book a huge TV show and make a gazillion dollars, I'll still hold breathwork groups without a doubt because the healing capacity for this work is like nothing I've ever seen," he said.

As his recent Tuesday class came to a close, Orsini asked his students what came up for them.

"I found the breathwork very emotional," one responded, as others nodded vigorously.

Orsini then asked if they had any questions.

"How can we have your voice at home?" one woman said.

"Pragmatically, I have free sessions available on my website," he answered, before suggesting other techniques to build their meditation practices. "My personal favorite is the hum."

But ultimately, he told them, different options — and different balances — work for different people. He recommends trying as many different practices as possible to figure out what's most effective for you. And even that can shift over the course of your practice, throughout your life.

"Build your tool kit," he told the class. "Have your options."

Aaron Simon Gross can be reached at agross@berkshireeagle.com.

[f](#) [x](#) [t](#) [e](#) [m](#)

Tags THE NANCE BREATHWORK MICAH MORTALI KRIPALU CENTER JONNY ORSINI NEW YORK CITY ROBERT MULHALL ROBERT DENIRO SCHOOL OF MINDFUL OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP ETHAN HAWKE

THE BOSTON GLOBE JAMES EARL JONES WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS JOHN MALKOVICH NICOLE KIDMAN LARRY DAVID YOUNG ACTOR THE NEW YORK TIMES KRIPALU KRIPALU CENTER FOR YOGA & HEALTH

Aaron Simon Gross
Arts & Entertainment Reporter

