

The New York Times

An Invisible Boy Keeps His Promise: Zach Braff on the Path From Summer Camp to Broadway

MARCH 19, 2014

BY ZACH BRAFF



Credit: Sasha Maslov for The New York Times

When I was 8 years old, I watched my trial-lawyer father play Horace Vandergelder in the Livingston, N.J., community-theater production of “Hello, Dolly!” He entered wearing an enormous marching-band bass drum (the character is in a parade), and he roared to his sobbing niece, “Dammit! How am I supposed to play ‘Yonkers My Yonkers’ with all that bellowing in my ears!” It was the most exciting thing I had ever seen.

I was a melancholic child. Worried, anxious. I never felt as if I belonged anywhere, as if I were a foreign exchange student living among the other kids, who seemed predestined to love sports.

Add to that alienation the fact that my parents were going through a divorce, and I was truly treading water. But in that junior high school auditorium, I felt like I’d discovered a secret I didn’t even know was being whispered. There was a place where I might belong: It was the Theater, and I was sold.

A few years later, at Stagedoor Manor in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., I joined an intensive theater boot camp for kids just like me. The second I stepped off the bus, I felt like baby Simba when he’s lifted into the air in “The Lion King” and all the animals sing. Everyone was affectionate; everyone hugged; no one was called “gay” for doing anything that wasn’t masculine. (My insecurity about this had shamefully kept me from doing theater in school.) It was utopia, and I never wanted to leave.

It was there I met Michael Larsen, the musical director of the camp. He told me that I wasn’t just a camper having fun, but that I also had talent. And he was tough — sometimes he’d scream at me — but I knew it was because he thought I had a shot. (Michael was the first of many gay men instrumental in guiding me to where I am now, which is why I try to speak on behalf of gay rights whenever I can. But I suppose that’s a different essay.)

At 18, I was cast as Woody Allen and Diane Keaton’s son in the film “Manhattan Murder Mystery,” my first movie role. And now, after studying film and theater at Northwestern University, playing J. D. on “Scrubs” on TV for nine years and directing two films, I’m working with Woody Allen again. I’m typing these words in my dressing room at the St. James Theater, where on April 10 I’ll open in “Bullets Over Broadway,” a musical adaptation of his hit film. I play David Shayne, a struggling writer in 1929 New York who agrees to cast a mobster’s ditsy girlfriend in one of his plays in order to get it produced.

The St. James is where Yul Brynner opened in “The King and I” in 1951; where hits like “Oklahoma!,” “The Pajama Game,” “Gypsy,” “The Who’s Tommy,” and “The Producers” played, and where, in 1964, by the most surreal of coincidences, Carol Channing first descended an endless staircase in “Hello, Dolly!” I sit in Dressing Room 201, where many of the great luminaries of the Broadway stage — Patti LuPone, Nathan Lane, Mandy Patinkin — have paced waiting for the intercom to chime, “Places for Act I, please.” This is the sanctuary that a little invisible boy in New Jersey dreamed he’d one day find.



Zach Braff in a 1988 production of "Godspell" at Stagedoor Manor.

It's my first time on Broadway, but not my first time onstage. My first job straight out of college was in George C. Wolfe's production of "Macbeth" at the Public Theater, starring Alec Baldwin, Liev Schreiber, Angela Bassett and Michael C. Hall, and I've since appeared Off Broadway in shows at the Delacorte and Second Stage Theater.

The first day of rehearsal for "Macbeth," Alec Baldwin sat down next to me. "Who do you play?" he asked. My voice quivered: "Ummm, I play Fleance and Young Seward." He paused. "Oh — so I kill you twice." Each night, as he drove his broadsword through my heart, I thought, "I've made it!"

In the sixth season of "Scrubs," the show's creator, Bill Lawrence (also a major fan of musical comedy), decided to do a musical episode. It was the first time I had done musical comedy since I was at camp, and it instantly reminded me how much I loved it.

My favorite song from the episode was called "Guy Love." In it, Donald Faison (my best friend in real life and on the show) and I sang about how our homoerotic love for each other was nothing to apologize for. ("It's guy love, that's all it is.") The experience replanted the seed, and I made a promise to myself: One day I would sing on Broadway.

I'd be curled in the fetal position spooning a pillow right now, though, if it weren't for my current director, Susan Stroman. Directing and choreographing a musical is the most epic undertaking for one human being, yet Susan (or Stro, as the cool Broadway kids call her) handles it with aplomb.

And she's not just choreographing the actors and dancers, but also the magnificent set designed by Santo Loquasto, which moves in ways I didn't know scenery could move. It's a dance of men and women and machines and winches and elevators and lights. The wings of the St. James are very narrow, so when a giant piece of scenery disappears from the audience's view, the most elaborate game of Tetris begins, as the outstanding stage crew turns and lifts and twists; not an inch is wasted. The second the orchestra strikes the first note of the overture, no one stops moving until the final curtain hits the deck.

During "Manhattan Murder Mystery," I had every word of my lines memorized down to the punctuation mark. I'll never forget: The first thing Woody said to me was, "We're probably not going to say exactly what's on the page so ... you know ... just try to keep up. ..." While we've been in previews on "Bullets," he and Stro have been giving us notes each day on the previous night's performance. One night, I dropped a great joke by accident. He said to me with a smile, "You'll probably get a bigger laugh if you actually say it onstage."

All the people on Broadway are the best at what they do. All dancers want to work with Stro, so she gets the best dancers in New York City. Is there an oboist in the orchestra? You can guarantee he's the best oboist on the island of Manhattan. Need to recreate the look of 1929? The six-time Tony winner William Ivey Long is here to design the costumes. And the voices! I am in awe. There has yet to be a time when I don't get goose bumps when Betsy Wolfe, who plays my girlfriend, belts out the final notes of our duet, "I Found a New Baby."

In TV and film, where I've had the bulk of my experience, the best moments of the day are edited together to create the best version of what you've captured. It's a different art, with a different process. But when the curtain rises at 8:05 every night at the St. James, the audience is being treated to a ballet of moving parts as intricate as a pocket watch. Whether it's the 19-piece orchestra under the stage, the crew in the wings or the 30 performers on top of it, the gears turn, the set spins and a tiny hidden smile creeps across my face.