

Serious ambition

Woodsider's hard-won acting chops on display in Off Broadway revival of 1932 'Biography'

By Raphael Sugarman - Thursday, December 3, 2009 11:12 AM EST



Leander "Bunny" Nolan is a very determined fellow. One of the leading characters in S.N. Behrman's 1932 comedy "Biography," Nolan is single-minded in his desire to be elected senator from Tennessee. That includes trying to block the publication of an autobiography written by a former lover and celebrated artist, which could undermine his political aspirations.

Queens resident Kevin Albert, who is currently playing Nolan in a limited-run off-Broadway revival of "Biography," couldn't

be more different than Bunny, in innumerable ways. More kindly and polite than Nolan and far less conservative, Albert would surely feel flattered, not threatened, to be cited in the autobiography of a former lover, particularly one with a reputation as a great artist. And even if the references to him in the book were uncomfortable or revealing, Albert would never dream of squelching the biographer's right to self-expression.

Despite their many differences, however, tenacity and ambition are traits the actor and his character share in spades.

Albert, 37, who lives in Woodside, began to act when he was only 5, and by age 10 had settled on it as a career, along with singing and dancing. He has formal training in all three art forms.

He is also a producer, having co-founded Mare Nostrum Elements, a nonprofit performance group and production company, which is producing the "Biography" revival, along with Theater 808, in association with The Schoolhouse Theater.

Albert is also the manager of Orso, a cozy Joe Allen restaurant in the theater district and one of Zagat Survey's more highly rated bistros on Restaurant Row.

"Handling extreme pressure with style and class" is how Albert describes what the theater and restaurant worlds have in common. "Maintaining your integrity and your sense of self is something that I have honed at Orso and have found is very useful in producing theater." Two other Orso staffers are also in the revival of "Biography": Cheryl Orsini plays Minnie, the angry German maid, and Simon MacLean plays Warwick Wilson, a fictional movie star.

Though “Biography” is a comedy, it takes a serious look at subjects like feminism, art, relationships and morality. S.N. Behrman was a journalist and a playwright. He was a staff writer for The New Yorker and The New York Times. He wrote the musical libretto for “Fanny” and three screenplays for Greta Garbo: “Queen Christina,” “Conquest” and her final film, “Two-Faced Woman.” His other successful works for the stage included “The Second Man,” “End of Summer” and “No Time for Comedy.”

“Biography” is considered by many critics to be Behrman’s finest play. Far ahead of its time when it was first staged in 1932, the production revolves around free spirited painter Marian Froude and two of her many former paramours: Nolan, which is Kevin Albert’s part, and Richard Kurt, an editor who offers her a large sum of money to write her autobiography.

“This play is written so that the audience walks away seeing all of the characters in a sympathetic way to one degree or another,” said Albert. “That is not easy to do and it makes the play more thought-provoking.”

If Albert were writing his own autobiography, it would reveal a person who has spent virtually his entire life devoted to developing himself as a performer.

Growing up in a big New England family, in a house with four brothers and sisters, and both grandparents, his parents were “very supportive of my acting goals, but told me that I would have to finance the training pretty much on my own,” said Albert. Never afraid of work and completely devoted to the idea of an acting career, he took jobs at a local restaurant, a bakery and a drug store. He also mowed lawns and shoveled snow.

Virtually all the money he made from a series of after-school and weekend jobs was funneled into dance lessons. One summer, when he couldn’t land an acting job at the respected Weston Playhouse in Vermont, he implored theater bosses to hire him as a tech, “so at least I could be close to the actors,” he recalled. But as his formidable skills as an actor — and his complete lack of prowess with a hammer and nails — became evident that summer, he was eventually hired as a cast member for Weston’s production of “Oklahoma.”

He performed in Weston productions every summer until he was 21 and was accepted to the prestigious Boston Conservatory, where he studied acting, singing and dance.

His professional career has included playing Bernardo in the national tour of “West Side Story,” as well as playing in the chorus of a European tour; “My Fair Lady” with Richard Chamberlain; Bobby in “North of Providence”; Michael in “Welded”; and The Reverend Hale in “The Crucible,” with The Schoolhouse Theater. He first played Bunny Nolan in Schoolhouse’s production of “Biography.”

As serious as Albert is about his acting career, he is just as devoted to developing the talents of others. As a founding board member of Mare Nostrum Elements, he produces and directs dance, theater and experimental theater productions and teaches movement. This combination of ambition mixed with generosity and altruism would be difficult for Bunny Nolan to appreciate.

“Bunny is ambitious but is too concerned about what the outside world thinks of him,” said Albert. “My ambition is to build a future for myself and the also for others, without too much concern for what the outside world thinks.”

“Biography” is playing through Dec. 19, at Theater 3 at The Mint, 311 W. 43 St. 3rd Floor.