

Zach Braff

Gets His First Shot at *Broadway*

By Iris Wiener

Throughout the creation of *Bullets Over Broadway*, Zach Braff found himself cheerfully overwhelmed at the fact that he was living his dream of being on Broadway. After all, there's quite a lot of pressure on you when you're making your Broadway and musical debut with seasoned talents ranging from Tony-winning director/choreographer Susan Stroman to Tony nominee Marin Mazzie. Don't forget the small fact that Woody Allen wrote the book for *Bullets Over Broadway*, which just received six Tony nominations ... and is also based on Allen's own film.

"I feel really lucky to be working on Broadway," the actor says, immediately humble when contemplating his current spot on one of the most coveted stages in the world. "It was a childhood dream of mine, so to be doing it is very surreal, and I just feel very grateful."

Braff, who is most well known for his role as Dr. John Dorian on *Scrubs*, is also a director and playwright. In fact, his 2011 play, *All New People*, saw a successful run off-Broadway at Second Stage Theatre. Ironically, in *Bullets* Braff is portraying a playwright struggling with maintaining his creative freedom.

"The similarities between myself and [my character] David Shayne are very bizarre, especially because I just made a film [*Wish I Was Here*] and crowdfunded it with the mantra of 'Help me make a film with no compromise,'" Braff says. "This entire play is about artists' struggles to make things without compromise. In fact, all but one artist in Woody's book compromises at some point, so obviously Woody Allen is making a statement on all that. I realized when I was a playwright at Second Stage that in any art form, trying to get what's in your brain to the audience without it being messed up by someone or something is a great challenge."

Set in 1929, *Bullets* is the story of David Shayne, a playwright with dreams of bringing his own work to the bright lights and big city. He manages to find a backer for his play (Vincent Pastore), only to discover that his financier is actually a mobster with some creative ideas of his own. The



comedic aspect of the show is nothing new for Braff, who has proven his talent with both humor and drama many times over (see *Scrubs* and his film *Garden State* for a reminder). Braff has also done stage work such as off-Broadway's *Trust* and *Twelfth Night*, but *Bullets* features a slew of rousing song and dance numbers set to tunes of the '20s, creating a new challenge for Braff.

"Learning to sing eight shows a week without losing my voice was probably the most difficult thing," he says of his experience with the show. "I can sing, but I'm not a professional singer. I guess technically I am now, but I never sang this much in my life!"

Singing may have come later in life, but Braff has always wanted to perform. He remembers making James Bond films with his brother on a Super 8 camera, but theater would come calling at around the age of nine years when he witnessed his father performing in a local production of *Hello, Dolly!*

"It was just exciting," he says of seeing his father on stage. "I was a kid in public school who didn't find any interest in sports, which is not a rarity, but it is a problem in your average American public school. None of that excited me, so I felt very lost and alienated. Then I went to see him do community theater and I just totally lit up. I liked magic as a kid and the idea that the curtain would close and there would be a different set, that the lights would change, there was an orchestra ... it was so exciting to me. It was like the circus came to town and my dad was the star!"

Even though Braff is now the star of a huge Broadway production, he continues to take advice from other Broadway actors – particularly Mandy Patinkin, who is also featured in Braff's upcoming film, *Wish I Was Here*.

"Mandy sent me a whole checklist of things I should be watching out for and doing," Braff says. "He's so paternal and lovely and wonderful, and in a great twist, was in my exact dressing room when he did *The Secret Garden* at The St. James!"

One aspect of the business about which Braff needs no advice is his rapport with his fans. After each performance of *Bullets*, fans of both *Scrubs* and his theatrical talent can be found lining up for selfies with the affable star ("I've never heard the word selfie so much in my entire life! I have it down to a science," he jokes). It should come as no surprise that *Scrubs: The Musical* is already in development. "We did a musical episode," Braff points out. "It's a really good launching point for one. I'm not involved with it. I wouldn't be in it, obviously, but it will be fun to watch and see it develop."

Braff plans to be watching its progress from nearby, as he would love nothing more than to continue doing theater for years to come. "It just brings me so much joy to entertain people and to make people laugh," he says. "You're quite literally making 1,700 people crack up every night. It's the best job in the world."



Photo by Paul Kolnik

