



Reese Witherspoon and Alessandro Nivola in *Best Laid Plans*

## RISING STAR

### ALESSANDRO NIVOLA'S "BEST LAID PLANS"

By Michael Giltz

Actor Alessandro Nivola is a bit harried these days. When we speak, it's the Monday after the opening weekend of *As You Like It* in Williamstown. A low-key summer theatrical outing, it quickly turned into a media meltdown thanks to the presence of Gwyneth Paltrow as Rosalind.

"They put shows on so quickly here," the 27-year-old actor says. "We ended up having a dress rehearsal on Wednesday and then a show Wednesday night and a matinee Thursday and then we opened Thursday night which was this whole..." he pauses, searching for the right word, "...scene. And then played a show on Friday and two on Saturday again. So by the end of it I could hardly walk."

He'll have to get used to the frantic pace—as well as attention being paid to himself as much as his costars. Reviews for the show pegged Nivola as an "extravagantly romantic leading man" (*USA Today*) and "a revelation" (*New York Post*).

That's a good start for a busy fall. Best known for playing Nicolas Cage's paranoid genius of a brother in *Face/Off*, Nivola stars next as the hapless antihero of *Best Laid Plans*, a clever film noir from Fox Searchlight due out September 10. That's followed by the debut of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* at the Toronto Film Festival (Miramax opens it officially in November), in which Nivola plays a cad. Finally there's Kenneth Branagh's musical adaptation of *Love's Labour Lost* in the spring. In it, Nivola finally plays an innocent romantic, fitting since that's the movie on which Nivola met his girlfriend, actress Emily Mortimer (*Scream 3*, *Elizabeth*).

"I have the opening number which is 'I'd Rather Charleston,'" says Nivola about his debut as a professional hooper. "We're all in a library having some debate and suddenly I break into song and by the end of it we're all leaping on the furniture. It's just like those old Busby Berkeley musicals. We all felt like we'd just stepped back in time."

Being the center of a musical number isn't so unusual for Nivola—he's sung in *A Little Night Music*, Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing*, and even Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar* ("loincloth and everything," he admits). And it was the title role in a grade school production of *Peter Pan* that helped spark his love of acting.

"I didn't fly because they had those asbestos ceilings and I think I would have ended up in the lap of some audience member," laughs Nivola about his very first role. "But I did march through the audience at the end leading up a line of people and thinking...well, I was pretty excited about the whole thing."

That excitement remains with him, for the stage gave Nivola his first big break and it was a doozy: debuting in New York on Broadway in *A Month in the Country* opposite Helen Mirren.

"I hadn't even worked in New York before that," remembers Nivola. "I'd gone to Yale and done a couple of years of regional and I'd been auditioning for every Broadway play that had come up. You know, you get closer and closer and closer and eventually one of them drops. So when *A Month in the Country* came, that really put me on the map in New York. And then the sort of same process began to happen in L.A. where I would go up for just about anything that came into town. And I'd get closer and closer and closer and finally I got a couple of little parts and then finally one came into town and I got it just from the audition."

That was *Reach the Rock*, a John Hughes-penned movie about a rebellious young man in his twenties that was semi-autobiographical and far more restrained than his usual comedic fare.

"*Reach the Rock* was actually a really big deal for me because I probably wouldn't have ended up doing *Face/Off* if it hadn't been for that," says Nivola. "I've never even seen it, but I've been told it's actually a sweet little movie." Though that sweet little movie was barely released, casting agents heard about his snagging the lead and that helped him land the flashy role in *Face/Off*—and that's propelled his career ever since. "Apparently, *Reach the Rock* just came out on video last weekend. Somebody sent me an email saying that there was a stack of them on the Blockbuster New Releases shelf." He laughs. "I was shocked because I'd forgotten all about it."