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Michael Giltz

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Posted May 1, 2009 | 07:11 PM (EST)

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Theater: *West Side Story's* Matt Cavanaugh Breaks Out



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When you're in a hit Broadway musical that both fans and critics are crazy about, there's nothing like it. A movie can keep piling up huge grosses, but Broadway stars get to go out onstage night after night and actually feel the wave of excitement from fans. For actor Matt Cavanaugh, who stars as Tony in *West Side Story*, it's also a moment he fully appreciates.

"I started off my career in what *Entertainment Weekly* called the worst show of 2003," laughs the 30 year old from Jonesboro, Arkansas about his debut in the musical version of *Urban Cowboy*. So he is savoring the moment of appearing on Broadway in the show that he saw as a kid and first got him excited about the theater.

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Photo credit: Joan Marcus

Josefina Scaglione as Maria and Matt Cavenaugh as Tony

"Tuesdays can be a drag sometimes in the theater," says Cavenaugh about the beginning of the week for a Broadway show after getting Monday off. "The cast needs to sort of wake up and the audience does too. But not with this show. From the first note, the audience is right there with us."

And from the first preview, fans have been lining up to see this revival of one of the most iconic shows of all time. The box office has been blistering -- *West Side Story* has been grossing more than \$1 million a week, putting it alongside blockbusters like *Wicked*, *Mamma Mia*, *Jersey Boys*, and *The Lion King*.

Come Tuesday at 8:30 am, the excitement could grow even more with the Tony Award nominations. But will Tony show any love for Tony? The Tony in the original Broadway production didn't even get nominated. And though the film won ten of eleven Oscar nominations, its Tony (Richard Beymer, in the role **reluctantly turned down by Elvis**) and Maria (Natalie Wood) weren't even nominated.

That streak will hopefully end, thanks to Cavenaugh and the lovely Josefina Scaglione making her poised Broadway debut as Maria. They're the center of a rock steady revival helmed by Arthur Laurents, who keeps the focus squarely on the story, just as he did with his revival of *Gypsy*. The tale of two young people from rival gangs who fall instantly and madly and tragically in love can't help being passionately over-the-top, but the scenes of drama aren't merely an excuse to get to the next gorgeous number.

Cavenaugh's opener is a case in point. Riff (a strong Cody Green) pushes Tony (who is cleaning the sign of the drug store where he works) into coming to the dance that night so they can parlay with the Sharks and set up a rumble. Tony is on a ladder, wiping down the sign and talks over his shoulder to Riff and eventually the audience about the changes coming just round the corner ("Something's Coming"). It's a quiet, conversational moment, utterly natural and winning. Cavenaugh doesn't belt out the number; he reveals it.

"That evolved after the debut," says Cavenaugh, who naturally praises Laurents and his focus on the emotional subtext of every moment. "Originally, I came down off the ladder right away. But I felt trapped at center stage. I wanted to stay with what I was doing. I had a job to do and so I stayed focused on cleaning the sign." The result is a smooth easing of the audience into the conventions of a musical.

Similar moments abound. Cavenaugh says Stephen Sondheim referred to "One Hand, One Heart" as a cigarette song, a boring bit where Tony and Maria goof around in a dress shop with some mannequins. But their faux marriage in that scene, along with their embarrassed reaction after it's over is quite moving now. "Tony's a romantic but Maria is more of a realist," says Cavenaugh, who is getting married himself in August to Jenny Powers, who is starring in Susan Stroman's musical *Happiness* at Lincoln Center. At the end of the scene, they're both thrown off by the unspoken realization that just about the only place their love can survive is when the rest of the world is shut out.



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PHOTO: Kate Hudson Poses as a Blushing Bride

It's just one moment among many in a show filled with great dancing and solid performances from showcase roles like Karen Olivo as Anita down to the appealing Kyle Coffman as the pugnacious A-Rab and Ryan Steele as the overwhelmed Baby John.



Cody Green as Riff and The Jets

For Cavanaugh, it's a triumph just to be taken seriously. He burst onto the scene in *Urban Cowboy* but the show was indeed a flop and the attention showered on Cavanaugh had more to do with his physique than his singing or acting.

"The whole experience for me was strange," says Cavanaugh. "There was a billboard of me in Times Square." That billboard showed him open-shirted and riding a bull. People bought the poster, but not the show. And offers came his way. "**Wilhelmina** offered me a modeling contract," says Cavanaugh who turned it down. Instead of pursuing TV and film and runway work, he jumped at the chance to grab a supporting role in *Grey Gardens*, a stirring musical based on the famed documentary about a socialite mother and daughter living in glorious decrepitude.

Cavanaugh was very funny and good in a supporting role as two characters, including a stoned handyman of sorts. An Off Broadway production of a show in which the focus was clearly going to be on the women (**Christine Ebersole was brilliant** and would ultimately win the Tony) might seem a comedown for someone plastered on every billboard in sight, but Cavanaugh was smart.

"I was so thankful to be in *Grey Gardens*, working with Tony winners and Pulitzer Prize winners," he says. "Whatever happened, I knew people would be talking about my acting instead of my six pack."

That show enjoyed glorious reviews and a fanatical following among theater lovers, but never quite caught fire at the box office and closed after a decent run. Cavanaugh followed that with *A Catered Affair*, another musical with a storied pedigree in which a woman -- in this case, Faith Prince -- would clearly again be taking center stage. It didn't enjoy nearly as much critical support and closed quickly. That meant Cavanaugh had been part of just about every Broadway experience except a hit: he'd been in a commercial venture aimed squarely at the masses, a critical success that enjoyed a modest run, and a bold musical that perhaps never got a fair shake. So an out and out smash won't be taken for granted.

"It's great to be in a show that everyone loves and wants to see," says Cavanaugh. And he knows he made the right choice pursuing theater even though it was tough from the start.

"My first show was in high school and it was called *Here's Love* [the musical version of *Miracle On 34th St*]. I played a street sweeper who is cleaning the street right in front of Macy's when Santa Claus walks by and I just happen to be whistling 'Here Comes Santa Claus.' And I actually happened to be a very good whistler. But I was the first person to come on stage and when the curtain went up and I could hear the murmuring of the audience, I just froze. Eventually I squeaked something out but it was rough there for a moment."

And now, finally, for a moment, things are easy -- a hit show on Broadway with ten days off in August to get married to the girl you love. The show's characters dream of a place where they can be happy and free. The actors on stage, like Cavanaugh, have already found it.

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