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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Ma Rainey's Black Bottom on Broadway

Extracted on Oct-22-2021 07:33:19

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[[image - color photograph of Roger Bart]]
[[Photo credit]] PAUL KOLNIK

BART IN BLOOM

by Robert Simonson

In the musical *The Producers* - surely the most democratic employer on Broadway - hard work, patience and dedication will get you everywhere. Onetime supporting player and understudy Brad Oscar rose to the lead role of shifty showman Max Bialystock within a couple months of original star Nathan Lane's departure. Brad Musgrove, a swing actor at the show's beginning, now plays Carmen Ghia, talentless director Roger De Bris's flamboyant Guy Friday. And the man who first donned Carmen's cat suit, Roger Bart, has ascended to over-the-title status as Leo Bloom, the milquetoast accountant Bialystock lures into a life of theatrical producing - that is to say, crime.

Bart got the call to play Leo while still on the set of "Bram and Alice," the sitcom that lured him from the show in June 2002. The series was canceled and he returned to the Broadway fold. "There was never a moment when I was unemployed," he said. "I had the best fall-back job in Hollywood."

The *Producers*' new Bloom is the first to hail from a largely theatrical background; Matthew Broderick has film star status and his successor, Steven Weber, has mainly flourished on the small screen. A musical comedy veteran, he is also arguably the best-sung Leo to date. And, it should be said, the pale, compact actor is the only one of the three that might actually be mistaken for an accountant in real life.

Though Bart won a Tony Award for playing Snoopy in the 1999 revival of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, it was Mel Brooks's riotously distasteful musical that lent his name currency in the theatre

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[[pull quote]] Roger Bart steps into a leading role in the Broadway juggernaut known as *The Producers* [[/pull quote]]

[[photo from stage show - credited: "PAUL KOLNIK]]
[[caption]] Bart (rear right, in black) in his original role of Carmen Ghia, with (front, l.-r.) Matthew Broderick, Nathan Lane and Gary Beach in *The Producers* [[/caption]]

business. He had originally auditioned for the part of Nazi playwright Franz Liebkind, but instead was cast as Carmen Ghia - a character that has freed normally sober journalists to employ words like "swishy" and "flaming." He won the part with his interpretation of a single letter.



"Mel always said if you're going to go up and ring the bell, then ring the bell," related Bart. "Which means don't hold back, take a chance." He kept that in mind while running through Carmen's first scene. Greeting Leo and Max at the door with the word "Yes?," he perhaps thought how the last letter of that word is also the first letter of "sibilant." "I held that 's' for 30 seconds. I think they couldn't believe how bold I was. That's probably the reason I got the job."

Along the way he devised the other earmarks of Ghia's character: the fright wig hair style moussed within an inch of its life; the quasi-Egyptian exit walk; and the mouth-popping noise he uses to summon attention. Bart stole the last bit from character actor Fritz Feld, who played many a supercilious maitre d' and hotel clerk over his seven-decade career (including a couple of Mel Brooks films). "I did that as a gag one day. It was one of the very few days that we had a tense rehearsal.

See BART IN BLOOM, page 45

[[advertisement]]

[[image - black & white photograph of a tall woman modeling a full length shearling coat, with fur collar]]

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