

Theater



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STRONG WILL
Allan smolders in
a rehearsal for last
spring's *The March*.

People person

Will Allan sets Steppenwolf's latest drama in motion. By **Kris Vire**

Will Allan was a senior theater major at North Central College in Naperville when he spotted an audition notice for TimeLine Theatre Company's 2009 production of *The History Boys*. The Chicago premiere of Alan Bennett's West End and Broadway hit about boys at a British prep school called for eight young male actors.

"I spent, like, 20 bucks to overnight my headshot and résumé from Naperville to Chicago," the actor, now a TimeLine artistic associate, says with a laugh that retains a hint of his Kentucky-native drawl. Allan scored one of the coveted roles and graduated from North Central two months into TimeLine's much-extended run. Three years out of school, the appealingly open young actor is performing his third role at Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

"I sometimes teach [workshops] back at my alma mater," Allan, 25, says on a break from rehearsal for Steppenwolf's *Good People*. "They always ask for advice in getting into it. I'm like, I literally saw something in that paper, sent it in, and it just happened from there. So I was superfortunate because that show really catapulted a lot of young Chicago actors into the scene."

Allan isn't exaggerating. *The History Boys* brought career-enhancing attention to Alex Weisman, Joel Gross, Rob Fenton, Behzad Dabu and Michael Peters, among others.

For Allan, it's led to appearances in Robert Falls's Goodman Theatre production of *The Seagull* as well as Steppenwolf for Young Adults' *A Separate Peace* and last spring's main-stage Steppenwolf production of Frank Galati's *The March*. Before going Equity, he squeezed in a couple of storefront shows at Strawdog.

"A part of me does feel like I skipped some of that storefront scene that I love," the performer says. "[But] while I didn't spend as much time in that area of Chicago theater... [it] had such an impact on me as a performer, working with actors who're so passionate."

Allan portrays a young South Boston dollar-store manager in *Good People*, David Lindsay-Abaire's class drama that premiered on Broadway in

2011. His character, Stevie, sets the play in motion by firing middle-aged single mom Margie, played here by ensemble member Mariann Mayberry.

"In this Southie environment... that is a very tight-knit community," Allan says. "He's arguably the best—the most 'good person' in the play. He has to do something terrible in that first scene, but it's not something he wants to do to someone he has loved as part of his community."

As for Allan's community, he'll appear next spring in Victory Gardens' production of *The Whale*, but between *Good People* and the VG show, he says, "I think I'm gonna head to New York just for a couple months in the early winter, to try to dive into pilot season

there and start getting my name out into that theater scene."

Especially given that his parents have recently moved to Chicago, he's not ready to depart permanently. But Allan can't refuse opportunities outside Chicago, he says, no matter how well this city has treated him: "I

love Chicago so much, and I love its theater scene. It's one of those things where I'm gonna try to have both. I'm comfortable doing this stuff anywhere in the world, so we'll see what happens."

Good People previews Thursday 13 and opens September 23. See *Resident companies*.

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A Class Act



Porchlight Music Theatre (see *Resident companies*). Music and lyrics by Edward Kleban. Book by Linda Kline and Lonny Price. Dir. Stacey Flaster. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 35mins; one intermission.

Musical theater composer Edward Kleban had one great success before dying in 1987 at age 48: He wrote the lyrics to Marvin Hamlisch's music for 1975's *A Chorus Line*, winning the Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize. But I don't need to tell you that if you plan on seeing *A Class Act*, the well-meaning but clunky musical biography constructed mostly from the many, many songs Kleban composed for musicals never produced. The first characters onstage, ostensibly close friends of Kleban's who are setting up his memorial service, mention *A Chorus Line* three times in the show's first 60 seconds.

It's not long before Kleban himself (a wildly mugging Bill Larkin) pipes up from the audience, here to listen in on his own funeral. And that's where Linda Kline and Lonny Price's meandering narrative begins to collapse in on itself. It's never clear where the world of the play takes place—at the memorial or in ghost Ed's head? Are the flashbacks to past relationships and beloved classes at the BMI Musical Theatre Workshop Ed's memories or his friends' recollections?

Kline, Kleban's longtime companion, doesn't shy away from his spikier elements in this 2001 piece; Ed's presented as neurotic, quirky, needy, frustrating and grudge-bearing. Yet this life story leaves out too much. It begins with Ed's commitment to a mental hospital in college, but we never learn what might have led him to become such a mess. More important, we don't see the charisma that keeps his friends loyal through decades of asshole behavior. And the music on display here, though well performed by Stacey Flaster's strong cast, isn't terribly impressive. When Ed's lifelong friend Sophie (Tina Gluschenko) "betrays" the frustrated composer by suggesting his lyrics just might not be as good as his music, you might be inclined to agree. —*Kris Vire*

MUSIC CLASS Larkin offers some pointers.



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