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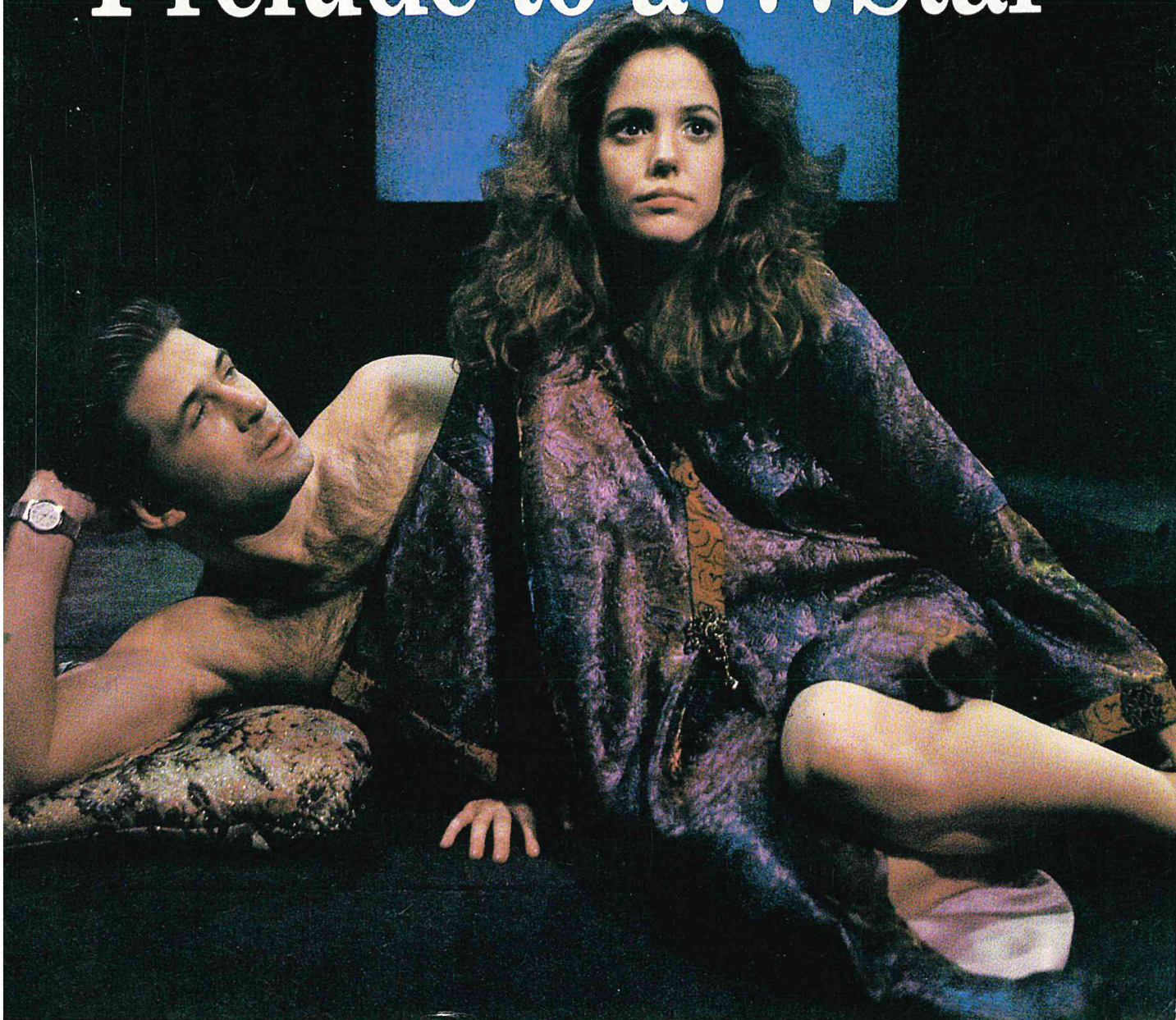
TheaterWeek

March 19, 1990

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Mary-Louise Parker:

Prelude to a... Star





Tim Curry and Mary-Louise Parker in *The Art of Success*.

Gerry Goodstein

Prelude To A... Star

Mary-Louise Parker lands the lead role opposite Alec Baldwin in the new Craig Lucas play at Circle Rep.

by Gerard Raymond

If you haven't heard of Mary-Louise Parker, you will. After just two productions in New York and a soon-to-be-released movie, people are talking. At twenty-five years old, she is one of the most talented young actresses around and, to put it mildly, one of the most unusual.

"I've heard the term 'otherworldly' used to describe me quite a bit," Parker says with a smile, adding, "I like it more than 'offbeat.'" Her persona off stage as well as on is a curious blend of wide-eyed innocence and mature wisdom. "I think people don't understand my sense of humor. They have told me time and again that I'm vapid or that I'm weird—of course when you are younger you do it inten-

tionally because men think it's cute—but I hate being described as 'kooky.' A man is funny, a woman is kooky. Why can't *I* be funny? Also, to me, kooky implies someone who is oblivious to what's going on. I know what's going on. I *always* know what's going on."

Parker is currently in Craig Lucas's *Prelude to a Kiss* at Circle Rep. Her costar, Alec Baldwin, has been the focus of much media attention these past few weeks. Parker, however, is wary of the press. Before we talked she had only spoken to *The New York Times* which published a capsule comment in the Friday *On Stage* column, accompanied by a distinctly unflattering Hirschfeld cartoon.

Over vegetarian fare at her favorite

West Village restaurant, *TheaterWeek* talked to the enigmatic actress on a Sunday evening between performances.

"I don't really have a home town and I've lived in a lot of different places," is all that Parker chooses to reveal of her childhood. She trained for the theater at the North Carolina School of the Arts. Apparently she had never acted in a play before auditioning for the school. So what made her choose the profession? "I don't think I want to know why. It wasn't a decision to be made. It just happened."

Parker moved to New York four years ago on the day she graduated from school. "I didn't have any money. My family thought the city would eat me alive." She worked at sixteen dif-

ferent jobs in her first year including selling shoes. "I can't be a waitress," she explains. "I am kind of slow, I could never get the hang of whipping around with a plate." Her first acting job was with a theater company called The Edge, but she did not get paid for it. "I never stopped to question why I was in New York. I just kept going."

Not much happened in New York, but Parker soon found work in regional theater, including the premiere of Terrence McNally's new play *Up in Saratoga* in San Diego and a production of Moliere's *The Miser* in

Syracuse. But, she says, "the first time anybody really saw me was in *The Art of Success*." Prior to her off-Broadway debut in that play last December, she completed *Longtime Companion*, an American Playhouse film written by Craig Lucas and directed by Norman René, the writer/director team of *Prelude to a Kiss*.

The film, which will be released in May, focuses on the impact of AIDS on the lives of ten gay men over a ten-year period. Parker plays the only female character in the story, representing a kind of liberal heterosexual

conscience in the movie. The film raised her own awareness of the reality of AIDS and the importance of gay issues in general. "There are so many homophobic people everywhere—all I can say to them is 'Grow up!'"

Parker's eyes, her most arresting feature, grow wide when she gets serious—"I feel strongly about a lot of things"—then her mood changes suddenly and, lifting her hair with her hand, she smiles sweetly and says, "But basically I am a happy person."

Parker has turned down auditions in the past because she felt the plays concerned were misogynistic or treated women as sex objects. "Half the time they cast with their genitals. I don't want to be some sexual device. I don't think I could be. They might as well get somebody who can do it really well. Those aren't the parts I want to play. There is not point in auditioning for something that I find offensive. It's not even that it's offensive—it's just stupid."

But Parker goes on to add, "I don't think my characters are frigid. I have no problem with sex." Indeed the women she has portrayed in her two New York productions are full-blooded and sexually active. In *The Art of Success*, she played Jane Hogarth, the newly-wed wife of the painter William Hogarth. When she learns about her husband's sexual quirks, she resolves to gratify them. Parker found the play's S&M scene "valid" and had no "moral problems doing it." In *Prelude to a Kiss*, her character, Rita, is also sexually confident.

Parker says she accepted these two roles principally because she is attracted to good writing. A poet in her spare time, she exclaims, "I'm so in love with good writing because that is where theater begins. My job is to best present what a writer has written." She acknowledges that Nick Dear's *The Art of Success* might be a little sloppy but says it inspired her "because it said things people don't say"—the play raises questions about patronage of the arts, censorship and relations between the sexes. Parker liked the fact that the play "doesn't attempt to answer anything, it just asks and asks and asks."

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Prelude to a Kiss affects her personally. "This play has a special place for me here," she says, touching her heart. In the play an old man yearns to be young again and for a short time he magically inhabits the body of the young woman played by Parker. "In this country getting old can be a tragedy," Parker comments. "I remember my father being over-qualified for jobs and not getting them because they thought he was too old. I want him to see this play," she says, excited at the prospect.

Parker notes that *Prelude's* author, Craig Lucas, "somehow knows how to take the darkest and most depressing situations of life and make them human and funny. 'God bless Craig Lucas,' that is what I say to myself everyday." She accepted the part in *Longtime Companion* before she even read the script because of her respect for Lucas and director Norman René. "Craig and Norman could tell me, 'Mary-Louise we are doing a performance piece and you are playing an elephant on quaaludes and I would say, 'where do I sign?'"

According to René that implicit trust and admiration is mutual. "I feel like I can trust her to be in the scene, in the moment. She tells the truth when she acts." He points out that in *Prelude*, Parker's part calls for her to play two different characters. When Rita is inhabited by the old man she undergoes a distinct personality change. "I think it's hard to find someone her age who has the versatility for this part," says René adding, "And I think she's beautiful!"

Mark Lamos, who directed her in *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Hartford, says she has a "unique spontaneity" and that she brought a freshness to Wilde's too-well-known dialogue. Playing the unsophisticated and unspoiled Cecily, she was childish and pert as well as strong-minded and pragmatic. "She worked very hard all the time, yet you never saw the work," Lamos adds.

Parker's philosophy about acting is to always "concentrate on the work, make it as simple and as new and as best you can." Her worst fear as an actress is not giving a good performance.

"That to me is absolutely mortifying, and it's not because, 'Oh my God, I look bad.' That's not what it is. It's because I'm not serving the play, I'm not serving the other actors. Like Nina in *The Seagull*, I am standing there and I don't know what to do with my hands."

To play Nina in Chekhov's play is one of Parker's ambitions. She was absolutely thrilled when novelist Edna O'Brien recently told her she should play the role. "Part of me is completely convinced that I could do it, but another part of me thinks I am insane

for thinking that."

When Parker talks about Nina you wonder if she is not describing some facets of Mary-Louise: "She is enamored of writers and people who can create—people who can express themselves and reach others. She knows her own limitations. She does. She thinks she can be a good actress, although she's not sure of it at the beginning of the play. On a more emotional level, she comes in and it's all 'the sky, the sky. . . it's a beautiful life,' but at the end she realizes, 'Oh, this is what life is. I see. Well, all right.'" □

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