

**THEATER**

# Faces to Watch: Heroes, Sidekicks, Cartoonists

By **ERIK PIEPENBURG, ROBIN POGREBIN, ROSLYN SULCAS** and **ALEXIS SOLOSKI** FEB. 19, 2015

The coming season brings exciting challenges for new artists working on and off Broadway.

## **MATT DOYLE AND NICOLETTE ROBINSON**

To ward off his childhood bullies, the actor Matt Doyle called on the galaxy-saving Super Dude and his monster sidekick Goo Goo Plex.

“I would draw my own comics when I was growing up, and just kind of escape,” he said.

Mr. Doyle draws on more playful comic book inventiveness as he leads the cast of “Brooklynite,” a new Off Broadway musical opening on Feb. 25 at the Vineyard Theater. Based on characters created by the novelists Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman, “Brooklynite” is a kaleidoscopic comedy about a nerdy hardware store clerk (Mr. Doyle) who longs for powers like Brooklyn’s greatest superhero.

That would be the spectacularly caped but uncertain Astrolass, played by Nicolette Robinson, also known as the best friend to Ruth Wilson’s aggrieved wife on the Showtime series “The Affair.” Directed by the Tony Award winner Michael Mayer, the kid-friendly “Brooklynite” features music and lyrics by Peter Lerman; a book by Mr. Lerman and Mr. Mayer; and choreography by Steven Hoggett (“Once”).

Mr. Doyle, 27, and Ms. Robinson, 26, said they were drawn to “Brooklynite” by a pop-rock score that serves a story, as she put it, about “coming to terms with what your gifts are and loving yourself for it.”

It’s a pursuit they each took on as children of broad-minded families. Mr. Doyle’s artist parents encouraged his dreams of Broadway, where his credits have come to include “War Horse” and “The Book of Mormon.”

Ms. Robinson's mother is Jewish, her grandfather was a rabbi and her African-American father ran the Passover Seders. "Our family looks like the U.N.," she said.

Before a recent rehearsal at the Vineyard, the pair embraced and giggled with an ease that mirrors the romance that sparks between their "Brooklynite" characters.

"She's the loveliest," Mr. Doyle said.

Ms. Robinson, who is making her New York stage debut in the show, is married to the actor Leslie Odom Jr., a star of the new musical "Hamilton." Mr. Doyle was recently named one of Out magazine's most eligible bachelors. A video game devotee, Mr. Doyle said he has "every system and everything that comes out" should a similarly obsessed suitor appear.

"I'm the biggest nerd," he said. **ERIK PIEPENBURG**

**SYDNEY LUCAS**

Small Alison is a far cry from Annie or Matilda. After all, little-girl roles on Broadway don't typically call for dancing in a coffin or singing about your attraction to a delivery woman.

But "Fun Home" is no typical musical, given that it brings to life Alison Bechdel's memoir about a budding lesbian cartoonist and her closeted gay father who teaches English, restores old houses, runs a funeral home and commits suicide.

"I think Alison is my dream role," the 11-year-old Sydney Lucas said in a recent interview. "Roles don't come this deep."

Born in Georgia, Ms. Lucas moved to New York City when she was 2 and has always wanted to be an actress. "My role model is actually Meryl Streep," she said. "I will strive to be as good as she is."

Performing is in her DNA — her parents met while singing and dancing at Six Flags Great Adventure — and her two brothers are also in the business. While Ms. Lucas has done a few commercials, TV shows and movies, "Fun Home" came her way only after she didn't make final callbacks for both "Annie" and "Matilda the Musical."

"I believe there are doors in life, and if one door closes, another will open," she said in her usual matter-of-fact manner. "And everything is meant to be."

Sam Gold, the musical's director, praised Ms. Lucas for embodying both Little Alison's youthful exuberance and internal complexity. "I have an incredibly vivid memory of the first time I worked with her on 'Ring of Keys,'" he said, referring to the character's solo about her budding infatuation. "We could have an incredibly nuanced conversation about [the character's] sexual identity."

Now that the show is coming to Broadway after an acclaimed run at the Public Theater — previews start March 27 at the Circle in the Square — Mr. Gold is relieved that Ms. Lucas hasn't physically outgrown the part. (Other actresses in the show play Alison at other points in her life.) "We made a lot of jokes about putting her in a freezer," he said.

Asked whether she thought her "Fun Home" dad — played by Michael Cerveris — was a good father, Ms. Lucas paused before responding. "How do I put this?" she said. "I think he needed to get to know himself better." **ROBIN POGREBIN**

### **BRANDON URANOWITZ**

"So it started like this." So says Brandon Uranowitz in the beginning moments of "An American in Paris," the much-anticipated new musical directed by Christopher Wheeldon, based on the 1951 film and its Gershwin score, which opens on Broadway on April 12.

Mr. Uranowitz plays Adam Hochberg, a composer and former G.I. who has stayed in Paris at the end of World War II, and with that first line he establishes himself as the narrator of the story, if not its Gene Kelly-esque leading man. (That would be Jerry, played by the New York City Ballet principal Robert Fairchild.)

Mr. Uranowitz is the sidekick, the sardonic, wisecracking observer of the lives and loves of his friends Jerry and Henri — both, like him, in thrall to the beautiful Lise Dassin. But he finds a vulnerability and depth to his character that brings surprising gravitas to the role and places Adam at the heart of the story.

"We needed someone who understood the more acerbic, temperamental side of being a young Jewish-American composer, who reflected Gershwin but also had the warmth and comedic qualities written into the role," Mr. Wheeldon said. "At the audition, it was one of those walk-into-the-room moments. We just looked each other and thought, this is our Adam."

Mr. Uranowitz, 28, grew up in New Jersey and wanted to be an actor, he said,

after his parents took him to see “Peter Pan” at 3. “I was constantly making little shows in the basement with my sister,” he said. He landed a part in a Toronto production of “Ragtime” at 11, acted in “A Christmas Carol” at Madison Square Garden and got an agent. In high school, he developed a liking for serious drama. “My director had very sophisticated tastes,” he said. “I was doing ‘The Heidi Chronicles’ at 16.”

At New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, he played “fun, meaty Shakespeare parts that I really fell in love with.” His big professional break came in 2013, when he was cast as Arnold Beckoff in a revival of Harvey Fierstein’s “Torch Song Trilogy” at the Studio Theater in Washington. “He embodies a character so fully, everything he does is that person,” said Michael Kahn, who directed the play. “Personally I think he should be a big star, but not too big to come back to act for me.”

Getting the part of Adam and working on a production from its inception has been thrilling, Mr. Uranowitz said. “There is something about Adam that lives inside of me,” he added. “The unrequited, struggling artist.”

For Mr. Uranowitz, it just might start like this. **ROSLYN SULCAS**  
**CHRISTINA MASCIOTTI**

June, the central character in Christina Masciotti’s “Social Security,” which begins performances on Feb. 25 at the Bushwick Starr, has gone deaf after 40 years of working the machines in a pretzel factory. “I shouldn’t talk,” her neighbor Sissy says, resignedly. “You can’t hear me.”

It’s both entirely plausible and wholly surprising that Ms. Masciotti would shape a play around someone like June. In plays like “Vision Disturbance” and “Adult,” she has similarly given voice to working- and middle-class characters inspired by real people. But June is deaf, and Ms. Masciotti is compulsively attuned to the “original poetry in everyday speech,” as Ben Brantley put it in his New York Times review of “Adult” last year. Ms. Masciotti, who is in her 30s, grew up in Reading, Pa., with a Greek mother and an American father. It was their conversations, full of malapropism and misconstrual, that aroused her interest in the possibilities and frustrations of language. She went on to study play-writing at Brown University and earned an M.F.A. in dramatic writing from New York

University.

A new play, she explained by telephone from the Astoria apartment that she shares with her sister, “always starts with something real and with real people.” And with real words, too, which she transcribes into a stack of notebooks. As Richard Maxwell, who directed “Vision Disturbance” observed, Ms. Masciotti then fashions these records into “rigidly faithful dialogue” that manifests “her empathy and her sense of humor.”

She met the woman who inspired June when the doorbell rang at her parents’ home. “Her husband had just died the night before, and she needed some help,” Ms. Masciotti said. “She talked sort of nonstop and was kind of fascinating to listen to.”

Even as Ms. Masciotti built a fictional story around her, she worked to capture and preserve the woman’s Pennsylvania Dutch intonations, her childlike cheeriness, her favorite exclamation, “Yay-yuh!” Expressions like this suggest to her a play, a world, a life. “The second a person opens her mouth,” she said, “you know so much.” **ALEXIS SOLOSKI**

***Correction: February 19, 2015***

*An earlier version of this article misidentified the theater in Washington where Brandon Uranowitz was cast as Arnold Beckoff in a revival of “Torch Song Trilogy.” It was the Studio Theater — not the Shakespeare Theater.*

A version of this article appears in print on February 22, 2015, on page AR12 of the New York edition with the headline: Heroes, Sidekicks, Cartoonists.