



Nathan Lane.

Lane, Nathan (b. 1956)

by Linda Rapp

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A highly-acclaimed actor, Nathan Lane has appeared on stage, screen, and television. He has starred in Broadway productions of *Guys and Dolls*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *The Producers*. He has received numerous acting honors, including two Antoinette Perry (Tony) Awards. Openly gay himself, he has portrayed gay characters in several plays and also on screen in *Frankie and Johnny* and *The Birdcage*.

One of the most accomplished comic actors of his generation, Lane has an appealing presence that has earned him the admiration of legions of fans and critics. Although his metier is that of comedy, he is remarkably versatile. As Alex Witchel has observed, "Lane is an outsize talent who can belt it to the balcony and back, cajoling and beguiling with song, laughs, a few lumps in the throat. With his classic clown's face, part bulldog, part choirboy, he can be good and evil, smart and stupid, funny and sad, sometimes all in one number."

The youngest of three sons of Daniel Lane, a truck driver, and Nora Lane, a secretary, he was born Joseph Lane on February 3, 1956, in Jersey City, New Jersey. Around the time of his birth, his father's eyesight began to fail. Unemployed, the father fell victim to alcoholism and eleven years later "drank himself to death," according to his son.

When Lane was in his early teens, his mother began to suffer from manic depression severe enough to require occasional hospitalization. Lane's older brother Daniel became a surrogate father to him and encouraged his love of reading and theater.

Lane began acting while attending St. Peter's Preparatory School in Jersey City. He won a drama scholarship to St. Joseph's College in Philadelphia, but even with the award, the family could not afford the expense of college, and so he began working as an actor.

As Lane established himself in the profession by performing in dinner theater and children's productions, he supplemented his income with various jobs, including telemarketing, conducting surveys for the Harris poll, and delivering singing telegrams.

At the age of twenty-two Lane registered with Actors' Equity. Since there was already a performer listed as Joe Lane, he changed his first name from Joseph to Nathan after the character Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls*, whom he had played in dinner theater the previous year.

With Patrick Stark, Lane formed a comedy team called Stark and Lane. The duo, based in Los Angeles, worked at clubs, opened concerts, and made occasional television appearances. After a couple of years Lane quit the act, which was not particularly profitable because of the travel expenses involved. In addition, Lane wanted to return to New York.

Before leaving California, Lane auditioned for and won a part in *One of the Boys*, a situation comedy

starring Mickey Rooney. The series, which was filmed in New York, ran for only thirteen episodes in 1982, but it brought Lane to the attention of the public.

In the same year Lane made his Broadway debut, playing Roland Maule in Noël Coward's *Present Laughter*, directed by George C. Scott. His performance met with critical approval, and he went on to appear in a number of plays, including Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1984, directed by Daniel Gerroll), Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1985, directed by Joseph Papp), Simon Gray's *The Common Pursuit* (1986-1987, directed by Simon Gray and Michael McGuire), and August Darnell and Eric Overmyer's *A Pig's Valise* (1989, directed by Graciela Daniele), as well as two unsuccessful musicals, Elmer Bernstein and Don Black's *Merlin* (1982-1983, directed by Frank Dunlop) and William Perry's *Wind in the Willows* (1985-1986, staged by Tony Stevens).

In 1987 Lane made his film debut playing a ghost in Hector Babenco's *Ironweed*, based on the novel by William Kennedy.

In 1989 Lane played his first gay role as Mendy in Terrence McNally's *The Lisbon Traviata*, directed by John Tillinger. His performance earned him the Drama Desk award for best actor in a play.

Lane's association with McNally has been long and successful. In 1990, he acted in McNally's *Bad Habits* (directed by Paul Benedict), while in 1991, he appeared in the playwright's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (directed by Tillinger). In the latter he played a homophobic character.

In the early 1990s Lane had roles in half a dozen films, including *Frankie and Johnny* (1991, directed by Garry Marshall), which was based on a play by McNally. In it he played the gay friend of Frankie, the female lead.

In 1992, Lane returned to Broadway in a revival of Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*, directed by Jerry Zaks. His performance as Nathan Detroit earned him rave reviews and another Drama Desk award, this one for best actor in a musical, as well as a Tony nomination. The next year he was well-received as the star of Neil Simon's *Laughter on the 23d Floor*, also directed by Zaks.

In 1994 Lane supplied the voice of Timon the meerkat in Rob Minkoff's *The Lion King*. Lane teamed with Ernie Sabella, who voiced a warthog, on the movie's extremely popular song *Hakuna Matata*. Lane has since been the voice of other animated characters, including a cat in the film *Stuart Little* (1999, directed by Minkoff) and a dog in the Disney cartoon show *Teacher's Pet*, for which he won a Daytime Emmy award.

In 1994 Lane worked in another play by McNally, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (directed by Joe Mantello). He earned a Drama Desk award as best featured actor in a play for his complex and moving portrayal of a gay man with AIDS.

Lane next appeared in a 1996 revival of Stephen Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, directed by Zaks. Starring as Pseudolus, a Roman slave, Lane garnered enthusiastic reviews and a Tony award for best performance by a leading actor in a musical.

In 1996, Lane played drag queen Albert opposite Robin Williams' Armand in Mike Nichols's film *The Birdcage*, a remake of Edouardo Molinaro's 1978 film based on Jean Poiret's play, *La Cage aux Folles*. The film, with a script by Elaine May and Mike Nichols, was set in Miami's South Beach. Although controversial in a number of quarters, especially for its stereotypical portrait of a gay couple, the film was a commercial success, and Lane's performance was described as "wide-ranging [and] inventive."

Lane starred in a CBS situation comedy entitled *Encore! Encore!* in 1998-1999. He played a retired opera singer who returns to his home in the Napa Valley to assume management of his family's winery. Lane's original concept for his character was that of a "diva chef in a five-star restaurant" who had come out and

was raising his son.

As it turned out, however, his character was entirely heterosexualized and he played an (unlikely) womanizer. Despite his own good acting (and the presence of veteran actress Joan Plowright, who played his mother), the show failed to attract an audience and was soon canceled.

Lane's recent work has included a 2000 production of Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (directed by Zaks) and a starring role in Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (2001, directed by Susan Stroman), described as "the biggest hit on Broadway in more than a decade." Lane won a Tony award for best actor in a musical for his hilarious performance as Max Bialystock.

In 2002 Lane appeared as Mr. Crummles in Douglas McGrath's film version of Dicken's *Nicholas Nickleby*. The actor, who has a "talent holding deal" with CBS, also was chosen to star in a comedy series in which he will play a gay congressman. The show has not yet been scheduled.

In 2004, Lane opened to mixed reviews in a musical adaptation of Aristophanes's *The Frogs*, with a book by Bert Shreve and music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. The show was originally produced in 1974 at the Yale School of Drama; for the 2004 production Lane freely adapted Shreve's book and starred as Dionysos, the god of theater.

Lane has never made a secret of his homosexuality. He came out to his family when he was twenty-one and about to move in with a lover. He did not comment publicly on his sexual orientation until 1999, however.

He has been criticized by some activists in the gay community for waiting so long to come out publicly. In an interview in *The Advocate* Lane explained that he "[found] it difficult to discuss [his] personal life with total strangers" but was moved to speak out after the murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard. "At this point it's selfish not to do whatever you can," said Lane. "If I . . . say I'm a gay person, it might make it easier for somebody else. So it seems stupid not to."

In other interviews Lane has alluded to an "on-again-off-again relationship with an actor who lives in Los Angeles," but has otherwise maintained privacy about his personal relationships.

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About the Author

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