


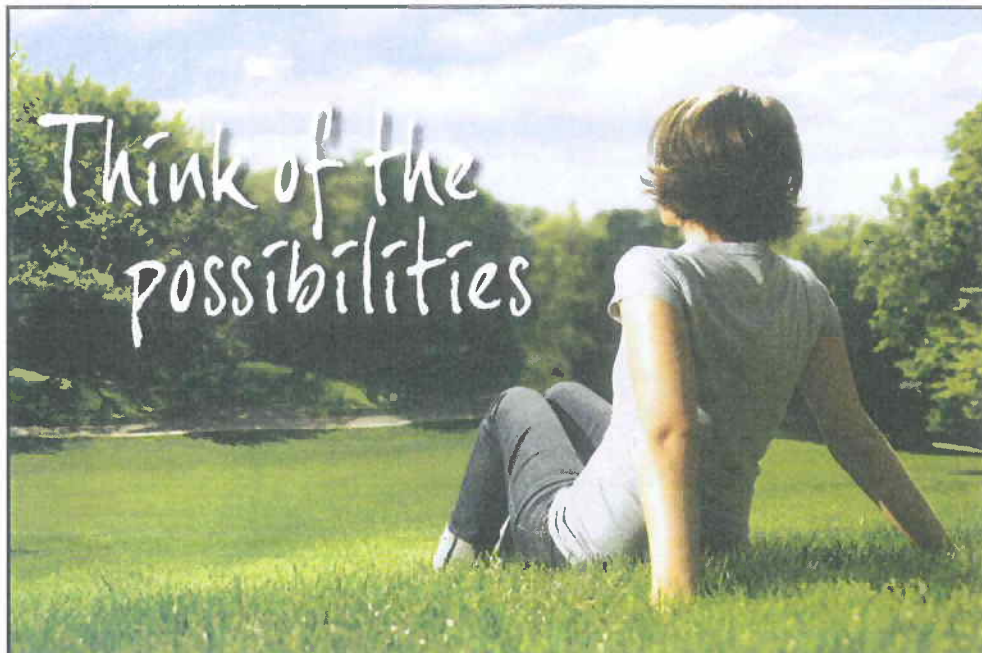
# SMASH HIT

BY ROB OWEN



He tread the boards at St. Edmund's Academy and sang at Shady Side Academy before wowing audiences on Broadway. Now Christian Borle is starring in Steven Spielberg's heralded new TV series.

Christian Borle with his *Smash* co-star Debra Messing.



Think of the possibilities

**A**ctor Christian Borle—who stars in NBC’s new Broadway-themed drama *Smash*—remembers growing up in Fox Chapel as an innocent time.

“We were very well-behaved,” Borle says of his teenage years as a student at Shady Side Academy Senior School. “I was not a drinker, and we’d go to King’s [Restaurant] at the Waterworks and challenge each other to have the ‘King’s Castle’—their big 20-scoop ice cream sundae. You’d get a pin if you ate the whole thing, but after three scoops, you’d be sick to your stomach.”

Still, it was not difficult to earn the pin.

“They were not very strict about it,” he continues, laughing. “They would give you the pin even if you really didn’t finish it. You couldn’t necessarily wear the pin with pride because everybody knew you were basically paying for it.”

While he still isn’t winning any Major League Eating contests, today Borle can wear his “celebrity pin” with pride, having definitely earned his reputation as one of TV’s hottest new stars through years of hard work and determination.

In executive producer Steven Spielberg’s TV show *Smash*, the actor plays Broadway composer Tom, who works alongside lyricist Julia (Debra Messing from *Will & Grace*) to create a musical about Marilyn Monroe. Tom hopes his old friend Ivy—played by Carnegie Mellon University grad Megan Hilty—will star in the Broadway musical that’s being directed by his nemesis, an arrogant director played by Jack Davenport. The show also features Anjelica Huston as a producer.

Although *Smash* marks Borle’s highest profile role to date, it comes after a string of Broadway successes. These include a Clarence Derwent Award and a Drama Desk Award nomination for originating several roles in Monty Python’s *Spamalot*, as well as a Tony Award nomination for Best Featured Actor in a Musical for his performance as Emmett Forrest in *Legally Blonde: The Musical*. He also starred on Broadway in *Footloose*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and *Mary Poppins*.

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# SMASH HIT



Borle (center, with two unidentified classmates) was a student at St. Edmund's Academy from 6th through 8th grade. According to his yearbook listing, he was involved in soccer, baseball, and basketball and "had an active interest in dramatics and played many major roles."

Borle's rise to fame comes as no surprise to those in Pittsburgh who helped nurture his talents and dreams as an aspiring young performer. One of his earliest lead roles came playing Ebenezer Scrooge in a 1986 production of *A Christmas Carol* at St. Edmund's Academy in Squirrel Hill. At Shady Side Academy in Fox Chapel, arts department chair and longtime music teacher Dan Brill recalls first encountering Borle singing in a band at a homecoming dance.



Borle's senior-year school photo from the 1991 Shady Side Academy yearbook.

"The band was awful, but I heard this voice, and I walked over at the break and invited him to sing in the choir," Brill recalls. "He sang with really good pitch, which is rare. Most people sing out of tune."

After graduating from Shady Side in 1991, Borle went on to study at Carnegie Mellon, where he took a second-year voice class from School of Drama professor Don Wadsworth, who says his student was always game for new challenges.

"He's got a very wild imagination and taking big risks is his trademark," Wadsworth says. "He'll really go out on a limb to deliver a very theatrical gift to an audience."

One particularly memorable occasion was Borle's performance in a 20-minute, one-person show called *Judgment*. "He was taking some big emotional chances, and people could not take their eyes away from him," Wadsworth says.

In the audience were his parents, Andre and Lee. "They were incredibly encouraging," Borle says. "My dad was a doctor, and he did not want me to follow in his footsteps. I was lucky. They came to see everything I did in high school and every little black-box piece of theater when I was at CMU. They got to see me go through my naked phase."

That was one of the emotional chances Borle took for *Judgment*. "Every college [acting] student goes through a phase where in order for their work to be legitimate, they have to be nude while doing it," he says, chuckling at the memory.

# MAGGIE & STELLA'S CARDS & GIFTS

Borle graduated from college in 1995 and then moved to New York. Soon afterward, his parents retired to Florida; his father passed away last year. His sister, Caroline, lives on a farm in Canada, and the 38-year-old actor says he hasn't made it back to Pittsburgh "in ages, and I miss it terribly."

Of course, he's been a bit busy filming the 15 episodes of *Smash* ordered by NBC for the pilot season, which marks Borle's first major foray into acting on camera.

"That's putting it lightly," he says good-naturedly. "I had no experience prior to this on TV other than a decade ago a two-second thing on *Law & Order*. This is me getting thrown in with the big boys and girls and learning how to swim very quickly."

Co-star Messing says he's caught on quickly. "When someone is as talented as he is, it doesn't matter where you put him, he's gonna shine," she says. "He is an original. We had instant chemistry, and I look forward to playing with him every single day on set—and it does feel like it's playing."

Some of the best advice the actor has received so far has come from his on-screen rival Davenport, who Borle calls "the most charming and affable human being on Earth."

"We have these scenes where we're yelling at each other, and when it's done, we burst into fits of girlish giggles," he says. "He has a lot more experience, and one bit of advice he gave was once you're finished with a scene, you have to never think about it again...because you can drive yourself insane replaying what happened and what you would have done differently."

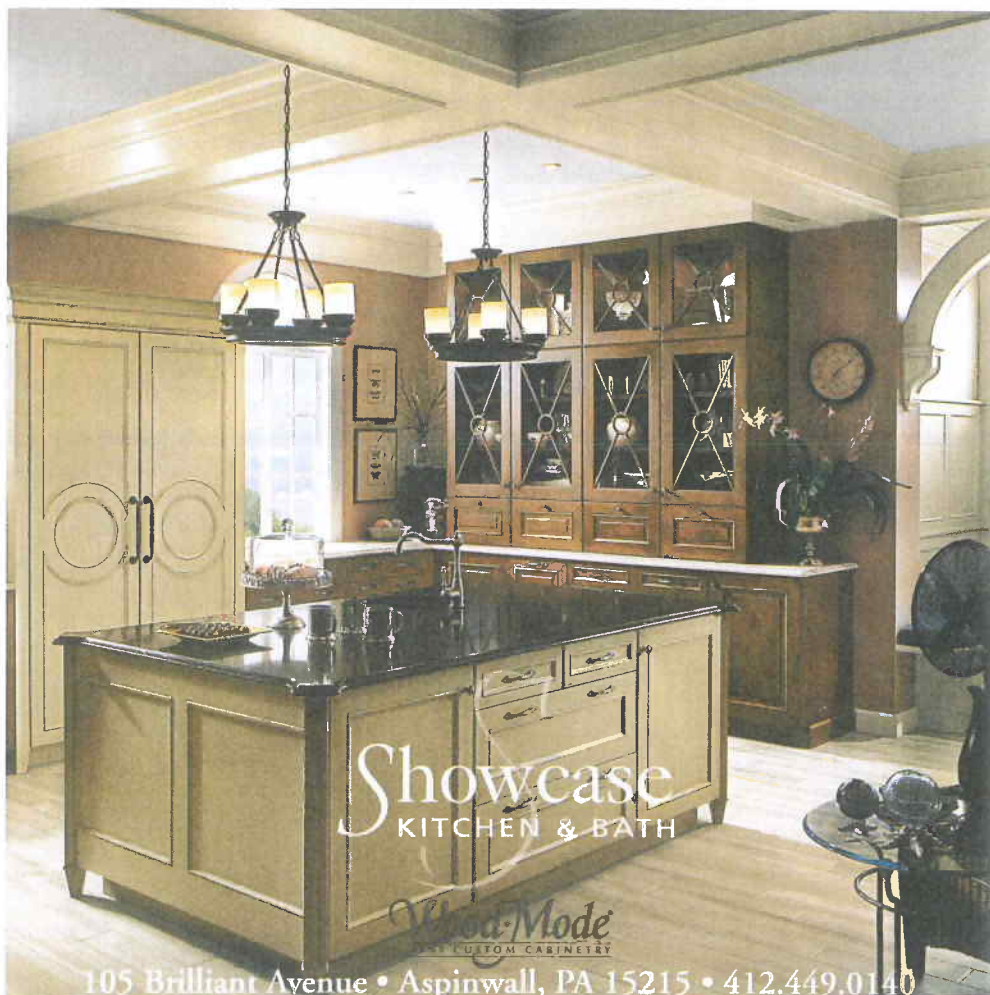
It's a world apart from theater, where some actors go out each night determined to get every beat right. "In truth, you never do, but that's the struggle with TV," Borle says. "You rarely revisit a scene, so you have to let it go and move onto the next day's work." Both Wadsworth and Brill hope their gifted former student will get a chance to show off his singing skills in *Smash*, although so far that hasn't happened.

"I think [the writers'] main focus for right now is to keep the singing and dancing in real world concepts so people don't all of a sudden, like in a musical, break into song to express how they're feeling," Borle says. "I have seen composers sing in my life, so it could happen. But nothing is in the can, as they say. I'm learning the terms." SA

*Rob Owen is author of the book "Gen X TV: The Brady Bunch to Melrose Place," a former president of the Television Critics Association, and TV writer/critic for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Follow him on Twitter or Facebook under RobOwenTV.*



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