

# INTERVIEW WITH

# THE ACTOR: NOLAN FUNK

UPSTAGE SAT DOWN WITH OUR VERY OWN CONRAD BIRDIE, NOLAN FUNK, TO DISCUSS HIS ROLE AS THE TEENAGE HEARTTHROB.

## What is your take so far on the character of Birdie?

He's someone who has been given a gift, and he's come from somewhat of a shady past. But through talent and appeal, he's been able to surpass the circumstances he was born into and now he's become this great star. There's a lot of humor in the part, but I want him to be a real human being. I don't want to lose the element of fun in him or get too heavy about it, but I want him to be a whole person. The challenge in playing this role is you want to retain his likeability. The role really teeters on the brink of unlikeability and it's a hard balance to play. I think he initially started out his career with the attitude: "Well, I don't have that much to lose, because I don't have that much anyway." It's even referenced in the play—they found him in reform school. Then, Rosie calls him a car thief. That's why he was able to swivel his hips more than the other guys on television and maybe scream a little harder. He has no social etiquette. So there is a kind of freedom to playing him. It's certainly relatable to me in terms of my life, being highly unaware of certain social practices. I took this role not knowing the musical. I just read the script like I was auditioning for anything else. And I based my interpretation of who he was on that.

## How do you feel about being on Broadway eight times a week?

I've been on a mission to do a Broadway show. I want to do something live. As grateful as I am to have played as many roles as I have in film and television, I've been trying to get on Broadway for a while. Since I was a kid, I remember thinking, "I really want to do this." I grew up in Canada, but *Les Miserables* came to town, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. One of the first things I ever watched on television, if not the first thing, was a video recording we had of *Into the Woods* with Bernadette Peters. And I loved mythology and fairy tales growing up. I love going into something that I'm not an expert in. I understand that there's a Broadway community, an audience that will be looking at me with a more critical eye than most performers have to deal with. I'm very aware that I'm coming from Nickelodeon. They may not realize that I've done a lot of other work. Maybe they're going to see me as this Nickelodeon kid who got the role because the producers thought some teenage girls will want to come and see him. That's Birdie's audience. But it's a limited run, it's the Roundabout Theatre Company, one of the most prolific theatre companies with one of

the highest subscription rates, and they don't need me to sell tickets.

## Did you look at the movie, or do any research on it?

I did a lot of research on the period. I watched some parts of the movie and some clips, but I saw what the original guy had done and it didn't feel like what I wanted to do with it. I just had a different take.

## In this video clip, "Bye, Bye Birdie" director Robert (Bobby) Longbottom: says something like, "We're reexamining this role for a new generation." What do you think he means by that?

What he means is that in the original cast of the Broadway production as well as in the movie, the actor playing *Birdie* was a lot older than me—I'm 22. One thing I love about Bobby's approach is that everything comes from an acting standpoint. I can't tell you how creatively fulfilling and gratifying it's already been. I do know that there is sincerity to the way I want to play Birdie. Even though there's part of him that's really pissed off, there is still that love of music. When Birdie gets up there and sings, it's coming from his gut. Every molecule in his body has got to be in it. For him to appeal to the audience as he does, it's got to be more than just having a catchy song and being attractive. I want to make "Honestly Sincere" have so much pent-up feeling that we can understand why it would have been the No. 1 song in America for six months. I want to play Birdie with a raw quality.

## In previous productions, the joke of "Honestly Sincere" was that he isn't sincere. But you're saying you have to see how committed he is to performing.

It's totally a different take on it. I know that the way I'm choosing to take on this role is risky. But I'm all about taking on a challenge. It's maybe because I read the script the way that I did, not bringing any preconceptions to it. I can only speak as the type of artist I am, but personally, I keep coming back to: This is a living, breathing, emotional human being. The only way to do that is exploring Birdie's back story, so that I'm not out there saying empty lines. I want to know everything about him. I don't know what kind of choices ultimately will be made and what they're going to let me get away with, but there are really some key things that he says. Obviously he is someone who is singing about sizzling steaks and shiny Cadillacs,



things that he didn't really know, and now he's gotten to a place where he can afford them. He's been so busy and wrapped up in touring and the life of being a star that he's trying to escape and finally enjoy those things. Ultimately, I think Birdie is a mask, but he's a talented mask.

**You've got a background in gymnastics—will you get to use any of that in this part?**

You know, we talked about it, and in *Spectacular!* I did a flip and things like that. But I'm kind of steering away from that, because I don't think it makes sense for Birdie.

**Here are some internet clips from *Spectacular!* of you dancing. Where did you learn to dance?**

My father actually dances the tango and I grew up always loving to dance. But doing a movie like *Spectacular!* was an education. I don't have a lot of formal dance training. Again, it's the character—I don't want Birdie to move like he's been on Broadway all his life. He has this innate feeling, this spark inside of him that gets him to move. I don't want him to seem slick and sleazy. I don't want him to feel polished. I want him to seem raw and genuine and greatly flawed.

**In some of the press about you, they're always calling you "the next Zac Efron." Is that flattering or annoying or both?**

It really doesn't bother me at all. I'm my own type of artist, and I'm quite particular and independent in my thinking, and I'm not trying to brand myself as Zac per se. But it's fun. Why wouldn't I want to be compared to such a popular actor? I was not the popular kid in high school, so if you want to compare me to the popular people, go ahead. **UP**