

# Locust Valley actor brings heart and humor to 'Dear Evan Hansen'

*And Roland's journey to Broadway includes an appreciation for frogs*

By Iris Wiener  
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Will Roland, a breakout star in the critically acclaimed Broadway musical "Dear Evan Hansen," grew up in Locust Valley. Only in his late 20's, he's managed to do what takes so many in the profession years to achieve. Roland attributes his success to his upbringing, and the education he received at Friends Academy. He sees a connection between his hometown and the Great White Way.

"Locust Valley shows you the grandness of another time," Roland explained. "I think its heyday was similar to the nascent beginnings of Broadway. There's a lot nestled away in that town, and the Music Box Theatre (current home to "Hansen"), was built around the same time all of the huge mansions were being built by the Vanderbilts."

And Locust Valley really isn't like other parts of Long Island, Roland reasoned. "You cross 25A and you think, 'Where am I?'"

In much the same fashion, as one of Broadway's brightest stars, Roland still pinches himself when he reflects on the road from his first home in New York City as a youngster (where his address was also ironically, Broadway) to the move to Locust Valley when he was 7, to his huge hit on Broadway.

After singing in the choir at Locust Valley Intermediate, Roland enrolled at Friends Academy, where he became very involved in the theater department. "I think it was the first community I found at my new school, so that was really important to me," he remembers. "I was in that building as much as I possibly could be because they had a really spectacular program there."

The teachers who run the department continue to impress him. "Tracey Foster

and Andrew Geha, are less interested in training young professionals than they are in using theater as a tool for personal growth and community building," Roland said. "For me and for a lot of kids, that's what it should be about, because it helps you get your priorities in order."

With a hit on Broadway, Roland can still remember the great many shows in which he performed while at Friends Academy, ranging from "City of Angels" to "Peter Pan" and "Les Misérables" — "I played Marius because I was handsome and young back then," he joked. When he wasn't singing as Cinderella's prince in "Into the Woods" or tackling Shakespeare, Roland could be found doing carpentry or lighting work. In fact, upon reaching high school, he even took on the role of director for middle school plays.

After graduating from NYU's Steinart School, the first thing he did was return to his roots in Locust Valley. One of his teachers was about to head to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with a show that he had written, and Roland was on board. His return from Edinburgh found him working on Off-Broadway's "The Bus," a play that was being directed by one of his college professors.

"I learned very early on that lots of opportunities are going to present themselves because you were kind to people and good to work with," Roland says of his career path. "You enjoy them and they enjoy you, so it's better than auditioning for strangers. I suppose it's a little bit of a bumper if you're moving here to audition for strangers, but it shows how important it is to build community outside of shows. You can't just do this on your own."

His connections and warmth once again served him well when he landed a role in musician Joe Iconis'

"The Black Suits," which was being directed by his high school teacher, John Simpkins. It's also where he first met Ben Platt, who would later be the title character in "Hansen." Though different aspects of his life continued to intertwine, Roland says it was simply coincidental that he ended up in an audition room for a show with Platt once again. "It's sort of strange — everything has led to everything else," he says. "This was really a perfect experience where I went into a room with a bunch of people I didn't know and they gave me the job."

Michael Greif, the mastermind behind "Rent" and "Next to Normal," directed "Hansen," which was composed by Academy Award nominees Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, and written by Steven Levenson.

"It's no surprise that he has written two Pulitzer Prize-winning musicals," says Roland of Greif.

The musical revolves around a letter that was never meant to be seen, a lie that is unintentionally told, and a life of being included and fitting in that a teenager never thought he would see. Roland plays Jared Kleinman, a nerdyish perceptive, but sometimes offensive, friend to Evan's introverted self. Roland is quick to say that this show is not about bullying.

"I really avoid the word 'bullying' because I think the word diminishes the problem," he said. "Bullying is something that happens to kids, and adults would never talk about being bullied. This show is squarely about older adolescents, or small adults. Nobody in the show is a bully, it's more about internal troubles and difficulties expressing oneself."

But Roland said that older adults will also relate to the sentiment in the story. "The four young people in this show have similar, very



Photo courtesy of Will Roland

Locust Valley's Will Roland is performing in "Dear Evan" on Broadway.

adult problems, even though they're 17 and 18," he explained. "The adults in the show share 30-year-old versions of the same problems, an inability to communicate, a feeling of not being seen by those around you, a feeling of not being accepted. That's what's so important to me. People say, 'Every teenager should see this show,' and that's sort of patronizing to teenagers."

To get inside Jared's head, it was helpful that it wasn't long ago that Roland himself was a teenager. Plus, through 2014 he worked with adolescents extensively as a teacher at the summer camp at Friends Academy, which was a massive factor in his great understanding of their feelings. "I fully believe in the smartness and

maturity of teenagers when you treat them like adults," he says. "There is incredible power in doing this, and forgiving them for the ways in which they are not adults. The word [bully] oversimplifies what is usually a complicated, grey situation, which is what the show is about."

As for his own experience with actual bullies? "I panted a kid at Field Day," he admitted. "That was very mean. I was kind of a bully, but I'm super nice now!"

When super-nice Will Roland is not performing, he can be found working in his family's New York auction house, Roland Auctions, or visiting The Brass Rail in Locust Valley. He is also partial to Bailey Arboretum, which is throwing distance from

his family's home. However, spare time is rare these days with "Hansen's" packed schedule. In fact, he compares the experience to his appreciation for . . . frogs?

"In my dressing room I have a ceramic frog that was a prop from "The Black Suits," he says. "He is my spirit-guide and unofficial mascot. I really admire frogs in terms of what I do every night, being a man in his late 20s playing a teenager. Frogs are these strange creatures that can live in the water and out of the water and they breathe through their skin. They're really strange animals, and I sometimes think of myself as a strange animal who functions in the water and on the land."

Follow Iris on Twitter: @Iris\_Wiener.

## NIFA already eyeing 2018 cuts for Nassau

By Melissa Koenig

Although the Nassau Interim Finance Authority, after much wrangling with the county, approved the Legislature's and County Executive Ed Mangano's 2017 budget in December, it is now searching for a consultant to identify potential cuts in 2018.

On Jan. 20, the financial control board issued a request for proposals for a consulting firm. The consultant would recommend cuts to the Legislature and Mangano in the hope of preventing the county's deficit from increasing to \$191 million, as NIFA estimates it will.

"[NIFA] found significant budgetary risks that could endanger the county's statutory requirement to ensure balance on a Generally Accepted Accounting Principles basis," NIFA's request read.

Nassau is the only county in New York that is required to pay all property tax refunds rather than individual districts, at a yearly cost of \$100 million or more, which is covered mostly through borrowing, according to the New York Property Tax Monitor.

According to NIFA Chairman Adam Barsky, the county borrows an average of \$80 million a year to fulfill that guarantee, and the deficit further increases when the county has to borrow money to settle a lawsuit.

In an attempt to mitigate this problem, NIFA plans to have its consultant present the Legislature with proposals to cut spending in the 2018 budget on May 31.

"We would like to work with Nassau County," Barsky said, "but we want to be prepared that in the event we get presented with a budget that is not sufficiently balanced, we can make our own cuts."

County officials scrambled for months to find revenues with which to reduce the 2017 budget deficit. Last September, Mangano proposed increasing certain traffic fines by \$105. After citizens complained, the Legislature decided to reduce the proposed hike to \$55, leaving a \$36 million gap in the budget.

Mangano also proposed cutting funding to some non-profit social service agencies, which rely on county aid to provide services such as early intervention and drug treatment. NIFA rejected that spending plan, however, because it relied on penalties from a 2013 law that requires businesses to report their income and expenses. The law is currently facing a legal challenge, and the county has been issued a temporary restraining order preventing it from ordering the payment of those fines until a court decides on the measure's constitutionality.

Nassau's finalized budget includes a freeze on hiring new police officers until March, a reduction of bus funding and an end to aid for local villages. The Legislature also voted to increase the tax map verification fee for real estate transactions by \$130. These proposals reduced the projected deficit from \$142 million to \$106 million.

"The county executive has



Courtesy LinkedIn

Adam Barsky, chairman of the Nassau Interim Finance Authority, told the Herald this week that the fiscal control board is seeking a consultant to identify possible cuts in the county's 2018 budget in order to prevent a further ballooning of the deficit.

significantly reduced the deficit since taking office," said Brian Nevin, a spokesman for Mangano. "He has cut over \$330 million in wasteful spending."

NIFA does not believe this is enough, however. "We still see significant pressure on spending," Barsky said, "so they need to make more significant efforts to either reduce their spending or increase their revenue, and increasing the revenue doesn't appear to be on the agenda for this year."

Responses to the request for proposal are due on Feb. 13.

Erik Hawkins contributed to this story.

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