

Tony Shalhoub

By Iris Wiener

Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Play, *Act One*



Tony Shalhoub in *Act One*. Photo by Joan Marcus

Shalhoub confesses that when it comes to *Act One*, James Lapine's adaptation of playwright Moss Hart's memoir, there is one line that reflects his own feelings for the art of theater. "I say it at the top of the show. 'Theater is not so much a profession as a disease,'" Shalhoub laughs softly as he considers the factors that regularly draw him to the stage. "In the play, Hart says, 'After seeing his first play at a very early age, it was the beginning of a lifelong infection.' There's a lot of fun and glamour attached to it all, but the process can be torturous!"

The fun aspect to which Shalhoub refers is most likely the act of being nominated for Tony Awards, as he is now celebrating his third nomination for the three real-life characters he portrays in *Act One*: Moss Hart, Barnett Hart (Moss' father) and playwright George S. Kaufman (Moss' mentor and collaborator). As for the torturous part? "We all have a certain level of insecurity about our own work, whether we're going to be able to succeed and if we succeed, if we're going to be able to sustain that," he says. "These things are just ever-present in this kind of work."

Despite his insecurities (and the fact that he is forced to give himself daily workouts through quick climbs on a long staircase throughout the play), Shalhoub was easily drawn to the story. "What spoke to me was the fact that it's about the world of the theater and the people who are stage struck," he says. "That right there takes a certain kind of obsessive quality. Though Moss Hart wasn't OCD, he did obsess over his work and he was a driven perfectionist. Whether you want to interpret that drive as raw ambition or whether it has more to do with an inner mechanism, it becomes a compulsion to do this kind of work and to succeed at it."

Shalhoub's turn as the obsessive-compulsive George S. Kaufman has raised comparisons to a certain obsessive-compulsive detective he portrayed on the small screen for eight seasons. "There's a crossover to the *Monk* character that I played, so people ask me, 'Is that something the director or writer put in? Is that a choice *you* made?'" he laughs. "The fact is that it's just a coincidence. Long before Adrian Monk was born, everything indicates that George S. Kaufman was suffering from OCD."

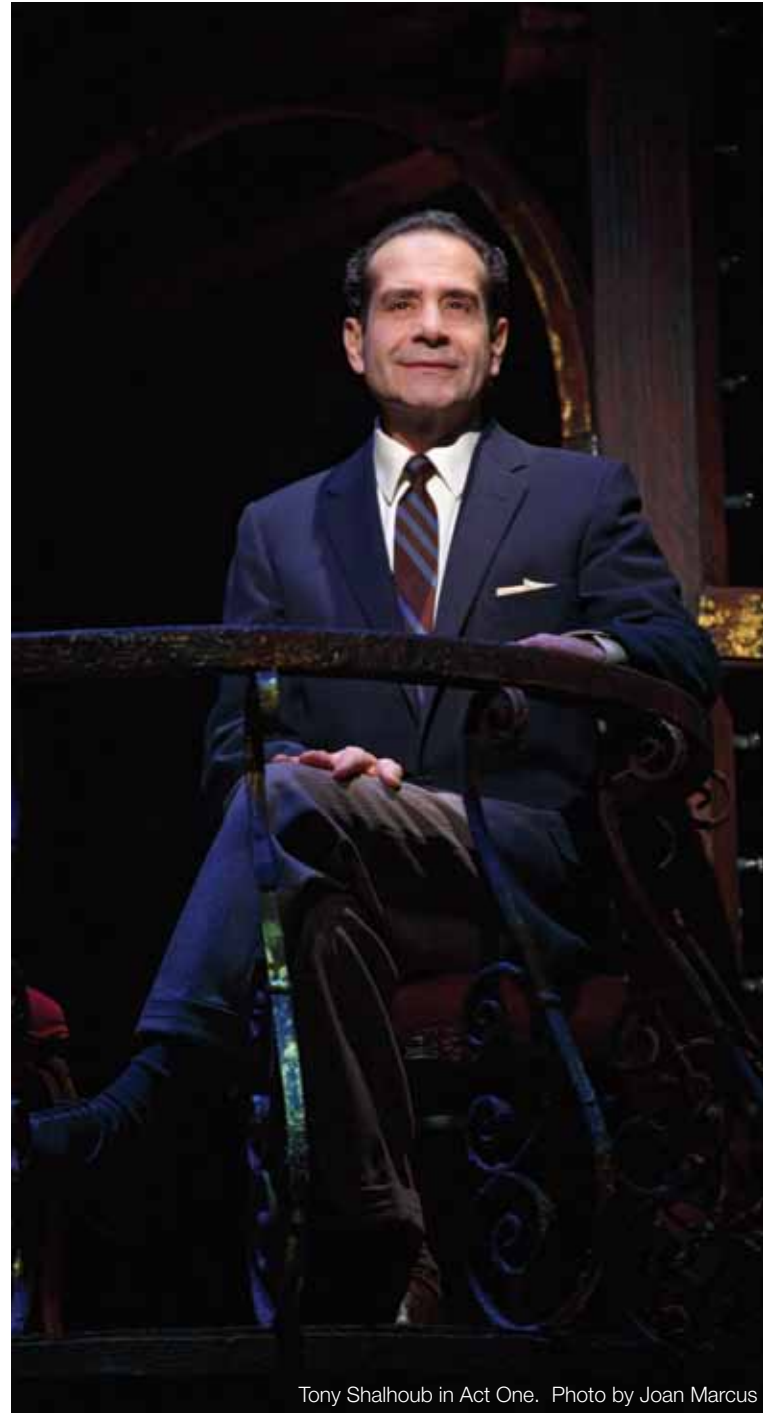


Shalhoub jokingly remarks that when it comes to his own life, he is equally as talented at playing a man with OCD.

That quality may have been an advantage when it came to researching the people he would be re-creating at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater. "I got some audio on Moss Hart, and there's also a '50s television interview Edward R. Murrow did on *Person to Person*," he says of his audio and visual preparation. "I had a little bit of Kaufman later in his life when he was on the game show *This Is Show Business*. There are only four or five clips of those, so I just tried to read as much as I could and watch as much as I could get my hands on."

Shalhoub says that a challenge in playing real people is the struggle to be true to the character while not commenting on it. "You can't editorialize your own feelings or impressions of the person, but you just have to trust that if you're true to what he is and what he does, it will best serve the material," he says in a moment of reflection. "I try not to form too many strong opinions of the people I play, especially if they're real life people. You want to make sure that you're not turning them into a caricature. There's also the challenge of trying to bring something fresh to it."

No one would accuse the seasoned actor of not bringing something original to each of his roles. A professional stage thespian for years after graduating from the masters program at the Yale School of Drama in 1980, he landed his breakout role as Antonio Scarpacci on television's *Wings* in 1991. He went on to receive his first Tony nod in 1992 for *Conversations with My Father*, and his second for *Golden Boy* just last year. Along the way Shalhoub has also racked up three Emmy Awards and a Golden Globe for his work on *Monk*, and has starred in a seemingly endless list of films (*Galaxy Quest*, *Men in Black II*).



Tony Shalhoub in Act One. Photo by Joan Marcus

Between his long career in entertainment and his chaotic childhood as one of ten siblings ("We'd perform little skits for each other – we always had built-in audiences, I guess"), one might wonder when he will follow in the footsteps of Moss Hart by writing his own autobiography. "I've been thinking about that, just kind of going back and picking through my experiences to see what they look like on paper," he says. "I think that might be interesting." In that case, if someone were to attempt to portray Tony Shalhoub, what would be the most challenging aspect of the role for the lucky actor? "They would struggle to keep themselves sane!" he says, laughing sheepishly. "I think playing me would be a little maddening, really. I'm a little all over the map. I have to keep talking myself off ledges."