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Beachwood **Buzz**
November 2021 Every Resident. Every Business. Every Month. **MAGAZINE**

A NEW MUSICAL IN THE MAKING

BHS GRAD ENTERS NEW STAGE IN LIFE
ALEX WYSE LAUNCHES
OFF-BROADWAY MUSICAL

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BHS Grad Enters New Stage in Life

Alex Wyse Launches Off-Broadway Musical



The Alex Wyse who attended Beachwood Schools was someone who wasn't sure where he belonged. He felt as though he was just surviving, and he could barely tolerate academia. He says high school was something he had to endure so he could eventually do what he really wanted. Today's 34-year-old Alex Wyse has succeeded in achieving that goal by appearing in his own Off-Broadway show. He is starring in a musical for which he co-wrote the script and composed the music and lyrics with Ben Fankhauser, a childhood friend from Orange High School.

Cover story starts on page 6.

Cover shot: Alex Wyse on the red carpet at the opening of *A Commercial Jingle for Regina Comet*. Photo by Tricia Baron.



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**BHS
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ALEX WYSE LAUNCHES OFF-BROADWAY MUSICAL

By June Scharf

The Alex Wyse who attended Beachwood Schools was someone who wasn't sure where he belonged. He felt as though he was just surviving, and he could barely tolerate academia. He says high school was something he had to endure so he could eventually do what he really wanted. Today's 34-year-old Alex Wyse has succeeded in achieving that goal by appearing in his own Off-Broadway show. He is starring in a musical for which he co-wrote the script and composed the music and lyrics with Ben Fankhauser, a childhood friend from Orange High School.

His trajectory since graduating with BHS' Class of 2005 has involved working as a professional actor/singer over the past 10 years. He attained his dream of appearing in Broadway shows, including *Lysistrata Jones*, *Waitress* and *Spring Awakening*, and he also co-produced the Broadway production, *What*

the Constitution Means to Me, a show that received Tony, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Award nominations.

Alex was also cast in a national touring production (*Wicked*), several Off-Broadway shows, TV shows (*NCIS: Los Angeles*, *Marvel's Iron Fist*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Modern Family*, and *Masters of Sex*, to name a few), a play (*For the Record: Dear John Hughes*, opposite Evan Rachel Wood and Rumor Willis), a movie (*XY*, opposite America Ferrera), and commercials.

His most recent notable accomplishment was starring in the self-created, award-winning, internet-based comedy, *Indoor Boys*, which ran for three seasons and was nominated for a Daytime Emmy Award and 18 Indie Series Awards, for which it won six. In many ways, the show is reflective of Alex himself in its foremost qualities: sassy, clever, quick-witted, entertaining, and irreverent, with a bawdy, slightly outlandish sense of humor, often relating to gay-life themes.

Aside from these performance successes, it has been an arduous climb, with rejection and frustration littering his path. One such example early in his evolutionary cycle came while he was earning his BFA degree from Boston University – a professor told him that he wasn't well-suited for an acting career.

"That made me dig my heels in even harder. I said, 'No, no, no, I have to do this.' Sure, it hurt me a lot, but I think that beneath it, I understood that I wouldn't be happy unless I'm doing what I love," Alex stated during a recent conversation in New York City.

His solution to overcoming the judgment of others was to craft his own material and ultimately create his own opportunities.

"The thing that has saved me again and again from feeling like I'm at the mercy of someone else's decisions is making my own decisions," he explained. "I've often felt the influence of this cruel industry, but when I'm in that zone of my own creativity, I feel like I don't need anyone else's approval," he added.

"I love that I'm surrounded by artists and people who I can call up and say, 'Hey, write a musical with me,' and they do it."

Alex Wyse, Ben Fankhauser and Bryonha Marie Parham star in *A Commercial Jingle for Regina Comet*.

Photos by Matthew Murphy.

These feelings were the initial drivers behind his interest in developing a musical, the one that became his current production, *A Commercial Jingle for Regina Comet*, showing at the 99-seat DR2 theater near Union Square until November 14, after opening on September 27. It was the first new in-person musical to open in New York since COVID-19 shut down theaters last year.

The show explores the lives of an out-of-work songwriting duo (Alex and Ben) who dream of writing hit songs. But, as it says in the show's promotional material, writing a hit "can be a real shit show."

Instead, they are tapped by fading pop star Regina Comet (Bryonha Marie Parham) to reignite her career and create a jingle to launch her new fragrance, "Relevance," which is meant to drive her professional life back into consequence. It's a great opportunity, but things go sideways very quickly. The musical draws on issues related to struggles with creativity, aging in a youth-oriented society, and the fleeting nature of fame.

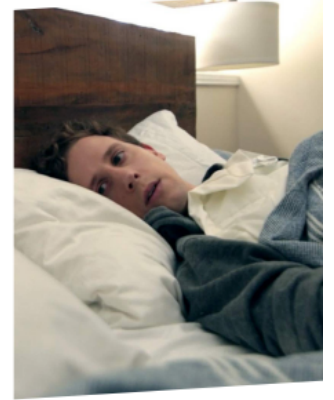
In a *New York Times* review, the show merited some positive notes. "The production ... moves at a steady clip ... and Wyse, looking like an overgrown summer camper in his neat shirt and shorts, excels at (the joking) kind of exchange."

In another review appearing on DC Metro Theater Arts' website, the production is described as being "delivered by a first-rate team of Broadway alums with perfect comedic timing and a laugh-out-loud millennial perspective in 80 rapid-fire minutes of razor-sharp wit and non-stop hilarity that shine a laser on the absurdities of chasing that elusive dream of stardom."

The show also adheres to some thematic territory Alex favors, that of friendship laced with some campiness, and "navigating murky waters."

"I really like stories that feel funny, and I use humor as a vehicle to reveal something that feels true. I definitely like to decorate dialogue with all the jokes we can think of. Plus, if you get an audience laughing, it can help them unlock their emotional selves."





Another storyline he likes to pursue is the one belonging to “mature women who feel stuck and are expected to act in a certain way.” He fine-tunes this detail by saying, “It’s another way of telling a version of my own story as a gay man.” But equally important, he points out, “Really, who doesn’t want to hang out with a fantastic mature woman?” He finds them very inspiring.

The genesis of *A Commercial Jingle* began a couple of years ago when Alex’s audition process was not going well. In the throes of despair, he called his creative partner, Ben, a Moreland Hills native now living in New York and an actor/singer who had roles in the Broadway shows *Newsies* and *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*.

“I said, ‘Ben, we have to do something together; we have to make something; I don’t know what, maybe a concert, just something;’ so we started brainstorming together.” Ideas kept flowing; they were making each other laugh and the idea for *A Commercial Jingle* began to emerge incrementally. “We thought, ‘we can write songs, can’t we? I think we can.’ So we started to write. I imagined it would be a concert evening with songs we wrote.”

But a plot line began to take shape. Once they had the loose structure of the show, they contacted Marshall Paillet, an award-winner writer and composer, who offered advice and became the show’s director. Alex and Ben worked daily during the pandemic, a process that gave them a sense of purpose and productivity. “We felt creative, and it was fun to be in that zone.”

The final product, however, was not part of the plan.

“Never in a million years would I have dreamed, when I called Ben, that it would end with our own Off-Broadway show,” Alex exclaimed. “It’s been very special to create something with people I really care about.”

He hastens to add that Beachwood readers might like to know about all the Judaism in the show. “It’s peppered with so many fun Jewish jokes and Jewish summer camp jokes. Had I not been raised in Beachwood, this show would not be what it is, nor would it have the quippy suburban humor that we love.”

Other source material for some show elements is derived from Alex’s experiences while attending summer camps at Stagedoor Manor and French Woods, both in upstate New York.

Theater has been playing a major role in Alex’s life for nearly as long as he can remember. While growing up, he frequently attended shows with his parents, Denise and Robert Wyse, and later, he tapped their time and patience to drive him to rehearsals for plays in which he appeared all over Cleveland. He fully believes these experiences bolstered his own self-discovery and growth.

“Theater let me try on so many different hats and be all sorts of people. I was working with people of different ages and backgrounds, and we came together with

a common goal. It was kind of like my own version of a sports team, except we were producing a play,” he said.

His range of exposures to theater, all before age 10, included Heights Youth Theater, Stagecrafters, and the Beachwood Community Theater, along with professional venues, such as The Halle Theater (at the Jewish Community Center), Lakeland Community College, and the Beck Center.

“When I couldn’t find my community in school, I thankfully had all these after-school theater programs I could be part of.” This involvement led him to meeting his creative partner, Ben.

When Alex reflects on his childhood, he says he loves Beachwood and is very thankful he grew up in the city. However, during his time in school, “There wasn’t as clear an avenue for kids who were artistic, but things are getting better.” Nonetheless, he found a safe haven in BHS’s drama club, led at the time by advisor Sheila Heyman. “This was a huge part of my high school experience, and she was a big influence.”

Another BHS staff member who impacted him was history teacher Bonnie Morosi. “She was spectacular! She really saw me as the creative person I am, and she encouraged me. Some teachers didn’t understand me or know how to talk to me, and I, in turn, had no interest in taking their classes. I’m sure I didn’t make it easy. I was a bit of a troublemaker.” The real alchemy arrived when a teacher saw the person he could become, he added.



From left: Alex Wyse featured in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Waitress*, *Wicked*, *Indoor Boys*, and *Iron Fist*; then at the Daytime Emmy Awards, and with Wesley Taylor in front of their Times Square billboard for *Indoor Boys*.

He also pursued vocal training while growing up, seeking the guidance of Joan Ellison, a talented instructor who taught at Baldwin Wallace.

The drama associated with life in the dramatic arts is something that Alex has trained himself to contend with, and it's been a journey. It mostly relates to the ebb and flow of work, which is a challenge to handle, especially when playing a part delivers so many heightened moments. He compares the stage time to a heroin rush, leaving a performer with a thirst for another fix. One's identity can get wrapped up in the cycle, too, and it can feel not cool to be on the sidelines. Over time, he learned how to process performances as temporary, rare, privileged stretches. During those periods, he collects what he calls a (fleeting) show family, and as a result, he has a long list of contacts on his phone.

He also has amassed a large social media following. His Twitter account (@alexwyse) has 17,500 followers, and his Instagram (alexjwyse) has 21,000.

Among those performers he counts as a friend is Broadway veteran Samantha Massell (*Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Flamingo Kid*), who is an especially talented vocalist. A year ago, during the thick of the pandemic, she invited Alex and Ben to work on a recording of a traditional Jewish song, Avinu Malkeinu, for inclusion in Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

virtual services at a progressive synagogue in Brooklyn. They collaborated and reimagined the song in a stunning rendition that can be found on YouTube. It is a shining example of Alex's tenor, along with his ability to rearrange and reimagine a classic melody.

Alex's creative restlessness knows no boundaries, and stark evidence rests with the development of the first feature film that he co-wrote and co-directed with Wesley Taylor (his co-star from *Indoor Boys*) this past summer. Titled *Summoning Sylvia*, it's a horror comedy that the pair is editing now. They are in preliminary talks with several streaming services for distribution. He and Wesley also have a play and a movie that they co-wrote and hope to develop in the next few years.

Additionally, Alex recently appeared in an episode of *The Other Two* on HBO Max, which was filmed in New York. Many of the opportunities that find him, as well as those he creates for himself, are a function of being in New York, a city of which he is extremely fond.

"I love that I'm surrounded by artists and people who I can call up and say, 'Hey, write a musical with me,' and they do it."

New York is also a place he feels helped him become more mature. He says it challenged him with struggle and adversity, but those hurdles aided in his becoming more of an adult. Just being in New York also affords him many wild adventures, including trips for work around the world, such as shooting a commercial in Germany and performing in a musical in S. Korea.

"The crazy things that have happened gave me more perspective on who I am and how to be the best version of myself, which has been a process," he notes.

The final credit in Alex's story belongs to his illustrious (and now deceased) grandmother, Lois Wyse, who carried heavy influence over his creative mindset. She was a highly respected advertising industry executive, having co-founded Wyse Advertising in Cleveland. During her tenure in the industry, she originated the tagline for The J.M. Smucker Co., "With a name like Smuckers, it has to be good." She advised another high-profile company, the small (at the time) retail chain Bed and Bath that it would fare better as Bed, Bath & Beyond. She also authored 60 books and worked as a columnist.

Looking ahead, Alex knows that songwriting and collaborating are in his future. In that space, he calls himself more of a lyric guy than a music person, though he still sometimes finds himself on the piano, working out patterns. The Great White Way certainly beckons, too, but so do studio lights and cameras.

"I have no idea what is going to come next. I hope there are more Broadway productions and films and tv shows. I don't know what, when, or where; I just know that I need to keep honing my creativity and finding which doors will open for me."