

Underestimating George Hamilton

George Hamilton has spent so much of his life cultivating his tan and playboy image that much of the substance of his career has gone unnoticed. Hamilton, who stars as Georges opposite Christopher Sieber's Albin in the national tour of *La Cage aux Folles* (opening this month in Des Moines), made his Broadway debut a decade ago as Billy Flynn in *Chicago*. But who knew that he was already a stage veteran with extensive experience?

"From the time I was under contract to MGM, I would do a play every other year," he says. "I'd go out on the road and do anything from dinner theatre to a national tour. You don't build acting chops by working in film. Film acting's great, but you don't learn timing, especially comedy timing. And I always loved comedy and wanted to do it. Over the years I did about 26 plays."

His credits include the national tour of *The Star-Spangled Girl*; *Funny Girl*, opposite Barbara Cook—really—in summer stock; and productions of *The Philadelphia Story*, *Gigi* and *Barefoot in the Park*. If most people are unaware that he's long been involved in theatre, well, he says, he wanted it that way.

"I thought, 'Why not be the tanned playboy having fun with acting?'" Hamilton says. "I did it to make it look easy and create a kind of image. I enjoyed it. And it didn't make any difference, because I was working all the time. That's all I cared about. And I love to be underestimated, then come in and surprise people."

He is excited to be back onstage, playing the part of a dapper, self-assured, cool character—one that, on the surface, seems not so different from himself. "People have said to me, 'You were born to play this role,'" he says. "I don't know what that means, but I know I can have fun with it. And the show has a lot of substance, on so many different levels. But when you come right down to it, it's a story about love, about people being themselves."

Hamilton, quick-witted and very funny, was one of the last contract players of the studio system. His official bio states that early on, "he was a serious contender for dramatic film

stardom," and he was initially cast as interloper characters in such movies as *Crime and Punishment*, *Home from the Hill* and *Three Weeks in Another Town*. "They really didn't know what to do with me," he says, "so they put me in *Where the Boys Are*. All of a sudden I was playing a watered-down David Niven. Cary Grant, and I kind of liked that role. I figured that to survive, you had to do everything. A

Hamilton as *La Cage aux Folles'* Georges



I did." He played Hank Williams, Moss Hart, and Evel Knievel in biopics, and produced a number of films that starred in the successful comedies *Love Me or Leave Me*, *First Bite* and *Zorro, the Gay Blade*. "I'm a showman by nature, I think I am a farceur. If I could have been somebody else, I would have wanted to be Peter Sellers."

He says that within the industry, expectations for his career weren't exactly high. "Everyone said, 'He's a dark, brooding, playboy studio actor, and he'll go soon.' Well, it didn't go soon. I held on with all my teeth. Fifty-two years later I'm still at it, and it makes me laugh. I created a character, the Teflon Don. I was the first to make the comment that people were obviously going to make about me. I was in on it. That's how I survived."

With a wink and a nod, George Hamilton is still here.