

Jason Alexander's *Seinfeld* role cemented him in pop culture. Now he's busy acting on screen and stage, directing, and podcasting

# CHARACTERS

By Mara Sassoon

Illustration by Pablo Lobato



This page: Alexander, left, in a dress rehearsal for a 1979 BU production of *A Month in the Country*.

Opposite page: One of Alexander's notable film roles was as the antagonist Philip Stuckey in 1990's *Pretty Woman*.



When Jason Alexander was a sophomore at BU, he received some life-changing advice. Jim Spruill ('75), then an associate professor of theater, called Alexander into his office and had him look in a mirror. "He said to me, 'Listen, I know you see yourself as a Hamlet, and you might actually be a really good Hamlet. But no one's ever going to cast you in that way. So you might want to get good at Falstaff,'" recalls Alexander ('81, Hon.'95). In mentioning the comedic character in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Spruill "was basically telling me that if I wanted to have any kind of a commercially successful career, I should start looking at comedy."

About a decade after Spruill (who died in 2010) uttered those prescient words, Alexander landed the comedic role of a lifetime: the self-absorbed yet hilarious George Costanza in NBC's *Seinfeld*. The part would eventually earn him a Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Comedy Series as well as four Golden Globe and seven Emmy nominations. He's appeared in notable roles in movies such as *Pretty Woman* and *Shallow Hal*, but no other part has had the pop-culture staying power of George, a character loosely based on *Seinfeld* cocreator Larry David. There's a Costanza-themed bar in Melbourne, Australia—George's Bar—whose walls are plastered with the character's quotes and likeness. Costanza fandom runs so deep that many were quick to

notice a viral 2021 Tide Super Bowl ad, in which Alexander's face is on a teen's hoodie, features the track "Theme from The Greatest American Hero (Believe It or Not)," a song Costanza sings a parody version of for his answering machine message in a season eight episode of *Seinfeld*.

"Comedy has clearly been the mainstay of my professional life," says Alexander. "And I am indebted to Jim Spruill for pointing me in that direction."

#### MAKING IT

Before his memorable meeting with Spruill, Alexander had envisioned himself as a dramatic theater actor. "I thought, 'I'm going to play the great roles of all time—Willy Loman, Richard III. My fantasies of a career did not really have film and television in them. If I could find a way to make a living on the stage in New York City, that would be the most fantastic thing that could ever happen.'"

He'd found the theater at a young age. In middle school, Alexander was an emergency replacement for a cast member who'd dropped out of *The Sound of Music*. "Once you join a company, a cast, a show, a project, you kind of have a new set of instant friends," he says, "and I found that rather fascinating. What initially grabbed me was not so much the performing part, but the community part in the world of theater."

He remembers seeing an early preview production of *Pippin* in its first Broadway run: "It blew my mind. I watched Ben Vereen doing his thing on the stage, and I went, 'I think

Boston University Photography

## "I thought, 'I'm going to play the great roles of all time—Willy Loman, Richard III. My fantasies of a career did not really have film and television in them.'"

I would like to be that guy,' not at the time understanding there might be a world of difference between what he could do and what I could do, but I wanted to at least try."

After that performance, Alexander became more heavily involved in school and community productions. He joined the Pushcart Players, a children's theater group that went on to do a TV special. He was signed by a management company after they saw him in the special, which opened up more professional acting opportunities.

When it was time for college, Alexander knew he wanted to attend a theater program. "While I was already technically a professional actor, I had no idea what I was doing. I had no real training."

At CFA, he performed in productions including *Othello* and *A Month in the Country*. The summer before what would have been his senior year at CFA, he landed a part in a horror film called *The Burning*. Filming wound up running three weeks longer than initially slated, so he couldn't make it back for the beginning of the first semester of his senior year. His plan was to take a semester off, but weeks later he was cast in the Broadway premier of the Stephen Sondheim and George Furth musical *Merrily We Roll Along*. "Suddenly, I was turning to BU and saying, 'I don't know when I'm going to be back.'"

Although he had an 18-month contract for the show, the production closed after a few months of previews and only 16 performances because of negative reviews.

By that time, Alexander had met Daena Title—they would later marry—and directors and casting agents were interested in him for other acting roles. "It just didn't seem opportune to go back to BU at that time," he says. "What was hard about not going back was I felt like I had not completed my understanding of the things I was being taught. At BU, I learned about all these tools and techniques and ideas that I felt I didn't quite have mastery of yet." Instead, he took classes with the acting coach Larry Moss, lessons he continued for years.

#### BEING GEORGE

For Alexander, 1989 was a pivotal year. He starred in the musical *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, a role that earned him a Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical.

It was also the year *Seinfeld* premiered.

"They called me out to LA, and I met Jerry and Larry, and they gave me a little bit more direction," he says of his audition for the show. "I literally went in with Jerry, read for NBC at their offices, got back on a plane right after the audition to go back home thinking, 'That'll never happen.' By the time I landed, there was a message saying, 'You've got it.'"

But for a time, Alexander thought the show was doomed to fail. "I like to tell this story—when we were done with the pilot, Jerry asked me if I thought our chances were good and, not to be a jerk, I said, 'No, I don't think so because the audience for this show is me. And I don't really watch TV,'" he says.

"The number one comedy in America when we did our pilot was *ALF*, I believe—very different vibe from what we were doing on *Seinfeld*. So, I just thought there wouldn't be an audience for this. I thought it was very good. I thought it was very funny. I thought it was the kind of thing I *would* watch if I watched TV."

At first, he was right—the show didn't get a favorable response. But then it caught on with one particular demographic—"guys like me who were 18 to about 35 years old, who had jobs or were students and lived in cities," says Alexander. Advertisers eager to target those viewers began sponsoring the show, he says. "That's what kept us chugging along until it finally caught on. I don't think any of us thought it would be so successful. I mean, maybe Jerry and



PictureLux/The Hollywood Archive/Alamy Stock Photo



Alexander's career-defining turn as George Costanza in *Seinfeld* earned him a Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Comedy Series as well as four Golden Globe and seven Emmy nominations.



Larry had—they always seemed pretty confident that they thought it would be a thing—but I think for the rest of us, we were all shocked as it started to gain momentum.”

That confidence was something he says he came to admire in *Seinfeld* and David. He often cites season two’s “The Chinese Restaurant” as an episode that really made him believe in the show. The format, filmed entirely in real time, was experimental. “It actually happens in 22 minutes and it has no story at all,” he says. “It’s just Elaine, Jerry, and George waiting for a table at a Chinese restaurant—and not getting one through a series of mishaps. When we first read the episode for the network, they were adamantly against it.”

*Seinfeld* and David ran with it anyway. “I remember thinking that these guys have the courage of their convictions. They know that we’re hanging on by a thread. Most people, if a network said, ‘We’re not happy,’ they go, ‘What can we do to make you happy?’ But these guys were not about to do that. They were going to be true to their vision and their sense of humor. If it meant that the show went off the air, then the show went off the air. But they weren’t going to go and become something they didn’t believe in, in the hopes that they’d get a pat on the head and stay on the air. I remember thinking that is something to be proud of.”

## ON HIS OWN TERMS

In a March 2013 interview with *Backstage* magazine, Alexander said, “I think the trick to happiness with this stuff is to admit that in my 30s I probably hit the pinnacle of popular success. I can’t imagine doing anything . . . that’s going to hit as large an audience and sustain their interest for as long. But I had that shot, that’s the unique thing; so you have to kind of embrace that and go, ‘OK, so what I do now, I’m doing for me.’”

Since *Seinfeld* wrapped in 1998, Alexander has been living by that mantra, taking on theater roles—he appeared in *The Producers* opposite Martin Short in 2003, replaced his former boss, Larry David, in David’s 2015 Broadway play, *Fish in the Dark*, and has lent his voice to notable animated television shows, including *Harley Quinn* on HBO Max. In 2021 and 2022, he played Jeff Bezos in viral comedic bits for *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *The Problem with Jon Stewart*. The latter had him portray Bezos in a mini musical parody, *Bezos Over Broadway*.

This year, Alexander will launch the iHeart podcast *Really, No Really with Jason Alexander* with Peter Tilden, his longtime creative partner and a talk radio host. “It began life as the simple notion of, we would tell each other stuff and the

Album/Alamy Stock Photo

Featureflash Archive/Alamy Stock Photo



“When we were done with the pilot, Jerry asked me if I thought our chances were good and, not to be a jerk, I said, ‘No, I don’t think so because the audience for this show is me. And I don’t really watch TV.’”

other one would go, ‘Really? No. Really?’ It was just stuff that we couldn’t believe—How could this exist? How could this be? How do people do this? Who would make that decision? Then we try and figure it out in the course of the podcast.”

Episodes explore topics ranging from silly to profound. In one, they explore why stall doors in public restrooms don’t go all the way to the floor—“Jerry Seinfeld had a comedy routine where he talked about this. ‘Why don’t they go down to the floor? Why is there this little viewing window?’” Alexander and Tilden found an award-winning designer of public restrooms to get to the bottom of it.

In another, they interview a former neo-Nazi. “He left the movement and has gone on to do amazing things,” he says. “One of the reasons that he left the movement was he really liked *Seinfeld*, and he couldn’t figure out how to hate Jews when these Jews were making him laugh so much. That conversation became very profound.”

Alexander is also speaking up when he admires a show. After the first season of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* aired on Amazon Prime Video, he asked his manager to call series creator Amy Sherman-Palladino and let her know he would be delighted to be considered for a part if the right one opened up. Sure enough, Alexander was cast as

Asher Friedman, a blacklisted playwright and old friend of Maisel’s father, played by Tony Shalhoub (Alexander had previously guest-starred in Shalhoub’s *Monk*) in the show’s third and fourth seasons. “I thought, ‘Well, we should just call everything that I like if that’s the trick,’” he says with a laugh. “The writing was extraordinary and Asher is a great character. It was also lovely in that it wasn’t a completely comedic character. He’s a guy who nursed a terrible wound in his life. It was a really lovely opportunity to showcase a different set of performance muscles.”

Over the years, Alexander has drawn from the advice he received from Spruill and other CFA faculty. “I had one professor who said to me, ‘Are you sure that you wouldn’t prefer to be a director?’” after Alexander had directed a student production of *Godspell* as an assignment. He’d enjoyed the assignment, but thought of himself as a better actor than director: “So, I took that professor’s advice as a bit of criticism at the time.”

Eventually, he understood the professor wasn’t trying to steer him away from acting, but rather pointing out his knack for directing. “He was saying that I had a natural sensibility of looking at projects from a sort of bird’s-eye view, seeing it as a whole,” Alexander says. “In that point of view, I would assess what my character was supposed to bring to the production and then I would do what I could to deliver exactly that. Whereas some of the best actors I’ve met both then and since see the whole thing through the eyes of their character—nothing else really exists.”

Alexander went on to direct a few episodes of *Seinfeld* and of hit television shows like *Criminal Minds* and *Mike and Molly*, and even a Brad Paisley music video that earned Paisley a Country Music Association Video of the Year award. In summer 2022, he directed the plays *Windfall*, a dark comedy about five office workers who bet all their money on a \$1 billion lottery jackpot to escape their manic boss, at the Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor, N.Y., and *If I Forget*, about three siblings grappling with their Jewish identities in the early 2000s, at the Fountain Theatre in Los Angeles. Both opened to positive reviews. More big directing projects are on the horizon.

“When you’re an actor, you can only make a contribution in one very specific way. But as a director, you get to participate on every possible level,” says Alexander. “What brought me into performing was community. I get to be in a community with many more people as a director than I am as just an actor. And it is not about what most people probably assume—it is not about having control. If I put it in music terms, a great conductor probably can’t play all those instruments, and surely cannot play them as well as the people playing for him. He coordinates all of them as an orchestra so that the whole is greater than any of its individual parts. That challenge, at this point in my life, is really rewarding.” ●