

A WALK IN THE PARK

by Michael Gioia

Much like in *Sylvia*, we take **ANNALEIGH ASHFORD** for a stroll in Central Park

“**T**he morning after the Tonys, I had on a onesie sweatpants outfit—they’re called one-pieces, they’re really cool. I had my dress in a bag, I had my jewels in a bag, my shoes in a bag, and my Tony in a really ugly tote bag,” Annaleigh Ashford recalls as we exit Central Park South by the intersection of 59th Street and Seventh Avenue.

“I took the Tony to the American Theatre Wing, dropped that off to get engraved, took my dress back to Zac Posen, dropped that off, and I took my jewels back to Fred Leighton, dropped that off! Then I went and had some nachos and I went to the airport.” She was flying out to Los Angeles, where she films Showtime’s *Masters of Sex* and lives for almost half the year—although she’s not quite ready to call herself “bicoastal.”

“But, most people, that morning, get a message from the American Theatre Wing saying, ‘We can pick up your Tony at any time...’”

For Ashford and husband Joe Tapper (also in the cast of last season’s *You Can’t Take It With You*, which gave Ashford her Tony-winning turn), though, “We don’t have a doorman, we don’t have anybody you can pick that up [from]. ‘You can pick it up from the Thai restaurant underneath our apartment, but they’re really rude to us, so I’m sure they wouldn’t have held it for me.’ So, I was keeping it real!”



Although Ashford's career is on the upswing, she remains grounded.

And, on this Monday afternoon in the park, she is totally unafraid to approach a stranger or two to meet their dog. After all, she's got some character work to do for her new play *Sylvia*, in which she plays the title character—a canine who was found running loose in Central Park—and she only has a few days before rehearsals begin. In the interim, she's been preparing alongside her “sassy,” six-and-a-half-year-old Miniature Australian Shepherd, Gracie.

In *Sylvia*, which takes its bow Oct. 27 at the Cort Theatre, she plays opposite Matthew Broderick, whose wife Sarah Jessica Parker originated the role Off-Broadway in 1995. Broderick plays Greg, the man who finds Sylvia and bonds with her over talks about life's mysteries.

We bond, however, about our love for *Sex and the City*.

“I love *Sex and the City*, are you kidding me?” Ashford tells me earlier in the afternoon on a park bench, grabbing my hand in excitement. “Also! My very first scene on camera for *anything* was with Sarah Jessica Parker in the *Sex and the City* movie, and she couldn't have been more lovely and beautiful and kind, and on top of that, she's just a killer actress.”

“However,” I say, “she really made me believe I'd be able to afford a cab everywhere!”

“Let's just get real,” says Ashford. “*Sex and the City* makes us want to live in New York in the late '90s/early 2000s—that's what's happening there. That was a different time. Carrie Bradshaw, in that time of New York, could have a big closet. Now the only time you can have a big closet like that is if you move to Greenpoint, and then who knows?”

Still, “I dreamed my whole life of New York being my home,” she says, “and I laid down in the bathtub yesterday, and I went, ‘New York is my home.’ It's kind of amazing.”

She's been here for 14 years. (“Isn't that crazy?!” she asks.) She moved from Denver to start school at Marymount Manhattan College at 17. And, she—like most—pounded the pavement in hopes of that “big break.”

“I won the Clarence Derwent Award in 2013,” she remembers referencing Broadway's oldest award that honors the most promising performers in New York. “When I was accepting it, I just

starting weeping openly... uncomfortably—people were confused a little bit at first—and the reason why I cried so much was that I used to be in line for auditions for Equity chorus calls and EPAs (Equity Principal Audition) when I was in college. I would sit outside. I had a little chair; I



Ashford's own miniature Australian Shepherd, Gracie

would bring my homework, I would come at six o'clock in the morning, get in line with everybody else, and I got one callback from those three years [and] all those auditions—I went to two or three a week. One callback. And, it was for Jerry Mitchell for the national tour of *Hairspray*. I got to the next round, and I didn't get called back again after that, but Jerry Mitchell gave me my very first callback. You know... it was during a time when I just couldn't get a bite, and it gave me such hope.”

She started out hosting at Cafe Fiorello—a restaurant not too far from where we chatted about taking on her sixth Broadway show, starring on Showtime, and, of course, winning a Tony Award.

After her Tony win (and post-Tonys nachos), “I took a lovely walk through Central Park,” she says on our bright afternoon. “I just walked through from the East Side to the West Side, and when I was a hostess at Fiorello's—when it seemed impossible—I used to take that walk to go to my hostess shifts. So, it was just like one, big, long ‘thank you’ walk—thank you to God for all of my blessings and opportunities. Isn't that cool?”

COURTESY OF ANNALEIGH ASHFORD