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THEATER

**REHEARSAL DINNER**  
ALISON PILL AND BOBBY  
CANNAVALE WILL DUKE IT  
OUT OVER A SET OF RARE  
STAMPS (BELOW) IN THERESA  
REBECK'S NEW PLAY.



rare find

*Broadway's newest darling, Alison Pill, squares off against Bobby Cannavale in Mauritius, writes Adam Green.*

I am sitting across the table at a theater hangout from the lovely—OK, adorable—21-year-old actress **Alison Pill**, who is explaining her knack for getting under a character's skin. "I always think that I'm just like my character and that my character is just like me, which I'm sure can be a little alarming for people who know me," she says. Her hair pulled back to accentuate her wide eyes and snub nose, she seems more like your friend's precocious kid sister than a preternaturally accomplished performer.

In her brief career, Pill has won critical hosannas, been nominated for a Tony, and scared the bejesus out of New York audiences in a series of life-or-death showdowns with dangerous men. As a trigger-happy Irish tomboy in 2006's

*The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, she wound up in a Mexican standoff with her I.R.A. terrorist boyfriend. In last season's punishing *Blackbird*, she played a young woman confronting the middle-aged man with whom she had an affair at twelve. Now, in Theresa Rebeck's *Mauritius*, Pill returns as a wounded, scrappy girl locked in a battle royal with three bullying philatelists and one double-dealing half-sister over some rare stamps. "I love playing these intense characters who are not easily likable and are driven to fight," Pill says. "It's great therapy."

A native of Toronto, Pill made her stage debut at nine, screaming, "You drank blood, Abby!" in *The Crucible*, and went on to a TV career, playing, she says, "everybody's daughter." After high school, she moved to New York and

landed the part of an amoral hottie in Neil LaBute's play *The Distance from Here*. Since then, she's won a reputation as a performer who inhabits her roles so fully that, as Ben Brantley wrote, "you're afraid she may lose herself there."

With *Mauritius*, Pill will be losing herself in a ferociously entertaining ensemble piece that bristles with the energy of a playwright hitting her stride. A former writer for *NYPD Blue*, Rebeck was last represented Off-Broadway by *The Scene*, a nasty little comedy about sex as blood sport in the big city. In her Broadway debut, the game is just as brutal, but the action has moved to the take-no-prisoners world of stamp collecting. Five desperate men and women try to get their hands on a pair of Mauritian stamps whose flaws make them worth millions; along the way, they expose a few flaws of their own. The show's director, Doug Hughes,

(*Doubt*) calls it "a caper story with a real beating heart."

From the start, Hughes wanted to cast Pill as Jackie, who sees the stamps, found among her late mother's belongings, as payback for an unhappy life. "Alison's emotional daring is accompanied by great honesty, clarity, and intensity—even in repose, she's fierce," he says. "The play requires someone who can start by gingerly negotiating with a sister she hasn't spoken to in years and, over the course of one scene, get to the point where she's capable of knocking her cold."

The terrific cast includes Dylan Baker as a sad-sack stamp dealer, F. Murray Abraham as a menacing big spender, and Katie Finneran as the sibling who takes it on the kisser. Bobby Cannavale (*Hurlyburly*) is Dennis, a charming if thuggish stamp-hound who may or may not turn out to be Jackie's savior. "You kind of can't take your eyes off Alison," Cannavale says. "Whatever role she's playing, she's in a very specific

place, and you're dying to know what that place is."

Pill has an instinctual grasp of what to reveal and what to hold back, a gift shared by the author of *Mauritius*. "Theresa is so amazing in terms of leaving out the stuff that's extraneous," Pill says. "As an actor, you really appreciate that, because it leaves you with so much to figure out that's just for yourself." Pill leans across the table, flashes a sunny smile, and says, "It's always nice to have a secret from the audience." □ *pata* >296

