



The Marvelous Mr. de Haas

Darius de Haas is a busy guy. The Broadway actor provides his singing voice to a hit television show, and this summer, in Central Park, he'll reprise his featured role in a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. We caught up with him at his home in Lambertville.

By LESLIE GARISTO PFAFF

In the center of Lambertville, even the grandest of houses stand close to their neighbors, and that's how Darius de Haas likes it. As we stroll around town, he talks about his decision to move full-time to the place that's been his part-time home for the past five years (he's been a weekender in the River Towns region for two decades). He never planned to leave his primary residence—an apartment in Inwood, at the northern tip of Manhattan—that he shared with his husband, Kyle Rudy, a corporate recruiter. But over time he became beset with a longing for what he calls “a safe haven.” As he talks about Lambertville, it's clear that what made it a haven for him wasn't just its relative safety during the worst days of the pandemic. It was also the city's sense of community. Like those grand houses, de Haas is close to his neighbors.

“People here do what they can to help each other,” he says. That sense of community was particularly keen last September, after flooding from Tropical Storm Ida wreaked devastation throughout the River Towns. No place suffered more than Lambertville, where dozens of city residents were left homeless. “People were galvanized,” de Haas says, recalling how neighbors and strangers alike pulled together to offer support and help the city rebuild. “That gave me such a sense of stability and well-being.”

Darius de Haas, photographed at the corner of Union and Bridge streets in Lambertville, February 7, 2022. Umbrella courtesy of A Mano Galleries, Lambertville.

PHOTO BY DAVE NORTON

His desire for stability is understandable. For more than three decades, de Haas, who is 53, has pursued a profession famous for its instability. A singer and actor, he's known for his roles on and off Broadway. He won an Obie award for his role as the lead in the musical *Running Man*, about which *The New York Times* wrote, "Mr. de Haas gives one of the best musical performances this season." Other accolades would follow: Reviewing the musical *Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin*, *The New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley wrote, "I was particularly taken with Darius de Haas (so affecting in 'Running Man'), who gives the show its anchor of emotional reality." He has also performed at the Bucks County Playhouse, in the musicals *Ain't Misbehavin'* (alongside his sister, Aisha de Haas) and *Guys and Dolls* and in a series of concerts in April 2021.

De Haas is equally celebrated for his vocal performances at venues from Lincoln Center to London's Royal Concert Hall. His impressive vocal range, which he estimates at two and a half octaves, is on display in nearly two dozen recordings and on the popular Amazon Prime series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, as the singing voice of the character Shy Baldwin. He

attributes his vocal range in part to his practice of emulating the high range of his mother, the jazz singer Geraldine Bey de Haas (her brother is the jazz singer and pianist Andy Bey).

That de Haas would become a performer seems preordained. He grew up on Chicago's South Side, where his father, Eddie, was a jazz bassist who played with legends such as Gene Krupa, Chet Baker, Blossom Dearie, and Miles Davis. His mother performed with the first national company of *Hair* and other successful shows. When his parents couldn't find a babysitter, they'd bring de Haas and Aisha—she's also a successful singer and actress—to gigs with them. These occasions provided the siblings a far better musical education than traditional lessons ever could. De Haas was enraptured.

His parents encouraged him "to follow my bliss," but they also warned him about the downside of a performing career. The hard work. The inevitable disappointments. He remained undaunted.

De Haas studied acting at Chicago's Whitney Young High School and at Columbia College in Chicago, and he secured his first professional role, in a play called *In the Beginning*, at the Chicago Theater Company, when he was seventeen. Before



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DARIUS DE HAAS

As Duke Senior, de Haas leads the company in a song from *As You Like It* at the Delacorte Theater in New York's Central Park.

he turned twenty-one, he'd scored roles in the first regional production of *Dreamgirls* and the twentieth anniversary production of *Hair*.

De Haas moved to New York in 1990 to study at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. Work followed: a role in the revue *Heartstrings*, a national tour of the musical *Once on This Island*. In 1994, he made his Broadway debut in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a musical adaptation of Manuel Puig's novel set in an Argentinian prison. Starring Chita Rivera, the play was directed by Harold Prince, written by Terrence McNally, and scored by composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb—all of whom de Haas describes as "Broadway royalty." When Vanessa Williams replaced Rivera, she and de Haas became



Recording for the hit TV show The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, for which de Haas provides the singing voice for the character Shy Baldwin.

close friends and occasional performing partners. "To this day," he says, "I count doing that play as the best Broadway experience I've had—and I've had great experiences on Broadway."

One of those experiences almost never happened. In 1995, his agent sent him on an audition for a then Off-Broadway musical called *Rent*. But after three weeks without a callback, he accepted a job in Morocco. Just before he left, *Rent*'s casting director got back to his agent to ask if de Haas could do a second audition for a place in the ensemble, which would mean, essentially, that he'd be working as an understudy. Instead, de Haas took the job in Morocco—"because I wanted to go to Morocco," he says, laughing.

When he returned, *Rent* was about to go into previews on Broadway. "I can't tell you why, but I knew I was going to be part of the show in one way or another," he says. He was right. The casting director contacted his agent again with the original offer to join the ensemble, and de Haas decided to see the show before accepting. By the end of the opening number, he knew he'd say yes. "It was just one of those electric, visceral feelings," he recalls. The job had him understudying for six characters and required him to keep six different roles in his head at the same time.



Clockwise from left: A 25-year-old de Haas with his parents and sister—musicians all—in Chicago; At home in Lambertville; Singing a duet with Vanessa Williams, whom he befriended when both were on Broadway in Kiss of the Spider Woman.

PHOTOS (ABOVE AND BELOW) COURTESY OF DARIUS DE HAAS

One of those characters was Angel, the street drummer and drag queen whose gentle soul has made her beloved of theatergoers. De Haas played Angel many times during his year with the show, but before his debut in the role he suffered a bout of anxiety, knowing he had to leap off a table in high heels. “I had such a fear of wiping out,” he says. He didn’t. De Haas describes *Rent* not merely as the show he wanted to do, “but that I had to do.”

In his early thirties, de Haas began to concentrate on his singing. It was, as with *Rent*, a kind of epiphany. “Something in my heart and mind was saying that I wanted to explore this more,” he remembers. At Lincoln Center and other venues, he performed the music of jazz composer Billy Strayhorn, who over nearly three decades cultivated a legendary collaboration with Duke Ellington. *Variety* praised de Haas’s ability to “reveal the sorrows, pains and joys of the composer’s richly layered repertoire with an intensity and honesty that easily envelops and mesmerizes the listener.”

As a Black, gay performer, de Haas is finely attuned to the need for greater diversity in the arts. In 2020, after the death of George Floyd, he and colleagues such as Williams, Audra McDonald, Billy Porter, Wendell Pierce, and Anna Deavere Smith were moved to establish Black Theatre United. The group’s mission is to help protect Black people and Black talent in the theatrical community through activism at the local and national levels. As de

Haas sees it, Black Theatre United embodies “my philosophy of the arts elevating humanity” and his firm belief that any progress toward social justice is likely to be undermined without constant reinforcement. His activism—de Haas also serves on the board of Covenant House, the nonprofit devoted to homeless youth—was inspired by his mother, a community leader in Chicago.

After Tropical Storm Ida ravaged the River Towns, de Haas used his art to help elevate his new hometown. In October he performed at Lambertville Helping Hands, a two-day benefit to raise money for flood victims. “I was very proud to be part of it,” he says. That pride of place extends to his home, a cozy semi-detached two-story that he shares with Rudy, two Australian labradoodles, and a baby grand piano. The house is filled with family photos, art—including paintings





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by de Haas’s grandfather, who was born in Curacao—and souvenirs of the couple’s world travels together.

As we walk along North Union Street, de Haas bidding each passerby a good morning, he talks about the changes he’s seen in Lambertville over the years. He’s heartened to have witnessed an increase in the diversity of its population—Hispanics make up ten percent of residents, and Lambertville is a welcoming home for a thriving LGBTQ community—but concedes the city has a long way to go. (According to recent Census figures, Black residents comprise less than one percent of Lambertville’s population.)

Over avocado toast at Under the Moon, de

Haas is asked what he would do, without a base in New York City, if he gets an extended role there. “Funny you should mention that,” he says. This summer, at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park, he’ll reprise his role as Duke Senior in a musical production of *As You Like It*, and he’s got shorter gigs at Lincoln Center and the 92nd Street Y scheduled in the spring. But de Haas is resolutely optimistic. “I think it’ll work out,” he says, his optimism perhaps reflecting the many successes already accrued to someone so determined to follow his bliss. 🌊

Leslie Garisto Pfaff is a regular contributor to River Towns. She profiled Bucks County architect Ralph Fey in the Winter 2021 issue.