



Photo: Nathan Johnson

GEORGE SALAZAR

THE VIDEO OF GEORGE Salazar singing “Michael in the Bathroom” from the new Broadway musical *Be More Chill* (Lyceum Theatre, 149 West 45th Street, NYC. www.bemorechill-musical.com) defines “going viral.” The Gen Z anthem has been viewed more than three million times on YouTube and has helped drive Joe Iconis and Joe Tracz’s musical to cult status since its 2015 regional theater premiere.

The musical, based on the young adult novel by Ned Vizzini, follows the futurist adventures of a teenager after he swallows a “squip”—a microcomputer chip that catapults him from loser to level-headed. Salazar plays his bestie, a role that he originated and has helped develop since the show’s inception. Salazar’s life, both personally and professionally, continues to blossom as *Be More Chill*’s long journey finally arrives on Broadway.

What’s different for you this time around since you made your Broadway debut in the 2011 revival of *Godspell*?

In a way, this feels like my Broadway debut because I was a completely different person when I did *Godspell*. I was so lost and didn’t have a clear idea of who I was, as a human being, as an artist, and as a gay man. I felt so conflicted and wasn’t out to my father. I’m having all of those first-time emotions. It’s also a show that I’ve been head over heels in love with for the past four years. It’s more than a dream come true.

For those living under a rock, how would you describe your role of Michael Menn?

Michael is the best friend we all wish we had, and the best friend we all wish we could be. He is unapologetically himself and delightfully weird and quirky. He doesn’t feel the need to fit in. He’s the type of high schooler I wish I had the courage to be, and the type of person that I’ve spent hundreds of dollars on therapy to try to become! He’s a kid who has it all figured out.

It’s been wild to meet the young people who love this show. I’m meeting 13-year-old trans kids who are so comfortable in their skin, and whose parents are so supportive and love them unconditionally. My goal is to create a representation of the kind of courage and bravery that exists in young people these days. I had a rough journey and came out to my father at 30 years old, so to see young people like this makes my heart explode. Michael is the only person in the show that doesn’t feel the pressure of changing himself to fit other people’s expectations.

The show has developed a massive following since the cast album of the Two Rivers Theatre production was released, and in particular your breakout song, “Michael in the Bathroom”—why do you think it so deeply resonates with people?

I’ve sung the song over 400 times in the past four years and it never gets old. Joe Iconis has a way with writing characters and songs that are so relatable. There’s a lack of pretension in his writing, so there’s no barrier between the audience and the subject matter of the song. In Act I, we see this character that is so put together, and in Act II you see this vulnerable side. It’s one of those earned moments in a musical and a combination of the lyrics and a catchy melody. But what I find most delicious about the song is that on the page, if you look at the lyrics, it’s really funny. But we all wear humor differently. It’s that juxtaposition of witty lyrics that fight the emotion—we’ve all been in that position of trying not to cry or have a panic attack.

You’ve got a fun sense of style, which fans can follow on Instagram, including a pretty impressive bandana collection. When did that signature look come about?

If you would have told me two years ago that people would be asking about these headbands, I’d be like, “Are you serious?” I love it. It began in 2014 when I was doing *Here Lies Love* at The Public Theater. The actress Jaygee Macapugay told me that in a certain light, I looked like Ralph Macchio (*The Karate Kid*). Then I did *Broadway Bounty Hunter* and wore a bandana. A year later I was doing a play in

Connecticut and didn’t have anything to do in my free time, so I bought some headbands to keep my hair out of my face while I was working out. I remember walking past a mirror and thought, “That’s not bad. I think I can rock this.”

You’ve been open about being gay, which I think is terrific, especially because *Be More Chill*’s fan base can see a role model for the LGBTQ community. Has that always been part of your DNA?

I wish I could say it was strategic and part of a grand design. Growing up, I didn’t have anyone who looked like me in any kind of spotlight. As *Be More Chill* was gaining traction, long before the Off-Broadway run, I was getting messages from young LGBTQ brown kids who had never seen me perform live and just found the album and YouTube videos, thanking me for being a positive role model. It weighed heavy on me. If I saw someone doing what I wanted to do at that age—being a positive presence in the world and open about who they were—my journey through adolescence and my 20s would have been so much easier. I didn’t come out to my dad until I was 30.

I’m mixed race. My mother is from the Philippines, and my dad is from Ecuador. So my teen years and 20s were more about figuring out my identity and which culture I belonged to, until I realized it could be both. It became clear that there was an intense and serious responsibility to be an ambassador. I could take it and run with it, and own it, and be proud of it, or hide. I decided to dive in with my whole heart. I’ve watched my father’s response to having a gay son change because of the young people that are sending me letters because of *Be More Chill*.

This June is going to be huge in New York City, with World Pride, the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall riots, and NYC Pride. You’ve been in the Big Apple more than a decade, where is your favorite NYC locale??

I love and adore the West Village. There’s a sense of community down there, especially at Marie’s Crisis where older and younger queens will come together to share their love of show tunes. There’s something really beautiful and “only in New York” about that experience.

—Matthew Wexler