

A Character Actress With a Soft Center

By ROBERT SIMONSON

MAY was a month of homecomings for Randy Graff. More than a decade after she won a Tony Award for her featured performance in "City of Angels," her name was again called, this time as a nominee for best leading actress in a musical for her role in "A Class Act," Lonny Price and Linda Kline's show about the life of Edward Kleban, the talented and troubled "Chorus Line" lyricist. Shortly thereafter Ms. Graff revisited her alma mater, Wagner College on Staten Island, where she spoke before the 2001 graduating class and was given an honorary doctorate.

Over lunch in a Midtown restaurant only hours after her Tony nomination was announced, it seemed that the commencement address was weighing most heavily on her mind. The speech was not yet completed. Did she at least have an idea of what she was going to say to the students?

"I'm going to tell them what I've learned," she replied with wide eyes and a self-deprecating laugh.

One thing she might convey is how to sustain a career on the New York stage. Ms. Graff, who is in her 40's, has been a Broadway character actress since the late 1980's.

"She is one of the most consistent performers I've ever known," observed Mr. Price, a longtime friend and sometime matchmaker (he introduced Ms. Graff to her husband, a musical director and conductor). "But she manages to be consistent without bloodlessness."

Her roots are in Brooklyn and Staten Island, and that outer-borough pedigree often informs her stage persona. Whether playing the Celeste Holm role in "High Society" on Broadway or the Nancy Walker part in the City Center Encores! production of "Do Re Mi," she is the Girl From the Neighborhood, the witty, square-shouldered and guardedly romantic Gal Friday. Michael Blake-more, who directed her in the musical "City of Angels," spoke of her "proletariat" quality.

"I've been told I can be very commanding and tough, and I think that comes from my Brooklyn upbringing," Ms. Graff said. "But I'm really a mushball underneath."

Certainly, the neurotic Ed Kleban in "A Class Act" never gets anything but the unvarnished truth from Sophie, the lover-turned-best-friend character that Ms. Graff plays. The lone civilian in a story peopled by an army of high-strung artistic types, Sophie responds to Kleban's phobias with warm common sense and returns his distrustful squints with a steady gaze.

"Randy is very good at taking care



Lonny Price as Edward Kleban and Randy Graff as Sophie in the musical "A Class Act."

Randy Graff has made a career of playing can-do women. But she's a 'mushball' underneath.

of people," said Mr. Price, who, in addition to playing Kleban and directing the show at the Ambassador Theater, has been nominated for a Tony for the book he co-wrote with Ms. Kline. "She's great in a crisis and clearheaded, which is very like the character of Sophie."

Ms. Graff achieves a lot in "A Class Act" by seemingly doing very little. What some people remember most from her performance is her unadorned delivery of the bitter-sweet ballad "The Next Best Thing to Love," which makes a persuasive case for minimalist acting. Bruce

Weber wrote in The New York Times that her "tender and wise rendition" of the song was "a showstopper."

"You have to give your audience a lot of credit," Ms. Graff said. "Making them listen doesn't necessarily mean lots of hand gestures and moving around. In college, I worked with a man I always refer to as my mentor, Milton Lyon. He guest-directed a production of 'Jacques Brel' when I was a freshman. He taught me that every song is a monologue."

"You do have to be a great singer," she continued, "but the fact is that in New York great singers are a dime a dozen. The person with the great voice who knows how to act the song has a better shot at getting the job."

But does that person get the Tony? For Ms. Graff, the 1990 win was perhaps experience enough. Five minutes after her thank-you's, she had had to change into wig and costume and perform a number from "City of Angels"; immediately afterward, she was ushered through that temporary holding cell known as the press room. "All those lights," she

remembered. "It was like Beirut."

This year she plans to enjoy the ride. "I don't necessarily need another Tony," she said.

She elaborated: "The lesson that Ed learns on his deathbed in 'A Class Act' is it's not about fame or stardom. It's about doing what you love, working and creating. There have been times in this business where I've done work and I've thought, 'Nobody's really paying any attention to this work and I think it's pretty damn good.' The thing that I've learned is that the people who count, the people who remember what you do, aren't the ones who necessarily write the big exclamation-point reviews. This may sound like I'm full of it, but the respect of my peers means everything to me. If you feel good about your work, that's everything. The rest is fluff."

She stopped talking for a moment, then asked, "Does that sound totally Pollyanna-ish?" No, but it sounds like good material for a commencement speech. □