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## Theater

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Mosley sings out loud.

## Innocently abroad

Dazzling newcomer Karla Mosley finds a home in *Expatriate*. By David Cote

The character description of doomed diva Alphine in Lenelle Moise's script for *Expatriate* reads: "Born to be a star." How's that for hard to play? Laughing gamely, Karla Mosley—the actor who currently incarnates Alphine at the Culture Project—admits that she didn't initially see herself in the part. "When I came in to audition, I thought I'd be reading for [her best friend] Claudie," Mosley explains. "Claudie's closer to my temperament: older sister, mother, caretaker, a little conservative. But they said, 'No, you're reading for Alphine.' I was shocked." Luckily the surprise wore off and she got to work; when *Expatriate* opens this week, Mosley will make one of the more head-turning theatrical debuts of the season.

In the episodic, lyrical two-hander—which costars author Moise as Claudie—Mosley gets to empty her bag of performer tricks: She plays men and women; she portrays Alphine from shy girl to sex-addicted, drug-addled celebrity; she sings; she dances; she joins Moise in a series of rhythmically complex spoken-word sequences, accompanied by the JamMan, a sound looper operated by foot pedal. By any standard, it's a workout, and Mosley pulls it off with massive charisma and glamour.

Looking at the actor's CV, you wouldn't have expected to find her in this sort of R-rated project. The Westchester native, 26, attended NYU for acting, but in her junior year she was tapped to join the ensemble of *Hi-5*, an international children's TV show that still airs in reruns on Discovery Kids in the U.S. From 2002 to '06, Mosley lived in Sydney for six-month filming periods. She says it was a daunting commitment, but she

relished it. "My dream, probably since I was in middle school, has been to do art, travel and teach," Mosley says. "Suddenly I found myself doing those three things." When the show went on permanent hiatus two years ago, she returned home, and made her Off Broadway debut in the children's musical *Max & Ruby*.

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It's obvious why the producers of *Hi-5*—an educational mix of animation and pop-flavored musical numbers—envisioned the performer in brightly colored costumes bouncily engaging young viewers: Mosley is delightfully upbeat, with a light, high

voice, wide eyes and expressive features.

Moise can't imagine anyone else in the role she wrote. "Karla was able to bring something fresh and youthful to her approach to Alphine," the author says. She also taps into her femininity—a feat that Moise notes seemed tough for the other black actors who auditioned for the part. "They struggled very hard to *perform* their femininity," she recalls. "Not because they weren't skillful, but because they had never been asked to play a part like this before. Usually, we see a lot of the strong, big-mama characters. Bitchy or sassy."

Alphine does have bitchy and sassy moments in *Expatriate*, but she's a moody, hilarious, loving, flamboyant and rather unpredictable creation. "She's a whole person," Mosley agrees. "She's not just an addict, not just a star, not just an abused child or someone with a high libido. She's all those things and more; she's bright, deep and funny."

The impetus for the drama came when Moise asked an actor friend what her dream role would be. "She was always in predominantly white ensembles, in what I'd call marginal roles," Moise recalls. "She said she was really interested in Josephine Baker. Who are the Bakers of today?" So the playwright invented modern equivalents.

What resulted is a play that is an expressionistic examination of race, showbiz and friendship. Claudie and Alphine are opposites who complement each other; Claudie escapes to Paris to become a lesbian artist; Alphine, sliding into addiction, joins her. The two create a singing act that becomes the toast of Paris. Eventually Alphine succumbs to her inflated self-image. "Karla and I laugh because we're playing these sexy rock stars and we're both dorks," the playwright says.

Nerd she may be, but Mosley might also be kicking off a lively career (she's nabbed small roles on *Gossip Girl* and *Law & Order*). Right now, she's busy juggling Alphine as a complex, flawed person who still burns bright. As for all the sex, drugs and rock & roll, she is intent on "not romanticizing it. That's the paradox of addiction," Mosley muses. "I've known many addicts in my life. Some of them are the dearest, most hysterical people I've known. They can shine so bright and be a gift to the world—and then they're gone." Not something she needs to worry about.

*Expatriate is at the Culture Project through Aug 3. See Off Broadway.*