

SUPPORTING
ACTOR

CHAZZ PALMINTERI

No. 1 with his 'Bullets' role? Woody's hitman gets his big shot.

CHAZZ PALMINTERI doesn't plan to make a whole career out of playing gangster types. That's just how things have worked out so far. After years of playing minor tough guy parts on such TV shows as *Dallas*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *Matlock*, the actor decided the best way to get a good role was to write one for him-

self. The result was his play, *A Bronx Tale*, which he later rewrote as a screenplay that marked Robert De Niro's directorial debut—and he insisted that he, Palminteri, 41, play the role of Sonny, the swaggering neighborhood don. Okay, so this was another gangster, but one with special meaning for Palminteri, who actually grew up in the Bronx and knew guys like Sonny.



Ironically, Woody Allen hadn't seen *A Bronx Tale* when he cast Palminteri in his gangsters-and-greasepaint comedy, *Bullets Over Broadway*. But Allen said, "The second he walked in, I knew that this guy was born to play this part." Okay, so this was still another gangster, but not just another gangster. Cheech may start off as a bodyguard for his boss' girl during her Broadway debut, but pretty soon, he's tearing the script out of its author's hands—and turning it into a better play!

"I was attracted to the role because I knew this character," Palminteri said. Having held out for creative control of *A Bronx Tale*, he could relate to Cheech, who has an artist's soul beneath his gruff exterior and who gives a whole new meaning to the term *temperamental*.

Fortunately, director Allen isn't temperamental when it comes to letting his actors ad-lib. Palminteri came up with an improvisational gem during Cheech's bullet-riddled death scene, as his playwright pal (John Cusack) leans over to say goodbye. "Don't speak," says Cheech, echoing the catchphrase of costar Dianne Wiest's melodramatic character Helen Sinclair. "Don't speak." The Woodman loved it. Cut. Print.

Bravo. —Michael Sauter