



LESLIE BEGA

PLAYS IT SMART



Leslie Bega wheels her white Mercedes coupe into a Hollywood parking lot. It's one of those L.A. days when the sky looks postcard blue and the breeze is sweet with orange blossoms. Although millions of viewers know her as the brilliant yet socially awkward Maria Borges on ABC's popular sit-com *Head of the Class*, the 22-year-old actress shares none of her character's adolescent angst—emerging from her car, she projects confidence and independence. In conversation, she is up front and tough.

"I've yet to find a role I can really sink my teeth into," she says while lurching on artichokes. "But playing Maria for three seasons has allowed me to develop a character I can relate to even though I *don't* have her neurosis," she adds, laughing. A Los Angeles native and high school valedictorian, Bega dropped out of the cinema studies program at the University of Southern California to join *Head of the Class*—a decision she still thinks about. "If the show got canceled tomorrow," she ventures, "I'd be tempted to go back to school and get my degree. I loved learning about what goes on behind the camera."

Bega made her professional acting debut at age seven in, of all things, a Kool-Aid commercial. Throughout her teens, she immersed herself in acting, dance and vocal studies, all the while working regularly in commercials and episodic TV. In 1984 she appeared in her first feature film, *Breakin'*, and has since been seen

in more teenage movie musicals than she cares to admit. "*Body Rock*, *Breakin' 2*, *Girls Just Want To Have Fun* and *Tuff Turf*," she says, listing her credits reluctantly. "I danced in all those films. But someday I'd love to do Broadway or some serious musical film where I could show people that I can *sing*."

Because she's always focused on her studies and career, Bega's never had much time for socializing. "I've collected acquaintances from show business but no real friends," she observes. "My true friends are the ones I met in school years ago. I can count them on one hand and still have fingers left over." Although Bega feels "fortunate to have achieved some measure of success at a relatively young age," being on a hit television show occasionally has its unpleasant side. "Some individuals have tried to get close to me only because they are interested in my professional connections or my money," she says, hazel eyes widening. "It's a drag having to be on guard when you meet someone new, but you just have to deal with it and not let it mess you up."

To maintain her equilibrium, Bega centers herself with horseback riding and reading. (She

shares with brainy Maria Borges a taste for high-brow literature. "I prefer poets like T.S. Eliot to contemporary, confessional ones because Eliot's work has epic themes," she explains.) A self-confessed semi-hermit, she recently purchased a house in the Hollywood Hills, which she shares with her dog, a feisty Rotweiler named Tyson. "I wanted to name my dog after a great fighter," she recalls, "and Mike happened to be hanging around the set at the time."

Bega's too discreet to say whether she's friends with costar Robin Givens, or how Givens's heavyweight break-up affected the atmosphere on the set. "All I can tell you is that some people in the cast were shell-shocked when Robin and Mike started having their troubles." She closes the subject with a commanding toss of her chestnut hair.

Self-possessed as Bega is, she admits she's uncertain about what she'll do upon graduating from *Head of the Class*. "I'd like to record a pop/R&B album, but I also want to do films and musicals. All I can do is keep my options open so I'll be prepared for that next step."

With her sure footing and level head, it's bound to be in the right direction. ■