

DISNEY THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS: TWENTY YEARS OF DISNEY ON BROADWAY

by

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Disney Theatrical Productions: 20 Years of Disney on Broadway

Thesis Directed by Professor Bud Coleman

Abstract:

This dissertation examines the production practices of Disney Theatrical Productions (DTP), the theatrical producing arm of the studio branch of the Walt Disney Corporation. Because of DTP's unique position under the Disney umbrella, DTP functions differently than other producers of Broadway musicals. DTP is first compared to other theatre producers, then case studies of three productions are presented to illuminate the various production models that the company has employed in order to determine how Disney Theatrical Productions functions as an independent producer under the umbrella of a multi-billion dollar entertainment corporation.

Through an explanation of three case studies (*The Lion King*, *Tarzan*, and *Newsies*) this dissertation aims to define the ways in which DTP is creating a new model for Broadway Producers. By thoroughly investigating the company's varied production models as well as the critical response to its Broadway musicals, this dissertation asserts that Disney Theatrical Productions has changed the landscape of American Musical Theatre.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Myth and the Mouse

On the short walk from my hotel at 51st and 8th to the Disney Theatrical Productions' offices at 214 42nd Street, a street vendor is displaying a copy of Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*. There is a certain irony in the fact that a diminutive old woman is sitting, hunched over in a tattered camping chair on 8th Avenue, peddling a book about myth, in one of the most mythic places in America. We may not have ancient myths here; most mythic beliefs came across the seas many years ago, or those that are native no longer reside on this tiny, but expensive piece of land between the East and Hudson rivers. But here in the heart of Manhattan, there is a younger mythology, the mythology of the Great White Way, the mythology of Broadway.

The Disney Theatrical Productions offices are perched atop the New Amsterdam Theatre on bustling 42nd Street. Times Square is a different place in the morning, the magic of the night before flickered out with the rising sun. Passing piles of trash waiting to be picked up, I walk by Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum, where several tourists are posing with an eerily lifelike statue of Morgan Freeman, giving a thumbs up to their cellphone, which is clipped to the end of a selfie stick in one of their outstretched hands. Times Square during the day lacks many of its romantic qualities, the things that all the Peggy Sawyers dream about. Approaching the New Amsterdam Theatre, a bald man, who looks strikingly like the Genie from *Aladdin* -- which is currently playing at the theatre -- stands outside, greeting tourists and guarding the door.

Since I have an appointment, “Genie” ushers me through the locked doors, which beckon like the cave of wonders, and points to a tiny elevator. Then, with a smile, he instructs me to visit the 8th floor reception area. The elevator is beautifully restored to its original art deco splendor, but I don’t have time to take it in, as the bell chimes and the doors slide open on the 8th floor. Nervously, I walk into a well manicured, yet surprisingly ordinary lobby; this is, after all, the place where magic is made. I would have thought the reception area would have been more, well, magical. And that is when I realize, that behind the magic of the Mouse, there are ordinary (yet extraordinary) artists, educators, accountants, writers, and receptionists who work in a brightly lit office atop the New Amsterdam Theatre, the crown jewel of 42nd Street. They make that magic happen.

I am greeted by an exceptionally cheerful receptionist (by New York standards anyway) and she instructs me to wait, as the man I am here to meet has not arrived yet. After waiting for a few minutes, and browsing through show programs from around the world...*Tarzan* in German, *The Lion King* in Japanese...I am greeted by an excited and friendly Kenneth Cerniglia, Disney’s resident Literary Manager and Dramaturg. He smiles, and escorts me through the door, into the belly of the Mouse. Several months ago, before I began this exploration, I had no idea that Disney Theatricals even had a Literary Manager or a Dramaturg. Disney, Cerniglia informs me, “runs a lot like a regional theatre company because each show, though it has specific personnel, is not an individual entity. When the show closes we all don’t go our separate ways, we continue working on the next one. There is always something in the works” (May 26).

Disney's offices are built into what was once Ziegfeld's rooftop theatre at the New Amsterdam. The idea of restoring the space had been tossed around, but due to the demands of contemporary commercial theatre, specifically modern sound amplification, it is not possible to run two shows in the building at one time. So Disney Theatrical Productions built its offices in the former frolicking grounds of Florenz Ziegfeld. Cerniglia points across the office to the conference rooms, which are large, well designed, glass enclosed, and florescent lit. Inside one of the rooms, I notice that Thomas Schumacher, President of Disney Theatrical Productions, is having an animated conversation with several other DTP employees. Cerniglia informs me that the conference rooms are suspended in the fly space of the old theatre, and that the rows of desks where the education department and the literary department reside, where we are now standing, was once the theatre's balcony. He then points to what was once the proscenium of the theatre, though covered in sheetrock, and perfectly painted, I can still see the structure framing the offices across and below. Cerniglia casually notes that during the renovation, every care was taken to preserve the architecture of the original space.

I take a moment, and look around. Though the office is slick, clean, and new, a far cry from the historic theatre that once occupied this rooftop position, I can still see the bones of what once was. Cerniglia walks me around the office and pauses at a row of large windows. He looks down on the Nederlander Theatre on 41st Street below, "This is where we spied on *Newsies*" he jokes, beaming with pride. "We watched from up here on opening night [in 2012]" (May 26). *Newsies*, which was a surprise hit, is a show for which Cerniglia has a deep affection.

Cerniglia takes me down the stairs, to what, I assume, was once the orchestra level of Ziegfeld's theatre. We pass by a row of poster boards with printed text and photos on them, he indicates that this is the display of shows that are running and shows that are currently being developed. When Cerniglia first told me that DTP had a display in its offices of all the projects that were in development, I expected a slick, high production value display with flashy graphics and the Disney touch. To my surprise, the display is simply a row of black foam boards with black and white paper print outs of the titles and the teams working on what is up and upcoming. Slowly, I walk down the row, past the currently running productions, to see the following titles in development: *Shakespeare in Love*, *Frozen*, *The Princess Bride*, *Father of the Bride*, *Freaky Friday*, and several others.

Across from these poster boards are two rolling white boards that list all of the Disney Theatrical Properties and where in the world they are currently playing. The titles and cities are printed in color and pasted onto magnets. The display seems more at home in a classroom than in the offices of one of the largest entertainment corporations in the world. It is decidedly un-mythic. But that is just it: Disney Theatrical Productions is a theatre company, doing what theatre companies do: developing shows, doing educational outreach, and selling merchandise. The catch, is that DTP is but one small part of the Walt Disney Corporation, a multi-billion dollar, multi-national, entertainment superpower.

I glance across the room to a large, red, throne-like chair that is perched in the corner. "That's from *Mary Poppins*" Cerniglia says. "Sometimes we keep a few things after the shows close." I am struck by his enthusiasm, for the shows, for his

job, and for Disney Theatricals. Behind the myth of the Mouse, on the 7th and 8th floor of an old, but new, building, perched above one of the most beautiful theatres in Times Square, the Disney Theatrical Productions offices are full of men and women, who create the extraordinary.

Disney the Corporation

These women and men are not only a part of Disney Theatrical Productions, but they are also employees of the Walt Disney Corporation. In his letter to shareholders that accompanied the Company's 2014 financial report, Disney's CEO Robert A. Iger divulges Disney's brand strategy: "we've reached this level of sustained success by focusing on three strategic priorities that unlock the limitless potential of this remarkable company: unparalleled creativity, innovative technology, and global expansion" (*Fiscal Year 2014 3*). Though Iger does not specifically refer to Disney Theatrical Productions (DTP) in his letter, the parent company's strategic priorities most certainly extend to DTP.

The Walt Disney Corporation (WDC) is divided into four segments: Media Networks (ABC, ESPN, and Disney Channel), Parks and Resorts, Studio Entertainment, and Consumer Products. DTP is a part of the Studio Entertainment Division. According to the *Fiscal Year 2014 Annual Financial Report*,

Disney Theatrical Group develops, produces and licenses live entertainment events. The Company has produced and licensed Broadway productions around the world...Disney Theatrical Group licenses the Company's intellectual property to Feld Entertainment, the producer of Disney On Ice

and Disney Live! (14)

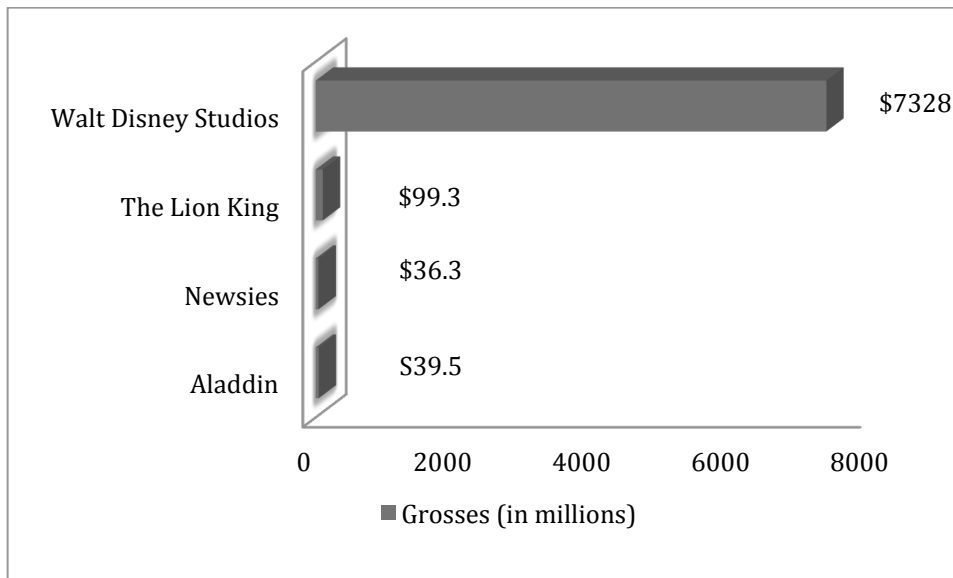
This statement makes up merely one small paragraph in a 214-page document, which parallels the reality that DTP is but one tiny drop in the Walt Disney Corporation bucket. It is also difficult to track what percentage of the WDC annual net income¹ DTP represents for several reasons. First and foremost, given the fact that DTP is a department in the Studio Entertainment division, the specific financial data for DTP do not have to be reported publicly. All that has to be reported are the data for the entire division, though sources note, DTP has never had an unprofitable year (Cerniglia May 26). Next, the percentage that DTP represents fluctuates each year, depending on what other properties are released by Disney Studios. In 2014, Disney Studios released *Frozen*, which was the highest grossing animated film ever (*Fiscal Year 2014*). Therefore, the profits generated by DTP, though surely sizable, often don't have a significant impact on the total profits of the studios. However, according to Cerniglia, "a decade ago [the studio] had [some] really bad years, in which case our [DTP's] profit ended up being the difference for in the black or in the red overall" (Cerniglia May 26).

In 2014,² the Walt Disney Studios brought in \$7,278,000,000 in revenue³ (*Fiscal Year 2014 71*). In comparison, the three Disney musicals running on Broadway in the same time period had the following grosses:

¹ \$48.8 Billion in FY 2014

² Fiscal year (October 1, 2013 to September 30, 2014)

³ Revenue, not profit



Aladdin grossed \$39,503,751, *Newsies* grossed \$36,297,148, and *The Lion King* grossed \$99,275,980 for a total of \$175,076,879⁴ (“The Broadway League”). With three profitable shows running on Broadway, the Broadway gross income of DTP⁵ was approximately 2.4% of the total revenue of the Walt Disney Studios. Given that the grosses don’t take into account the cost of running the show, the actual profit that DTP’s Broadway productions bring in is tiny compared to the studio division as a whole. Look again at the film *Frozen*, which grossed \$400,736,600 between December 1st, 2013, and July 14, 2014 (“Internet Broadway Database”). The film grossed more than twice as much as all three Broadway shows combined, in a shorter amount of time (29 weeks vs. 52 weeks), with a much lower average ticket cost. Though the money may be small in comparison, the visibility of these productions is very large. Between the billboards in Times Square, the

⁴ Gross income, not profit

⁵ This only takes into account the income generated from the shows running on Broadway at that time. It does not include the revenue generated from licensing, touring productions, and merchandise.

performances and feature segments on ABC television shows, the performances in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and productions around the world, DTP's Broadway shows are a glimmering jewel in the Disney landscape. In addition, the theatrical properties can realize royalties for decades to come, whereas, many animated films have a relatively short shelf-life.

Disney as Critical Target

Over the past ninety years, Disney has become synonymous with American childhood.⁶ The company has earned a reputation for producing family-friendly entertainment over a variety of platforms. When Disney seals a product with its name, parents know that product is appropriate for family consumption. The Walt Disney Corporation has been able to gain the trust of American parents and position themselves as the leader in childhood entertainments on screen, on ice, and in person at the company's numerous theme parks. The Walt Disney Corporation has built an indomitable brand that has become synonymous not only with childhood wonder, but also with consumer capitalism and commodification. In his introduction to the 2005 book, *Rethinking Disney*, Mike Budd notes,

Considering the highly developed corporate synergy in which every Disney product is both a commodity and an ad for every other Disney commodities, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that each story the company tells, each theme the company deploys builds the Disney brand. (1)

That brand has become a staple of American culture and has managed to thrive

⁶ The Walt Disney Corporation was founded in 1923

despite criticism. The success and size of the corporation makes Disney a target, with the company under fire for everything from exploitative labor practices to racism in its cartoons. Many of these criticisms are justified and in recent years, the company has attempted to become more inclusive and culturally sensitive, but is not always successful.

Walt Disney himself has been the subject of bitter dispute almost since the company's inception. In 1941, Walt Disney's "paternalistic and exploitative labor practices" led to the Disney cartoonists' strike (2). In 1947, Walt Disney gave testimony in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee as a "friendly witness" (Guider 4). The Walt Disney Corporation has not been immune to criticism either. The Walt Disney Corporation has been accused of many things over the years. The company has been labeled anti-union and has faced criticism about the disparity in pay between its highest executives and its minimum wage workers. It has also been under fire for its aggressive attitude toward litigation and copyright protection, and its use of unethical sweatshop labor to produce some of its merchandise. In addition, concerns about the corporation commercializing childhood, allegations of racism in many of the company's cartoons, and backlash against the female stereotypes seen in Disney's princesses, has left The Walt Disney Corporation constantly under scrutiny (Budd 3-5).

This anti-Disney sentiment that exists in the marketplace, however, has not hurt the company's bottom line. Disney manages to remain impervious to the many criticisms that have been lobbed its way, regardless of the merit of the allegations.

This success despite complaints has led to a rise in criticism of Disney in recent

years. In fact, the term “Disneyfication” has entered the American vocabulary. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as: “The addition or acquisition of features or elements considered characteristic of Disney films, cartoons, or theme parks; the simplification, sanitization, or romanticization of a place or concept” (“Disneyfication”). The OED also gives the term the designation: “mildly derogatory” (“Disneyfication”).

Despite these criticisms, the Walt Disney Corporation seems immune to the repercussions that most other corporate entities would incur given similar circumstances. In their 2001 book, *Dazzled By Disney? The Global Disney Audiences Project*, Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan notice, “the multitude not only favors Disney but also often considered as taboo any serious examination—never mind any criticism—of Disney’s meaning and impact” (331). Disney is an integral part of many people’s childhoods, and as such the memories and associations that consumers have of the company is often blinding. This may account for the fact that despite many controversies, the coverage of and attitude toward the Walt Disney Corporation has skewed positive. However, recently there has been a growing amount of literature and critical examination of the corporation and its practices. In her 2001 book *Understanding Disney*, Janet Wasko notes,

During the last decade, there has been a definite backlash to Disney’s intense expansion, as some consumers have come to view the Disney Company as behaving in an overtly greedy and overly materialistic manner. The Disney cynics are typically still involved as consumers of Disney production, but are

critical of the increases in theme park prices and the intense marketing and merchandising efforts. (208)

The Walt Disney Corporation's critics still love the merchandise, which may explain the company's success despite its practices and policies.

Disney Theatrical Production's position as an independent theatrical producer under the umbrella of the Walt Disney Corporation has put DTP under the microscope. From the moment Disney announced it would be making its entrance on 42nd Street, the Broadway community was very vocal in its concerns about the negative impact that Disney might have on Times Square and on Broadway theatre. Since Disney Theatrical Productions exists as part of the Disney Brand landscape, the theatre company inherits its parent corporation's baggage. Although the Walt Disney Corporation as a whole has often been immune to the effects of critical backlash, Disney Theatrical Productions has not always shared that immunity. Since the early 1990s members of the Broadway community and many scholars have voiced their disdain for the Disneyfication of Times Square and Broadway.

In his 1995 article for *TDR*, "Broadway and the Beast: Disney Comes to Times Square," Steve Nelson refers to the Walt Disney Corporation as a "300-pound gorilla like no other" (71). Nelson notes "America's most influential entertainment conglomerate was greeted with less than open arms by the supposedly unflappable Broadway establishment" (71). In 1994, when Disney announced that it would be producing a stage version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the corporation was discussed as an "invader" on 42nd Street. Articles began popping up in the New York newspapers questioning the city's choice to allow a huge corporation to come in and revamp one

of New York's most iconic districts. In his February 1994 article for the *Los Angeles Times*, "Broadway Mickey Mouse: Theatre Deal Brings Disney Back to New York," Jonathan Weber reports on the deal struck between the city of New York and the Walt Disney Corporation for the renovation of the New Amsterdam Theatre. He notes, "two major theatre owners initially opposed the deal on grounds that the state was unfairly favoring Disney with subsidies" (3). In his article, "Is Disney the Newest Broadway Baby?" Alex Witchel of the *New York Times* discusses the backlash against Disney by other theatre owners due to the low interest loan that Disney was able to obtain from the city of New York to renovate the New Amsterdam. Similar loans had in the past been denied to other producers, leading them to fear that the entrance of the Walt Disney Corporation on Broadway would lead to the ousting of other smaller companies (H1). In addition, when DTP was developing *Beauty and the Beast*, the media coverage focused on the exorbitant amount of money that the company was spending on the project. Disney reported spending \$12 million, which at the time broke the record for the most money spent on a single Broadway show. However, many, including Witchel, conjectured that the company spent closer to \$19 million on the project (H1).

The criticism and fear was not unjustified, in his 2004 book *Ghosts of 42nd Street*, Anthony Bianco reports, "Many smaller retailers have struggled. And in transplanting glitzy theme-park culture into the heart of the big city, 42nd Street's redevelopers have enhanced its tourist appeal at the cost of alienating many New Yorkers" (298). In his 2001 book, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing the Marketing of Culture*, John Seabrook, a former writer for *The New Yorker* expresses his disdain

noting, “The new place [Times Square] meant the destruction of a unique local culture and the substitution of a generic market culture, this Times Square [does] not feel like an improvement to me” (8). Locally, the sanitization of Times Square was not popular, further compounding the ire directed toward Disney, as the corporation was seen by many as the instigator of the makeover. The mixed feelings that many in New York had toward the transformation of Times Square, the fact that the Broadway establishment felt that Disney was given unfair and preferential treatment, not to mention the seemingly limitless corporate dollars that the company threw at its first Broadway production led to a critical target being placed squarely on the back of any and every Disney Theatrical Production.

In addition to the critical target and the initial disdain for DTP within the Broadway community, DTP also received fire from the academy. A string of publications beginning in the early 1990s and continuing well into the 2000s criticize many aspects of DTP and its productions. Steve Nelson’s aforementioned article in *TDR*, “Broadway and the Beast: Disney Comes to Times Square” conjectures that Disney “exploits theatre as another option on the tourist agenda” (75). In 1998, John Bell published an article in *TDR* entitled, “Disney’s Times Square: The New American Community Theatre,” in which he asserts,

Disney’s development of the New Amsterdam Theatre will put that historic Times Square playhouse and its theatre productions squarely into the middle of the Disney corporate network of consumer performance. In that network live theatre will serve, like theme-park performance, as a place where Disney consumers can participate in

(consume) a Disney event with other Disney consumers, helping to establish in person a temporary Disney consumer community. This is a different type of community and a different type of theatre than the community attracted to and the theatre produced by the New Amsterdam in its heyday in the 1920s, when the Ziegfeld Follies played inside the theatre...(27)

What Bell loses sight of here is that Disney Theatricals and Florenz Ziegfeld have much in common. Ziegfeld produced lavish productions featuring tastefully displayed beautiful girls wearing elaborate costumes to entice theatregoers, young and old, to step into the theatre and be transported for a few hours, just as DTP produces lavish productions featuring well known characters and spectacular effects to entice the contemporary version of those same theatre goers.

In 1999, Maurya Wickstrom published an article in *Theatre Journal*, "Commodities, Mimesis and *The Lion King*: Retail Theatre for the 1990s" in which she criticizes the capitalist nature of the Disney Theatrical model. She argues,

The theatrical embodiment of cartoon characters allows Disney...to transform what have become traditional capitalist strategies for attracting consumers.... It is not enough to encourage consumers to have commodities; they must be compelled to become them. By creating environments and narratives through which both shows and stores, entertainment and retail based corporations allow bodies to inhabit commodities and so suggest that commodities, in turn, can be brought to life. (285)

Here, Wickstrom reduces the value of *The Lion King* to that of a commodity, rather than recognizing its potential and value as a work of art. This points to the fact that Disney Theatrical's musicals are often dismissed as commercial theatre that contains no artistic merit and is undeserving of scholastic praise or discussion outside of its perceived flaws.

However, DTP is not the only commercial theatre producer to be targeted or dismissed. In fact, for decades the academy has given very little scholarly attention to American musical theatre in general. And though the pendulum is beginning to swing the other way, as over the last ten years scholars have begun to focus on the scholastic value of musical theatre, there are still many scholars who dismiss the form. This problem is addressed in David Savran's 2004 article "Toward a Historiography of the Popular." In it, Savran urges, for the survival of the study of theatre that scholars intervene and overrule "long-standing class-based prejudices about the superiority of art to entertainment" (211). He continues,

Theatre historians looking to have a greater impact both within and without the profession could do worse than to reconsider the kinds of theatrical practice that have held millions spellbound but have been routinely dismissed by scholars...Until very recently, however, historians and critics of twentieth-century theatre have obstinately (if inadvertently) endorsed the binary opposition between highbrow and lowbrow -- which in fact was consolidated only at the end of the nineteenth century -- privileging elitist, modernist, and avant-gardist forms at the expense of those deemed merely and regrettably popular. (211)

Since 2004, when Savran's article was published, the popular forms of the last century have begun to find legitimacy in the academy. However, the same academic dismissal that most musical theatre received prior to the 21st century is now being aimed at corporate theatre producers like Disney Theatricals. Because of DTP's affiliation with the Walt Disney Corporation, an entity that is outside the Broadway establishment, and the company's specifically focused on producing popular, commercial theatre, Disney Theatrical Productions struggles to be taken seriously in the academic community. In her March 2007 essay for *Theatre Topics*, "In Defense of Pleasure: Musical Theatre History in the Liberal Arts [A Manifesto]," Stacy Wolf explores the current status of the study of Musical theatre within the academy. She shares that her students were shocked when reading Savran's article and couldn't understand why anyone hated musicals. She notes,

They don't live in a world in which high art is better than pop culture. They have grown up being thoroughly postmodern, moving easily among media in a culture that privileges what John Seabrook calls the 'nobrow': the mind-bogglingly active shifting of cultural categories of value and worth both commercially and intellectually. (52)

Wolf's students, like those at universities all over the country do not adhere to the strict hierarchies of previous generations. John Seabrook defines a "Nobrow" moment as "neither high nor low, and not in the middle, a moment that exist[s] outside the cultural hierarchy altogether" (*Nobrow* 13). Most contemporary Americans in their 20s and 30s live in the world of "Nobrow" and do not share the academy's disdain for the popular, or think that theatre with wide commercial

appeal is automatically of lesser value. Millennials have grown up in a world of cultural fluidity where value is assigned based on taste rather than the manufactured hierarchies of class and culture. For many theatre students entering universities now, *The Lion King* is the performance that first got them hooked on theatre and ignited their passion. Whereas, this author can trace that moment of theatrical addiction to the first national tour of *Phantom of the Opera*, and others might point to iconic shows like *A Chorus Line* or *Hair*, simply put, the family friendly shows produced by Disney Theatrical Productions are inspiring the next generation of theatre practitioners and scholars.

Forging a New Model

Despite critical disdain and academic dismissal, Disney Theatrical Productions has changed the landscape of American musical theatre over the past twenty years. As of 2015, Disney Theatrical Productions has been a producing partner, or sole producer, for eleven Broadway productions (nine musicals, an oratorio, and one play) since its inception in the early 1990s. Over two thirds of the productions were (or are) financially successful, making DTP one of the winningest producers on Broadway to date. Disney Theatrical Productions is unique, as the company is but one small part of the Walt Disney Corporation. Though there are other entertainment companies that are beginning to produce shows on Broadway, none of them have independent theatrical divisions like DTP. In examining the production practices of DTP, this study uncovered several factors that have contributed to DTP's accomplishments as a Broadway producer: fidelity to the

Disney brand, use of the existing Disney infrastructure, an awareness of where DTP properties fit into the entire Disney landscape, and a commitment to quality.

Throughout this study one thing was made very clear: any show that DTP takes on has to conform to the tenets of the Disney brand. This is perhaps best evidenced in the formation of Hyperion Theatricals to produce Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida*. Hyperion was formed solely to produce the show, as the subject matter, which contains a double suicide, was not in line with Disney brand standards of offering material suitable for children and families. Though the company was folded after *Aida*, and all subsequent productions have been produced under Disney Theatrical Productions, the impetus to remove Disney from the forefront of a show that was not aimed at Disney's traditional audience base—children and families—shows the company's commitment to the Disney brand. All Disney productions that have appeared on Broadway, even those that are not directly from Disney source material, have several things in common. First, as mentioned above, they are aimed at the same audience base and are family friendly.

Next, while other entertainment companies have begun to act as Broadway producers, none of these companies have the comprehensive branding that Disney has. Though the films of these other producers might be recognizable and the stage show may conform to the brand of the film, the films that these other companies are bringing to Broadway do not conform to a distinct studio brand identity in the same way that DTP's properties must. For example, Universal has produced several Broadway shows including *Bring it On the Musical*, *Seussical the Musical*, and *Glengarry Glen Ross*. These three shows are completely different in content and

target audience, and are in no way indicative of a brand identity for Universal Stage Productions. In contrast, Disney properties, even those that are not directly labeled as Disney (*Sister Act* and *Peter and the Starcatcher* being two excellent examples) are all aimed at the same target audience, children and families, and uphold the tenets of the Disney brand regardless of whether or not they are labeled as belonging to Disney.

In addition to Disney brand fidelity, DTP is also able to use the existing Disney infrastructure to its advantage. DTP is able to repackage existing, known and loved properties into Broadway musicals. DTP is but one facet of the Walt Disney Corporation entertainment machine. Most properties produced on Broadway by DTP are closely related to the other incarnations of those properties. Every time a family visits a Disney theme park and engages with *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Lion King* there is built in marketing for those shows either in New York or on tour. The live entertainment division of the Walt Disney Corporation also produces Disney on Ice, which often features characters and stories that overlap with the Broadway shows as well. Disney's target audience is exceptionally familiar with Disney films and stories, and also with the nature of any type of entertainment produced by the Disney brand.

This familiarity means that DTP already has a built in audience base for its shows. DTP is also able to use the power of the Disney name to attract theatregoers. This is evidenced in the relationship between Disney Theatricals and the Tuacahn Amphitheatre in St. George, Utah. The Tuacahn has a summer season every year, and often produces Disney properties. DTP has started to send shows that need to be

tested to Tuacahn for trial runs and development because the audience base in St. George, which has a high percentage of Mormon families, loves Disney properties. In fact, Tuacahn is able to sell anything Disney sends, even works that are still in development. This relationship allows DTP to test out materials far from the critical eyes of the commercial theatre (Cerniglia May 26). In addition to DTP's popularity outside of New York, the brand familiarity also allows DTP to bring in a high volume of tourist dollars on Broadway. Many families coming to New York choose Disney musicals because they are familiar with their titles and content, and they know that the show will be appropriate for and exciting to their children. In fact, the push toward cleaning up Times Square, that is said to have begun with the Walt Disney Corporation's entrance on the Great White Way, has led to a Times Square that is family friendly in a way that it had never been before. Tourists in Times Square can visit The Disney Store, The Hershey's Store, the M&M's store, and many other businesses aimed at children and families, something that was certainly not possible in Times Square before the mid-1990s.

DTP is also very conscious of how its shows fit into the entire landscape of the Walt Disney Corporation, and is constantly strategizing about which properties to release and develop for Broadway or for licensing. For DTP it is not just about what will work on Broadway, but what will work for the Disney Corporation as a whole. This is seen by the fact that Mary Zimmerman's gorgeous stage production of *A Jungle Book*, which was well received in Chicago in 2013, is currently in storage. According to Cerniglia, though the show was beautiful and both financially and artistically successful, there are several factors that make its future uncertain. For

one, it is not a typical Disney musical, which means that producing it on a large scale is risky, and secondly, a live action version of the same title is due out soon from Walt Disney Studios (May 26). The film is a much larger investment for Disney than the stage show, and a failure on stage could create a bad precedent for the film, whereas, if the film is a hit, its momentum could launch the stage show into a new life on Broadway or elsewhere. But for now, the entire show is being stored, waiting for Disney leadership to decide its fate.

Lastly, Disney Theatrical Productions differentiates themselves from other producers in the quality of all materials that are produced and sold in conjunction with DTP productions. Though Disney uses Musical Theatre International (MTI) to manage the licensing of its productions, the Disney Theatrical licensing materials are of a much higher quality than many other MTI licensed shows. Many scripts licensed by MTI are simply published versions of the last script that was used before a show opened on Broadway. They often contain multiple errors. DTP on the other hand, sends its scripts through further revisions prior to releasing them for licensing, and the shows that are sent straight to licensing are also of the highest quality. Cerniglia notes,

We put in a lot of effort to make sure [licensed shows] are high quality story telling that is age appropriate and that kids can handle. Some of the shows are actually challenging, but there are a variety of them, I think that all that effort to maintain the quality of those shows has really paid off. I think people know that the content of them is solid, they are real stage adaptations, [and the adaptations are] not stupid. (May 26)

The same attention that is paid to opening night on Broadway is paid to the materials that DTP sends out for licensing. Compared to many of the other materials sent out by Musical Theatre International, the company that distributes DTP's licensing materials, which are often full of typos and without support materials, DTP does an excellent job of preparing its librettos and anticipating the needs of amateur producers and directors. This commitment is directly in line with the quality and attention to detail that is seen across the Disney brand. In fact, DTP runs its own merchandising department rather than contracting it out so that DTP will have complete control over which vendors are used and the overall quality of products, which keeps the DTP merchandise in line with the rest of the Disney brand merchandise.

Disney Theatrical Productions is not just another theatre company doing what all theatre companies do, DTP is doing something different, and something important. The continued success of Disney properties on Broadway and in professional and amateur theatres around the world is changing the landscape of the American musical. Whereas family oriented shows were few and far between from the end of the Golden Age to the early 1990s, now musical theatre aimed at families with children is big business on Broadway. In addition, Disney's commitment to quality and artistic innovation is pushing the form forward. DTP continues to reinvent itself with every production, not simply relying on the draw of its animated titles to make money, but by consistently demanding that its shows are artistically meritorious. Even its unsuccessful shows have been innovative, for example, Natasha Katz, the lighting designer for *Tarzan*, DTP's greatest financial

failure to date, invented several new lighting effects for the show that have since been copied in other productions and were lauded by many in the industry as ingenious.

Need for Study

Disney Theatrical Productions has been producing large-scale musicals on Broadway for over twenty years; yet, very little scholarship exists about the company and its practices. Since Disney stepped out on the Great White Way, the landscape of 42nd Street and Broadway musical theatre has changed significantly. While Disney is not the only major corporation to venture into producing large-scale musicals on Broadway, DTP is the first theatre company producing musicals on Broadway to be backed by a multi-billion dollar, multi-national entertainment corporation. Most often tension exists between corporate bottom lines and the nature of producing theatre. DTP is a part of a large, public corporation and must answer to shareholders and corporate executive. However, despite this apparent tension between art and commerce, DTP manages to not only navigate this tension, but most often to mitigate it. Though DTP often employs traditional models of development for its musicals, its position under the umbrella of the Walt Disney Corporation makes the company unique, and therefore, worthy of study.

Methodology

The research for this dissertation is divided into two parts, review of existing sources, and the procurement of new information through personal interviews. I

first compiled and reviewed all existing sources of information about Disney Theatrical Productions; these sources came from several places, most notably from newspapers, magazines, and trade papers. In addition, I reviewed books and journals with information about DTP. I also accessed the books published by Disney about each of DTP's Broadway musicals.

After compiling existing published sources, I then noted the information that was not available. With that in mind, I contacted Disney Theatrical Productions and was able to conduct several interviews with DTP's resident Dramaturg and Literary Manager, Kenneth Cerniglia. I was also able to interview Jeff Lee, DTP's staff Associate Director and Greg V. Josken, DTP's Digital Marketing and Social Media Manager. Through these interviews I was able to obtain detailed information about the inner workings of DTP and the company's production practices. Cerniglia's was employed by DTP through the development of both *Tarzan* and *Newsies*, two of the shows I am examining. Lee was employed as a stage manager on *The Lion King* (another of the shows being detailed here), and then as an Associate Director during the development of *Tarzan* and *Newsies*. Josken joined DTP right before *Newsies* opened at the Paper Mill and has been involved in expanding DTP's online presence.

In addition, I utilized the resources in the Theatre on Film and Tape archive at the New York Public Library's Lincoln Center branch. There, I was able to watch the original productions of *Beauty and the Beast*, *Tarzan*, and *Newsies*, three of the

four musicals discussed in this dissertation,⁷ as well as the raw footage from the interviews with Julie Taymor and Michael Eisner.

Literature Review

Though there are very few scholarly accounts of Disney Theatrical Productions, there are many existing sources that make reference to DTP and its endeavors. The first and most prolific is mainstream media outlets and entertainment industry trade papers. *The New York Times* has extensive coverage of Disney's entrance on Broadway as well as feature articles about all of the shows that DTP has produced. In addition, many other newspapers in and outside of New York have covered DTP's work. This coverage includes both the out-of-town incarnations of the shows and their Broadway productions. Over the last twenty years Disney Theatricals has also been covered extensively in *Variety*, *Back Stage*, and on *Playbill.com*. *American Theatre* magazine has also covered DTP, including a profile of the company in the 2006 article, "The Hit Makers: Commercial Producing."

The mainstream media is the largest outlet of information on Disney Theatrical Productions, but in addition, a few scholars have published articles in academic journals about the Disney Theatrical phenomenon. Examples are Steve Nelson's 1995 article for *TDR*, "Broadway and the Beast: Disney Comes to Times Square," which looks at DTP's renovation of the New Amsterdam Theatre and entrance as a Broadway Producer. *TDR* also published John Bell's article, "Disney's Times Square: The New American Community Theatre" (1998) and Jason King's

⁷ This author has seen *The Lion King* several times, on Broadway and on tour, and, therefore, did not view that title at the NYPL.

2002 article, “Toni Braxton, Disney, and Thermodynamics,” in which Braxton’s turn as Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* is discussed. In 1999, *Theatre Journal* published an article titled “Commodities, Mimesis, and *The Lion King*: Retail Theatre for the 1990s,” by Maurya Wickstrom.

In addition to the journal articles that focus on Disney or Disney musicals, there are several other notable articles that mention Disney Theatricals. Elizabeth Wollman’s article, “The Economic Development of the ‘New’ Times Square: and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical,” which was published in *American Music* in 2002, discusses Disney Theatrical Productions; as does Thomas P. Anderson’s article “*Titus*, Broadway, and Disney’s Magic Capitalism; Or, The Wonderful World of Julie Taymor,” which appeared in *College Literature* in 2013. *Social Text* also published Neil Smith’s article, “Giuliani Time: The Revanchist 1990s” in 1998, which discusses Giuliani’s cleanup of Times Square in order to bring in corporations, including Disney.

Next, there are a handful of chapters in academic edited collections that are of use. Most notable is Kenneth Cerniglia’s chapter “Tarzan Swings onto Disney’s Broadway,” which was published in *Global Perspectives on Tarzan: From King of the Jungle to International Icon* in 2012. Cerniglia also has a chapter titled, “The Business of Children in Disney’s Theatre” in *Entertaining Children: The Participation of Youth in the Entertainment Industry*, which was published in 2014. Both were written while Cerniglia was employed by DTP. Kathy L. Privatt also wrote a chapter, “Modern Medicis: Disney on Broadway” in the 2007 edited collection, *Angels in the American Theatre: Patrons, Patronage, and Philanthropy*.

The next category of sources is books, which come in two types: books about theatre or musical theatre that mention DTP, and books specifically about Disney or Disney musicals. In the first category there are several subcategories. The first, concerning works that are historical surveys of musical theatre, include two books which make a small mention of DTP: Pamyla Stiehl and Bud Coleman's *Backstage Pass: A Survey of American Musical Theatre* (2012), and Larry Stempel's *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theatre* (2010). Both texts mention DTP, but in a very limited capacity. Next are other books on theatre that include Disney Theatrical Productions. The most useful of these sources is Iris Dorian's *Great Producers: Visionaries of the American Theatre* (2008), which includes a chapter on DTP's president Thomas Schumacher. Anthony Bianco's *Ghosts of 42nd Street* (2004) discusses the Walt Disney Corporation's role in the revitalization of 42nd Street. There are also two books about Broadway commerce that include small discussions of Disney: Tim Donahue and Jim Patterson's 2010 book, *Stage Money: The Business of the Professional Theatre* and Steven Adler's 2004 book, *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way*. There are also several theatre history survey texts that mention Disney Theatricals. Philip Zarelli, Bruce McConachie, Gary Jay Williams, and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei's *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* briefly mentions DTP. In addition, Robert Cohen devotes several paragraphs to DTP in the section of his book, *Theatre: Brief Version*, titled "Foreign Invasions." The text also discusses DTP and *The Lion King* in the section about Julie Taymor.

The other books that are relevant are studies specifically about Disney. There are two types that are of interest. First, there are "coffee table" books published for

each show that Disney Theatrical Productions has produced. These books are published by Disney Editions, which is part of Disney Publishing Worldwide. Though intended as keepsakes from the shows, these books offer an in-depth look at each DTP production and provide a wealth of information. The second category are books that are generally about Disney, in which the most useful example is Andi Stein's *Why We Love Disney: The Power of the Disney Brand* (2011), that devotes a short chapter to Disney theatre and live productions, but it is mostly an overview of what has been produced by the corporation. There is also an edited collection called *Rethinking Disney* (2005) that contains several chapters that mention DTP and/or Times Square, including Wickstrom's article from *Theatre Journal* that was mentioned above.

In addition to these published sources, online sources were also useful. These include the *Internet Broadway Database* and the website of The Broadway League. These sites provide information about the shows including personnel, awards, and opening and closing dates. The other valuable source has been the personal interviews with Julie Taymor and Michael Eisner, recorded by Michael Kantor for the 2004 documentary, *Broadway: The American Musical*.

Organization

Despite the fact that the Walt Disney Corporation has had a presence on Broadway for over twenty years, very little scholarly attention has been paid to Disney Theatrical Productions (DTP). That is why this dissertation is crucial. In it, the production practices of DTP will be examined in order to answer the question:

How does Disney Theatrical Productions function as an independent theatrical producer under the umbrella of a multi-billion dollar, multi-national entertainment corporation? In order to answer this question, this study will look at four key areas, first, in Chapter One, the arrival of the Walt Disney Corporation on Broadway with the development of *Beauty and the Beast* and renovation of the New Amsterdam Theatre. Next, the following chapters will examine three distinct production models that DTP has engaged over the past twenty years to bring full-scale musicals to the Broadway stage. Those shows and models are as follows: First, in Chapter Two, *The Lion King*, which employed a traditional development and out-of-town tryout model. Next, Chapter Three will look at *Tarzan*, which utilized a model of multiple, multi-national workshops and extended previews before opening on Broadway. And last, Chapter Four is about *Newsies*, which landed on Broadway after a highly acclaimed pilot production at the Paper Mill Playhouse and a large social media response. Through examining these three production processes, this study intends to illuminate the how DTP has become one of the largest, most successful producers on Broadway over the past twenty years.

CHAPTER 2

The Disney Way - Disney as Producer and Theatre Owner

Be Our Guest: *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*

The 1980s were a tough decade for Disney animated features. Disney had a string of artistically barren films, leading to speculation about the future of the company. However, in 1989, *The Little Mermaid* changed the division's trajectory. In his article in *Time Magazine* in 2014, "How the Little Mermaid Cued the Disney Animation Renaissance," Richard Corliss notes, "Disney had earned Best Song Oscars in 1941... and in 1947...then nothing — until *The Little Mermaid* again changed the studio's luck. In the past quarter-century, ten Disney tunes have won the Best Song Oscar" (Corliss). *The Little Mermaid* marked the beginning of a string of animated hits, the second of which was *Beauty and the Beast*. In Michael Kantor's 2004 Documentary, *Broadway: the American Musical*, Julie Andrews, the documentary's narrator, marks that just as 42nd Street was "resurrected by Disney," Disney was "resurrected by the Broadway musical" (*Broadway: The American Musical*).

Walt Disney Pictures released the film *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991 to tremendous critical acclaim. In her 1991 review, "Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* Updated in Form and Content," Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* calls the film "fresh and altogether triumphant" (C17). On the opposite coast, Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times*, heralds the film as Disney's "most satisfying in decades" (F1). It was not, however, until Frank Rich, the *New York Times* theatre critic, lauded the

film's score, calling it the best on Broadway, that the wheels started turning at Disney to create a live action version of the film for Broadway. Despite Rich's praise, it was not an easy decision.

Beauty and the Beast was not Eisner's first foray into the world of Broadway. From 1982 to 1985, Paramount Pictures (of which Eisner was the chairman until 1984) had a theatrical division: Paramount Theatrical Productions. The company produced three Broadway shows, including the musical *My One and Only*, a revival of the musical *Funny Face* (1927).⁸ The show ran for 787 performances and was nominated for seven Tony awards, three of which it won. Despite the respectable number of performances, in an interview with Michael Kantor for *Broadway: the American Musical*, Eisner describes the show as "difficult and unsuccessful financially." He notes, "we decided that if you are going to do all that work for one theatre, you might as well do all that work for two thousand theatres, i.e. stay in the movie business" (*Interview with Michael Eisner*).

Eisner's previous Broadway experience kept him resistant to the idea of a Disney outing on Broadway. In the 2004 PBS documentary, *Broadway: the American Musical*, Eisner, who was the CEO of Disney at the time, describes the decision to bring *Beauty* to the stage, citing Rich's article as the final push Eisner needed to try his hand at a live, Broadway musical. The leap from animated musical to live stage musical is a big one, but one that made sense for Disney. Eisner explains, "Walt Disney World alone puts on more live theatre than all of Broadway" (*Broadway: The American Musical*). Disney employs a tremendous number of theatre professionals

⁸ *My One and Only* contained an original plot and was not based on a Paramount film despite being produced by Paramount Theatrical Productions.

in its parks, both on stage and off, so Eisner decided, “when it came to *Beauty and the Beast* I said we were just going to do this ourselves, we didn’t want any investors” (*Interview with Michael Eisner*).

By taking on all of the risk and producing the show internally, Disney was able to have complete creative control. Kenneth Cerniglia, Disney Theatrical Productions’ resident Dramaturg and Literary Manager, notes that Disney Theatrical Productions (DTP) is “shielded” from the negative effects of having outside producers because DTP “only has to answer to [themselves] and [their] shareholders” (April 23). This was especially true with *Beauty and the Beast* as there was no precedent of Disney success with live, commercial theatre.

Despite the gamble, Disney approached the show the same way the company approaches everything: if it was going to be done, it was going to be done right. Disney enlisted employees from other divisions, especially the Imagineers⁹, to work on the show’s more magical moments; for example, the transformation of the Beast into a human in mid-air is a Disney Imagineering trick. Eisner notes the benefits of working on a live show, explaining, “it was easy, because you can change it daily” even when the show is performing in front of a live preview audience, it was unlike a film where you put out what you think is the best product and keep your fingers crossed that it will hit the mark (*Interview with Michael Eisner*).

⁹ Imagineers refer to the individuals who work for Walt Disney Imagineering, the arm of the Walt Disney Corporations responsible for imagining and designing Disney theme parks and attractions. Imagineer is a combination of “imagine” and “engineer” referring to the team’s dual purpose of dreaming and transferring those dreams into tangible realities.

Beauty and the Beast went through several workshops and an out-of-town tryout in Houston, Texas. Everett Evans of the *Houston Chronicle* called the show “cartoonish, broader, and more obvious” than the film and noted that the show lacked a “consistent, unifying visual style” (“Stage Version of ‘Beauty’” 1). In contrast, he goes on to praise the technical elements of the show, especially the transformation of the Beast, and the acting of many members of the company. *Beauty and the Beast* ran to sold out houses for its entire stay in Houston, and even added an additional two weeks of performances because of the demand, further solidifying its potential for success when it reached Broadway. Before the show closed in Houston on January 9, 1994, several changes were implemented, including cutting fifteen minutes of the show and reworking choreography on several numbers (1). The show landed on Broadway in March 1994 for 46 previews before its official opening night at the Palace Theatre on April 18, 1994 (“Internet Broadway Database”).

Cerniglia insists that initially Disney had no plan to produce shows after *Beauty and the Beast* (May 26). Though Disney renovated the New Amsterdam in hope of producing future musicals there, Michael Eisner notes, there was a “pass/fail” on *Beauty and the Beast*. It was either going to work as a stage production and be profitable, or it wasn’t (*Interview with Michael Eisner*). Disney didn’t make a full commitment to producing Disney-branded shows on Broadway until *Beauty* recouped its investment. Had *Beauty and the Beast* failed, Disney could have allowed other producers to rent the theatre for outside productions. This cautious approach can be seen in the fact that DTP did not set up permanent offices

in New York until the early 2000s once the company had put up three Broadway shows (Cerniglia May 26). Until that time, there was only a small satellite office in New York to run both *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*. The fact that *Beauty* was an experiment is also evident in the organization and structure of DTP when *Beauty and the Beast* opened. In the opening night *Playbill*, the listing for Walt Disney Productions¹⁰ only listed seven employees, much like other producers, rather than the extensive roster that would be listed for subsequent productions. In fact, on opening night, another company, Dodger Productions, was the general management company for *Beauty and the Beast*¹¹ (“Playbill Vault”).

Beauty truly was a great experiment, and one that was far more profitable than anyone could have imagined. It ran for thirteen years and over five thousand performances on Broadway. It was nominated for nine Tony Awards (including Best Musical) and won for costume design. Since its inception, it has had productions and tours all over the world, including Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, Germany, Great Britain, Argentina, China, Spain, Brazil, Korea, South Africa, Russia, and Italy (“DTP Opening”).

Despite *Beauty and the Beast’s* eventual profitability and impressive run, stepping back to opening night, the fate of the show was not guaranteed. The real question was if the draw of Disney and the title could overcome the bad reviews.

Both the *New York Times* and *Variety* published negative reviews after opening

¹⁰ In April, 1994 the division was called Walt Disney Productions.

¹¹ A show’s general manager or management company is responsible for the day to day running of a production and handling contracts and payroll for all show personnel, on stage, back stage, and in the front of the house. For *Beauty and the Beast*, DTP did not fill this role themselves, but for subsequent productions, the company did serve as general manager.

night. Jeremy Gerard of *Variety* wrote the show “feels bloated, padded, gimmick-ridden, tacky and, despite the millions, utterly devoid of imagination.” He goes on to criticize almost every element of the production; the sets he quips, “look like something designed to be seen by people in moving seats, maybe at Disneyland. Broadway audiences will stare in horror at the Day-Glo drop that passes for the countryside that Belle wanders through in the endless opening.” He calls the production number, “Be Our Guest,” “anemic and under populated” and states, “Matt West’s deadly choreography, lame kick-line stuff, barely deserves to be called dancing.” Robert Jess Roth’s direction is also under fire, as Gerard refers to his staging as “incompetent” and “crude” (Gerard). Gerard also touches on his disdain for many of the special effects in the show, and many of the performances. It seems that only a few people were able to escape his wrath, among them Terrence Mann (The Beast), Susan Egan (Belle), and he actually praises Burke Moses (Gaston). Gerard even attacks the costume design, which ended up winning a Tony.

Though some of Gerard’s points are valid, the sheer cruelty with which he doles them out points to his animosity toward something bigger than the show itself, a disdain for what the show represents: the intrusion of a wealthy corporation on the independent spirit of Broadway. Gerard points out that the show is going to be successful and that the audiences are enjoying themselves, but in the end, he remains firm in the high art/low art binary. He continues, “The irony, of course, is that for years, people have complained that the imported musicals have turned Broadway into a theme park. Now Disney’s come along and proven the point. It’s a small world, after all” (“Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*”)

Though the review in *Variety* was the harshest, David Richards' *New York Times* review, "Disney Does Broadway, Dancing Spoons and All," was not glowing either. He calls the show "Las Vegas without the sex, Mardi Gras without the booze and Madame Tussaud's without the waxy stares." He goes on to note, "the musical says far less about the redemptive power of love than it does about the boundless ingenuity of what is called Team Disney" (Richards). Though Richards does give a nod to several of the actors and acknowledges the beauty and complexity of the costumes and scenery, overall he too judges the work from the position that *Beauty* is not an example of high art. He concludes his review by stating,

Nobody should be surprised that it brings to mind a theme-park entertainment raised to the power of 10. Although not machine-made, it is clearly the product of a company that prizes its winning formulas. Inspiration has less to do with it than tireless industry. (Richards)

Clearly, Richards has more of a problem with Disney, than with the show *Beauty and the Beast*, allowing him to let his antipathy toward the corporation color his opinion of the musical and the people by whom it was created.

These two reviews are just a small example of the battering that the show took in the press. In his interview with Michael Kantor, Michael Eisner admitted that Disney is "often more criticized than we deserve and often more honored than we deserve." In reference to DTP's financial failures, *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*, Cerniglia observes,

I think generally we felt we were unfairly treated, not that the shows didn't have their problems, but the fact that they got such a hammering in New

York because we have a big target on us, [because] why not? [The critics think we are] this big successful entertainment company impervious to criticism so [the critics say] “we will let them have it with whatever we’ve got,” there is a little bit of that; you can’t deny it’s happening out there or that it happened in the critical establishment. (May 26)

Cerniglia’s words also apply to *Beauty and the Beast*, with the exception that the show was financially successful, despite the harsh criticism.

Disney reportedly spent \$12 million on the show, which at that time was a Broadway record, making the show a huge gamble. In the press, that budget number was also hotly debated. In Alex Witchel’s 1994 *New York Times* article, “Is Disney the Newest Broadway Baby,” Michael Eisner addresses the rumors that the show’s budget was between \$16 and \$19 million by calling them “ridiculous.” Eisner says Disney doesn’t talk about the budget because “then the budget gets reviewed, not the product” (qtd. in Witchel 10). Whether *Beauty* cost \$12 million or \$19 million, in the first year the show grossed over \$35 million with attendance over seven hundred thousand (“The Broadway League”). Clearly the negative reviews did not deter theatregoers from purchasing tickets. It is also likely that the nine Tony nominations helped to soften the blow of the negative reviews. The original Broadway production ran for 690 weeks before it closed on July 29, 2007, and grossing \$429,158,458, selling over 7.5 million tickets (“The Broadway League”). With 5461 performances, at the time of this writing it is the ninth longest running show in Broadway history¹² (“Long Runs”). As Michael Eisner observed, “not bad”

¹² As of January 21, 2016

(*Broadway: The American Musical*). *Beauty and the Beast* was a huge financial success, but before the production had even been realized, the Walt Disney Corporation was investing in its future on Broadway.

Disney Comes to Times Square: The New Amsterdam Theatre

On December 21, 1991, Frank Rich of the *New York Times* published his annual retrospective “The Year in the Arts,” in which he declared, “The best Broadway musical score of 1991 was that written by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman for the Disney animated movie *Beauty and the Beast*” (1). Rich’s declaration was significant as 1991 was not a year that was devoid of meritorious productions: Alain Boublil and Claude Michel Schonberg’s mega hit mega musical *Miss Saigon* opened at the Broadway Theatre, and Lucy Simon and Marsha Norman’s now classic musical adaptation of *The Secret Garden* opened at the St. James Theatre in April 1991 (Green). In addition to the shows on Broadway, off-Broadway Stephen Sondheim’s *Assassins* played at Playwrights Horizons in January and February 1991, and the John Kander and Fred Ebb review *And the World Goes ‘Round* opened in March 1991 at the West Side Theatre (Hischak 264-265). Despite these productions, Rich pointed to *Beauty and the Beast* and his endorsement of the movie’s merit set in motion Disney’s foray onto 42nd Street.

Prior to 1991, the 42nd Street Development Project had tried to entice an unresponsive Disney Corporation to restore a theatre on 42nd Street (Bianco 278). In the 2004 documentary *Broadway: The American Musical*, Michael Eisner, the then CEO of the Walt Disney Corporation reminisced,

Just dealing in New York was hard. We were ducking bullets in the 70s, and garbage trucks and it was just, you know, “Forget it, let’s go make movies.” And [we] kind of kept that resistance until we made the movie *Beauty and the Beast*, and I think Frank Rich reviewed it as the best musical in New York, but it was a movie. And that got us thinking. And we said, “You know what, let’s give it a shot.” (*Broadway: the American Musical*)

Eisner gave it more than a shot. In 1992 he gave his blessing to the formation of Disney Theatrical Productions, a new division within Walt Disney Studios, and the work to bring *Beauty* to the stage began. However, Eisner noticed a problem, in the tight market of Broadway real estate, it was difficult to find a theatre that was large enough to stage a big budget musical that wasn’t already occupied by Andrew Lloyd Webber (Bianco 279)¹³. In March 1993, after a conversation with Disney architect Robert A.M. Stern, Eisner toured the New Amsterdam Theatre (279). In Anthony Bianco’s 2004 book, *Ghosts of 42nd Street*, Eisner remembers,

We could see water leaking from the roof, birds nesting in the ceiling, puddles mingled with rubble on the floor. The interior was badly gutted...still, the theatre’s remarkable detailing remained in ghostlike form—its Art Nouveau décor, Wagnerian friezes, and allegorical murals. The once-lavish grandeur of this building was easy to visualize, even in its dilapidated state. By the time we left, I felt excited. (279)

¹³ In 1991 and 1992 three Andrew Lloyd Webber Musicals were playing on Broadway: *The Phantom of the Opera* (Majestic Theatre), *Cats* (Winter Garden Theatre), and *Aspects of Love* (Broadhurst Theatre). In addition, Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg’s *Miss Saigon* (Broadway Theatre) and *Les Miserables* (Imperial Theatre) also occupied larger theatres.

The New Amsterdam Theatre opened in 1903 with a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It went on to house the Ziegfeld Follies in the nineteen teens and twenties, and was then turned into a movie house during the great depression (Shenot A1). In Christine Shenot's 1995 article in the *Orlando Sentinel*, "Disney's Big Apple Project Has Makings of Broadway Hit," David Malmuth, a VP at Disney Development Co. states, "We needed a theatre that has special appeal...the New Amsterdam has that. It was regarded as the finest Broadway musical house and we think it could be again" (qtd. in Shenot A1).

Despite the appeal of restoring the historic theatre, the neighborhood still posed several problems. Since the early 1970s the Times Square area had been a den of porn and prostitution. Fueled in part by the 1967 ruling that massage parlors did not have to have a license and the 1971 lessening of criminal charges for prostitution, illegal "massage parlors" sprang up all over Times Square (Bianco 171). These newly relaxed regulations gave rise to the adult playground that Times Square became in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1993, Times Square was not a place that Disney wanted to invite families.

Before agreeing to renovate the New Amsterdam, Disney had several stipulations. First, the company wanted to see other businesses commit to projects in the neighborhood (Shenot A1). Next, Disney wanted assurances that the neighborhood would be cleaned up and made safe for families. In 2004's *Broadway: the American Musical*, Michael Eisner remembers a conversation with New York Mayor Rudi Giuliani, "I had a little concern about the adjacent nightlife and he said, 'it will be gone'...he said 'look me in the eye...they will be gone.'" Though Giuliani

took up the charge of revitalizing Times Square when he was elected Mayor in 1994, the process began in the late 1980s under the jurisdiction of Mayor David Dinkins (Wollman 447). The original plan for the area involved making Times Square an offshoot of the corporate hustle and bustle of Sixth Avenue, but when that venture failed in the late eighties, the decision was made to turn the area into an entertainment district (Nelson 83). In his 1995 article for *TDR*, "Broadway and the Beast: Disney Comes to Times Square," Steve Nelson explains the vision for a new 42nd Street was "a formerly indigenous theatrical district transformed into a romantically idealized tourist version of its former self" (83). This new vision of 42nd Street was perfectly in line with what Disney does. According to Nelson, Disney takes "trappings of different eras and cultures and meld[s] them into theme park and movie entertainments that are safe and accessible, yet still enticing to a mass audience" (83).

In 1993, the Disney Corporation and the 42nd Street Development Project began negotiations that would last over two years. In *Ghosts of 42nd Street*, Anthony Bianco notes that negotiations dragged on because Disney had the upper hand. Eisner knew that Disney was more valuable to the development project than the renovation of the New Amsterdam Theatre was to Disney. The theatre was also not essential to Disney's presence on Broadway. Eisner states, "We didn't need a theatre to be successful, the pressure on me was a social pressure. You're from New York, don't you want to do something for New York?...it was, I don't know, impulse. Okay, let's do it" (*Interview with Michael Eisner*).

In February 1994, an agreement between Disney and the city of New York was finally reached with Disney contributing 8 million dollars to the renovation project (“Broadway Mickey Mouse” 3). In addition to the \$8 million investment, Disney was able to negotiate a \$21 million low-interest loan to renovate the aging New Amsterdam Theatre. This loan angered many other producers who in the past were denied the same perk, leading some of them to compare Disney to Wal-Mart, saying that Disney’s work at the New Amsterdam was akin to Wal-Mart opening in a small town and putting the “mom and pop” stores out of business (Witchel H1).

Despite the controversy, Disney moved ahead with a two-year plan to renovate the New Amsterdam. In his July 1995 article, “Disney Getting a House of its Own on Broadway,” Peter Marks of the *New York Times* explains, Disney was looking for a “musical house of its own in the theatre district, capable of housing the kinds of musical spectacles that Disney officials [were] convinced they [could] supply to Broadway on a continuing basis” (B4). The New Amsterdam, which was at one time the jewel of 42nd Street, afforded the space and the grandeur that Disney wanted. Not only would the New Amsterdam Theatre provide Disney with a dedicated space for producing on Broadway, the renovation also legitimized Disney as a Broadway producer due to the historical significance of the building. The New Amsterdam as the former home of Florenz Ziegfeld and his *Follies* gave any occupant an automatic air of theatrical authenticity and importance. By rescuing the crumbling theatre, Eisner hoped to gain acceptance for Disney as a legitimate production company from the skeptical Broadway community. In addition, the company now owned a theatre, much like the Nederlander Organization and the Shubert Organization, two

established and respected companies that own theatres and produce Broadway shows.

In her book, *The New Amsterdam: The Biography of a Broadway Theatre* (1997), Mary Henderson describes the renovation process. She explains, once the project was green lighted, Disney brought in architect Hugh Hardy to complete the renovation. The task was huge: restore the theatre to its former glory while making it a suitable space for large scale, big budget, and technically complicated musicals. According to Henderson, Hardy renovated every space in the building “in a sensitive interpretation of their original appearance” (130). However, Henderson notes, it is the auditorium itself that is the greatest accomplishment:

Here virtually every element of the [original] design has been recalled through restoration or careful interpretation. Cleaned and repaired, the allegorical proscenium murals by Robert Blum and Albert Wenzell resonate with rich color and detail for the first time in half a century. Cantilevered boxes distinguished by art nouveau styling once again flank the peacock-bordered proscenium. Molded plaster gleams with fresh paint, walls are detailed with stenciling, and iron seat stanchions (cast from an early design uncovered in New Hampshire) wear new green and lavender damask upholstery that harmonizes with the house decoration, for a subtle blending of old and new. (130)

In addition to the lavish renovation of the front of the house, the backstage area was also updated with modern equipment and is currently the largest backstage area in any Broadway theatre (130).

The New Amsterdam Theatre is once again the jewel of Broadway. It shines on 42nd Street amidst the hustle and bustle of Times Square. Disney's transformation of the theatre stands as a symbol for the transformation of the entire Times Square area. In Michael Kantor's 2004 documentary, *Broadway: The American Musical*, Michael Eisner admits, "We simply came in and did a theatre, that's it! The articles written about Disney [that it] saved 42nd Street, Disney created tourism back in New York, hotels picked up, is very flattering and pretty much untrue" (qtd. in *Broadway: the American Musical*). Though Eisner is right and Disney may have just done one theatre (and a large retail store), its corporate presence on Broadway paved the way for other corporations to come in and turn the area into a thriving commercial and entertainment district. Someone had to be the first to step in and take the risk and Disney was the first. The New Amsterdam Theatre opened in 1997 with the world premiere of *King David*, a modern oratorio with music by Alan Menken and lyrics by Tim Rice.

Two Worlds: Disney as a Broadway Producer

The financial position of DTP, as a part of the Walt Disney Corporation, but a financially small one, means that DTP does not function the in same way as other producers of Broadway shows. Cerniglia informs, "We operate differently from other producers, [as] we don't have to raise money for our shows as long as we get approval from the higher ups" (May 26). DTP has the deep pockets of the Walt Disney Corporation to finance its Broadway endeavors. He continues, "The only people we have to answer to are our shareholders and ourselves" (April 23). DTP

has eliminated the middleman. There is no need to ask for outside funds, which means that no outside entity dictates what a show should (or should not) be. Michael Eisner, the former CEO of the Walt Disney Corporation, discusses the advantages of being the sole producer. In the raw footage of his interview for Michael Kantor's 2004 PBS documentary *Broadway: The American Musical*, Eisner explains:

We [are] a producer in the old sense of producer: that entity doesn't have to go to a committee. [We have] a consistent point of view where the creative are the loudest voices...we will have failures because the creative people fail. We will not have failures because the production side failed or the financing side failed. We are taking that out of it. (*Interview with Michael Eisner*)

The failures have been few. Of the first eight Disney-branded Broadway musicals, only two, *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*, have not recouped their initial investment while playing on Broadway. Though the failure of those two titles was difficult, Thomas Schumacher, the head of DTP, consistently reminds the staff that 2/3 of Broadway musicals fail and 2/3 of Disney's musicals have succeeded (Cerniglia May 26).

Although Eisner sees being a sole producer as an advantage to the company, there are also disadvantages to producing without partners. Often when there are more voices in a discussion, one party may notice an issue that goes unnoticed by others. This shortcoming in DTP's model is most evident in the company's two financially unsuccessful productions, *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*. Had their been

other voices in the room when decisions were made, some of the problems that led to the financial failure of both titles might have been avoided.

Disney Theatrical Production's position under the umbrella of the Walt Disney Corporation does mean that DTP is subject to oversight from its parent corporation. Cerniglia informs,

Tom [Schumacher] reports to the chairman of the [Walt Disney] Studios, Alan Horne...and at the same time, Tom is in constant communication with the [Walt Disney Corporation] CEO, Bob Iger. Tom has been with the company since the late 80s. It's not like these people are unfamiliar with him, he has close personal relationships with all of them. At the same time they really know that Tom is the expert on the business and the [theatre] company. He was raised in theatre, comes from theatre, has worked on every aspect of theatre. Although he worked in feature animation for a number of years and ran that business, he is a theatre person, so there is really no one better to run [Disney Theatrical Productions] than Tom. We do all our internal vetting too, but officially if we are going to open a Broadway show, that's got to get whole studio, company buy in. (May 26)

While DTP has internal control of its smaller projects, decisions about the large, high profile shows are often made in concert with the senior executives at the Walt Disney Corporation.

Disney vs. Other Entertainment Corporations

It must be noted that Disney is not the only major entertainment corporation that is producing live shows on Broadway. Since the enormous return on investment for *The Lion King* and *Wicked* (which was produced in part by Universal Pictures) several major movie studios have begun to explore producing on Broadway. Those studios include Universal Pictures, which has its own theatre division, Universal Stage Productions (USP). In 2015, USP tapped Robert Greenblatt, who won the Best Musical Tony for *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* (2014), to run the division along with Universal Pictures President Jimmy Horowitz. In his 2015 article for *Variety*, "Hollywood and Broadway: Studios Rush to the Stage Despite Clashing Business Models," Gordon Cox notes, Universal Pictures "conjured up \$10 million of the musical's \$14 million capitalization, and as of winter 2015, the show [*Wicked*] has rung up enough coin (some \$3.75 billion worldwide) to make it one of the most profitable enterprises in Universal history" (Cox). USP has produced several shows on Broadway in addition to *Wicked*, including *Bring It On, the Musical* (2102) and *The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* (2012). USP also produced *Billy Elliot*, which won several Tony Awards and ran in London's West End for eleven and a half years.

In addition to Universal Pictures, Warner Brothers is getting into the theatre production act. In 2015, the company's theatrical division, Warner Brothers Theatre Ventures Inc., picked up a "Best Play" Tony Award for the British import, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. Warner Brothers also recently produced a new adaptation of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in London's West End and is currently developing *Beetlejuice, the Musical* (Cox). In addition, MGM has a stage division that produces titles from the MGM catalogue in partnership with other

producers. MGM Titles include *Rocky* (2014), *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (2011), and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (2005). 20th Century Fox and Sony Pictures are also getting into the Broadway game, however, both companies have opted to partner with experienced producers to bring selections from their vast catalogues to the stage rather than producing them themselves (Cox).

While all of these studios have entered the Broadway race, none of them have committed to the extent of Disney Theatrical Productions. Even Paramount and Warner Brothers, who have set up theatrical divisions, do not have the infrastructure that DTP has. The other studios are still producing shows like any other Broadway producer: by bringing together a team for each specific show, only employing personnel for each individual production. Also, in many cases the studios are simply putting up the money for the productions in concert with other producers; the studios are not serving as the sole producer. Disney Theatrical Productions rarely produces in partnership with other producers, and because of this and because of the fact that DTP has a large, in-house staff that is not directly tied to each production, DTP is organized more like a regional theatre company than the theatre divisions of other studios.

Disney vs. The Lincoln Center Theatre: A Non-Profit Producer

Jeff Lee, Staff Associate Director for Disney Theatrical Productions, describes the company as, “a wonderful mixture of non-profit, and Off Broadway, and Broadway, and regional, and commercial, and touring talent that has been brought under the same roof to be able to collaborate together” (Lee). Lee’s comment points

to the fact that DTP has created a new and different model for producing commercial musical theatre on Broadway. The company's position as an arm of a multi-billion dollar global entertainment corporation affords them the luxury of creative freedom that is usually found in non-profit regional theatres, without the financial constraints of relying on fundraising to cover costs. This can best be illustrated by comparing DTP to a non-profit regional theatre that also produces new Broadway musicals, Lincoln Center Theatre (LCT). LCT is an excellent company to compare to DTP because it is in the same business as DTP: producing commercial theatre, and it shares the same primary market as DTP: Broadway.

Lincoln Center Theatre was conceived in 1958 when Vivian Beaumont Allen donated \$3 million dollars to Lincoln Center. Allen hoped that the theatre would become a national theatre to rival those in Europe (Sheehy 4). This tremendous gift came after the formation of a drama committee in 1956 by the founders of Lincoln Center. The committee was tasked to define the artistic concept of a theatre company at Lincoln Center (Stamas and Zane 25). In her article for the *Lincoln Center Theatre Review*, "6 Dreams" Helen Sheehy notes, Elia Kazan and Robert Whitehead, "two distinguished and respected Broadway veterans" were brought in to "dream the new theatre into existence" (4). The original concept for the company was one like the Old Vic in England: A repertory company that performs a rotating selection of plays each season (Stamas and Zane 26).

During The Lincoln Center Theatre Company's first season (1963-1964), the Vivian Beaumont Theatre was still under construction, so the first performances were held at the ANTA Theatre in Washington Square until the company could move

into its permanent home at Lincoln Center. The company moved into the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in the fall of 1965, and was slammed by the critics. The company continued to struggle in the 1970s. Renowned Public Theatre producer Joseph Papp came on board to lead the company in 1973 and stayed until 1977. Papp's vision for the company did not fit with the mainstream, commercial aspirations of Lincoln Center, and he eventually resigned. With no one to lead it, the theatre "went dark" until 1980, when it reopened briefly under the direction of Raymond Crinkley. The 1980 season was critically panned, and though Crinkley stayed on board, the stage was dark for several more years. In 1983, tired of the theatre company's failure, the Lincoln Center Board defunded the company and forbade anyone from using the company's name. Finally, in 1985 Gregory Mosher, a veteran of Chicago's Goodman Theatre, stepped in and was allowed to reopen the Lincoln Center Theatre Company. By 1988, its plays were selling out and the company was well on its way to becoming the successful, non-profit, commercial theatre company it is today (*International Directory* 239).

Lincoln Center Theatre Company is a useful company to compare with Disney Theatrical Productions, because, like DTP, LCT operates under the umbrella of a larger organization, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, whose purpose is threefold: to be the "world's leading presenter of superb artistic programming, national leader in arts and education and community relations, and manager of the Lincoln Center campus" ("Lincoln Center"). Lincoln Center Theatre Company is one arm of Lincoln Center's artistic programming along with New York City Ballet, The

Metropolitan Opera, and The New York Philharmonic, among others. In 2014¹⁴ Lincoln Center as a whole brought in \$65,085,387 in revenue (*Lincoln Center Consolidated Financial Statements*). Though a substantial number, Lincoln Center's \$65 million is less than the \$99 million annual Broadway gross of just one of DTP's shows, *The Lion King*, (2014 fiscal year). Though both LCT and DTP exist under the umbrella of a larger entity, the sheer difference in size of those parent organizations sheds light on the differences between the two.

The comparison is also justified because, despite the difference in size of their parent companies, Lincoln Center Theatre and Disney Theatrical Productions are similar in size. In the Playbill for LCT's 2015 Broadway musical, the revival of *The King and I*, 89 people are listed as employees of LCT whose jobs are not solely related to the show (*The King and I*). In comparison, in the Showbill¹⁵ for *Aladdin*, Disney Theatrical Productions' most recent musical, DTP lists 106¹⁶ people, not counting those who are employed solely on the show itself (*Aladdin*). In addition, the most current Showbill for DTP's long running *The Lion King* lists 112 such employees (*The Lion King*). Though similar in size, the structure of the companies is different. Disney has a licensing business that licenses productions both domestically and internationally. DTP also has its own in-house merchandising

¹⁴ July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014

¹⁵ DTP's programs, though produced by Playbill are called Showbill because DTP controls the ad space and content of the program unlike a regular Playbill. Playbill's advertisers pay for space in every Playbill, so in order to give DTP control over the content to ensure that all content is appropriate for Disney's audience of children and families, the program cannot be called Playbill.

¹⁶ DTP's staff has grown exponentially with each production, 106 is the number of employees as of the opening of *Aladdin* in 2014. The numbers at the opening of DTP's other productions are as follows: *Newsies*: 97, *The Little Mermaid*: 86, *Tarzan*: 79, *Mary Poppins*: 82, and *The Lion King*: 64 ("Playbill Vault").

department. In contrast, LCT employs its own House Staff, whereas, DTP only employs a house staff of its own in the New Amsterdam Theatre (which it runs) and those positions are tied to the show itself, not DTP as a whole (Cerniglia April 15). In the Nederlander theatres in which Disney presents its shows, the Nederlander Organization employs the house staff.

Disney vs. Kevin McCollum: An Independent Broadway Producer

Though DTP's structure most resembles that of a regional theatre, the work that DTP produces, large-scale commercial musical theatre, is more closely aligned with the work of other independent Broadway producers. An excellent example for comparison is Kevin McCollum, who is a leading producer of Broadway plays and musicals, with two new productions in the 2014-2015 Broadway season: the original musical comedy *Something Rotten* and the original American play, *Hand to God*. McCollum has produced a wide variety of Broadway musicals including *RENT* (1996-2008), *Avenue Q* (2003-2009), *In the Heights* (2008-2011), *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006-2007), and the 2009 revival of *West Side Story* ("Alchemation"). McCollum worked with producing partner Jeffrey Seller at their company, The Producing Office, until 2012, when the partnership and the company was dissolved, and both men amicably went their separate ways (Cohen). Since the split with Seller, McCollum produced *Motown, the Musical* with his new company, Alchemation. In 2013, McCollum entered into a partnership with 20th Century Fox to develop stage adaptations of movies from the studio's catalogue. In July 2013, Adam Hetrick of playbill.com reported "at least nine musicals are planned for development

within the next several years, with the potential goal to return the stage properties back to film in their new musical form.”

McCollum was born in Hawaii, where he lived until high school when his family moved to Chicago. He recalls that growing up in Hawaii, it was “cool to perform” and that was how his love of performing began (Davenport). After being mercilessly teased in a Chicago high school—he compares his experience at an extremely sports-oriented high school to the first season of the television series *Glee*—he went on to attend the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music where he received a degree in musical theatre (“UC Alumnus”). McCollum was then a working actor until his late 20s when he decided that he wasn’t satisfied and wanted to earn his MFA in the renowned Peter Stark producing program at the USC Film School. In his interview with producer Ken Davenport, McCollum recounts a chance encounter with then CEO of Disney, Michael Eisner,

I had done a show called “On the Top” that Michael Eisner at Disney had seen, he brought it out to LA while I was still living in Florida. Backstage, I am talking [to Eisner], “You know, I am applying to the Peter Stark program,” and I said, “You don’t know me, but I would love a recommendation” and he agreed. And I went in and talked to him, and he turned me on to his head of staff, Art Levit, and wrote a letter of recommendation for me to get into the Stark Program. (qtd. in Davenport)

McCollum got into the Stark Program. After he graduated, he worked as a production executive for the Walt Disney Corporation for two years (Ryan).

Eventually he ended up in New York as a Broadway producer; since 1994, he has

produced 22 Broadway shows, earned 12 Tony nominations, and won four Tony Awards (“Internet Broadway Database”).

Despite the Disney connection, and any similarity in what McCollum and DTP are producing, the sheer size difference between Alchemation and DTP means that the companies operate vastly differently. In the Playbill for *Something Rotten*, McCollum’s latest musical, there are six people listed as employees of Alchemation (including McCollum), and none of them have specific job titles listed (*Something Rotten*). On the other hand, as stated earlier, in the Showbill for *Aladdin*, Disney’s most recent musical, DTP lists 106 people in nine departments, including a marketing department (*Aladdin*). Just the fact that DTP has a separate Marketing department points to how different DTP and Alchemation are, as McCollum consistently speaks about the fact that he is personally involved in marketing and how often he is the one coming up with many of the ad campaigns and slogans.

As an independent producer, McCollum has to work differently than DTP, as he does not have the unlimited resources of a major corporation behind him, he actually has to raise money to put on a show. He also has to contend with other producing partners, which is something that DTP rarely encounters. In fact, other than *Mary Poppins*, which was produced in partnership with Cameron McIntosh as he held the rights to the story, DTP has been the sole producer on all of its Broadway musicals.¹⁷ McCollum discusses the hardship of working with producing partners in his interview with Ken Davenport,

¹⁷ Disney Theatrical Productions has produced two shows in partnership with other producers, *Peter and the Starcatcher* and *Sister Act*; however, these titles are not Disney branded shows. The Walt Disney Corporation also produced a play called

There is a lot of capital right now, but that capital comes with a lot more baggage than it did before...there needs to be a lot more handholding, there needs to be a lot more social events for them, a lot more meetings. And that's great on one level because you are building your community and I think this business needs to be more of a community...at the same time there are only so many hours in a day and so many decisions have to be made as a producer. I look at *Something Rotten* and *Hand to God*...I have two very discrete businesses that are being run, and I look at my producing partners as collaborators and partners, but deciding, you know, do we need to order more salt for the shelves, there has to be someone in charge of that. So I am very clear with my partners, investors, that I kind of have to be in charge of that and I will inform you, and if you think I am doing anything wrong, please call me, but you have to let me run with it. (qtd. in Davenport)

By bypassing the need to raise capital and producing its shows without partners, DTP has eliminated the hardship of dealing with partners. However, working without partners presents its own pitfalls, as producing collaboratively can reduce risk and bring more ideas and experience to the table. Cerniglia mentioned how different it was working on *Peter and the Starcatcher* because Disney produced that play in partnership with other producers. He commented on the way that decisions had to be made because of the multiple interested parties involved in the production, which slowed down the process, making it incredibly different from the way an internal DTP production is produced (Cerniglia April 23).

Largely New York in 1989 with other producers, and funded a play called *Total Abandon* that ran on Broadway in 1983 (www.ibdb.com).

McCollum also differs from Disney in the material that he chooses to produce. The ad campaign for his latest play, *Hand to God*, states, “no movie stars, no London transfer, no film adaptation...pray for us” (qtd. in Davenport). Though the message is in good fun, it points to the fact that most successful Broadway properties, whether plays or musicals, include one of the above, or in the case of musicals, are often a revival of a known property. DTP has an entire catalogue of properties from which to draw, films that have name recognition and are widely loved. Bringing an animated Disney film to the stage is a very different process than building a completely original musical or play from nothing and finding the audience to support it.

With this being said, McCollum’s new partnership with 20th Century Fox does mean that he is currently working to produce material that is similar to DTP. *Ever After*, the musical adaptation of the 1998 film starring Drew Barrymore, was the first of the 20th Century Fox films that McCollum adapted (“Kevin McCollum Tapped”). The stage musical had its world premiere at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey in May 2015, which is the same theatre company that did the trial run of *Newsies* in 2012 that led to its triumphant Broadway outing. Reviews for *Ever After* were mixed, with most praising the cast but some remarking that the material was less than stellar (“Review Roundup”). Though no opening date is set, the title may still open on Broadway. In May 2015 McCollum indicated to ABC News that he is planning musical adaptations of *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Clement).

Disney vs. The Nederlander Organization: A Corporate Broadway Producer

In addition to non-profit, and independent producers, DTP can also be compared to other corporate theatre producers. However, before this comparison is made, it must be noted that currently DTP is the only¹⁸ major Broadway producer that is a part of a publicly traded company. Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group was public between 1986 and 1990, but has been private since 1990 (Hunter). The other notable public theatrical producer was Livent, a Canadian company founded in 1990 by Garth Drabinsky and Myron Gottlieb that went public in 1993. The company faltered and was sold in 1998. After the sale it was discovered that Drabinsky and Gottlieb committed fraud by falsifying the company's books ("What was Livent Inc.?). In 2009, both men were convicted of fraud. With the demise of Livent, and the fact that Really Useful Group is no longer a publicly traded company, Disney Theatrical Productions is currently the only Broadway production company that is publicly traded.

Though public, DTP does have some similarities with other corporate, but privately held production companies. Founded in 1912 by David T. Nederlander, the Nederlander Organization is one of the largest privately held entertainment companies in the world. The Nederlander family currently runs the company: James M. Nederlander is the Chairman and James L. Nederlander is the company's President. The Nederlander Organization owns and operates ten Broadway theatres in New York City, and sixteen other venues around the United States, including the

¹⁸ Excluding the theatrical divisions of other entertainment companies that were mentioned earlier. These companies are being excluded because they rarely function in the same capacity as DTP and are more often simply a financial backer for productions.

Pantages Theatre in Los Angeles (former home of the Academy Awards), and three theatres in London (“The Nederlander Organization”). Nederlander theatres are the only theatres --other than the New Amsterdam-- that have housed a Disney production on Broadway.

The Nederlander Organization includes an arm that produces Broadway shows, and a touring arm that produces tours of Broadway (and other) shows. This three-fold purpose makes the Nederlander organization similar to DTP because DTP also owns¹⁹ and operates Broadway theatres and produces shows on Broadway and on tour. However, there are several differences that should be marked. First of all, The Nederlander Organization, like Kevin McCollum, most often produces shows in partnership with other producers. For example, *On Your Feet* is being produced in partnership with Estefan Enterprises, Inc. and *School of Rock* is a joint venture between the Nederlander Organization, the Shubert Organization, and the Really Useful Group, among others (“Internet Broadway Database”). There has only been one instance where DTP produced a Broadway musical with a partner, and that was *Mary Poppins*, which was co-produced with Cameron McIntosh because he held the rights to the story; Disney held the rights to the music from the original film, and neither was willing to sell to the other.

The next difference is the fact that the Nederlander Organization’s theaters present shows that the organization did not produce, and it also produces tours of shows that it did not originally produce. This is something that DTP does not do. All shows that have played in the New Amsterdam since Disney revitalized the theatre

¹⁹ through a 99-year lease

have been Disney shows. The last non-Disney Broadway play or musical in the theatre was a production of *Othello* in 1937 (“Internet Broadway Database”).

In addition to producing Broadway shows and running Broadway theatres, both organizations produce tours outside of the United States; however, those tours are different. Nederlander Worldwide Entertainment, another arm of the Nederlander Organization that is run by Robert Nederlander, Jr., produces Broadway shows outside of the U.S., mostly in China. In fact, Nederlander Worldwide produced the Chinese version of *Aida* for DTP (“Nederlander Worldwide Entertainment”). While Disney’s Broadway musicals tour all over the world, DTP does international tours in partnership with other organizations. According to Cerniglia, the productions are done “very local[ly]... on the practical end its our creative supervision...we train them all and they [produce] it...Then our business office actually figures out what our deal is with them, and who puts in what money and who recoups [their investment] first” (May 26). Unlike the Nederlander Organization, DTP is not actually producing international tours; it is minimizing its risk by partnering with companies in each market. If a show fails, DTP loses a smaller amount of money because the risk is split between Disney and the local company. For example, in Japan, DTP partners with the Shiki Theatre Company to produce the Japanese language versions of its productions. Shiki is an established and respected Japanese theatre producer and theatre owner that has been in business for over sixty years. Prior to working with Disney, Shiki was responsible for the Japanese productions of many Broadway hits including *A Chorus Line* (1979), *Cats* (1983), and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988). Shiki has produced Disney’s

Beauty and the Beast, Aida, and The Lion King, which, at the time of this writing, is still playing in Tokyo (“Shiki Theatre Company”).

Next, the Nederlander Organization and DTP are structured differently with regards to how the company runs on a day-to-day basis. As has been stated before, DTP employs over one hundred people who are not solely associated with the shows that are currently running. In the Playbill for *Jekyll and Hyde* (2012), the last Broadway musical for which the Nederlander Organization was a major producing partner, there are only seven individuals listed as a part of the Nederlander Organization (*Jekyll and Hyde*). According to Alice Gold, the receptionist for the company, the Nederlander Organization does not have any staff that is solely dedicated to producing new shows. She notes that James M. Nederlander and James L. Nederlander are the producers, and “put in the money,” but they also run the rest of the company, which is focused on managing the Nederlander theatres. She mentions that it would be impossible to pinpoint employees of The Nederlander Organization who are not tied to the shows who work on the production side of the company, as those positions do not exist (Gold). This is a striking difference between the Nederlander Organization and DTP, as DTP’s staff is primarily employed to produce Broadway shows and to develop shows for the Disney Theatrical catalogue.

Lastly, the Nederlander Organization does not market itself as a brand in the same way that Disney does. Though the Nederlander name commands respect in the Broadway community, the company does not extend to other areas of the entertainment industry like the Walt Disney Corporation. The Nederlander Organization also does not possess built-in, multi-platform advertising or extensive

merchandising outlets, while DTP is able to sell its merchandise at the theatres where its shows perform, in brick and mortar Disney Stores all over the world, and online.

Uniquely Disney

Clearly, though DTP has commonalities with other organizations and individuals who are producing musical theatre on Broadway, its structure and practices are unique. DTP is an independent theatrical producer that is under the umbrella of a multi-billion dollar, international entertainment corporation, The Walt Disney Corporation. This unprecedented position means DTP has created a new model of a Broadway producer. DTP is able to invest significant amounts of capital into its productions, like productions that are financed independently or by other corporate producers, but on a day-to-day basis, it functions more like a large non-profit theatre company, employing over one hundred people whose jobs are not directly tied to the show or shows that are currently running. DTP also has an education department and an in-house creative team, which is also similar to a nonprofit regional theatre company. Not to mention the fact that DTP owns and operates its own Broadway theatre, which is also more like a non-profit theatre company than most other producers of Broadway musicals.

In addition, unlike most other Broadway producers, DTP is able to take advantage of the fact that the company is but one branch of a comprehensive entertainment corporation. Merchandise for Disney's Broadway shows occupies a place on the shelves at Disney stores all over the world alongside the merchandise

from Disney films. Disney also owns the television network, ABC, which provides an exceptional opportunity for promotion. DTP's latest Broadway offering, 2014's *Aladdin* is an excellent example. Stories about the show and performances from the show appeared on several different ABC programs, exposing a wide demographic of potential audience members to the new title. In April 2014, ABC's *Nightline* aired a behind-the-scenes story and the cast performed on *The View*. In addition, the musical appeared on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* when it was the subject of a reoccurring bit where Kimmel sends an ABC security guard, Guillermo, into comedic, fish-out-of-water situations. Guillermo became a part of the cast of *Aladdin* for the night, and the scene in which he participated was broadcast on Kimmel's show. These ABC programs (among others) brought *Aladdin* into the consciousness of a wide variety of TV viewers through high profile product placement, rather than traditional advertising. DTP benefits from the reinforcement of its titles across the multiple holdings of the Walt Disney Corporation.

With these facts in mind, the next three chapters will explore three specific and distinct examples of DTP's production practices, highlighting the flexibility and property specific nature of the Disney Theatrical production model. The first show to be examined is DTP's longest running, and most financially and artistically successful musical: *The Lion King*.

CHAPTER 3

King of the Broadway Jungle: *Disney's The Lion King*

The Lion King is Disney Theatrical Production's most financially successful show to date. As of January 2016, it is the highest grossing musical on Broadway and has earned DTP numerous accolades for its artistry. The following chapter explores the process of producing the show from inception to opening night (and beyond) in order to illuminate one highly successful production model that DTP has employed.

In 1997, when *The Lion King* opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre, Disney Theatrical Productions (then known as Walt Disney Theatrical Productions) was young and growing. On opening night of *The Lion King*, under the direction of President Peter Schneider, DTP employed sixty-three people in various departments: Executive, Production Supervision, Business Affairs, Labor Relations, Marketing, International, Finance, Development, Group Sales, and Administrative Staff. Other than the Administrative staff, each of these departments only employed three to six people (*The Lion King*). When *The Lion King* opened, *Beauty and the Beast* was still playing at the Palace Theatre on Broadway and was in residence or on tour in several places outside of the United States, including Japan, Australia, and Canada, leading to the need for an international division. When *The Lion King* opened, DTP was growing.

1994 was a big year for the Walt Disney Corporation. The film version of *The Lion King* was a tremendously profitable (currently it is the 3rd highest grossing animated film of all time at \$987 million:) ("The Highest Grossing"). This was also the year that Disney brought *Beauty and the Beast* to Broadway and the year that

Michael Eisner struck a deal to renovate the New Amsterdam Theatre. In his interview with Michael Kantor, Eisner explains that if *Beauty* had not succeeded, Disney might never have moved forward with another Broadway musical. As Eisner notes, *Beauty and the Beast* “encouraged us to keep on going, we learned how to do it, we learned what you need to do as a producer” (*Interview with Michael Eisner*). Once *Beauty and the Beast* passed the test, the Walt Disney Corporation began to think about its next Broadway project.

In 1995, after *The Lion King* the film had exceeded all expectations, several Walt Disney Corporation executives questioned Eisner about a live version of *The Lion King*. Eisner loved the idea but was having difficulty figuring out how to adapt the film to a live stage show. The title presented a challenge. Whereas, *Beauty and the Beast* had non-human characters who had once been humans, presenting a costuming challenge, but not a conceptual one, *The Lion King* does not have one human character. Eisner knew adapting the film was a daunting task, so he turned to two other Walt Disney Corporation executives, Thomas Schumacher and Peter Schneider, who were in charge of Walt Disney Theatricals.²⁰ Eisner remembers walking into a staff lunch and proclaiming, “we are going to do *The Lion King*” (*Interview with Michael Eisner*). Schumacher and Schneider didn’t have any idea how to do it, in fact Schumacher promptly told Eisner that a stage version of the film was “the worst idea [he] had ever heard” (Schumacher 14). Eisner then informed Schumacher that it wasn’t impossible and all he needed was a “brilliant idea.” Schumacher left the meeting without a clue how to develop the title for the stage,

²⁰ In 1995, the theatrical arm of the Disney Corporation was known as Walt Disney Theatricals.

but with the notion that he needed to “find someone with a brilliant idea” (Schumacher 14).

Schumacher mulled over the seemingly impossible task, and finally came up with an excellent solution: Julie Taymor. In the 1980s Schumacher had worked on the Biennial Los Angeles Festival and had tried to bring Taymor’s *Liberty’s Taken* to Los Angeles. At the time, Schumacher reached out to Taymor, but once he received the ground plans and budget for the show, he realized that financially, it was out of his reach. Although he wasn’t able to work with Taymor for the festival, after the exchange, he knew her name, and her work. When the time came to figure out how to do the impossible, bring an animated film with no human characters to the Broadway stage, Schumacher remembered Taymor (Schumacher 15).

Julie Taymor arrived at DTP via the world of experimental and not-for-profit theatre. Prior to her work on *The Lion King*, she had never helmed or even worked on a Broadway musical, though she had successfully directed several operas and experimental musicals (“The Stars”). As a teenager, Taymor studied mime with Jacques Le Coq in Paris, and visited Sri Lanka, where she was first exposed to Asian theatrical traditions. Taymor studied folklore and mythology at Oberlin College in Ohio, and later returned to Ohio to work with noted experimental director Herbert Blau. She was also a member of Joseph Chaikin’s experimental Open Theatre in New York. Eventually Taymor received a Watson Fellowship to research performance forms in Asia. On the fellowship she studied puppetry in Japan and visited Indonesia, where she was taken with the traditional forms of puppetry (“Julie Taymor Biography”). After her time in Asia, Taymor returned to the U.S. and

designed several major productions including Elizabeth Swados' *The Haggadah*. Eventually Taymor met composer Elliot Goldenthal, with whom she would create *Liberty's Taken*, the show that attracted Thomas Schumacher's attention ("The Stars").

After receiving the call from Schumacher, Taymor agreed to work on the project. At first, the form that the project would take was uncertain, but Eisner kept insisting that it be a full-scale, Broadway musical, so Taymor got to work. In her book, *The Lion King: Pride Rock on Broadway*, Taymor notes,

To maintain the integrity of my own style, while incorporating it into one of the most beloved stories in recent history, was the first challenge to contemplate. The film's imagery is so identifiable and ingrained in the audience's minds. With preconceptions about what the characters should look and sound like, would [the audience] accept variations on a theme? (21)

Additionally, many iconic scenes in the film presented a staging challenge. From the scenes atop pride rock to the stampede and death of Mufasa, the settings of the film are just as iconic and recognizable as the characters. Taymor had a daunting task ahead of her, but a challenge that she embraced. Six weeks after accepting the project, Taymor presented her initial concepts to Schumacher, Schneider, and Eisner, who recalls, "at the end of the meeting, I and everyone else said 'go, let's do this, she's got it'" (*Interview with Michael Eisner*).

After her concept was green-lighted, Taymor got to work. She first tackled the book. The original film is 75 minutes long. Taymor felt that 75 minutes wasn't enough time to fully develop the characters and story, and was thrilled to move the

show to a two-act, full-length musical. The story of *The Lion King* is the story of the prodigal son, Taymor explains,

In every prodigal son story the hero needs to pass certain trials, tests that hurdle him to the bottom before he is allowed to come back on top. Simba, in this coming of age saga, needed to earn his homecoming to Pride Rock. His story needed more detail, depth and conflict. His character, that of a troubled and lost teenager, could use more bite and a rebellious edge. (22)

After spending several months trying to create the script on her own, Taymor turned to the animated film's co-director, Roger Allers, and screenwriter, Irene Mecchi. Together, they crafted the new script. This collaboration led to several notable changes to the stage version of *The Lion King*. One problem that the team addressed was the lack of female characters. In the film there are only three, Sarabi (Simba's mother), Shenzi (one of the hyenas), and Nala (Simba's love interest). The decision was made to focus on the latter and to expand her narrative. Taymor remembers,

We agreed that Nala, who has a feisty personality in the movie, could be shaped into a more dimensional character. In expanding her role in the musical her rebellious spirit gets her in trouble with the villainous Scar. She is an appealing conquest and when he practically forces himself on her she defiantly rejects him. As a result, though her dignity is intact, she must flee the pride lands. In the film, Nala leaves home to search for food and everyone expects her to return. In the musical she goes into exile, a departure that evokes deep sadness, loneliness, and permanence. (24)

By expanding Nala's story, the character becomes a more proper foil to Simba. It also allows for deeper exploration of character and circumstance by the performer. Nala became three-dimensional, a woman forced to flee to protect her own dignity.

In addition to the expansion of Nala, later in the process, Rafiki, the "marvelous shaman baboon" was made a female character. In the film, the song "Circle of Life" is sung by a disembodied female voice, so the writing team decided to embody the song in Rafiki. Taymor explains, "we now have Rafiki in the form of a shaman bringing us all together as both a character and a sort of force of nature. This strong, essential female presence elevates the entire theme of the circle of life." (25) Rafiki opens the musical with the iconic song and throughout the musical serves as a spiritual tie to something beyond the world of the action. Rafiki also goes back and forth between English and Zulu, which adds authenticity to her character and the setting, and allows for the character to transcend words, relying on humor and body language to communicate with the audience.

With a new storyline in place, it was time to dive into the music. The original film contained five songs by Elton John and Tim Rice. These were sufficient for an animated musical, but not for a full-length stage musical. During the development process, Taymor listened to *Rhythm of the Pride Lands*, an album of music inspired by the film. It contains music by several composers, including Hans Zimmer, Mark Mancina, and South African performer, Lebo M.

Lebo M. (Lebo Morake) is from Soweto, South Africa. He fled the country at 14 because of politics and his own frustration with the apartheid music industry. He relocated first to neighboring Lesotho, where he worked as a lounge singer at the

Victoria Hotel. It was there that he met the U.S. Ambassador who helped him relocate to the U.S. to study music (“Lebo M”). In Julie Taymor’s Book, *The Lion King: Pride Rock on Broadway*, M remembers his first involvement with *The Lion King*,

The Lion King project came to me at a crucial and critical time in my life and my country’s history, when serious changes were taking place. Most of the characters in the movie became human beings to me, because I associated Mufasa with Mandela, and I associated Simba with myself. I was in exile...[M]ost of the music I wrote, and the lyrics and arrangements, are very much inspired by my life story and my background as a South African Artist. (qtd. in Taymor 157)

M is a practitioner in the tradition of South African choral music, which grew out of the compounds that gold mine workers were forced to inhabit during apartheid. Within these compounds, music was created that reflected the hardships of life in the mines, and out of that music, acapella choral competitions began to be held. M remembers, “When I was three, four years old, my father used to take me to where the mine workers lived, because every weekend there were competitions from seven in the morning until ten at night, 200 choirs, great music and singing and dancing” (qtd. in Taymor 157).

It was M’s music, inspired by the traditions of South African choirs, complete with a chorus singing in Zulu that spoke to Taymor and offered new possibilities for the music in the stage version of *The Lion King*. Taymor selected two of M’s songs from *Rhythm of the Pride Lands*, “Lea Halalela” and “Lala” to be given English lyrics and used as numbers for Simba and Nala. The former became “Shadowland,” which

is sung by Nala as she rejects Scar's advances and flees into exile. The song also features Rafiki offering Nala a blessing on her journey. The latter became "Endless Night," in which Simba recalls the death of his father and his bitterness over Mufasa's broken promise to always be there. "Endless Night" is also how Rafiki learns that Simba is alive, as she hears him singing it in the wind. Taymor also used Mancina, Zimmer, and M's "He Lives in You," which was written in English. With a few adjustments to the lyrics (the version in the stage show is called "They Live in You" and the reprise is "He Lives in You"), Mufasa sings the song to Simba to inform him about the great kings of the past and how they and he will always be there for Simba. Lastly, Taymor selected "One by One." Taymor concedes, this song "actually has no relationship to anything in the story, yet it seemed to belong to the piece in spirit" (Taymor 26). This number serves as the entr'acte and is sung acapella by an exuberant chorus clad in traditional South African attire, while the performers fly bird puppets over the audience as the second act begins.

The decision to add more of M's music, complete with African rhythms and Zulu language, changed the entire feeling of the musical. Mark Mancina, who wrote additional music and lyrics for the show notes, "We draw on all sorts of different areas—film scoring, pop tunes, South African choir work. The music for *The Lion King* is diverse. It is African and it is pop and it is incredibly emotional" (qtd. in Taymor 25). The hybridity of the music and the emphasis on African forms and rhythms allowed the team to bring the chorus to the forefront of the stage adaptation. The film does feature some choral work, but it is in the background and used as underscoring. According to Taymor, "on the stage the chorus becomes

visually and aurally a principal character” (Taymor 27). Taymor also made the decision to keep the chorus’ songs in Zulu as she felt that the feeling and tone of the songs was more important than the actual words.

In addition to the new African inspired music, Taymor felt that Zazu, the comedic bird sidekick could use a song as well. She approached Elton John and Tim Rice and they composed “Morning Report,” which fit the bill. They also composed a new comedic trio for the three hyenas entitled, “Chow Down,” and a scene-long song between Nala and the hyenas, “The Madness of King Scar” (Taymor 27). The new pop numbers, African-inspired numbers, and choral numbers were woven together seamlessly to create a sound landscape for the show that was recognizable to fans of the film, but that also incorporated the rich tapestry of the film’s African setting in ingenious ways. Musically, the show now reached beyond the theme-park feel of its Disney predecessor, *Beauty and the Beast*, and was beginning to take on a life and an identity all its own.

With script and score in hand, Taymor turned to the next challenge of producing a live-action *The Lion King*, how to represent the characters and the settings on stage. Taymor chose a theatrical lens to reinterpret the imaginative aspects of the film. Her task was to translate the magic of the film into the magic of the theatre. DTP did not want *The Lion King* to look or feel like a theme park ride and hired Taymor for her avant garde sensibilities. DTP expected something different, something artistic and innovative. Taymor remembers,

As I began to visualize *The Lion King*, the dominant theme and image to emerge was the circle. “The Circle of Life,” the song that opens both the film

and the musical, sets the stamp for this symbolism. In addition to being a tale about a boy's personal growth, *The Lion King* dramatizes the ritual of birth, death, and rebirth...nature's cycle is evident throughout the work. (Taymor 28)

Taymor decided to use the circle as the central scenic concept. To realize her vision, she turned to set designer Richard Hudson. Born and educated in Zimbabwe, Hudson won the Olivier Award for Best Season in 1988 for his work at the Old Vic in London. Prior to his work on *The Lion King*, Hudson designed several operas in Chicago where he was praised for his bold use of color and distinctive iconography ("Theatre Designers"). Taymor was drawn to Hudson's daring aesthetic and together they created the preliminary designs for the Pride Rock set. Taymor knew she did not want a realistic depiction of the settings for the show; she wanted to release the audience "from their memories of the film right from the start" (Taymor 28). Taymor and Hudson created a Pride Rock that swirls out of the stage floor in full view of the audience, exposing the mechanics and the theatricality of the set piece. The decision to expose the magic of Pride Rock cemented the concept for the entire show, that the mechanics and magic would be visible. There would be no miraculous Imagineering tricks, like the Beast's transformation in *Beauty and the Beast*, but rather Taymor "wanted [the audience] to take a leap of faith and imagination" (28). Taymor explains,

Magic can exist in blatantly showing how theatre is created rather than hiding the "how." The spectacle of a stage transforming, of Pride Rock coming

into being before one's eyes, is more visually compelling, more entertaining than drawing a curtain and seeing the piece of scenery already in place. (29)

In addition to the concept for the scenic elements, Taymor also had to tackle the challenge of the costuming for the show. Taymor was intrigued by the duality of humans playing animals on stage. She wanted to suggest the animal without hiding the human behind it. Rather than putting actors into animal suits, Taymor opted for a stylized hybrid of costume and puppetry. She turned to her knowledge of eastern performance forms for inspiration and designed several types of puppets for the production. For each of the animals that inhabit the world of *The Lion King*, the human actor visibly manipulates a wearable puppet. Each puppet is designed to allow for the actor to move like the animal, for example, the actor portraying a giraffe is elevated in the air on four stilts and the animal's neck and head are attached to the top of the actor's head. This gives the illusion of four long legs and a long neck while the actor operating the puppet still remains visible. For the zebra, the actor's legs become the front legs of the creature and the animal's head extends from the actor's chest, thus creating the animal while the human is still present. These hybrids of human and animal heightens the experience of watching the show, as spectators are able to simultaneously connect what is like themselves, the human form, to that which is not, the animal, endowing the non-human characters with human traits, thus allowing for cross-species connection and empathy.

In addition to the individual animals, Taymor also came up with a concept to mimic herd movement,

The herd of gazelles and the flock of birds involve what I call “corporate puppetry,” where one person conveys the essential movement of a group, often by manipulating or wearing a device that carries multiple figures. For instance, five dancers will each bear three gazelle puppets: one on each head and one on each arm, thus creating a herd of fifteen. (Taymor 31)

The dancers of the chorus can manipulate these puppets and bring them to life through choreography; however, the principal characters also have to speak, which meant a different solution had to be found. Taymor explains, “I wanted to “preserve the flavor of the characters as conceived for the movie, and as written in the script, but I also wanted to maintain my own aesthetic” (Taymor 41). This desire led to questions about the audience, and if they would be able to simultaneously take in the face of the actor and a mask that represented the animal character. To help with the task, Taymor hired Michael Curry, a puppet designer that she had worked with on several past projects including her acclaimed production of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. Curry and Taymor went through several iterations of the mechanics of the masks for the adult lions (Scar and Mufasa) before finally finding something that would both evoke the form of a lion and allow for the actor’s face to be seen. The final concept was derived using animatronics wherein “the mask was attached to a harness and worn as a headdress above the actor’s head. Via a cable control hidden in the sleeve of the costume, the mask could move forward or backward or from side to side” (53). The final product is a striking combination of the images of the characters from the film, the actors portraying them, and the overall exposed aesthetic of the stage show.

In Michael Kantor's 2004 documentary, *Broadway: The American Musical*, Taymor explains, "[it] was a big question in the development of *The Lion King*, can the audience look at a mask and at a human face at the same time? Where will they focus?" Taymor continues, "In the theatre you can expect more from your audiences, they know they are in a theatre." With this in mind, Simba and Nala's masks were designed to rest atop the actor's heads, leaving their faces completely exposed, highlighting the duality of human and animal.

In addition to the lions, several other principal characters posed a challenge, most notably the show's main comic relief: Timon (a meerkat) and Pumbaa (a warthog). Taymor opted to create puppets for the two rather than masks. For Pumbaa, a puppet was designed that is worn by the actor with his head sticking out the top. The body of the warthog is worn over the chest of the actor, with a large face protruding from his torso, complete with over-sized tusks. Behind the actor, the warthog's legs and tail extend, so when the actor crouches, the animal's back legs are on the floor. The actor's head pops out the top of the puppet between the warthog's ears. A wig is used so that the actor's head becomes the warthog's hair (Taymor 65). For Timon, several possible puppets were explored with Taymor finally settling on a Bunraku (Japanese) style puppet. She explains,

[Timon] was inspired by a classical Japanese art form where three puppeteers manipulate a four-foot puppet. After a while, the audience no

longer notices the manipulators and just focuses on the puppet. Our version would have the actor manipulating his own Timon puppet.²¹(Taymor 67)

The Timon puppet is attached to the feet of the actor portraying the character. The actor manipulates the left arm of the puppet with a rod and the actor's right hand move the mouth. Unlike the Pumbaa puppet, which envelopes the actor portraying the warthog, the puppet for Timon is free standing and complete. The actor portraying Timon stands behind the puppet and is dressed in green from head to toe to blend in with the surroundings. Though the actor is very visible while manipulating the puppet, the character comes to life as the puppet is the main focus, with the green-clad actor fading into the background.

With many of the key elements in place, a workshop was set for August 1996. In order to get ready, in early 1996, Taymor and her team set up shop, or rather shops, in an old loft in lower Manhattan. It was here that designs were completed, important decisions were made about materials and construction, and *The Lion King* was taken from concept to reality. In August 1996, a two-week workshop was held. At this workshop, the script was given a reading and many of the mask and puppet prototypes were tested. Though the show in its entirety was not put on its feet, several scenes were worked on, which opened up new ideas and possibilities. The workshop proved that it was possible to stage the film, and though problems were revealed with some of the prototypes, it was clear to everyone involved that *The Lion King: The Musical* was well on its way to becoming a stage musical.

²¹ Traditionally, Bunraku puppets are manipulated by a maximum of three puppet masters, rather than one performer.

The producers were, however, concerned about the interplay between the masks, puppets, and actors, especially for the principal characters. In order to address these issues, a second workshop was held in February 1997. This time, scenes were performed twice: Once using the masks, puppets, costumes and makeup, and once with only costumes and makeup. Taymor remembers,

Ultimately the producers' fears about focus in the puppet/mask alternatives were allayed. Though the viewer was completely aware of the human being and the animal, the singular essence of the characters came through, much more so than when the scenes were performed in a more traditional way with the actors in costume and makeup only. (Taymor 125)

With the costumes and puppetry set, it was time to build the rest of the musical. Taymor passed off the remaining scenic design to Richard Hudson, who in turn employed his associate designer, Peter Eastman, and technical director David Benken to oversee construction of the scenery (Taymor 131). Hudson came up with ingenious designs for the show that simultaneously evoked the film and the exposed, African aesthetic of Taymor's vision for the musical. Perhaps the most ingenious of his creations was the Stampede. For this iconic scene, Hudson designed five sets of portals that would give the illusion of a canyon in forced perspective. He also designed a canvas scroll at the back of the stage, painted with wildebeest; in front of the scroll he created rollers that were covered in two-dimensional cutouts that would move as the wheels turned. Taymor describes the effect, "The rollers rotate like an old-fashioned penny arcade game, and create the sense of the herds careening toward the audience"(98). Hudson continues the description,

The use of rollers to simulate the oncoming wildebeest harks back to 18th-century European theatre, which often used rollers decorated with wavelike structures to create the effect of the sea. Placing side portals one behind the other to create false perspective goes back to the scenic designs of the Italian Renaissance, but it's a very simple method of making a canyon. (qtd. in Taymor 99)

In addition to the scenic stampede, dancers outfitted with several full scale wildebeest masks rise out of a trap in the floor in front of the rollers. This creates a sense of depth and menace that is able to capture the intensity of the iconic moment from the film. To achieve an effect that would capture the essence of film, the show utilizes simple techniques, rooted in theatrical tradition. By blending the contemporary and highly recognizable imagery of the film with an old method of achieving perspective, the musical is connected to the film as well as theatrical precedent.

With the main design elements and the libretto ready, the team pushed forward toward a Broadway opening. First, however, was an out-of-town tryout in Minneapolis. After an intensive technical rehearsal process, the show went into previews and subsequently opened on July 31, 1997, at the Orpheum Theatre in downtown Minneapolis. In her book, *The Lion King: Pride Rock on Broadway*, Julie Taymor uses one word to describe opening night, "Glorious" (177). Michael Eisner remembers being at opening night in Minneapolis, noting that was when "the feeling and the magic happened" (*Interview with Michael Eisner*). From the moment the show opened in Minneapolis, critics were raving about it. In his article, "*The Lion*

King is an Evening of Almost Pure Delight,” Mike Steele of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* called the show “an audacious, cross-cultural re-envisioning of the film” that “manages to be true to the film’s spirit while becoming a playful, imaginative celebration of theatre.” He notes that the show is “technically complex and sophisticated, yet earthy and simple.” He mentions that there is not a weak member of the cast and that the pacing is excellent, finishing his review by calling his experience “an evening of pure delight” (4B).

Chris Hewitt of the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* was equally impressed, starting his review, “Opening makes *The Lion King* the Mane Event,” by stating,

I would pay to see the Broadway-bound “The Lion King” again, even if I could only stay for the first five minutes. The “Circle of Life” is among the most spine-tingling, goosebump-raising, overwhelmingly beautiful curtain-raisers in the history of Broadway musical theatre. (D1)

While he was impressed by the imagination and ingenuity on display, he did note that the narrative felt choppy and sometimes got “lost in the effects.” He also criticizes some of the acting choices, and thinks that the show was too long and could use some “pruning.” However, he ends by noting, “even unpruned, it’s a mighty entertaining show” (D1).

In addition to the local reviews, Richard Christiansen of *The Chicago Tribune* took a trip down to Minneapolis to review the show. He notes that Taymor was “an inspired choice” to direct the show, and marvels, “In a remarkable kind of reverse anthropomorphism achieved through masks and puppets and funky mechanical toys, she has humanized every animal character in the story.” He calls the opening

“astounding” and “brilliant” and praises the choreography and designs. He does note that the show lacks the “sense of drama” of the original film and that it could use a stronger intermission teaser and a few cuts to the second act. However, he also calls *The Lion King*, “the most incredible combination of children’s show and avant-garde spectacle ever conceived for the American theatre” (1).

These reviews speak to the magic of *The Lion King*. The show is simultaneously transporting viewers into the world of a beloved film, and creating a theatrical experience firmly rooted in global performance traditions. This duality allows the show to function on multiple levels, it tells a compelling and clear story, it contains a wealth of imagery and symbolism, and it is aesthetically innovative and pleasing. The production is rooted in two disparate traditions at the same time, the tradition of Disney animation, which appeals to children and families, and the tradition of avant garde performance, which appeals to discerning theatregoers. *The Lion King* is an ingenious marriage of popular and elite that defies the binary categorizations of high and low art.

With mostly excellent reviews, and information about what was effective and what was less so, in late August 1997, *The Lion King* moved to Broadway. The sets were loaded into the New Amsterdam Theatre while the cast rehearsed minor changes to the script and choreography. A cast album was also recorded during the weeks before opening, allowing DTP to sell them on opening night, a commercially lucrative decision that DTP would continue with its subsequent shows (Taymor 180). With the set finished and the cast ready, *The Lion King* began Broadway

previews on October 15, 1997. After 33 preview performances, *The Lion King* officially opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre on November 13, 1997.

Because of the beating that *Beauty and the Beast* took from the press, and the comparison of the multi-million dollar Broadway production to “theme park entertainment,” DTP was holding its breath until the reviews for *The Lion King* went to press. Especially of interest was the review from the *New York Times*. The task of reviewing the latest Disney offering fell to the esteemed Ben Brantley, a critic who is not often fond of large, commercial musicals. Brantley’s review, “Cub Comes of Age: A Twice-Told Cosmic Tale,” starts positively as he marvels at the first ten minutes of the show, referring to the “transporting magic” of the staging and mentioning the opening is “filled with astonishment and promise.” To the relief of DTP, he notes,

For one thing, it is immediately clear that this production...is not going to follow the path pursued by Disney’s first Broadway venture, *Beauty and the Beast*, a literal-minded exercise in turning its cinematic model into three dimensions. Ms. Taymor...has her own distinctive vision, one that is miles away from standard Disney fare. (1)

Brantley was thoroughly taken with Taymor’s aesthetic for the show, noting the “breathtaking beauty and scenic ingenuity” of her techniques. However, despite his embrace of Taymor, his review is not without strong criticism:

Ms. Taymor’s vision, which is largely rooted in ritual forms of theatre from Asia and Africa, collides with that of Disney, where visual spectacle is harnessed in the service of heartwarming storytelling. There were hopes that the Disney-Taymor collaboration might reflect what Katherine Hepburn

reportedly said about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: “He gives her class, and she gives him sex” (if you think of Ms. Taymor as Astaire and you substitute sentiment for sex). (1)

Brantley continues by noting that Taymor’s strength was never in “sustained narrative” and that the actors are often “hampered” by the masks and puppets. He calls the songs “mostly unexceptional” and then states, “It’s when *The Lion King* decides to fulfill its obligations as a traditional Broadway book musical that it goes slack” (1). Garth Fagan’s choreography is labeled “clumsy” and he accuses the catchy song “Hakuna Matata” of lacking “effervescence.” In contrast, he concludes his review by declaring that the show is an “important work in a way that *Beauty and the Beast* simply is not.” And that, “Seen purely as a visual tapestry, there is nothing else like it.”

Brantley’s review, though mixed, was a step forward for DTP, and his criticism of the show, which rightfully pointed out that *The Lion King* is not without flaws, would later be overshadowed by the six Tony Awards that the production would win, including Best Musical, Best Choreography, Best Costumes, and Best Director, making Julie Taymor the first woman to ever win in that category. With multiple awards and mostly positive reviews (Brantley’s was one of the few that was negative), the show picked up momentum. In his editorial, “Learning from *The Lion King*,” Michael McMahon of the *New York Times* describes overhearing a father tell his daughter, “I want you to know, a ticket to this costs as much as a ticket to Disney World for the whole day” (16). Despite the high price of tickets, theatregoers

flocked to the show. In its first year, over 750,000 people saw the show and it grossed over \$43 million (“The Broadway League”).

On the tails of its New York triumph, In December 1998, the first international production of *The Lion King* opened in Tokyo. The show would go on to financially successful runs all over the world including Great Britain, Germany, Spain, Canada, Australia, The Netherlands, China, France, South Korea, South Africa, Mexico, and Singapore (“DTP Opening”). At the time of this writing, the show is currently running in residence in London, Australia, Germany, Japan, Mexico, and Spain (“Worldwide”). There is also a production opening at the new Shanghai Disney in Spring 2016 (Glover). The story of *The Lion King* functions on a mythical level, it deals with the human condition, rather than any specific culture. It is in its essence, an archetypal coming of age story, versions of which can be found across many mythologies and cultures. *The Lion King* also utilizes non-human characters, widening its ability to connect to audiences across multiple cultures. In her 2004 interview with Michael Kantor, Julie Taymor explains, “The major essence is of the prodigal son, which is fundamental to being human, if you’re in Japan you get it, you’re in Africa, you get it, now we’re going to Australia, they’ll get it” (*Interview with Julie Taymor*).

The Lion King is also a domestic triumph, evidenced by the resident and touring productions in the United States. In October 2000 a production opened at the Pantages Theatre in Los Angeles, where it ran until January 2003, when it moved to the Cadillac Palace Theatre in Chicago (“Casting and Venues”). In addition to LA and Chicago, a streamlined version of *The Lion King* opened at the Mandalay Bay

Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas in May 2009 (“DTP Opening”). For the Vegas production, the show was revised. Twelve minutes, including Zazu’s song, “The Morning Report,” was cut. Subsequently, the cuts made for the Vegas production were rolled into the other productions of the show across the world as the team at DTP felt that making the edits refreshed the property and trimmed some unnecessary time (Cerniglia May 26). The Vegas version ran until December 2011, performing over 1000 times (“End Las Vegas”). These resident productions, however, were not the only incarnation of the show in the U.S. In April 2002, the First National Tour commenced in Denver, Colorado (“Casting and Venues”). Currently, the show has a Second National Tour on the road and shows no signs of slowing down (“Re: *Lion King* Info”).

According to DTP’s Resident Dramaturg and Literary Manager, Kenneth Cerniglia, the financial success of *The Lion King* offers DTP flexibility and opened up many options for the company. The show has been running on Broadway since it opened in 1997, having moved from the New Amsterdam Theatre to the Minskoff Theatre in 2006. In April 2012, it took the record for highest grossing currently running Broadway show away from *The Phantom of the Opera* (Kennedy). On October 25, 2013, Rebecca Sun of the *Hollywood Reporter* reported that *The Lion King* would soon break one billion dollars in Broadway box office grosses, making it the first show to hit the billion-dollar mark on the Great White Way. She notes that ticket prices have remained in the middle of the Broadway pack, and that consistently packed houses, rather than inflated prices, brought the show to this incredible benchmark in less than sixteen years (20). In September 2014, Charlotte

Alter of *Time Magazine* reported that *The Lion King* had worldwide grosses over \$6.2 billion dollars, making it the “biggest box office hit of any work in any medium of all time” (1).

Once *The Lion King* found success—critically, artistically, and financially—DTP had used a traditional Broadway production model twice with astonishing results. By testing *The Lion King* out of town, just as *Beauty and the Beast* was tested out of town, DTP was able to hone the show outside the gaze of the New York critics. The incredible amount of money that the title has earned for DTP has allowed the company to expand (Cerniglia April 15). In 2000, DTP created Hyperion Theatricals to produce *Aida*,²² a Broadway version of Verdi’s opera of the same name. In his 2000 book, *Aida: The Making of a Broadway Musical*, Michael Lassell divulges that Disney acquired the rights to Leontyne Price’s children’s story based on the opera and asked Elton John and Tim Rice if they would do the music for an animated film version. John and Rice, however, were not interested in doing a film and instead wanted to tackle a modern stage adaptation of the title (29-30). *Aida* did not come from an animated hit, and was not a well-known story. As such, it was a risky choice for DTP, but ended up being financially successful, running for four and a half years on Broadway. In 2004, DTP opened *Mary Poppins* in London in partnership with Cameron Mackintosh, marking the first time that DTP worked in partnership with another producer on a Disney title. *Mary Poppins* opened on Broadway in 2006 and played until 2013. DTP continues to grow, and the money that *The Lion King*

²² Hyperion Theatricals was created because of the subject matter of *Aida* and the fact that it was not an existing Disney title. Disney executives felt that “a double suicide was better non-Disney” (Cerniglia, April 15).

consistently brings in helps finance that growth. However, it was not just DTP that noticed the triumph of *The Lion King*. In August 1998, Barry Singer of the *New York Times* reported, “ticket buyers in record-breaking numbers are demonstrating to commercial producers that there is a vast new potential audience for musical theatre” (AR 5). With the popularity and financial success of *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, other entertainment corporations began to turn their eyes to Broadway, and other established producers began to produce shows courting this newfound audience of children and families.

Prior to the arrival of Disney on Broadway, few shows were targeting children and families. Though there were occasional exceptions like *Annie* in 1977, family friendly fare was not the norm. As Disney began to draw families and kids to Broadway, other shows targeting the new audience base began to spring up. Interestingly, Hollywood studios also backed many of these shows. In 2000, in partnership with several other producers, Universal Studios mounted *Seussical the Musical*. In 2008, DreamWorks produced *Shrek the Musical*. Though neither show was as financially successful as DTP’s family friendly offerings, these shows mark a growing trend toward harnessing the new demographic.

After *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, Disney Theatrical Productions mounted a string of hits. It would not be until July 2007, when *Disney’s Tarzan* closed its Broadway production without recouping its initial investment, that DTP would taste financial failure. The unorthodox production process of *Disney’s Tarzan: The Musical* is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

For the First Time: *Disney's Tarzan the Musical*

After *The Lion King*, Disney Theatrical Productions produced two hit musicals: *Aida* (under Hyperion Theatricals) at the Palace Theatre and *Mary Poppins* in partnership with Cameron Mackintosh at the New Amsterdam Theatre.²³ *Beauty and the Beast* was still performing well on Broadway and had moved to the Lunt-Fontanne theatre in 1999 to allow *Aida* to open at the Palace Theatre. By 2006, when *Tarzan* opened, *Beauty and the Beast* had taken up residence in multiple locations across Europe and Asia, and had embarked on three Disney produced American national tours (“DTP Opening”). DTP was four for four and looking for the next winning property. The title that the company settled on, *Tarzan* did not allow for a traditional production model under which DTP had profited with its first two productions, and forced the company to utilize a less traditional model to transport the vine swinger from screen to stage. Given the fact that *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, and *Mary Poppins* were all enjoying profitable, extended runs, DTP took the leap, looking to create another show that would not only bring in money, but that might also be artistically innovative like its biggest hit, *The Lion King*.

On opening night of *Tarzan* in 2006, the structure of DTP had shifted from when *The Lion King* opened in 1997. Though the company had only added thirteen employees, the labor was now divided into nine categories, and many employees now had more specific job titles. The Executive division was split in two, and now there was a general management division in which each other division had a Vice

²³ In 2006, *The Lion King* moved from the New Amsterdam Theatre to the Minskoff Theatre to allow *Mary Poppins* to open in the New Amsterdam Theatre.

President or a manager. There was no longer an International division, but rather a Vice President of International, Ron Kollen. The company also now had a Vice President of Licensing to oversee the growing catalogue of Disney shows available for both professional and amateur productions. In addition, DTP created a production division which now contained VP's of production, music, and creative affairs. DTP also added a resident Associate Dramaturg and Associate Designer. In addition, the Marketing, Sales, Finance, and Business (which now included legal) Departments were expanded ("Playbill Vault"). Though there were still a handful of employees who were listed as administration, most of DTP's employees now had specific job titles and the organization of the growing company was beginning to look more like a regional theatre company than other Broadway producers.

Any Broadway outing is full of risks, and despite DTP's tremendous previous success, both financially, and with *The Lion King*, artistically, when *Tarzan* opened in 2006, there were no guarantees. The risk for *Tarzan* was compounded by several factors. First, Disney Theatrical Productions decided to use an unorthodox method of developing the show, without an out of town tryout, but rather an extended period of previews in New York. Next, the film from which the show was adapted, unlike DTP's previous adaptations, was not a conventional musical. It had an unconventional story structure: there were essentially two stories being told, that of Tarzan's childhood and then that of his meeting Jane in the jungle. In addition, only one song in the film was actually sung by the characters. Lastly, in 2006 DTP still had a huge critical target on its back. Despite several hit shows (both with critics, audiences, and Tony Award voters), Disney's status as a corporate producer still left

many in the Broadway community wishing for DTP to fail, as the company was still seen as a corporate intruder. Every show that DTP produced on Broadway prior to 2006 was financially successful, despite the type of criticism that often led to other producers being forced to close their show before recouping their investment. Thus far, DTP had been able to turn the appeal of the Disney brand into Broadway dollars regardless of the critical reception and perceived quality of the company's product. However, Broadway is a gamble and turning a profit is about smart prospecting. For *Tarzan*, the risks certainly outran the rewards.

In the early 2000s, Disney Theatrical Productions had three shows running simultaneously on Broadway: 1994's *Beauty and the Beast* at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, 1997's *The Lion King* at the New Amsterdam Theatre, and 2000's *Aida* at the Palace Theatre. At the same time, DTP was developing its next Broadway offering, *Tarzan, the Musical*, which would play at the Richard Rogers Theatre. The show is based on the 1999 Disney animated feature and the 1912 novel by Edgar Rice Burroughs. *Tarzan* the film was highly successful; it was number one at the box office the week it opened and "grossed \$171 million domestically and \$448 million worldwide" ("*Tarzan Swings*" 45). Phil Collins, who wrote the songs and score, won an Academy Award for "You'll Be in My Heart," and the characters from *Tarzan* became a staple at Disney theme parks (45). So when it was time to begin work on a new title for Broadway, the recent success of the film, *Tarzan*, and the fact that it was vastly different from the other currently running Disney screen-to-stage adaptations, made it an easy choice.

Like *The Lion King*, however, the story of *Tarzan* was not a simple one to stage and many risks were taken along the way, and unfortunately, unlike *The Lion King*, they did not pay off. One of the largest gambles that DTP took was with the team assembled to lead the production. Julie Taymor was a risky hire as director for *The Lion King*, and that choice proved to be the smartest decision that could have been made for the title. Taymor's out-of-the-box thinking and avant-garde aesthetic made *The Lion King* a triumph of art, as well as a commercial gold mine. With three hit productions, DTP was willing to take chances, as so far, it had reaped nothing but rewards. Then Executive Vice President Stuart Oken and current head of DTP Thomas Schumacher made the decision to hire Bob Crowley to direct the production, after unsuccessfully trying to enlist Cirque du Soleil's Franco Dragone ("Tarzan Swings" 46). Crowley was a well-known designer, having won numerous Tony Awards and Olivier Awards over the years for his scenic and costume designs. Despite his Broadway pedigree, Crowley had never led a Broadway production as a director, and consequently, hasn't directed again on Broadway. Crowley's ideas were ambitious; in his chapter "Tarzan Swings Onto Disney's Broadway," Kenneth Cerniglia explains, Crowley "wanted to be able to design an environment that would reflect the 'two worlds' theme, so that the audience would come from the street into a completely different world once they entered the theatre" (47). This idea led to a design for the show that had more in common with a circus inspired spectacle than a traditional Broadway musical. Crowley originally wanted to create a live-action version of *Tarzan* that was produced in a traveling structure, almost like the circus.

Crowley recalls, “At one point we were considering two buildings... we were going to hopscotch these buildings across the country and one would be under construction while we were performing in the other” (qtd. in Lassell, *Tarzan* 25). The show was conceived on an epic scale, and one that was not financially or practically viable. In his book, *Tarzan, The Broadway Adventure*, Michael Lassell notes, “it became clear...that they were on the wrong conceptual path, that the way into the heart of *Tarzan* was not to make it bigger and more complex, but to move toward something much smaller” (25). This sent the show in a new direction and the decision was made to abandon the traveling circus show for a proscenium theatre concept. This decision is what ultimately led to an unhappy ending for *Tarzan: The Musical*.

The final design and concept for the show involved what would come to be known as the “green box.” Crowley explains,

There would be no literal vines on stage, although a lot would go on in the air. There would be a shipwreck event at the beginning, and that would be done with the Japanese-like simplicity of painted silk. Nothing would look “natural.” The reality would be highly theatrical rather than literal. (qtd. in Lassell, *Tarzan* 25)

The “green box” was a covering of fabric and rope that enclosed the three walls of the stage space in an abstract, green world. This representation of the jungle was an artistic risk, but perhaps because the show came close on the heels of *The Lion King*, which had succeeded with its abstract setting, taking the show in a less literal direction seemed like a sound artistic choice.

This aesthetic extended to Crowley's costume designs as well. To outfit the apes, he opted to use an abstract representation of the animals, rather than putting the company in gorilla suits. In *Tarzan: The Broadway Adventure*, Michael Lassell states, Crowley envisioned "costumes that were drawn from nature but that did not attempt to hide the actors wearing them" (46). The final costumes were fashioned out of strips of Lycra that were pulled tight so that when released, they stayed in the shape of a tube. These strips were fastened onto "lightweight, perforated nylon used in the United States on professional football jerseys" (48). This construction created a breathable costume that would work with the actors' movement. Each costume, complete with a wig made of the same material, was slightly different, to mirror the different personalities of the apes in the show.

In addition to the risk that was taken in hiring Bob Crowley to direct the production, other Broadway newcomers were also hired to fill out the creative team. In fact, other than David Henry Hwang, the show's book writer, none of the team members had Broadway experience in their respective positions, and Hwang had never written a musical on his own ("Tarzan Swings" 46). Phil Collins, who had won acclaim for his songs in the original film, was brought in to adapt his music to the stage. He had no experience with musical theatre, other than a brief outing as the Artful Dodger in the original London production of *Oliver!* (46). Choreography was also placed in the hands of an individual new to Broadway. Schumacher hired Australian contemporary ballet star Meryl Tankard who was known for her work in aerial ballet to develop the movement for the show (Lassell, *Tarzan* 29).

Perhaps related to the team's lack of Broadway experience in their respective roles, *Tarzan* also had a lengthy development process. There were many questions that had to be answered before bringing the story to the stage, the biggest of which, was the flying. In the film, Tarzan moves through the jungle by "surfing" on the vines, an idea that animator Glen Keane had stumbled upon while watching his son skateboard. However, surfing the vines was not going to be possible on stage, so another idea had to be developed. According to Disney Theatrical Production's Staff Associate Director Jeff Lee, the team "virtually researched every company in the U.S. inclusive of people who were doing flying for Television and film" (Lee). Eventually they settled on Flying by Foy, the company that developed the flight for *Peter Pan* (1954) and who, over the years, had developed a state of the art computerized flying system (Lee). A traditional flying workshop with Flying by Foy was held in Las Vegas in 2004, and was disappointing, leading the team to look for other solutions to the flying challenge.

Eventually, in a conversation about the adaptation, Keane and Schumacher imagined the idea of rock climbing as the vocabulary for Tarzan's flight. Schumacher remembers, "What if Tarzan's loincloth is actually a harness, with the carabineer that held him onto the rope totally exposed?" (qtd. in Lassell, *Tarzan* 29). The idea worked well with the show's theme of difference: Tarzan was not able to easily navigate the world of the jungle because he was different from the apes. It also spoke to the ingenuity of man, as Tarzan clipping in and out of a harness system demonstrated his cleverness in manipulating the world around him in a way in which only humans are capable. Jeff Lee explains, "Not only would rock climbing

provide for a more rough-and-tumble, unrefined approach to the flying, it would exhibit his ingenuity and intellect above and beyond that of his gorilla counterparts” (qtd. in “Tarzan Swings” 52). Exposing the flying apparatus did not guarantee a creative victory, but it was reminiscent of the concept of *The Lion King*, where Julie Taymor deliberately highlighted the duality of the animals and the human actors who were playing them.

This new revelation led to the need for another member of the team, someone who was intimately familiar with the type of flying that would be employed in the show. Enter Pichon Baldineau, Argentinian co-director of De La Guarda aerial performance troupe. At the time of *Tarzan’s* development, De La Guarda was presenting *Villa Villa* at the Daryl Roth Theatre in Union Square (53). Baldineau’s aesthetic was similar to what the team was seeking for *Tarzan*, and he was quickly enlisted to work on the show. The final plan for the flying was a combination of rock climbing and bungee jumping, that utilized harnesses and carabineers attached to dynamic climbing ropes. Those ropes were attached to a computerized flying system. According to DTP’s Jeff Lee, Flying by Foy designed a “Mother Grid, which is essentially a framework of trussing that hangs over the entire footprint of the stage and channels ropes from electronic, computerized winches, up to drop points that are in the overhead system of the stage.” This hybrid system allowed for the exposed mechanics of the rock climbing to be controlled with the press of a button. However, the system was not completely automated, and extra riggers were needed to run the production, adding to the show’s cost. Designing the

system was also a huge expense, as every move had to be carefully plotted and programmed to ensure that the ropes did not become entangled (Lee).

Under the direction of Baldineau, another flying workshop was held in Buenos Aires in April 2005 (“Tarzan Swings” 53). At this workshop different parts of the show were tested in multiple ways to figure out how the flying would function as a part of the narrative. Thomas Schumacher remembers,

When we went down to Argentina...David [Henry Hwang] had written the show. Phil [Collins] had composed the music. But we were not yet committed to doing the show. We went to Argentina and tried to stage half a dozen major moments...so we built a rig in an abandoned theatre and spent two weeks learning how to fly. (qtd. in Lassell, *Tarzan* 31)

At the Disney Theatrical Productions offices in New York there is a binder full of DVDs documenting this workshop, representing hundreds hours of experimentation, which also represents a significant amount of development money.

The workshop in Argentina, though informative and productive, was not enough to put the show directly into rehearsals; another workshop was needed, again adding to the cost of development. The answers obtained in Argentina did, however, provide Crowley with enough information to complete the set design. This allowed for the construction of the metal framework of the set on one of the stages at the Performing Arts Center of the State University of New York in Purchase (Lassell, *Tarzan* 31). Michael Lassell notes, “Here the cast, some of whom had appeared in *De La Guarda* in Manhattan, and all of whom had auditioned...in midair,

would begin to familiarize themselves with the environment they would inhabit and the theatrical language in which they would express themselves” (31).

The Purchase workshop was enough to push the show into rehearsals, but unlike most musicals, and the four previous DTP musicals, *Tarzan* could not be rehearsed in a rehearsal studio in Times Square. The show would have to be rehearsed in a location that had enough space to construct the framework of the set, as it was an integral part of the staging and choreography of the show. A larger space was needed, and it was not going to be found in Manhattan. The team looked to Brooklyn and Steiner Studios, a complex that sits on 15 acres of the old Brooklyn Navy Yard. Steiner has several large sound stages and plenty of office space to house all of the support staff needed to rehearse the production. The space was big enough to not only construct the actual stage set for *Tarzan*, but also “to create what the production team referred to as ‘Rig Junior,’ a rough approximation of the actual set where the actors could develop, and practice their ‘flying’ movements” (Lassell, *Tarzan* 32). This set-up allowed multiple rehearsals to happen simultaneously, reducing some of the time needed to develop the production. In addition to the two “rigs,” other spaces housed music and fight rehearsals as well as shops for the construction of costumes, set, and props. Steiner studios served as both rehearsal and creation space.

After the expense of development, perhaps the biggest risk that was taken was the decision to forgo an out-of-town tryout. The sheer scale of the scenery made is very difficult to take the show anywhere, so the team decided instead to do an extended preview period in New York. This decision is, in this author’s opinion, the

single most important factor that led to the critical and financial failure of the production. The show did not have the opportunity to be worked on outside the gaze of New York's critics. It also did not have the opportunity to get in front of a live audience over an extended period of time with the opportunity for revision prior to previewing and opening in New York. Had the show had a traditional out-of-town tryout, perhaps some of the issues that were solved in the later revisions for licensing would have been discovered before Broadway and the show may have been slightly more successful in its original production, both critically and financially. Putting any show up on Broadway "cold" is a huge risk, and when you have a target on your back like Disney Theatrical Productions, that risk is magnified.

Tarzan moved from Brooklyn to the Richard Rogers Theatre in March 2006²⁴. In his chapter, "Tarzan Swings onto Disney's Broadway," Cerniglia explains, "Following a model that *Billy Elliot* had recently tried with its premiere production in London, *Tarzan's* extended preview period included light performance schedules, which accommodated more rehearsal and adjustment" (54). The show received a lot of buzz and played to sellout houses during previews. Audiences were curious about how DTP would stage the musical. It is also possible that some people came to see the show fail. Though adjustments were made during the extended preview period, those fixes were not enough to tackle the numerous problems with the show, and when it opened on May 10, 2006, the reviews were predominately negative.

²⁴ *Tarzan* premiered at the Richard Rogers Theatre rather than the New Amsterdam Theatre because *The Lion King* was still playing at the New Amsterdam when *Tarzan* went into production.

In his *New York Times* review, “Broadway and Vine: Ape-Man Hits Town,” Ben Brantley not only points out the flaws of the show, he proclaims his disdain for almost every element. He begins by calling the show a “giant, writhing green blob with music” and states, it “feels as fidgety and attention-deficient as the toddlers who kept straying from their seats.” He notes, after the first scene (the shipwreck), “the thrill is gone” and that the creative team relied too heavily on the flying to generate dramatic tension. Brantley goes on to attack almost every element of the production including Crowley’s set design, which he calls “oppressive” and “claustrophobic” and his costumes that “suggest a cross between heavy-metal band and refugees and Daryl Hannah in ‘The Clan of the Cave Bear’” (E1). Brantley also attacks the show’s music and book. He calls Phil Collins’ music “treacle” and points out that it is “often impossible to tell who is singing.” David Henry Hwang’s book is dismissed because of its “wise guy tone” and some of the “stupid” lines, especially those delivered by the character Terk, the gorilla who is Tarzan’s best friend and comedic sidekick (E1). In fact, the only element Brantley extolls is Natasha Katz’s lighting, which was the recipient of *Tarzan’s* only Tony Award nomination.

Though Brantley’s review was the least positive, he was not the only critic to dismiss the show. Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* titled his review “Fumble in the Jungle” and though he did praise some of Crowley’s design elements, he states, “As for his skills as a director: Did we mention he designs a heck of a set?” Marks notes the problems with the show’s structure, remarking that nothing happens in Act 1. He also calls the show’s attempts at humor “lame” and accuses the music of “trailing off” just like pop tunes on the radio. He concludes the review by stating,

“Tarzan’ is a production with pretty surfaces that bungees unremarkably into thin air” (Marks). Robert Feldberg of *The Record* calls the show a “chaotic, lightweight, all-around- disappointing mega-musical” (F7). Brendan Lemon of London’s *Financial Times* notes, “The book scenes are often awkward devices to get us from plot point to plot point, and the evening’s chief effect is that of an illustrated songbook” (10).

It must be noted that there were positive reviews of the show. In his review, “*Tarzan Has Winning Look*,” David Rooney of *Variety* praised almost every element of the show, including the scenery, stating, “Crowley’s choice to box in the stage with a single dominating color creates an intimate storybook effect” (29). The review is still mostly positive, while pointing out some of the show’s flaws, like over-miking and lackluster direction. Even Hwang’s book, which was dismissed by most other critics, is given praise. The one area that Rooney attacks is the music. He notes,

The show may be more sophisticated in terms of its design and physical presentation than in its workmanlike musical craftsmanship, but an insipid score has not stopped other Disney tuners from finding popular acceptance in the marketplace. (29)

Though the critics were harsh, the problem for Disney Theatrical Productions was that they were not wrong. The show does have beautiful moments, the jungle flora and fauna during Jane’s first number, “Waiting For the Moment,” is striking, and the shipwreck that opens the show is innovative and visually stunning. The critics were divided on Crowley’s scenic and costuming choices. While this author agrees with Brantley about the set, it fell short of what it could have been; this author disagrees

with him about the ape costumes. They were a perfect melding of human and animal, and stayed true to Crowley's overall vision for the musical.

In addition to critical dismissal, the show did not generate the same audience buy-in that DTP found with its other shows. *Beauty and the Beast* was widely dismissed by critics, but generated excitement with theatregoers and ran for over thirteen years. The same cannot be said for *Tarzan*. There are many opinions as to why the Broadway show failed to connect with audiences. Jeff Lee, Disney Theatrical Productions Staff Associate Director, believes that Broadway audiences were not prepared for the show's aesthetic. He points to the subsequent positive reception of the production in Europe as evidence of a mismatch between the show and American audiences. Lee notes that European audiences are more receptive to spectacle-based productions and that musicals like *Tarzan* are viewed as more akin to circus entertainments than serious drama (Lee). Cerniglia posits that the first ten minutes of the show set up an expectation that was then not met in the rest of the production, therefore, disappointing the audience (May 26). He goes on to discuss the limitations of the Richard Rogers Theatre and how the original vision of an immersive experience had to be cut back to fit in the space. The production did not extend out from the proscenium and envelop the audience in the world of the play; instead it was very much behind the 4th wall, with only a few moments where the action was brought out into the house. Cerniglia felt that the show has to immerse the audience in the theatrical experience.

[The set] has to come out into the audience. The whole theatre has to be a jungle, which we couldn't do in the Richard Rogers Theatre...you either go

whole hog spectacle, almost environmental, or cut it all back, really simply, just behind the fourth wall and do something to engage the audience's imagination. (May 26)

Cerniglia asserts that the original production existed in a place of in between, which didn't resonate with American audiences.

While this author agrees with Cerniglia that the show was not effective in its "in between" incarnation, and that the promise of the opening set up an expectation that was not realized, the problems with the original book and music can't be ignored. Some of these issues were fixed for the licensed version of the show, and some were not. Despite the conflicting opinions on the design elements, there are two key pieces of *Tarzan* that never fell into place: the book and the score.

The show has lofty themes, DTP's Jeff Lee notes, as it asks the question, "what family do you come from in life, the one that loves you, or the one that gave you birth?" (Lee). Juxtaposed against this theme, some of Hwang's dialogue feels trite. Terk tells Young Tarzan, "don't eat that – you know how many apes are lost to under-ripe bananas? It's a silent epidemic!" (Hwang 14). This line, with its sophomoric sense of humor doesn't fit with the aesthetic of the show. Many of Terk's lines, which are attempting to evoke the signature side-kick humor that is a hallmark of Disney animated films, in the context of the stage show, feel stilted. In fact, in the original Broadway production, the character of Terk was a caricature.²⁵

Given Terk's insipid dialogue and antics, the casting of an African American actor, Chester Gregory II, was also problematic because of the historically racist

²⁵ For the licensed version, some of Terk's dialogue was rewritten and the character was reworked.

association of African Americans with monkeys. In the animated film, Disney was very careful about the casting of the apes; in his chapter “Tarzan Swings onto Disney’s Broadway” Cerniglia explains,

The team initially cast a prominent African American actress in the role of Kala, but Dr. Alvin D. Poussaint, the prominent psychiatrist and civil rights veteran who has consulted for *The Cosby Show* on responsible media programming, gently advised against it. Given the problematic association of the African racial type with primates in earlier Disney films, the dark-skinned Gorilla Kala, who raises a white human baby...could not be perceived as a “mammy” character. (45)

Such care, however, was not taken in the casting of the live stage show. In the original cast, both the characters Kala and Terk were played by African American actors.²⁶ It must be noted that Merle Dandridge’s portrayal of Kala, and the way that the character was written was in no way evocative of the “mammy” stereotype. On the other hand, the character of Terk as written and performed, is reminiscent of both the racist depictions of African Americans in early Disney films and the minstrel tradition on which those characters were based. Terk’s dialogue and characterization is not only cheesy and jarring in the context of the rest of the show, it is racist. In speaking about race and *The Lion King* in Michael Kantor’s 2004 documentary, *Broadway: The American Musical*, Julie Taymor says, “it is not about race and it is all about race” (Kantor). She is referring to the fact that when a black child sees a black king on stage, it has meaning. Though *The Lion King* is not a

²⁶ Merle Dandridge is half African American and half Okinawan (“Merle Dandridge About”).

musical about race, race cannot be ignored in the musical. The same is true for *Tarzan*, especially given the existing cultural history of a negative association between apes and African Americans.

In addition to the problems with the dialogue and characterization, every song in the show, with the exception of the Act Two opener, “Trashin’ the Camp,” is a pop tune, and feels like a pop tune. This is not surprising, given Phil Collins’ background as a pop star and pop songwriter, nor does it automatically mean the score will not be effective in a musical. Unfortunately, there were several major mistakes made that led to the critical dismissal of the entirety of the show’s music. First of all, the decision was made to keep Collins’ signature synthesized sound. In fact, in his book *Tarzan the Broadway Adventure*, Michel Lassell informs that Collins never put anything on paper, but instead composed the show on the computer. After the electronic compositions were finished, he would hand them to Conductor Jim Abbott and Associate Conductor Ethan Popp to be transcribed (115). The opening night version of the show had a very synth-heavy sound, and felt more like a pop album on stage than a pop-inspired Broadway score.

Cerniglia remembers, when creating the music for the animated film, Collins attempted to write more traditional, musical theatre style songs that are driven by the plot and sung by the characters, but after failing to do so, he decided to go another direction (“Tarzan Swings” 44). His final “signature style songs” were used in the film to “establish theme and mood” and were not sung by the characters themselves, but rather, served as underscoring with Phil himself singing them as an omnipresent narrative voice (44). For the animated version, this approach was

successful; he won an Oscar for “You’ll Be in My Heart,” which was highly effective in the film. That being said, a great film song is not necessary a great musical theatre song. In the film, only one song, “Trashin’ the Camp,” was sung by the characters, and it is, as has been said previously, the only traditional musical theatre song in the stage show.

What had worked so well for the film would not work on stage. In fact, the opening night version of the show began with an offstage voice singing, “Two Worlds,” and was one of the elements that confused critics and audience members. The opening moment was one of the biggest challenges in the translation of the material from screen-to-stage. Cerniglia explains, “We did one workshop where we had the voice of Tarzan telling us the story from the future after [he’d already] been civilized and could have language” (May 26). Eventually that idea was put to rest, but the idea of a narrative voice remained, which was problematic and led to the disembodied voice in the original production.

There are plenty of musicals that are written in a pop style whose music is integrated into the story and style of the show: *Mama Mia*, *Legally Blonde*, *Hairspray*. The problem was not pop music; many successful musical scores contain pop music. However, Phil Collins was unable to deliver musical theatre songs for the animated film, so when time came to transition the film to the stage, he no doubt had first right of refusal, so he was tasked with trying to do it again. Across all of the reviews of the show, the music is the one element that is consistently criticized. If DTP had partnered Collins with a more experienced musical composer, perhaps the score would have better met the needs of the story.

Because of the failure of the book and score, edits were made to both the post-Broadway script that was produced by DTP overseas, and the version that is available through Musical Theatre International for licensing. The new script is much improved as several major changes were made, including adding the character of Young Terk to be a foil for Young Tarzan. The second act story was streamlined by mostly eliminating the subplot between Jane and Clayton. And the opening of the show (post shipwreck) was reworked to have “You’ll Be In My Heart” sung by both Tarzan’s birth parents and by Kala. Cerniglia jokes,

You can break a fairytale. I’ve learned that. We’ve learned that over time and are always wary that if you put too much into a fairy tale, it starts to break. People start asking questions. If there is a lot of fairy tale premise, you say “yeah that is the premise” and go on from there, but if you start to make it too realistic then the audience starts to ask questions that they wouldn’t ask if they were just in fairytale land, and it can break your fairy tale. (May 26)

In the original production, Disney Theatrical Productions broke *Tarzan*, and while the licensed version is better, *Tarzan* isn’t completely mended. Despite some reworking, the structure is still a problem. The inciting incident, which Cerniglia refers to as the thing that “makes this day different from every other day,” is when Jane enters the jungle. This important event doesn’t occur until the end of Act One, leaving the first and the second act feeling like two completely different stories.

The original Broadway production of *Tarzan* ran for fourteen months²⁷ (486 performances) before closing on July 8, 2007 (“Internet Broadway Database”).

Though running over a year would be considered successful for most shows, *Tarzan* was expensive; mounting the show had cost between 12 and 15 million dollars (Healy). So when it closed, it did not recoup its investment, making it Disney Theatrical Productions’ first financial flop. Cerniglia explains,

Tarzan pleased but failed to consistently thrill audiences, and simply “good” word of mouth wasn’t good enough to sustain an expensive Broadway show. The producers struggled to fill houses...and when summer tourism failed to provide a sales boost, *Tarzan* was forced to end its Broadway run. (“*Tarzan Swings*” 54)

Despite the show’s losing run, DTP felt that it still had potential and had already begun to look elsewhere for possibilities for the show. In spring 2007, DTP opened a version of the production in the Netherlands. The production was staged in collaboration with Joop Van Den Ende’s company, Stage Entertainment, at the Circustheatre in Scheveningen (“*Tarzan Swings*” 54). Van Den Ende felt the Broadway version of the show lacked “the epic nature and feel that this jungle adventure deserved” (qtd. in Healy). The new incarnation extended the spectacle further into the audience and attempted to remedy its lack of epic quality. The show did well in Holland, and ran, sold out, for two years; in fact, it even outsold *The Lion King*, which had set records for ticket sales (Healy 54).

²⁷ It should also be noted that the run of *Tarzan* extended into the Great Recession, when tourist dollars and Broadway ticket sales were precarious. The recession may also have been a factor in the show’s inability to recoup its investment before closing on Broadway.

Tarzan's success in the Netherlands was aided by several factors. First, Phil Collins is wildly popular in Europe, and was a huge draw. Next, a reality television show, "Wie Wurt Tarzan?" (Who is going to be Tarzan?) aired to cast the leading man and was watched by over one million viewers ("Disney's Tarzan to Premiere"). In addition, just moving the show to Europe was an advantage because a show like *Tarzan* (and many of the other Broadway musicals that find success overseas despite failures in the U.S.) is not viewed as serious theatre, it is viewed as its own entity, more akin to the circus than to serious drama (Cerniglia May 26). Because of this sensibility, and because the spectacle was extended and brought out of the fourth wall, *Tarzan* was very well received in Holland. In Cerniglia's chapter, "Tarzan Swings onto Disney's Broadway," Associate Director Jeff Lee notes, *Tarzan* is popular in Europe because of "Phil Collins, Disney and an European aesthetic appreciation of design and presentation of the show not shared by traditional [American] musical-theatre audiences" (55).

Even before *Tarzan* closed in Holland, Stage Entertainment was opening another, even bigger production in Hamburg, Germany, for fall 2008 ("Tarzan Swings" 55). The popular Hamburg production ran through October 2013, when it moved to Stuttgart ("Tarzan in Hamburg"). The show continues to be financially successful, and at the time of this writing, tickets are available through August 2016 ("Disney's Musical TARZAN®"). Cerniglia notes,

In both the Netherlands and in Germany, the government subsidizes the performing arts and at least one legitimate theatre in every city, so citizens grow up going to the state-sponsored theatre, which is often avant-garde. At

the same time, they are open-minded to abstract design by virtue of their artistic exposure, audiences also desire more “entertainment value” in the commercial theatre. Celebrity casting, expanding *Tarzan’s* physical production with 60 percent more flying and 30 percent more “jungle” and more entertaining and explosive choreography by Sergio Trujillo (which replaced Meryl Tankard’s ballet-inspired movement)²⁸ helped to raise the profile of *Tarzan* as top-dollar, high-class entertainment in both Schevingin and Hamburg [and later Stuttgart]. Where “Disney” can be somewhat of an anathema to critics and some audiences on Broadway, the brand is a huge draw in these two overseas markets. (“*Tarzan Swings*” 55)

Tarzan never found the right balance of spectacle, story, and receptive audience in New York, but the show did find that balance in Europe. In fact, another production is in the works for Oberhausen, Germany. Associate Director Jeff Lee explains, “recently we were asked to create another version of the show for about a quarter of what the original one cost” (Lee). For this new production, the plan is to get rid of the majority of the automated flying and to employ an entirely new visual aesthetic, “the vines will be replaced with some silk screen design that has much more to do with foliage and the show will have a depth of field now that it did not have with the green box” (Lee). According to Lee, This new incarnation has the potential for production in Spain, France, and Russia after its initial run in Oberhausen.

²⁸ parentheses in original text.

As for *Tarzan* in the United States, it is a much different story. After closing on Broadway there was no national tour of the show. The set was too big to be easily moved, so the show did not tour. However, currently a tour is still a possibility and DTP is working on making a smaller version of the set (Cerniglia May 26). Perhaps DTP will look to the scaled down European version once it opens. Cerniglia (along with others at DTP) is hopeful that the show will find a new life in the United States: “We are working on it, and there is new interest in it. If we can scale back the cost of our production, then it could tour. And there are markets that want to see it” (Cerniglia May 26).

Though no national tour materialized after the show’s closing, DTP did immediately begin working on the licensed version of the show.²⁹ Creating a script for licensing is not something that Disney Theatrical Productions takes lightly. Every script that DTP puts out is a reflection of the Disney brand and so it has to meet Disney’s standards. Layer in the fact that it will be produced by amateurs and students, the script also has to be “actor-proof” and still be good, even with less robust production values and uneven talent. In the case of the script for *Tarzan*, as mentioned above, DTP first revised it and worked out some of the issues that became apparent in the Broadway run. Unlike many other producers, DTP doesn’t simply type up the script and put it out; every licensed script has pilot productions at handpicked theatres around the country. DTP staff will see the pilot productions and ensure that the script is viable and that all errors are corrected before making it

²⁹ *Tarzan* also never ran in London’s West End, which has been a destination for most of DTP’s Broadway musicals.

widely available. DTP has also created directors' handbooks that are aimed at high school directors, the purpose of which, Cerniglia explains,

Is to give them other ideas and also just permission to do the show and to do their own version of the show, which is what we really emphasize. Here is what we tried, here is what we learned from it, here is what other people have done with it, and here are what are seeming to be best practices: Go for it. So you actually can do *Tarzan*. Because if someone only saw the Broadway production, they would say, "there's no way we can do that." But you can totally do *Tarzan*! You can do the whole show on a jungle gym; you don't even need any flying apparatus. You can do a single point thing, he swings in, that is all you need to do. (May 26)

Through this careful crafting of the script, and extra support for licensees, DTP hopes that any version of *Tarzan* (or any Disney production) will meet the Disney brand standard.

Despite the show's eventual profitability in Europe, DTP's model for producing *Tarzan* was not a successful one. When *Tarzan* failed on Broadway, the impact was not just financial. It was a huge hit to the morale of Disney Theatrical Productions. Cerniglia explains, "we got more careful moving forward. We just try to be prudent as far as spending on development" (May 26). The failure of the show taught DTP a valuable lesson. Just because the company has access to almost unlimited funds for developing a show does not mean it is always wise to spend enormous amounts of money on development. Disney Theatrical Productions is still

a business and still must answer to the Walt Disney Corporation as a whole, and its shareholders.

Despite the financial lessons that were learned through *Tarzan* and the hit that was taken in the DTP offices, the company of *Tarzan* had a show to put on.

Associate Director Jeff Lee remembers,

The New York company [of *Tarzan*] had been through quite a bit of development, we had done multiple workshops and there was always a great deal of family enthusiasm for the story we are telling and how we were telling it. We were confident that we had material that was proven and good. And if we weren't received by the industry, or weren't received by the critical industry, then you kind of have to take that and roll with it. I mean it's not easy, you want to be met with open arms, but we weren't. But it didn't really seem to do damage to what we believed we were doing on stage every night. You know I've been through this quite a bit on Broadway and when you have something that really gets killed and the people know that they are in something that is not really great, then you take it harder, because you go, "well, we knew it." But I think everybody involved with *Tarzan* stood by what we were doing and, therefore, everybody just went out and continued to do the same show, because we believed in it. (Lee)

Though not entirely sure, Cerniglia thinks that with licensing and the international productions, in 2015, *Tarzan* has finally recouped its initial investment, or at the very least, is very close (May 26). So even though the show failed on Broadway, in the long run, the Walt Disney Corporation is still going to

make money from the title. This is uniquely Disney. Few shows can fail on Broadway and still recoup its investment, especially when the show doesn't go on a U.S. national tour and/or play in London. Though the possibility exists because of licensing, earning enough money to offset the Broadway losses in less than ten years takes the power, resources, and brand value of the Walt Disney Corporation.

Theatre is a risky business, and DTP learned a valuable lesson from the Broadway failure of *Tarzan*. Since 2006, no other Disney Theatrical Production has opened in New York without an out-of-town tryout, and the company is far more cautious about the way development money is spent. This caution almost led to Disney's fastest recouping show never making it to Broadway. That show, 2013's *Newsies*, and its unorthodox development process is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Watch What Happens: *Newsies: The Musical*

Sometimes, success happens by accident. This is the case for Disney Theatrical Productions' 2012 surprise hit: *Newsies*. The show ended up on Broadway by chance, and was developed in a new, unconventional, and highly profitable manner. The process of bringing *Newsies* to the stage highlights the flexibility of DTP and shows the resourcefulness and ingenuity of Disney's theatrical team.

When *Newsies* opened in 2012 *The Lion King* was still enjoying a successful run at the Minskoff Theatre and *Mary Poppins* was running at the New Amsterdam Theatre. *Tarzan* (2006) and *The Little Mermaid* (2008) had each had an underwhelming run and both Broadway productions were closed. *Beauty and the Beast* had also closed in 2008 to make way for *The Little Mermaid*. *The Lion King* was in residence in multiple locations around the world as well as on tour both in the US and abroad. *Beauty and the Beast* was still on a licensed US tour and in residence and on tour in multiple places internationally. *Tarzan* opened in Hamburg, Germany in 2008 and was running successfully and DTP was preparing *The Little Mermaid* for a production in Holland and a European tour.

In addition to the productions, there were also several notable changes to the structure of Disney Theatrical Productions. First, the company had swelled to ninety-one employees. Several key positions had also been added, including an Education and Outreach Manager, and a Digital Marketing Coordinator. The Creative and Finance departments had significantly expanded and the Executive division

now included three executives in charge of International engagements and also executives in charge of regional engagements and domestic tours (“Playbill Vault”). These changes reflect not only the growth in the Disney Theatrical catalogue but also the expansion of the company into more cities around the world as well as the addition of education programs in New York, Nashville, Las Vegas, Seattle, and California (Cerniglia May 26).

In an interview with Graham Douglass, Thomas Schumacher (President of Disney Theatrical Productions) mused,

Sometimes you set out on a path and you know exactly where it is going.

Sometimes you set out on a path, thinking it is taking you one place, and you discover something else. And the trick in all of this is being able to figure out when you are on the path, which path you are on. And having enough faith to keep walking, even though you are not sure, knowing you are on a path to something. (qtd. in “Finale”)

Disney Theatrical Productions starting developing the stage musical of *Newsies* on one path, but ended up finishing it on a very different one. The show’s development process was unorthodox and unexpected. In the beginning, there was no plan for a Broadway run and as such, the budget for the show was small. Because of the small amount of money spent on development and the wild, unexpected success on Broadway, *Newsies* recouped its investment faster than any other DTP show (Cerniglia May 26). Disney Theatrical Production’s Kenneth Cerniglia, credits Harvey Fierstein with putting the property on its path to triumph. In *Newsies: The Broadway Adventure*, Fierstein recalls how he came to write the book for *Newsies*,

So, we were sitting around Alan Menken's studio wondering what project we could write together when I spotted the poster for *Newsies* on the wall. "How about a stage version of that?" ...Alan said, "Forget *Newsies*. We slaved over an adaptation. We even gave it two table readings. Disaster. It's never going to work. Forget it." I was hooked. There's nothing I like more than a challenge.

"Let me take a whack at it," I said. (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 43)

Fierstein's outside perspective and experienced hand was exactly what the project needed and his entrance is what set *Newsies* on its course toward a winning Broadway run.

Newsies' journey to the stage, however, started long before Harvey Fierstein got involved. In his interview with Graham Douglass, Thomas Schumacher explains, "We knew that the audience wanted *Newsies* to be performed [on stage] because if you went to YouTube [or] Facebook, people were endlessly performing numbers from the film *Newsies*" ("Finale"). In an interview with *Playbill's* Robert Simonson, Schumacher also notes,

What happened is we do surveys with lots of smaller theatres, asking, "What do we have in our catalogue that you would like to see?" And *Newsies* kept popping up. Over and over people would tell me, "Nobody cares about *Newsies*." But whenever I would go speak at colleges, some kid would say, "When are you doing *Newsies* on stage?" And then Alan Menken told me that when he went to colleges to speak they always said, "When are you doing *Newsies*?" (qtd. in Simonson)

Curiously, the love that these college kids had for *Newsies* sprang from the film, which premiered in 1992 and was a box office disaster. The film cost an estimated \$15 million to make and only grossed \$2.8 million (“*Newsies* (1992)”). *Newsies* was nominated for five Golden Raspberry Awards (Razzie) and won the Razzie for Worst Song for “High Times, Hard Times,” which never made it to the stage (“*Newsies* (1992)”). In her review, “They Sing, They Dance, They Go on Strike,” Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* asserts the film’s “real trouble lies in its joyless, pointless execution.” She goes on to state, “*Newsies*’ is a long, halfhearted romp through what is made to seem a not terribly compelling chapter in New York City’s history.” She calls the film “dull” and “contrived” and mocks its “fairy-tail view of labor relations” (“They Sing, They Dance”).

In his review, “*Newsies*: Striking Up the Band,” Michael Wilmington of the *Los Angeles Times* also recognized the film’s flaws, calling the happy ending “a commercial prerequisite” and noting that the film’s “various elements seem to clash.” In contrast to Maslin, however, Wilmington admits that he is fond of the film despite its flaws. He begins his review by stating, “Certain movies engage your affections so strongly that, even if they start to fall apart, you tend to keep rooting for them. That’s pretty much the case with ‘*Newsies*’” (Wilmington). Wilmington’s affection for the film despite its flaws mirrored the reaction that thousands of kids would have to the film after it left movie theatres.

Despite the film’s poor performance at the box office, and its critical panning, due to its persistent presence on The Disney Channel, and its availability on home video, *Newsies* was able to find its audience. For many children who grew up in the

late 1990s and early 2000s, *Newsies* was an important fixture in their childhood. Noni White, the film's co-screenwriter reports, "Whenever Bob [Tzudiker] and I are asked to speak at colleges, people tell us that we wrote their favorite movie. The people that *Newsies* reached, it touched deeply (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 27). In the book, *Newsies: Stories of the Unlikely Hit*, Alan Menken notes, "A generation of kids fell in love with this story and the songs that these newsboys sang. They watched it on video. They watched it on TV. They performed it at their schools and their camps, crafting scripts out of the movie dialogue and the songs" (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 42). It was these fans, lovingly known as "fansies" who ultimately convinced DTP to go ahead and develop a live version of *Newsies*. There was a market for a stage version of the film and DTP wanted to capitalize on the demand.

Though the cult status of the film meant a built in market for a stage show, *Newsies* was still a gamble. In addition to the fact that the story was simplistic and some of the music and lyrics were less than stellar, the film was also far different than any other film successfully adapted by Disney Theatrical Productions. *Newsies* was a historical story with a live, human cast, whereas, all of DTP's previous adaptations were from Disney's hit animated features. Though a musical, *Newsies* is realistic. It features real people (though highly fictionalized) and is about an actual, historical event: the newsboys' strike of 1899. Other than *Aida*, whose source material was outside the Disney catalogue, on Broadway, DTP had previously only worked in the genre of fantasy drawn from animated features. However, the decision to turn the film into a stage production did come on the heels of the well received of the stage adaptation of *High School Musical*, another Disney live-action

feature. Like *High School Musical*, *Newsies* was not destined for Broadway, so the question of its commercial viability rested on educational and regional theatres, rather than the Great White Way.

In 2006, before a stage version of *Newsies* was a reality, Disney Theatrical Productions developed a stage version of *High School Musical* for licensing. The film version of *High School Musical*, which was also directed by *Newsies*' Kenny Ortega, broke several television and album sales records ("Camp' Site"). Because of the title's wild popularity, the stage show was developed by DTP with the intent, just like *Newsies*, to be licensed to high schools and amateur groups. The first production license for *High School Musical* was granted to Stagedoor Manor, the summer theatre camp made famous by the 2003 cult movie hit, *Camp* ("Camp' Site"). After this pilot production, the show launched a professional, national tour in June 2007 ("National Tour"). Directed by Jeff Calhoun, who would go on to direct *Newsies* at the Paper Mill Playhouse and on Broadway, the tour reached across the United States capitalizing on the title's popularity and launching the new stage adaptation. DTP did consider launching the tour of *High School Musical* with a limited Broadway engagement, however, Cerniglia informs, "we ultimately decided, just because we were living in an era of getting slammed by critics, it may be too honest a show to bring in, and then just get slammed" (May 26). Though having a "Broadway stamp" on the property might have helped the licensing business, terrible reviews, an unfortunate reality for DTP in 2007, would not. So the decision was made to steer clear of Times Square and build *High School Musical's* momentum on the road.

The original plan for *Newsies* was to develop the title for licensing in the same way that DTP developed the stage adaptation of *High School Musical*, which never had a Broadway run, but was instead made immediately available for performance by professional and amateur companies. Cerniglia informs,

The real intention was to develop [*Newsies*] for high schools. Since we started our licensing business, the most highly requested show was *Newsies*. There had been this whole cult following for *Newsies* that had developed because of replay on the Disney channel and [availability on] VHS. People were “*Newsies* crazy.” A lot of people came to musicals because of *Newsies*, so we said, “alright we are going to do something with this.” But we went back and looked at the movie and it’s got problems. So we came back and said, “we are going to try and figure this out.” (May 26)

DTP made several attempts at adapting the script. First, Noni White and Bob Tzudiker, the screenwriters from the film, were brought in to help transition the story from screen-to-stage. Cerniglia posits, “they were having trouble cracking it because they had too much invested in it over time” (May 26). Music supervisor Michael Koserin notes, “The wonderfully talented scriptwriters had never written for musical theatre, which is a tremendously different medium requiring a different skill set... Everyone agreed that *Newsies* was not working as a stage show and the idea was shelved” (qtd. in Cerniglia “Stories” 43).

It was at this time that Harvey Fierstein happened to notice the poster in Alan Menken’s studio, and joined the team. Alan Menken had written the music for the film and though his music would be used in the stage adaptation, he was told

that he wouldn't need to do any additional work for the new version. Nevertheless, Menken insisted that he and the film's lyricist, Jack Feldman, be involved with the adaptation and allowed to refine their work. So the writing team, Menken, Feldman, and Fierstein, got to work, and despite the show's destination, licensing for high schools and regional theatres, the team was full of Broadway heavy hitters.

At the time he was working on *Newsies*, Alan Menken was a Disney veteran with several Broadway shows and Hollywood films to his credit. Menken's journey to Disney began at a young age. He always aspired to be a composer, partly because of his love of music and partly because of the fact that his ADHD made other academic pursuits difficult. As a young musician he had a flair for improvisation and as a teenager, a love for rock and roll. Menken attended New York University where he ended up graduating with a degree in Musicology in 1971 ("Biography"). While at NYU, Menken penned a musical for NYU's Hall of Fame Players. More importantly, at the urging of his parents, he applied for and was admitted to the BMI Musical Theatre Workshop where he came into contact with a network of people that would help and support him launch his career ("Biography").

Menken wrote music and lyrics for many musicals, but his first major success came in the spring of 1982 when a musical written in tandem with Howard Ashman took Off-Broadway by storm. *Little Shop of Horrors* ran for five years at the Orpheum Theatre breaking box office records. In 1988, Ashman called Menken about collaborating on a new Disney animated feature: *The Little Mermaid*. Menken agreed and began working with Ashman on the film. *Mermaid* was also the first film score that Menken had ever composed. *Mermaid* was a huge hit, cementing Menken's

place as a Disney composer. He and Ashman would go on to write two more animated films together, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*. Though Ashman died before the release of either film, the legacy of their partnership lives on through the incredible films and later stage adaptations of their animated musicals (as well as *Little Shop*, which finally had a Broadway run in 2003).

When Disney decided to bring *Beauty and the Beast* to the Broadway stage, it was only natural that Menken would be brought in to transfer the work from the screen to the stage. With the triumph of *Beauty* and a Tony nomination for Best Score, Menken finally fulfilled his dream of becoming a successful Broadway composer. After *Beauty*, Menken would compose and/or adapt several other Broadway musicals including: *Sister Act*, *Leap of Faith*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and of course, *Newsies*.

Before working on the film *Newsies*, lyricist Jack Feldman was best known for writing “Copacabana” for Barry Manilow, for which he won a Grammy (“Jack Feldman”). When the film was being written, Alan Menken had just lost his long-time writing partner, Howard Ashman, to AIDS, Feldman was brought in to work with him and write the film’s lyrics. It was the first and last time that the two would work together (other than their reunion to rework the music for the stage version), perhaps because of the film’s poor reception.

The third member of the team, Harvey Fierstein, is an accomplished film and theatre performer and writer. His Broadway writing credits include, *Torch Song Trilogy*, *La Cage aux Folles*, *A Catered Affair*, *Kinky Boots*, and *Casa Valentina*. Prior to *Newsies*, he won two Tony Awards as a writer and one as a performer. In addition,

he was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical for *Newsies* in 2012, Best Book of a Musical for *Kinky Boots* in 2013, and Best Play for *Casa Valentina* in 2014. Clearly, the writing team for *Newsies* was on par with any other Broadway offering, however, the path was never aimed at Broadway, but to high school, community, and regional theatres.

Fierstein had many ideas about how to fix the script so it could successfully be adapted to the stage. The two biggest changes he made were: one, change the newspaper writer, played by Bill Pullman in the film, to a woman who would become the main character's (Jack Kelly) love interest. And two, start the show with its best known and best loved song, "Santa Fe" (Cerniglia "Stories" 44). The first version of the stage script had a new, "downbeat" opening song that didn't capture the hopefulness of the story or of its main character. That song was one of the reasons that the earlier version of the script had not worked. By choosing to open the show hopefully ("Santa Fe"), Fierstein set the appropriate tone for the musical.

In addition to Fierstein's changes, Menken and Feldman were given a rare opportunity to revisit the old score. Feldman notes,

We were getting an almost unheard-of opportunity for a do-over. When Alan and I wrote the score for the movie...short deadlines and the prerecording of songs before filming left little time for rewrites. I was sure every lyric could have been better, but at a certain point I knew that ship had sailed...I grabbed the chance to go back and make improvements in any number of areas: clarity, storytelling, character, gracefulness, etc...Professionally speaking, it

was very satisfying to make my work better. (qtd. in Cerniglia “Stories” 44-45)

Menken and Feldman were able to take the much-loved score and improve it. For example, in the song “Carrying the Banner,” the verse from the film read: “We need a good assassination/We need an earthquake or a war!/How ‘bout a crooked politician?/Hey, stupid, that ain’t news no more!” For the musical, it was changed to: “You wanna sell the next edition?/ Give us a earthquake or a war!/ How ‘bout a crooked politician?/ Ya nitwit, that ain’t news no more!” (44). Feldman explains the edits,

The point of those lines is to help define character by emphasizing the kids’ street smarts and cynicism. I don’t remember why I didn’t rhyme the word “politician” back then, because rhyming a word helps it stand out, and “crooked politician” is what sets up the next line. Finding a replacement line that rhymed wasn’t hard. There was nothing that rhymed with “an earthquake” but I like “a earthquake” better because it sounds wrong in the right way: it’s unexpected without sacrificing clarity, and it tells us something about the kids’ social class. And “Ya nitwit” is just technically easier to sing than “Hey, stupid.” (qtd. in Cerniglia “Stories” 44)

Some of Feldman’s edits were met with skepticism. Feldman indicates that the deletion of a troublesome verse in “Carrying the Banner” caused a huge uproar amongst some of the more devoted “fansies” on social media. Feldman removed the verse because he found it “extraneous, misleading, and overwrought” (Cerniglia “Stories” 45). Aware of their outrage, in *Newsies: Stories of the Unlikely Broadway*

Hit, Feldman implores, “Guys, please forgive me and take comfort in knowing that it will always be there on the soundtrack, haunting me until the day I die” (qtd. in Cerniglia “Stories”45). The edits and revisions to the music and lyrics certainly paid off as *Newsies* won the 2012 Tony Award for Best Score and the 2012 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music (“Internet Broadway Database”).

In 2010, with the script and score ready for a test, the new version of *Newsies* was workshopped. Then, in February 2011, it was announced that the regional premiere of *Newsies* would open the 2011-2012 season at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey (“Extra! Extra!”). The plan was to pilot the show in New Jersey to make sure that it worked and to perhaps snag some publicity in the process. Cerniglia notes,

We didn’t really know [if it would work] for sure until we tried, so we said, “lets do a pilot production, lets hire Broadway caliber people, do it right, don’t spend any money on it, but let’s just see how it goes.” Paper Mill out in New Jersey put in some money, we put in some money, not a lot, because again, this wasn’t going to come to Broadway and be a big hit and recoup its investment in a year and start to make a profit. We were like, “we can’t spend that much money on it because licensing is a much longer recoup period and high schools doing it is not going to give these huge royalty checks.” We just wanted to make a good show; that was totally the intention. (May 26)

Cerniglia alludes to the financial pressure felt by DTP in developing *Newsies*, or any other show, for licensing. A balance had to be struck between spending the necessary funds to ensure a quality product that was up to Disney’s stringent brand

standards, and not spending so much money that it would take an inordinate amount of time to recoup. *Newsies* also came at a time when DTP had to be exceptionally careful, as its last two Broadway offerings were not financially successful. 2006's *Tarzan* and 2008's *The Little Mermaid* both lost money while on Broadway and neither production has had a Disney-produced U.S. tour.³⁰ As was pointed out in the previous chapter, according to Cerniglia, after the failure of *Tarzan*, DTP became more careful with how much money was spent on development (May 26). These two financial failures certainly tightened the purse strings for any subsequent Disney Theatrical projects. Add to that the failure of the original source material for *Newsies*, it is no surprise that DTP was extremely careful.

In order to produce the pilot production, Paper Mill brought in Broadway talent to lead the team. Jeff Calhoun, who had worked as a director and choreographer on Broadway since the 1980s was brought in to direct the show, and Christopher Gattelli, another Broadway veteran, was brought in to choreograph. In addition, Broadway caliber performers were cast to bring the characters to life on stage. This co-production between DTP and Paper Mill was never intended to last longer than its New Jersey run, however, in the development process, a decision was made that would change the course of *Newsies'* future on stage. In *Newsies: Stories of the Unlikely Broadway Hit*, Associate Producer and Vice President of Production for Disney Theatrical Productions Anne Quart recounts,

³⁰ At the time of this writing, *The Little Mermaid* is on a U.S. tour produced by Houston theatre company, Theatre Under the Stars. However, that tour is not directly affiliated with Disney Theatrical Productions other than being licensed by DTP.

I remember very clearly standing in the lobby of the 5th Avenue [Theatre] on the phone with Paper Mill's Mimi Intagliata and Mark Hoebee, grappling with the budget: they had this much money, and we had this much money but Tobin [Ost]'s inspired set design which Tom [Schumacher] had fallen in love with, was going to cost half a million dollars more than we had budgeted to build...So we were faced with...com[ing] up with something vastly cheaper...or figuring out a way to make this design viable. With three big towers that come downstage and rotate to create various atmospheres, you couldn't just go to one tower—it's not quite the same. There was just no way to make cuts without bastardizing everything they came up with. So I thought, "Well, what if we built it so it could tour?" (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 59)

The team decided to go with Quart's idea, knowing that the set could be rented out with the license as a package to the bigger theatres that would inevitably produce the show. Quart was optimistic that the investment would be paid back quickly with a few rentals. So an additional quarter of a million dollars was spent on the set to allow for Tobin Ost's ingenious moving tower design to become a reality. Though the team did not know it at the time, creating a mobile set that could be loaded in at almost any theatre quickly would heavily influence the decision to bring the show to Broadway the next year.

Success in New Jersey was not guaranteed. Sure, DTP was optimistic that the Millennials who had grown up with the film would jump at the chance to see it on

stage, but the real question was: would the property have a wider appeal? Mark Hoebee, Paper Mill's Artistic Director, points out,

The real key for me was putting the show in front of our subscribers, whose median age was 62. Most of these people had no idea even what *Newsies* was. At our first Thursday matinee, which is our heavily subscribed senior audience, I thought, "This is going to be a test." When they stood up at the end and loved it, it was a real eye opener, a huge turning point in the potential of this musical. (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 87)

Clearly, *Newsies* had an appeal that extended beyond the "fansies." Its story and characters spoke across multiple generations, which was necessary to sustain a Broadway run. Danny Troob, who did the orchestrations for the stage version of *Newsies*, and also arranged and conducted the music for the original film, pinpoints one possible reason for the show's popularity. He explains, "Our story was in sync with the Occupy Wall Street movement" (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 87). The story of a bunch of poor newsboys (the 99%) standing up to the corrupt owners of New York's newspapers (the 1%) could not have come at a more opportune moment. On September 17, 2011, just two days after *Newsies* opened at the Paper Mill Playhouse, a couple hundred protestors marched into Liberty Square in Lower Manhattan protesting the widening gap between the rich and the poor ("Revolution Number 99"). The movement quickly spread to over 100 cities in the United States and 1,500 cities across the globe ("About Us"). As news coverage of the Occupy Movement grew, the story and themes of *Newsies* seemed more and more relevant, despite its historic setting. *Newsies* is fundamentally an underdog story, of "David" going up

against “Goliath” and triumphing. In the wake of the Great Recession, Americans were increasingly receptive to a story where the little guy wins.

In his September 28, 2011, *New York Times* review, “Newsboy Strike? Sing All About It,” David Rooney sums up the connection between the Paper Mill production and 2011 culture,

“Newsies” has a stirring, old school sincerity that is hard to resist. In its call to arms, its refusal to back down to big business, its fight for basic human dignity and its skepticism toward politics, the show also has themes that resonate in our new depression. It’s not Clifford Odets, but an adorable pro-union, up-with-the-downtrodden musical seems worth singing about. (C5)

Newsies was closely tied to the Zeitgeist of late 2011, which may account for some of its success, however, the Paper Mill production of the show was also very good. Rooney begins his review by stating,

With its spring-loaded backflips, airborne spins, rambunctious kicks and balletic pivots, the athletic ensemble in “Newsies the Musical” ...puts up a persuasive struggle against corporate greed. But the irrepressible physicality of that scrappy band of ragamuffins is just part of what turns this canny stage transformation of Disney’s 1992 big-screen misfire into a crowd pleaser. (C5)

In the review, Rooney admits he doesn’t like the film and goes on to praise many aspects of the stage adaptation. He lauds Menken and Feldman’s music and lyrics, calling them “buoyant” and “rousing.” He also applauds the choreography and direction, and notes the strong cast. He continues his review, stating, *Newsies* “slathers on the sentiment. But it does so in an honorable Disney tradition that

connects with the embattled kid in all of us” (C5). The show may be solidly Disney, with its optimistic characters and happy, deus ex machina ending, but the show is good, and Rooney makes sure to point that out.

Variety's Michael Sommers was also impressed with the show. He notes, “Plenty of frisky dancing, several stirring anthems and an exuberant production staged by Jeff Calhoun with a handsome company and impressive visuals score a winner for Paper Mill Playhouse” (Sommers). However, Sommers also recognizes that the show “may be too earnest for Broadway circulation”(Sommers). In addition, he posits “this lusty saga of striking newsboys in yesteryear Gotham should appeal to twenty- and thirtysomethings who teethed on the DVD release as well as the older crowd who enjoy nicely traditional musicals” (Sommers). While his assessment of the appeal of the show was correct, his assertion that the show was “too earnest for Broadway” was not. The ability of *Newsies* to draw in audiences and its striking connection to the 2011 American social and political climate outweighed its old-fashioned earnestness. Whereas *High School Musical* was not brought to Broadway because of its honesty, for *Newsies*, that same sincerity was a selling point.

The positive response to the show, both from the critics and from theatregoers, got DTP thinking about a future for the show other than just licensing. Disney Theatricals toyed with the idea of sending it on tour immediately, but the Nederlander Organization informed DTP that the Nederlander Theatre on 41st Street was not occupied and suggested that a limited run of *Newsies* could be housed there (Cerniglia May 26). DTP had never before done a limited Broadway run.

Though one was considered for *High School Musical*, it was ultimately decided against for fear of what the critics would say. In contrast, the *Newsies* reviews were already positive and word of mouth about the quality and caliber of the show was spreading.

In addition to the positive press, the other factor that led to the decision to go ahead and open the show on Broadway was the set. Because DTP had already spent extra money on it and it was moveable, there was little added cost to putting the set up at the Nederlander Theatre. This would allow a short rehearsal and load-in process before it could open, keeping costs down. Cerniglia notes, “it ended up being, ‘spend this much more money to bring it to Broadway’ and we were like, ‘well, we won’t recoup it on Broadway, but maybe eventually it will help us with more people knowing about it’” (May 26).

The team at DTP was not prepared for what would happen next. The initial run was scheduled to be limited, twelve weeks. But almost as soon as they went on sale, the tickets sold out. The run was extended an additional ten weeks, which also quickly sold out (Cerniglia May 26). DTP had no intention or expectation of the show remaining on Broadway long enough to recoup the initial investment, the hope was that the time on Broadway, however long, would fuel the property moving forward and help it to recoup its investment sooner rather than later. But clearly, the demand for the show extended beyond a limited run. So DTP listened to the ticket sales, and the growing social media momentum, and decided to let it run its course. Cerniglia explains,

[We] went to the decision, you know, “well maybe we can open run it and just see” and it ended up being our quickest recouping show, because it was cheaper. We had a small house, the ticket [inventory] was tight initially, [so] we could actually sell it. Then we recouped and the attitude was, “well, people love it,” there was a lot of affection for it. We were developing marketing around social media; it’s a fan-fueled thing. And then other people were like, “it got eight Tony nominations, it won for Best Score, oh, it’s legitimized all of a sudden.” [It wasn’t] just this one off thing, it’s a real Broadway show! So then, we kept it going as long as we could. What was supposed to be 100 performances ended up being 1005. (May 26)

Newsies officially opened on Broadway on March 29, 2012, and ran until August 24, 2014. Despite the extended run, and the fact that *Newsies* defied all odds and won at the box office, DTP was still holding its breath for the official Broadway review from the *New York Times*’ Ben Brantley who had negatively reviewed several Disney properties in the past, including *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*. His review of the award winning, long running, *The Lion King* was luke-warm at best. In fact, in the lead up to *Newsies*’ opening, in his article, “Good Newsies for Disney” Michael Riedel of the *New York Post* points out, “One hurdle might be Ben Brantley, who’s reviewing the Broadway transfer. He didn’t like “The Lion King,” so I can’t imagine he’ll fall under the spell of those jaunty little newspaper boys.” However, Brantley’s review for *Newsies*, though not without criticism, was mostly positive. He did point out that the show lacked nuance and that it was trading on the street urchin stock character made popular on the musical stage by *Annie* and *Oliver!* He also mentions

that perhaps the cast is a bit too old and the dance numbers are a bit too long, and that the ending is contrived. However, he doesn't say the show is bad, or that any element of the show is not worthy of Broadway. Cerniglia asserts that Brantley "just didn't get it" but despite his lack of enthusiasm for the show, he still saw its merits (May 26). In fact, Brantley concludes his review, "Urchins with Punctuation," with high praise for Alan Menken and Jack Feldman; he commends Kara Lindsey for her portrayal of Katherine:

She also has the show's best and most atypical song. It's called "Watch What Happens." And it is about, of all things, writer's block, and trying to find the words to capture momentous events. Mr. Feldman's lyrics are spot-on, while the melody reminds us just how charming a composer Mr. Menken...can be.

(C1)

In addition to Brantley's surprisingly positive review in *The New York Times*, Thom Geier of *Entertainment Weekly* also praised the show, starting his review for ew.com by declaring, "Disney has produced a winning, high-energy musical for family audiences" (Geier). His review praises all aspects of the show, especially the choreography and the ensemble. In her review, "Striking Ensemble is on Tap" Elizabeth Vincentelli of the *New York Post* praises leading man Jeremy Jordan, noting he "hits a good balance of sexiness and humor, and he has a velvety singing voice." She also praises the ensemble, the choreography and shares; "this family-friendly production makes it clear that fighting for your rights is a worthy cause." Steven Suskin of *Variety* begins his review bluntly, noting, "The hallmarks of Disney on Broadway—lavishly expensive sets and costumes, [and] state of the art

automation...are thoroughly and gratifyingly absent in 'Newsies,' the corker of a family musical from the 'Mouse House.'" He posits *Newsies* is Alan Menken's "best-sounding show since *Beauty and the Beast*," and calls Gattelli's choreography "the most exuberant dancing currently on the Rialto." Clearly, the show wholeheartedly won over the critics in a way that previous DTP properties had failed to do.

The critical praise for *Newsies* was new territory for Disney Theatrical Productions. The show marked the first time that the majority of reviews skewed positive and that a Disney branded Broadway show was met with critical enthusiasm across the board. Even *The Lion King* had its detractors when it first premiered. There are several factors that could account for this critical change of heart. First, the show's budget. In comparison to the previous musicals DTP produced on Broadway, the budget for *Newsies* was tiny. The show did not have the lavish production values and expensive magic of the company's previous efforts. *Newsies* is a musical that relies on excellent performers to tell a compelling story that is enhanced by some really smart technical choices. Next, the show came to Broadway having already been legitimized and positively reviewed by the major papers. *Newsies'* Paper Mill review in the *New York Times* was glowing, so it opened the door for other critics to enjoy the show. In fact, if Brantley had slammed it after Rooney praised it, his criticism might have been dismissed. Lastly, *Newsies* came after two big budget DTP musicals had failed on Broadway. Prior to *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*, all of the company's shows were profitable, a fact that may have enlarged the target on DTP's back. After two shows in a row failed, the Broadway

community may have felt that Disney Theatricals could now join the “club,” since the company had survived several flops.

In addition to positive reviews, *Newsies* earned eight Tony nominations, including Best Musical, and won Tony Awards for Best Choreography and Best Original Score.³¹ The praise did not stop at the Tony’s; the Internet was buzzing with excitement and praise for the show. Andrew Flatt, Senior Vice President of Marketing for DTP notes, “The voice of these spirited and loyal *Newsies* ambassadors on social media became a key factor in raising awareness around the production” (qtd. in Cerniglia “Stories” 118). Brian Dockett, DTP’s Vice President of Sales continues, “The interesting thing was all the die-hard fans who came out of the woodwork and were the ones who told us that there was more to *Newsies* than just us. They helped build that whole base of folks who now enjoy the show every day” (qtd. in Cerniglia “Stories” 119). Here Dockett recognizes the fact that the people who worked on *Newsies* at DTP and Walt Disney Studios were not the only people to have affection for the film and to buy in to its message. *Newsies*’ devoted fans became the marketing team for the show, shouting on social media about the merits of the property and generating an incredible amount of buzz that translated into box office momentum.

As the fans of the film were Millennials who were comfortable with social media, *Newsies* exploded all over the Internet. The first video that was posted to the Disney on Broadway YouTube channel has over 135,000 views, and the video of the

³¹ The latter win is ironic, considering that Menken and Feldman won the Golden Raspberry Award in 1992 for Worst Song, and then won a Tony for Best Score for the same property (albeit one with new songs).

cast's first day at the Nederlander Theatre has over 120,000 views. The wide reach of social media enabled the show to communicate with fans all over the world. In a YouTube video posted on March 26, 2012, several cast members celebrate 100,000 Facebook fans (*Disney's Newsies on Broadway Celebrates*). David Schrader, DTP's Executive Vice President and Managing Director was baffled when "At one point, 'Newsies Broadway' was trending on Yahoo. To be relevant at that level means that many people are suddenly talking about a stage show—a lot!" (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 120). In addition, on June 2, 2012, *Newsies* trended on Twitter for the show's first "live chat." DTP's Digital Marketing and Social Media Manager, Greg V. Josken notes, "We received over 800 mentions generating over two million possible impressions on Twitter"³² ("Re: Social Media Data").

For *Newsies*, DTP took a new approach to digital marketing. First of all, DTP hired a digital media coordinator for the first time in summer 2011, right before *Newsies* had its run at the Paper Mill, recognizing the growing potential of digital media advertising. That coordinator (who is now manager), Greg V. Josken explains,

[DTP] used video content in a new way for us. We relied very heavily on a *Newsies* cast member Andrew Keenan-Bolger, who played Crutchie, to actually create video content for us on a regular basis...Andrew produces a web series on his own, he's constantly making his own video content, and so having a unique talent like that in the show to capture moments that we at the time weren't able to capture on our own, it did a few things: one, it just caught the authenticity of the cast members and the energy of the show in a

³² This information was obtained from Crimson Hexagon, the tool DTP uses to monitor its social media.

very, very unique way, that really showcased the cast and the relationship that existed among them... so it didn't feel like a talking head interview, it truly felt like you were backstage with the cast and you got to know their personalities and the antics that happened backstage, in a way that was very true to the show. (Dec 4)

In addition to the new approach to video content, Josken also notes, "we hit an audience that was very, very familiar with social media, so we just started making content that enabled them to share our message" (Dec 4). DTP's marketing team started the practice of creating what the company refers to as "bumpers" which are memes that feature show quotes paired with production images. These easily sharable digital mini-posters allowed DTP to harness the social media networks of the "fansies" to promote the show (Dec 4). The buzz that was generated by the fansies on the Internet also made *Newsies* a news story. Schrader notes, even if the media wasn't interested in the show itself, they were certainly interested in the "phenomenon that it was, which helped [the show] cross over to a regular Broadway audience" (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 120).

The marketing team at Disney Theatrical Productions had never sold a show like *Newsies* before, and didn't know what to expect, but the huge outpouring of support and interest on social media helped to fuel the show past its initial run. Dockett remembers thinking, "Let's let it run and the fans will tell us when they've had enough" (qtd. in Cerniglia "Stories" 119). In fact, sales remained strong through the entire run of the show, Cerniglia points out that the show didn't close on Broadway because of a lack of ticket sales, but after two and a half years it was

closed to try and launch the tour with the same momentum that the show had on Broadway (May 26). The tour was met with as much enthusiasm as the Broadway incarnation, and according to Cerniglia, the tour recouped its investment in May 2015, less than a year after it began (May 26).

Newsies' victory on Broadway echoes the journey of its own characters. No one believed that a bunch of scrappy newsboys could take down a newspaper empire, just as no one ever imagined that the stage version of a terrible, Razzie Award winning, movie musical from the early 1990s would triumph on Broadway. David Schrader muses,

[*Newsies*] totally is “The Little Engine That Could”—one of those things that nobody can reverse engineer that would make that work. Step-by step, *Newsies* just sort of confounded and surprised us. You can’t plan for that to happen. And it echoes what happens in the musical. A group of people got together and spread the word—now in a 21st-Century way—and got people excited about something. Nobody told them they had to do it. It was just crowd sourcing, “What would I like to see on Broadway?” And suddenly, there it is! (qtd. in Cerniglia “Stories” 121)

Disney Theatrical Productions didn’t set *Newsies* on a path to Broadway from the beginning, but through a series of unplanned and unexpected events, the show landed on Broadway and leapt into the hearts of people of all ages all across the country. The model for producing the show probably could not be duplicated, but its artistic and financial success proves that DTP can win at more than just adapting animated films for the stage. *Newsies* also opened up new digital marketing methods

for DTP. After the success of the cast created content, every Disney Theatrical show now has a cast member who is designated its “Social Media Captain.” This cast member is in charge of documenting the rehearsal and performance process, and posting photos and video directly to the Disney Theatrical Instagram account (Josken Dec 4). DTP’s Social Media and Digital Marketing Manager Greg V. Josken informs,

We know that the kind of content that exists on Instagram [needs to be] authentic and real. We [can’t] rely just on production photos. As a marketer, I can never go into a backstage setting and capture the kind of content that a cast member could because I have a different relationship with those people... We want to continue to find ways to bring people into our productions in a very real way that makes them feel part of the cast as opposed to “I am just giving you another sales message as a marketer,” that’s not what it’s about, it about creating a relationship with our fans, that [is something that] really only our cast members can do. (Dec 4)

At the time of this writing, the national tour of *Newsies* is in its second year, and the biggest complaint about the show is that the high schools for which the show was developed still haven’t had the chance to produce it as the performance rights have yet to be released. *Newsies* proves that as the character Katherine sings in the rousing number, “Watch What Happens,”

It’s David and Goliath do or die,

The fight is on and I can’t watch what happens.

But all I know is nothing happens if you just give in,

It can't be any worse than how it's been.

And it just so happens that we just might win,

So whatever happens, let's begin! (Feldman)

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: Part of Our World

Disney Theatrical Production is writing a new mythology on Broadway. With the financial backing of the Walt Disney Corporation, DTP is able to function as a sole producer, owning all the risk and reaping all the rewards, despite the rising costs of producing large-scale productions on Broadway. Akin to the celebrated producers of bygone eras, like David Merrick, Joseph Papp, and Saint Subber, DTP stands alone. As the cost of producing a show on Broadway increases, the sole producer, a producer who backs a show without any partners, has become increasingly rare and the number of people necessary to get a show from idea to fruition continues to climb. The myth of the Broadway producer, immortalized and lampooned on Broadway in the *The Producers* (2001), is a thing of the past. Though a producer like Cameron Mackintosh is recognized as an individual producer, in reality he is the figurehead of a corporation, Cameron Mackintosh Ltd., of which he is the chairman. Additionally, producers like Kevin McCollum, who helms a much smaller production company, Alchemation, must partner with dozens of other producers to mount a show.

In addition, unlike many producers, DTP continues to thrive despite changes in personnel and leadership. When Peter Schneider, the first President of Disney Theatrical Productions, left DTP in 1999 to run the studio division of the Walt Disney Corporation, the company did not fold, in fact, it continued to grow and to succeed. The staff at DTP is constantly changing, yet the company has continuity and is able to consistently produce a high quality product that remains true to the

Disney brand promise. Disney Theatrical Productions must adhere to the tenets of the Disney brand and produce high quality theatre that is suitable for children and families, and create products that seamlessly fit into the Disney portfolio. This is how DTP is able to offer a consistent product despite the changes in leadership and personnel. By keeping the Disneyess of its productions at the forefront, no matter the approach to the development of each show, or who works on each show, the final product always comes from a singular point of view, the Disney point of view.

Disney Theatrical Productions has created a new model of Broadway Producer. Modern demands have required most established major producers and productions companies to incorporate, making them corporations, and the last twenty-five years has seen an influx of non-theatrical corporations investing on Broadway, making DTP one of many corporate Broadway producers. Still, no other producer or production company is structured like DTP with the backing of a publicly traded corporation. While the Walt Disney Corporation is not the first non-theatrical corporation to produce shows on Broadway, Disney is the first to set up a profitable, comprehensive theatre company, organized to produce original productions and screen-to-stage adaptations.

Because of the connection to the Walt Disney Corporation, DTP, though autonomous, must still ensure that every decision that is made about every production not only serves Disney Theatricals, but also serves the Walt Disney Corporation. This is evidenced in the journey of Mary Zimmerman's production of *The Jungle Book* (2013). When the show played at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, it was very well received. The show is innovative and beautiful, but it has not come

to Broadway for two reasons: One, because like *Newsies*, it is not a typical Disney musical, which makes it risky to mount on Broadway, but more importantly, an expensive, live action version of the story is being released on April 15, 2016. The film is far more important to the Walt Disney Corporation than the musical. Therefore, despite the success of the Chicago production, the show in its entirety is in storage. Storing an entire production is not an inexpensive endeavor either, and the vast resources of the Walt Disney corporation make it possible for DTP to wait and see what happens with the film, as if it is successful, resurrecting the production in some form may turn out to be a smart decision.

The production of *The Jungle Book* also points to another interesting and unique ability of Disney Theatrical Productions. Choosing Mary Zimmerman to adapt the title was a very bold decision, just as choosing Julie Taymor to adapt the *Lion King* was a bold decision. Often in commercial theatre, because of the amount of money being spent on a production, producers will decide to make a safe choice, rather than a bold choice. However, that is not the case with DTP. Because of the company's financial resources and commitment to quality, it is able to take risks that other companies might not be willing to take. Though as a public company, The Walt Disney Corporation must answer to its shareholders and the bottom line, DTP represents such a small percentage of the corporation and spends only a tiny portion of the billions of dollars the company makes each year, so DTP is shielded from the scrutiny with which one would assume a publicly traded theatre company would be viewed. This immunity allows DTP to make choices based on artistry rather than always being bound by finance. The company's productions are always

of a very high quality, even *Tarzan* and *Little Mermaid*, DTP's least financially successful shows, employed high quality production values and top-notch performers. Although these two productions did not recoup their investments while playing on Broadway, they both still adhered to the Disney Brand Promise and commitment to a quality product.

John Lahr, the senior theatre critic for *The New Yorker Magazine*, referred to *The Lion King* as "Ultimate Business Art" (qtd. in Kantor). This term applies not only to *The Lion King* but also to the entirety of the Disney Theatrical canon. DTP continues to produce financially viable theatrical properties that are also on the cutting edge of theatrical artistry and technology. As the cost of producing shows on Broadway continues to inflate, and the standards to which these shows are held rises every season, large-scale musicals must be both financially viable and of high artistic quality. Musicals that meet both criteria are what DTP offers and thus raises the bar for what other theatrical producers create.

As of 2016, Disney Theatrical Productions has been on Broadway for twenty-two years. The company is no longer the idealistic child of the Great White Way, but has grown up to become a more seasoned young adult. With age comes privilege, and DTP is now reaping the benefits of being accepted, even if grudgingly, by the Broadway establishment. An excellent marker of this shift is Charles Isherwood's *New York Times* Review for Disney's 2014 blockbuster musical, *Aladdin*. Isherwood begins by reminding readers what he, and most critics, think of Disney Theatricals: "Broadway has been lapped by wave after wave of big, often gloppy songfests adapted from animated movies, mostly from the mother ship, Disney" (C1).

However, in the next paragraph he declares that *Aladdin* “defied his dour expectations” (C1). He notes, “while [the musical] mostly sticks to the formulaic pattern of the movie...the stage ‘Aladdin’ also joshes the somewhat exhausted conventions of the genre with a breezy insouciance that scrubs away some of the material’s bland gloss” (C1).

Although Isherwood does make note of the show’s bland and predictable plot, and that often the less populous musical numbers are less than memorable, his review feels positive, something that cannot be said of many reviews of DTP’s earlier shows. In fact, where DTP was often criticized for its use of highly technical “magic” in early productions, Isherwood seems thrilled with the “magic” in *Aladdin*. He informs, “On the plus side, the Disney engineers have provide a nifty bit of wonder for the magic carpet, which appears to float softly around the stage without benefit of any visible lifting apparatus” (C1). This attitude is in stark contrast to David Richard’s *New York Times* review of *Beauty and the Beast* in 1994. In reference to that show’s magic tricks, he notes, “in the end the musical says far less about the redemptive power of love than it does about the boundless ingenuity of what is called Team Disney” (Richards). Yes, *Aladdin* is a more mature Broadway musical than *Beauty and the Beast* as DTP has learned something about how to create a show that not only attracts children and families, but that also resists the temptation to become a theme park ride. But the critics reviewing Disney Theatrical’s productions have also “evolved” and Isherwood reviewed *Aladdin* rather than reviewing the Walt Disney Corporation.

At the time of this writing, DTP has two shows playing on Broadway, *The Lion King* at the Minskoff Theater and *Aladdin* at the New Amsterdam Theater, and both are performing well with consistent ticket sales. DTP also has resident and touring productions of *The Lion King*, *Tarzan*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Newsies*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Aladdin* in the United States and internationally. The company also recently announced its next Broadway show, *Frozen: The Musical*. The stage adaptation of the wildly successful film will have an out-of-town tryout in Denver, Colorado, in summer 2017 and will land on Broadway in Spring 2018. The musical will feature music from the film and new music by the film's composers, Kristin Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez, and a book by the film's screenwriter, Jennifer Lee. The show will be directed by Alex Timbers, who directed *Peter and the Starcatcher*, and Broadway veteran Bob Crowley will serve as the scenic and costume designer ("*Frozen*").

Despite the money, the critics, and the awards, live theatre is still about the experience. It is about walking into a theatre and experiencing something extraordinary with only the other people in that theatre for that performance. Regardless of any opinion on the merit or quality of what Disney Theatrical Productions offers, attending a DTP production is an extraordinary experience. In this fast paced, ultra connected, multi-media, multi-tasking world that of the 21st century, musicals like those produced by Disney Theatrical Productions, provide a much needed respite from the "real" world.

A Whole New World

The shows produced by Disney Theatrical Productions, like all theatre, have the power to transport, transform, and start conversations across perceived barriers. By repackaging familiar and successful children's films into the medium of Broadway musicals, Disney Theatrical Productions is attracting the next generation of theatregoers. In May 2014, I attended *Aladdin* at the New Amsterdam Theatre. I purchased a single seat in one of the house right boxes, expecting that the seat next to me would most likely remain unoccupied. About ten minutes before the curtain, a young girl and her mother approached the box and the girl sat down. Her mother, who was Indonesian, did her best to speak to me, apologizing in advance for her daughter and telling me that she hoped she would behave during the performance. I assured her that she would not be a bother and that I was happy to have her sit next to me.

The little girl was eight years old and this was her second trip to America, but her first time in New York City. *Aladdin*, she informed me, was her second Disney show this week, as she saw *The Lion King* two days ago. Her mom and dad, she said, were seated in the Orchestra, but she begged them to buy her a ticket in one of the boxes because she always wanted to sit in one, so they did. She also told me that she was excited for Princess Jasmine.

The show began, and as soon as the Genie appeared, the little girl seated next to me let out a little squeal. I smiled. It didn't matter that she was extremely polite for an eight year old, at least by American standards; she was transported by the magic of the moment and the excitement hit her like any other kid. Later in the first act, when Jasmine appeared, she turned to me and whispered, "there she is, it's the

princess!" She had a smile a million miles wide and her eyes were filled with wonder. This little girl, who traveled thousands of miles with her family to visit America, was filled with pure joy. We watched the rest of the show together, with her telling me which parts were her favorite from the movie, and that she thought the actor playing the Genie was doing a really good job (which he was, as James Monroe Iglehart would go on to win a well-deserved Tony for the role).

After the show, her mother came to retrieve her, and after accepting her unnecessary apologies again, I assured her that I thoroughly enjoyed sharing the show with her daughter. I wished them well, and let her mom take a picture of her daughter in our house right box. I left the New Amsterdam Theatre that night with a smile on my face, and not just because I had enjoyed the show, but because I was able to share it with that little girl from Indonesia. The critics may look for any reason to tear apart Disney Theatricals, and the Broadway establishment may not approve of the presence of DTP, what it represents, or where its money comes from, but, sitting in that house right box at the New Amsterdam I anew realized the power of live theatre and the power of Disney to transcend generations and cultures.

I was reminded of the first time I saw a show on Broadway: in the spring of 1999, I took my first trip to New York with my high school choir, and I saw *The Lion King* at the New Amsterdam Theatre. Though I was fifteen, not eight, I remember the way I felt sitting in that theatre waiting for the curtain to raise, I remember the magic of the show, the theatre, and Times Square. That is what Disney Theatrical Productions does; it creates magic, memories, and experiences that linger long after the final curtain falls. Generations of theatregoers have fallen in love with theatre by

experiencing a Broadway musical. For many young people today, that love affair begins with a Disney Theatrical Production. In order for live theatre to continue to remain a relevant “part of our world,” the memories of a theatre event must continue to linger.

The Walt Disney Corporation is in the business of making magic, and what is more magical than the Great White Way? From its theme parks to its animated films, Disney has become a staple of American culture and childhood, and has extended its reach all over the globe. As one small facet of the Disney portfolio, Disney Theatrical Productions taps into the magical Disney formula, and creates Broadway experiences that not only conform to the Disney brand, but also push the boundaries of the Broadway musical. DTP is blazing a corporate trail through American commercial theatre and only time will tell where that path will lead and who will follow.

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