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Looking beyond the Tonys, women on Broadway seek to increase their numbers

THERESA AGOVINO



Kevin McCollum with Tyrone, the foul-mouthed star of *Hand to God*. Buck Ennis

Kevin McCollum swears he doesn't have a puppet fixation, although it's easy to understand why he might.

Mr. McCollum, 52, earned a Tony Award—one of three—and millions of dollars producing *Avenue Q*, which features a group of Muppet-like creatures that would have definitely been banished from *Sesame Street*. This spring on Broadway, he is presenting *Hand to God*, a play about a puppet show staged at a Christian church in Texas, where a foul-mouthed sock puppet named Tyrone has a habit of blurting out decidedly un-Christian thoughts.

"I don't have a license plate that says 'Geppetto One,' " Mr. McCollum joked. "Puppets are a way to deal with things that are politically incorrect to say but necessary. Such things are heard more benevolently through an alter ego."

Hand to God marks the Broadway debut of playwright Robert Askins, and Mr. McCollum acknowledges it's a gamble bringing it to the Great White Way. That's not the only chance he is taking this season. He is also producing *Something Rotten*, a musical written by a trio of Broadway newbies set in Shakespearean England about two brothers' attempts to create a hit when the theater world was dominated by the Bard. The show did not have an out-of-town tryout—a rare and risky move.

The productions are representative of Mr. McCollum's approach. He has never produced a star-driven show on Broadway and has been involved only in a handful of revivals.

He regularly brings little-known actors and writers to Broadway, which runs counter to conventional wisdom but is key to his success. For example, he gave Casey Nicholaw his first break on Broadway as the director and choreographer of the musical *The Drowsy Chaperone*. Mr. Nicholaw went on to choreograph and co-direct *The Book of Mormon* and will direct *Something Rotten*. And Mr. McCollum was working with *Rent* writer and composer Jonathan Larson to bring the show to the New York Theatre Workshop when he died suddenly at the age of 35 in 1996. It eventually became a big Broadway hit.

"I'm not afraid to commit to someone who needs a break," said Mr. McCollum, who was raised by a single mother in Hawaii. His mother died at age 40 when he was 14. The father of two said the deaths of his mother and Mr. Larson were seminal events that crystallized for him life's fragility, the importance of testing boundaries and the need to control one's own destiny.

Mr. McCollum started out as an actor, although he quickly realized that he didn't want to be relegated to waiting for someone to deem him worthy for a role. He started on Broadway in 1991 as a booking agent for shows, where he eventually met his former producing partner, Jeffrey Seller. The duo collaborated for more than 15 years before ending their partnership in 2011, when they each realized their desire to go out on their own.

SETTING THE STAGE
$3.5M Production cost of *Hand to God*
$14M Production cost of *Something Rotten*

Moving mountains

"Kevin moves mountains to get things done," said Mr. Seller.

For example, Mr. Seller said that his former partner loved *The Drowsy Chaperone*, even though its run in Toronto hadn't generated much interest among Broadway producers. Mr. Seller wasn't enthralled, so Mr. McCollum raised the money himself, and brought what became a Tony-winning hit to Broadway in the reasonably short time of 18 months. "Kevin has really good instincts," said Mr. Seller.

His sixth sense for spotting a hit has led to a cadre of investors who bankroll his productions. However, in the beginning he was using earnings from his booking company, as well as investments from family and friends, to stage his shows.

"Kevin has a way of making the mass audience come to him without catering to the mass audience," said Tom Greenwald, co-founder of ad agency SpotCo, who has known Mr. McCollum for more than 20 years. "He's not reckless. He understands that Broadway is a business."

Saving money

Indeed, Mr. McCollum closed *Motown* earlier this month even though it was making money. He realized that he could bring it back later with new sets and save the production about $100,000 a week. It is slated to return to Broadway in 2016. "I could really only do this with *Motown* since it is such a brand," he said.

There have been the inevitable financial failures along the way, including his revival of *Ragtime.* He lost all but $1 million of the $9 million it took to stage a musical version of *High Fidelity*, based on the book by Nick Hornby that also became a movie starring John Cusack. In retrospect, Mr. McCollum said, the show didn't work because most of the action takes place inside the main character's mind, and he wasn't an especially nice person.

"There was no one to root for," said Mr. McCollum. And *High Fidelity* didn't share the theme of finding or creating a family, which were so crucial to the successes of shows like *Rent* and *Avenue Q*. "I'm always looking for family because I didn't have one," he said.

Hand to God deals with family, religion and community, though that's not obvious from the print ads, which state "No movie stars. No London transfer. No film adaptation. Pray for us."

"I believe in leading with vulnerabilities," said Mr. McCollum. *Hand to God*, which cost $3.5 million to produce, earned rave notices when it ran off-Broadway, yet Mr. McCollum chose not to put reviewer quotes in the ad because the tactic is so typical.

Mr. McCollum doesn't have the option of sprinkling ads for *Something Rotten* with critics' compliments because no one has seen it—yet he was able to raise the $14 million to stage the show.

Mr. McCollum was introduced to *Something Rotten* by one of its book writers and composers, Karey Kirkpatrick. The two met about 30 years ago, when they were working at Disney World, and remained friends. Mr. Kirkpatrick kept mentioning that he was working on a musical with his brother Wayne. Eventually, Mr. McCollum heard some songs and decided to produce the show.

"I was really lucky that he was willing to take the chance," said Karey Kirkpatrick. He was struck by Mr. McCollum's willingness to hear suggestions about the noncreative aspects about the play, such as advertising, even though Karey and his partners had no Broadway experience.

"He is very respectful. He makes everyone feel that they are part of the team," said Mr. Kirkpatrick.

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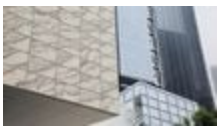

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