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

THERESA AGOVINO



Producer Darren Bagert is hoping *Side Show* can overcome the odds.

Buck Ennis

The bearded lady, reptile man, tattoo girl and those lovely conjoined twins are back, and they're aiming for the record book.

They populate the cast of characters of the revival of *Side Show*, a musical that hopes to join an elite group of Broadway productions: flops that return to become hits. Just two or three shows, including *Candide*, have ever been transformed from failure to smash in Broadway history.*Side Show* closed after just 91 regular performances in early 1998, and typically, producers prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. This time, however, *Side Show*'s producers think the musical will prevail. It is based on the real-life story of joined-at-the-hip Violet and Daisy Hilton, who worked in a circus and became huge stars in the 1920s and 1930s.Darren Bagert, one of the show's lead producers, is undaunted by the musical's past. Despite being overshadowed by *The Lion King* and *Ragtime* when it debuted, *Side Show* received mostly positive reviews. The story and score developed a cult following. Mr. Bagert called this production more of a reimagining than a revival. The show has been rewritten, new songs have been added, and director Bill Condon is making his Broadway debut. He is a film hotshot who helmed

two *Twilight* movies and won an Academy Award for writing the screenplay of *Gods and Monsters*. Though the show's story revolves around those shunned by society, its theme remains universal. "It's a beautiful story," said Mr. Bagert, a two-time Tony winner. "It's about people who are different and want to defy the odds to find happiness." Equally important to the show's comeback is the country's cultural transformation, said the producer, who noted that society has become more welcoming—and often fascinated by—people's differences. Consider that the premiere of *American Horror Story: Freak Show* this month was the most-watched show in cable network FX's 20-year existence.If there's any doubt about growing interest in outcasts, a revival of *The Elephant Man* is opening in December. Recent Broadway shows have also tackled less traditional subjects such as mental illness (*Next to Normal*) and autism (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*). Two of Broadway's biggest hits feature misfits: *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked*."Freaks are just a part of pop culture now," said Mr. Bagert. "It's just not frightening."

Marketing challenges

One investor who passed on the show, and who requested anonymity, said he thinks that people's intrigue with oddballs has limits. He said audiences longing to see a show featuring curiosities might rather take in *The Elephant Man*, a classic hit starring movie star Bradley Cooper.

Indeed, the two jarringly different images in front of the St. James Theatre highlight the challenges of marketing a show that tells the story of the sisters' journey—which would likely appeal to traditional theatergoers—and the human anomalies who became their family. One is a poster of the twins swathed in beautiful white evening gowns that hide their attachment. The other is a sort of police lineup of characters with physical perversions, like the dog boy and the half-man, half-woman.

Hollywood feel

The current ads feature lush shots of the sisters with some boasting for the show's noted director and its composer, Henry Krieger, who won Grammys for both the stage and screen versions of *Dreamgirls*.

"There is a fine line between turning people off and making them want to see it," said Stacy Lieberman Prince, executive creative director at Spotco, a Broadway advertising agency. "We are emphasizing Bill Condon because we want to give it a Hollywood feel." Veteran investor Scott Kirschenbaum said he declined to put money into *Side Show* because he wasn't sure the marketing hurdles could be overcome. He said he didn't think that women in their 40s—a huge segment of ticket buyers—would be moved enough to shell out more than $100 for a full-price orchestra seat. Younger people might be attracted to the offbeat story, but might not cough up the money to see it, said Mr. Kirschenbaum."I love the score," he said. "But it's a challenging property." One big advantage is having Clear Channel Spectacolor as a producer because it will provide large, and usually expensive, billboards in Times Square. Another is the favorable notices from reviewers who saw it in out-of-town tryouts. Snippets from the raves are displayed outside the theater. The tryouts did more than generate quotes. The costumes and sets from those productions were up to Broadway standards and will be reused,

reducing the show's budget. *Side Show* cost $7.8 million to stage, while the average musical requires between $10 million and $15 million. "I don't need to sell out every night," said Mr. Bagert.

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