

BROADWAY

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THIS PAGE: "MAMMA MIA!"; "MOVIN' OUT!"
PHOTOS BY JOAN MARCUS

★ ACROSS THE ★



Have you seen a Broadway show lately?

No, not the over two dozen shows currently playing on the fabled Great White Way in New York City, but the equally exciting slate of touring Broadway productions playing in major cities across America. Over the next month, theater fans on the West Coast could see "Hairspray," "Thoroughly Modern Millie," "Mamma Mia!" or "Urinetown, the Musical," while Broadway lovers in the Midwest might experience "Movin' Out," "The Producers" or "Riverdance."

U.S.A

MANY OF THE SHOWS on the road are touring while their parent shows are still drawing enthusiastic audiences in New York. National tours didn't always happen this way. "It used to be that a Broadway tour was an afterthought. In fact, it almost never happened until the show closed in New York," observed Jed Bernstein, president of the League of American Theaters and Producers. A sea change occurred in the mid-1980's with the advent of shows like "Cats," "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Les Misérables." "These shows had such gigantic consumer appeal that cities outside New York were

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able to build entire subscription series with those shows as the anchor," said Mr. Bernstein. Today, there are as many as half a million subscribers around the country, and Broadway-quality theater is presented in over 100 cities in America.

Getting the show on the road

The logistics of taking a Broadway show on the road requires the planning of a small military operation. "If a show is successful, the week after it opens on Broadway you are having a meeting on how to put that show on the road," said "Hairspray" choreographer Jerry Mitchell. Once a tour begins,

PAUL KOLNIK



HAIRSPRAY

generally a show will close a run in one city on a Sunday night and open in another the following Tuesday night. That leaves just a little over a day for travel and set-up time in the new venue, not to mention a break for the performers. Working within this tight window has been greatly facilitated by the advancement of stage technology over recent years. Most major musicals today use a computerized deck — the playing stage on which the actors perform — which is built in sections to enable easy transportation and reassembly in different locations. "When you get to a new place, the backstage situation may be different, but once you step foot on the actual deck of the show, everything remains the same, for the most part," said Mr. Mitchell.

The first day in a new venue can still be quite hectic, according to actress Darcie Roberts, who plays the lead role in "Thoroughly Modern Millie." "We get in to the city on

Monday and then we have to be in the theater on Tuesday at 6:00 p.m. We first get information whether anything is going to be different. For instance, we find out if the lighting is more from overhead rather than from front of house. They will give you information about backstage — where the doors are, how you cross over behind the set and where the quick changes are. Then we start a sound check at 6:45 p.m., and that will be the first time we will run anything with the orchestra. We'll do a couple of numbers and then we start the show at 8 p.m. come hell or high water."

Not just a carbon copy

When a show achieves huge critical and popular success — like "Hairspray," with eight Tony Awards and 10 Drama Desk Awards (including Best Musical) or "Mamma Mia!" which

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continues to break box-office records around the globe — the show's producers must ensure that the road tours deliver the same level of excellence as the original productions and generate a similar kind of excitement. Audiences around the country, now used to the steady diet of Broadway tours passing through their cities, have come to expect a high degree of artistry and professionalism. The producers are committed to delivering the same experience of the original Broadway show, but mere duplication is not the goal.

Speaking about the tour of "Hairspray," which kicked off last September, director Jack O'Brien said that the creators have a major commitment to what they have already achieved in the original production. But, for the tour, he added, "we depend a lot on the creativity and the personality of the people we are using." Mr. O'Brien said that he is attracted to actors that bring "vivid energy" to the stage. "So we are not making just carbon copies of what has come before, but we try to pull out of the new performers what they have to offer and then harness that energy in the service of the

**“IF YOU ARE A CREATIVE PERSON YOU
NEVER STOP CREATING, SO IF YOU
GET MORE TIME, YOU KEEP GOING.”**

piece itself." An example in the case of "Hairspray" is the presence of writer and performer Bruce Vilanch in the role of Edna Turnblad, the plus-size Baltimore housewife memorably created on Broadway by Harvey Fierstein. "What do I bring to the role? My own fabulous physicality," quipped Mr. Vilanch, whose hirsute presence and gift for one-line zingers are well known from his three-season stint on television's "Hollywood Squares." "You have to find your own interpretation," he continued. "A lot of the show was written by Harvey for himself — no one else talks in that gravelly voice. We've had to rewrite, and every actor who plays the role after me will probably do the same." One of Mr. Vilanch's innovations is to include, in the musical number "Timeless to Me," a few topical political references tailored to the city in which they are currently playing.

Sometimes, changes are introduced into a show because the creative team has had the opportunity of taking a second or third look at the work. Without the pressures of a high-profile Broadway opening night looming, at a time when the production is first getting on its feet, the artists have the luxury of reassessing and tweaking at their own pace. "When you are mounting a show on Broadway, time and money are not on your side," observed Mike Isaacson, associate producer of "Thoroughly Modern Millie." "The teams all work very hard during previews to get the show to opening night, but the truth is you never stop learning about the show." He cited an example of a verse in the opening number of the show that had been dropped in previews because it didn't work. During rehearsals for the "Millie" tour, however, they figured it out and incorporated it into the traveling production. "It worked so beautifully that we put the verse back into the New York production as well," said Mr. Isaacson.

"If you are a creative person you never stop creating, so if you get more time, you keep going," concurred Mr. Mitchell, relating a similar experience with the road tour of "Hairspray." "Every time I revisit a show I try to make it work for the actors

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playing the parts — so steps change here and there or entrances and exits change. Sometimes you just get a better idea the second time round. When I was putting together [the musical number] “Without Love” on tour, I added a whole chunk of dancing where there was just singing before. I liked it so much on the tour that I brought it back to the Broadway show a month later.”

“People around the country equate Broadway with the best of American theater, and particularly when it comes to the musical, that embodies a whole culture and a whole set of dreams,” said Mr. Isaacson. “You are plugging them into that when you take a Broadway show on the road.”

Just as Broadway has evolved to reflect the diversity of American life and experience, the shows touring across America this summer encompass a wide range of styles and tastes. “Riverdance” is a novelty spectacle of Irish music and dance, while “Movin’ Out” is a new theatrical form of narrative dance musical shaped out of Billy Joel’s song catalog by the modern dance choreographer Twyla Tharp. “Hairspray” offers a high-energy tribute to the more innocent early 1960’s with a sweetly subversive take on social conventions and race relations and “Mamma Mia!” inevitably gets audiences dancing in the aisles to the melodies of ABBA. There is also room in the

universe of touring Broadway for plays such as “The Graduate” (you may remember the movie), the percussive excitement of “Stomp” and the silly fun of “Nunsense.” People have always visited New York to drop in on Broadway, but now, more than ever, you can stay at home and let Broadway come visit you. ★



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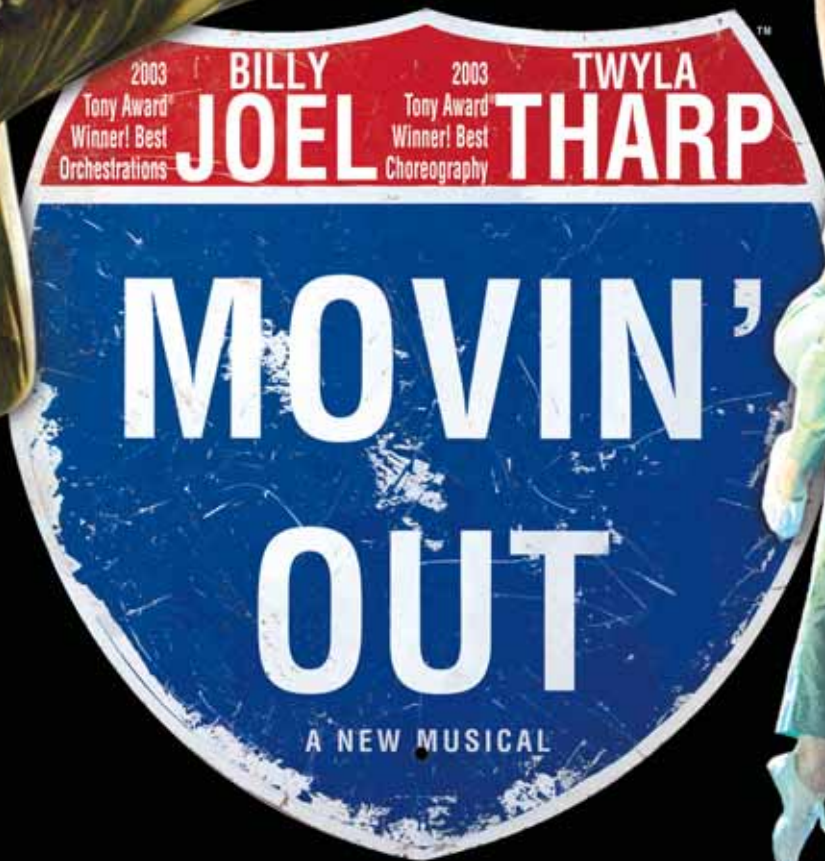
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MOVIN' OUT

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Twyla Tharp keeps movin' on

EVEN AS AUDIENCES AND CRITICS hail "Movin' Out," there is no easy way to describe this innovative and electrifying Broadway experience. A full-length narrative dance show with a live performance of songs by Billy Joel, it blurs the conventional boundaries of stage musicals, dance performances and rock concerts. The artist who conceived, choreographed and directed this unusual project is Twyla Tharp. A giant in the field of modern dance, and not exactly a novice in the world of Broadway, either, Ms. Tharp has created more than 125 dances, choreographed five movies and written a couple of books.

Ms. Tharp said in an interview that Mr. Joel had agreed to let her use all of his music after she showed him a videotape sample of choreography based on his songs. Inspired by two songs in particular — "Goodnight Saigon" and "Angry Young Man," about a Vietnam veteran — Ms. Tharp came up with a story outline set in a turbulent period of American history. "I said to Billy, this is the spine: 'Sing to me, muse, of the rage of Achilles.'" Invoking the opening line of Homer's "The Iliad," Ms. Tharp drew a parallel between the Trojan War and the Vietnam War. "I said to him, 'That makes you Homer, and me the muse, and that would make Achilles

a generation of American men. Let's just take some men from Long Island and sing about their rage.'"

"I think it is becoming ever more clear that America appreciates these guys [Vietnam veterans] and I wanted to be sure that the message got out," Ms. Tharp continued. To narrate her story, Ms. Tharp dispensed with the conventional Broadway method of interspersing songs with spoken dialogue scenes. Instead, she created a powerful story through dance and movement. "I like language and I consider it a very special art form, but I don't consider it the be-all and end-all of information gathering," said Ms. Tharp. "You can read emotions from actions."

"Movin' Out" has played over 500 performances on Broadway and earned Ms. Tharp a Tony Award for choreography. But she's not one for resting on her laurels. She is actively involved in the national tour of her show as well. "All audiences are important to me, and Broadway is no more important than Columbus, Ohio. The big challenge is to see that the show goes on living," Ms. Tharp said. "I wanted to give the show a shot at surviving." Judging from the enthusiastic reception so far, "Movin' Out" has done more than survive, it has triumphed. ★

A Broadway blockbuster comes to town

BACK IN THE OLD DAYS, the greatest show in town was the circus. Today, it's the Broadway blockbuster. Since the mid-1980's, mega-musicals like "Les Misérables," "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Miss Saigon" have been entertaining millions on Broadway and beyond. Produced by the British impresario Cameron Mackintosh, each of these shows is famous for a technically complex trademark effect — the helicopter in "Miss Saigon," the revolving stage of "Les Misérables" and, of course, the crashing chandelier of "Phantom." Productions once toured as scaled-down, paler versions of their Broadway counterparts, but Mr. Mackintosh set a new standard for his shows. "Our producer wants you to have the same experience whether you see 'Phantom' in London; New York; Tokyo; or Phoenix, Ariz.," said David Hansen, advance stage manager for the show's current touring production.

The latest touring blockbuster is "The Lion King." Julie Taymor's magical production draws on a panoply of theatrical techniques from around the globe, using puppetry and masks to create a parade of animals, including a life-size elephant, in the theater. The trick is moving the costumes, scenery and more than 200 puppets from city to city. "I spent almost a year and a half working on the tour before it actually went out, just engineering how we would get the show in and out of the theaters," said David Benken, technical director of "The Lion King." The supersized show is transported in a

convoy of as many as 22 large semitrailers. Mr. Benken said that in order to reduce the amount of time between tour engagements, "The Lion King," as well as "Phantom," travels with duplicate versions of key set elements that leapfrog over each other from city to city. In other words, when the show is playing in one venue, an advance party is laying the foundations for the set at the next stop.

The number of theaters on the road able to recreate the Broadway experience of these heavyweight musicals is limited. "Phantom's" chandelier, for instance — all 1,000 pounds of it — requires a steel framework in the theater ceiling to support it. "Some cities are building new theaters or upgrading existing theaters just so they can fit "The Lion King," said Mr. Benken. Still, "The Lion King" did make one major change for the road. In New York, Pride Rock rises majestically up from the ground, but on the road it moves slowly in from upstage, creating a different yet equally arresting effect.



THE LION KING

Despite their insider's perspective, neither Mr. Hansen nor Mr. Benken are immune to the wondrous effects of their respective shows. "My favorite is the 'Journey,'" said Mr. Hansen. He is still blown away by the scene in which the Phantom rows his boat to his subterranean lair while the stage fills with dry ice vapor. In Mr. Benken's case, his greatest thrill during "The Lion King" is hearing the shrieks of delight from the audience during the "Circle of Life" musical number. "As difficult and as complicated as it is to get that elephant onstage every night, the applause from the audience always makes it worth it." ★



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Putting it together making musical history

“Mamma Mia!”

SOME 15 YEARS AGO, Judy Craymer sat in her London apartment listening to tapes of ABBA songs (this was before the CD era), and was seized by an idea that would eventually lead to the box-office champion “Mamma Mia!” By then, the world-famous 1970’s Swedish pop group had already disbanded and no longer dominated the charts. And Ms. Craymer, although she had worked in theater, film and television, hadn’t created a musical from scratch before. “It wasn’t easy,” she said in an interview, “but I just had my head down and went full steam ahead.”

“My inspiration was the song ‘The Winner Takes It All,’ because it had a big story to tell,” Ms. Craymer continued. In fact, she said, “[All] their songs range from soap opera to



PAUL KOLNIK

high drama.” The songwriters Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus gave the project their blessing on condition that the show not be a tribute compilation, and certainly not an ABBA biography. No strangers to book musicals (they had just composed the music for “Chess”), Andersson and Ulvaeus insisted that the songs be integrated into a good story.

Ms. Craymer asked Catherine Johnson, a British playwright and television writer, to come up with a plot for the ABBA musical. Ms. Craymer suggested “holidays, weddings, romance and irony,” as key plot elements. “ABBA is like a confection,” she explained. “You couldn’t make this into a



JOAN MARCUS

Greek tragedy.” A tragedy no, but Greek, yes. Ms. Johnson devised a frothy tale set on a Greek island in which a young woman attempts to discover the identity of her father by inviting three possible candidates to her wedding. Meanwhile, her single mom’s two best women friends, also on hand to celebrate, relive the carefree days when they once performed in a band. “There is something for everyone,” Ms. Craymer noted. “You have the gorgeous young things, and, I think, the gorgeous older ones.”

It’s a rare Broadway musical with three strong roles for forty-something women. This one even has a remarkable troika working behind the scenes. In addition to hiring Ms. Johnson to write the book, Ms. Craymer selected Phyllida Lloyd, who comes from the world of opera and straight theater, to direct the show. “It wasn’t intentional,” said Ms. Craymer, but she acknowledged they all joke about the inevitable comparisons between the three women onstage and the three on the creative team.

At the show’s first preview performance in London five years ago, the audience’s tidal wave of enthusiasm instantly demonstrated that Ms. Craymer’s initial hunch had paid off. “Mamma Mia!” was a phenomenon. The producing team raised the fun quotient of the evening by listing the show’s songs in the program alphabetically rather than in the traditional scene order. Well-known hits like “Dancing Queen,” “Knowing Me, Knowing You” — and, of course, “The Winner Takes It All” — sneak up on the audience in unexpected contexts. By the curtain call, the audience is literally dancing in the aisles. As Ms. Craymer put it, “It’s the audience’s moment to go, ‘Yes, I’ve had a good time and I want to stand up and say so.’”

“Hairspray”

NEARLY ONE YEAR BEFORE Ms. Craymer’s dream was about to be realized, on the other side of the pond, another woman was setting the stage for another Broadway success:

The veteran producer Margo Lion saw the movie “Hairspray” and decided it would make a great musical. The film, by John Waters, is set in the 1960’s and tells the story of a feisty teenager with outrageous hairdos who, against all odds, wins a spot on a local television dance program. “I thought the material had a great big heart,” said Ms. Lion. “All the ingredients you need for a musical are there. It’s about dancing and popular songs, the characters are larger than life, and there was a lead character who really wanted something and overcomes obstacles to become triumphant.” In the musical adaptation, a plump Tracy Turnblad overcomes her — well, her size — and transforms herself from outsider to teen celebrity. Singing and dancing up a storm, and without once, as the blurbs put it, “denting her ’do”, she not only manages to integrate the racially segregated dance show and help her mom get a makeover, but also wins herself the best-looking boy in town.

When Ms. Lion first met Mr. Waters, the elegant Broadway producer and offbeat filmmaker hit it off very well. “I promised that I would honor his voice and he agreed to be a consultant on the project,” Ms. Lion recalled. And she has kept her word. The show, which walked away with eight Tony Awards last year, including Best Musical, has connected with a broad spectrum of theatergoers, but it also retains the film’s quirky tone. In the movie, Tracy’s mother is played by the oversized, cross-dressing actor Divine. Ms. Lion cast Tony-winning actor Harvey Fierstein on Broadway, and hirsute funnyman Bruce Vilanch as Edna Turnblad on the road. The audience takes the gender reversal in stride and completely accepts the relationship between mother and daughter onstage. “People just embrace it,” commented Ms. Lion, and it’s easy to see why. “Hairspray” exudes such high energy and warmth it sends the audience out on a giddy high. “The show celebrates inclusion, possibility, diversity and hope,” Ms. Lion added. “Everybody loves that!” ★



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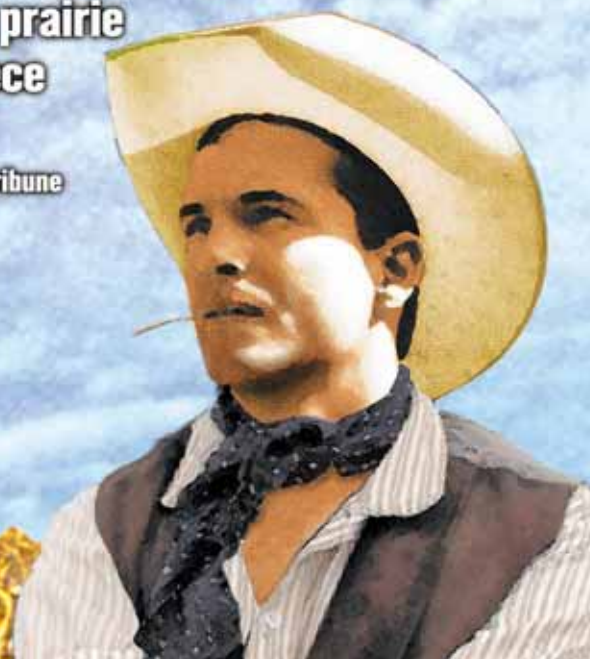
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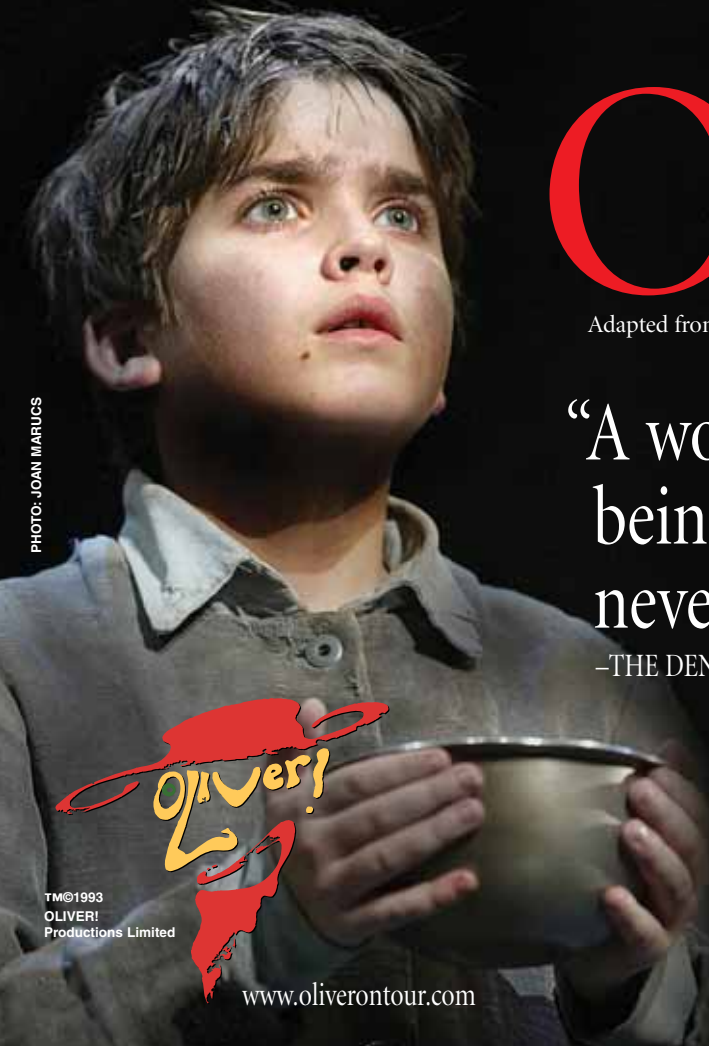


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