

# King of Collaborators

Disney exec and Artios Award recipient **Thomas Schumacher** talks passion.

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On Nov. 10, theatre producer Thomas Schumacher will receive the New York Apple Award from the Casting Society of America. Meanwhile three of his musicals are enjoying hit runs on Broadway, while several of his productions are touring the country or playing internationally. But he's most interested in talking about *How Does the Show Go On? An Introduction to the Theater*, the handsomely produced book he wrote last year (with Jeff Kurti), which is now in a second edition. Actually, all these accomplishments are interrelated and spring from a single passion. "I have loved the theatre from the day I was born," he declares.

Schumacher, who is the president of Disney Theatrical Group, made his mark in New York 10 years ago with the Tony Award-winning production of *The Lion King*. Since then he has spearheaded a string of Disney musicals—including *Aida*, *Tarzan*, *Mary Poppins* (co-produced with Cameron Mackintosh), and *The Little Mermaid*. "Tom has created a real gymnasium for work in New York," says casting director Bernard Telsey, who is also the New York vice president of the CSA. Telsey says Schumacher was singled out for the New York Apple Award, which will be presented at this year's Artios Awards for outstanding achievement in casting, for his collaboration with the casting community and the creative teams working in the city and for his "enlightening" championship of nontraditional casting. Says Telsey, "He doesn't just pull the strings as a producer; he gets his hands dirty in the casting process. He's present at all those casting sessions, whether it is for Ensemble Member No. 23 or the lead starring role or the replacement one year later."

That commitment, Schumacher says, comes from the belief that "there are few critical decisions that you can make on a show that can have more effect on the production than casting. You have to take it very, very seriously." Telsey says Schumacher "knows that auditions are not always the best way to decide on what an actor is capable of" and will put all his resources behind an actor to help him or her along the journey from audition to opening night. "I believe the goal of casting is not to harass or badger actors but to allow actors to be the greatest they can be," says Schumacher. "Your job, when they come in the room, is to make them as comfortable as possible and to allow them to reveal as much depth as they can."

## JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES

Schumacher grew up outside of San Francisco, immersing himself in every aspect of theatre, making use of every opportunity he had in junior high and in his local community center—on stage and behind the scenes. "I took dance class, learned how to design sound, how to make a costume, and before I went to college, I knew how to get up on a ladder and focus a light," he recalls. When he enrolled at UCLA his plan was to major in psychology and become a drama therapist, but he switched to theatre when it became clear that was his natural path. "Through a bizarre turn of events, through me answering a pay phone backstage at midnight, I ended up getting a job as a driver at the Mark Taper Forum for two weeks," he recalls. That serendipitous introduction led to a series of jobs over the next five years at the major Los Angeles regional theatre and to connections that would shape his future career. He took a detour from the medium in 1988 and joined the newly reconstituted animation division at the Walt Disney Studios, and six years later he was executive producer on the animated blockbuster *The Lion King*. Then came the opportunity to help set up a new live theatre division for Disney in New York, and in 1997 he co-produced the musical version of *The Lion King* on Broadway. "When I was a kid I thought, 'Gee, if I could only have my own theatre company,' and now I get to end up producing on Broadway and around the world with the best teams of people working in the theatre today," he marvels.

Schumacher turns 51 soon but retains his boyhood enthusiasm for the theatre and now is eager to share it with a new generation. That's where his book comes in. When he was in seventh grade, there was dearth of books about the theatre, he says, and he would subscribe to the *The New Yorker* just so he could read the theatre listings. "I wrote this for the kid that I was," he says. "This is a 'how it is done' book: How do they do it, and what are the elements? When you know the effort that has gone into theatre, you can more completely comprehend it."



## OUTTAKES

- > Shares a birthday with the late Walt Disney: Dec. 5
- > At 16, played Barnaby Tucker in the San Mateo Community Theatre production of *Hello, Dolly!*
- > Helped put Cirque du Soleil on the map by giving the company its U.S. premiere at the 1987 Los Angeles Festival of the Arts

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