

# EVERYTHING ABOUT IT IS APPEALING



'SHOW BUSINESS'  
DOCUMENTS A BROADWAY SEASON.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBIN HOLLAND

"I WAS OBSESSED WITH THE THEATRE GROWING UP IN Los Angeles," says Broadway producer and documentary filmmaker Dori Berinstein. "As much as I was in love with what was on stage, I wanted to go inside that world, behind the curtain, and see how it all came together." In addition to co-producing several Tony-winning shows (*Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Fool Moon*) and this season's *ShowBusiness: The Road to Broadway* depicts the inner workings of commercial Broadway theatre—the thrills, the risks, all the creative forces. It premiered in New York on May 11 and rolls out nationally in the coming months, starting June 1 in Los Angeles.

Berinstein had cherished the idea of making a documentary about Broadway since college, when she read William Goldman's seminal book *The Season*, which chronicles the 1967-68 Broadway season. "I became fascinated with the passion and the creativity and the risk that was behind the drama on stage," she recalls. But it was only after 10 years of Broadway producing—and pursuing a parallel career as a TV director—that she felt ready to tackle her dream project.

*ShowBusiness* examines the 2003-04 Broadway season, specifically the significantly different histories of four major new musicals: *Wicked*, *Avenue Q*, *Taboo*, and *Caroline, or Change*. Berinstein began shooting in spring 2003, before the season had officially begun, and had no idea how the film—or the season—would turn out. "I was eager to capture as many of the shows during the season in their infancy, so we could see them evolve," she says, adding that she also shot material on the season's plays and revivals.

Originally, Berinstein intended to have Tony-winning actor Alan Cumming serve as the film's narrator. "I came on board to interview a lot of people, and partly to help with access to performers and artists," Cumming recalls. "People would hear that [actors being filmed] had a good time, and then you actually got others who said they wanted to be a part of it, too." But Berinstein quickly won the trust and confidence of the Broadway community and even persuaded Goldman, the project's inspiration, to speak on camera. "The only show that gave us absolutely no access was *The Boy From Oz*," Cumming reports. "I think that's dopey, you know, because their absence speaks volumes."

Then, midway through the season, Berinstein decided to eliminate the narrator. "In a way, doing a year-in-the-life kind of thing with a host was a potentially cheesy element," Cumming explains. "It's much better to have the film speak for itself." The actor retains a co-producer credit and still appears in the film to provide a bridge for certain sequences. Interviews with John Lithgow, Patrick Stewart, Eileen Atkins, and Liza Minnelli and other unused footage will likely end up on the forthcoming DVD, Berinstein says.

And before shooting ended, Berinstein brought in Richard Hankin, editor of the documentary *Capturing the Friedmans*, to help shape the story line. "To me, every little moment on every single tape was precious, so I wanted somebody who could be brutal," she says. "We had to figure out what will tell a total story that was also representative." Berinstein and Hankin, who is also credited as a writer on the film, whittled the footage down to the swirling controversy and early demise of *Taboo*, the creative risks involved in moving *Caroline, or Change* from Off-Broadway's Public Theater to Broadway, and the unexpected Tony victory of *Avenue Q* over the megahit *Wicked*. "You couldn't wish for a more beautiful arc to a story, the way you're drawn to the underdogs and the underdogs win," Cumming enthuses.

"It was nice having Dori be there every step of the way," recalls composer-lyricist Jeff Marx, who with his writing partner, Robert Lopez, won a Tony for the *Avenue Q* score. "It was also scary because we'd never had a show on Broadway before." The audacious puppet musical, an Off-Broadway hit at the Vineyard Theatre, was in rehearsal for its Broadway transfer when Berinstein started shooting. "Certainly no one had any idea they were going to win a Tony, but I loved that, four years before, Jeff and Bobby were interns," Berinstein says. "Their story represented that you could have a Broadway dream come true."

In one of the documentary's more colorful moments, Marx's father, Ron, reacts exuberantly to Marx's Tony nomination by extolling his son's "genius" and noting that his son wasn't able to hold a job as a kid. "All that enthusiasm in the film is a hundred percent real," the younger Marx reports. "My dad's sort of a clowny guy—he's a children's dentist—a little wacky. I grew up seeing that all the time." Still, he notes, "When he was reciting my accomplishments, you can see me just sitting there waiting to die!"

## The Unmasking of 'Taboo'

During the season, Berinstein seemed to be everywhere with her small—and, everyone notes approvingly, unobtrusive—camera crew. One night they were shooting preview audiences for *Taboo*, the Boy George musical produced by actor and talk-show host Rosie O'Donnell, when Marx and Lopez happened to walk by. Berinstein took the opportunity to grab a few moments with them. "Jeff was just talking about his lifelong obsession with Boy George when all of a sudden Boy George appeared," Lopez recalls. "I wasn't really sure if it was him, but it looked like the theatre posters." The *Taboo* composer-lyricist had just stepped through the stage door for a smoke, in full costume as the character he played in the musical. "To have been there that very second and to capture Jeff and Bobby's reaction, it was a perfect theatrical moment," marvels Berinstein.

*Taboo* was generating headlines not only for the creative tensions backstage but for the very public lawsuit involving O'Donnell and the publishers of her magazine. "It's very hard to produce a Broadway show, and it's even harder when you are in the middle of a media circus," remarks actor Raúl Esparza, who received a Tony nomination for his work in *Taboo*. "If there's a failing in Dori, it's that she loved our show so much and she didn't show the bad stuff." Esparza adds that even if it isn't apparent in *ShowBusiness*, the musical was in obvious trouble: "Suddenly there were too many people trying to help, trying to fix things. At one time we had seven different people giving us notes. Poor Rosie was trying her hardest to support the show and be a leader while at the same time she was going through that court trial."

After just 100 performances, *Taboo* closed, and the *ShowBusiness* cameras captured the lachrymose effect it had on Euan Morton, who was Tony-nominated for his performance as George O'Dowd (Boy George's real name). The end of *Taboo* meant the expiration of the Scottish actor's work visa: He'd have to leave the country (though he would return to work on other shows, including this season's Off-Broadway production of Patrick Marber's *Howard Katz*). Morton says: "I didn't want to go back home. I was mourning the loss of Boy George. I had been playing him, traveling with him—we did a lot together. The end of *Taboo* was also kind of the end of the relationship for me."

Many have pointed fingers at the press for speeding up the closing of *Taboo*. So it may surprise some to find several members of the press included in Berinstein's film. "They are essential characters in our storytelling," she insists. "As a Broadway producer, I didn't feel that I could tell the story behind the curtain without including the press." So she gathered a group of theatre critics and journalists, took them out to a series of lunches, and recorded their conversations.

"I think she wanted to use us as a kind of Greek chorus," reports Newsday critic Linda Winer. "Dori and company were extremely good at establishing a dangerously convivial atmosphere for us. Before each lunch, my husband would say to me, 'Remember, you're going to have to live with what you say,' and half an hour into lunch I had totally forgotten the warning altogether. I'm glad to be on record giving *Taboo* some credit as a near-miss." Charles Isherwood, then with *Variety* and now the *New York Times*' second-string critic, says, "I don't have a problem with having our observations exposed to the public. Dori probably put an emphasis on some of the more acerbic things we said, so of course it's not a complete picture of our responses, but it's an entertaining one, I think."

For his part, notorious *New York Post* columnist Michael Riedel is seen relishing the opportunity to play the villain of the film. "I'm not paid to be a booster of Broadway," he says. "I do what reporters do: look for stuff that the people they are reporting on don't necessarily want reported, and, God knows, *Taboo* was fertile ground." As for the fallibility of the press, "Everything I predict in the movie is wrong," Riedel says, chuckling. "I say *Avenue Q* is going to close in two months and *Wicked* is in serious trouble." Cumming notes that the scenes with the press are also a valuable lesson for artists: "Who would want to be validated by these people? You have to do what you do as an artist for yourself and for the experience of doing it. If you believe the good ones, you have to believe the bad ones as well."



**Facing page: Back row: Patrick Pacheco (reporter, Los Angeles Times/NY-1 News); Susan Hilferly (costume designer, *Wicked*); Stephanie D'Abruzzo (actor, *Avenue Q*); Tonya Pinkins (actor, *Caroline, or Change*); Raúl Esparza (actor, *Taboo*); John Taragliola (actor, *Avenue Q*); front row: Robert Lopez (songwriter, *Avenue Q*); Dori Berinstein (filmmaker, *ShowBusiness*); Jeanine Tesori (composer, *Caroline, or Change*). Scenes from *ShowBusiness*: Alan Cumming; Kristen Chenoweth and Idina Menzel taking a bow in *Wicked*; a cast member making up for *Taboo*; Boy George with *New York Post* columnist Michael Reidel**

## 'Change' Is Coming

Berinstein says one of her goals in *ShowBusiness* was for the audience "to connect in a personal way with actors." She cites Tonya Pinkins, who received a Tony nod for the title role in *Caroline, or Change*, the Tony Kushner-Jeanine Tesori musical. "Every time I saw her in the role of Caroline, it gave me goose bumps," Berinstein says. "Not just for what she was doing on stage, but because of the intensity she was bringing to the role. It was an extraordinary bit of acting, but it was also her life." A year before Berinstein began shooting, Pinkins' personal life was in disarray: The 1992 Tony winner (for *Jelly's Last Jam*) was now a single mother with sporadic work and four kids to raise. "That's what made it possible for me to do *Caroline*," Pinkins says. "All that energy had come in from real life and didn't have anywhere to go. After a while your friends don't want to hear about it; you don't have enough money for therapy. Then suddenly you have a role where you get to vent, and not only is it appropriate for the role, but other people get to see it and be transfixed by seeing you go through something that was, you know, your darkest day. That's the holy grail."

Berinstein also captured a rare moment of creative impasse during one of the *Caroline, or Change* segments. "One of the things that makes her an extraordinary filmmaker is that she is very invisible," says Tesori, "but she's very judicious about it and has great respect for her subject." The *Caroline* composer, a friend of Berinstein, recalls the first time she saw the scene in which she and Kushner struggle with a new ending for a song. "It was hard to watch because it's so true," Tesori says. "When we finished, it turned out to be a really strong section, but at that moment it was so far away. The first clue is when my head pounds on the piano."

Of Broadway's traditions and lore, Berinstein says, she most wanted to capture the opening-night good-luck ritual of the gypsy robe. "I'm so glad they showed that," says Kristin Chenoweth, a Tony nominee for *Wicked*. When she landed her first Broadway musical, *Steel Pier*, in 1997, Chenoweth had no idea what that was ("I was going, 'Gypsy robe what? Gypsy Robe Lee?'" she quips). In the ceremony, which dates back to 1950, the chorus member with the most Broadway credits is handed a robe decked with logos and mementos of previously opened Broadway musicals. With the entire cast gathered, the anointed one walks around the stage three times and later visits every dressing room, bestowing good luck on all. "I don't get excited about opening nights, because I'm nervous every night," Chenoweth says. "But the one thing that makes it special is the gypsy robe. It's a cool thing, whether you understand it or not."

## Tony Time

*ShowBusiness* climaxes with the Tony Awards ceremony, which also marks the end of the Broadway season. In the film, Berinstein builds the tension leading to the announcement of best musical, the final award of the night. That year the odds were firmly on *Wicked*, but *Avenue Q* won. Not coincidentally, *Avenue Q* had embarked on a very intensive and unprecedented advertising campaign before the Tonys, which Berinstein documented but omitted from the final cut. "Conventional wisdom in the industry was that the big show always wins the big award," Marx explains. "We thought it was a forgone conclusion, and we had opened a year before. So the only way we were going to even have a chance of shaking things up was if we did a funny, attention-getting campaign and just to remind people that they liked us."

However, much of the industry disliked *Avenue Q*'s campaign, which is why actor Stephanie D'Abruzzo, a Tony nominee for the tuner, insists on setting something straight: "People always talk about the big guy and little guy, but as far as the cast goes, we never felt any animosity at all. In fact, *Wicked* probably helped our box office. We'd have a lot of kids at the stage door wearing *Wicked* hats and T-shirts." The shows also shared a music supervisor—Stephen Oremus—and both have enjoyed post-Tony success, spawning national tours and international productions while still running on Broadway.

"I was so happy that somebody finally did something about our work, and that watching people create was the focal point," says Chenoweth. For her part, Berinstein—who co-founded the summer program Camp Broadway "so theatre will be a part of kids' lives forever"—hopes audiences will get caught up in the "drama behind the drama," so that "when they see a show, whether it's on Broadway or a regional or a high school production, they'll take a moment to appreciate all the hard work, the amazing commitment, that is both on stage and behind the curtain." And the magic, too, as the curtain rises.