

Taming the 'Beast:' TheatreZone's world premiere brings in big writers, big star and one extremely big character

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This is an Aug. 1968 photo of David Merrick, producer of Broadway plays and Musicals. (AP Photo)

GET READY TO GROWL

TheatreZone 2009-2010 season

What: TheatreZone season includes "Man of La Mancha," starring Jeff McCarthy, Dec. 3-6 and 9-13; "High Spirits," starring Georgia Engel, Jan. 7-10 and 13-17; "The Beast of Broadway," world premiere, starring Hal Linden, March 4-7 and 10-14; "Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance," starring Lee Roy Reams, April 22-25; "I Love My Wife," June 10-13 and 16-20.

Where: G&L Theatre, campus of Community School of Naples, 13275 Livingston Road, Naples Information and tickets: (888) 966-3352 and www.theatrezone-florida.com

Something else: Backstage tours of the G&L Theatre are being offered from 2 to 4 p.m. Nov. 15. Visitors will learn about TheatreZone's backstage production "secrets," meet professional actors and costumers, and have a Q&A with artistic director Mark Danni.

Mark Danni is behind you, and he's running, running, running to catch up to you and tell you about the play TheatreZone has commissioned.

It's about the meanest, most fascinating, man in show business. It's got name writers hammering out the script. It's ...

Wait. Danni has outstripped you and he's still bounding down the road. Will the world start running to keep up?

Danni, producing artistic director of TheatreZone in Naples; scriptwriters Faye Greenberg and Robert L. Freedman; and the agent of a get-me star name, Hal Linden, are praying for that.

Greenberg and Freedman are Los Angeles writers who hope their collaborative story crystallizes the life of Broadway's Midas, producer David Merrick, in a riveting way. Linden's agent is hoping for a one-man show that unleashes Linden from the urbane, inventive — and generally likable — characters he's generally created.

Danni is hoping to see a good idea — his — turned into a national theater contender. With its first curtain call in Naples.

The play is set to premiere here March 4 and, with Danni figuratively running beside them, Los Angeles-based Greenberg and Freedman have sent out their the first draft. ("You know," Freedman warns wryly, "that the script isn't finished till opening night.")

Linden — a longtime theater star but best known as TV's "Barney Miller" — will star. And the audience in the 250-seat G&L Theatre will probably be peppered with more than its usual share of professional critics for the world premiere of "The Beast of Broadway."

Making it click

Almost everything about this play has become links snapping together:

* Danni talking with producer Larry Spellman (“Say Goodnight, Gracie”) about his wish for a one-star play for Linden just after Danni had read a Merrick biography.

* Former TheatreZone producer Larry Goodsight finding scriptwriters with a high musical IQ. Greenberg has written lyrics for Disney’s “High School Musical” films and Freedman won a Screenwriters Guild award for his work on the TV biopic, “Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows.”

* An information-rich tribute to Merrick, who churned out winning plays at the rate of eight a season during the late 1950s to the early 1970s, in New York Oct. 17. Danni, Greenberg and Freedman flew to New York to absorb every ounce of information they could sleuth at the event. One of its stars, former “42nd Street” hero Lee Roy Reams, shared his reminiscences of Merrick with the trio later at the legendary spot for that kind of discussion: Sardi’s.

Not everything clicked quickly, Danni concedes. Contracting for a play was navigating a print labyrinth.

“It was over my head. I called Larry (Goodsight) because I knew he’s good with numbers and all the strategic stuff this really needed,” Danni remembers.

“There’s a whole other world, where we had to get an entertainment lawyer, and I had to employ a New York City lawyer to draw up the contract.”

He also remembers the early discouraging words from Spellman about a play on Merrick: “Nobody’s going to come see a play about him.” (Spellman has since indicated he’ll attend the play here.) Danni also remembers his own skepticism about being able to get Greenberg, who has adapted lyrics for Diane Schuur and Earth, Wind and Fire: “She will never do this”

But he flew to LA to meet the two, loaded with CDs of Merrick's greats — "Hello, Dolly," "42nd Street" and "Gypsy" as well as a few turkeys; press clippings; and a lone tape of a Merrick TV interview. The writers warmed to the idea immediately. Merrick had created enough legends to be his own play. He hired pseudo-critics to write glowing reviews of a dud, "Subways Are for Sleeping"; is said to have outed philandering critics in classified ads if they panned his shows; and once sneaked a life-size nude statue in Central Park to publicize "Fanny." (The musical did benefit with a two-year run on Broadway.) Merrick produced an unparalleled 90 shows on Broadway.

"The whole idea of it being a one-man show — how everything is from that perspective — is a unique opportunity," said Greenberg in a phone interview from Los Angeles. Not to mention, she adds, how she and Freedman both feel about the two decades of Broadway in which Merrick productions were golden.

"We both share a great love for theater, and also share great love for what Merrick accomplished. It's been wonderful to delve back into the theater of the 1950s and 60s. We could do research for five years on this happily."

Actually, they add, they have spent much more time researching than writing. Merrick didn't write himself, and some of the people who were burned by his notorious temper refused to talk about him.

Merrick was married six times, with rarely amicable partings; even his biography called him "The Abominable Showman." Merrick died in 2000, after a stroke had effectively leveled him in 1983. However, Etan Aronson, who married him twice, talked freely with Greenberg and Freedman.

"One of our goals in writing this was to find the real David Merrick, the humanity in David Merrick. We wanted to know what his vulnerabilities were, and she was able to help us understand him much better," Freedman says.

“She made a point of letting us know that she has withheld that before. There have been a lot of things written that she felt were showing only one side of him,” adds Greenberg. “The reason she was willing to speak with us, we think, was to right some of that wrong.”

Freedom of speech

Danni says he gave Freedman and Greenberg carte blanche to create a play with multiple characters if they felt that was necessary. He’s glad they validated his first hope.

“I’m so glad it turned out to be a one-man show because I think it can be so powerful. If it’s one person, you’ve got to find his inner workings through soliloquy,” Danni observes. “He was known as a very harsh and uncaring, sometimes abusive, person. Yet they found some heart to the man — a lot of kindness. A lot of that meanness was true meanness, but some of it fabricated. It was part of the persona he wanted to be known as.”

Revelations of the softer showman won’t turn a producer whose forecast was generally stormy into Mr. Wonderful. But Freedman and Greenberg are mum about the details, except for their shared word about the result: “Excited!”

Attach Danni’s name to that word as well: He received the script Tuesday.

Commissioning a play is a costly venture. While Danni was not talking figures, a forthcoming book, “Stage Money: The Business of the Professional Theatre,” (University of South Carolina Press) estimates a researched play created by a nonprofit theater in New York, cost \$170,000 to bring to a workshop format.

“We’re all looking at the big picture here,” says Danni. He says everyone has agreed to lower paychecks now to invest in what the play can earn if it works its way onto major city stages.

“Everyone’s been very kind. The people were kind in taking smaller advances against their percentage of box office. They were kind in knowing TheatreZone is a not-for-profit theater,” he adds. He feels this play has enough financial support committed that it won’t do what Merrick’s own musical version of “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” did: close before opening night.

“We don’t have all the i’s dotted and the t’s crossed, but I’m confident we will have,” he says. “I have two top writers on this; we’ve done endless research; I think this is going to be everything we’re hoping.”

Danni’s voice is fading into the distance at this point. He’s still running, running, running toward next March.