

Hey, Mr. Producer, I'm Talking to You, Sir

by Brendan Lemon

From Berkeley to Broadway, David Binder has forged his own path.



David Binder is a producer, and when I asked him to define his profession during our recent interview at his office on West 14th Street, in New York, he replied, "To be a producer, you have to create the impression that everything is going forward all the time."

Over the past year, it's Binder's career that's been hurtling ahead. For Broadway, where this forty-six-year-old redhead has been lead producer or coproducer on seven shows, Binder put

together a hit staging of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* starring James Franco and Chris O'Dowd. Capitalized at \$3.8 million, the limited-run event recouped its investment. Of more glamorous import, however, was Binder's production, directed by Michael Mayer and starring Neil Patrick Harris, of the John Cameron Mitchell/Stephen Trask musical, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, which this past June won the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. And

if you think *Hedwig* is last season's story, I've got news for you: there are plans afoot to re-create the production in London and take it on tour. Andrew Rannells has taken over the title role from Harris on Broadway and Michael C. (Dexter) Hall takes it on starting October 16. Hedwig's glam boots were made for walking, and they're about to scale the world.

No one gets to an awards podium overnight, but even by the long-gestation norm of

show biz, Binder's triumph on Broadway was protracted. It began twenty-three years ago, shortly after the producer, fresh from the University of California, Berkeley, moved to New York and got a job as a production assistant on the Broadway musical *The Secret Garden*. Among the cast was Mitchell, playing the role of Dickon. After a month or so, Binder, who by his own admission had a bad attitude, got fired. But, he says, "[Garden was] one of the most important

Photo of Shannon and Jared Leto photographed by Damon Baker for FourTwoNine

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Above: **Andrew Rannells** as Hedwig at the Belasco Theatre
Photograph by Joan Marcus

jobs I had in my life because I met John.”

Of Binder during that show, Mitchell told me, “He took a lot of naps. He wasn’t the best P.A. [But] once he was in charge, he was fantastic. He is the best producer I’ve worked with in the theater. He cares what people think.”

And how did the *Hedwig* collaboration come about? “Around 1995,” recounted Binder, “John said to come to SqueezeBox [a downtown NYC club] and see what I’m working on.” Binder hadn’t produced anything on Broadway, but he had amassed a list of credits studded with as many big names as that of just about any twentysomething in the annals of New York’s strivers. For three years, starting in 1991, he produced holiday readings

of Truman Capote’s “A Christmas Memory” featuring the likes of Elaine Stritch, Kevin Spacey, and Stockard Channing. He assembled a benefit presentation on Broadway of Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, with introductions by Barbra Streisand. Binder, in other words, was no longer the California kid rubbing shoulders with rhinestones and paste; though he, in his charming, self-effacing way, says, “I just started putting things together.”

The *Hedwig* of SqueezeBox was not the full-blown glamazon she became in Mitchell’s 2001 movie or in Harris’s starry avatar. “She wasn’t even a full show yet,” Binder recalled. “She was a character. John was doing cover songs as that character, and I just helped him out.”

Hedwig and the Angry Inch had its first airing at the Westbeth Theatre in New York in 1997. “It was very much a first production,” Binder admitted. It ended with the song “You Light Up My Life”

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sung in German. It was not a glittering success. “Now everybody claims to have been there. If all these people were at Westbeth, we would have done much better.” The show closed after little more than a month.

Binder, who thinks of himself less as an old-fashioned theater producer than as a creator of “transformative experiences,” was not involved in the 1998 off-Broadway *Hedwig*. By then, Binder had turned his attention to *De La Guarda*, a water-filled, aerially awesome performance piece created in Argentina. Teaming with *Rent* producers Jeffrey Seller and Kevin McCollum (Binder had been a *Rent* investor), he brought the show to New York’s Union Square area. At first it struggled. “Those were the pre-social-media days,” Binder said, when it could take months to build word of mouth, and snail-mail post-cards were still used to promote product.

In October of 1998, fortunes shifted. “Celebrities come to see every show in New York,” Binder said. “One night, Leonardo DiCaprio came. He was hoisted up over the audience by a performer. Another night, the story was Janet Jackson dancing with a hot Argentine

guy.” These occasions turned into newspaper-column items, which spread the word. “From day one, people felt really passionate about that show,” Binder said, adding that “some people hated it because it was

loud, and you got wet. The haters were a small group, but they really hated it.” *De La Guarda*, he continued, happened long before the mainstream media,

focusing on recent hit New York shows like *Sleep No More* and *Here Lies Love*, started liberally employing the phrase “immersive theater.”

Binder was a trendsetter in another way. After seeing a production of Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, in 1999 at the Williamstown Theater Festival in Massachusetts, he managed to secure the rights to produce the work on Broadway. Five years went by before his production arrived there. Binder remembered how “[the theater establishment] said black audiences won’t come to Broadway,” and “African American artists said, ‘That play is dated.’”

Audiences disagreed. The casting of Sean “Puffy” Combs in the 2004 production helped make the play a hit, attracting younger, more diverse audiences than are usual on Broadway.

The *New York Times* subsequently credited Binder and his production with providing the “breakthrough” to bringing African Americans to midtown-Manhattan theater.

The 2004 production of *Raisin* and this year’s production of *Hedwig*, which Binder worked to assemble for six years, offer ample proof of

Continued on Page 124



Above:

David Binder (left) and Diqui James, creator of *De La Guarda* and *Fuerza Bruta*

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DAVID BINDER From Page 38

his confidence and persistence. Where do those traits come from? Binder's parents. "They both had businesses when I was growing up," he said. Each gave him the message that "there's nothing that you can't do."

It's easy to imagine Binder as a child with enthusiasms, since he still comes across as boyishly eager. This quality can be surprising to people who are used to a more corporate, less rock 'n' roll way of doing things. "People are joining a party when they join David's productions," Mitchell observed. "He doesn't give a shit if no one likes his enthusiasm."

Binder grew up in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, far from the beach: "I wasn't a surfer dude. I was a mall rat." His family went to the theater and would occasionally come to New York. "I once went through a box of letters from my teenage years," Binder said. "Everybody I knew came to New York to see *Cats*. Every letter was 'Dear David, I'm in the third row and *Cats* is about to begin.' Or 'I went to *Cats* and met Betty Buckley after the show.'"

Binder credits Mitchell with expanding his worldview beyond Grizzabella and Griddlebone. But his own work history and nightlife choices transformed him too. He was the assistant to director Tina Landau, later known for such productions as

Floyd Collins and *Wig Out!* He hung out at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, consuming more of the kind of fare he had seen at Cal Performances at Berkeley. Even now, as he's become associated with midtown shows, Binder is quick to define himself more broadly than Broadway: "*Hedwig* is a Broadway musical that doesn't look like any other Broadway musical. *Raisin* is a classic play, but we mashed it up with unexpected casting."

Binder's 2009 production of Moisés Kaufman's 33 *Variations*, about Beethoven and musicology, on Broadway, also drew attention for its unconventional choice of actor: Jane Fonda, whose career had been based overwhelmingly in the movies. Unlike *Hedwig* and *Raisin*, *Variations* came together Snapchat-fast. "Moisés called me," Binder remembered, "and I read the play and said, 'Let's get Jane Fonda.' We got to her very quickly. She read the play, she met Moisés, she agreed to it." Of Fonda, Binder said, "She's one of the most amazing people I've ever worked with. She's so clear."

With all this starry glamour, what tends to get buried in Binder's story is his commitment to a democratic, arts-festival aesthetic. He even gave a TED talk touching on the subject. The festivals he favors tend to be thrown in far-flung places.



Above: Chris O'Dowd (left) and James Franco in Binder's production of *Of Mice and Men*
Photograph by Richard Phibbs

(Binder's appetite for travel is as great as his appetite for *Hedwig*.) "Most of the festivals in North America are marketing constructs," he said, in which the people have to commit to specific shows in advance. Binder said that the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland and Oerol festival in the Netherlands, by contrast, create "zones of sociability. People come; they interact in new and unexpected ways. They come for one thing and see another."

Binder gave this philosophy a workout in 2009, when he was the American partner for the Dutch government-funded New Island Festival, inspired by Oerol, on Governors Island in New York. The festival celebrated the 400th anniversary of the Dutch arriving in Manhattan. Binder says New Island was "one of the most successful things I've done in my life." He added, "It was incredibly expensive. It ran at a loss, as planned." It could have happened only, he explained, with government support. "That kind of subsidy is what it takes to make a true festival, and generally in North America that subsidy is not available." Binder says that his "dream would be to have a festival in North America every year. I don't see a viable way to do it at this point."

In making that statement, Binder is bowing to economic reality. Yet part of his success as a producer stems from his ability *not* to get hung up only on money questions. "I'm not saying that money falls from the trees," he said. "But it is a renewable resource." Unlike first-rate talent, that is. He explained: "There's one John Cameron Mitchell. There's one James Franco. Those people are singular. That's where my focus is." At this point in his career, Binder has amassed an impressive pool of investors who share his philosophy and who are likely to help bankroll his future endeavors.

Those enterprises are still taking shape. "I spent the past six years on the Broadway production of *Hedwig* and three years on *Mice*. Now I get to take stock and say, what do I want to do next?"

His plans may even extend to changing his residence. He's lived in the same walk-up apartment in New York's Greenwich Village for twenty-four years. "I would like to live somewhere bigger," Binder said. "I'm thinking about moving. We'll see." His recent success would seem to have earned him the right to more palatial quarters. But in New York, he said, "The ultimate luxury is being able to walk to work."

TALLULAH, TRUMAN, AND ME From Page 46

retired look on their faces. Others, you know, are probably dead of AIDS in Indochina or something.

I like parties where there's a cross section of the world. And if somebody brings a goat or a camel—like Patricia Highsmith once brought her pet tortoise to one of my parties—that makes it even better. But you have to have a cross section of the world. I always tried to have worlds in collision. Youth and old age, richness and poverty, painting and poetry, stock market and

bordello. Worlds in collision. That's what makes a party.

I'd hate to be trapped in any little nasty world, whether it's the business world, the banking world, the garden club, the gays, the literary—I'd hate to be trapped in any little club. I belong to a union called international cats and monkeys. That's the union I belong to. So I see everybody. I can get through picket fences and over high walls other people don't. And I can dig out when I have to.

GIFT OF GARB From Page 89

TM Did you talk to them? Did you incorporate what they were doing into what you were doing?

CB I jested. I did my banter. The whole stage was shaking, and I was on *very* high heels.

TM That's exactly what I was saying during that interview with Craig. All that stuff was happening, and meanwhile you were performing. So you have to incorporate the threatening thing into the story, the thing that's trying to take the story away from you. You have to make it part of the story, or it's going to steal the story. As long as you acknowledge that the stage is shaking and the people are screwing right in front of you, you'll be okay.

CB And yet be funny. Because the audience will get nervous and turn off and feel bad for you. I've never ever wanted to be "Poor Charles." As soon as I'm "Poor Charles"—I may be there now, I don't know—but if I ever was, that's the time to get out. You always have to be in on the joke. And that's why, in a way, I've found when I started doing plays at the Limbo Lounge in the East

Village in the mid-'80s, I just thought it was so cool. I know some people in the show were kind of embarrassed. They didn't really want to tell their friends they were doing this. But to me life has always been about *the anecdote*. I'll do anything just for the sake of the anecdote. And the idea that we were doing this crazy play in this very sordid environment . . . well, I just thought it was perfectly divine. I loved feeling like Sally Bowles. I just always did. I never found that threatening at all. It might be because I was raised on Park Avenue by my Aunt Lillian. But I always got a kick out of the sordid side of life. If I had been raised in poverty, I might find that more threatening.

TM Or if you were raised in poverty, you would find it boring. And you'd want to be on Park Avenue.

CB Yeah. I always got a kick out of the seamy side of life like that and of wanting to be a part of this decadent underworld.

TM The decadent underworld where the bohemians live.