

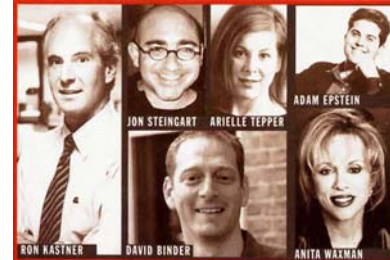


Legit babies sit on B'way's doorstep

By CLAUDE BRODESSER

It's Broadway: The next generation. The Fabulous Invalid is getting a shot of adrenaline from new producers who are mounting a slew of Broadway and Off Broadway shows, often with older producers serving as mentors.

"They bring lots of money to the table," says longtime legit producer Alexander H. Cohen. "On many occasions, we (the old school) need their help because of escalating costs. And they need us, because we usually get first shot at the material."



In the short term, the new blood is giving a boost to the biz. But in the longer run, the jury's still out on its contributions to the theater.

A generation ago, a would-be producer rose through the ranks first as an assistant company manager, then company manager, then general manager. With the contacts and an investor list, a few made the leap to producing.

Now, that method is as dated as footlights and greasepaint. The new producers come from businesses as diverse as marketing (Randall Wreghitt), the record industry (Ira Pittelman), education (David Binder), the agency biz (Jon Steingart), printing (Ron Kastner) -- even biotechnology (Anita Waxman).

"We are not lacking in terrific plays or playwrights," said Frederick Zollo, a vet producer of Broadway and Hollywood fare. "What we *do* lack are producers. These new guys bring new energy to us, they invigorate us."

Still, the arrival of these tyros is not always tranquil.

As the economics of theatrical producing continue to spiral upward, more and more producers are haphazardly partnering on projects -- with too-many-chefs results.

"It makes it very difficult for the people who work for them," said Jon Wilner, CEO and owner of Wilner Advertising, a seasoned Broadway ad shop. "It's made worse by the fact that the new guys all want to establish themselves, and make their voices heard, too. I often don't know which group to listen to."

The newcomers' abundant coin notwithstanding, many Broadway old-timers question the resolve of this fresh crop of producers.

"They're playing with us, and we're the other ballerina in this pas de deux," says one vet, insisting on anonymity. She adds ruefully: "If they don't make money on their projects, so what? If I don't, I have to go into dry cleaning or waiting tables."

Many new producers have transferred their business acumen to Broadway, and bring to the job a passion typical of recent converts. But so far, they generally rely on transfers, revivals and one-person shows -- Broadway's tried-and-true formula for the past few years.

Aside from the risks that producer Ron Kastner took with "Side Man" and David Binder took with "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," few seem anxious to nurture unproven artists.

And, in a telling comment on the Broadway scene, they seem content to leave musicals -- a much-needed commodity -- to multinational conglomerates, not-for-profits and endless corporate sponsorships.

Many of the new breed have not given up their day jobs -- even though established producers like Roy Gabay insist that's the only way to really be effective on Broadway.

But the newcomers retort that it's their day jobs skills that allow them to produce differently and in fact they represent a mix of entrepreneurs, rich kids, techies and business execs.

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With that cash injection, she's taking a cue from David Binder, a peer who's one of the most successful guerrilla producers around.

Binder, 31, is a former substitute teacher in Gotham's public schools, who has managed to turn chutzpah into box office gold.

The son of a florist and a clothing wholesaler, he lacked the real cash to produce theater, instead focusing on producing theatrical events.

In 1990, he produced a staged reading of Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory" that alternately starred Kevin Spacey, Stockard Channing and Christine Baranski and went on to run three seasons. Shows were produced "on my credit cards."

Later, after one of Binder's spies confirmed Barbra Streisand's arrival at a play, he immediately printed a letter soliciting her to emcee a reading of Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart," and sprinted into the theater to hand it to her.

She accepted. "Heart" soon hit Broadway for one night only, with John Turturo, Eric Bogosian and Kevin Bacon, with Jerry Zaks at the helm.

"We never dealt with agents or managers or publicity. After all, who the hell is going to take a 23-year-old kid seriously?"

Now, lots of people take him seriously. He's the force behind the Off Broadway hit "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" -- slated to be a New Line pic -- and the Public Theater's special presentation of Lisa Kron's "2.5 Minute Ride."

With "Rent" producers Jeff Sellers and Kevin McCollum, and "Wit" producer Daryl Roth (and later, Tepper), he's producing "De La Guarda," the Off Broadway hit that features Argentine acrobats in what he describes as "part rave, part circus, part theatrical event, and at the same time, none of those things."

Binder is now aiming to produce a revue, "Julian Fleisher and His Rather Big Band," a '30s and '40s mix of story and song for Off Broadway, and is working to raise the funding for a Broadway play.

"Now, people (investors) present themselves to me," Binder says. "And after all this free-form stuff, like 'Hedwig' and 'De La Guarda,' I am ready to do something text-based, on Broadway, and bring downtown audiences uptown."