

SELLING OUT WITH DAVID BINDER

DATE: JULY 17, 2014

POSTED BY: JESSICA KOSLOW

CATEGORY: SELLING OUT WITH



David Binder

The cliché “you’re on a roll” fits Broadway producer David Binder quite nicely right now. His current Broadway revival of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* received four Tony Awards last month and just this week recouped its initial capitalization investment, less than four months after beginning performances. *Of Mice and Men*, starring Chris O’Dowd, James Franco and Leighton Meester, recouped its \$3.8 million capitalization in just 12 weeks.

Binder zigzags between mainstream productions like *A Raisin in the Sun* (starring Sean Combs, Audra McDonald, Phylicia Rashad and Sanaa Lathan) and *33 Variations* (starring Jane Fonda) and genre-defying shows like *De La Guarda* and *Fuerza Bruta*. He also dabbles in international productions, like *This Is Our Youth* with Michael Cera and Kieran Culkin at the

Sydney Opera House, and his TED Talk, "[The Arts Festival Revolution](#)," has been seen online by over one-and-a-half million people. Below, Binder shares with us why musicals coming to TV is a great thing, how he's using performance to tell stories for big brands like IBM and Condé Nast, and what his Of Mice and Men marketing strategy — run away from anything that says "spinach" — means.

Selling Out: Congratulations on your big Tony win for Hedwig and the Angry Inch. It's been a long time coming.

David Binder: 20 years! Who would have ever thought, really? We started to make this crazy story about a rock 'n' roller from East Berlin who had a botched sex-change operation because we wanted to. Because it was a great story. Because Stephen Trask wrote great songs. Who would've ever thought we would have ended up here on Broadway 20 years later? And then to be recognized like this — it's beyond our wildest dreams.



Broadway revival of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch." Photo Credit: Joan Marcus

SO: We heard that you initially weren't sure you understood [writer] John Cameron Mitchell's vision for the production. As a producer, did you have concerns about the audience "getting it"?

DB: Yes and no. At the beginning, I didn't fully understand everything JCM and Trask were trying to say. But as a producer, that's actually a good thing. Because if you get it all from the beginning, then how can it sustain you through the many years of development and production? And if it's so simple from the beginning, how will it sustain an audience? So no, I didn't get everything in the beginning. It would take time to find out how to best communicate Ms. Hedwig's story.

SO: There were a few challenges in getting audiences to Hedwig at the Westbeth Theatre in NYC when it opened in March 1997. Can you tell us what specifically you did — what marketing, advertising, ticket-pricing programs — to become so successful? Or was there some other reason that you can think of why the show reached cult status?

DB: Oh, let's be clear — no one came to see the show at Westbeth! It was too rock 'n' roll for the gays and the theater people. The downtown crowd sneered at the word musical. And yet, what's sort of funny is now everyone tells me how they saw the show there! But in truth, we couldn't give the tickets away. The show would find its audience in its subsequent production at the Jane Street Theatre. I think it was a long, slow burn there. Remember, this was before social media, and a show would take months to find an audience off-Broadway.

SO: You do a lot of other things besides Broadway — off-Broadway, festivals, special events.

DB: I love working in different formats, for different kinds of audiences. I've done some exciting work with some really innovative companies. I've worked with HP, Condé Nast and for the past four years, IBM. These brands are really interested in utilizing performance to tell their stories. In 2011, I produced IBM's 100 anniversary at Lincoln Center. The evening was about our century of progress, and to tell that story we had everyone from Joshua Bell and Jessye Norman to De La Guarda, from Steve Martin to the Juilliard Orchestra. It was co-directed by Moisés Kaufman, who I did 33 Variations with, and Kinky Boots' Jerry Mitchell [director, choreographer]! I love bringing artists from one arena to another.

SO: After a 40-year absence, you brought Of Mice and Men back to Broadway. The show, starring Chris O'Dowd, James Franco and Leighton Meester, has recouped its \$3.8 million capitalization in just 12 weeks. What marketing strategies did you use to make a Steinbeck classic relevant and appealing to audiences today?

DB: What Eric Schnall, the show's brilliant marketing director, and I have done is to get rid of any sense in the campaign that the show is important or good for you. We run away from anything that says "spinach." We know everyone had to read Mice in school, and no one particularly remembers homework as being fun. So we worked against that.



Of Mice and Men's James Franco and Chris O'Dowd

Instead our message has been, “this is a fantastic night of theater” and “come see our amazing cast.” We had these very contemporary photographers, Robert Maxwell and Richard Phibbs, shoot the ad campaigns. The look is clean and crisp and clear. And, of course, we really embraced social media. Everyone knows James Franco is a social media superstar. His circulation is higher than The New York Times. Really! So having a vital presence on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., really drove thousands of people to Mice. And finally, in the end, Steinbeck delivers. People leave the theater and they’ve had this fantastic, moving experience.

SO: You produced the first Broadway revival of *A Raisin in the Sun* with a cast that included Sean Combs, Audra McDonald, Phylicia Rashad and Sanaa Lathan. You then produced it for TV. Some people argue that broadcasting live events is bad for the live entertainment industry. We at *Selling Out* think the opposite. There are a number of musicals heading to TV now. Do you believe broadcasting live events is good for the live entertainment industry, and why do you think so?

DB: We have seen again and again that a movie can sell a show. The numbers are there to prove it. *Chicago* the movie came along and helped sell *Chicago* the show. The National Theatre has proved this again and again with NTLive. So I think that musicals coming to TV is a great thing. As long as they’re good!

SO: What’s next for you?

DB: After two Broadway shows and last month’s *Deblozay*, a performance piece in London I co-produced with LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) and GDIF (Greenwich Docklands International Festival), I’m thinking about a

beach! Ah, that might be lovely. But I'm also super excited for Andrew Rannells' first performance on August 20 as Hedwig! Hope to see you there.