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Tony-Winning Producer David Binder on How He and 'Hedwig' Met



David Binder

By **Stephanie Cohen**
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David Binder, Tony-winning producer of **"Hedwig and the Angry Inch,"** met **John Cameron Mitchell** in 1991, when he was working for **"The Secret Garden"** on Broadway. Mr. Mitchell was playing the role of Dickon, and Mr. Binder was a production assistant — until he got fired. "I was terrible at it," he says, "but it was one of my most successful jobs in my entire career because I met John."

A few years later, Mr. Mitchell gave Mr. Binder a script to read. Mr. Binder says he didn't really understand it, but he liked it. "I remember sitting in my apartment on 13th street, in my walk-up, reading 'Hedwig' out loud to a friend and laughing so hard," says Mr. Binder, who won the Tony for best musical revival for "Hedwig" last night, almost 20 years after he and the creators first discussed it.

"John had this vision for this incredible thing," said Mr. Binder. "I didn't quite understand all of it, but I was like, what is this weird, cool thing? Let me hold it up to the light and see all the light going through it."

Mr. Binder had never produced a show before, but he'd produced events — the **Drama Desk Awards** and a reading of **"The Normal Heart,"** hosted by **Barbara Streisand**, among other things. He said he knew that "Hedwig" co-creator **Stephen Trask** and Mr. Mitchell were going to find a way to get the show made one way or another, and he wanted to produce it for them.

"Frankly, I don't think there were too many other takers," he says.

He hit up friends, family, and whoever he could for the \$30,000 he needed to stage the show. He found 10 people to put up \$2,400 each — one investor was the actress **Christine Taylor** who is now married to **Ben Stiller**, Mr. Binder says. Another was **Alize**, a liquor company that put up \$5,000 (and which Mr. Mitchell drinks in the film version of "Hedwig.") The original investors made their money back, says Mr. Binder.

"I don't think anyone did it because they thought, 'This is going places,'" he says. "They just wanted to support these guys."

The show opened at the **Westbeth Theatre** in New York City in March 1997. It was "too rock 'n' roll for the gays, and too downtown for the theater crowd," says Mr. Binder, but "you could see there was something there." Their friends, especially the more artistic ones, told them to keep working on it. The show ran for four or five weeks, he said, but began to attract publicity and some attention. It was remounted at the

Jane Street Theater (Mr. Binder did not produce that version of the show) a year later where it ran for two years and became the darling of the downtown theater scene.

In the meantime, people began taking Mr. Binder more seriously, he said. He went to see "**De La Guarda**" at a festival and loved it — and because of his experience with "Hedwig," he was able to convince producers **Jeffrey Seller** and **Kevin McCollum** to get on a flight to the U.K. with him to watch it. They booked the show and brought it to New York in 1998, where it became the most expensive off-Broadway show at that time, at \$1.3 million. "Hedwig" allowed people to listen to me and trust me," he said. He's currently producing "Deblozay," a piece about Haitian voodoo beliefs as part of the LIFT 2014 Festival in London this month.

Then, six years ago, he was talking to Mr. Trask and Mr. Mitchell about staging a one-night concert of "Hedwig," but realized that made no sense, and that they should just do the show again. At first, Mr. Mitchell was going to play "Hedwig" again, but decided against it. Mr. Binder approached **Neil Patrick Harris** about playing the part and he liked the idea, but scheduling was tough. For years they tried to find a chunk of time while Mr. Harris was on hiatus from "**How I Met Your Mother**" but they couldn't make it work. Finally, it became clear the TV show was going to end, and they were ready to bring the show to Broadway.

"When we did the readings and workshops 20 years ago, we never pictured this," says Mr. Binder. "It's like the dream of a lifetime."