

'Beast' explores prolific Broadway legend

Naples 1-man show centers around producer Merrick

BY AMY SOWDER • ASOWDER@NEWS-PRESS.COM • FEBRUARY 27, 2010

He's been called everything in the book.

A beast. Abominable. Cruel.

Of course, a few words that won't be mentioned.

But David Merrick was nothing if not prolific.

In his monstrous, ego-centric yet brilliant manner, Merrick solely produced the most Broadway plays and musicals in entertainment history. About 85 of them.

He did it with his own money after his first smash hit, and he was willing to risk it all on his creative vision.

His daring dasher-do might have masked a deeper, sensitive side, some say.

Or did it?

With humor, wit and intrigue, director Mark Danni's "The Beast of Broadway" world premiere at TheatreZone in Naples will delve into the dimensions that make Merrick tick.

"While he's probably not a household name to non-theater people, his plays are," Danni says.

Audiences will explore the psyche of the man who brought big-budget blockbusters such as "Gypsy," "Hello, Dolly," "Oliver," "Stop the World — I Want to Get Off" and "42nd Street."

Despite all his success, Merrick was the most hated man in show business.

"His antics are notorious. He was ruthless to critics," Danni says.

Based in part on the best-selling book "The Abominable Showman" by Howard Kissel, writers Faye Greenberg ("High School Musical") and Robert L. Freedman (TV's "Cinderella") chose an intense, pivotal point in Merrick's life for the story they adapted to stage.

The play focuses on opening night of "42nd Street": Aug. 25, 1980.

Something life-shattering happens, something even Merrick couldn't have orchestrated.

As he battles his despair with his desire to capitalize, the play is interspersed with reflections of his past publicity stunts.

Danni got the idea after meeting an L.A. producer who wanted to find a vehicle for actor Hal Linden, the Tony Award winner best known for his role on the TV show “Barney Miller.”

Danni pitched the idea of adapting the Howard Kissel book, and the producer (and Linden) went for it.

Then they got to thinking: it’s a one-man show and pretty physically taxing.

So Linden decided to pass on this one, and Danni offered the part to David Garrison, who, at 57, is about 20 years younger.

Garrison is best known as the nerdy neighbor Steve Rhoades on TV’s “Married With Children.”

“To this day I still get stopped on the street by people saying, ‘Hey Steve, where’s Marcy?’” he says.

Garrison left “Married” after four seasons to return to Broadway.

“I didn’t want to get typecast as the geek next door,” Garrison says.

He didn’t.

Garrison was nominated for a Tony Award for his role in “A Day in Hollywood/A Night in Ukraine.” He performed in the Tony-winning “Titanic,” and was the Wizard of Oz in the first run of “Wicked” on Broadway.

He’s had recurring roles on TV’s “Law & Order,” “West Wing” and “The Practice.”

Still, Garrison was flattered to be offered the role of Merrick in a one-man show.

Pausing while memorizing lines at home in New York, Garrison said he researched the part by reading books on Merrick and talking to people close to the producer.

Some people told Garrison the producer was a jerk. Others said he was charming and accommodating.

“His moods were as changeable as New England weather. Of course, much of his behavior was calculated for effect,” Garrison says.

There may have been a disconnect between the public and private Merrick.

Research leads Garrison to believe Merrick had an unhappy childhood which caused him to seek the cheering approval of audiences.

Merrick’s third wife dragged him to a psychiatrist who put him on medication, but the producer quit the meds because it impeded his creativity.

“Unfortunately, in this business, to be a success you have to be a monster in some way,” Garrison says. “He may have had what we call today bipolar disorder but I don’t want to be a dime-store psychiatrist.”

Writers Greenberg and Freedman also talked to those who lived and worked with Merrick.

“He had a nasty reputation and a tumultuous personal life,” Greenberg says.

He had six marriages, five of which ended in divorce. The last marriage ended with his death in April 2000.

Still, Merrick took ownership of his plays and musicals, down to the smallest detail, even when he had six or seven shows running simultaneously.

“Like all great generals, he knew what the enlisted man was eating,” Garrison says. “In this case, chorus boy.”

And Merrick did it time and time again, as the sole producer.

Today’s shows have upwards of 30 producers who usually play it safe and just write the checks, Greenberg says.

“What I was really unprepared for was the list of his shows. It’s a history of theater in the latter part of the 20th century, and it’s one man,” she says.

Greenberg and Freedman tried to write a funny, entertaining play — not scholarly.

“We don’t have a line of 52 dancers like he did, but we’ll have 52 jokes in it,” she says.



Actor David Garrison rehearses for the production “Beast of Broadway” under the direction of Mark Danni, founder of TheatreZone in Naples. (Special to new-press.com)



Prolific producer David Merrick working at his desk. (Special to new-press.com)

IF YOU GO

- What: TheatreZone's "The Beast of Broadway," an original, funny play about the prolific, infamous Broadway producer David Merrick.
 - When: March 4 to 6 at 8 p.m., March 6 and 7 at 2 p.m., March 10 to 13 at 8 p.m. and March 14 at 2 p.m.
 - Where: G&L Theater, 13275 Livingston Rd., on the campus of the Community School of Naples.
 - Tickets or information: Call 888-ZONE-FLA 888-966-3352 or visit theatrezone-florida.com
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