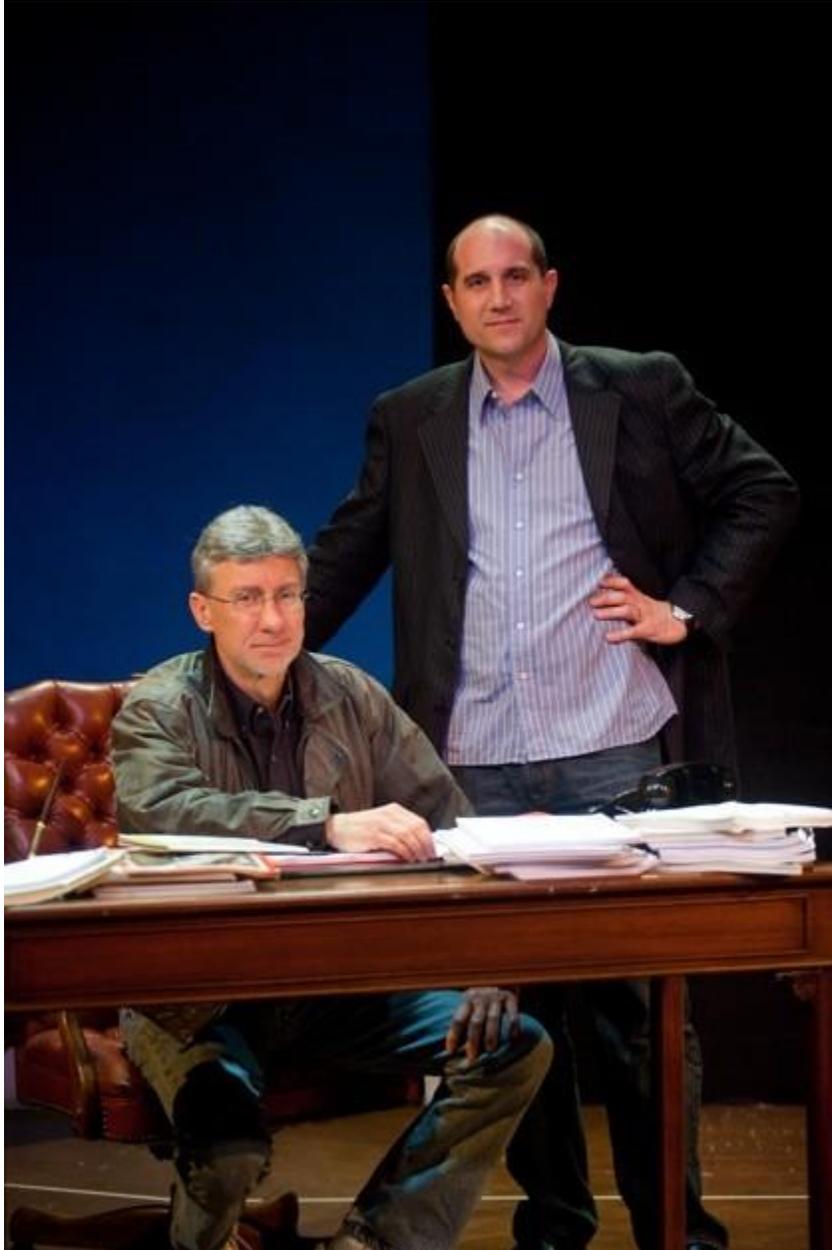


# Gulf Coast Business Review

## Way off Broadway

BY: JEAN GRUSS | EDITOR/LEE-COLLIER

February 25, 2010



Actor David Garrison, seated, rehearses *The Beast of Broadway* at Theatre Zone in Naples. Mark Danni, standing, is the theater's artistic director who hopes the one-man play will reach Broadway.

What's the secret to having a play become a Broadway hit?

Get as far away from New York City as possible.

Just ask the producers of *Jersey Boys*, the hit musical that won four Tony awards in 2006, including Best Musical and Best Actor.

*Jersey Boys* got its start at the small La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, Calif., where its director tweaked the show and got it ready for the big time away from the critics' harsh glare.

Mark Danni hopes he can accomplish a similar feat at Theatre Zone, a small theater in Naples that has attracted some big-name actors in recent years.

Danni, the theater's artistic director, put together an original play called *The Beast of Broadway*. It stars David Garrison, best known outside theater circles for his role on the popular TV show *Married with Children*.

*The Beast of Broadway* is a one-man play that recounts the life of David Merrick, one of the best-known Broadway producers. It is co-authored by Faye Greenberg, who has also written the hit *High School Musical*. It opens March 4 and runs for two weeks at the G&L Theatre on the campus of the Community School of Naples.

If it turns into the hit that Danni and others hope it becomes, *Beast of Broadway* could bring the small Naples theater the same kind of fame and fortune *Jersey Boys* brought the La Jolla Playhouse. "I came here to do something big," says the 43-year-old Danni. "I didn't come here to retire."

The nonprofit Theatre Zone spent about \$50,000 for the show, including the rights to stage the premiere, Garrison's performances and the production costs such as costumes and advertising. "If it goes big in Naples, it'll be huge in New York," Danni says.

If the show is successful on Broadway, the non-profit Theatre Zone will likely get a percentage of the profits it generates and its name will forever be mentioned in playbills as the first theater to stage the play. Its reputation as a birthing center for Broadway hits will be sealed, bringing more attention from artists and producers.

For now, however, the life of the show is two weeks. "These audiences are the test market," Danni says. Producers from New York and elsewhere will come to Naples to see the show, Danni says. If they choose to take it to Broadway, then negotiations will begin with the writers, the actor, the director and the theater.

In a relative sense, \$50,000 to stage an original production with established writers and actors is not expensive. Everyone is betting that the show will be a hit and make money when it reaches Broadway, says Ellen Elleman, the theater's managing director.

Ticket sales help, of course, but Theatre Zone has a group of donors who contribute regularly. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, contributions to Theatre Zone totaled about \$57,000 out of total revenues of nearly \$326,000, according to its latest tax return.

Still, there were some unexpected expenses that cropped up for this show. For example, attorneys' fees totaled about \$15,000 to draft agreements with the writers and the actor. Danni and Elleman had to ask donors to cover those costs. "We were pleasantly surprised how the donor base stepped up," Elleman says.

Although Danni and Elleman decline to say how much the writers and actor were paid, they say it's much less than the salaries they command on larger stages. "Everybody's betting on the come," Elleman says.

—*Jean Gruss*