

Review: Garrison tames 'Beast of Broadway' Merrick at TheatreZone

- By [CHRIS SILK](#)
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Tony-nominated actor David Garrison takes the stage in his one-man show about legendary Broadway producer David Merrick. The world premiere of "The Beast of Broadway," brought to you by TheatreZone, at the G&L Theatre on the campus of The Community School of Naples. *Photo courtesy TheatreZone*

The Beast of Broadway - TheatreZone





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IF YOU GO

'The Beast of Broadway'

What: A one-man show exploring the life of theater legend David Merrick

When: 8 p.m. today through Saturday and Wednesday through March 13, matinees at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Sunday and March 14

Where: The G&L Theatre, 13275 Livingston Road

Admission: \$38 and \$42

Information: (888) 966-3352 (888) 966-3352 or theatrezone-florida.com

NAPLES — David Merrick was a monster, nicknamed the "abominable showman." Actor David Garrison tames him in TheatreZone's world premiere of "The Beast of Broadway," a saucy, snarky, intimate and deliciously dishy night of stage gossip that peeks into Merrick's career as a kingpin of the Great White Way.

"The Beast of Broadway," based in part on former New York Daily News theater critic Howard Kissel's hefty biography "The Abominable Showman," catches Merrick as he prepares for the opening night of "42nd Street," his last, greatest hit. TheatreZone's artistic director Mark Danni hopes to take the show on tour - first in Florida and then on to Broadway..

"Beast" seems a misnomer for the witty and entertaining show that plays out on stage. Co-writers Robert L. Freedman and Faye Greenberg pepper the script with anecdotes from four decades of theatrical history and name-check dozens of shows - hits ("Hello, Dolly!"), flops ("Mata Hari") and everything in between ("A Taste of Honey"). Jokes, one-liners and gags fly thick and fast, greased along by Garrison's sharp comic timing; the audience cackles like a busy henhouse.

"Beast" tries to equate Merrick's loneliness with his drive to succeed; there's no accident that this is a one-man show with multiple angry phone calls to assistants, references to ex-wives and anonymous deliveries of suits, flowers and ice cream. Despite these efforts and, there's little sign of what makes David Merrick tick.

The humor, while it makes for a breezy evening, masks Merrick's essential nastiness - and the personality that earned him the "Beast of Broadway" title. The man wasn't just mean, he was a tyrant on a grand scale. The show downplays that in favor of laughs,

making Merrick's antics seem more P.T. Barnum-style promotional gimmicks than the ruthless Machiavellian rumblings they were.

Merrick's stunt of keeping Gower Champion's death secret in order to announce the news during curtain call on the opening night of "42nd Street" caused such lingering animosity as to be mentioned in his obituary two decades later. "Beast" shows audiences the incident, but never digs into the context of just how underhanded the deed was.

Garrison, dapper in a dark suit with a royal blue tie and pocket square, peddles the tales with a practiced hand. He flits about the stage - from Playbill and script-strewn desk to a Fanta-stocked refrigerator (a clever nod to "The Fantasticks," created by longtime Merrick collaborators Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones) and a memento-filled set. He shifts from charming (tales of Pearl Bailey's obstinacy) to acerbic (opinions on critics, actors, wives, et al.) in a flash, although the script softens Merrick's rougher edges.

If you think he's whispering - he probably is, but it is all part of the act; the real David Merrick practiced a subtle power play by speaking in a low voice to force everyone in the room to lean toward him. I applaud the authenticity, but not the application in front of an unsophisticated audience that fidgets, rustles, creaks and otherwise makes plenty of noise for 95 minutes.

Kirk V. Hughes' set, with carmine walls (the show tells us he favored a bloody shade known as "David Merrick Red") and white trim, establishes an airy apartment with little more than a few panels and windows - the first time TheatreZone's stage has seemed spacious. Garrison gains plenty of room to pace and places to interact with objects - like memorabilia from Merrick's hit shows. Posters for "Hello, Dolly!" "Fanny," "Carnival," "Oliver," "I Do! I Do!" and others line the walls, with "42nd Street" front and center.

Rights to the choicest tunes from Merrick's laundry list of iconic shows must be prohibitive, which means music plays less of a role in the show than audiences might suspect. Dramatic lighting effects, from Phillip Watson, take advantage of the open set design, but suffer in execution with abrupt transitions that don't so much signal a shift in mood as shout it from the rooftops.

"Beast" serves up an interesting and amusing evening of theater trivia and a portrait of one of Broadway's titans. The show doesn't dig deep into Merrick's demons or motivations, but does offer a fascinating glimpse into the psyche that became "The Beast of Broadway."

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