

Broadway's 'Beast' in world premiere here

- By [JONATHAN FOERSTER](#)
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David Garrison's rehearses with Mark Danni for the one-man show "Beast of Broadway." Submitted photo

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 \$4

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



Actor David Garrison is coming to TheatreZone's world premiere of "The Beast of Broadway," a one-character play about prolific Tony Award-winning American theatrical producer David Merrick. Photo courtesy TheaterZone

David Merrick is possibly the most famous Broadway producer of all time. He's also, perhaps, the most infamous.

Notoriously hot-tempered, but also brilliant, Merrick made a career of making hits on the Great White Way. Now a one-man play exploring his life is making its world premiere in Naples.

TheatreZone's production of "The Beast of Broadway," is both a departure for the theater, which has made its bones reviving "hidden gem" Broadway musicals — and a investment by the principals. If things go poorly, years of work, months of revision and weeks of rehearsal will be for naught.

But if things go well, it could be the propulsive force that sends this play to Merricks' old stomping grounds, and bring a little fame and fortune to the brain trust behind it.

We asked four of those people — actor David Garrison, director Mark Danni and co-writers Faye Greenberg and Robert Freedman — three questions about the man, the play and its possibilities for the future.

On the man

Naples Daily News: Would you have worked for David Merrick, and how long do you think you would have lasted?

David Garrison, actor: (laughter) Yes, I would have worked for him and I think we have gotten along just fine because (laughter), I think we share the same dark and twisted sense of humor. I'm a pretty good foot soldier and Merrick appreciated performers who showed up on time and did their job. I am not temperamental. ...I don't believe in missing performances unless I'm missing a limb. I've worked when I've had laryngitis. Merrick's passion was the theater and he respected and supported people with the same passion. Half the people you talk to who worked with him loved him, and the other half hated him. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

Faye Greenberg, co-writer: Great questions. Yes, I would have worked with David Merrick. In talking to the many people we did to prepare the script, we learned that Merrick fought tooth and nails to keep a show running. As a writer, to work with someone who champions your work is exceptional. Although Merrick is the type of producer that you would need a break from. You'd have to pick and choose productions — "I can't do this one. I'll do this one" — and work together again.

Robert Freedman, co-writer: I probably would have worked with him knowing that I had a chance to work on a great show with a great producer. The people we met through our research either loved him or hated him with equal measure. Most of the people who worked with Merrick, if not all of them, worked with Merrick again and again. In fact, one of the parts of the play "The Beast of Broadway," retells how he worked with director Gower Champion. Although Merrick and Gower (who worked on seven Broadway shows together) fought like cats and dogs — at each other's throats on everything — they were smart enough to know and respected each other's talent to work together again.

These were no minor disagreements. We're talking about walking off the show, storming out of the theater and making threats to each other. These were not minor disagreements; these were epic battles. In fact, when Gower Champion worked on his last show with David Merrick, "42nd Street," Merrick was banned from the theater. Champion had a clause in his contract that stated that producer David Merrick was not permitted to attend rehearsals for "42nd Street" without Gower Champion's express permission and David Merrick accepted those terms, because he knew that Champion was right for the show.

Mark Danni, director: I would have absolutely worked for him, just to have his name on my resume. To work with someone who was able to produce such a wealth of work and so many hits would have been an incredible experience. How long would I have lasted before he fired me? Hopefully, he'd never fire me.

On the play

Daily News: What kind of pressure is involved in premiering a play? Is it freeing to not have a precedent for how things should look? How so?

Freedman: Because of our terrific producer, Larry Goodright, and director, Mark Danni, who have been supportive, creative, and wonderfully collaborative, there isn't pressure. It's the pressure that Faye and I put on ourselves because we want this to be the best play possible. Yes, it is very freeing to have a world premiere so we can all of us — the actor, writers and director — have a great deal of freedom to present the play as we see it.

Danni: Freeing isn't the word, it's exciting and challenging because there nobody before you has staged it. No one has even ever designed the set. ...The other thing is that a premiere is very collaborative, because you're working (with) the writers and they have very specific ideas about the show. The writers have a vision. It's sort of like having Thornton Wilder sitting in the room with you while you're doing "Our Town."

Garrison: There is a fair amount of pressure. But in this case, you're trying to do justice to human being who walked the face of the earth. There's a certain responsibility to honor, or attempt to be as fair to the person as possible. Beyond that, there's a particular challenge to being the only guy on stage. There's nobody there to throw you a lifeline.

On the future

Daily News: What is the ultimate goal for this production and for the play itself? How do you accomplish that goal?

Danni: (To get) the play on Broadway. We accomplish that by generating an interest from producers who are coming to Naples to look at it. Get them interested, do a tour

around Florida and then get it to New York. ...And it's all very possible. "The Beast of Broadway" is very appealing to New York audiences because David Merrick is a theatrical icon.

Garrison: At the moment, (the goal) is to fulfill the authors' intent as best as I can and let them see their work embodied for the first time. Beyond that, it will depend on the audiences' reactions and the playwrights' reactions to the piece. Hopefully, it will have a life beyond. It is a team project from the first words being put on paper. Right now, we are just trying to give it life.

Greenberg: The ultimate goal is for the play to have a life around the country and go onto New York. To really accomplish that goal is really the job of Mark Danni and Larry Goodsight, but we're hoping to do is really get a sense of what we have and make sure the production is the best possible piece. ...No matter how many times we go over the play, as writers, we may have questions, but we try to fix them.

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