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Margo Lion

By Jenna Schnuer

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Baltimore and big girls who like to dance aren't typical theater fare, but thanks to the vision of producer Margo Lion, both have been shaking up Broadway since August in the smash hit "Hairspray." A Baltimore native, Ms. Lion approached New Line Cinema about optioning filmmaker John Waters' most mainstream flick in 1998.

"It's a story about a larger than life character who really wants something and has to overcome obstacles to get it. It has a traditional story structure, but the idiosyncratic voice I appreciate," says Ms. Lion, 58.

When she first played such show tunes as "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now" for Nancy Coyne, CEO of New York Broadway agency Serino Coyne, Ms. Coyne told her: "This is going to be your home run." The Broadway agency created the advertising logo for the show and handled some media.

"This was one woman's vision," says one of the show's publicists, Don Summa of Richard Kornberg & Associates, of Ms. Lion.

The advance ticket sales for "Hairspray" were some of the best in the history of Broadway. And the show's weekly gross hasn't stopped climbing. For the four weeks ended Sept. 29, 2002, the average weekly gross was \$885,268; for the four weeks ended Jan. 26, 2003, the average weekly gross was \$992,191.

Producer and general manager Richard Frankel of Baruch-Viertel-Routh-Frankel Group says it spent \$1 million to \$1.5 million to market "Hairspray" before it opened and about \$75,000 per week since.

Ms. Lion's talent for assembling and working with an A-list marketing team hasn't hurt either.

MARKETER LINKS HELPED

Why did "Hairspray" take hold? Try unexpectedly good timing, a bold image, the ultra-catchy early 1960s-inspired music, and "Hairspray"-influenced programs with companies including Bloomingdale's and M.A.C. cosmetics. Also, "John Waters [has] been terrifically cooperative. It's important for the public and critics to know that he approved," says Ms. Lion.

The show's non-traditional August opening was driven by the director's availability. The press, hungry for something new and fun to write about, got stuck on "Hairspray." Stories about-or inspired by-the show appeared everywhere from multiple sections of The New York Times (from "Arts/Leisure" to "Home") and New York Magazine to TV Guide, women's titles, the gay press and teen magazines.

"It's fun and about a big American subject, race. It celebrates a great deal that's important ... inclusion and diversity and [how] one person can make a difference."

As for the show's Serino Coyne-designed bold blue hair logo: "I was particularly vocal about wanting a lot of outdoor advertising. It's a show with broad popular appeal and a happy logo. You walk down the street, see it and smile," she says.

The team is unanimous when it comes to the show's biggest selling point-the music. "It just has such joy in it," says Tanya Grubich, partner with TMG-The Marketing Group. A pre-opening direct mailing of 325,000 sampler CDs received a 7% response rate.

"[The music] puts a smile on [people's] face, and they reach for a credit card," says Mr. Frankel.