

## Lion makes a killing

**There's no predicting a winner in theatre, Margo Lion, producer of the hit Broadway musical *Hairspray*, tells MICHAEL POSNER. But the dividends are enormous when it happens**

MICHAEL POSNER

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It was January, 1998, the depth of winter. On Broadway, two new musicals were going gangbusters -- *The Lion King* and *Ragtime*. A third, *The Triumph of Love*, starring Betty Buckley and F. Murray Abraham, had just closed, despite critical acclaim. Seriously depressed, its lead producer, Margo Lion, retreated to her apartment on New York's Riverside Drive. She'd been producing shows for 20 years. Maybe, she thought, it was time to quit. Nursing a cold, she rented a batch of movie videos, among them John Waters's 1988 cult classic *Hairspray*. Ten minutes into the film, her spirits lifted; she had found her next project.

Of course, it took Lion another four years to bring *Hairspray*, the musical, to Broadway's Neil Simon Theatre -- a relatively fast track by New York standards. But her instincts proved impeccable. Starring Marissa Jaret Winokur, the story of feisty, overweight Tracy Turnblad's campaign to integrate a teen-dance television show in racially divided 1962 Baltimore was showered with awards (eight Tonys and 10 Drama Desks).

Lion, who had her single most valuable asset -- her Manhattan apartment -- evaluated for possible sale, is now reaping serious financial dividends. On the eve of *Hairspray*'s opening at Toronto's Princess of Wales Theatre on May 5, Lion said in a recent interview, the Broadway production has already recouped 186 per cent of its original \$10.5-million (U.S.) budget.

There's more moolah flowing from a national touring production in the U.S., and a new film version of the musical is in the works; New Line is producing. Eventually, a London version will also be staged.

Will Toronto audiences respond as positively as New Yorkers? Actually, the show may do even better. Mounted in conjunction with the Mirvish organization, the Canadian *Hairspray* will cost about \$10-million, a saving of roughly 40 per cent. With anticipated box-office revenues of about \$1-million a week, and weekly carrying costs of about \$600,000, it could reach break-even status after only 18 weeks. For purposes of comparison, another monster Mirvish hit, Disney's *The Lion King*, cost roughly the same

amount to stage and went into profit mode after 23 weeks. And it was a far more expensive show to maintain.

Hypnotic as these numbers are, and as fat as Lion's royalty cheques must be, producing Broadway musicals is not for the faint of heart. Three out of four never earn back their initial investment. Paul Simon's *Capeman* (estimated loss: \$12-million U.S.) may be the most memorably egregious example, but it has had lots of competition through the years, including *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1966), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1982), *Carrie: the Musical* (1988), *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* (1999), and *La Bohème* (2003), which lost about \$6-million.

So why roll the dice when the odds are so dismal? There are other, certainly cheaper, ways to derive creative fulfilment. Why put up a valued nude sculpture by Matisse as collateral, as Lion did when she produced her first Broadway show in 1992, *Jelly's Last Jam*? She has also remortgaged her apartment on a couple of occasions.

It's the money, of course. For winners, the dividends can be enormous, even greater than the one Lion and the other *Hairspray* producers are now beginning to enjoy.

Consider *Mamma Mia!*'s lead producer Judy Craymer. There are now 11 *Mamma Mia!* productions playing around the world and, from each of them, Craymer is said to pocket a minimum of \$50,000 a week in royalties. Do the math: it's more than \$25-million a year. And the show is now in year six.

The problem is that in many ways, Broadway is not unlike the film business: Nobody knows anything when it comes to forecasting success. Having the best cast, script, director or designer -- even all of them at once -- guarantees nothing, while shows with only mediocre talent often thrive. Or as Lion has said: "What makes one of them take off like this? I have no idea. Any producer that tells you they have the solution to this is either seriously deluded or a rank beginner. You can't predict it. . . . In the theatre, you can't make a living, but you can make a killing. Obviously, if we all knew what would make a hit, we'd be able to make a living."

Ironically, when Lion first contemplated turning the Waters film into a musical, she saw it as a smaller endeavour, along the lines of *Rent*. Five minutes into the show's first New York workshop, she knew otherwise.

But apart from the richness of the material -- that American Camelot moment before John F. Kennedy's assassination, the civil-rights protests and Vietnam -- nothing about *Hairspray* or Lion's creative choices guaranteed a hit. Marc Shaiman might have composed 50 Hollywood film scores, but he had never written for Broadway. Nor had his real-life partner and lyricist, Scott Wittman. Scenic designer David Rockwell, an architect, had only one previous show to his credit (*The Rocky Horror Show*).

And Lion's original choice for director, Rob Marshall, opted out a year into development to direct the film version of *Chicago*, giving way to veteran Jack O'Brien.

If you had taken the show's basic story line to a potential investor, they would have laughed. A fat teenager, the heroine, whose mother is played by a man (the late Divine in the film, Harvey Fierstein on Broadway, Jay Brazzeau in Toronto), wants to appear on a TV dance show. Initially rejected because of her weight, she leads a campaign to integrate the show. For this, someone is going to pay \$100?

Yet grounded in Shaiman's score, which perfectly mimics the melodic motifs of the early sixties, and Rockwell's brilliant set design, it has more than silenced the skeptics.

Although some 20 other producers (and more than 200 investors) are associated with *Hairspray* -- one group alone provided a quarter of *Hairspray*'s \$10.5-million budget -- Lion is the lead producer. It's a fitting role. Now in her late 50s, she has always had a forceful personality. Director O'Brien's nickname for her is "the Pneumatic Drill." She describes her management style by recalling the words on a T-shirt once given to her by a colleague: "If it isn't broke, you haven't looked hard enough." During development, Lion lobbied to remove what has become one of the show's most popular tunes, *I Know Where I've Been*, an anthem song sung to show-stopping effect in Toronto by Fran Jaye, thinking it was freighted with too much political content. The reception it received when it was staged during a preview in Seattle persuaded her she was wrong.

Raised in a largely assimilated German-Jewish family outside Baltimore, Lion says she can identify with Tracy Turnblad.

"I went to a WASPy private school and people knew I was Jewish and I would try to deny it. I can remember feeling I was not like everybody else. . . . Everybody feels that way as a teenager, but the Jewish thing added to it."

Originally a teacher, Lion moved into producing in the late 1970s, working on non-profit theatre with the likes of Twyla Tharp and Joyce Carol Oates. After tackling the commercial world with *Jelly's Last Jam*, she produced *I Hate Hamlet*, *Angel's in America*, *Elaine Stritch at Liberty*, *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* and *The Crucible*. She's now working on a musical version of *The Wedding Singer*, and negotiating for Broadway rights to another potential blockbuster. She declines to name it, but *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* wouldn't be a bad guess.

In the spring of 2001, with *Hairspray* still a dream in development, Lion congratulated producer Rocco Landesman for his success with *The Producers*. I said, "God, Rocco, I'm really happy for you. A show comes along and it just works. No horrible moments. This will never happen to me. This will absolutely never happen to me." Add that to famous last words.