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“Women in Showbiz – Margo Lion: Producer Brings ‘Hair’-Raising Musical To Great White Way”

by Robert Hofler

From Irene Selznick (“A Streetcar Named Desire”) to Elizabeth I. McCann (“The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?”), female producers have long been a vital force for new plays on Broadway. Lead producers of musicals, however, tend to be male – with a few exceptions.

Margo Lion is one of those rarities, and that was true even before she delivered the humongous hit “Hairspray” in August. She also took the lead on “Jelly’s Last Jam” (1992) and “Triumph of Love” (1997), and in the process, gave directors George C. Wolfe (“Topdog/Underdog”) and Michael Mayer (“Thoroughly Modern Millie”) their first crack at helming a Broadway musical.

True to form, she made certain “Hairspray” also introduced a couple of debutantes, with Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman, of “South Park” fame, composing their first Broadway score.

“Margo was the first person who ever came to me about turning ‘Hairspray’ into a musical who got it,” says John Waters, who helmed the film version of “Hairspray” back in 1988. “We were celebrating outsiders and weirdness, and the musical keeps those elements.”

Broadway’s open-armed reception to “Hairspray” has definitely given Lion “access to most of the creative talent I want to work with,” she says. But it is doubtful that its superhit status will increase her output of original musicals in the coming decade.

“It takes at least three to four years, from conception to opening night,” Lion surmises. Unlike most in her profession today, she has never been a checkbook producer – one who joins the parade after someone else has assembled the team.

“Since I never had great access to money, I had to create this niche in order to play the game,” Lion says of commissioning projects and discovering new talent. “It’s what I enjoy most, and that will not change.”

Job description: As lead producer of Broadway’s “Hairspray,” Lion conceived the show, assembled the creative and producing team, and raised the \$10.5 million capitalization.

Breakthrough: “Hairspray” looks to be the most lucrative show on Broadway since “The Producers”; in the long run, it may be even more profitable in subsidiary markets.

In the works: Lion looks to develop new stage projects as a recently appointed board member of Philip Seymour Hoffman’s Labyrinth Theater Co.