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The box office effects of casting celebrities as replacement actors on Broadway

Douglas Santana
San Jose State University

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THE BOX OFFICE EFFECTS OF CASTING CELEBRITIES
AS REPLACEMENT ACTORS ON BROADWAY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Television, Radio, Film, Theatre

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Douglas Santana

May 2009

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The Undersigned Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

THE BOX OFFICE EFFECTS OF CASTING CELEBRITIES
AS REPLACEMENT ACTORS ON BROADWAY

by

Douglas Santana

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF TELEVISION, RADIO, FILM,
THEATRE

5/14/09

Dr. David Kahn, Department of Television, Radio, Film, Theatre Date

5/14/09

Dr. Ethel Walker, Department of Television, Radio, Film, Theatre Date

5/14/09

Professor Buddy Butler, Department of Television, Radio, Film, Theatre Date

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

5/20/09

Associate Dean Office of Graduate Studies and Research Date

ABSTRACT

THE BOX OFFICE EFFECTS OF CASTING CELEBRITIES AS REPLACEMENT ACTORS ON BROADWAY

by Douglas Santana

This thesis addresses the commercialization of Broadway theater through the casting of celebrities from another medium. The celebrities are brought in as replacement actors for trained theatrical performers with the intention of extending a production's longevity. Twelve Broadway musicals that have opened since 1994 are examined through a series of case studies to determine the effectiveness of this casting technique through analysis of box office gross proceeds, theater capacity, and overall ranking of theater capacity compared to weekly competition. Case studies include *Grease*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Smokey Joe's Café*, *Rent*, *Chicago*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Cabaret*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Aida*, *Hairspray*, *Monty Python's Spamalot*, and *The Color Purple*. The research explains the financial success of this trend and the potential benefits for producers, actors, and theater professionals.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The presence of celebrities from outside the theater community has been a part of Broadway's history for decades. In June 1980, musician David Bowie performed the title role of John Merrick on Broadway in *The Elephant Man* with impressive box office results. Importing Bowie into an established Broadway show that had been running for over a year, replacing a theatrically trained, Tony Award winner and original cast member Phillip Anglim was something that had not been seen before. Although Bowie had no theatre experience, producers took the chance that he could pull off the physically demanding role of Merrick while giving *The Elephant Man* a needed boost at the box office. Their gamble, according to the *New York Times*, paid off financially. "The play has been selling out ever since Mr. Bowie's glittering name went up on the marquee" (Lawson C2). Bowie's six month run proved to be the foundation for a celebrity-casting trend that would be used again in the world of musical theatre in 1981 by Joseph Papp and the New York Shakespeare Festival on the Broadway transfer of *The Pirates of Penzance*. A wide list of celebrities who made their names in other entertainment media appeared in this production. These included vocalists Maureen McGovern and Peter Noone, film actor Treat Williams, and television star Pam Dawber. In 1983, *The Partridge Family* television star David Cassidy took over the title role in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* for 26 weeks from March 7, 1983, to September

4, 1983. After this date, the practice of casting celebrities in hopes of catching box office gold went dormant for nearly a decade. In May 1992, producers of the Tony Award winning musical, *The Will Rogers Follies*, attempted to breathe new life into their production after losing their original star, Keith Carradine. They cast a pair of country music stars Mac Davis and Larry Gatlin to finish the run. Also joining the cast was socialite and tabloid celebrity Mrs. Donald Trump (Marla Maples) in the role of Ziegfield's Favorite. Each of these celebrities, with no theater training or previous Broadway experience, performed in the show for more than six months in an attempt to reclaim the \$7.5 million investment by its producers. According to Bruce Weber of the *New York Times*, " 'Will Rogers' is likely to close, this year or early next, without recouping the \$7.5 million it cost to put on. In fact, it hasn't even come close: one major investor estimated recently that after two years he had gotten back not quite 60 percent of his money" (sic) ("Tougher Odds," par. 3).

While the producers for all the shows mentioned above used untrained celebrities from another medium in extended runs of over 20 weeks to give their shows a lift in ticket sales, none of them took this strategy to the level that would soon be implemented by producers Fran and Barry Weissler, in their 1994 revival of *Grease*. Fran and Barry Weissler took untrained celebrities from another medium, cycled them into the show in limited engagements of 20 weeks or less, and built mass marketing campaigns around their celebrity image and name. This new marketing and casting technique, referred to by Eric Grode as "the

revolving-door” (sic) (par. 1), required two essential ingredients: a Broadway musical and a celebrity. The first question this paper will explore is what makes a person a celebrity and how, in turn, does this make them marketable to an audience?

In order to celebrate a person, a wide range of people across a considerable population must recognize their accomplishments. Michael Newbury, in his article “Celebrity Watching,” noted that the continued development of mass media in the 1920s led to the creation of the first modern celebrity, Eddie Cantor. Newbury contended that “the production of celebrity requires an elaborate organization of media behind it,” (276) allowing the celebrity’s name and what they are famous for to reach the masses through radio, television, print and motion pictures. Not included in Newbury’s criteria was the entertainment medium of theater, and it begs the question, how does the theater community participate in the exploitation of celebrity in modern society? The term celebrity may have been best defined by Daniel Boorstin when he wrote, “The celebrity is a person who is well-known for his well-knownness” (57). These celebrities come from all different entertainment sectors, including music, television, film, fashion, sports, journalism, and politics. For the purpose of the case studies, celebrities are used as products to attract consumers to the Broadway theater as producers parlay the celebrity’s fame into box office dollars for their production. This statement would be in agreement with writer Tirdad Derakhshani when he wrote, “They (celebrities) themselves are commodities. As

consumer goods whose lives are laid out for us to enjoy, celebs are objects to be bought and sold – and eventually discarded” (30). This thesis will investigate the commercialization of the Broadway theater since 1994 to discover the extent to which casting celebrities from another entertainment medium as replacement actors in principal roles impacted the box office success and longevity of Broadway theatrical productions. The significance of this research will be to explore the impact this casting trend has had not only on the Broadway theater community, but the regional theater community, and how this casting trend impacts the future employment for theater professionals working on Broadway. This research will also help determine whether or not Broadway theater producers should consider this potential business model viable for the financial success of their future productions.

Broadway has always created its own headliners, performers who have trained to do live theater and originally made their living in front of live audiences night after night. Theater actors of this breed, including Bernadette Peters, Patti Lupone, Nathan Lane, Julie Andrews, Angela Lansbury, Chita Rivera and Mandy Patinkin, have been seen all over Times Square with their names above the marquee headlining straight plays and musicals. Eventually, producers attempted to attract an audience outside the existing theater community by using a marketable name from another entertainment medium. For example, two recognizable celebrity names, James Earl Jones and Peter O'Toole, performed on Broadway in the 1987 season. James Earl Jones, well known for his

Academy Award-winning performance in the 1971 film *The Great White Hope* and as the voice of Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* film series, appeared in the role of Troy Maxson in August Wilson's play, *Fences*. Although producers might have been banking on his box office appeal as a film and television celebrity, which he achieved in the early 1970s, Jones cut his teeth performing on Broadway in 1958. He had established himself as a Broadway star in 1969 with a Tony Award-winning performance in the boxing drama that later made him a film celebrity, *The Great White Hope*. Peter O'Toole also appeared at the Plymouth Theatre for 113 performances as Professor Higgins in the 1987 revival of *Pygmalion*. He was well known and a commercial draw in the United States for his film performances, receiving seven Academy Award nominations between the years 1962 and 1982. However, O'Toole was a prominent British stage actor who had previously performed with the National Theatre in England, the Royal Shakespeare Company, The Abbey Theatre in Dublin, and at the Old Vic.

In contrast, celebrity names on Broadway marquees in 2007-08 including film and television stars, recording artists, and pop culture icons come from a melting pot of different media, and some of these celebrities are completely untrained for live theatrical performance. When examining the value that a celebrity's name brings to marketing a product, Jagdish Agrawal's and Wagner A. Kamakura's "The Economic Worth of Celebrity Endorsers: An Event Study Analysis" concluded that while the cost of using celebrities in endorsements is rising, investors have determined that it is an effective and profitable business

strategy (60). Sejung Marina Choi and Nora J. Rifon in their article, "Who Is the Celebrity in Advertising? Understanding Dimensions of Celebrity Images," commented that the success a celebrity achieves in his or her career is attractive to consumers, thus giving credibility and power to the product with which he or she is associated (305-06).

Some of these celebrities have formal theatrical training and previous Broadway experience. David Hyde Pierce, famous for his Emmy Award-winning portrayal of Niles Crane on the NBC sitcom *Frasier*, is a Theatre Arts graduate from Yale and speaks of stage director Peter Brook and acting teacher Uta Hagen as his main influences. He recently headlined in two musicals on Broadway, *Spamalot* in 2005 and *Curtains* in 2007. Patrick Stewart, well known to American television audiences as Captain Jean-Luc Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, is a classically trained stage actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company and has been called by Nicholas de Jongh in *The Evening Standard* of London "one of our finest Shakespearean actors" (Lyll 1). Patrick Stewart's name was featured in *Macbeth* in 2008 above the bill at the Lyceum Theatre. While Hyde Pierce and Stewart are trained or have previous experience performing professional live theater prior to their television fame, numerous celebrities are currently appearing or opening on Broadway despite their lack of any previous professional theater credits or training. This new trend of hiring performers, less for their theatrical talent and more for the potential economic

gain their name or image could bring to the production, demonstrates a new and different focus for Broadway shows in the 21st century.

Research for this thesis has identified the steady importation by theatrical producers of celebrities from other entertainment media to the Broadway stage and national tours as a significant component of change in the Broadway community. While celebrity has been capitalized on for decades, this new trend of rotating in personalities who have made their celebrity in a form of entertainment other than the Broadway theater was started by producers Fran and Barry Weissler during their 1994 revival of the musical *Grease*. Their approach was to transform a Broadway show into a tourist attraction. In the words of their own publicist, Frank Pellegrino, "We want to institutionalize 'Grease' as a New York tourist destination, right up there with the Empire State Building...continuing the show's revolving-star strategy" (Collins, par. 8).

The Weisslers were able to accomplish this by extending this production for 1505 performances by employing a wide variety of celebrity headliners and guest stars with vastly different levels of theatrical training. Some, like actress Brooke Shields, had no formal theatrical training but had several years of experience in television and film. Others, like actress Linda Blair (*The Exorcist*) and singer Chubby Checker, were cast solely for their potential commercial appeal to a targeted segment of the population. The Weisslers continued to use this formula to extend the theatrical run of several of their other Broadway productions, including the Flaherty and Aherns musical *Seussical* and the recent

revivals of *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Chicago* and *Sweet Charity*, where in 2005 they reportedly attempted to hire Britney Spears to replace their original headliner Christina Applegate. According to the *New York Post*, Spears declined.

Britney Spears has declined to follow Christina Applegate in the revival of *Sweet Charity* at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre, the New York Post reported Nov. 30....On Nov. 23, the New York Post said that, should the casting be achieved, the production would move to the Hilton Theatre, which has roughly 400 more seats than the Al Hirschfeld. The Post also reported that Spears would likely be offered \$25,000 a week against 10 percent of the box office gross. (Simonson, pars. 1, 4)

Through my research, it has been determined that only one Broadway play, *The Elephant Man* in 1980 with rock musician David Bowie, has notably used untrained celebrity replacement casting in an effort to increase attendance. Since the 1994 revival of *Grease*, there have been eleven musicals in which producers have used some form of celebrity casting where the celebrities from another medium were used as replacement actors following a trained theater actor after the production had played an uninterrupted run of over a year. Because of these overwhelming numbers, only the celebrity casting strategies of Broadway musicals will be examined for the purposes of this study. In all of these musicals, producers also utilized the name and image of the replacement celebrity in some form of advertising for their production. Shows that will be examined are *Beauty and the Beast*, *Smokey Joe's Café*, *Rent*, the 1996 revival of *Chicago*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, the 1998 revival of *Cabaret*, the 1999 revival of *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Aida*, *Hairspray*, *Monty Python's Spamalot*, and *The Color Purple*.

The term commercialism refers to the emphasis on making a profit as the primary goal of the enterprise and the use of available resources to achieve that goal. Elizabeth L. Wollman discusses Broadway commercialism in her journal article, "The Economic Development of the 'New' Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical," noting how major entertainment conglomerates have now begun to invest in their own Broadway shows based on existing products within their stable of material, such as *The Full Monty* (Fox Searchlight Pictures), *Footloose* (Paramount Pictures), and *The Lion King* (Disney). While the majority of her article focuses on Disney and their gigantic impact on the Broadway community, Wollman raises the notion of risk free Broadway productions that come with an already built in audience that is familiar with the title, the characters and the content of a show. Her conclusion is that, while Broadway is enjoying financial growth, the Broadway musical has evolved "from creative forms of artistic expression into products developed by committee and suitable for synergistic appropriation by the entertainment conglomerates that produce and market them" (462). For example, on March 10, 2008, on the popular theatrical website *Playbill.com*, 50% of the Broadway musicals, either running currently or scheduled to open, were based on feature films or biographies featuring the music of a well-known recording artist. This is in comparison to 21% of the musicals in March 1998 and 9% in March 1988. The feature film material comes from motion pictures that have already achieved a level of success on film, such as the *Legally Blonde* franchise with earnings of \$267 million world wide, *Dirty*

Rotten Scoundrels earning \$62 million through theatricals and video rentals, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* which has achieved cult film status across the United States and Europe. Wollman writes:

The rising costs and emphasis on synergy have led to a shift from the desire to perfect a property toward the desire to sell that property in as many ways as possible; many producers are thus becoming less concerned about the quality of the show than they are in secondary income generated from that show's related merchandise. (456)

This new emphasis is reflected in the casting of untrained celebrities from other mediums because, while it could potentially have an adverse effect on the quality of the production, the upside at the box office and the ability to use the celebrity's name in advertising and on merchandise is too appealing for some producers to resist. *American Theatre* exposes the highs and lows of the three largest Broadway producers; Jujamcyn Theatricals (*The Producers*), Dodger Theatricals (*Jersey Boys*), and Disney Theatricals (*The Lion King*) in Terry Berliner's article "The Hit Makers: Commercial Producing." Through a series of interviews with different employees, including Jujamcyn creative director Jack Viertel, the article established that these major Broadway producers are focused on creating commercial theater that will appeal to the largest cross section of potential Broadway audiences in New York City. "Jujamcyn is in the business of creating musicals that have mass appeal – 'pieces that a million people will want to come see,' Viertel declares. 'I would have loved to have been involved in shows like *The Light in the Piazza*, but I don't think that a million people are going to want to come and see that' " (Berliner 51).

Producers have also turned to selling ad time within their productions, offering product placement opportunities, in order to offset the rising costs of doing a show on Broadway. According to Laura Petrecca from *USA Today* “Spirits marketer Jose Cuervo paid to have the 2005 Broadway revival of *Sweet Charity* promote Gran Centenario tequila. Playwright Neil Simon approved a script change that has a character drink the tequila instead of scotch. Gran Centenario’s logo also was incorporated into a dance sequence” (Petrecca, par. 23).

All these elements have led producers to spend more money on securing recognized names to place above their theater marquee in hopes of sparking interest in the production or resurrecting a box office lull after the production has been running for an extended period of time. This strategy for making money is the new commercialization of Broadway. Susan Bennett states in her article “Theatre/Tourism,” “Typically the tourist audience is characterized as a singular and indiscriminating entity, marked only by its antithesis to a committed and cultured spectatorship, its significance in the production and reception of contemporary theatre easily ignored or dismissed” (409). This is no longer the case, contends Bennett, with the balance of power shifting towards the tourist audience based on the creation of new shows that can be marketed, packaged, and sold. This philosophy has become a clear focus for producers now using celebrities from other mediums to attract a wider audience, including the tourist who looks for the familiar when consuming entertainment.

When examining if a Broadway show is considered a financial success, this research looks at two factors: the number of weeks a show is open and its weekly box office receipts. The musicals *Wicked* and *Avenue Q* are examples of shows from the 2003 Broadway season that would be considered a financial success, with *Wicked* having recovered its initial \$14 million investment after 14 months on Broadway and *Avenue Q* recouping its \$3.5 million investment in April 2004 after 12 months. Another financially successful Broadway production in recent history is *Crazy For You*, although it took nearly two years to become so. "On Nov. 15, after 725 performances and 91 weeks at the Shubert Theater, 'Crazy For You,' the reconstituted Gershwin musical, finally earned back the \$8.3 million its investors pumped into it" (Weber, "On Stage" C2).

A show that would be considered a failure is *Lennon*, the musical based on the life of John Lennon. The show played to an average audience capacity of 50.38% during its 91 performances on Broadway from July to September 2005. The musical only brought in \$3.5 million, not enough to cover its original \$7 million investment by the producers. The Rosie O'Donnell produced musical *Taboo*, based on the life and music of recording artist Boy George, lost \$10 million after just 100 performances on Broadway in 2004. Campbell Robertson of the *New York Times* reported on the failure of the Elton John and Anne Rice musical collaboration, *Lestat*:

The producers of 'Lestat' decided yesterday that the show, after 39 regular performances and 33 previews, would close after the Sunday matinee. As closing announcements go, it was a resounding one, since 'Lestat' – which is said to have cost more

than \$12 million – was the Broadway debut of Warner Brothers and involved creative best sellers like Elton John, Bernie Taupin and Anne Rice. (“Proving Mortal,” par. 1)

In order to answer the question of whether or not celebrity casting has an impact on the box office success of a Broadway show, this research looks at a wide variety of statistical data, trade magazines, newspapers, and published scholarly discourse. The resource for Broadway show box office data for this paper is *LiveBroadway.com*, an entertainment website powered by The Broadway League, which is comprised of over 600 theatre owners, producers and professionals in North America. Researching the box office receipts for several Broadway productions on *LiveBroadway.com*, including information on paid attendance, number of performances, and percentage of theatre capacity, resulted in a series of case studies for a select group of Broadway shows that have met the following criteria. First, the show must have run in a Broadway theater for one year or longer with a theatrically trained performer or performers in the featured role before the untrained celebrity was brought in. Theater critic Michael Riedel writes in his column “Curtain Call” that “For today’s \$14 million shows to break even, they generally must run at least a year and a half to houses packed with theatergoers paying retail ticket prices” (par. 8). This article emphasizes that if a show hasn’t run for over a year, at the minimum, it would be difficult to consider that the production could be profitable. Second, the untrained celebrity coming into the show as a replacement performer must have achieved their fame in an entertainment medium other than live theater. For example, the

replacement actor for the before mentioned *Will Rogers Follies*, Mac Davis, is a country music singer, songwriter, and personality who had his own television show on NBC and starred in the film *North Dallas Forty*, but never had appeared in a theater production. Third, the producers and marketing team for the show need to have released some form of advertising that features the celebrity's name with the title of the show, giving them top billing. For *Will Rogers Follies*, producers used Davis' and Maples' image in the *New York Times* to promote their appearances in the show with the quote "All I Know is What I Read in the Paper – Will Rogers. Depends on What Paper You Read – Marla Maples. Mac Davis and *The Will Rogers Follies* welcome Marla Maples to the cast, beginning tomorrow at 8" (Marla Maples H3).

Once a show has met the aforementioned three criteria, the celebrities who appeared onstage are considered under two celebrity casting categories, extended run celebrity casting and revolving door celebrity casting. Eric Grode writes about the phenomenon of the celebrity second string on Broadway focusing on Brooke Shields, Joely Fisher, Deborah Gibson, and Jon Secada. "Those three revivals (*Grease*, *Chicago*, *Cabaret*) all enjoyed, or in the case of *Chicago* continue to enjoy, multiyear runs by pioneering the revolving-door casting of celebrities not always known for their onstage resumes" (sic) (par. 1). The time span of 20 weeks is used as the dividing point between a limited revolving door run and an extended run. If a performer is with a show for 19 weeks or less, they would fall into revolving door celebrity casting category, and if

the performer appears in the production for a run longer than 20 weeks, it would be considered an extended run celebrity casting. Another criteria for the revolving door category is that the producers need to have used more than two different untrained celebrities who have established their marquee value in a different entertainment form as replacements in a run of 19 weeks or less. The term extended run refers to a production that has enjoyed an uninterrupted Broadway run of one year or longer in which the untrained celebrity that has been cast as a replacement for a trained principal role will perform for more than 20 consecutive weeks with a more standard Broadway contract. Examples of the norm for a principal or featured performer are Laura Bell Bundy's two year contract as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* or Nathan Lane's ten month contract to appear as Pseudolus in the 1996 revival of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

When referring to the professional qualifications of an actor on Broadway, performers will be classified into two different categories, trained and untrained. For the aspiring actor, there are hundreds of options for professional development programs available. According to author Robert Cohen:

A general college education, perhaps with a drama or theatre major, followed by a Master of Fine Arts degree from a qualified institute of higher learning has clearly become the most desirable training base for professional *stage* actors....Most MFA programs showcase their graduates before agents and casting directors in New York and/or Hollywood to help them jump-start their professional careers. 'We are hard pressed even to *look* at someone without an Equity card or an MFA,' says Lee Shallat, former casting director for the South Coast Repertory Theatre. (28-29)

An example of a university that provides this type of training would be California State University Fullerton in Anaheim, California. According to their department website, courses that are provided at CSU Fullerton's BFA in Musical Theatre program include Acting II, Musical Theatre Workshop, World Theatre, Seminar in Critical Techniques, Dance for Musical Theatre, Diction, Musical Theatre Practicum, Audition and Rehearsal Processes, Acting III, and Advanced Acting Workshop. Of the original actors that played the eight principal roles in *Young Frankenstein* on Broadway in 2007, seven out of eight had degrees in theater, and the one who didn't, actress Sutton Foster, was one year into her BFA program at Carnegie Mellon when she left to work professionally. An untrained actor would be a performer who has no formal theater education that is designed to prepare them for a professional acting career. An example of an actor who would be untrained and performing in a lead role in a Broadway show would be recording artist, Clay Aiken. Aiken was cast as Sir Robin in *Monty Python's Spamalot* in January 2008, replacing two previous Broadway veterans David Hyde Pierce (*Beyond Therapy, Art, Curtains*) and Martin Moran (*Big River, Titanic, Cabaret*). Both men have extensive theatrical training, with Moran training at American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, CA and Hyde Pierce a Theatre Arts graduate of Yale University. This is in comparison to Aiken who has no formal training in theater beyond the high school level. Aiken received his B.A. in Special Education from U.N.C. Charlotte and did not study theater in college.

Interpreting this research as a whole will provide an answer to the question of whether the casting of untrained celebrities as replacement actors has a positive or negative impact on the financial success of a Broadway show. Beginning with the revival of *Grease*, which opened on May 11, 1994, and ending with the production of *Spamalot*, which closed on January 11, 2009, the casting and marketing decisions of twelve different Broadway shows will be presented and analyzed to discover if the trend discussed by author Charles Isherwood in his article "Changing Coasts (And Accents, and Pay Grades)" could be a permanent fixture in the Broadway community. Isherwood writes, "In general the Broadway debut of a television or movie actor has now become a commonplace occurrence, even if anxieties about the ultimate consequences of this strategy – Steve Carell as Richard III? – could keep you up at night" (7).

Chapter II

“Grease Is the Word” For Celebrity On Broadway

When the new Broadway revival of *Grease* opened its doors at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre on May 11, 1994, it was sharing Times Square with some very prestigious neighbors. The French Revolution was occurring nightly in *Les Miserables* at the Imperial Theatre, *The Who's Tommy* was mesmerizing audiences at the St. James and *Miss Saigon*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Phantom of the Opera* were all selling over 90% of their theatre capacity each week. This was a good time to have a Broadway musical and the producers of *Grease*, Fran and Barry Weissler, intended on making the most of it. They brought in one of the most respected names in the Broadway community, Tommy Tune, to function as the supervising producer for first time director and choreographer Jeff Calhoun. The Weisslers were no strangers to the Broadway revival, having won Tony awards for their productions of *Gypsy* in 1990 and *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1991. Both musicals had a well-known, trained Broadway theater performer attached to their marquee in Tyne Daly and Topol, respectively. This was not a new formula for the Broadway stage but a proven marketing technique that has been occurring in theater for decades. Producers have long displayed the names of Broadway stars such as Gwen Verdon, Carol Channing and Bernadette Peters to attract audiences, but to the surprise of many in the Broadway community, the Weisslers were willing to take it one step further with their production of *Grease*.

Grease was originally scheduled to open on Broadway with two marquee names attached, Ricky Paull Golden from the television soap opera “Another World” as Danny Zuko and comedian Rosie O’Donnell as the tough talking Pink Lady, Rizzo. The fact that the Weisslers were willing to spend the money on two names to headline their show may have served as a shock to some around the Broadway community. According to Robin Pogrebin of the *New York Times* “In the 16 years that the Weisslers have produced on Broadway, they have earned the reputation for being – among other things – cheap” (“Mixed Feelings” AR5). On top of this, their partnership with the producer of the film, Robert Stigwood, had dissolved and their revival of *Grease* lost some valuable songs that were his property. “Mr. Stigwood took back his money and his two songs: the title song, ‘Hopelessly Devoted to You’ and ‘You’re the One That I Want’ ” (Weber, “On Stage” C2). Despite opening to mixed reviews, the *New York Times* called the production “corny...a clumsy spectacle...a strained pastiche of a pastiche....” (Brantley, “Memories” C15), the show managed to run for six months with solid box office numbers, averaging \$434,365 per week gross and 90.6% theater capacity in the 1108 seat Eugene O’Neill. For the week ending November 20, 1994, this ranked *Grease* eighth out of 23 shows reporting box office gross to The Broadway League with \$384,844.

On November 22, 1994, the show got another boost through the addition of film icon Brooke Shields to the cast, replacing Rosie O’Donnell as Rizzo. The Weisslers continued to capitalize on casting celebrities, hiring *The Brady Bunch*

star Maureen McCormick, former professional wrestler Lucy Lawless, and recording stars Sheena Easton and Jon Secada to play Rizzo or Danny Zuko respectively. While all of these celebrities achieved fame in another entertainment medium and are untrained theater performers, they don't meet the criteria previously established because the originators of the roles, O'Donnell and Golden, are also both untrained for the Broadway stage. Despite these omissions, there are several celebrity casting moves by the Weisslers in other roles in *Grease* that demonstrate that this production is the origin of the revolving door celebrity casting trend.

According to Michael Kuchwara of the *Associated Press*, the Weisslers and their staff focused on how to keep *Grease* afloat at the box office on Broadway. Kuchwara states:

Once a week, staff members for *Grease* sit down at a formidable speckled-green marble table in the Weisslers' Times Square office to discuss casting changes – and wish lists....In the case of *Grease*, the Weisslers and company have refined casting to the art of celebrity. Well, minor celebrity. And they clearly have extended the life of a show which critics sniffed at when it arrived on Broadway in May 1994. ("Imaginative" 1)

Theater critics and Broadway purists have sneered at the notion of producing musicals featuring celebrities who achieved their fame from outside the theater community. The casting decisions made by the Weisslers on *Grease* were called everything from "celebrity product endorsement" (Brantley, "Memories" C15) to "literally – catch a falling star – just after they have peaked in another career" (Al-Soyaylee R1). From the beginning, the Weisslers identified the roles of the

dreamy rock and roll figure Teen Angel, the perky cheerleader Patty Simcox, and disc jockey Vince Fontaine as the characters they would look to cast with recognizable celebrity talent from another medium. The Weisslers made it possible to attract talent from outside the theatre community by offering them large contracts, for example up to \$40,000 a week for Brooke Shields' services, and a short commitment that allowed them to pursue other entertainment opportunities. Commenting on her appearance in the 1998 tour of *Grease*, the *Sacramento Bee* reported Brooke Shields saying, "The stars don't obviously have to fit the roles, just be stars" (Shields EN24). These celebrities began appearing in *Grease* at the beginning of 1996, often appearing in pairs, acting as a dual attraction at the top of the marquee. Their stays would vary from four weeks to 13 weeks, with a different celebrity often on deck to take their place.

First in line for this new phenomenon of revolving door casting was veteran comedian and "Saturday Night Live" alum, Joe Piscopo. Piscopo replaced comedian and actor, Brian Bradley, who made his Broadway debut originating the role of Vince Fontaine. Bradley is considered a trained theater performer due to his degree in Theatre from the University of Central Florida. Piscopo had roots in stand-up comedy and no formal theatrical training prior to joining the cast of *Grease*. "Mr. Piscopo achieved his greatest fame when, at age 29, he was among those chosen to be part of the first major overhaul of the 'Saturday Night Live' cast in 1980" (Strauss, par. 9). The Weisslers ran ads in the *New York Times* promoting his appearance in the show, "Gotta Go Daddy O!

Last 7 Perfs For Joe Piscopo as D.J. Vince Fontaine *Grease*" (Joe Piscopo H9). Beginning performances on January 2, 1996, Piscopo brought in \$362,386 in box office gross his first week in *Grease*, which resulted in placing the show 11th out of 20 Broadway shows reporting. In six weeks, the show starring Piscopo averaged \$319,771 in weekly box office gross and was only maintaining its standing in comparison to the Broadway competition. During the week ending February 11, 1996, *Grease* had fallen to tenth out of 16 shows reporting box office grosses.

On February 13, 1996, producers added seven-time Grammy Award winning artist, Al Jarreau, to the cast as Teen Angel. The original cast member who played Teen Angel, Billy Porter, was a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University with a B.F.A. in Drama and an original cast member of the Broadway companies of *Miss Saigon* and *Five Guys Named Moe*. An alum of both Ripon College in Wisconsin and the University of Iowa with a master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling, Jarreau is an untrained theatrical performer but a celebrity in the medium of music.

Since then, Jarreau has released recordings in a range of musical styles, including *Al Jarreau Live in London*, *L is for Lover*, and *Heart's Horizon*, which earned him another Grammy nomination, this time for best R&B album. His next recording, *Heaven and Earth*, received a fifth Grammy for Best R&B performance, making Jarreau one of the rare artists to win Grammys in three categories of jazz, pop, and rhythm and blues. ("Distinguished Alumni," par. 5)

The Weisslers promoted Jarreau in *Grease* by placing ads in the *New York Times* with his image stating, "See *Grease* go Platinum" (Al Jarreau C2). The

first week of performances starting February 13, 1996, starring Jarreau and still featuring Piscopo in the show debuted with \$415,489 box office gross and 96% theater capacity, good for eighth place out of 16 shows. This was over a \$100,000 improvement over the week prior without Jarreau with \$300,165 box office gross and 75% theater capacity, good for tenth place out of 16 shows. Jarreau's 11 week run, which ended on April 28, 1996, was an enormous success averaging \$390,011 gross per week and 92.2% theater capacity.

The Weisslers wasted no time replacing him as Teen Angel on April 30, 1996, with another legend in the music industry, Chubby Checker. According to Chuck Taylor of *Billboard Magazine* "In all, Ernest Evans – who refers to his musical persona in the third person – has sold 250 million albums worldwide and charted 35 times on The Billboard Hot 100, including top 10s 'Pony Time,' 'Let's Twist Again,' and 'The Fly' in 1961 and 'Slow Twistin,' 'Limbo Rock' and 'Popeye' in 1962" ("6 Questions" 51). Ads taken out in the *New York Times* featured a picture of Chubby Checker in costume as Teen Angel and stated, "Broadway's Twistin' Again" (Chubby Checker 33). Checker's 11 week run averaged \$318,613 box office gross per week and 80.2% theater capacity, maintaining the production's status in the middle of the pack of Broadway shows reporting theater capacity. Checker's impact on the box office is best illustrated during his final week ending July 14, 1996, *Grease* placed eighth out of 23 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity with 91%, compared to the first week without

Checker ending July 21, 1996, placing 11th out of 22 Broadway shows reporting and 89% theater capacity.

Without a celebrity appearing as Teen Angel or Vince Fontaine for 20 weeks between July 21, 1996, and December 1, 1996, box office gross dropped slightly to an average of \$308,879 and fell off even more after the busy summer months ended, averaging \$279,881 box office gross from September 2, 1996, to December 1, 1996. *Grease* also fell in comparison to its Broadway competitors, ranking 19th out of 22 shows reporting theater capacity statistics between September 2 to 8, 1996, with 49% theater capacity. In a first for the production, the Weisslers added a celebrity, Olympic Gold Medal winning gymnast Dominique Dawes, on December 2, 1996, in the role of the peppy cheerleader, Patty Simcox. Her image was recognizable across the country, according to *ESPN.com* columnist Mary Buckheit. "You remember Dominique Dawes. Even if you know nothing about gymnastics, you probably know the name or can recall the face" (par. 1). Dawes stepped into a role created in the original cast by actress Michelle Blakely, who had previously performed in the Broadway show *Senator Joe* under the name Michelle Fleisher. Dawes performed for four weeks in the show, between December 2 to 31, 1996. While the show averaged \$392,967 box office gross during Dawes' time in the show, this is more a reflection of the busy Christmas season on Broadway than her celebrity draw since the combined average of all shows open during this same time was \$427,757. *Grease* actually fell further down from 11th place in theater capacity

with 92% the week before to 79% and 20th place out of 28 shows reporting with Dawes as Patty Simcox.

With a posted closing date of February 23, 1997, *Grease* was preparing to close its Broadway run until its replacement, the 20th anniversary production of *Annie*, moved its run to the Martin Beck theatre due to the cancellation of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Whistle Down the Wind*. The initial reaction of producer Barry Weissler was non committal.

Barry Weissler, a producer of 'Grease,' said that he has not decided on its future. His star, Jasmine Guy, is joining the show's Chicago production, and there may not be time before Feb. 23 to line up a new star and get the show's advertising campaign fully cranked up. 'My guess is we'll close down temporarily, rev up the sales and then come back in early April and enjoy a good, healthy six-month run,' Mr. Weissler said. (Grimes, par. 17)

This statement by Weissler demonstrates how reliant the production was on its celebrity guest stars to create buzz and business at the box office. Instead of keeping the production running with trained, Broadway performers in the roles normally filled by celebrities, the producers did indeed opt to shut down the production from February 23, 1997, to April 7, 1997. At this point, they reopened with two familiar celebrity names, Joe Piscopo back as Vince Fontaine and Dominique Dawes as Patty Simcox. The ads were back in the *New York Times* Sunday paper featuring a photo of Dawes and a quote "Starring Dominique Dawes as Patty Simcox. Also Starring Joe Piscopo as Vince Fontaine" (Joe Piscopo H9). The shows reopening proved to be a success at the box office, debuting with \$309,110 weekly gross and 87% theater capacity, placing it

seventh out of 32 Broadway shows reporting capacity for the week. Sales came back down and when Piscopo left the show after seven weeks on May 25, 1997, they were averaging \$279,926 weekly gross and 72.8% theater capacity. On May 27, 2007, the Weisslers returned to casting a celebrity as Teen Angel by bringing in vocalist Darlene Love. A powerful singer who started her career as a back up vocalist in the 1950s, she later had a string of hits under producer Phil Spector including "He's a Rebel," "He's Sure the Boy I Love," "Wait Til My Bobby Gets Home," and "Zip-A-Dee-Do-Dah." According to writer Alec Foege "A pop star since the pre-Beatles era, Darlene Love has become as famous over the years for astonishing comebacks as she has for her big, brassy voice" (par. 1). While Love had previously appeared on Broadway in both *Leader of the Pack* and *Carrie*, she is still considered untrained for the stage because these performances came after she established herself as a celebrity in the music industry. The producers ran ads in the *New York Times* featuring her name displayed below the show's title, "*Grease* and New York We Go Together! *Grease!* Starring Darlene Love" (Darlene Love C2). During her 11 week run, she shared the celebrity billing with Dawes for eight weeks until Dawes departed on July 20, 1997. During this time the show increased its sales at the box office. With Love as the main attraction, *Grease* averaged \$365,428 box office gross and 93% theater capacity. In her final week, ending August 10, 1997, *Grease* climbed back up to ninth place in theater capacity out of 22 Broadway shows reporting with 97% capacity.

After Love's departure, producers ceased using their celebrity casting tactics on the roles of Teen Angel, Vince Fontane and Patty Simcox. The show closed its doors permanently on January 25, 1998, after 1505 performances and approximately \$72.3 million in box office gross. Other Broadway producers took notice of the longevity that the *Grease* revival was having due to their "revolving door of film, pop and country-music celebrities" (Al-Soyaylee R1) and would look to adopt the Weisslers' formula to achieve financial longevity on their own projects. The impact that music industry celebrities had on the box office of *Grease* is evident in the spike in attendance from their entry into the production to the dip in attendance after they departed. By not keeping the celebrity in the production for longer than 15 weeks at a time, *Grease* was able to consistently tap into different celebrity fan bases and even potentially get repeat business from customers looking to see how the show was different with each celebrity performer. Columnist Andrew Cagle writes:

Grease has become Broadway's most unlikely hit, and not because it was restaged or musically ameliorated (trust me – I've seen it three times). Instead, its success is due to a series of unlikely TV and film stars who have generated tickets sales by stumbling and dancing (often both, simultaneously) through *Grease*'s revolving stage door. (par. 1)

This revolving door formula was utilized by the Weisslers on one of their next Broadway productions, their revival of Kander and Ebb's musical *Chicago*, and other producers have applied it to their productions of *Monty Python's Spamalot*, *Smokey Joe's Café*, and *Jekyll and Hyde*. Other Broadway producers soon

manipulated this original marketing tactic as they moved away from transferring the celebrities in and out of the show so quickly. Producers began to extend celebrity runs as replacements in a Broadway show for 20 weeks or longer for a potential long-term box office boost. These extended run celebrity productions include *The Color Purple*, *Rent*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aida*, and *Hairspray*. There is one production on record, Roundabout Theatre's revival of *Cabaret*, that used both the revolving door and extended run casting techniques to extend the run of their Broadway production. Eventually, the Weisslers themselves exclusively used extended run casting to their advantage on their 1999 revival of *Annie Get Your Gun*. Other producers even brought back some of the original celebrity guest stars used by the Weisslers in *Grease* to attempt to capitalize on their previous box office success. What follows are eleven case studies that document the impact the revolving door and/or extended run casting of celebrities from other media as replacements for trained Broadway performers actually had on the box office and theater capacity for their respective productions.

Chapter III

Beauty and the Beast

On April 18, 1994, Disney Theatricals opened their first homegrown Broadway production at the Palace Theatre with a full length musical version of their Academy Award nominated animated film *Beauty and the Beast*. The stakes were high due to controversy among Broadway producers and theater purists surrounding Disney Theatricals presence in the Broadway community and the extremely high production costs of *Beauty and the Beast*. Wollman writes:

The musical versions of *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, for example, each reportedly cost Disney approximately \$15 million; while such a sum is reasonable for a corporation accustomed to gambling four or five times as much on a television or film property, the shows were nevertheless the two most expensive musicals in Broadway history upon opening in 1994 and 1997, respectively. (448-49)

The show opened with blockbuster box office results to offset the production costs and set Broadway financial records in the process, despite mixed critical response and a lack of major industry awards. "The day after Stephen Sondheim's *Passion* won the Tony for best musical in 1994, its competitor, *Beauty and the Beast*, broke a box-office record previously held by *Phantom of the Opera* by selling over \$1 million worth of tickets in a single day" (sic) (457). For the first year of performances, *Beauty and the Beast* made \$35,867,833 in total box office gross and averaged 98.1% theater capacity. In its second year, from April 17, 1995, to April 14, 1996, *Beast* continued its success, bringing in

\$34,953,308 in total gross and 93.5% theater capacity, which is only a \$914,525 drop from its first year of operation. At the end of its third year on Broadway, from April 15, 1996, to April 13, 1997, box office numbers took a more significant dip to \$32,575,591 and average theater capacity dropped to 84.7%. *Beauty and the Beast* was routinely ranking in the top three in weekly box office gross and theater capacity for nearly three years and now had fallen to a tie for 16th place in theater capacity (73%) with productions of *Titanic* and *Play On!* for the week ending May 11, 1997. In an effort to positively impact their box office gross, Disney Theatricals turned to a former teen pop star Deborah Gibson to bring new financial life to their first Broadway production.

The role of Belle was created in the original cast by Broadway newcomer, Susan Egan. Egan received her theater training at UCLA and “received a Carol Burnett Award in Musical Theater” (“Susan Egan,” par. 7). After she left the show, Egan was replaced in 1995 by Sarah Uriarte Berry, who also received her undergraduate theater training at UCLA. After her run as Belle, Berry was replaced by Christianne Tisdale, who completed her theater training at the Yale School of Drama. In 1996, actress Kerry Butler assumed the role of Belle after transferring from the Toronto production of *Beauty and the Beast*. Butler, a musical theater major with a degree from Ithaca University, already had Broadway experience in the ensemble of the musical *Blood Brothers* in 1993. So, when Disney Theatricals gave the role to theatrically untrained recording artist, Deborah Gibson, this was a first for this production and the part of Belle.

Gibson had a brief, but successful career as a pop recording artist in the late 1980s. “She shot to No. 1 on the Hot 100 Singles chart – first, with ‘Foolish Beat’ in 1988, then ‘Lost In Your Eyes’ in ’89 – and earned triple – and double platinum albums and an American Music Award” (Taylor, “Broadway” 73). Gibson admits to having experience performing on stage as a young child.

At 5, she played the littlest elf in *The Elves and the Shoemaker* at a repertory theater near her hometown of Merrick, NY. Later she and her sisters, Denise, Karen and Michele, appeared in a number of musicals. ‘By 11, I was community-theatered out,’ says Debbie. (Chin, par. 4)

While Gibson had performed on Broadway prior to *Beauty and the Beast* as Eponine in *Les Misérables* for three months in 1992, she still qualifies for this case study because her celebrity was achieved in the medium of pop music before she started her theatrical performing career. Fulfilling the final part of the criteria, Disney Theatricals ran ads in the *New York Times* promoting Gibson’s presence in the production and featured her name above the title of the show. “Now Starring Deborah Gibson and Chuck Wagner!..Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*” (Deborah Gibson AR8). For the ten weeks prior to Gibson’s debut as Belle, July 20, 1997, to September 21, 1997, *Beauty and the Beast* averaged \$562,801 box office gross and 75.6% theater capacity, 105,248 paid attendance out of a possible 139,200 (see fig. 1). In her first week, the initial box office increase due to Gibson’s celebrity was not evident. *Beauty and the Beast* ranked 17th out of 22 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity with 73% capacity and \$508,759 gross. This showed approximately a \$40,000 improvement over

Beast's 18th place finish the week prior to Gibson's arrival on the week ending September 21, 1997, with 66% capacity and \$473,181 gross. Gibson's stay in the show is considered an extended run, because it lasted 39 weeks in total and ended on June 27, 1998. The overall box office numbers reveal \$22,819,246 in box office gross, an average of \$585,108 per week and 81.6% theater capacity. Gibson's celebrity, in the end, proved to be worth only on average an additional \$23,000 weekly gross and 6% more theater capacity improvement compared to the ten weeks prior to her arrival. In her final week, the show ranked 17th out of 28 shows reporting theater capacity with 84% capacity. In a reversal of trend, Gibson's name likely contributed to helping *Beauty and the Beast* maintain the status quo of their box office standing instead of continuing to slide from year to year.

After Gibson left the show, box office gross actually increased to a \$641,503 weekly average for the next ten weeks from June 29, 1998, to September 6, 1998, with national tour star Kim Huber as Belle (see fig. 2). The show even managed to climb into the top half of the box office standings during its strongest box office week during this stretch with \$706,882 gross but a ranking of tenth with 91% capacity on the week ending August 2, 1998. Once the summer season ended and box office sales returned to normal, Disney Theatricals turned to former pop star Toni Braxton to boost their box office numbers. Braxton achieved fame as an R&B artist in the early 1990s, winning six Grammy Awards and American Music Awards. Her appeal to Disney Theatricals

was noted by the editor of *Playbill On-Line* Robert Viagas in an interview with Disney producers. “ ‘She’s going to help bring in teens and attract a more ethnically diverse audience’ ” (Angulo, par. 2). Braxton, who had no prior theatrical acting experience, was given the star treatment by Disney Theatricals as far as marketing her appearance in the show.

In the effort to usher Braxton into *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney went wild making alterations in the already-running show. The multinational corporation first reconstructed its marketing strategy to capitalize on Braxton’s presignified celebrity as a sultry R&B beauty. On handbills and New York City billboards, the revised advertising campaign featured a medium close-up photograph of Braxton shot from just below the neck line: she wears a white V-neck T-shirt...plus a black baseball cap sporting the white words ‘Beauty’. The caption at the bottom of the ad, in red lettering, read ‘Braxton and the Beast.’...Even at a closer look, it is not clear whether the ad is a promotion for Toni Braxton the celebrity or for *Beauty and the Beast*. On the back of the postcard version of the ad, Braxton’s name is noticeably larger, set in a bolder font than the title of the show.” (King 54-55)

As also noted by King, Disney even altered the Belle costume to accommodate Braxton’s fashion sense and added a song especially to highlight her talents. “Midway into the second act Braxton performed a rousing pop-soul ballad, ‘A Change in Me,’ added to the show by composer Alan Menken especially for the crossover superstar...But there is no question that the song serves as a showcase for Braxton’s vocal prowess” (61). Braxton’s initial impact on the box office can be clearly seen in the first six weeks of her run, from September 7, 1998, to October 18, 1998. Every week the box office gross increased, starting from \$485,941 gross and 70% capacity, good for 11th place out of 20 shows the

week ending September 13, 1998, to \$691,859 gross and 85% capacity, for 13th place the week ending October 18, 1998. With the overall Broadway box office numbers increasing from \$7.6 million to \$10.3 million, *Beauty and the Beast* was able to maintain its status quo with Braxton in the show, much as they did with Gibson. In the end, Braxton's 26 week run ending March 7, 1999, brought in \$16,362,229 in box office gross, an average of \$629,316 per week and 82.5% average theater capacity. While Braxton's box office numbers were an improvement over Gibson's, she was only able to keep *Beast* afloat in the lower middle of the Broadway pack, in her final week ranking 20th out of 29 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity.

Beauty and the Beast continued to run after moving from the 1740 seat Palace Theatre to the 1474 seat Lunt-Fontanne Theatre on November 8, 1999. After more than 13 years on Broadway, 5461 performances, and grossing nearly \$426 million, *Beauty and the Beast* closed its doors on July 29, 2007. In addition to Gibson and Braxton, several other actresses who have achieved their celebrity in another medium have served as replacements for the role of Belle. They include former *Sopranos* cast member Jamie Lynn Siegler, star of children's television shows *Even Stevens* and *Kim Possible* Christy Carlson Romano, and Disney Channel television star from the show *That's So Raven*, Anneliese van der Pol. Upon further research, none of these actresses qualify for this case study because they all have an extensive professional theater background that precedes their fame achieved on cable television. Producers never attempted to

do another extended run with an untrained celebrity. Together, Braxton and Gibson combined to bring in \$39.1 million in the box office gross for *Beauty and the Beast* in 65 weeks. At an average of \$601,000 per week, this puts their efforts roughly on par with the \$626,442 per week *Beauty and the Beast* averaged during its third year on Broadway from April 1996, to April 1997. Their celebrity was likely a factor in keeping *Beauty and the Beast* running beyond any of its contemporaries that opened during the 1994 Broadway season.

While there is no record of Gibson and Braxton's salaries for *Beauty and the Beast*, based on fellow celebrities appearing on Broadway at that time, it could have been upwards of \$30,000 a week. "In the recent past, there have been reports of stars getting between \$30,000 and \$35,000 a week" (Kuchwara, "Curtain," par. 16). During the 26 weeks after Braxton left, the show grossed \$15,725,744 without a celebrity in the role of Belle, which is down nearly half a million dollars. Box office results like this, combined with the fact that Disney Theatricals continued to employ actresses with television celebrity, supports the conclusion that the extended runs of Gibson and Braxton proved to be successful and important for the long term profit and extension of Disney's Broadway run of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Figure 1. Box Office Report, *Beauty and the Beast* (July 20, 1997-July 12, 1998)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 2. Box Office Report, *Beauty and the Beast* (July 19, 1998-July 11, 1999)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter IV

Smokey Joe's Café

March 2, 1995, marked the opening night for *Smokey Joe's Café*, a musical review featuring the music of Leiber and Stoller, at the Virginia Theatre. Led by producers Richard Frankel, Thomas Viertel, Steven Baruch and Jujamcyn Theatres, the show was met with mixed critical response and solid numbers at the box office. According to *LiveBroadway.com*, its second week of shows and first full week with eight performances brought in \$250,386 in box office gross with 81% theater capacity. In its first full year of performances, *Smokey Joe's Café* grossed approximately \$20.7 million and averaged 88.2% theater capacity. Year two on Broadway, from March 4, 1996, to March 2, 1997, it grossed approximately \$19.7 million and averaged 80.4% theater capacity. In its third year, *Smokey Joe's Café* grossed approximately \$18.4 million and averaged 78.2% theater capacity. *Smokey Joe's Café* was still performing well compared to its competition, placing 15th out of 29 Broadway shows in theater capacity on the anniversary of its third year on Broadway during the week ending March 1, 1998, with 77% theater capacity. During the summer of 1998, the show began to see its consistent box office numbers take a dip and it struggled to play over 70% capacity. For a 17 week stretch, between August 23, 1998, and December 13, 1998, the show averaged \$309,580 box office gross and 64.4% theater capacity (see fig. 3). *Smokey Joe's Café* dropped all the way down to 25th out of the 28 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity for the week ending November 1,

1998, with 54% capacity. At the end of this stretch, producers decided to attempt to boost their box office numbers by importing celebrity musicians and vocalists as guest stars into *Smokey Joe's Café*. Sticking to strict two week engagements, producers would start by incorporating musician Ben E. King into *Smokey Joe's Café*. He was the original artist to sing some of the Leiber and Stoller music in the show, thus reasoning that his name would impact box office sales and attendance. This would prove to be a different arrangement than other revolving door replacement casting examples on Broadway because these celebrity guest stars were not technically replacing any actors. They were being added to the production in addition to the existing cast members. Each guest star's situation was different, as explained by Mike Weatherford of the *Review-Journal* when interviewing another *Smokey Joe's Café* guest star, Gladys Knight:

'The way they were having people come in and guest, it was like, if you want to do one number, you can do that' she explains. And other R&B greats, such as Ben E. King and Lou Rawls, had stepped in to do only the songs they were known for. 'But I said, I want to be part of the cast. I want to do what they do. I want to rehearse, I want to learn the (dance) routines. I want to meld into the show.' (par. 6-7)

Ben E. King gained celebrity status in the 1950s and 1960s as a pop singer, first with the group The Drifters and then later as a solo artist.

In 1959, the original Drifters disbanded, but the name lived on in a five-member group fronted by King. The first record by the 'new' drifters, 'There Goes My Baby' – a tune co-written by King – shot to the R&B Top Five. As a solo artist, King later recorded the smash hits 'Spanish Harlem' and 'Stand By Me' – a song that enjoyed a second surge of popularity in 1986. ("Mary Wilson," par. 16-17)

King was not a trained theater performer and this appearance marked his Broadway debut. Producers ran an advertisement in the *New York Times* with King's name above the show title, promoting his exit. "Today is last chance to see Ben E. King" (Ben E. King CT9). The week prior to Ben E. King guest starring in *Smokey Joe's Café*, the show grossed \$375,084 and played at 74% theater capacity, placing it 21st out of 29 shows reporting. The first week starring Ben E. King grossed \$302,444 and was at 63% theater capacity, placing it 23rd out of 29 shows reporting, resulting in a 19.3% drop in box office gross. The second week, December 21, to December 27, 1998, didn't show any improvement grossing \$325,976 and 61% theater capacity, tying it for 27th in capacity with the play *Side Man*. The first experiment in celebrity casting did not prove to be financially successful but producers continued to keep the show running including a two week appearance by musician Lou Rawls from April 6-18, 1999.

Lou Rawls is described in his obituary by *Rolling Stone* magazine as "the Chicago native, who won three Grammy Awards over the course of a career that spanned more than a half-century, got his start in the gospel realm...leading to a recording contract that spawned a wide-ranging array of releases..." (Sprague, par. 3-5). This confirms his status as a widely recognized celebrity and, while he had some television and film credits, he had no experience performing in the theater prior to *Smokey Joe's Café*. Rawls' appearance was advertised in the *New York Times*. "Today last chance to see Lou Rawls!" (Lou Rawls AR 10).

The week prior to Rawls, *Smokey Joe's Café* continued to place in the lower rankings of Broadway shows reporting box office statistics, with \$333,292 gross and 78% theater capacity, ranking 22nd out of 33 shows. In his first week, April 6 to 11, 1999, the box office gross shot up 21.3% to \$404,369 and 92% theater capacity, ranking the show 19th out of 34 shows reporting. All business on Broadway was up during this week, from approximately \$13.2 million to \$14.9 million, but *Smokey Joe's Café* did climb higher and gain business. Rawls' final week, ending April 18, 1999, saw the show drop back down to 65% capacity and a tie with *Cats* for 25th out of 33 shows. So after an initial attendance spike, box office results returned back to status quo.

Starting on May 11, 1999, music legend Gladys Knight of famed music group Gladys Knight and the Pips began a two week guest star engagement. Inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996, her storied career over four decades includes the chart topping hits "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," "Midnight Train to Georgia," "That's What Friends Are For," and "If I Were Your Woman". Knight has appeared on television and in films, but has no formal theatrical training or experience. Her presence in *Smokey Joe's Café* was marked in advertisements in the *New York Times*. "Gladys Knight joins the cast beg. May 11" (Lou Rawls AR10). The three weeks between Rawls and Knight averaged \$273,356 box office gross and 63.3% theater capacity. The show reached a new low, placing 32nd out of 35 Broadway shows reporting the week ending May 9, 1999. During Knight's first week, it jumped to 80% theater

capacity and \$397,482 box office gross, up from 54% and \$249,776 box office gross the previous week. The show continued to capitalize on the presence of Knight in its second week, with \$426,435 gross and 87% capacity and 14th out of 34 Broadway shows reporting on May 23, 1999. The drop off after she exited the show, \$251,170 gross and 58% capacity, reinforced how good her celebrity name was for business since *Smokey Joe's Café* fell 16 spots in the rankings to 30th out of 34 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity. Producers brought Knight back for a second stint from August 17 to 29, 1999, and the results were not as dramatic, but still had an impact. Her second run averaged \$339,178 box office gross and 74.5% theater capacity, moving the show back up to 14th out of 22 shows reporting (see fig. 4). The week after she left, ending September 5, 1999, the show dropped back down to 18th out of 19 shows reporting with 58% capacity.

Following Knight's first appearance in *Smokey Joe's Café* was entertainer, television star and vocalist, Tony Orlando. Orlando achieved celebrity with his music group Tony Orlando and Dawn and recorded #1 hits including "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree," "Knock Three Times," and "He Don't Love You Like I Love You." Orlando, while having appeared as Jim Dale's vacation replacement in the title role of *Barnum* from May 5 to 25, 1981, is still considered an untrained theatrical performer because he had already achieved his celebrity in the media of television and music prior to his Broadway debut.

Orlando's presence in *Smokey Joe's Cafe* was marketed by the producers with print advertising in the *New York Times* on June 20, 1999. "Today Last Chance to see Tony Orlando" (Tony Orlando CT11). Orlando averaged \$251,278 box office gross in his two weeks and 57% theater capacity between June 8 to 20, 1999. The week prior to Orlando's debut, the show placed 29th out of 32 reporting and in Orlando's first week, *Smokey Joe's Café* actually dropped to 26th out of 27 shows reporting. This continued in Orlando's final week with the show ranking 24th out of 26 shows in theater capacity. There was no evident effect from Orlando's departure since the show remained 24th out of 26 shows after Orlando left on the week ending July 4, 1999, with 56% capacity.

On August 3, Gloria Gaynor joined the cast for a two week run. Her celebrity status is documented by columnist Robert Simonson, "Gaynor indelibly carved her name in the annals of pop history when she recorded the 70's disco anthem, 'I Will Survive.' Subsequent hits included 'Never Can Say Goodbye' " (Simonson, "Gaynor," par. 1). Gaynor is not a trained theater actress. She has no formal acting training and her highest level of education is high school. Her inexperience performing in professional theater is supported by her quote in an interview with *ModaMag.com*. When asked if she would ever do another musical, Gaynor responded, " 'I would definitely do another musical if I could do only two or three weeks. Eight shows a week is a bit much for me' " (Brodsky and More, par. 6). Producers marketed her presence above the title *Smokey Joe's Café* in the *New York Times*, "See Gloria Gaynor now thru Aug. 15" (Gloria

Gaynor E8). Gaynor's weekly average was on par with Orlando's numbers, averaging just slightly more than Orlando with \$260,580 gross per week and 61% theater capacity. Gaynor's stint also delivered what Orlando and Gore did not, a climb in the rankings among the Broadway community. *Smokey Joe's Café* placed in a tie with the play, *The Weir*, for 19th out of 23 shows the week ending August 15, 1999, with 62% theater capacity.

In the period between Knight leaving the cast on August 29, 1999, and the next celebrity guest star, *Smokey Joe's Café* played for seven weeks without a headliner. The results were financially poor, with an average of \$226,733 box office gross per week and 52% theater capacity. The show reached an all time low in box office gross on the week ending September 12, 1999, with only \$168,276 and 37% capacity, placing *Smokey Joe's* dead last out of 22 shows reporting theater capacity, a full 6% behind the next closest show, the musical review *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues*. On October 19, 1999, pop star and entertainer Rick Springfield joined the cast for a two week appearance. "Also expected, October 19-31, is 80s teen heartthrob Rick Springfield, who parlayed a career as a soap star of 'General Hospital' into a string of pop hits, most notably 'Jesse's Girl' " (Simonson, "Gaynor," par. 5). Springfield is a high school drop out and, while he has appeared in numerous television series, he has no formal acting training or theatrical experience beyond performing his music in concert. His appearance was noted in the *New York Times* advertisement, "See Rick Springfield tonight – 10/31" (Rick Springfield E6). His first week in the show saw

an approximate \$50,000 increase in weekly gross from \$258,080 on September 17, 1999, to \$306,794 on September 24, 1999. While theater capacity remained nearly unchanged, 62% to 63%, Springfield's effect on the box office was reflected in the increased gross. This demonstrates that more patrons were paying for full price tickets instead of purchasing discounted tickets. The show also gained on its competition in theater capacity during Springfield's first week, jumping from 21st place on October 17, 1999, to 20th place on October 24, 1999. Springfield's second week was less successful, grossing \$247,014 and 51% capacity and the show placed 24th out of 29 shows reporting. After Springfield departed, the show dropped two places down to 26th out of 29 shows reporting on November 7, 1999. Springfield's celebrity was enough to increase presale and full price ticket purchases and make some additional gross at the box office.

The producers of *Smokey Joe's Café*, benefited financially by keeping their show, which was met with mediocre critical response, afloat past 1997. According to an article in the *New York Times* from June 10, 1997, the support of Jujamcyn president Rocco Landesman led to eventual success, " 'Smokey Joe's Café,' for instance, opened to tepid reviews in March, 1995. Its producers say that it survived – and a few months ago, broke even – only thanks to an obsessive attention to marketing and an infusion of cash from Mr. Landesman shortly after it opened" (Marks, "Outlook," par. 18). On January 16, 2000, the musical revue ended its impressive five year run on Broadway, compiling 2,035 performances. The closing announcement was made on September 24, 1999,

prior to Springfield's two week tenure in the production, so his box office numbers had no bearing on the fate of *Smokey Joe's Café*. When commenting on their own marketing tactics, it's clear that the producers were well aware they were traveling in undiscovered territory for the Broadway community. "*Smokey* also broke new ground in terms of marketing. 'On the business side,' explained producer Tom Viertel, 'the marketing of *Smokey Joe's Café* blazed new trails and changed the approach to creating visibility for every show on Broadway today' " (McBride, "Smokey," par. 7). The connection between *Smokey Joe's Café* and the 1994 revival of *Grease*, produced by the Weisslers, was noticed by many in the theater community. "Knight first joined the Broadway production of the show that, like 'Grease', has a rotating policy of guest stars joining for short stints" (Weatherford, par. 5). For *Smokey Joe's* the effectiveness of the celebrity guest stars can be found in the box office numbers between December 15, 1998, and December 12, 1998. In the 14 weeks these seven guest stars that qualified for this case study appeared in the show, *Smokey Joe's Café* made approximately \$4.4 million and averaged \$317,562 per week. Compared to the 38 weeks the show ran without a guest star, *Smokey Joe's Café* made approximately \$10.2 million and averaged \$268,756 per week. The 15% decline in gross box office without a celebrity guest star during these 52 weeks reinforces the effectiveness of the producers' strategy. The show's finale was filmed and broadcast by the Broadway Television Network as part of a pay-per-view event that brought live theater into the home through cable television. This final event brought a fitting

end to a show that went to new lengths to promote and market their product by importing musical celebrities into their production and accommodating their comfort level by allowing them either be part of the regular production or perform their own music and not be part of the ensemble. It cannot be disputed that the producers of *Smokey Joe's Café* were willing to take theater marketing to new lengths in order to make money and extend the life of the production.

At a meeting several months ago, the producers and marketing consultants for 'Smokey Joe's' revealed just how willing they were to fight to keep the show afloat. In the midst of a discussion of where they might send the cast members to promote the revue, one of the producers suggested an appearance at a prison. Mercifully, the idea was shot down. That it was raised at all, illustrates the new market-driven reality on Broadway. (Marks, "Outlook," par. 20)

In conclusion, it should be noted that two celebrities who did guest star appearances in *Smokey Joe's Café* are considered trained theater performers according to my criteria and thus do not qualify for this case study. Pam Tillis joined the cast on March 16, 1999, for a three week engagement scheduled to end on April 4, 1999. She performed professionally as a theater actress prior to gaining her celebrity as a country music star by starring in a professional production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* at Tennessee Repertory Theatre. 1960s pop star Lesley Gore, was brought in for a two week run from July 13, 1999, to July 25, 1999. Due to her B.A. in Performing Arts from Sarah Lawrence College in 1968, she is considered a trained theater performer and does not qualify for this case study.

Figure 4. Box Office Report, Smokey Joe's Café (Aug. 22, 1999-Jan. 16, 2000)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter V

Rent

In what might be considered the most iconic show of the 1990s, Jonathan Larson's rock musical *Rent* endured a long journey to Broadway from its first staged reading at the New York Theatre Workshop in 1993. Based loosely on Giacomo Puccini's opera, *La bohème*, the story focuses on young people living the Bohemian lifestyle in New York City. Author Barry Singer believes it summarizes the social issues of the 1990s. "The show would not just be a musical, it would be an opera, and not just an opera, but a rock opera, 'a *Hair* for the 90s set in New York's East Village, and not just a *Hair* for the 90s but a testament to the plague of AIDS" (105). The show premiered Off-Broadway on February 13, 1996, at the New York Theatre Workshop, two weeks after Larson's tragic death from an aortic rupture. After much critical and commercial success, *Rent* quickly transferred to the Nederlander Theatre and opened its Broadway run on April 29, 1996. The show ran for 80 weeks with most of its original Tony award-winning cast intact and played at 102% capacity for this entire stretch. Even after original cast member Adam Pascal (Roger) left the show on November 2, 2007, *Rent* continued to play at over 100% capacity until the week ending July 5, 1998, when the show drew only 92%, breaking its streak of 113 weeks of paid attendance over the Nederlander Theatre's capacity. During 1999, *Rent* continued to slip at the box office, even falling to 69% capacity and 17th

place among 23 shows during the week of July 4. Overall the musical continued to play at 86.4% capacity in its third year on Broadway, grossing in approximately \$27 million in total gross. In the year 2000, the shows fourth year running, box office gross fell to approximately \$22 million and in 2001, *Rent* slipped to approximately \$20 million in total gross on Broadway.

In the Spring of 2002, *Rent* continued to slip, bringing in a paltry \$251,370 the week of May 12 and placing 26th in the Broadway box office rankings (see fig. 5). *Rent* continued to struggle for the rest of May through July. In an effort to boost ticket sales, the show brought in former N'Sync boy band star Joey Fatone to play the shows narrator, Mark. Fatone, who had no formal musical theater training before starting rehearsals for the Broadway musical on July 8, 2002, gained his fame as a multiple platinum recording artist. *Rent* producer Jeffrey Seller went on the record with reporter Kenneth Jones:

‘Hopefully, Joey is going to bring in tens of thousands of new audience members who I believe will be converted to *Rent*-heads, who will keep us going for the next couple years,’ *Rent* producer Jeffrey Seller told Playbill On Line. ‘Girls who were eight (when *Rent* started) were not going to see *Rent*, but now they’re 14 and they would go see *Rent*.’ That 14-year old demographic happens to be Joey Fatone’s fan base. (“Joey Fatone and *Rent*,” par. 4)

Fatone’s name began running in the *New York Times* the week of August 2 “*Rent* with Joey Fatone” (Joey Fatone E4), and the press paid immediate dividends at the box office, with the show bringing in \$459,337 at 94% capacity his first week of shows starting August 5, compared to the week prior without Fatone that played at 73% and did \$354,193 at the box office. *Rent* with Joey Fatone

skyrocketed back up to 11th place at the box office in its first week and stayed at an average of 82.1% theater capacity for the duration of his 20 week run as Mark, that ended on December 22, 2002.

Producers waited another 14 weeks before bringing in a different celebrity to attempt to boost box office sales. This time, they turned to another former boy band member Drew Lachey of 98 Degrees to play the role of Mark in *Rent*.

Lachey's career as a platinum album selling pop star is discussed by columnist Wayman Wong in his article "The Leading Men: Making his Mark." Wong writes:

Before he became a platinum pop star, Lachey drove an ambulance in New York. But in 1995, his mother and his brother, Nick, visited him and they saw *Miss Saigon*. Drew recalls, 'Wow, that's when I realized I missed performing. It lit a spark in me, and two weeks later, Nick called me and said he was starting this group (with Jeff Timmons and Justin Jeffre).' That became 98 Degrees, which scored such heat-sinking hits as 'Because of You', 'I do (Cherish You)', 'Invisible Man' and 'True to Your Heart' (with Stevie Wonder). In 2002, the Grammy-nominate group decided to take a break.... (par. 3)

To promote Lachey's Broadway debut, producers marketed his celebrity name in the *New York Times*. "No Performances Today, *Rent*, DREW LACHEY of 98 Degrees & MTV's 'Newlyweds' starts 9/10" (Drew Lachey AR5). Before Lachey joined the cast, the show had slipped in attendance after Fatone's run, checking in at 70.5% theater capacity from June 6, to September 5, 2004 (see fig. 6). The final two weeks before Lachey appeared in *Rent*, theater capacity was at 56% and 55% respectively. After Lachey's first full week in the show, ending September 19, 2004, producers did not see immediate dividends, although his

presence brought the box office back up to 69% capacity, the show *Rent* placed 12th out of 20 shows in capacity percentage and the week before, without Lachey, the show was 14th out of 22 shows. According to *LiveBroadway.com* overall percentages climbed to 82% theater capacity the week ending October 10, 2004, but the show was just maintaining status quo in the Broadway ranks placing 15th out of 24 shows. Lachey's 26 week run in *Rent* brought in \$9,617,612 and played to an average of 73.8% theater capacity. When compared with the numbers for the 26 weeks prior, \$8,531,609 gross box office and 72.3% theater capacity, did Lachey's celebrity status contribute to the show selling an additional million dollars in ticket sales? Since there was no drop off in box office gross in the 26 weeks post Lachey, with \$9,862,179 in box office gross and 75.2% average theater capacity, Lachey's celebrity impact on the box office for *Rent* appears to have carried over past his departure.

Lachey's longer contract with *Rent* continued the extended run celebrity casting trend it had embarked on with Fatone, committing to the celebrity casting for the longer extended run of 20 weeks or more. This trend continued when *Rent* producers turned to former American Idol contestant Tamyra Gray to take on the role of Mimi starting May 29, 2007. A reality television star whose celebrity was built when "five years ago, Tamyra Gray had the country talking about her elimination from the first season of *American Idol*" (Hatkoff, par.1), Gray had no formal theatrical training, and while she appeared for a brief run in the Broadway musical, *Bombay Dreams*, this does not change her status since

her celebrity as a reality television star and vocalist was established prior to *Bombay Dreams*. While there is no documented advertising featuring Gray's name, there was extensive major media coverage documenting her joining the cast of the show, including articles in *USATODAY*, *People Magazine*, and the *New York Times*. Gray's first week in the show starting May 29, 2007, posted an immediate loss of \$112,000 box office gross from the previous week and saw theater capacity drop from 73% to 48% (see fig. 7). The show never played above 71% theater capacity in Gray's first nine weeks in the show, so her impact on the box office initially proved to be negative. The week before Gray joined the cast, *Rent* placed 26th out of 36 shows, and her first week on the job saw the show fall even further down, to 33rd out of 36 shows. The middle of her extended run was boosted by the return of two original cast members, Adam Pascal and Anthony Rapp, and including those ten weeks with Rapp and Pascal, her tenure in *Rent* played at 62.2% theater capacity. Yet, if those ten weeks are removed and Gray's celebrity name is figured in as the only outside draw to see the show, those 14 weeks averaged \$372,205 box office gross and an average of 66.4% theater capacity. She departed the production on June 15, 2008, after 53 weeks in the show. Her final week of performances saw no dramatic spike in attendance, with a gross of \$326,643 and 67% theater capacity, ranking it 24th out of 34 Broadway shows reporting capacity (see fig. 8).

While the show was not able to return to its two year box office dominance from 1996-98, Joey Fatone was able to bring a spike of approximately \$1.6

million in gross over the previous 20 weeks before his arrival and Drew Lachey's 26 week run grossed over \$1 million more than the previous 26 weeks before his arrival. While the extended run of Tamyra Gray proved to be a failed experiment to regain the financial success achieved under the extended runs of Fatone and Lachey, the overall investment in celebrity casting paid off and allowed the musical to become the seventh longest running show in Broadway history.

"*Rent*, which cost \$240,000 to put up downtown, has gone on to gross more than \$280 million on Broadway and another \$330 million on the road" (Robertson, "Nearly," par. 9). The Broadway production closed its doors for good on Broadway on September 7, 2008. It should be noted that vocalist and former member of the Spice Girls Melanie "Scary Spice" Brown appeared in *Rent* for six weeks in 2004 but her appearance did not qualify for the case study since it was so brief compared to the extended runs of Fatone, Lachey and Gray. Former *American Idol* contestant Frenchie Davis also was part of the ensemble of *Rent* off and on for four years from May 16, 2003, to May 24, 2007. Since her run was extremely long and there is no documented advertising promoting her celebrity in the show, Davis does not qualify for this case study. It also should be noted that the production was dark from November 13, 2007, to November 25, 2007, due to the union stagehands strike.

Figure 5. Box Office Report, *Rent* (Jan. 6-Dec. 29, 2002)
 "NYC Grosses." *LiveBroadway.com*. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 6. Box Office Report, *Rent* (Apr. 4, 2004–Mar. 27, 2005)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 7. Box Office Report, *Rent* (Jan. 7-Dec. 30, 2007)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 8. Box Office Report, *Rent* (Jan. 6-Sept. 6, 2008)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter VI

Chicago

In May 1996, the Encores performance series at City Center, under the direction of then artistic director Walter Bobbie, staged a production of Kander and Ebb's *Chicago* to play four performances as part of their concert season. With only ten days of rehearsal and a budget of \$350,000, the production was a huge critical success and caught the eye of New York producers Fran and Barry Weissler, who immediately made plans to keep the modest production values intact and move the show to a larger Broadway theater with the same cast. This tactic of transferring an existing production that needed no development did not resonate well with all of the Broadway community where the Weisslers were already controversial figures.

The Weisslers are still lightning rods in the theater business, and people apparently either love them or hate them. Those in the latter category say the Weisslers are lowbrow and litigious and bully their employees. In dismissing the couple on artistic grounds, their critics say the Weisslers prefer to play it safe with revivals rather than develop productions from scratch. According to this argument, the work on 'Chicago' had already been done for the 1996 production in the Encores concert musicals series at City Center; the Weisslers simply moved the show to Broadway more or less intact. (Pogrebin, "A Team" AR5)

The production opened at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on November 14, 1996, with the original cast from Encores, featuring three Broadway veterans in lead roles. Anne Reinking, with ten Broadway shows on her resume including the original production of *Chicago* with Bob Fosse, played the role of Roxie Hart.

Broadway veteran Bebe Neuwirth originated the role of Velma Kelly. While best known for her role as Dr. Lilith Crane on the hit television show *Cheers*, Neuwirth was an experienced Broadway performer prior to her television career having appeared in *A Chorus Line*, *Little Me*, and *Sweet Charity*. She is also a graduate of The Julliard School in New York City in Drama and Dance. As the slick and silver-tongued lawyer Billy Flynn, James Naughton won a Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical. He was trained by the Yale School of Drama and had previously appeared on Broadway in *City of Angels*, *Whose Life is it Anyway?*, and *I Love My Wife*. In its first year on Broadway, *Chicago* grossed approximately \$32.7 million and played to over 100% capacity for 45 weeks of its run. During this first year, the Weisslers decided to pack up their production and move it to a bigger Broadway theater since it proved to be such a success. *Chicago* moved one block over from the Richard Rodgers Theatre on 46th Street to the larger Shubert Theatre on 44th Street.

When last we left Barry and Fran Weissler, the producers of 'Chicago', they were desperately seeking a theater to which they could move the musical if it proved a hit at the Richard Rodgers on West 46th Street. ('Chicago' opens on Nov. 14 at the Rodgers but must vacate on Feb. 9 to make way for 'Steel Pier.')...Last week, Mr. Weissler met with officials of the Shubert Organization to discuss the two block hop to the Shubert, the only unbooked Broadway house with the capacity (1,521 seats) for a big musical. 'We've given each other a commitment,' Mr. Weissler said, adding, 'You have people who tour the United States with a show. I tour Broadway'. (Marks, "On Stage," par. 3-5)

In its second year on Broadway, *Chicago* actually surpassed its initial box office gross from its first year, making approximately \$34.6 million from November 10,

1997, to November 8, 1998. Even though the show was going strong, the Weisslers began to experiment with the formula they used to great success with *Grease*, casting untrained celebrities for a brief box office lift.

The first in a long line of untrained celebrities from other media to join the cast of *Chicago* was television personality, Alan Thicke. He performed for four weeks from October 3, to October 25, 1998 (see fig. 9). Thicke's career is described in a press release published through the industry website *Broadway.com* on June 5, 2001. "He has garnered seven Emmy nominations and one Golden Globe nomination. His television credits include *Growing Pains*, *Hope & Gloria* and many television movies and feature films....He is also well-known for hosting his own program, *The Alan Thicke Show*, for three years" ("Ask Thicke," par. 2-3). Thicke had no formal theater training or professional stage experience prior to gaining fame as a television star, so his performance in *Chicago* marked his Broadway debut. His appearance was marketed in print material that appeared in the *New York Times*, "Now Sundays at 2 and 7. *Chicago* The Musical. Welcome Alan Thicke – 4 Weeks Only!" (Alan Thicke AR8). Thicke's four weeks in the production averaged \$667,260 box office gross and 97.7% theater capacity, ranking third out of 28 Broadway shows reporting with 99% capacity on Thicke's final week, behind *The Lion King* and *Little Me* starring Faith Prince and Martin Short. Compared to the box office gross and theater capacity the four weeks prior to Thicke, August 31, to September 27, 1998, where the box office gross averaged \$641,096 and capacity averaged 94%

and the four weeks after Thicke's departure, October 26, to November 22, 1998, when box office gross averaged \$647,907 and capacity averaged 94.1%, it appears Thicke was responsible for an additional \$25,000 in box office sales. The first week after Thicke left and was replaced by Broadway actor Brent Barrett, *Chicago* fell to fifth out of 28 Broadway shows reporting. Thicke was considered to be successful enough to bring back for a one week appearance from June 25, to July 1, 2001 (see fig. 10). This appearance was not nearly as financially successful, while the show actually dropped approximately \$37,000 in box office gross from the week prior, from \$473,923 to \$436,838, and actually maintained its standing as 23rd out of 29 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity both weeks. Thicke's return engagement had no apparent affect on the box office receipts.

The next Billy Flynn was film star George Hamilton, who played the lawyer role for 13 weeks from November 19, 2001, to February 17, 2002. His own biography appearing in the *Chicago* program reads:

George Hamilton personifies the golden age of Hollywood, when stars were as exciting off screen as on. His feature film credits begin with Vincente Minnelli's *Home From the Hill* when he was a teenager. Other films include *All the Fine Young Cannibals*; *By Love Possessed*; *Light in the Piazza*; *The Visitors*; *Your Cheatin' Heart*; *The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing*; *Love at First Bite*; *Zorro, the Gay Blade*; *The Godfather Part III*; *Woody Allen's The Hollywood Ending*; *Doc Hollywood*; *Crocodile Dundee* and others. ("George Hamilton")

Producers ran ads in the *New York Times* promoting his presence in the show, "*Chicago* The Musical, George Hamilton stars." (George Hamilton AR10).

Chicago averaged \$495,428 box office gross per week and 72.7% theater capacity during his run. The 13 weeks prior to Hamilton's appearance in the show, between August 12, 2001, and November 11, 2001, *Chicago* averaged \$413,643 box office gross and 67.9% theater capacity. Based on these statistics, Hamilton's run saw an approximate 5% spike in theater capacity and an average of approximately \$82,000 additional box office gross per week, yet *Chicago* only maintained its standing in the Broadway community in terms of theater capacity. Hamilton's final week, *Chicago* placed 15th out of 24 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity with 85% compared to the week after Hamilton's departure, when the show had 87% capacity and ranked nine places from the bottom at 19th out of 27 shows reporting. Hamilton returned six years later for a second run in *Chicago* after the production had switched to the Ambassador Theatre from September 14, 2007, to October 7, 2007, with \$441,728 average box office gross and 72.3% theater capacity. During this run, the producers ran a television commercial featuring George Hamilton going through a fake audition for the role of Billy Flynn. At the end, an announcer comes on and says, "Don't miss George Hamilton in *Chicago*. Four weeks only beginning September 11. Call Telecharge.com today" (30 second 'TV Spot). Hamilton's presence can be seen as more profitable during this second run since the theater capacity rose 13% in his first week back, from 18th place out of 21 shows with 57% the week prior to 15th place out of 23 shows with 70% on the week ending September 16, 2007.

The next untrained celebrity to appear after Hamilton's first run was former Backstreet Boys pop singer, Kevin Richardson. The teen idol music group comprised of five singers established their celebrity by achieving a high level of success in the late 1990s.

In all, the group has sold more than 75 million albums worldwide. Their first two U.S. releases both received the Diamond Award for sales of more than 10 million: 'Backstreet Boys' in 1997 and quintessential 'Millennium' in 1999, which reached No 1 in 25 countries. They have scored a dozen top 40 hits, including 5 smashes 'Quit Playing Games (With My Heart),' 'As Long As You Love Me,' 'Everybody (Backstreet's Back)' and 'All I Have To Give.' ("Biography," par. 2)

Richardson's lack of theater experience is established in his interview with columnist Aidin Vaziri in 2003. When asked about his previous theater background, Richardson responded:

'Growing up, I did high school and community theater. I was in 'Barefoot in the Park' and 'Bye Bye Birdie'. When I was at Disney World, I was working in the park during the day and doing dinner theater at night. I used to play an Italian gangster in a musical review where we played songs from 'Chicago,' 'Guys and Dolls' and 'Cabaret.' (par. 4)

His inexperience also showed in his interview with *People Magazine* when responding to a question about whether performing in theater is scary, Richardson said, " 'The dialogue is scary for me. I worried about forgetting my dialogue. I stayed up til 3 o'clock in the morning studying my script before I went on Broadway. I sometimes over-prepare. I wish I would have done that in

school' " (Dagostino, par. 7). Producers ran print advertising with Richardson dressed as Billy Flynn surrounded by female ensemble stating, "Backstreet Boy Kevin Richardson Begins Tomorrow at 8 *Chicago* Live!" (Kevin Richardson AR8). Richardson had a unique situation with the production as he was performing when *Chicago* transferred from its second theater, the 1,460 seat Shubert Theatre, to the smaller 1,065 seat Ambassador Theatre a few blocks uptown. In Richardson's first week ending January 20, 2003, the last at the Shubert, *Chicago* averaged \$449,536 box office gross per week and 92% theater capacity (see. fig. 11). In its last full week with Richardson, February 26, to March 2, 2003, *Chicago* climbed all the way back up to first place out of 27 Broadway shows reporting, with 98% theater capacity.

On July 11, 2003, film star Melanie Griffith joined the cast of *Chicago* on Broadway as Roxie Hart for a 13 week run from July 11, to October 5, 2003. Best known for her Academy Award nominated performance in the film *Working Girl*, she has been nominated for five Golden Globes, an Emmy and received the Cannes Film Festival Lifetime Achievement Award in 2001. Griffith received some theater training from Stella Adler prior to achieving her fame in film, but she never was able to apply what she learned in a professional production on stage. Her nerves for performing on stage are clear in her interview with the *New York Times*. Robin Pogrebin writes:

She also found preparing for this role unexpectedly terrifying. 'It was the scariest thing I ever committed myself to,' she said. She tried to postpone her first performance, she said, until Ann Reinking, the show's choreographer and its original

Roxie, gave her some advice. Ms. Griffith recalled her saying: 'It's not going to get any easier. It's only going to get worse if you put it off. It's going to get harder. So go, do it, you're going to be fine.' ("A Long Shot," par. 14)

The Weisslers put Griffith front and center in a marketing campaign, featuring her face in print advertising, including this ad before her final performance on October 5, 2003, "Thanks for all the razzle dazzle, Melanie! See Melanie Griffith's Final Performance Tonight at 6:30! *Chicago* Live!" (Melanie Griffith AR4).

Despite her lack of experience, Griffith's performance was met with a warm response. Pogrebin also notes that:

And what was initially dismissed as typical marketing hocus-pocus by the Weissler husband-and-wife producing team – and potential professional suicide by Ms. Griffith – has turned out to be, in the judgment of several critics, something of a casting coup. In a review in the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley called Ms. Griffith, 'a sensational Roxie, possibly the most convincing I have seen'. In *Variety*, Charles Isherwood wrote, 'The contours of the character fit Griffith's screen persona like a lace glove: Inside this Roxie, a knowing woman playing the little girl lost, is a real little girl lost.' ("Long Shot," par. 4-5)

The ten weeks prior to Griffith entering the show, *Chicago* was still enjoying strong attendance boosted from Richardson's run and its move to the Ambassador Theatre. It was averaging \$564,195 box office gross per week and 97.8% theater capacity, ranking fifth out of 23 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity the week ending July 6, 2003, with 99% capacity. During Griffith's 13 weeks in the show, the box office gross increased approximately \$76,000 per week and theater capacity rose to an average of 98.3%. Griffith's impact can be seen in the dramatic rise of the average ticket price sold during her run, with the

average price never dropping below \$70 per ticket and even hitting an average of \$79.82 the week ending August 17, 2003. Compared to the average ticket price the previous ten weeks of \$66.72, this confirms that audience members were purchasing more tickets in advance to see Griffith at a higher price than waiting to see if discount tickets would be offered at outlets like TKTS in Times Square on the day of the show. The ten weeks after she departed the show, *Chicago* remained in the top ten on Broadway in theater capacity but saw box office grosses fall to an average of \$582,031 and down to 91.1% theater capacity. Her impact was not lost on theater trade papers. "Most celebratory reviews for Melanie Griffith's Broadway debut as 'Chicago's' Roxie Hart kept that long-running revival SRO. Show was up by \$16,011 to \$692,762" ("B.O.," par. 3).

Over two years later, the next untrained celebrity stepped into the role of Roxie Hart on Broadway when Brooke Shields joined the cast for a brief eight week stint from September 9, to October 30, 2005. Shields, who had previously appeared in three Broadway shows and is established as a celebrity in the *Cabaret* case study, is still considered to be untrained because prior to her first appearance on Broadway in *Grease* in 1994, she had no previous theatrical experience or training. Therefore her casting can still be considered to be marketing related. A sexy marketing photo of Shields standing in costume in front of a brick wall was featured in an ad in the *New York Times*, "*Chicago* The Musical Starring Brooke Shields Now through October 30th only!" (Brooke Shields AR9). The eight weeks before Shields arrived, *Chicago* averaged \$476,221 box

office group per week and 84.8% theater capacity, falling down to 14th out of 24 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity during the week ending September 4, 2005 (see fig. 12). Shields' run provided approximately a \$60,000 weekly box office spike, averaging \$534,643 per week with theater capacity rising to 90.3%. Her final six weeks yielded even more impressive results, averaging 95.7% theater capacity. Shields brought *Chicago* back into the top ten in the Broadway rankings tying for seventh place with *The Woman in White* out of 29 Broadway shows reporting during her final week ending October 30, 2005. The average ticket price is again another solid indicator that Shields celebrity led to more advance full price ticket sales. During her final week ending October 30, 2005, average ticket prices were \$71.71, approximately \$7.70 higher than the week prior to Shields performing when the average ticket price was \$64.01. Once Shields left the production, box office results dropped approximately \$150,000 as *Chicago* fell from \$592,312 to \$440,547 box office gross and to 11th out of 30 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity on November 6, 2005, with 80%, down from 96% the week before. These numbers clearly demonstrate the impact that Shields celebrity had on the financial fortunes of the production.

Immediately following Shields was rock and roll front man, Huey Lewis, for an 11 week run as lawyer Billy Flynn from November 1, 2005, to January 15, 2006. Lewis' celebrity is established in this press release discussing his casting in *Chicago* issued by industry website, *Broadway.com*. According to the press release:

Lewis is the Grammy-winning lead singer of Huey Lewis and the News, which released 10 albums that produced top-10 hits such as 'The Power of Love,' 'The Heart of Rock and Roll,' 'Stuck With You,' 'I Want a New Drug,' 'Workin' For a Livin' and 'If This Is It.' 'The Power of Love,' which was written for the film *Back to the Future*, not only reached #1 on Billboard's singles chart but was also nominated for an Academy Award. ("Lewis to Return," par. 3)

Lewis, who dropped out of Cornell College where he was an engineering major, has no formal training as a theatrical actor. He has appeared in cameo roles on television series and films, with his largest role coming in the 2000 film *Duets*.

Producers advertised Lewis by placing his image on the side of a gift box in newspaper ads, "Give 'em the Old Razzle Dazzle. Now starring Huey Lewis.

Chicago The Musical" (Huey Lewis AR7). Following Shields' impressive financial success would be a tough measuring stick to live up to. Lewis' 11 weeks averaged \$545,483 box office gross per week and 85.6% theater capacity during the busy Thanksgiving and Christmas season. While box office gross increased slightly over Shields' run, *Chicago's* standing in the rankings was not affected, ranking 15th out of 24 shows reporting theater capacity during Lewis' final week in the show ending January 15, 2006. Even during the productions best week during Lewis' run, 95% theater capacity the week ending January 1, 2006, *Chicago* only placed 17th out of 28 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity. After Lewis left, the show fell even further in the Broadway ranking, down to \$393,101 box office gross and 67% capacity for 19th place out of 25 shows reporting the week ending January 22, 2006. While not as dramatic as Shields', his box office drawing power was strong enough to have the Weisslers invite

Lewis to return to the show for a second run as Billy Flynn later in the year, from November 20, 2006, to January 14, 2007. This eight week appearance averaged \$603,492 box office gross and 90% theater capacity, a nearly \$60,000 improvement over his first time in the show a year earlier. While some of this box office success can be attributed to Lewis' celebrity, the return of original cast member and Broadway star Bebe Neuwirth on December 31, 2006, might also have had a major impact on the box office numbers.

After Lewis left the production the first time, television actress Robin Givens took his place as the marquee celebrity name above the title, starring as Roxie Hart for 13 weeks from January 16, to April 16, 2006. Givens' fame is established by Michael Portantieri on the industry website *TheaterMania* when he profiled her entrance into the show, "Givens, who began her career as a model, first gained fame as Darlene Merriman in the TV sitcom *Head of the Class*" (Portantieri, par. 2). Beyond her other television guest appearances, TV movies and film credits, she is perhaps most well known for the tabloid divorce coverage of her abusive marriage to notorious heavyweight boxer, Mike Tyson. While she participated in classes at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City at the young age of ten, Givens has no other professional theater experience or training prior to gaining her celebrity on television and in the tabloids. Marketing strategy for promoting Givens in the show featured print ads with Givens dressed in a sexy, short dress with garters and stockings reading, "True Crime. *Chicago*. How Super! Today at 2 & 7. The Most Wanted Musical.

Robin Givens, Amra-Faye Wright, John O'Hurley" (Robin Givens AR10).

Chicago averaged \$479,012 box office gross and 79.8% theater capacity during Givens' 13 week tenure, which was approximately a \$65,000 box office gross drop from Huey Lewis' celebrity run that ended right before. However, this could be attributed to the strong holiday season. Givens' final week ranked 15th of out 34 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity ending April 16, 2006, playing near the top of the Broadway productions in operation. After Givens left the show, *Chicago* dropped four more slots in comparison to its competition with 89% capacity, falling to 19th out of 38 Broadway shows reporting on April 23, 2006, demonstrating that losing Givens' celebrity name had a negative effect on the box office numbers. Appearing with Givens during this same stretch of dates was television star John O'Hurley as Billy Flynn. However O' Hurley is considered a trained theatrical actor due to his B.A. in Theatre which he obtained from Providence College.

From August 22, to October 6, 2006, Grammy Award winning music artist Usher made his Broadway debut as Billy Flynn in *Chicago*. According to Geoff Boucher of the *Los Angeles Times*, "Usher is famous as a music bestseller (his CD 'Confessions' was the top title of 2004 and his career sales in the U.S. are closing in on 20 million albums), urbane sex symbol and perhaps the most exciting dancer in pop since Michael Jackson..." (par. 4). Usher has no professional theater training or experience prior to his Broadway debut in

Chicago. In addition, Boucher notes Usher's inexperience as a theater actor after observing a rehearsal prior to his first performance. Boucher writes:

Usher has some things to work on. His singing is great – strong, lively and spiked with appropriate attitude – but when speaking, his lines were far quieter than the other actors and his syllables had too many soft corners for a character who is defined by his fast-talking sparkle and feint. (par. 11)

These sentiments are echoed by *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley in his review of the show starring Usher, “In his relationship with the audience, he brings to mind the most popular boy in high school, running for class president....It’s hard not to like the guy. Which goes to prove that it’s possible to like someone and be bored by him at the same time” (par. 6). Immediate box office results were noted by media outlets, including the CBC, which reported:

The League of American Theatres and Producers said Monday that for the week ending Aug. 27, the long-running revival had a net gross of \$747,331 US, an increase of \$240,000 over what the show made during the previous week....Sanders (a show spokesman) also said that the *Chicago* producers have hired extra security to control the crowds who have been gathering outside the theatre waiting for the popular singer after each performance....” (“Usher Sparks,” par. 3-5)

Print advertising in the *New York Times* featured a photo of Usher surrounded by female ensemble members in costume, “Usher. *Chicago* The Musical. Tonight at 7” (Usher AR6). Usher’s seven week run averaged an impressive \$735,673 box office gross and 95.2% theater capacity and the show’s average ticket price rose to \$89.29, more than twenty dollar per ticket improvement over the seven weeks prior to Usher performing in the show, with a \$67.41 average paid admission.

While box office sales unquestionably increased, Usher contracted strep throat and was unable to perform causing theatergoers to demand their money back.

Since Usher's illness the refund line outside the Ambassador Theatre has stretched halfway down the block with hundreds of disappointed fans demanding their money back. Refunds are expected to cost producers an estimated \$400,000. Despite the last minute losses, Usher's seven-week stint will still be extremely profitable. He played to packed houses and theatre insiders estimate profits to be around \$1.7 million for the short, but lucrative run. ("Usher's Illness")

After Usher's run, and before Huey Lewis' return for his second appearance, the show dropped approximately \$100,000 a week to \$630,718 box office gross and down to 92% capacity. Beginning May 4, 2007, television personality Joey Lawrence took over the character of Billy Flynn for a seven week run until June 17. *Playbill.com* writer Andrew Gans notes Lawrence's celebrity status in an article:

Joey Lawrence has been seen on television in 'Gimme a Break', 'Blossom', 'Brotherly Love' and 'American Dreams.' His film credits include 'Summer Rental,' 'Chains of Gold,' 'Radioland Murders' and 'Urban Legends.' His solo recording is titled 'Joey Lawrence.' *Chicago* marks the singing actor's Broadway debut. ("Joey Joins," par. 5)

Lawrence has no theatrical training or experience since he started his career at the age of five on *Gimme a Break* and never attended college. Advertising in the *New York Times* Theatre Directory promoted Lawrence's presence in the show "Now Starring Joey Lawrence" (Joey Lawrence E4) and publicity photos with Lawrence in the Billy Flynn trademark black and white tuxedo were widely distributed on the internet. During the seven weeks prior to Lawrence, *Chicago*

averaged \$559,436 box office gross and 89.6% theater capacity, ranking 16th out of 37 Broadway shows reporting on April 29, 2007, with 85%. Lawrence's first full week in the show, ending May 13, 2007, it fell to 20th out of 36 shows reporting with 75% capacity. His entire seven week run averaged \$477,492 box office gross per week and 78.5% theater capacity, not really demonstrating that Lawrence's celebrity had any impact on the box office results. The week after Lawrence finished his appearance, the show ranked 22nd out of 33 shows reporting on June 24, 2007, compared to ranking 22nd out of 34 shows reporting Lawrence's final week on June 17, 2007.

Immediately following Lawrence was television actress and personality Lisa Rinna, who played Roxie Hart for seven weeks from June 18, to August 5, 2007. Rinna achieved her celebrity status as a soap opera star, appearing for several seasons as Billie Reed on *Days of Our Lives* between 1992-95 and again from 2002-03. Rinna also did 34 episodes on the popular television series, *Melrose Place* from 1996-98 as the character Taylor McBride. Rinna, while having some training as a singer and appearing on the television show *Dancing With the Stars*, had no professional theater experience, as noted by CBS News on their website, "Rinna, a former co-host of *Soap Talk*, has never done a musical before and is making her professional theatrical debut" ("Harry Hamlin," par. 13). In the *New York Times* Theatre Directory, ads for *Chicago* included the promotion of Rinna, "Tonight at 7. Lisa Renna. *Chicago*" (Lisa Rinna AR6). Rinna's seven weeks in *Chicago* averaged \$550,031 box office gross per week,

approximately a \$72,000 improvement over Lawrence's celebrity run as Billy Flynn, and the show averaged 89.6% theater capacity. Her last week in the show ending August 5, 2007, *Chicago* ranked 12th out of 25 Broadway shows reporting. When contrasting this against the week after Rinna's run concluded, when *Chicago* ranked 16th out of 25 Broadway shows reporting with 92% capacity, the lack of her celebrity saw the show fall four slots in comparison to its competition. Rinna's husband Harry Hamlin also appeared in *Chicago* during the same time as his wife, but because of Hamlin's previous Broadway acting experience (*Awake and Sing!*), he does not officially qualify for this case study.

Beginning October 8, 2007, pop singer Brian McKnight took over the role of Billy Flynn until November 11, 2007. McKnight's celebrity is noted in a profile about his appearance as the fourth African American actor to portray Flynn on *Broadway.com* by columnist Karu F. Daniels:

With a string of hit singles under his belt, including 'One Last Cry,' 'Love Is,' 'Anytime,' 'You Should Be Mine,' and 'Back at One,' McKnight is a Grammy-nominated singer, songwriter, arranger, producer and multi-talented musician. He has released a total of ten R&B/pop albums in fifteen years, seven of which have gone platinum or multi-platinum. (par. 5)

McKnight has no formal theatrical training or previous professional theater experience prior to his Broadway debut in *Chicago*. *New York Times* Theatre Directory had McKnight's name featured above the title of the show, "Tonight at 8. Michelle DeJean, Brenda Braxton, Brian McKnight, Rob Bartlett, Adriane Lenox. *Chicago* The Musical" (Brian McKnight E6). McKnight performed in *Chicago* for five weeks and the production averaged \$450,062 box office gross

per week and 74.1% theater capacity before the show was forced to close its doors due to the Broadway stagehands strike in mid-November. While the box office gross appeared to be down, *Chicago* moved up significantly in the Broadway ranks in theater capacity, ranking eighth out of 34 Broadway shows reporting on what turned out to be McKnight's final week ending November 11, 2007. The first week back after the strike, *Chicago* performed without McKnight and fell back down to 13th in theater capacity out of 33 Broadway shows reporting with 79% capacity, proving McKnight was responsible for raising the production into the upper third of Broadway competition during his limited run.

In addition to these untrained celebrities from another medium, the Weisslers turned to several other celebrities for their star power to boost box office numbers, however they had professional theater experience or formal training prior to achieving their celebrity. Included in this category are celebrities Marilu Henner, Sharon Lawrence, Jasmine Guy, Louis Gosset Junior, Billy Zane, Paige Davis, Patrick Swayze, Gretchen Mol, James Naughton, Christopher McDonald, Aida Turturro, Vincent Pastore, Rita Wilson, and John Schneider.

With over 5,000 performances, the *Chicago* revival currently sits in eighth place for the longest runs in Broadway history and it will pass *Rent*, which closed with 5,124 performances, sometime during 2009. There is no doubt, given the low production costs and consistent box office returns in response to their creative celebrity casting and marketing techniques, the Weisslers' production of *Chicago* is the best current example of how a show can be extended into its 13th

year by capitalizing on the power of celebrity. In 1999, the Weisslers announced that *Chicago* had already passed the \$100 million mark for profits. McKinley writes:

Who ever said crime doesn't pay? Not Fran and Barry Weissler, the producers of 'Chicago,' who announced this week that the gross proceeds of that Broadway production have passed \$100 million. Mr. Weissler declined to say what the profits were, but a calculation of the gross minus the show's running costs (about \$350,000 a week), royalty payments and other costs puts the figure at \$30 million to \$40 million. ("On Stage Nov.," par. 8-9)

Using this same formula, which poses that *Chicago* has made \$100 million, one can estimate that the show cost approximately \$60 to \$70 million to produce and thus grossed \$30 to \$40 million after costs in three years. This would make for an average \$20 to \$23 million of production costs a year for operating the revival of *Chicago*. For the last nine years, since this original article appeared in the *New York Times*, *Chicago* has grossed approximately \$266.2 million at the box office. Using this same formula, in nine years estimated operating costs would be between \$180 million to \$207 million, making the total gross for the Weisslers from November 1999 on their revival of *Chicago* anywhere from \$59 to \$86 million. For the last year, from February 4, 2008, to February 1, 2009, *Chicago* has grossed approximately \$25.4 million at the box office, minus estimated costs of between \$20 to \$23 million, the production is still turning a profit of anywhere to \$2 to \$5 million. As long as the show continues to be profitable, there appears to be to no end in sight for this long-running Broadway smash.

Figure 9. Box Office Report, *Chicago* (July 19-Dec. 27, 1998)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 10. Box Office Report, *Chicago* (May 20, 2001-Mar. 3, 2002)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 11. Box Office Report, *Chicago* (Mar. 5-Dec. 28, 2003)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 12. Box Office Report, *Chicago* (Aug. 7, 2005–Oct. 22, 2006)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter VII

Jekyll and Hyde

The musical retelling of *Jekyll and Hyde*, loosely based on the novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, opened on April 28, 1997, at the Plymouth Theater on Broadway. With music by Frank Wildhorn and book and lyrics by Leslie Bricusse, who had previous success with *Victor/Victoria*, *The Roar of the Greasepaint*, and *Stop the World – I Want to Get Off*, the show opened to a mixed bag of reviews. It still managed to gross \$57,993,174 and maintain an extremely respectable average theater capacity of 84.7% from opening night until January 23, 2000, selling a total of 1,032,912 seats out of a possible 1,218,360 seats during that nearly three year period. The original casting of the title role of Dr. Henry Jekyll involved two actors, one principal performer who did five shows a week and one alternate Jekyll who did the three matinee performances. In the original cast actor Robert Cuccioli, who won a Drama Desk Award and Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Actor in a Musical for his performance in *Jekyll and Hyde*, was the principal Jekyll and Robert Evan served as the alternate until January 3, 1999, when Mr. Evan took over the role full time. Prior Broadway credits for the original Jekyll's include multiple stints in *Les Misérables*, for Cuccioli as Inspector Javert and for Evan a run as Jean Valjean in 1996. In an interview with *Talkin' Broadway* in 1999 by Tony Swanick, Evan was asked about the challenge of the title role and if Dr.

Jekyll was the toughest character vocally and physically on Broadway. Swanick writes:

'It has to be among them, which was why Bob (Cuccioli) was not expected to do all the shows when we opened. Physically, you are all over the stage, involved in most of the scenes, and it is a physically challenging role. There are some nights when I am just sore after the show. Vocally, it is at least as tough as Valjean in *Les Miserables* and the range from high to low and from powerful to soft is huge.' (par. 8)

On January 23, 2000, Robert Evan put his split personalities behind him and left the production, leaving the producers, SFX Theatricals and PACE Theatrical Group Inc., to find an actor capable of playing the demanding title role while keeping the show afloat at the box office. They decided to go with television star Jack Wagner, best known for his roles as Frisco Jones on the soap opera *General Hospital* and as Dr. Peter Burns in *Melrose Place*. While Wagner achieved his fame in a different medium, he does not fit the criteria in place for the revolving door case study because he is considered a trained musical theater performer, having graduated with a BFA in 1982 from the School of Theatre Arts at the University of Arizona. He had also previously appeared as Tony in the national tour of *West Side Story* in 1987 and Danny Zuko in a national tour of *Grease* in 1988.

Jack Wagner played the role for 20 weeks and averaged a capacity of 82.6%, and was replaced on June 13, 2000, by an untrained Broadway rookie, heavy metal vocalist Sebastian Bach (see fig. 14). Bach gained celebrity status

in 1987 when he joined the heavy metal group Skid Row and turned out two platinum albums, *Skid Row* (1989) and *Slave to the Grind* (1991), and one gold album with *Subhuman Race* (1995). Known for his wild personality and appearance, Bach had several run-ins with the law and was shrouded with controversy, highlighted by his appearance on MTV wearing a t-shirt with the slogan "AIDS Kills Fags Dead." Bach was dismissed by Skid Row and he formed a solo career in 1997 before joining the cast of *Jekyll and Hyde*. Bach didn't seem intimidated by the role or the fact that he had no theatrical performing experience in an interview with *Backstage*. According to columnist Mike Salinas:

He also said there are fewer differences between concert performances and Broadway performances than people might think. Many of Skid Row's best-selling songs were ballads – 'power ballads', in rock parlance – that were 'not so removed' from the Frank Wildhorn/Leslie Bricusse score he'll sing in *Jekyll and Hyde*. He's also unfazed by the quick costume changes in the show: 'I've always done costume changes in my performances,' he said. 'The difference is that on Broadway I'll have someone to help me backstage!'....'I am not in this to stink,' he said. 'I have every intention of knocking 'em dead.' (par. 5-7)

Jekyll and Hyde producers geared up the production for Bach's arrival, adding television commercials featuring a costumed Bach injecting himself and morphing into the Evil Mr. Hyde, with the announcer saying "Broadway's hottest thriller just got hotter. Sebastian Bach is *Jekyll and Hyde*. Evil has never looked this good. Call Telecharge now" ("Jekyll"). Ads also appeared in the *New York Times* featuring Sebastian Bach's name above the title of the show. Bach's arrival seemed to be met with some hesitation at the box office. His first week in

the title role ending June 18 took in only \$300,949 gross, the lowest box office gross total for the show since September 19, 1999, when the show took in only \$261,685. It was also a \$108,000 drop off from Jack Wagner's final week in the show, almost a 15% drop in theater capacity. Bach averaged 64% capacity in his first five weeks as Dr. Jekyll, but turned the corner in his final 12 weeks at the box office, with the show averaging 77.8% for Bach's total run, which included his only foray into the \$400,000 club on his week ending October 15, 2000, when the show brought in \$400,331 and 85% theater capacity.

On October 17, 2000, television actor and international recording artist David Hasselhoff took over the role of Dr. Jekyll in a highly publicized move by the producers of the musical. Hasselhoff, who has the notoriety of holding the title of being the Guinness Book of World Records Most Watched TV Star in the World, made a name for himself on the television series *Baywatch* and *Knight Rider*. Hasselhoff's lack of theatrical training didn't stop theater producers from pursuing the international celebrity to appear on the Broadway stage.

After his commitment to 'Baywatch' kept him from pursuing a chance to do *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and after an attempt to bring *The Rocky Horror Show* to Broadway failed, Hasselhoff turned in his swim trunks and left 'Baywatch' earlier this year. As luck would have it, when a TV series and a film fell through, Broadway was waiting with not one but two offers: *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Jekyll and Hyde*. (Snyder, par. 11)

The producers marketed the show heavily using David Hasselhoff's name, including a television commercial featuring Hasselhoff popping into frame at the

end of the ad saying, "This is no day at the beach" (*Jekyll & Hyde*), a clear play on his fame and targeted at his *Baywatch* fan base. New posters were created with two pictures of Hasselhoff, one of him in a tuxedo shirt staring into the camera and the other in the background of the actor dressed as the evil Mr. Hyde. Perhaps the biggest attempt at capitalizing on Hasselhoff's celebrity status involved the producers' partnership with the Broadway Television Network, a company that filmed selected Broadway shows and broadcast them into homes across the United States on pay per view cable television. Hasselhoff seemed confident that he would be a profitable presence at the box office for *Jekyll and Hyde*. "But Hasselhoff is eager to have his family by his side as he embarks on his five-month Broadway stint, and says he isn't worried about producers relying on his name to sell tickets. 'I can get tons of publicity; I know how to market David Hasselhoff better than anybody,' says the actor..." (Snyder, par. 16).

Among the 28 shows playing major Broadway houses during his first week, October 17-22, 2000, *Jekyll and Hyde* grossed \$321,213 and tied for 23rd in theater capacity percentage at 72% with *Saturday Night Fever*. This was approximately a \$50,000 loss compared to Bach's previous week, when the show placed a more respectable tenth place in theater capacity at 85%, tied with the long running smash hit *The Phantom of the Opera*. The numbers continued to decline on October 29 when the show placed 27th with \$267,542 gross and 60% capacity and on November 5, the show grossed \$286,148 and was 26th out of 29 shows with 62% theater capacity. The producers reacted by announcing in

a press release that the long running musical would close its doors on January 7, 2001, after four years and 1,543 performances. The Hasselhoff experiment numbers don't look terrible on the general overview. His 12 week run played at an average of 74.4% capacity, but these numbers are likely inflated by the show's closing announcement and a final rush at the box office by loyal fans which led to a strong closing at 85% capacity. Even this late rush was only good enough for 15th place out of 28 Broadway shows reporting to The Broadway League.

Even with the revolving door tactic of placing two celebrities from another medium in the title role for less than 20 weeks, it still couldn't bring *Jekyll and Hyde* out of debt. McKinley writes:

After more than three and a half years and more hair gel than you can imagine, confirmation came this week that the long-running but money-losing musical *Jekyll and Hyde*, Frank Wildhorn's third Broadway show, would close on January 7th....While the \$7 million *Jekyll* was the most successful of the three – spawning a cultish fan base and several international productions – the show is expected to close at a loss of more than \$1.5 million....(McKinley, "On Stage Jekyll," par. 2)

In the end, *Jekyll and Hyde* had a box office gross of \$76.3 million in 193 weeks on Broadway, so if producers are reporting a loss of approximately \$1.5 million, one can deduce that the show cost approximately \$77.8 million, an average of approximately \$403,000 per week, to operate during this time. According to these statistics, *Jekyll and Hyde* was ahead at the box office on January 23, 2000, when Robert Evan left the production on January 25, 2000, with the show

grossing approximately \$60 million in 143 weeks compared to approximately \$57.6 million in operating costs. This left approximately a \$2.4 million profit for SFX Theatrical and their producing partners. The revolving door casting proved to be the financial downfall of the production, causing an approximate \$3.9 million swing in profits, leading to their eventual \$1.5 million in reported losses. Even with the failures of stunt casting, the producers were reportedly not going to give up after Hasselhoff kept them afloat.

According to the Oct 26 issue of *Time Out New York*, Donny Osmond is a dream candidate of SFX Theatrical Group associate producer Heather Hamilton, who wooed previous stars to play the dual roles personifying good and evil. The magazine reported she is hoping for Osmond, rocker David Bowie and KISS singer Paul Stanley to one day take the role in the show. (Jones, "After," par. 3-4)

Unfortunately for Hamilton, Hasselhoff's failures never allowed these dreams to come to fruition on Broadway.

Figure 14. Box Office Report, *Jekyll and Hyde* (Jan. 16, 2000-Jan. 7, 2001)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter VIII

Cabaret

On March 19, 1998, the Roundabout Theater Company opened a revival of the 1966 Kander and Ebb musical *Cabaret*, starring Natasha Richardson as Sally Bowles and Alan Cumming as The Emcee. Inspired by the 1993 London production produced at The Donmar Warehouse and directed by Sam Mendes, who also directed the Roundabout revival, the show opened to critical acclaim and went on to win four Tony Awards, including Best Revival of a Musical. Playing in the Kit Kat Club, formerly known as the Henry Miller's Theatre which was converted into a night club known as Xenon, which housed the Broadway revival of Terrence McNally's *The Ritz* in 1983, the show posted strong box office numbers. *Cabaret* grossed approximately \$7.3 million in box office gross in its first 30 weeks, averaging 97.5% theatre capacity in its intimate performing space, which only held 512 patrons. What can't be gleaned from these statistics is that a construction accident forced the Roundabout Theatre to close *Cabaret* from July 20, 1998, to August 21, 1998, losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in the process.

Two weeks ago, the Roundabout had Broadway's most-desired ticket in 'Cabaret' record overall sales and the appearance of a theater juggernaut. Since then the construction accident in Times Square has shut down 'Cabaret' indefinitely....'Cabaret' is losing about \$280,000 in box office receipts each week and is still paying most of the \$200,000-a-week costs of mounting the production. Since the accident on July 21, Mr. Haimes and the show's artistic

leaders have been scrambling to find an alternative site.
(Applebome, par. 3, 9)

Even after the show reopened at the Kit Kat Club, Roundabout Theatre had decided to renovate the infamous night spot Studio 54 and move the production there because the space could suit the needs of the revival, creating the atmosphere of a seedy German nightclub. In addition to this unique situation of the forced shutdown of *Cabaret* is the early departure of the shows star and Tony award winner, Natasha Richardson. Richardson never got to play a farewell performance since the production was interrupted by the construction accident, thus ending her four and a half month tenure with *Cabaret* prematurely and causing the show to reopen with film actress Jennifer Jason Leigh in the role of Sally Bowles. Due to these unique circumstances, and under the criteria previously established for this case study, the role of Sally Bowles cannot be formally considered for the extended run or revolving door casting exploration because the show did not run for a year before producers cast a celebrity from another medium in the production. Yet, since the approach used by the Roundabout to extend the run of its critically acclaimed revival follows the premise of casting celebrities from another medium so closely, it would be inappropriate not to explore it briefly.

The role of Sally Bowles was played by multiple actresses during the productions nearly six year run on Broadway, including several performers who had achieved celebrity in another medium but also had extensive theatrical

training. Included in this category are television actress Joely Fisher, who trained at the University of Paris and Emerson College, former Miss America Kate Shindle, who holds a B.A. from Northwestern University in Theatre, film actress Gina Gerhson, who attended NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and Circle on the Square Professional Theatre School, television actress Teri Hatcher, who trained at American Conservatory Theatre, television actress and star of *NYPD Blue* Melina Kanakaredes, who holds a B.A. in Theatre from Point Park College, and teen film icon Molly Ringwald. While Ringwald had no established theater training before establishing herself as a film star, she performed professionally in a regional production of *Annie* at age ten, giving her professional stage experience prior to gaining her celebrity. In addition to these actresses, there were five celebrities chosen to portray Sally Bowles who had no relative theatrical experience or training prior to gaining celebrity status in their particular medium. The first, Jennifer Jason Leigh, who was best known at the time for her roles in the feature films *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Single White Female*, and *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*, played a 26 week run as Sally Bowles from August 4, 1998, to February 28, 1999, and averaged \$375,381 box office gross per week and 94.6% capacity. Film actress Lea Thompson, from the *Back to the Future* franchise, played Bowles from August 1, 2000, to November 19, 2000, and averaged \$431,531 weekly gross and 91.3% capacity. The increase in box office gross can be partially attributed to having approximately 400 more seats available per performance in the larger Studio 54 performing space,

making theater capacity a truer indicator of celebrity impact. Film and television star Brooke Shields played a 17 week run in *Cabaret* from July 3, 2001, to October 28, 2001, and averaged \$403,992 gross and 91.9% capacity. This was an amazing accomplishment given Shields' run coincided with the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, that brought business on Broadway to a virtual stand still. Finally, pop star Deborah Gibson played Bowles for 17 weeks from February 21, 2003, to June 15, 2003, and the production averaged \$331,691 and 86.3% capacity. Out of the 19 actresses to play Sally Bowles after Richardson left the production, ten of them obtained celebrity in another medium and all except for Leigh played runs of less than 20 weeks, making this a clear example of revolving door celebrity casting if the role had met the criteria for the case study. While this character and the actresses who portrayed her do not qualify, producers also used the part of The Emcee as an opportunity to cast celebrities from another medium in an effort to capitalize on their image and name, and thus, they can be examined in further detail.

The role of The Emcee was originated on Broadway by Scottish actor Alan Cumming, who won the Tony award for Best Actor for his performance in 1998. Cumming, who studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, exited the show June 6, 1999, and was replaced by a string of Broadway veterans including Michael C. Hall, Matt McGrath, Adam Pascal, and Raul Esparza. Based on the previously established criteria for revolving door celebrity casting, the first eligible celebrity to join the cast would be John Stamos, who

began performances as The Emcee in *Cabaret* on April 29, 2002. Stamos had previously appeared on Broadway in the 1995 revival of Frank Loesser's *How to Succeed in the Business Without Really Trying*, but established his celebrity as a television star on the ABC sitcom, *Full House*. *How To Succeed...* is not eligible for a case study since its original star Matthew Broderick left the show only eight months after it opened at the Richard Rodgers Theatre. Stamos never attended college and had no formal theater training prior to jumping to the cast of *How to Succeed in Business* in 1995. Producers ran ads in the *New York Times* featuring Stamos in costume as the Emcee, which consisted of no shirt, suspenders and full androgynous theatrical make up with dark eye shadow, painted eyebrows, pale face and dark lipstick. The ad read " 'The Best Musical on Broadway!' – Clive Barnes, *New York Post*. Now Starring Jane Leeves, John Stamos, Polly Bergen, Hal Linden. *Cabaret* at Studio 54" (John Stamos AR13). During Stamos' 19 week run in *Cabaret* the show maintained its financial standing established under the previous celebrity guest star, Molly Ringwald. Her final week, *Cabaret* placed eighth out of 35 shows reporting theater capacity on April 28, 2002. Stamos' first week maintained the standards established by Ringwald's successful run, with *Cabaret* placing eighth out of 34 shows reporting theater capacity on May 5, 2002. The 19 weeks prior to Stamos grossed approximately \$7.6 million at the box office, averaging \$402,945 per week and playing at an average of 94% theater capacity (see fig. 15). During his own 19 week run, between April 29, 2002, and September 8, 2002, *Cabaret* grossed

approximately 47.8 million, averaging \$412,498 per week and playing at an average of 92.3% theater capacity, maintaining nearly a mirror image financial result and keeping *Cabaret* consistently in the top ten of Broadway shows currently in operation. When Stamos departed and was replaced by Ringwald, coming in for her second stint with the show as Sally Bowles, the impact was clearly felt at the box office. Stamos' final week, ending September 8, 2002, *Cabaret* grossed \$365,137 and placed in a tie for fifth in theatre capacity out of 23 shows reporting with 78%. The next week, ending September 15, 2002, the show dropped to \$304,324 gross and 73% capacity, placing ninth out of 23 shows reporting, losing approximately \$60,000 of business in a week that all Broadway show receipts were actually up approximately \$400,000 from the previous week.

The next celebrity guest star to join the cast as The Emcee was television star Neil Patrick Harris, whose celebrity was achieved as a teenage actor on the television series, *Doogie Howser, M.D.* which ran from 1989 to 1993 on the ABC network. He never attended college or received any formal theatrical training which Harris discussed in his interview with *Playbill.com* writer Kenneth Jones in 2002, when responding to a question about attending college or getting any acting training. " 'Between Jim Sikking and Belinda Montgomery and Larry Pressmen (his co-stars in 'Doogie Howser'), you couldn't ask for a better theatrical upbringing. I thought about (college), but then I kept working on other things and so it never really happened' " (Jones, "Playbill," par. 16). Harris also

later stated in a question and answer session with the readers of *Broadway.com* when asked if he always had the intention of moving on to theatrical performing, “ ‘ I’d always been mesmerized by theater, whether it be Broadway or regional rep or magic shows or theme park reviews. I just dig the live element. So when I was on TV, I knew I’d get to it someday, I had no idea it would be so soon and on such a large scale...’ ” (“Ask Neil,” par. 15). Producers marketed Harris’ appearance in the show in the same way they promoted Stamos, with an image of Harris in costume as the Emcee in an ad in the *New York Times*, “ ‘The Best Musical On Broadway’ Now Starring Neil Patrick Harris, Deborah Gibson, Tom Bosley, Mariette Hartley. *Cabaret* at Studio 54” (Neil Patrick Harris AR13). The ten weeks prior to Harris joining the cast, *Cabaret* averaged \$374,403 box office gross each week and 82% theater capacity. With Harris in the cast starting January 3, 2003, the weekly average box office gross dropped down to \$340,076 average per week, but the theater capacity climbed to an average of 87.6% for his 21 weeks. The drop in gross can be attributed to the overall drop in the Broadway community in combined theatrical gross during the slower months between the holiday season and the summer months. This is illustrated by comparing the ten weeks prior to Harris entering *Cabaret* when all Broadway receipts grossed approximately \$161.7 million, for an average of approximately \$16.2 million per week. Compare that to the 21 weeks when Harris was on Broadway as The Emcee when all Broadway shows grossed \$284.1 million, for an average of approximately \$13.5 million per week resulting in an approximate

\$2.7 million drop off. With all of Broadway suffering a 16.7% drop in box office gross, *Cabaret* only saw a 9.1% decline during Harris' tenure (see fig. 16).

Therefore, using this statistic and theater capacity as the most accurate marker of Harris' box office impact, his stint in *Cabaret* can be viewed as a financial success. The week after Harris left the show, *Cabaret* dropped from 89% theatre capacity and 11th place out of 30 Broadway shows reporting the week ending May 25, 2003, to 78% capacity and 14th place out of 30 shows reporting on June 1, 2003.

The final celebrity guest star to play The Emcee was music artist Jon Secada. His musical career had been successful, establishing him as a celebrity draw for the producers of *Cabaret*.

In 1992, Secada signed with SBK records and released his self-titled debut recording. It was an instant smash, selling over six million copies. While continuing his English-language work, Secada released Spanish albums, *Otro Dia Mas Sin Verte*, the Spanish-language version of his debut, won a Grammy for Best Latin Pop Album. His subsequent albums included the English-language *Heart, Soul & a Voice*, *Secada* and *Better Part of Me* and the Spanish-language *Amor* (which won him a Grammy for Latin Pop Performance). (David, par. 2)

While Secada had previously appeared on Broadway as Danny Zuko in the 1994 revival of *Grease*, he had no formal theatrical training or professional theatrical experience prior to gaining celebrity as a music artist. Producers continued the same marketing strategy by featuring Secada in full Emcee make up and shirtless costume in the *New York Times*. "Now Starring Susan Egan, Jon Secada, Blair Brown, Tony Roberts. Today at 2&7, *Cabaret* at Studio 54" ("Jon

Secada" AR7). Secada's run was met with a positive response from one of New York's most prominent theatre critics, Clive Barnes, who wrote:

Some of the incoming stars – the good, the bad and the merely beautiful – have been, on the face of things, unlikely. Yet, it must be admitted some of the unlikely ones have worked the best. The venomous, vibrant and epicene Master of the Ceremonies – formulated first by Joel Grey in the original production, and then by Alan Cumming in the Sam Mendes re-invention – seems hardly the role for an Emmy-winning Latino heartthrob. For the first long 30 long seconds or so of Jon Secada's bravura, powerhouse performance I had my own preconceived doubts, but the man is just a wonderful performer, and, without really changing the Mendes/Cumming persona he fits it around his own flamboyant individuality. (39)

The week in between Harris and Secada dropped *Cabaret* down three places in theater capacity in comparison to the other shows reporting on Broadway. In his first week beginning June 3, 2003, Secada's celebrity presence in the show had no bearing on the box office. *Cabaret* grossed \$285,343 that week and played at 74% capacity, sliding even further to 15th place out of 28 shows reporting capacity. In his 19 weeks as The Emcee, *Cabaret* eventually climbed back up to averaging \$335,528 box office gross per week and 89.4% theater capacity. Coinciding with the announcement on August 27, 2003, that *Cabaret* would be closing its doors at Studio 54 for good on November 2, 2003, the show saw a boost at the box office from theatergoers coming to see the production before it left Broadway. These final six weeks of Secada's run between September 1, 2003, and October 12, 2003, averaged \$343,973 box office gross and 88.3% theater capacity compared to the \$331,630 and 90% capacity the show averaged in 13 weeks with only Secada's name as the primary drawing card. During the

week of the show's highest gross and theater capacity with Secada, \$348,683 gross and 95% capacity, the show only was still tenth out of 23 Broadway shows reporting and only maintained its position just above the middle of the pack. This statistic indicates that Secada's celebrity served as more of a stabilizer than a boost financially.

The revival of *Cabaret* finally closed its doors after extending one last time past its original closing date on January 4, 2004. The show was so successful for the non-profit Roundabout Theatre Company that there were even reports of the company reviving their own revival in May 2007.

The *New York Post* reports that the nonprofit theatre company will likely present the Sam Mendes-Rob Marshall production following its upcoming staging of Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Sunday in the Park With George* at Studio 54....A Roundabout spokesperson told the Post, '*Cabaret* was a huge artistic success. Reviving the show would allow new audiences to see it. And unlike the commercial theatre, if the engagement made a profit, the money would go into other productions (seven-plus new stagings a year) and educational programs.' (Gans, "Roundabout," par. 2-4)

After a reported \$1.2 million renovation to Studio 54, keeping the show alive with celebrity casting was a calculated risk for the non-profit Roundabout that gave the company financial and professional success.

The list of name-brand Sally Bowleses is a testament to the lessons learned by Roundabout in the care and feeding of a long-running show....When '*Cabaret*' opened, he said, the theater had no endowment; now the endowment is \$12 million. The Roundabout's annual budget when '*Cabaret*' opened was about \$15 million, Mr. Haimes said; this year it's about \$40 million. When the show opened, the company didn't own Studio 54; now it does. It didn't have a long-term lease on the beautifully refurbished American Airlines Theater; now it does....'It's provided us a degree

of stability, that's for sure,' Mr. Haimés said. 'Second, when a show is that big a hit, it helps your visibility, which results in increased contributions, subscriptions, increased awareness in every way. But even more than that, artistically it gave us credibility as an institution that could produce musicals well and market and exploit the success of a musical well. As a result people are more likely to give us their projects. It's been sort of a seminal experience.' (Weber, "Critic's," par. 12-15)

Figure 15. Box Office Report, *Cabaret* (Jan. 13, 2002-Jan. 5, 2003)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 16. Box Office Report, *Cabaret* (Jan. 12, 2003-Jan. 4, 2004)
"NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter IX

Annie Get Your Gun

On March 4, 1999, producers Barry and Fran Weissler, in partnership with Kardana Productions, Michael Watt, Irving Welzer and Hal Luftig, brought Irving Berlin's classic musical *Annie Get Your Gun* back to the Broadway stage.

Starring Broadway icon Bernadette Peters in the title role, the show opened at the Marquis Theatre and played a successful 42 week run, making \$29.2 million and playing to an average of 90.7% theater capacity with approximately \$690,000 gross per week. The producers got their first glimpse of how critical Tony award winner Bernadette Peters would be to their show's box office hopes when the star took a four week vacation from December 23, 1999, to January 16, 2000, and was replaced by soap opera star, Susan Lucci. Lucci gained fame by playing Erica Kane on the daytime television show *General Hospital* and was called by TV Guide, "unequivocally the most famous soap opera character in the history of daytime TV" ("Biography Susan," par. 1). While Lucci gained fame exclusively in another medium, she did graduate with a B.F.A. in Theater Arts from Marymount College at Fordham University in 1968. Thus, for the purpose of this case study, Lucci is considered a trained theater performer, and her box office result cannot be considered evidence.

On January 18, 2000, Bernadette Peters returned to the role of Annie Oakley and stayed with the show another 33 weeks, bringing in \$20 million in box office gross and an average of 86.3% of theater capacity (see fig. 17). Her final

full week of performances brought *Annie Get Your Gun* back up to sixth place out of 23 shows reporting on Broadway, with a theater capacity of 95%. To replace Peters, producers Fran and Barry Weissler looked to former *Charlie's Angels* vixen and television celebrity, Cheryl Ladd. Best known for her role as Kris Munroe on *Charlie's Angels*, Ladd's image and name were used to promote the show, with the new poster featuring Ladd in Annie Oakley's trademark western attire and revolvers. Cheryl Ladd opened on September 6, 2000, and her first week grossed \$314,792 and 55% theater capacity, a significant drop from Peters final week of \$593,015 and 82% theater capacity. The production averaged only \$420,000 in box office gross during her 20 weeks in the title role, as compared to the \$690,000 average pulled in by Bernadette Peters. The week ending on December 24, 2000, saw *Annie Get Your Gun* fall to \$301,270 of gross and only 49% theater capacity, ranking the show 27th out of 30. Ladd's final week of performances, ending January 24, 2001, didn't see any spike in attendance, grossing \$304,182 and 54% theater capacity, but the financial strategy of producers Fran and Barry Weissler soon became clear. Ladd was only a temporary bridge between Peters and the celebrity they truly hoped to cash in on, country music celebrity Reba McEntire. The Weisslers admitted she was their first choice above Ladd, and might have even been their original preference over Peters for the role. The following quote, published in the *New York Times* on March 28, 2001, two months into Ms. McEntire's run, proved to be prophetic and accurate.

Producers also weight the cost of rehearsal time and new costumes against the potential upswing at the box office. The Weisslers made the calculation to hang on until Ms. McEntire, who had concert dates and recordings to finish, could step into the show, casting Ms Ladd in the interim. 'If I didn't have Reba, I would not have put Cheryl in the show,' Mr. Weissler said. 'Those were rough months.' 'We took a loss, but it's worth it,' he continued. 'We'll make that loss back, and we'll make a profit'. (Pogrebin, "New Star," par. 13-14)

Reba McEntire was called a "theatrical neophyte" ("Headlines," par. 19) in a review by Ken Mendelbaum, which was another way of saying that she had no theatrical training that qualified her to be a Broadway star. She attended college at Southeastern Oklahoma State University to get a teaching degree and from there launched her career as a country superstar. Her success in the music industry is well documented. "Reba McEntire was the most successful female recording artist in country music in the 1980s and 1990s, during which time she scored 22 number one hits and released five gold albums, four triple-platinum albums, a quadruple-platinum album, for certified album sales of 33.5 million over the 20-year period" (Ruhlmann, par. 1). Reba McEntire admittedly never saw herself as a live theatrical performer, as reported by the *New York Times*.

She didn't actually attend her first Broadway show until she was nearly 30. (It was *Dreamgirls*) And until two and a half years ago, when the producers Barry and Fran Weissler approached her to star in the Broadway revival of *Annie Get Your Gun* (she initially turned them down), she never imagined herself on any stage other than the concert stage, where she reigned as one of the queens of country music since the mid-1980's. (Holden, par. 6)

McEntire's celebrity status was used extensively to promote the show, including her image on a new show bill reading, "Rip-Roarin' Reba! Reba McEntire in

Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*" ("Collectables"). McEntire began performances on January 26, 2001, and results during her first full week in the show were dramatic with \$462,110 box office gross, an approximate improvement of \$160,000 of box office gross over Ladd's final full week as Annie Oakley on January 21, 2001, at \$304,182 gross (see fig. 18). Box office really started to pick up the week ending February 18, 2001, when *Annie Get Your Gun* climbed back up to \$706,026 for the week and 82% theater capacity, placing 14th out of 26 shows running on Broadway. Compared to the week ending February 4, 2001, when *Annie Get Your Gun* placed 23rd out of 24 shows, the statistics show the production had gained momentum due to McEntire's presence in the show. After February 18, 2001, until her closing date on June 22, 2001, *Annie Get Your Gun* averaged 87% theater capacity for those 15 weeks. Her run in the show was so successful her contract was extended past her original closing date on May 27, 2001, moving her out of the revolving door category and into the extended run with 26 weeks in the production. Her stint in the show drew the attention of CBS and there was talk of turning the musical into a television movie featuring Reba McEntire in the title role, but the deal fell apart as McEntire moved on with her sitcom, *Reba*. During her final three weeks, the show improved to an average of 93.3% theater capacity and *Annie Get Your Gun* placed eighth out of 29 shows during her final week ending June 24, 2001, at 93% capacity and \$821,599 box office gross. The show continued to run until September 2, 2001, and closed with television star Crystal Bernard in the title

role of Annie Oakley. Bernard does not qualify for this case study because she studied theater at Baylor University and performed professionally with the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas prior to achieving her celebrity on the television show *Wings*.

Annie Get Your Gun grossed a total of approximately \$82.1 million in 135 weeks on Broadway. After such a successful initial run mostly featuring Bernadette Peters, grossing approximately \$53,456,982 and \$644,060 average weekly gross, the producers were able to endure a difficult run with Cheryl Ladd since, according to columnist Jesse McKinley on November 10, 2000, the producers had already made it into the black financially. "The show (*Annie Get Your Gun*), which has long since recouped its \$8 million investment..." (McKinley, "On Stage Jekyll," par. 7). With Reba McEntire in the title role, the show grossed \$17,491,164 in 26 weeks, for a weekly average of \$672,737 box office gross, their calculated strategy paid off for McEntire's box office average was actually approximately \$28,000 higher than the original cast starring Peters.

Figure 17. Box Office Report, *Annie Get Your Gun* (Jan. 23, 2000-Jan. 14, 2001)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 18. Box Office Report, *Annie Get Your Gun* (Jan. 21-Sept. 2, 2001)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter X

Aida

On March 23, 2000, Walt Disney Theatricals opened their third Broadway show, Elton John's adaptation of *Aida*, at the Palace Theatre. The show starred Broadway actress Heather Headley in the title role of Aida. Headley was trained as an actor at Northwestern University and left at the end of her junior year to understudy in the Broadway company of *Ragtime* and in 1997 created the role of Nala in Disney Theatricals' original cast of *The Lion King*. *Aida* won four Tony Awards, including Best Original Score, Best Actress in a Musical for Heather Headley, Best Scenic Design, and Best Lighting Design. In its first year, *Aida* made \$41,944,892 in total box office gross and achieved 95.7% theater capacity. On March 18, 2001, the week celebrating *Aida*'s first year on Broadway, out of 29 Broadway shows reporting, *Aida* was third place with 99% theater capacity and second in weekly box office gross with \$855,215. In its second year, on March 17, 2002, *Aida* grossed \$40,806,715 and 87.3% theater capacity. Disney Theatricals found the show had fallen on its second anniversary to 17th in theater capacity and sixth in gross with \$741,535 out of 31 Broadway shows reporting that week. From then on, the production continued to slide at the box office, reporting only \$33,361,837 in its third year of operation from March 24, 2002, to March 16, 2003, a drop of over \$7 million from the previous year.

On April 4, 2003, Disney Theatricals responded by announcing they had cast Grammy Award winning vocal artist Toni Braxton in the role of Aida. She would enter the show on June 30, 2003, replacing Broadway actress and original cast member of *Rent*, Simone. Braxton achieved fame as an R&B artist in the early 1990s, winning six Grammy Awards and American Music Awards. Toni Braxton had no training as an actress, but did appear in a previous Broadway show as Belle in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* from September 9, 1998, to March 1, 1999, and in the feature film *Kingdom Come*, directed by Doug McHenry and released by Miramax pictures. Braxton's appearance in *Beauty and the Beast* does not allow her to be considered a trained actress for the purpose of this case study, since her celebrity was achieved in the medium of pop music before her first Broadway show. Print advertising in the *New York Times* for the show displayed Toni Braxton's name above the show title, "One Legend Takes On Another. Toni Braxton Begins Tomorrow. Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida*" (Toni Braxton AR9). As part of her contract, Toni Braxton only performed six shows a week and the role of Aida was covered by Braxton's understudy, Saycon Sengbloh, during the Wednesday or Saturday matinees. Columnist Andrew Gans noted this special concession in Braxton's contract, "Although opera companies regularly feature two or more performers sharing the same vocally demanding role, that practice is a rare occurrence on Broadway" ("Toni," par. 4). In Braxton's case, she cited having a four-month-old child as her reason for not performing on two show days. During Toni Braxton's first six

weeks in *Aida*, June 30, to August 10, 2003, the theater averaged 90% capacity, a 12.6% jump since she joined the cast (see. fig. 19). This raised the show's standing in comparison to its Broadway competition, with *Aida* ranking 19th out of 24 shows reporting on June 29, 2003, with 84% theater capacity without Braxton to 15th out of 23 shows with 93% theater capacity on August 10 with Braxton. In the end, Braxton's tenure in *Aida* played 20 weeks at an average of 86% capacity and \$703,605 weekly gross, a positive investment by Disney since the previous 20 weeks averaged 74.8% theater capacity and \$536,760 weekly gross. As noted by Robert Hofler in *Variety*, "The Disney tuner by Elton John and Tim Rice has done very well with Braxton. Most weeks of her run have topped \$700,000, a good six figures above its average in previous months" (par. 3).

The week after Braxton left *Aida*, the show brought in \$532,913 in box office gross and 73% theater capacity, which was over a \$250,000 drop from the previous week starring Braxton at \$803,666 in box office gross and it played at 89% theater capacity. There were 13 weeks between Braxton and the next extended run celebrity casting by Disney Theatricals. During this time, the show averaged \$581,004 total gross and played at 69.5% theater capacity, even dropping as low as 46% during the week of January 27, to February 1, 2004 (see fig. 20). This was over \$100,000 less than Braxton's weekly box office gross average and *Aida* fell back down from 15th in theater capacity with Braxton to 23rd with 46% capacity on the week ending February 1, 2002. Staying in the same R&B music genre, Bernard Telsey Casting hired Canadian pop singer Deborah

Cox to start performances on February 17, 2004, to play the title role. Cox gained acclaim in 1998 with her song "Nobody's Supposed to Be Here" from her album *One Wish* that held the top spot on the Billboard Hot R&B/Hip-Hop charts for 14 weeks. Other top ten hits include "Why Can't We Be Friends," "Something Happened on the Way to Heaven," and "Who Do U Love?" Deborah Cox had some television and film credits on her resume prior to joining the cast of *Aida*, but had no documented experience performing in live theater, as evidenced in this interview with Broadway gossip website, *BroadwayStars.com*. " ' So I was more than a bit worried that none of that prepared me for live theater,' Cox admits. 'I was extremely nervous at the auditions but I had wonderful support from everyone...' " (Nassour, par. 16). In an effort to capitalize on Cox's celebrity, Disney Theatricals placed a large display ad in the *New York Times* stating, "Music Sensation Deborah Cox stars as Aida in Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida*" (Deborah Cox E6) along with a photo of Cox in costume dramatically staring into the camera. Also, in a rare move for a Broadway show, Cox was permitted to record a dance mix of the second act power ballad song from the musical, "Easy As Life." This move was supported by the show's lyricist Tim Rice when he was interviewed by Broadway website, *Playbill.com*. " 'I have always felt that it is a shame that Broadway and the popular music charts have often drifted away from each other. I am therefore delighted to hear a Top 40 take on one of the songs from *Aida*...' " (Gans, "Aida's," par. 4). After Cox's addition to the cast, the box office numbers climbed. During her first three weeks, February

16, to March 7, 2003, the show played to 68.3% capacity and averaged \$489,061 weekly gross and then grew to average 82.5% capacity and \$627,382 weekly gross over the next six weeks, March 14, to April 18, 2004. During her entire 29 week tenure in the title role, which ended when the show closed on September 5, 2004, *Aida* averaged \$604,569 of weekly box office, which comes to 80% average theater capacity of the Palace Theatre.

Upon closing, *Aida* had climbed back from the bottom third in theater capacity to finish sixth out of 22 shows reporting its final week ending September 5, 2004, with 83% and \$651,855 gross. By employing celebrities in the title role of *Aida* for 49 weeks, Disney Theatricals grossed \$31,604,631. This weekly average of \$644,992 with pop star celebrities in the role of *Aida* versus the \$641,573 weekly average from June 2002, to June 2003, shows a \$3,000 improvement in weekly box office gross. For a show operating in its fourth year, this is quite an accomplishment and a sign that casting two pop stars who achieved celebrity in the music industry had an impact on the shows overall stability at the box office. Disney Theatricals effectively used extended run celebrity casting to keep their production open on Broadway.

It should be noted that recording artist Taylor Dayne did play a 27 week run in *Aida* starting February 27, 2001. While she is an untrained theater performer, she appeared in the production prior to *Aida* running uninterrupted for one year and does not meet the criteria for this case study. Former Destiny's Child pop star Michelle Williams also played the title role of *Aida* for 13 weeks

between Braxton and Cox, but since she was in the show for under 19 weeks, Williams falls into the revolving door category, which requires two or more celebrities to be cast in the show for a period 19 weeks or less. For *Aida*, this is not the case. Thus, Williams' effect on the box office of *Aida* will go undocumented as part of this case study.

Figure 19. Box Office Report, *Aida* (Jan. 5-Dec. 28, 2003)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 20. Box Office Report, *Aida* (Jan. 4-Sept. 5, 2004)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter XI

Hairspray

Based on the 1988 John Waters cult film of the same title, the Broadway musical *Hairspray* was the pet project of independent producer Margo Lion. She was no stranger to producing Broadway shows, having been instrumental in 12 previous productions including the critically acclaimed *Angels in America: Perestroika*, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, and *The Secret Garden*. In an interview with Robin Pogrebin of the *New York Times*, Lion offered what drew her to create a Broadway musical from an underground film.

‘I wanted to do something joyful, something celebratory, like the show I remembered when I was a kid,’ Ms. Lion said. She also wanted to do a show that was full of dance, since the 1980’s had been dominated by British musicals, which had limited movement. In addition, she wanted to reach a broad demographic: black, white; young, old; gay, straight. (Pogrebin, “New Star,” par. 27)

After an out of town try-out at Seattle’s 5th Avenue Theatre, the musical opened on August 15, 2002, at the Neil Simon Theatre to rave reviews. It won six Tony Awards including Best New Musical. Despite the production’s \$10.5 million budget, Lion was able to pay back the show’s 300 investors prior to the Tony Awards. “ ‘All the capital has been returned,’ said Lion, whose first Broadway production was ‘Jelly’s Last Jam’ in 1992. ‘From here on in is profit.’ The checks were mailed to investors about six weeks under a year since ‘Hairspray’ began its previews last July in New York, she said” (Beamon, par. 6-7).

In that first year, *Hairspray* grossed approximately \$49.6 million and averaged 96.4% theater capacity. The second year, between August 11, 2003, and August 8, 2004, *Hairspray* continued to be financially successful, grossing approximately \$48.2 million at the box office and averaging 98.5% theater capacity. During its second year, there were 13 weeks when *Hairspray* averaged 101% capacity because they were able to sell standing room only tickets for sold out performances, increasing the 1,385 capacity that was normal for the Neil Simon Theatre. The show's third year, between August 10, 2004, and August 7, 2005, is when the show fell 17.4% in box office gross from the previous year, making approximately \$39.8 million but still averaging 95.1% theater capacity. This can be attributed to the show now offering discounted tickets, so theater capacity remained high but overall gross slipped significantly. The average paid admission for the week ending August 7, 2005, was \$68.10 and the show sold at 98% capacity in comparison to the previous year in the week ending August 8, 2004, when the average paid admission was \$84.35 and the show sold at only 92% capacity.

The original cast of *Hairspray* starred Harvey Fierstein as Edna Turnblad, Laura Bell Bundy as Amber Von Tussle, Kerry Butler as Penny Pingleton, Dick Latessa as Wilbur Turnblad, Matthew Morrison as Link Larkin, and Clarke Thorell as Corny Collins. In this group of performers, there was an abundance of experience and professional theatre credits including Fierstein (*Torch Song Trilogy*), Bell Bundy (Drama Desk Nominee for *Ruthless! The Musical*), Butler

(Ithaca College and *Beauty and the Beast*), Latessa (15 previous Broadway shows), Morrison (NYU Tisch School for the Arts, Broadway's *Footloose*), and Thorell (Broadway's *The Who's Tommy* and *Titanic*). With all of these original cast members out of the show by the third year, box office gross continued to slip in the next six months down to an average of \$620,041 per week and 84.2% theater capacity. On January 17, 2006, the producers of *Hairspray* announced that 2004 *American Idol* runner-up Diana DeGarmo would be joining the cast for a 14 week run as Penny Pingleton on February 7, 2006. DeGarmo had some community theater experience in Atlanta prior to gaining her celebrity as a contestant on *American Idol*. Despite not having any notable success as a recording artist to date, DeGarmo can still be considered a celebrity due to the popularity of the third season of *American Idol*, on which she was runner-up. The season finale starring DeGarmo and fellow finalist, Fantasia Barrino, was broadcast on the Fox Television Network to blockbuster Nielsen ratings.

The 2003-04 TV season went out with a bang for Fox and with a whimper for the other networks. With the 'American Idol' finale airing on the last night of the season, Fox earned a rare victory in the weekly Nielsen ratings race, scoring a one-two punch with the last two 'Idol' episodes – Wednesday's was tops, drawing 28.8 million, while 25.1 million viewers made Tuesday's edition the week's No. 2 show. (Susman, par. 1)

When discussing her preparation to make her Broadway debut with *Broadwayworld.com* columnist Nick Orlando, DeGarmo's inexperience with working in professional theater comes across. " 'It was really quick. I only had two weeks of rehearsals. I never realized how fast people get 'thrown in' "

(Orlando, par. 7). Marketing for DeGarmo's appearance in *Hairspray* featured the following above the show's title in the *New York Times*, "Welcome American Idol's Diana DeGarmo beginning this Tuesday at 7" (Diana DeGarmo AR7). Before DeGarmo started, *Hairspray* was ranked 18th out of 25 shows with 69% capacity and \$462,775 gross and \$58.92 average paid admission on the week ending January 2, 2006. DeGarmo's first week saw a slight increase in the ranking, coming up to 16th out of 26 shows reporting and \$530,619 gross and \$63.60 average paid admission (see fig. 21). Overall sales increased an average of \$44,000 per week up to an average of \$664,176 box office gross and theater capacity rose back up to 92.9% during her 14 weeks as Penny. DeGarmo's final week, ending May 14, 2006, *Hairspray* ranked 18th out of 37 Broadway shows reporting 77% theater capacity. Even though statistics show theater capacity rose to 84% the following week, *Hairspray* dropped one spot to 19th out of 36 Broadway shows reporting on May 21, 2006. Her celebrity helped the show reach a new audience and maintain the show's standing as 11 new productions opened on Broadway during her run. According to publicist Richard Kornberg in an interview with David Finkle, " 'The *Hairspray* producers were initially surprised at how much money Diana brought in' " (Finkle, par. 3). She was so successful that producers brought her back for a second time as Penny, this time for an extended 23 week run from September 8, 2006, to February 11, 2007. Crossing over with DeGarmo for part of her second appearance as Penny was another teen icon television star Haylie Duff.

Haylie Duff, star of the television series *7th Heaven* and sister of pop star Hillary Duff, began performances as Amber Von Tussle on July 18, 2006, and stayed with the production for 14 weeks before having to leave to resume filming *Heaven* on October 22, 2006. Duff's celebrity prior to joining *Hairspray* came from being part of one season of the long running series *7th Heaven* and starring as Amy Saunders on her sister Hillary's television show, *Lizzy McGuire*. While she did perform in a production of *The Nutcracker* at the age of ten, Duff had no formal professional stage experience prior to making her Broadway debut in *Hairspray*. Promoting her as Amber, newspaper ads read, "Haylie Duff joins the party Tuesday..." (Haylie Duff AR9). She got her own profile on E! Entertainment News promoting her appearance on Broadway with a voice-over playing while footage of her dancing in the show is on screen, "Yet another A-Lister is enjoying her first run on Broadway as well, stepping into one of the Big Apple's long running hits" ("Haylie E! News"). A few critics including *AM New York's* Matt Windman reviewed her performance, noting that while her acting was up to the test, Duff was surprisingly absent from some of the shows tougher choreography. "Her character has no solo songs or big dramatic moments. Not only that, Duff has been removed from the teen ensemble's most intense moments of dance choreography. Frankly, all that Duff needs to do is be funny while reciting some very funny lines in her nasal voice. And at that, she is fine. No complaints!" (Windman, par. 4). Duff's first week in the show played at \$751,827 and 98% capacity, which was a \$90,000 and 10% capacity improvement over the week

before, when box office gross was \$661,181 and capacity was 88%. The show also climbed among Broadway shows reporting capacity, from 15th out of 25 shows reporting the week before Duff ending July 16, 2006, to seventh out of 24 shows reporting the week ending July 23, 2006, with Duff as Von Tussle. During Duff's final week, *Hairspray* was tied for 12th out of 27 shows in theater capacity with 90%, a slight drop off from when she entered the production but still a strong showing for a Broadway musical into its fourth year of performances. After Duff left the show, the week immediately following *Hairspray* dropped down to 18th out of 30 Broadway shows reporting with DeGarmo as the solo headliner. DeGarmo continued to carry the show alone for 12 weeks, and the box office numbers were \$626,503 and 80.1% capacity, but *Hairspray* continued to fall in Broadway theater capacity ranking, down to 25th out of 28 shows on January 14, 2007, with 74% capacity (see fig. 22).

On January 19, 2007, teen reality television and pop star Ashley Parker Angel joined the cast as Link Larkin for what turned into an extended 87 week run that didn't end until September 14, 2008. His celebrity and potential box office appeal is noted by the press release promoting Angel's appearance in the show on industry website *Broadwayworld.com*:

Ashley Parker Angel became a breakout star on the ABC series 'Making the Band.' The show chronicled the formation of his multi-platinum recording group O-Town, most widely recognized for the smash hit 'All or Nothing.' Ashley has toured internationally, recently appeared in his MTV series 'There and Back' and last year released his solo album Soundtrack to Your Life. His single 'Let You Go' achieved the highest debut on Billboard's hot singles chart

of any artist in 2006 and spent weeks at number one on MTV's 'TRL.' (par. 2)

Angel never had any formal acting training prior to making his Broadway debut in *Hairspray*. His appearance was constantly promoted during his year and a half in the show in print advertising, "Broadway's #1 Party Welcomes 2 Special Stars. Welcome Ashley Parker Angel of MTV Fame. Welcome Diana DeGarmo of *American Idol* Fame. The *New York Times* says 'If life were everything it should be, it would be more like *Hairspray*' (Ashley Parker Angel AR2). Due to the length of Angel's extended run, it is difficult to measure how his celebrity name alone affected the box office results since he shared top billing with DeGarmo and the four other untrained celebrities to follow, Alexa Vega, Jerry Mathers, Lance Bass, and George Wendt. Angel injured his back in April 2008 and was forced to miss a month of performances and was replaced by Broadway actor Aaron Tveit during this stretch of performances. Angel's final week ranked 20th out of 25 Broadway shows reporting with 64% capacity, compared to the week after Angel left the show, when *Hairspray* was 21st out of 29 Broadway shows reporting theater capacity with 65%. The statistics are not available to truly see how he contributed to the financial outlook of the production.

Alexa Vega, star of the *Spy Kids* film trilogy, replaced DeGarmo as Penny Pingleton on February 13, 2007, for a 25 week run that ended on August 5, 2007. In an article, columnist Kenneth Jones lists Vega's celebrity qualifications:

Alexa Vega, who starred in the 'Spy Kids' trilogy, joins the Tony-winning musical *Hairspray* Feb. 13 at the Neil Simon Theatre....Alexa Vega has been seen on screen in 'Evening

Shade,' 'Spy Kids,' 'Twister,' 'Little Giants,' 'Nine Months,' 'Ghosts of Mississippi,' 'Deep End of the Ocean,' 'Sleepover,' 'State's Evidence,' 'Ladies Man,' 'ER,' 'Chicago Hope' and 'Odd Girl Out.' She was most recently seen in HBO's 'Walkout' and just completed filming 'The Beautiful Ordinary.' *Hairspray* marks the actress' Broadway debut. ("Spy Kids," par. 4-5)

Her inexperience with live performance is evident when she responded to questions asked by reporter Sarah Wassner Flynn about how performing on Broadway compares to anything she has done before. Vega responded, "It's completely different! I've never done theatre, danced, or sang professionally. When I sang in *Spy Kids*, it was more of a joke than anything else – and I had no idea how hard it was all going to be" (par. 3). Vega's name was used in print ads to promote the show and her celebrity name, "Welcome Spy Kid Alexa Vega" (Alexa Vega E8). Vega's 25 week run, which overlapped with Ashley Parker Angel, averaged \$684,414 box office gross and 90% theater capacity that extended through the busy summer months of June to August 2007. Her final week, ending August 5, 2007, *Hairspray* tied for first place in theater capacity with 101% out of 25 Broadway shows reporting but her celebrity name can't be given all the credit since the week after, ending August 12, 2007, it also ranked first with 101% capacity. As with Angel, such a long run that overlaps with another celebrity, makes it difficult to get an accurate read on her celebrity name's contribution to the success of the show at the box office.

Leave it to Beaver television star Jerry Mathers played the role of Wilbur Turnblad for 15 weeks from June 4 to September 16, 2007, overlapping with Ashley Parker Angel and Alexa Vega's appearances in the show. Mathers

portrayed one of the most memorable characters in television history, Beaver Theodore Cleaver, from 1957 to 1963 on the series *Leave it to Beaver*. His place as a celebrity is firmly cemented by the longevity of the popular television series, which was selected by *TIME* magazine as one of the 100 best television shows in history. In addition, the amount of merchandise centered around Mathers' character included records, memorabilia, toys, board games and comic books. Mathers was not a trained stage actor and had only appeared in some dinner theatre productions as an adult, after he became a television celebrity. His inexperience on stage was evident in an article by Campbell Robertson that appeared in the *New York Times* that discussed the rehearsal process for *Hairspray*.

After a successful audition in December Mr. Mathers was set up with dance and vocal coaches who worked with him in Los Angeles, where he lives. At a rehearsal on Friday, his first with his Broadway co-stars, his moves were a little tentative. But he had them down, and his lines were greeted with laughter and applause by cast members watching from the orchestra. ("Jerry Mathers," par. 9)

Mathers even commented on how the dancing was a struggle for him at the audition in an interview with Michael Buckley:

'The dancing in *Hairspray* is the biggest challenge. But I'm kind of a perfectionist and I like challenges. When I auditioned, I sang the chorus of 'Timeless to Me,' and read some lines. I went in thinking: It's just an audition. When I finished, I started to walk out, and one of the producers asked me to wait, so the dance captain could work with me. I wasn't very good at it; I've never been a dancer' (par. 3)

Newspaper ads for *Hairspray* featured Mathers' name above the title during his run, "The Beav Goes Broadway! Ashley Parker Angel of MTV fame, *Spy Kid*

Alexa Vega and the entire *Hairspray* family welcome Jerry Mathers! Today at 3pm” (Jerry Mathers AR11). Mathers first week played at 91% capacity, which brought *Hairspray* back up to tenth out of 36 shows reporting from 15th out of 36 shows the previous week without Mathers, ending June 3, 2007. Overall, Mathers’ run averaged \$781,783 and 98.3% capacity, allowing producers to capitalize on the star power provided by their trio of untrained celebrity names above the marquee in Vega, Angel, and Mathers. In his final week, *Hairspray* played to 81% theater capacity and was ninth out of 23 shows reporting on September 16, 2007, slightly higher than the 11th out of 24 shows reporting the week after Mathers departed on September 23, 2007.

Also overlapping with Mathers was pop star Lance Bass who took over the role of Corny Collins on August 14, 2007, and played the part for 21 weeks until January 6, 2008. Bass was the second member of the music group N’Sync to perform on Broadway, following in the footsteps of Joey Fatone who had appeared in *Rent* and *Little Shop of Horrors*. Bass is a well-known celebrity for his time with the boy band N’Sync. Their record setting album, “No Strings Attached,” sold close to 2.5 million copies its first week in the Spring of 2000. The most notable evidence of his celebrity is that when Bass announced that he was a homosexual, it was covered by a multitude of media outlets and made the cover of *People* magazine with his photo and the headline “I’m Gay. Hurt by rumors, the pop star opens up about his decision to come out” (“Lance Bass Gay”). A high school drop out, Bass has no formal theater training or

professional live theater experience other than performing in concerts as a member of N'Sync. He discusses the chaotic nature of his first week on Broadway with columnist Robert Simonson:

'Well, I don't really remember it. (Laughs) I think the first week I was so flustered. I had like a week and a half to prepare this role. I was really rushed in doing it. The first weekend on stage I don't really remember a thing. I was definitely running into people and forgetting lines. It was insane. The more you get to do it, the better it gets.' ("Brief," par. 5)

His celebrity name was used above the title in the *New York Times* Theatre Directory ad for *Hairspray*. "Today at 2&8, Tom'w at 3. Welcome Lance Bass and Ashley Parker Angel" (Lance Bass B17). Bass overlapped with Angel until September 14, 2007, and then became the featured untrained celebrity draw for *Hairspray* for the rest of its run. Two of these weeks, the production had to go dark due to the stagehands' union strike in November 2007. For the 14 weeks the show was in operation, *Hairspray* averaged \$704,911 box office gross per week and 86.6% theater capacity. During this time it was consistently placing in the upper half of shows running on Broadway in theater capacity and at the end of Bass' tenure as Corny Collins, the show placed 13th out of 34 Broadway shows reporting with 92% capacity on January 6, 2008 (see fig. 23).

Success without a celebrity over the marquee proved unattainable for *Hairspray* in its final year on Broadway. The show took an immediate hit at the box office after Bass departed, falling to 71% theater capacity his first week out on January 13, 2008, placing in the bottom half at 17th out of 30 shows reporting. From January 7, 2008, to its closing date on January 4, 2009, *Hairspray* grossed

\$31.4 million without an untrained celebrity from another medium performing with the cast. Compared to the two previous years, January 8, 2007, to January 6, 2008, which featured Angel, Mathers, Bass, and Vega, the show grossed approximately \$33.9 million at the box office, a \$2.5 million hit without a celebrity boosting sales. The celebrity impact can be seen when comparing the numbers from January 2006-07, when only two celebrities with name power, DeGarmo and Duff, were used. The box office receipts were \$1 million lower, approximately \$32.9 million gross, compared to January 2007-08 \$33.9 million gross with Bass, Vega, Angel, and Mathers. This type of result cannot be found in any of the other case studies examined and emphasizes that by doubling the star power, *Hairspray* producers made an additional \$1 million in box office gross. Combining celebrities was not a new trend, but using them for combined extended runs is a casting and marketing strategy unique to *Hairspray* thus far in the Broadway community. As previously documented with the 1994 revival of *Grease*, the Weisslers would cast multiple celebrities at one time and promote them together as a package, but it was *Hairspray* that first successfully promoted multiple celebrities in an extended run of over 20 weeks. There were even more celebrities who appeared in *Hairspray* during the run but were not eligible for this case study because they had prior professional theater experience before they gained celebrity status or they had extensive theater training. Included in this category are comedian Bruce Vilanch (B.F.A. Theatre from Ohio State in 1970),

George Wendt (trained performer through the improvisational theater company, The Second City), and pop singer Audrey O'Day (theater major at UC Irvine).

Figure 21. Box Office Report, *Hairspray* (Jan. 8-Dec. 31, 2006)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 22. Box Office Report, *Hairspray* (Jan. 7-Dec. 30, 2007)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Figure 23. Box Office Report, *Hairspray* (Jan. 6, 2008-Jan. 4, 2009)
"NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter XII

Monty Python's Spamalot

On March 17, 2005, a group of producers headed by the Shubert Organization and Clear Channel Entertainment opened *Monty Python's Spamalot*, the musical version of the 1974 feature film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The musical featured a cast of trained theater veterans who had also achieved great success in film and television, including Tim Curry (Birmingham University graduate in Drama, *Amadeus*, *The Rocky Horror Show*), David Hyde Pierce (Yale School of Drama graduate and Broadway's *Beyond Therapy* and *The Heidi Chronicles*), and Hank Azaria (trained in theater at American Academy of Dramatic Arts and Tufts University) with director Mike Nichols (Broadway's *Barefoot in the Park*, *Annie*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Odd Couple*). This star-powered original cast, coupled with book and lyrics by original Monty Python cast member Eric Idle, proved to be a recipe for financial success at the box office. "The show (*Spamalot*), which opened in March and has built a mammoth advance of \$25 million in advance ticket sales..." (McKinley, "Spamalot," par. 2). *Spamalot* was an instant success with critics, eventually leading to three Tony Awards including one for Best New Musical. On April 2, 2006, the final two remaining stars, David Hyde Pierce and Hank Azaria, left the show. The ten weeks prior to their exit, January 23, 2006, to April 2, 2006, brought in \$9,994,708 in box office gross and averaged 97% theater capacity in the 1441

seat Shubert Theater. The box office for *Spamalot* did not suffer due to their departure, in fact it actually picked up heading into the typically busy summer Broadway season. From April 9, 2006, to June 11, 2006, *Spamalot* did \$10,120,996 in box office gross and played to 98.7% theater capacity. It wasn't until 32 months after *Monty Python's Spamalot* opened at the Shubert Theater that the production saw its box office dominance slide. On the week ending September 9, 2007, the weekly box office gross hit a new low at \$495,470 and 59% theater capacity. For the next five weeks, the box office gross averaged \$624,877, and the announcement was made on October 16, 2007, that soon pop star Clay Aiken would be joining the cast of *Spamalot* in early January 2008.

In response to the box office numbers, producers turned to theatrically untrained singer and second season *American Idol* runner up Clay Aiken to join the cast of *Monty Python's Spamalot* in the role of Sir Robin, Guard 1, and Brother Maynard. His celebrity was achieved during his run as a contestant on the second season of *American Idol* and his subsequent success as a recording artist. "Aiken, who was bested by Rueben Studdard during the second season of *American Idol*, has gone on to sell more than 6 million albums, co-author a best selling book ("Learning to Sing: Hearting the Music in Your Life") and play six sold-out concert tours. He was the focus of the short-lived Off-Broadway musical *Idol: The Musical* and has appeared on "Ed", "Saturday Night Live" and "Scrubs" (Hernandez, par. 4). Aiken was replacing two Broadway veterans who had played the role before him, David Hyde Pierce (*Beyond Therapy, Art, Curtains*)

and Martin Moran (*Big River, Titanic, Cabaret*). Both of these actors have extensive theatrical training, with Moran training at American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, CA, in comparison to Aiken who has no formal training in theater beyond the high school level. Aiken received his B.A. in Special Education from U.N.C. Charlotte and did not study theater in college. His inexperience was made clear in this January 2008 interview with the *New York Daily News* columnist Joe Dziemianowicz when he said, “ ‘I’ve kind of gotten past the whole audience-makes-me nervous thing,’ Aiken says, ‘but this is first time I’ve danced. I’m kind of a little weirded out about that ’ ” (par. 10). In addition, *Spamalot* creator Eric Idle and the production staff altered some of the content of the book and score to better suit Aiken’s talents. “Audiences will find out tomorrow if the tip actually helped, and they’ll see the new bits of music and jokes “Spamalot” writer Eric Idle has added for Aiken. ‘It’s just a touch here and there,’ says Aiken. Songs have been modified to better fit his voice” (par. 9).

Marketing materials featuring Clay Aiken could be found promoting his 16 week stint in the Broadway show from January 18, 2008, to May 4, 2008, including a television commercial that emphasized Aiken’s appearance in the musical. “And now for something completely different. Clay Aiken joins the cast of *Spamalot* starting January 18. Where else can you get big laughs, beautiful girls, a killer rabbit, and international superstar Clay Aiken, all in one show? Why it’s Spam-tastic” (*Spamalot* commercial). The week ending January 20, 2008, and the week before Clay Aiken arrived in the production, *Monty Python’s*

Spamalot finished sixth in theater capacity (83%) and seventh in box office gross (\$659,488) out of 30 shows that reported their gross box office receipts to The Broadway League. Aiken's first week in the show saw a 5% increase in theater capacity to 88% and 10,141 paid attendance at the Shubert and brought in an additional \$137,902 in box office sales, with \$797,390 in gross sales (see fig. 24). After two rough weeks where the theater capacity slid back down to 68% the week ending January 27, 2008, and 60% the week ending February 3, 2008, *Monty Python's Spamalot* began to see the financial benefits of casting Clay Aiken. For the final 13 weeks of his run, from February 10, 2008, to May 4, 2008, the show averaged 86% theater capacity. *Spamalot* brought in a total of \$11.8 million during Aiken's tenure as Sir Robin. Clay Aiken's impact on the box office fortunes of the show was not lost on *Variety* writer, Gordon Cox. "His previous run in *Spamalot* had a noticeable effect on box office. Weekly sales for the tuner surged the week Aiken joined the cast and took a steep tumble the frame after he departed" ("Clay," par. 4).

As noted by *Variety*, after Aiken left *Spamalot* the box office gross suffered. The first week after Aiken departed *Spamalot*, box office gross dropped over \$300,000, down to \$519,455. *Spamalot* had placed tenth in theater capacity out of 36 reporting Broadway shows on Aiken's final week with 84% capacity, and the show plummeted to 23rd on May 11 with 68% capacity. Producers immediately enlisted help in the form of another untrained celebrity to join the cast, Drew Lachey. The recent winner of the reality show *Dancing With The Stars*

and the music group 98 Degrees, would play the role of Patsy, King Arthur's manservant. Lachey had already performed a 26 week run in the Broadway production of *Rent* in 2004, but this does not change his status as an untrained theater performer, since the reasons for bringing him into *Spamalot* were financially motivated. Producers marketed the production on the marquee of the Shubert Theater, "*Monty Python's Spamalot....Now with Dancing With the Stars* winner Drew Lachey!" ("Hollywood"). Prior to Lachey's arrival, *Spamalot* maintained 79% theater capacity and in 23rd place out of 35 shows reporting on June 22, 2008. His first week in the show saw 78% theater capacity and 22nd place out of 35 shows reporting on June 29, 2008. As these opening week numbers demonstrate, Lachey's 12 week Broadway run actually maintained the previous status quo of *Spamalot* in the bottom third of Broadway shows during the busy summer months, averaging \$576,973 of weekly box office gross and 74.4% theater capacity. Lachey's final week of performances ending September 7, 2008, actually ranks as *Spamalot's* worst week at the box office in its three and a half year run, with 42% theater capacity, ranking it 24th out of 25 Broadway shows reporting that week, only ahead of the musical *Title of Show*. As with his appearance in *Rent*, Lachey's celebrity status appears to have been overestimated by the producers and did not prove to have the expected positive impact on the box office returns.

In what appeared to be a last ditch attempt to salvage some more box office legs for *Spamalot*, the producers announced in August 2008 they were

bringing Aiken back for a second 16 week stint in the Broadway company starting September 19, 2008, until January 4, 2009. While ticket sales did pick up slightly, the first five weeks of Aiken's return as Sir Robin only averaged \$482,419 and 60.2% theater capacity. On October 19, 2008, the producers of *Spamalot* decided it was time to close the doors on their enormously successfully musical. "For the week ending Oct 12, nearly 71 percent of the seats were filled, a sixteen percent increase from the previous week, but still below the traditional break-even bar. The average price was \$68" (P. Cohen, par. 6). *Spamalot* played its final performance on January 11, 2009, without Aiken, who left the show on January 4, 2009.

Capitalizing on Clay Aiken's enormous popularity and appealing to his fan base, the producers of *Spamalot* were able to justify the revolving door celebrity casting approach for their show and could likely attribute Aiken's presence in the musical for extending its life on Broadway for an additional year. During the 32 week span of shows featuring Aiken in 2008-09, *Spamalot* brought in over \$21,032,260 in box office gross and an average of \$657,258 per week, improving on the \$12,423,094 and \$591,575 brought in during the 20 weeks Aiken was not part of the show. This improvement of more than \$66,000 per week is the type of return that producers are seeking when adding an untrained celebrity to their productions. While the experiment with Lachey did not bring box office dividends, the numbers show that his casting likely didn't do any damage and only maintained what would have been the box office gross without any untrained

celebrity in the cast. Ultimately, *Spamalot* will be considered an enormous critical and financial success. The show reportedly will have earned more than \$175 million during its 46 month Broadway run.

Figure 24. Box Office Report, *Monty Python's Spamalot* (Jan. 6, 2008-Jan. 11, 2009)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter XIII

The Color Purple

A group of producers headlined by Oprah Winfrey, Quincy Jones, Bob and Harvey Weinstein, and Nederlander Presentations Inc. brought a new musical, *The Color Purple*, based on the novel by Alice Walker, to the Broadway stage. Opening on December 1, 2005, at the Broadway Theatre, the show starred Broadway veteran LaChanze as Celie. She received a Tony Award for her performance. LaChanze had previously appeared on Broadway in *Dreamgirls*, *Once on This Island*, *Company*, and *Ragtime* before originating the role of Celie. She had theater training, according to her website “After high school she attended Morgan State University for two years where she studied drama. She then transferred to The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where she majored in theatre dance” (“Backstage,” par. 1). For 49 weeks, *The Color Purple* enjoyed an extremely successful financial run, bringing in \$49,282,326 in total grosses, an average of over a million dollars per week at \$1,005,761. In the Broadway Theatre, which holds 1718 per performance, *The Color Purple* had a paid attendance of 619,933 out of a possible 666,584 capacity, for an average of 93% capacity. On November 5, 2006, LaChanze played her final performance in the show and was replaced by her understudy, Jeannette I. Bayardelle. Without LaChanze, the performance of *The Color Purple* began to sputter financially at the box office, dropping nearly \$300,000 off their first year average to \$749,091

per week and down to 77.2% average theater capacity. After routinely placing in the top ten among Broadway shows reporting box office gross and theater capacity, *The Color Purple* dropped to 27th out of 30 Broadway shows with 69% theater capacity on January 7, 2007. On February 22, 2007, in an effort to boost box office sales, it was announced during an episode of the reality television show *American Idol* that their Season Three champion and recording artist Fantasia would step into the role of Celie on April 10, 2007.

The winner of the Third Season of *American Idol*, Fantasia Barrino's celebrity had been steadily rising in the music world. "Since Barrino's May 2004 victory in *America Idol's* Third Season, she has released two successful albums, *Free Yourself* and *Fantasia*, and has been nominated for awards as diverse as Grammy Awards, American Music Awards, Vibe Awards, BET Awards, NAACP Image Awards, and many more" (W. McBride, par. 2). Having dropped out of high school at the age of seventeen, Barrino has no recorded formal theater training for the stage. In order to capitalize on Fantasia's celebrity at the box office, producers created new posters, web advertising and newspaper ads featuring a large photo of Fantasia smiling, "*The Color Purple* starring Fantasia, The Musical about Love" ("Fantasia").

Fantasia began performing on April 10, 2007, and her first week in the show produced dramatic box office results, bringing in over one million dollars in box office gross with \$1,183,723 and 98% theater capacity (see fig. 25). To put it in perspective, the week prior without Fantasia *The Color Purple* brought in

\$817,125 in box office gross and 90% theater capacity. This is a jump of more than \$360,000 in a week and the show placed fourth in box office gross among 36 shows reporting in Fantasia's first week compared to the show placing 12th out of 33 shows reporting the week prior to her arrival. While overall box office numbers cooled off after the 19 day strike by the stagehands union in November 2007, Fantasia's run closed on January 6, 2008, with \$770,006 box office gross and 70% theater capacity, good for 12th in box office gross and 22nd in theater capacity out of 34 Broadway shows reporting. *The Color Purple* was never able to recover from losing their star at the box office and closed only seven weeks after Fantasia left the production on February 24, 2008.

'The Color Purple,' the Oprah Winfrey-produced musical that turned Fantasia into the unexpected darling of Broadway, posted its closing notice yesterday. The surprise announcement comes less than three weeks after the 'American Idol' winner ended her critically and commercially hailed run in the Broadway show....According to reports, 'The Color Purple' was running at 76.8 percent capacity during the holiday week of December 23. For the week of January 13, its first without Fantasia, it ran at 45.9 percent capacity. (Bardsley, par. 1, 6)

Completing a run of 910 performances, the show grossed approximately \$101.6 million and "recovered its \$11 million US investment less than a year after it opened on Broadway" ("The Color Purple," par. 1) to qualify the show as an extreme financial success. *The Color Purple* got an incredible boost from the celebrity draw that Fantasia possessed, grossing approximately \$32.1 million in her 37 weeks in the show and averaging 82.8% theater capacity. When compared to the previous 39 weeks of *The Color Purple* featuring either

LaChanze or Bayardelle, the show grossed approximately \$31.8 million between July 24, 2006, and April 8, 2007, and 83.1% average theater capacity. What these numbers show is that, while theater capacity average was up the 37 weeks prior to Fantasia, the average ticket price was lower since the advance pre-sale was lower. Fantasia was responsible for a unique box office situation, where the weekly box office average of *The Color Purple* with her in the cast, \$867,567, was nearly identical to the overall weekly box office average of the entire run of the show, \$868,689, a 1% drop in weekly box office. To put this in perspective, compare *The Color Purple* against two other contemporary Broadway shows, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* and *Spring Awakening*. Both comparisons will examine two 37 week periods starting seven weeks before the show closed on Broadway, to match up against *The Color Purple*. Starting on July 3, 2006, *Spelling Bee* averaged \$279,873 box office gross per week for 37 weeks ending March 18, 2007. From March 19, 2007, to December 2, 2007, *Spelling Bee* averaged \$237,596 box office per week during this 37 week period, a 15% drop in weekly box office. Starting on July 2, 2007, *Spring Awakening* averaged \$603,882 box office gross per week for 37 weeks ending March 16, 2008. From March 19, 2008, to November 30, 2007, *Spring Awakening* averaged \$406,987 per week during this 37 week period, a 32.6% drop in weekly box office. Avoiding the normal drop off that leads to a show closing on Broadway, *The Color Purple* was able to maintain their financial success due to Fantasia's celebrity, and without it, the show plummeted and was forced to close.

This is a strong example of how celebrities on Broadway in an extended run can be a worthwhile investment for producers.

Figure 25. Box Office Report, *The Color Purple* (Jan. 7, 2007-Feb. 24, 2008)
 "NYC Grosses." LiveBroadway.com. The Broadway League, n.d.

Chapter XIV

Conclusion: *Legally Blonde* Taps Into Reality

After examining the evidence provided by the case studies, one can conclude that the casting of celebrities from another medium as replacement actors in Broadway musicals is financially beneficial for producers and has a positive overall effect on the longevity of the production. Several factors lead to this conclusion. In the last 15 years since the 1994 revival of *Grease* first pioneered the revolving door celebrity casting technique, the 11 other Broadway shows that have followed that model have all placed in the top 16 in total performances given. Since the 1993-94 season, 56 Broadway musicals have remained open for over a year of performances. Out of the 20 longest running musicals that have opened post 1994, ten shows, or 50%, have used celebrities from other mediums as replacement actors. Of the ten longest running musicals post 1994, five of them, or 50%, have used celebrities from other mediums as replacement actors. In fact, the three longest running musicals post 1994 (*Beauty and the Beast* with 5461 performances, *Rent* with 5123 performances, and *Chicago* with 5076 performances as of February 8, 2009) all used celebrities from other mediums as replacement actors. No show that used the revolving door casting policy ranks lower than 16th, which happens to be the original *Grease* revival produced by the Weisslers, with 1505 performances. As far as documented profitability, 11 of the 12 Broadway musicals profiled in the case

studies are on record in the media as turning a profit. The only show not to be financially successful, Frank Wildhorn's *Jekyll and Hyde*, ran for 1543 performances reportedly losing \$1.5 million as reported in the case study. If the show had closed with most of its original cast intact, it's estimated that *Jekyll and Hyde* would have turned a profit. These statistics, 11 out of 12 shows recouping their investment, overwhelmingly support the practice of casting celebrities from another medium as replacement actors as a viable approach for keeping a show open past what might normally be its expiration date. The technique has not gone unnoticed by the New York media as something that producers should take note of if nurturing an ailing box office slump.

And if a show does make it to the tenure track, it can take a page from the playbook of Fran and Barry Weissler, who with their 1994 revival of 'Grease' and the 1996 revival of 'Chicago,' perfected the star-replacement technique, giving shows that are years old a calculated injection of buzz every few months. (Is there a single person watching Usher's performance as Billy Flynn who bought tickets just to see how 'Chicago' is holding up?). (Robertson, "New Season," par. 3)

Every year since 1996, when the Weisslers first cast an untrained celebrity from another medium as a replacement actor in their revival of *Grease*, this same casting trend has been used in a Broadway show, emphasizing that this is a trend that has not faded away over time and continues to grow. Since 1996, the Broadway community has seen an untrained celebrity from another medium appear in a featured role in a musical consistently for every season without exception.

1996: Joe Piscopo, Al Jarreau, Chubby Checker, Dominique Dawes (*Grease*)

1997: Deborah Gibson (*Beauty and the Beast*)

Joe Piscopo, Dominique Dawes (*Grease*)

1998: Toni Braxton (*Beauty and the Beast*)

Ben E. King (*Smokey Joe's Café*)

Alan Thicke (*Chicago*)

1999: Lou Rawls, Gladys Knight, Tony Orlando, Gloria Gaynor, Rick Springfield

(*Smokey Joe's Café*)

2000: Sebastian Bach, David Hasselhoff (*Jekyll and Hyde*)

Cheryl Ladd (*Annie Get Your Gun*)

2001: Alan Thicke, George Hamilton (*Chicago*)

Cheryl Ladd, Reba McEntire (*Annie Get Your Gun*)

2002: John Stamos (*Cabaret*)

Joey Fatone (*Rent*)

2003: Toni Braxton (*Aida*)

Neil Patrick Harris and Jon Secada (*Cabaret*)

Kevin Richardson, Melanie Griffith (*Chicago*)

2004: Deborah Cox (*Aida*)

Drew Lachey (*Rent*)

2005: Brooke Shields, Huey Lewis (*Chicago*)

2006: Diana DeGarmo, Haylie Duff (*Hairspray*)

Huey Lewis, Robin Givens, Usher (*Chicago*)

2007: Fantasia Barrino (*The Color Purple*)

Huey Lewis, Joey Lawrence, Lisa Rinna, Brian McKnight (*Chicago*)

Ashley Parker Angel, Alexa Vega, Jerry Mathers, Diana DeGarmo
and Lance Bass (*Hairspray*)

Tamyra Grey (*Rent*)

2008: Clay Aiken and Drew Lachey (*Spamalot*)

This list further illustrates that the casting of celebrities from another medium as replacement actors in Broadway musicals is not an isolated trend but rather an ongoing practice of synergy between marketing associates, producers, and casting directors that was all started by the Weisslers with *Grease* in 1994. According to George Wachtel, president of Audience Research and Analysis, a performing arts market research firm in New York, the Weisslers are connecting with a new audience by bringing in celebrities from another medium to headline their productions. "Although many theater executives talk about developing new audiences, 'Grease' is really doing it," Mr. Wachtel said. "About 25 to 30 percent of their audience is composed of people who have never seen a Broadway show" (Collins, par. 16). According to this article, reaching out to this 25 to 30 percent that Wachtel refers to is the goal for any producer who engages in the casting of celebrities from another medium as replacement actors. The fact that the casting of celebrities continues to happen so frequently in a wide cross section of different productions, from musical revues, rock operas, musical comedies, and

human dramas, further proves that this technique is beneficial for the financial longevity of a production.

In addition, there is a new trend developing based on the success of the casting of celebrities from another medium in which the Broadway community is now creating their own stars from another medium by casting lead roles for upcoming productions from network and cable reality television shows. Theater producers have started developing their own celebrities from another medium by partnering with reality television programs to find new unknown talent to star in their upcoming Broadway productions. After weeks of elimination challenges and competitions, a new celebrity is born through the medium of television and then transferred to the Broadway stage. This format for celebrity casting has already been a proven success on the West End in 2006, when Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber and theatre producer David Ian found the actress to headline as Maria in their revival of *The Sound of Music* on a reality television show of their own creation, *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* With judges narrowing down prospective contestants to a group of 12, the premise then lets the viewers decide who stays and who goes on a weekly basis through an online or telephone voting process. Eventually, the winner is chosen and the show opens with its new, homegrown television celebrity in tow. This formula has been repeated twice in London for different West End musicals, including casting the title role for a revival of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* on the reality show, *Any Dream Will Do*. In 2008, the search for an unknown actress for

the role of Nancy, and three child actors to share the role of Oliver, was staged for a revival of *Oliver* on the reality show, *I'd Do Anything*. This resulted in a Canadian version of *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* and a Swedish reality show, *West End Star*, casting female hopefuls as The Lady of the Lake in the West End production of *Monty Python's Spamalot*. In 2007, this new casting trend, which brought over six million television viewers in its debut on *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* came over to the United States when producer David Ian mounted a revival of *Grease* and cast the two main characters, Danny Zuko and Sandy Dombrowski, on reality television. Attracting a new audience from a different demographic was the objective of the producers of *Grease*, according to Mark Blankenship of *Variety*. "After participating in the selections of Sandy and Danny in 'Grease,' national auds may feel more invested in New York theater as popular entertainment" (Blankenship, par. 23). This program, *Grease: You're The One That I Want*, aired on NBC and despite mediocre television ratings, the effect on the Broadway shows advance sales was evident. "Still there's no greater proof of the appeal of this new wave of stars than the almost \$15 million advance for *Grease*, which topline Max Crumm and Laura Osnes, the winners of NBC's *You're the One That I Want!*" (Finkle, par. 5). The financial success of the *Grease* revival, which ended its run on January 6, 2009, with a total box office gross of approximately \$47.5 million in only 76 weeks, led the producers of *Legally Blonde, The Musical* to find the replacement for their star Laura Belle Bundy in the reality television medium. Their show, called *Legally*

Blonde: The Search for the New Elle Woods began airing on June 2, 2008, and followed a similar format as its reality television show predecessors with the exception that all casting decisions and eliminations were made by a panel of three theater professionals, Broadway casting director Bernard Telsey, *Legally Blonde* ensemble member Paul Canaan, and original librettist Heather Hach. This process resulted in a professional theatre rookie and current college student Bailey Hanks winning the right to replace Laura Belle Bundy as Elle Woods beginning July 23, 2008. The strategy behind casting an unknown was clearly stated by *Legally Blonde* producer, Amanda Lipitz. “ ‘Right now, a Broadway show is something that we go to and leave and don’t think about anymore,’ she said. ‘But people in Middle America will hear the word *Broadway* over and over, and they’ll see that their favorite star from MTV is on Broadway and they’ll buy tickets’ ” (Bondy, par. 16). Other than being a new reality television celebrity, Hanks’ professional theatre credits were limited. “Bailey Hanks, an Anderson, SC native, is a musical theatre student at Coastal Carolina University. Among her previous stage credits are *The Wizard of Oz*, *Seussical the Musical*, *A Year With Frog and Toad*, *Annie* and *Bye Bye Birdie*” (Hetrick, par. 7). Hanks’ debut allowed the show to maintain the status quo following the popular Bundy’s departure, remaining at tenth out of 27 Broadway shows reporting during her first week. In four weeks, box office gross and theater capacity tailed off and on August 24, 2008, *Legally Blonde* dropped down to 18th out of 25 Broadway shows with 73% theater capacity. On the week ending September 7, 2008,

Legally Blonde fell even further to 22nd out of 25 Broadway shows reporting with 55% theater capacity. Two weeks later, producers announced that the production would be closing its doors on October 19, 2008. The attempt at creating a celebrity to breathe new life into the show was short lived and not a long-term solution, since Hanks' run as Elle Woods only lasted three months. "A recent MTV reality series cast Bailey Hanks, a first-time Broadway performer, as Ms. Bundy's replacement but failed to reignite substantial interest in the show" (Itzkoff). With one Broadway success in *Grease* and one failure in *Legally Blonde*, the future of this strategy of casting celebrities from another medium is unclear, but the goal for the Broadway producers considering the technique is clear. "Reality television has the ability to bring new audiences to Broadway, which is a great thing. And a percentage of these Broadway newbies, once they've had the pleasure of seeing one show, are likely to come back and buy tickets for more shows" ("Relationship," par. 6). In a poll conducted on the theater website *Broadwayworld.com*, as of February 12, 2009, 3897 readers responded to the following poll question. "Which best represents how you feel about Broadway shows using TV reality shows for casting. A. Love it. B. Hate it. C. I'm ok with it as long as it remains open for professionals and amateurs. D. Any national exposure of Broadway is a good thing. E. It's ok as long as it doesn't get overdone or become the norm" ("Broadway poll"). 1,373 of the readers, or 35%, responded as B, Hate it, leaving 2,524 of the readers, or 65%, open to casting Broadway shows on reality television in some form, with or

without any reservations. If the results of this poll can be taken at face value, two thirds of Broadway patrons are open to continuing to see reality television as a forum for casting actors in productions.

Barry Weissler is not embarrassed about how he keeps his Broadway productions up and running. He has found a formula that has paid off for him on three out of four productions, with the only show that couldn't be saved being the 2000 production of *Seussical: The Musical*. Even after importing teen pop star Aaron Carter, the face of Olympic gymnastics, Cathy Rigby, and former *Grease* star, Rosie O'Donnell, the show closed in less than six months and 198 performances.

Mr. Weissler makes no apologies....'Listen, if I'd have staged an epic musical opera, like 'Phantom of the Opera' or 'Les Miserables', or if I'd opened in a less expensive setting, such as London. I'd do without stars, but I've never been that fortunate,' he said. 'Because it's expensive, and because you want to safeguard your investment, you cement the experience by bringing in high-profile people.' He added that tourists don't care what New York critics say. 'Give the public a show and a star that they know,' he said. (McKinley, "Broadway," par. 16-18)

Mr. Weisslers' philosophy on producing has been applied with great results, including a 92% success rate for Broadway shows casting celebrities from another medium as replacement actors increasing their box office gross, theater capacity and extending their run. As long as a production moves up the Broadway rankings in theater capacity, as *Hairspray* producer Adam Epstein stated in an interview, it will be a worth while practice and good business in an industry that is becoming more and more commercial every year. " 'People might

underestimate the value of these folks, but they have a core audience,' says Adam Epstein, the lead producer of 'Godspell' who is also a producer on 'Hairspray.' ' Even if they bring in a 10% increase in business, that's still 10%' ” (Cox, “Broadway,” par. 10).

Given these final statistics, it is my conclusion that this trend of casting celebrities as replacement performers will continue to exist and be successful, with Broadway producers continuing to find new and creative ways to make money and extend the shelf life of their product beyond what would be its normal expiration date. These results provide evidence to the Broadway theater producer that, while the quality of the production could suffer, the financial benefit of casting celebrities from another medium as replacement performers is too significant to ignore. Some theater professionals might make the argument that the casting of celebrities is taking away potential jobs from trained theater actors, but I believe this research indicates that the casting of celebrities can create and maintain employment for theater actors who are part of the production the celebrity is cast in. It's hard to imagine the Weisslers' revival of *Chicago* remaining open this long without the endless parade of celebrity guest stars. While some have been a critical and financial success (Melanie Griffith) and some came and went without much notice (Joey Lawrence), the long-term success achieved by this production has led to the employment of over 200 cast members since November 2006, not to mention all of the orchestra members,

front of house staff, and stagehands who have remained employed in large part due to celebrity casting.

Despite the success of the casting celebrities as replacement actors at the Broadway level, I believe it is unlikely that it will find its way outside the Broadway community for several reasons. For the most part, major national tours of Broadway shows have a limited run from city to city, negating the effect the inclusion of a celebrity as a replacement would have on the audience since the availability of the production is limited in the first place. This does not preclude the inclusion of a celebrity from another medium as an original cast member of the national tour, as seen by the casting of *American Idol* winner Taylor Hicks in the 2009 national tour of *Grease*, but this is not the same phenomenon explored in this thesis. In addition, regional theaters and summer stock companies should largely be exempt from this casting trend due to the lack of flexibility in their previously established season schedule to extend a production by adding a celebrity from another medium as a replacement actor. It is also not financially viable for a regional theater or summer stock to pay a celebrity from another medium the weekly salary reported in this thesis needed to secure their talents due to budget restraints. With the national tour and regional theater market likely unable to capitalize on celebrity replacement casting, this should only continue to lead to the profitability and success of the casting trend in the Broadway community since this will be the only forum for people to see a variety of celebrities from another medium rotating in and out of the same production. This

final comment reinforces the significance that the Broadway community is more about the business end of theater than ever before, with the inclusion of Hollywood corporations, recycled film titles, and celebrities from another medium as replacement actors. Instead of focusing on a production running its course, relying solely on the material to be conveyed by trained theatrical actors for its success, Broadway producers are seeking the next long-term blockbuster homerun by any means necessary. The documented success of this formula, the limited availability for its consumer and the continued growth of producers now creating their own celebrities through reality television leads me to conclude that the casting of celebrities from another medium as replacement actors is a trend that will continue to exist, and evolve, in the future of Broadway.

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