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Theater: The Tonys

Moving Your Show to



From left, Joshua Henry, Sutton Foster and Colin Donnell in the Broadway production of the musical "Violet."

Celebrated revivals prove the wisdom of creative patience.

By PATRICK HEALY

It's the most critically acclaimed musical of the New York theater season. It has on-stage characters—a hungry protagonist and a colorful family—as well as clever storytelling and tuneful songs. Its creators spent years developing the show, dreaming of Broadway, but tempering their expectations, only too well aware they didn't have the big-name stars or tourist-friendly material that can keep a multimillion-dollar musical in business.

So, the show isn't "A Gentleman's Guide to Love & Murder," a front-runner for the Tony Award for best musical next month, though it comes close to fitting the bill. It's "Fun Home," the father-daughter heart-breaker that can't Off Broadway last fall—and probably would win the best musical Tony if a planned Broadway transfer had been expedited for this spring. (Only Broadway shows are eligible for Tonys, the theater industry's highest honor.)

A missed opportunity? The producers and creators of "Fun Home" don't see it that way. Had they rushed ahead, they risked "Fun Home" becoming the next "Caroline, or Change," a critical darling downtown that moved to Broadway in 2004 but closed quickly, at a financial loss, because it wasn't able to fill 1,300 seats eight performance weeks.

Instead, the "Fun Home" team is looking to the experiences of these other shows with risky material that found optimal moments and formulas for success on Broadway. This spring's productions of "Violet" and "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," which have been nominated for the best musical revival Tony, and "The Cripple of Inishmaan," which is up for best play revival.

"Sometimes, shows take time to get to Broadway," said Jeanine Tesori, the composer of "Fun Home," who has learned this by experience. She wrote the music for "Violet" and "Caroline" as well.

"It's really hard, making the distinction between having momentum to go to Broadway and just rushing to Broadway," Ms. Tesori added. "With 'Caroline, or Change,' we moved fast to keep the team and cast together. I don't think it was rushed, but we didn't have much time. With 'Violet,' I think the show benefited by taking a long road to Broadway."

"Violet," as well as "Hedwig" and "Inishmaan," each had earlier productions Off Broadway in the 1990s, none screamed "commercial" or "tourist" and a Broadway trajectory wasn't viable for years. All three, like "Fun Home," needed stars to sign, angel investors and some luck. "Hedwig" waited for years for its star, Neil Patrick Harris, to become available. "Violet" relied on funds from fans of its lead actress, Sutton Foster, and "Inishmaan" hinged on the last-minute change in the schedule of its star, Daniel Radcliffe, and a Broadway theater. (Even "Gentleman's Guide" caught a break: A lawsuit nearly derailed the show in 2010, but it persevered and slowly made its way from out-of-town tryouts to Broadway.)

As for "Fun Home," the current plan is to open on Broadway next spring with a tight budget, between \$5 million and \$6 million, after spending the next 10 months carefully plotting the move.

"When we were making decisions about Broadway late last year, this spring looked crowded with new musicals, so how much oxygen would there be for 'Fun Home?'" said Mike Isaacson, one of the commercial producers on the show, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in drama and has been winning New York theater awards this spring. "And unless you're a musical comet like 'The Book of Mormon,' it takes longer these days for word of mouth to spread and audiences to build, even if you get great reviews."

The team behind "Violet" did have hopes for a quick Broadway transfer in 1997 after the Playwrights Horizons premiere of the musical, based on a Dore Reta story about a physically scarred young woman. An investor was even attached to "Violet" for a possible Broadway move. But after a mixed review in *The New York Times*, talk of a transfer ebbed.

Tim Sanford, the artistic director of Playwrights Horizons, had already been through the disappointment of "Floyd Collins," another ambitious musical on the



From top, Neil Patrick Harris in the current production of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," John Cameron Mitchell in that show in 1998 and Daniel Radcliffe in "The Cripple of Inishmaan."

darker side that, like "Violet," struck him as worthy of Broadway but did not move.

"Floyd Collins" ends in a death, and who knows what a Broadway theatergoer would think of that," he said. "And 'Violet' was tricky, too. It takes place on a bus, a woman has a scar. Shows like that need a combination of factors to go your way."

A few years ago, Todd Haimes, the artistic director of Roundabout Theater Company, which has three Broadway houses, did a workshop of "Violet" and came away pleased with the results. Yet without a star in the title role, he said in a recent interview, he could only see doing it in Roundabout's Off Broadway theater. Ms. Tesori and others opted against it, as she put it, "We didn't want to repeat an Off Broadway experience."

Then, last summer, a new musical series at City Center did a one-night concert of "Violet" starring Ms. Foster, a two-time Tony Award winner (Ms. Tesori oversaw the series, but "Violet" wasn't her idea, as luck would have it, the concert was suggested by a City Center board leader, Stanley Mindich). The critics raved, and Ms.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Theater: The Tonys

Broadway? Not So Fast



From left, Michael McElroy, Lauren Ward and Michael Park in "Violet," from 1997, at Playwrights Horizons.

Foster's agent quickly contacted Mr. Haimes about bringing the show to Broadway. To finance such a production, Mr. Haimes said he needed \$1.5 million from commercial backers, four came forward, including Amy Sherman-Palladino, a creator of Ms. Foster's television series "Bunheads," and Ted and Mary Jo Shen, longtime supporters of Ms. Tesori's work.

Ms. Tesori and Brian Crawley, the book writer and lyricist for "Violet," heard the musical into an intermission 100 minutes with restructured scenes that, she said, reflected the creators' own professional growth since 1997. The show opened last month to terrific reviews; Ms. Foster is now a front-runner for the best actress Tony, and "Violet" is in a tight race against "Hedwig" for the best revival Tony.

"Hedwig," with its thrashing rock score and transgender title character, seemed anything but mainstream commercial fare when it opened Off Broadway in 1997 and then moved to the Jane Street Theater, inside a decrepit hotel favored by prostitutes. The show became a cult hit, but it only had a few hundred seats to fill, a fraction of Broadway's. David Binder, who produced the premiere on a \$20,000 budget, said he and his colleagues didn't believe that Broadway was hospitable to adventurous work at the time.

"Back then, it was very, very prestigious to have an edgy hit show Off Broadway," he said. Referring to the best musical Tony winner in 2007, he added, "Rock musicals like 'Spring Awakening' hadn't happened on Broadway yet."

Five years ago, he and the show's creators, John Cameron Mitchell (who played Hedwig onstage and then in the 2001 movie) and the musician Stephen Trank, began discussing a Broadway production to bring "Hedwig" to a wider audience. They considered having Mr. Mitchell reprise the role, but everyone preferred a fresh take. They then agreed on Mr. Harris, who had excelled in darker roles in "Cabaret" and "Assassins" and had a wide fan base from his hit CBS series "How I Met Your Mother." Mr. Harris was interested but unavailable for at least a few years.

Mr. Binder decided to wait. "The No. 1 challenge of coming to Broadway was casting," Mr. Binder said. "Neil has showmanship, like when he hosts award shows, so we knew 'Hedwig' wouldn't feel like a tiny Off Broadway show in a Broadway theater. And he could get a broad audience to go on a journey with a transgender character."

Once Mr. Harris committed, Mr. Binder said, "raising money to produce became relatively easy." The budget is about \$5 million, according to investment papers.

"Hedwig" looks like a hit, setting a new box office record at the Belasco Theater for the performance week ending May 4, and the show has received eight Tony nominations, second only to "Gentleman's Guide." Mr. Binder declined to comment on whether Mr. Harris would extend in the role beyond his exit date, in mid-August, or whether the producers will eventually recast the show.

If "Hedwig" was a phenomenon in the 1990s, the first New York presentation of "The Cripple of Inishmaan" was problematic. Reviews for the Public Theater production in 1998 were mixed, with some critics judging the play as a quaint work by the rising-star playwright Martin McDonagh. The tale of a disabled young Irish-

man living on an island of eccentric, "Inishmaan" didn't win major Off Broadway awards as "Violet" and "Hedwig" did, and there was no serious talk of a Broadway transfer. Another Off Broadway run of the play in 2008, by the Druid Theater Company, presented at Atlantic Theater Company, earned far stronger reviews, but Broadway wasn't in the cards for a cast of unknown Irish actors.

Then, two years ago, the London director Michael Grandage (a Tony winner for "Red") met with Mr. Radcliffe about doing a play together in the West End. Mr. Radcliffe suggested picking an Irish work, and Mr. Grandage recommended "Inishmaan." Their London run last summer received strong reviews from American critics, but Mr. Radcliffe's schedule precluded a move to Broadway until late last year when a film project was canceled. Executives from the Shubert Organization, the landlord for 17 of Broadway's 40 houses, quickly offered the Cort Theater, once was clear it would be available in April. The timing was razor close. "Inishmaan" started performance barely two weeks after the previous Cort production closed.

Mr. Radcliffe's star billing was certain to stir curiosity among theatergoers, but "Inishmaan" was by no means a sure thing at the box office.

"The word 'cripple' in the title is very unattractive in terms of the commercial potential of the piece," Mr. Grandage said. "So we knew we'd need to educate the public that this is a very funny, very moving, very human story."

Among other things, the producers de-

The musical "Fun Home" looks to other shows as it plots a careful path to Broadway.

cided to feature handsome photos of Mr. Radcliffe out of character in its marketing, rather than production shots. "We thought that audiences would come to be eager to invest in this actor," Mr. Grandage said. ("Inishmaan" is up for six Tonys, although Mr. Radcliffe missed out on a nomination.)

While "Inishmaan" lacked out with a Broadway theater becoming available, the lack of other Broadway playhouses made it easier for the "Fun Home" producers to wait, they said. Over the next year, they aim to build a prospective Broadway audience through sales of its cast recording, social media outreach to fans of both the musical and the Alison Bechdel memoir that inspired the show; overtures to group sales agents; and a publicity campaign of articles and television appearances that can benefit from long lead times.

For all that, can "Fun Home" succeed commercially given its subject matter, a coming-of-age story about a lesbian cartoonist and her father, who commits suicide? Will some people buy premium-price tickets of \$200 or more—the sort of sales that musical producers depend on?

"This is how I saw the show: It was about a child and her relationship with a parent, and as she became an adult, how she came to peace with how she saw that parent," said Kristin Caskey, another of the "Fun Home" producers. "I think a broad audience can relate to that, and will give the show a chance to be commercial."



From left, Beth Malone, Sydney Lucas and Alexandra Socha in the show "Fun Home" last year at the Public Theater.

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