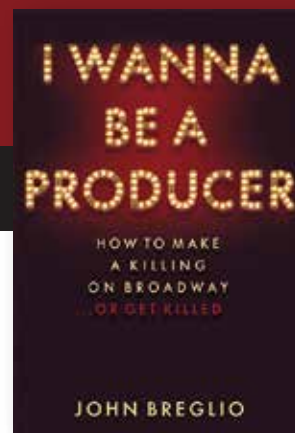


I WANNA BE A PRODUCER

HOW TO MAKE A KILLING ON BROADWAY... OR GET KILLED

A NEW BOOK BY BROADWAY VETERAN JOHN BREGLIO



A captivating behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to succeed as a Broadway producer—full of practical information and entertaining anecdotes!

P R E F A C E

I grew up in a family where no one ever cursed. We were observant, but not strict, Roman Catholics. Unlike many of my Irish American friends, my brother, sister, and I didn't attend parochial school, and none of our relatives became priests or nuns. But we went to church every Sunday and ate fish on Fridays. I also went to confession every month to be absolved of my venial sins (as opposed to a mortal sin, like murder). These were second-degree transgressions such as fighting with your sister, lying to your parents, or thinking impure thoughts. (I didn't know what an impure thought was until the age of eleven, when an older friend, Peter, clued me in.)

Anyway, cursing was just a lowly sin, but I never had to confess to it because neither my parents nor we kids ever thought about saying anything more than "nuts" to express frustration.

My parents loved popular music, especially musical comedies. They could see that it was in my DNA as well. I think the pomp and theatricality of the church served as a catalyst for my attraction to drama and music at an early age. My mother often told of searching the apartment for her six-year-old son only to find me behind the heavy damask curtains in the living room ringing a bell, genuflecting with a blanket around my shoulders, and muttering chants straight from a Sunday Mass. At first she worried that I was headed for the priesthood, but she soon realized this was my private fantasy playing out against the backdrop of the only dramatic event I knew—a church service, with its staging, music, costumes, and lighting.

I tell you this so you can appreciate the dilemma my parents faced when, several years later, they considered taking my sister and me to see our first Broadway musical, *Damn Yankees*. By this time we had moved to Garden City, Long Island. Things were looking up for the Breglios, as they were for many families who in the 1950s made their exodus from the outer boroughs of New York City to the new suburbs farther out on the Island.

Leaving aside the title of the show, they must have also been concerned about exposing their nine-year-old son and thirteen-year-old daughter to the show's content. Keep in mind, in those days, Broadway musicals were mostly meant as adult entertainment, in the best sense of the phrase. Ultimately, given my sister's and my infatuation with music and the theater, their determination to introduce us to musicals as soon as possible overcame their ambivalence. What's more, I think my father had his heart set on seeing the leggy star of the show, Gwen Verdon. Still, when they told me we were going to see the show, I wondered whether I'd be allowed to say the title out loud. I soon figured out it was fine. After all, I'd only be referring to the play they were taking me to. So off we went in our new pale green Chevrolet Impala on a hot summer's evening in August of 1956.

Almost sixty years later, I remember every moment of that night. As we walked into the 46th Street Theatre (now the Richard Rodgers) I sensed that I was entering a sanctuary not unlike a church, but definitely more fun. Everyone was dressed up—all the ladies wore hats and the men wore suits, white shirts, and ties. The theater was dimly lit and seemed mystical. The walls were painted red with gold gilt and, in my memory, cherubs and angels were carved in the ceiling. I assumed there wouldn't be "smells and bells" (a phrase first heard from a WASP friend years later) as we had in a High Holy Mass, but the red plush seats were a lot more comfortable than pews.

The usher eyed us a bit suspiciously as she checked our ticket stubs since we seemed to be the only children coming into the theater, but the absence of other children only made me feel particularly grown-up. We were shown to our seats upstairs in an area my father referred to as center mezzanine. He told us with some authority that it was the best place to see a musical because it gave the clearest view of the direction and dancing. My five-foot-two mother also preferred being upstairs. She said the orchestra seats were meant only for tall people whose view wouldn't be blocked by the person in front of them. They were both right.

After I riffled through the Playbill and finally found the title page about a third of the way through, the lights dimmed and the overture began. The acoustic sound of the orchestra (no amps then) was like nothing I'd ever heard before. It was exhilarating and overwhelming. By the time the curtain rose, I was on such a sensory overload that my heart was pounding and my palms were sweating.

I won't belabor what I witnessed for the next couple of hours except for two things. When Ray Walston, who played the devil (my Catholicism was coming in handy), crossed his legs in his opening scene and revealed bright red socks, the audience roared with laughter at what is still today one of the most brilliant sight gags ever. Even I got the joke at the age of nine. But what struck me most, and has stayed with me all these years, was hearing for the first time some 1,200 people burst into spontaneous, loud laughter. Like the overture, it was a sound unlike any I'd ever heard.

My other distinct memory is of a scene later in the show, when Verdon, playing Lola, the devil's assistant, stripped down to a shimmering black, tight leotard as she seduced the young protagonist, Joe Hardy, and sang the signature song from the show, "Whatever Lola Wants." I'm sure, at that moment, my parents had second thoughts about having taken an impressionable prepubescent boy to see this risqué show. But when they looked at my face, they surely realized I was transfixed—I was being transported into another realm. After that scene, saying "damn" seemed quite innocent by comparison. I also realized I wasn't even remotely in a church.

From then on, the theater, particularly musical theater, took me over with a vengeance. As soon as my mother thought she could deal with my going into Manhattan alone, I used my allowance to travel by bus and subway to see show after show. These were usually solo escapades since most of my teenage friends had little or no interest in Broadway plays and couldn't afford to spend as much as \$4.60 on a theater ticket—the price for the best seats in the house, by the way.

Fast-forward to years later in New Haven, Connecticut. I was a freshman at Yale when the nearby Shubert Theatre was still playing tryouts of new plays and musicals. A new show, *The Roar of the Greasepaint—the Smell of the Crowd*, starring Cyril Ritchard and Anthony Newley, was coming to town ahead of its Broadway opening. I rushed to get my single ticket—still having trouble finding theater companions—for the opening night weeks in advance. I specifically requested a center orchestra seat right off the aisle, near the front. By some miracle, that's what I got. I arrived early. Although I had seen dozens of shows since I was a boy, I had never been to an opening night. I wanted to have that experience even if it was out of town.

Sadly, entering the disheveled Shubert Theatre in 1965 wasn't anything like going to see *Damn Yankees* ten years earlier. There was paint peeling off the ceiling, the seats were worn thin from too many years of neglect, and there was an occasional missing light bulb. What was most disillusioning, however, was that the theater had empty seats scattered all around both downstairs and up. On opening night! There wasn't exactly a buzz in the audience, but I tried to erase all those disappointments from my mind and focus instead on watching the opening of a new musical never seen anywhere before.

When I sat down, there was one seat vacant in front of me. Probably for a critic, I thought. I had read somewhere that they always came late, perhaps in Moss Hart's book, *Act One*. The audience was restless and the curtain was late. After all, this was New Haven, not Broadway, where everyone would have been happy just to be invited to an opening night.

Then it happened. Bounding down the aisle, in black tie and patent leather evening slippers, came none other than David Merrick, Broadway's most notorious and successful producer. Somehow, I had forgotten that this was his show. He took his seat directly in front of me. Seconds later, the houselights dimmed and the overture began. Nothing goes on in his theater until he's ready, I thought. During the show, he barely moved. And, not unlike the transfixed nine-year-old boy I had once been, he seemed oblivious to everything except each line spoken and each song sung on the stage. So this was what it was like to be a producer.

I appreciate that these vignettes may not be particularly unique. Anyone who has ever become infected with the theater bug can recount every detail of his first sighting of a Broadway show. When you are exposed to one for the first time, you're either possessed or not. Either you know it's something that must be part of your life, or you can take it or leave it.

I knew, from the age of nine, that somehow the theater would have to be part of my life. I didn't know in what guise, but details didn't matter then. The intoxication was so strong, I can recall saying to my college roommate, "I'd be happy just to pull the curtain."

None of us can foresee how we will get from here to there in our lives. Little did I know that becoming a producer myself would require that I first act as an entertainment lawyer and consigliere to artists and producers for more than thirty years.