

# DISNEY TAKES CENTER Stage

By Courtney Potter

How Disney raises the curtain on productions that touch hearts II around the

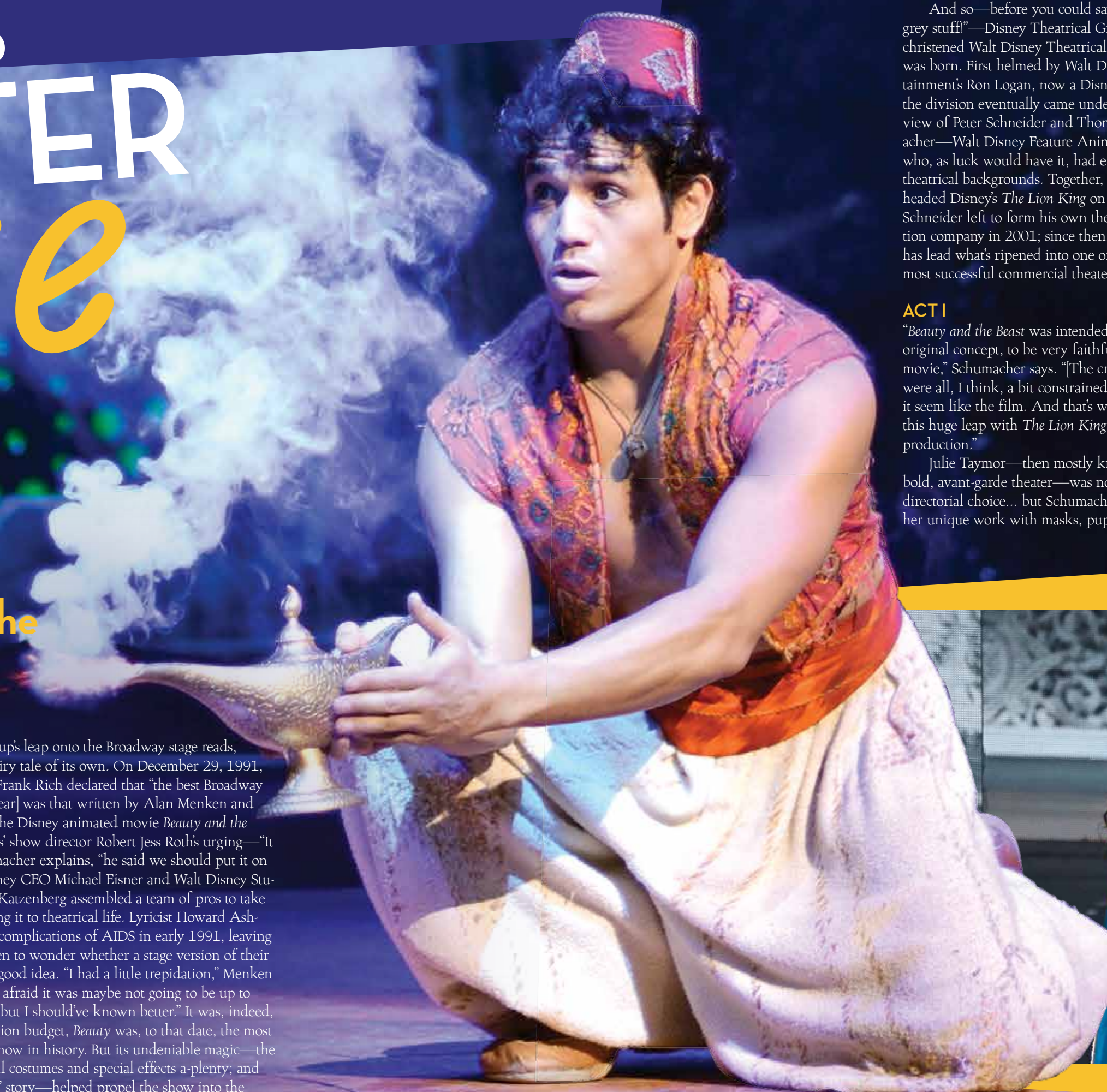
## HIGH ATOP

the magnificent New Amsterdam Theatre on 42nd Street and Broadway—where Disney's *Aladdin* is currently taking audiences to Agrabah eight times a week—Disney Theatrical Group President & Producer Thomas Schumacher sits in his office looking to the future... while drawing from the past.

He's hard at work on multiple projects, including the new musical *Freaky Friday*, which will have its licensing premiere this October at the Signature Theatre near Washington, D.C. It's based on the popular movies of the same name, and on the original book by the late Mary Rodgers—herself a Broadway player, having written the Tony-nominated *Once Upon a Mattress*. “She sat in my office, right here,” Schumacher recalls, remembering a fateful meeting just a few years ago. At the nearby grand piano, the *Freaky Friday* creative team (including the Pulitzer Prize-winning composers of *Next to Normal*, Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey) had played through a few of the songs for the then-proposed musical version of her story of a mother and a daughter who switch bodies to—literally—walk in each others shoes for a day. “She had comments and thoughts... but this [story], to her, made perfect sense to musicalize. There's nothing realistic about the situation, but everything is realistic about the behaviors. It's a fable. It's a fairy tale.”

## OVERTURE

Disney Theatrical Group's leap onto the Broadway stage reads, appropriately, like a fairy tale of its own. On December 29, 1991, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich declared that “the best Broadway musical score of [the year] was that written by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman for the Disney animated movie *Beauty and the Beast*.” At Disney Parks' show director Robert Jess Roth's urging—“It was Rob's idea,” Schumacher explains, “he said we should put it on Broadway”—then Disney CEO Michael Eisner and Walt Disney Studios chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg assembled a team of pros to take 2D animation and bring it to theatrical life. Lyricist Howard Ashman had passed from complications of AIDS in early 1991, leaving composer Alan Menken to wonder whether a stage version of their beloved project was a good idea. “I had a little trepidation,” Menken admits, “because I was afraid it was maybe not going to be up to Broadway standards... but I should've known better.” It was, indeed, a risk; with a \$14 million budget, *Beauty* was, to that date, the most expensive Broadway show in history. But its undeniable magic—the brilliant songs; colorful costumes and special effects a-plenty; and a universal, “feel good” story—helped propel the show into the Broadway-smash stratosphere in 1994. As Menken says, “It ended up being a really wonderful, first-class stage musical.”



And so—before you could say “Try the grey stuff!”—Disney Theatrical Group (initially christened Walt Disney Theatrical Productions) was born. First helmed by Walt Disney Entertainment's Ron Logan, now a Disney Legend, the division eventually came under the purview of Peter Schneider and Thomas Schumacher—Walt Disney Feature Animation execs who, as luck would have it, had extensive theatrical backgrounds. Together, they spearheaded Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway. Schneider left to form his own theater production company in 2001; since then, Schumacher has lead what's ripened into one of the world's most successful commercial theater enterprises.

## ACT I

“*Beauty and the Beast* was intended, [with] the original concept, to be very faithful to the movie,” Schumacher says. “[The creative team] were all, I think, a bit constrained to make it seem like the film. And that's why you see this huge leap with *The Lion King*, our second production.”

Julie Taymor—then mostly known for bold, avant-garde theater—was not an obvious directorial choice... but Schumacher knew of her unique work with masks, puppets, and

mime, and reached out to gauge her interest. (Spoiler alert: She was.) He once said, “With *The Lion King*, the idea was to redefine what one can do with theater. How do you do a show with animal [characters] in a way that lets the audience discover something?” At the time Taymor said, “I was particularly inspired by the minimalist ways animals are portrayed in African art.” The result was an innovative stage production unlike anything audiences had ever seen before.

Following *The Lion King*, Schumacher and Disney Theatrical Group brought a dazzling array of musical productions to the Broadway stage—including *Aida*, *Tarzan*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Mary Poppins*. And away from Times Square, there was a hugely successful stage adaptation of Disney Channel juggernaut *High School Musical*—as a national tour that first premiered at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta. “The minute the house lights went down in Atlanta, and [the audience] started screaming, I didn't know what was going on,” remembers the show's director, Jeff Calhoun. “I mean, I was really not prepared for that.”

“If you think about what we've done, for the most part, is [we use] material that is already musicalized,” Schumacher explains.



Above: Disney's *Aladdin* on Broadway stars Adam Jacobs as Agrabah's favorite “street rat” with a heart of gold. Right: *Beauty and the Beast* first took the Indian theatrical world by storm in 2015.



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—Thomas Schumacher, president & producer, Disney Theatrical Group

“We’re not turning films into musicals; we’re adapting musicals from screen to stage. When we put it on stage, you see something altogether new—but [you] have something altogether familiar happening to you. That’s the key.” And developing a show just for the Great White Way, Schumacher says, is shortsighted. “Millions and millions of people are going to theaters that have

nothing to do with Broadway,” he says. Both through its own professional tours, and through licensing with Music Theatre International (MTI), Disney Theatrical shows have indeed gone global. “There’s two fundamental, different kinds of licensing,” Schumacher says. “One is a licensed ‘replica’ production; essentially, it’s the same as the Broadway production, just put into the local

language with local actors. *The Lion King* has been around the world like this; *Aida* has been around the world like this. The other kind is creating a property that is to be mounted by people locally in whichever way they want to stage or direct it.” A good example: the revamped (and English-language) version of Menken and Schwartz’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. After an acclaimed 2014 run at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, California, the title is now available to “ring the bells” inside community and regional theaters worldwide, thanks to Disney’s licensing arrangement with MTI.

#### ACT II

Originally developed specifically for licensing, *Newsies*—one of Disney Theatrical’s most recent triumphs—is a perfect example of Broadway “kismet.”

“Every college I would speak at,” Schumacher recalls, “during the Q&A, someone would ask ‘When are you going to put *Newsies* on stage?’ Alan [Menken, who composed the 1992 cult classic’s songs] would get the same thing—the people wanted it. So we knew we could create a licensed

version that could be done anywhere.” Menken and his original *Newsies* cohort Jack Feldman wrote more tunes, and book writer Harvey Fierstein reshaped the story. To workshop the show, the creative team—including director Jeff Calhoun (the only director to have helmed two Disney musical projects from launch)—headed to the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey. The results? Better than anyone anticipated. As Jeff explains, “After our first performance, we were certain that the audience’s overwhelming reaction was [because it] was filled with friends and family. When it sustained night after night, with ‘regular’ people having the same reaction—[to have] *Newsies* catch the imagination of the public like that, it’s almost indescribable.” The production moved to Broadway, where a “limited engagement” became a mega-popular two-year run and then a North American tour.

Of tantamount importance, of course, is the staff Schumacher assembles behind each production—whether it goes out for licensing, or premieres in the Big Apple. Disney’s *Aladdin* had a somewhat circuitous route to the stage;

it began at Seattle’s 5th Avenue Theatre, before several regional productions and an “out-of-town tryout” in Toronto guided it to the New Amsterdam in 2014. But the team remained committed, due in large part to the material—including several Menken/Ashman songs that were cut from the ‘92 film. “Howard was the great lost talent of our generation,” Menken says. “Every bit of material that we worked on together—and there’s still a trunk-full of wonderful material that we haven’t gotten out there—any time that can be brought to the stage, it’s really a gift to theater audiences. And the fact that we’ve been able to bring it in such a way that it really supports the movie, but enhances it in such a radical way, is just a blessing. I credit Chad Beguelin, who wrote the musical’s book, and [director/choreographer] Casey Nicholaw—both of whom totally embraced this idea.” As Schumacher proclaims, “It’s a big smash, God bless it!”

#### FINALE... AND MANY MORE ENCORES TO COME

While current shows entertain at home and in far-flung locales, Schumacher and his troupe still manage to keep a keen eye on the bright theatrical horizon. After *Freaky Friday*’s licensing debut, the development pipeline includes a musical version of *The Princess Bride* (“The team is so high-end, that just getting them all in the same room is very, very challenging,” Schum-

acher admits. “So we schedule out time—their approach is so theatrical and so unique”). And Anna and Elsa fans, take note: “I’m developing *Frozen* with a brilliant team of people,” he states. “As a group, we’re going to hear it read by professional actors in a few weeks... really, how could we not? The audience so wants to see the fuller story of *Frozen*.”

And to think, it all started with a “tale as old as time.” “Music is in the DNA of *Beauty and the Beast*,” Schumacher notes. “Music is the

most powerful thing that we have—this great, great music.” And it’s that music—at the heart of so many of Walt Disney’s, and his company’s, successes—that authentically translates these universal stories for theatrical audiences across the globe. “You and I could hop on a plane tonight and see *Newsies* on tour somewhere in America. See *The Lion King* on Broadway... see *Aladdin* in Tokyo or Hamburg. People always call us ‘Disney on Broadway.’ But we’re so much bigger than Broadway.”



Opposite page, top to bottom: Michael Arden stars as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which (after a 2014 premiere in San Diego) enjoyed a successful ‘15 run at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey; Original cast members Ashley Brown and Gavin Lee brought *Mary Poppins* to life at the New Amsterdam Theatre in 2006; James Monroe Iglehart, *Aladdin*’s Tony-winning Genie, in an early rehearsal. This page, clockwise from top to bottom: Disney translated *Tarzan* for the stage with help from visionary aerialists; South African singer Tshidi Mayne has played *The Lion King*’s Rafiki on stages around the world; and original Broadway cast member Kara Lindsay joins the news boys in a scene from *Newsies*.

