



A Beauty AROUND the GLOBE

By Courtney Potter

The stage musical of the beloved animated film has become the "belle of the ball" in theaters from Minneapolis to Mumbai.

IT WAS AN EXPERIMENT—something that would've intrigued even Belle's father, "crazy old" Maurice—taking *Beauty and the Beast*, Walt Disney Animation Studios' now-iconic 30th animated film, and adapting it for the stage. Sure, the movie is chockablock with fantastic songs from Alan Menken and Howard Ashman. But could a story originally told in 2D (and with a host of inanimate-object costars, to boot) bring the same humor, drama, and warmth to musical theater audiences? In the grand tradition of the company—Walt himself once admitted, "By nature, I'm an experimenter"—the chance was taken... and a veritable Broadway juggernaut was born.

On April 18, 1994, Disney Theatrical Group first took the Great White Way by storm when the stage musical adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* opened at New York City's Palace Theatre. The show became one of the longest-running, highest-grossing Broadway shows of all time; beloved by audiences and critics alike, the production was nominated for a whopping nine Tony® Awards and 10 Drama Desk Awards. Since Disney Theatrical Group started licensing *Beauty and the Beast* in 2004, more than 6,000 individual theaters have produced it in the United States alone. "It's a modern [version] of a Rodgers and Hammerstein show," says Thomas Schumacher, president & producer, Disney Theatrical Group. "Every high school does it. My local high school, where my [upstate New York] farm is, just did it a few weeks ago!"

It comes as no surprise, then, that *Beauty and the Beast*'s themes—of never judging a book by its cover; of finding happiness where you least expect it—manage to move audiences all over the world. Thanks to both Disney touring companies and other professional productions, the show's been translated into 17 different languages (in 25-plus diverse countries across Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and

more) with almost 30,000 performances—which is the unbelievable equivalent to a run of 67 years.

No matter where kindly Mrs. Potts and her son Chip; brutish Gaston and manic Lefou; and beautiful Belle and her Beast tread the boards, the show's message of love and acceptance is universal indeed. "I think one of the reasons that we're moved when we see a story like *Beauty and the Beast* is it's an iconic story—a deeply powerful and emotional one," Schumacher explains. "But we also get to see our wish come true. We know that we won't always be redeemed



for things that we have done... but in *Beauty and the Beast*, there is redemption, there is restoration... The power of redemption is gigantic; the power of healing is fantastic."

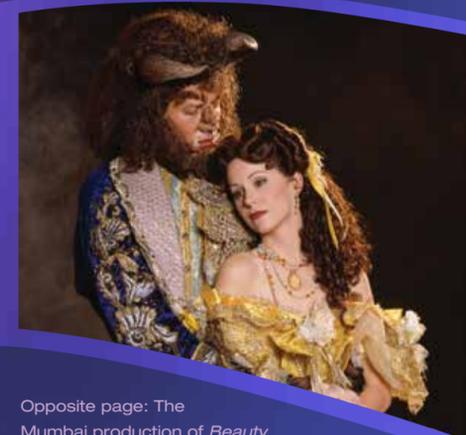
In 2015, the now-timeless classic was brought to the Indian stage for the very first time—and it proved so popular, it was remounted this past summer. The colorful, culture-combining, English-language production of *Beauty and the Beast* was directed by Vikranth Pawar, Disney India's show director and creative head – Live Entertainment. "We revere films that are

larger than life," Pawar explains. "So it was important to tell *Beauty and the Beast* in a similar format that we are used to consuming, and yet keep the integrity of musical theater as an art form alive... The idea was to make the experience for the audience as immersive as possible."

This *Beauty*—seen across Mumbai and Delhi—marries the best of modern technology with the color, scope, and scale that exemplify India itself. Pawar says, "We chose to stage it in a mini indoor arena. The seating was unique, as a select set of [guests] could choose to be seated on swivel chairs to enjoy a 360-degree view of the show." The stage itself—framed by state-of-the-art LED panels—is filled by more than 100 local performers, making it the biggest production of *Beauty and the Beast* ever produced globally. "This made the overall experience magnificent in scale," Pawar says proudly.

In the two-plus decades since its debut, the stage version of *Beauty and the Beast* has been seen by more than 35 million people... and counting! "The biggest thing that makes *Beauty* work is that it has this joyful comedic element of these sidekicks in an extraordinarily complicated setting they find themselves in," Schumacher adds. "And Belle... she's not a princess; she's not a pampered girl. She's a woman who's trying to solve a problem and is willing to sacrifice."

There's a moment in the show that's resonated with Schumacher over the years—though it may not be what you expect. "The part that kills me in every performance isn't the Beast's transformation," he admits. "Everyone loves that, and people talk about it... [But] for me, it's when Chip runs and jumps into Mrs. Potts' arms. It kills me every single performance... The power of just this one simple thing—a child trapped by circumstances that he had nothing to do with. And yet, he makes the best of it, as this plucky little teacup... That's why *Beauty* works. It's got so many powerful layers inside it." 🍵



Opposite page: The Mumbai production of *Beauty and the Beast* features dozens of talented local performers in a show that marries the colorful culture of India with a universal story of love and acceptance. This page, clockwise from top to bottom: *Beauty and the Beast* hit the Japanese stage in 1995; Mumbai's *Beauty* first delighted audiences in 2015—proving so popular, it returned this past summer; and original Broadway cast members Susan Egan (Belle) and Terrence Mann (Beast).

