



DEEN VAN MEER

Newsies

Gets Its Break

Kara Lindsay and the cast of *Newsies the Musical*.

Disney called on Jeff Calhoun, the director behind the stage version of *High School Musical*, to bring their most-requested title to the boards

Director and choreographer Jeff Calhoun is no stranger to big shows and even bigger pressure. With the opening of Disney's latest Broadway offering, *Newsies the Musical*, Calhoun can breathe a little easier now that his hard work has paid off with ecstatic audiences and numerous award nominations, including eight Tony Award nominations.

Recalling how he joined *Newsies* early in its development, Calhoun shares his initial reaction to Disney's story of Jack Kelly and the Newsies. "Tom Schumacher, the president of Disney Theatricals, called me and asked me to come see a reading. I was so moved by it. And when it was over, he asked me if I'd want to direct it. I was just thrilled."

Calhoun knows his way around a stage, having also directed the Tony-nominated Broadway musical *Bonnie & Clyde* this season, as well as *Grey Gardens* in 2006, Deaf West's *Big River* (which earned a 2004 Tony Honor for Excellence in Theatre), *Annie Get Your Gun* (which took home the 1999 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical), and he earned a 1994 Tony nomination for Best Choreography for *Grease!*

He explains that *Newsies* has been Disney Theatricals' most requested show for years. "All the schools in the world were calling Disney—the number one title they wanted was *Newsies*." There was just one problem: a stage version of *Newsies* did not exist. "Disney didn't have a product to license to these schools.

They realized this was such a missed opportunity."

Disney contacted their musical heavyweights to create a new stage musical based on the film version of *Newsies*. Academy Award-winning composer Alan Menken was brought in to handle the music with Grammy Award winner Jack Feldman as lyricist. Four-time Tony Award winner Harvey Fierstein was enlisted to adapt Bob Tzudiker & Noni White's original screenplay for the stage.

The *Newsies* story is based on the real-life protest and workers' revolution led by Kid Blank during the "Newsboy Strike of 1899." Kid Blank's ragtag throng of ramblerous—fellow orphans and runaway newspaper boys who sold papers to make a living, who called themselves "Newsies"—fought against Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst and other powerful publishing titans who had increased their take from newspaper sales, cutting into the already meager profits the Newsies counted on for basic survival.

In Disney's version, with a plot that parallels recent Occupy movements, "Jack Kelly" and the Newsies decide to take a stand against the corporation big shots' greed by encouraging other blue collar workers to unite for the cause, and strike.

Repeated Viewings

Getting asked to helm the work in progress was a pleasant



Jeff Calhoun, director of *Newsies the Musical*



Newsies needs a cast full of triple-threat performers who are all teenage boys. On Broadway, their energy drives the show.

surprise for Calhoun. "I had worked with Disney earlier in a stage adaptation of the Disney show *High School Musical*. So I had worked with them before, and to be quite honest, I was shocked when they asked me to do this because I'm the first director they've asked to work for them twice," reveals Calhoun. He adds with a laugh, "After *High School Musical*, I assumed that was my one-off for Disney."

Since the motivation was to create a show for high schools to perform, mounting *Newsies* on Broadway was never a focus in the early stages. "People think this was some really smart strategy, and it was really just serendipitous," says Calhoun. "They created a show, and they said, 'Let's just put this on at Papermill Playhouse regionally and make it good, and now we'll have something to license to these schools.' And we all thought, 'It's a great job, we love the show, and we'd like to be a part of history.' We did it with that in mind. There's a certain level of inevitability about it that none of us could have predicted."

The film version is still remembered as a flop, but Calhoun knew Disney was on to something. "As unsuccessful as it was in the theatrical release, it has been quite successful as a DVD, creating this cult following. Or else it wouldn't be the number one requested title for Disney."

Another aspect of *Newsies* that should give any director and choreographer pause is the need for a large cast of male triple-threat performers. Choreographer Christopher Gattelli set the bar high with his thrilling athletic and acrobatic dance numbers reminiscent of Golden Age movie musicals, à la Gene Kelly. Taking a tip from choreographers DeMille and Robbins, Gattelli advances the story through movement that includes full-out tap dancing, soaring leaps, lightning fast pirouettes and incorporates chairs, pushrooms and a unique use of newspapers as turn "partners."

"Transcending the normal difficulties of mounting a show, in this case, it was finding and casting those boys. They are the title characters of the show," says Calhoun. "At Papermill, because of the economics, half of the boys had to be non-union. And at first that was intimidating, because I thought, 'How are we going to find non-union? It's hard enough to find union people this good! What we realized was that because we wanted younger guys, that really wasn't an issue.'"

The actors-singers-dancers he found came from the worlds of musical theatre, ballet and gymnastics. "The new kids out on the market wouldn't have their union cards yet. Most of them didn't have agents. So what's thrilling about this show was that we were introducing a new generation of actors-singers-dancers to Broadway. Twelve actors are making their Broadway debuts. And that's really part of the story; it's art imitating life. These boys in the show conquer Goliath, and these actors are conquering Broadway with their debuts."

Any doubt anyone may have had about *Newsies'* audience appeal were swept away once previews began and the show officially opened to paying audiences.

"What happens in the audience I haven't seen happen very often," Calhoun says. His cast's boundless enthusiasm translates from the stage effortlessly. "It's just infectious, their youth and their energy." Younger theatregoers and older crowds alike love the story and the music. "I'm sure that's a majority of the success of the show — it's just undeniable."

Occupy Broadway

It's easy to make comparisons with *Newsies'* plotline and events in current society that aim to knock down the elitist 1% in 21st century society, but Calhoun knows the creative team started work on this show long before Occupy camped anywhere. "You would think they had their finger on the pulse of society when they had this idea to do it, but I know this idea was 8 years in the making. It's just serendipitous that we're as timely as we are."

Similar themes seem to hit the boards at the same time, showing a trend in theatre as well as the collective unconscious. "Society gets what they need when they need it. I feel that's what's happening right now, and I think we need these reminders. It's interesting how this happens when they need to happen."

Having already extended on Broadway once, *Newsies* is still listed as a limited run, but there is hope the show may become an open run or even spawn a national tour. Whether it will or not is a numbers game. *Newsies* is doing extremely well at the box office as well as in the awards department. "I'm old enough to know it's always hard to put on a show," says Calhoun. "And it's a miracle when one works. It defies all logic. You work just as hard on a flop as you do on a hit, and no one knows at the beginning of the journey which of the two it's going to be."

Maybe it wasn't at the beginning, but by now it's fairly clear that *Newsies* is a critical hit. As of this writing, it has been nominated for eight Tony Awards, seven Outer Critics Circle Awards, five Drama Desk Awards and two Drama League awards.

"We'll know more about our future in the next month. But we're breaking box office records at the Nederlander Theatre. Two weeks ago, we broke the record that was previously held by *Rent*. They did 9 performances in a week to set the record, and we broke the record with an 8-performance week. It's remarkable what's happening."

Even with all the nominations for *Newsies* under his belt, Calhoun remains pragmatic about life upon the wicked stage. "Success is never guaranteed."

With a motto of "One for all, and all for one," *Newsies the Musical* may well prove to be "King of New York" come Tony Awards night June 10. **S**