

THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

David Skinner talks management and Broadway show selection process for the Saenger Theatre

By Dean M. Shapiro | Senior Editor

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVID SKINNER

Thousands of New Orleanians annually pack the seats of the opulent, historic Saenger Theatre on Canal Street for a wide variety of performances ranging from dance revues, rock concerts, standup comedy, and especially touring musicals that were box office successes on Broadway.

But, while enjoying the performances, theatergoers rarely think about the process and logistics of what goes into staging these productions and how decisions are made as to which shows will be staged. Those events, especially the eight or nine Broadway musicals presented annually at the Saenger, are chosen by a dedicated professional with more than 50 years in the theatrical venue management industry, David Skinner. He is the CEO of a local subsidiary of the London, U.K.-based Ambassador Theater Group (ATG) which also owns the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts in Louis Armstrong Park.

Breakthru Media recently connected with Skinner near the tail end of the pandemic-shortened 2021-22 season at the Saenger. During our interview he generously shared much of his insider knowledge and experience in the business

of presenting live entertainment for appreciative patrons in a city whose cultural traditions date back more than three centuries. Following are some of the highlights of our 30-minute interview:



Let's start with your background. Are you from New Orleans and how did you get into the theater management business?

I moved to New Orleans in 1977. I'm an adopted native. My wife is a New Orleanian and she says because I wasn't here for the first couple of years of the Saints, I can't be called a native. I told her I was here during the bad years, so that's got to count for something.

I was born and raised in the public assembly facilities industry, which includes stadiums, arenas, convention centers and theaters. My father was in the business and when I finished college (Old Dominion University in Virginia) I started in the same business. My father and I were the first ones to start what's called private management or privatization

of these venues. My first job out of college was as the first box office manager of the (no longer standing) Omni Arena in Atlanta when it first opened in 1971.



What brought you to New Orleans?

What brought me here was when we assumed management of the Superdome on July 1, 1977. It was two years old and during the first year the city ran it and then the state ran it and they realized that neither one of them knew what they were doing. And so they put out a proposal for somebody to run it and the folks that owned the Hyatt Hotel, a family from Chicago called the Pritzgers, got the right to negotiate the contract. They got hold of my dad and we took over the Superdome management. We ran it for about 15 years and then we sold it.



So how did you get into running the Saenger and the Mahalia Jackson Theater?

When the Mahalia Jackson Theater was coming back online after Katrina, I joined this group and helped not only reopen the Mahalia in January 2009 following renovations from the hurricane, and then in September 2013, after rehab, also reopened the Saenger Theatre. ATG operates roughly 60 venues worldwide, 12 to 15 of which are here in the U.S. I operate our venues here in New Orleans.

Q Have you ever done any acting or have any sort of an acting background? Or participation in any of the other performing arts?

None at all.

Q But you have an appreciation for it though obviously?

Oh, absolutely. Yes.

Q Do you get up to Broadway to screen performances with the prospects of staging them here?

Normally once a year I get up there and see a couple of the shows that are performing on Broadway and have the potential of touring. I want to see what kind of product is coming out.

Q Do you go largely by the audience reactions or reviews that they get or both? What procedures go into the selection process for a season? What sort of considerations come into play?

Bottom line, the consideration is how financially successful the shows are. How they are received by the critics and the public and if they have staying power on Broadway and will subsequently tour. Are they going to have the staying power to be able to tour for at least a year or more?

The life of most of the good Broadway shows is anywhere from 3 to 5 years. But then, on the other hand, the extremely good ones may be around for 10, 15, 20 years or longer. Some of them are still playing on Broadway today, like “Wicked,” “The Lion King” and so forth.

Q Or they come back as revivals too, some of them.

Absolutely. We’ve got “Fiddler on the Roof” coming back here as a revival (in February 2023). There have been a lot of successful revivals through the years.

Q So when decisions are made to bring in shows here, is it done by a committee or is there a board of some sort? How does the process work, basically?

We work in conjunction with Broadway



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Across America and there are a few people involved in the process. We look at what shows are touring in a certain year, which shows have a successful track record or, if they're new, which ones do we anticipate having a successful track record. We look at the financial cost of the shows because each show is different in what it may cost us. So we have to look at how much the shows are bringing in and get the biggest ones we can while still trying to keep the cost of the tickets to where it doesn't get out of hand.

Q When you say “we” do you have a board or a committee that makes these calls, along with yourself?

No. It's primarily me and Broadway Across America. We're the ones who are looking at what's touring, what's selling, and what makes sense for our package. And we do a lot of customer surveys on what types of shows they like, what shows they'd like to see and what they don't like. And we try to take all that into consideration when we put together a season.

Q Last season you had a couple of recent Tony winners in there: “Hamilton” and “HadesTown.”

We try to get Tony winners each year. But Tony winners are not always a barometer of what's going to be successful. Most folks don't know it but if you crank the

clock back a number of years, the Tony winner was “Avenue Q” for Best Musical and it beat out “Wicked” but it seems like, in the long run, “Wicked” was more successful.

Q Anything else you want to add?

No. That's pretty much it. Just looking forward to another great season in '22-'23.

The 2022-2023 Broadway in New Orleans Season kicks off with “Pretty Woman: The Musical” from October 4-9, 2022. Season tickets are now on sale.



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