

*Tony-Winning Producer
Stewart Lane
has another idea.
Think Netflix.*

Meet Mr. Broadway

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By Susan Seligson

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS SORENSEN

STEWART F. LANE ISN'T CRAZY ABOUT the term "Broadway impresario," a label that is often applied to him. It can conjure some unsavory stereotypes, like David Belasco's "casting couch" and the vindictive, high-profile antics of "abominable showman" David Merrick. Then there's Lane. Mercurial playwrights like him. Directors like him. As the *New York Times* has reported, stagehands from the powerful Local One union like him. Even the press likes Lane the man, although critics continue to eviscerate his shows





Stewart F. Lane (CFA'73) and his wife and business partner, Bonnie Comley, are a high-profile couple joined at the hip like romantic leads at a curtain call.

as they see fit. The *Times* calls the prolific, multiple Tony-winning producer a Broadway powerhouse and headlined an at-home-with piece about him and his family's upper East Side town house, "A Producer and a Gentleman," a flat-out compliment as well as a playful nod to his latest Broadway hit, *The Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*.

Lane (CFA'73) has given himself and his website, www.mrbroadway.com, the well-deserved moniker "Mr. Broadway," a name he shares with a popular deli and the protagonist of a 1960s TV show. He is a largely hands-on producer who has been nominated for nine Tonys and taken home six, four, including one for *Gentleman's Guide*, for

BroadwayHD, a Netflix-like subscription service, offers more than 150 feature-length performances.

shows coproduced with his wife and business partner, Bonnie Comley. Joined at the hip like romantic leads at a curtain call, the two have several productions in the works, among them Lane's long-gestating passion project, *A Moment in Time*, a musical he crafted around the songs of the late John Denver. Google images of the pair and out pour scores of photos: Lane, tall, broad-shouldered, strong-jawed; Comley, luminous in form-fitting evening gowns, her signature waist-length blonde hair billowing over her left shoulder. There are photos of Lane, Comley, and both, smiles beaming and arms full of Tony trophies. The high-profile pair steps out constantly, both as Tony nominee voters and to support colleagues. "We see everything," says Comley, a UMass Lowell graduate who studied business (she earned an MA from Emerson College in 1994) and is accustomed to playing the superego to her husband's creative id.

The latest venture of the two may be their most ambitious yet. In October 2015 they launched BroadwayHD.com, a Netflix-like subscription or pay-per-view destination that now offers more than 150 feature-length performances. (Subscriptions cost \$169.99 a year, or \$14.99 a month, and shows can be rented for \$7.99.) As the list of streamed Broadway productions grows (many, particularly the Shakespeare canon, were filmed by PBS or the BBC), Lane believes they are stoking a hunger for Broadway entertainment that is likely to be quenched in the form of follow-up ticket sales to those who can manage it. And in the days of the \$800 *Hamilton* ticket, it will convey the Broadway experience to those priced out of it.

Unsurprisingly, Lane and Comley have had to calm some Broadway kin who fear a resulting dent in ticket sales. "We are huge live theater lovers and wanted to expand the reach of this art form to a broader audience," Lane told one interviewer. "So many people don't have the opportunity to enjoy live theater in person, and many others want the chance to see shows again and again. We are preserving live theater, while bringing the Broadway stage into people's homes."

He predicts a resulting increase, not decline, in ticket sales. He says he's taking the lead from what's happened with film versions of Broadway shows. (After the film *West Side Story*, for example, people flocked to the theater to see the show.) In spite of, or more likely because of, the popular film, a revival of the '70s musical *Chicago* continues

to play to sellout crowds after nearly 7,500 performances.

While live-streamed performances from the Metropolitan Opera have been a popular draw at movie theaters for years, there has been no equivalent for Broadway musicals and stage plays, except for a handful of highly hyped network broadcasts. In June, Lane and Comley made history with the live-streaming of the romantic confection *She Loves Me*, which drew considerable press, both previewing and following up on the event, with rave reviews from around the world. They had been thinking about live-streaming a production for years, but were waiting for the right time, and as it neared the end of its run at Studio 54, this star-studded revival of the 1963 musical, with a book by Joe Masteroff, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, and music by Jerry Bock, was the perfect choice. For \$9.99, anyone with a laptop or smart TV was welcomed into the show's Budapest perfume shop.

Streaming *She Loves Me* was a complex endeavor, involving 10 cameras situated on empty seats throughout the theater. For this theater-film hybrid, BroadwayHD and Studio 54 had to negotiate with the Screen Actors Guild and Actors' Equity.

She Loves Me was monitored closely within the industry and beyond. The following day the *Times* reported that with the exception of "a few technical hiccups," BroadwayHD's stream of the revival "did everything right." In its wake (the show is now available to the website's subscribers or for a one-time fee), Lane and Comley received grateful emails from watchers. A viewer in Nicaragua thanked the pair "for making Broadway accessible and for inspiring young people all over the world." Closer to home, reactions were equally effusive, says Comley, noting that as a rule, celebrities don't tour with the productions; if you want to see Patti LuPone, or in this case, Jane Krakowski, without live-streaming, it has to be Broadway or not at all. Lane and Comley won't disclose numbers, and they won't attempt to predict when the venture will break even, but they say they were very satisfied with the stream viewership of *She Loves Me*. The musical currently is their strongest performer, along with the *Gypsy* revival, starring Imelda Staunton, and the 2010 musical *Memphis*.

Act One

Lane says he knew he was headed for a life in theater since age 11, when his pal Ricky took him to his first Broadway show, the Cy Coleman musical *Little Me*. It starred Ricky's dad, Sid Caesar. Lane strutted and fretted his way to adulthood accompanied by the compulsively hummable soundtracks of Rodgers & Hammerstein, Lerner & Loewe, Frank Loesser, and others. But as much as he remains a sucker for *Oklahoma!* and *Fiddler on the Roof* (he produced a 2004 Tony-nominated revival starring Alfred Molina), his tastes and instincts have evolved with the form. "When I produced the original musical *La Cage aux Folles*, based on the film about long-time gay partners, my friends said, 'What are you, nuts?'" Lane recalls. The play earned him his first Tony Award as producer.

📺 **ONLINE:**
Watch a video of Stewart Lane and Bonnie Comley on Broadway at bu.edu/bostonia.

He and Comley have since produced shows like *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. They've produced dramatic works from Shakespeare to David Mamet. Lane may be able to sing all of "Gee, Officer Krupke," but he doesn't live in the past. The blogosphere, for example, has provided a welcome dilution of the acid dispensed by critics,

he says. The days when a few choice words of a scribe like *Times* former drama critic Frank Rich (aka "The Butcher of Broadway") could shut down a play are over, says Lane, who co-owns Broadway's Palace Theatre.

Lane and Comley, both William Fairfield Warren Fellows, an honor BU bestows on philanthropic leaders who have given more than \$1 million to the University, and longtime friends of the College of Fine Arts, are benefactors of theater programs at UMass Lowell and Emerson College. They endowed a concentration in musical theater at CFA and the popular black box theater at the recently sold Boston University Huntington Theatre was named Lane-Comley Studio 210. (Lane is also a BU overseer.) They are often center stage at charity events, and Lane has been a member of every major theater board, from the Actors Fund of America to the David H. Koch Theater. In a notoriously remorseless business, he has gained a reputation for being a playwright's producer, a deal maker with heart. He has produced many shows in London's West End, a tamped-down version of Broadway, has written several books and plays, and occasionally takes to the stage himself in community theater productions.

"Bonnie and Stewart reflect some of the best traditions of people of the theater," says Jim Petosa, director of the CFA School of Theatre. "They care deeply about the art form, show a real generosity to people who practice it, and ensure that our institutions of learning carry on the legacy of bringing along the next generations of artists. They are the real thing."

Lane is an irrepressible raconteur who is elated over his successes and philosophical about his failures—and there have been more than a few. Whether dropping names, picking up checks, or in the Hamptons playing grizzled old Erro-nius in the 2013 Bay Street Theater summer production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, he is still that 11-year-old kid, blown away by all things Broadway.

"Stewart Lane in 2016 is an ebullient, larger-than-life man of the theater; Stewart Lane in 1969—exactly the same," says

It's an odd business. "When people tell you that you can't lose," Lane says, "run for the hills."

Lane's old friend Jimmy Roberts, who coauthored the long-running off-Broadway musical *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*. Roberts says Lane was among the few "crazies" in high school who could not get enough of the stage. "He was a year ahead of me, but we were both members of Junior Players, the drama club at Great Neck North High School on Long Island. In fact, I was only in junior high when Stewart enlisted me to play the piano part for a production of *The Fantasticks* he was organizing. Stewart, who already looked

like a little—albeit tall—man, even as a teen played the role of Hucklebee, one of two fathers and neighbors who plot to get their callow kids married. Stewart was born to play comedic roles like that."

Roberts says it was a tough transition, during and after BU, as Lane gradually put acting on the back burner, shifting his focus toward the producing end as a steady livelihood.

The parents of five, Lane and Comley divide their time between Manhattan and their chateau in the Hamptons, but most days and nights are spent in the midtown zip code embracing the 500 stages defined as being on Broadway. They often stop for a lunch of chicken curry at Sardi's, the nearly century-old watering hole whose legendary walls of fame include two caricatures of Lane and a third of the two of them.

Hits That Flop, and Flops That Hit

Stewart F. Lane Productions operates out of a suite of offices in an elegant prewar building on 42nd Street, with walls covered in posters and playbills signed by performance icons like Liza Minnelli and the entire casts of *Gypsy* and *Legally Blonde*. There are framed articles about Lane's coffee table books, *Jews on Broadway* and *Black Broadway*. There are individual portraits by the celebrated caricaturist Abe Hirschfeld, and photos of the couple's 11-year-old twin sons, Lenny and Frankie.

Investing in Broadway is notoriously risky, and *The Producers'* Bialystock and Bloom notwithstanding, absolutely everyone involved is banking on success. "Fifteen million is not a lot for a typical Broadway musical, which takes about seven years to develop," says Comley. And only about one out of five recoup their investment, adds Lane. In June, post-Tonys, everyone in the business was obsessing over the Hamiltonization of Broadway. (The rap musical was nominated for an unprecedented 16 awards and won 11.) "We're all watching it," Comley says. "I don't think it will set off a spate of rap musicals," says Lane. But he points out that writer-actor Lin-Manuel Miranda smartly delayed the play's move uptown from off Broadway because he didn't feel it was ready, and had it debut when Tony Award voters would still be reeling from the experience.

Veteran Broadway producer Harold Prince said it's important to distinguish between a success and a failure, a hit and a flop. A critical hit can be a flop—Lane likes to point out that before *Sweeney Todd*, not one of Stephen Sondheim's musicals recouped their cost. It's an odd business. "When people tell you that you can't lose,"

he says, "run for the hills." He always goes for a good story. "I don't pander." He's guided by what he sees as theater's calling to educate, amaze, and entertain, but he is often quoted as saying that when choosing shows to produce, he goes with his gut. On occasion, that gut has failed him royally.

In his 2007 book *Let's Put On a Show!* (Working Arts Library) Lane relates the story of the biggest flop (that is the correct word) of his career: a stage adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* that opened on January 4, 1981, and closed

the same day. Earning a place on the famed “wall of flops” at Broadway hangout Joe Allen’s, the show had “the dubious honor of becoming the most expensive nonmusical ever to open and close in one night,” Lane writes, calling the effort “simply part of the business.”

Lane and Comley often share a laugh over another, less catastrophic glitch, a song in *La Cage aux Folles* that in previews proved to be such a dud that no one clapped. “There was just silence, and shock,” Lane recalls of the song, sung by the bride-to-be’s conservative father. “It was an expensive mistake. They had to restage an entire scene because of it.” But that mistake wasn’t as expensive as Lane’s agreeing to allow a stage director to install an operable elevator for a single scene in a musical he was producing. The stars had nothing to do while the elevator rumbled to life, so they just stood there in awkward silence. “The elevator cost \$350,000,” he says. “Needless to say, it was gone when the production went on tour.”

When he’s working with a big-name veteran playwright, Lane tends to back off, he says, and that has cost him, too. He refers to the ill-fated 1993 musical version of Neil Simon’s *The Goodbye Girl*, which never gained any footing despite a cast that featured Bernadette Peters and Martin Short. After revisions, firings and hirings, and creaky previews in Chicago and London, the Broadway production closed after five months. “You don’t tell Neil Simon what to do,” Lane says with a shrug. Not long ago Lane faced a slightly delicate

encounter with another sacred cow, David Mamet, who he has long deeply admired. “I was recently given a script by Mamet, who said, ‘This is exciting stuff,’” Lane says. “Bonnie asked how was it, and I said, this is either the best or the worst thing in the world.” He passed.

“I didn’t want to read it,” says Comley. “I trust Stew’s opinion.” Mamet’s *The Anarchist* with Patti LuPone closed after three weeks, earning the cheeky *Guardian* headline, “Anarchist Bombs on Broadway.” She recalls that “people were climbing over each other to get out” in midperformance. Then there are the shows that outrun the critics, says Comley. They savaged *Wicked*, which won no Tonys. “Thirteen years later it’s the highest grossing musical in the world.”

“I wish I’d produced it,” says Lane.

These days Lane is juggling several Broadway productions, the John Denver musical, an updated version of *Jews on Broadway*, and of course, promoting and pumping money and energy into BroadwayHD. His friend Jimmy Roberts says it must keep Lane young, “this passion for show business in all its aspects.” But Roberts vividly remembers that Lane’s passion took shape in a quiet community on Long Island, “where most students aimed immediately for medicine or law. Not Stewart. The ‘little man’ from Great Neck turned his youthful zeal into real skill and wisdom, the kind needed to create and market winning shows, attract an audience—and send them home with their hearts singing.”



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