Broadway Yearbook, 1999–2000

Steven Suskin

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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1999 2000 BROADWAY YEARBOOK

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For

Helen, Johanna,

and Charlie

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The Curtain Rises

The reader of these pages is no doubt familiar with the two long-existing series chronicling the Broadway theatre. Burns Mantle's *Best Plays*, offering intensive statistics and abridged versions of ten selected plays, began following the 1919–1920 season. Daniel Blum's *Theatre World*, a comprehensive pictorial record, began with the 1944–1945 season. Both are invaluable and much-thumbed reference sources.

A third Broadway annual existed for a decade. George Jean Nathan began his *Theatre Book of the Year* with the 1942–1943 season (predating *Theatre World*). Rather than simply reporting the season's activities, Nathan presented what he termed "a record and an interpretation." *Best Plays* reliably tells you what the shows were about, while *Theatre World* provides a fascinating visual picture. Nathan, though, gave you an idea of what the shows were *like*, and whether you would have enjoyed them. In a nutshell: Were they any good?

Nathan's series ended with his retirement in 1951, when he was nearing seventy. There have since been two other notable books of seasonal Broadway analysis. Jack Gaver examined the 1965–1966 season in his highly informative *Season In—Season Out*. Two years later, William Goldman took on 1967–1968 in *The Season*, which remains one of the finest books about the Broadway theatre.

I have always found the *Theatre Book of the Year* series of inestimable value in compiling research or simply sating curiosity. (Nathan's thirty other books also make for enjoyable, if idiosyncratic, reading.) I do not necessarily agree with his opinions, but that is of little matter; to begin with, the man could barely tolerate musicals. Of course, it is unlikely for

any theatregoer to find a critic with whose opinions he *always* agrees. Taste is individual, or at least it should be. What is important, I think, is that critics be consistent in their opinions and that they support their arguments, in the nonargumentative sense of the word. It is one thing to turn thumbs up or thumbs down. It is another, and more valuable, thing to explain *why* the imperial thumb is nudged toward the heavens or the opposite. Or someplace in between.

Criticism, by nature, is personal and colored by the critic's experience. I am the first person to agree that no critic is infallible, present company included. My aim has been to keep things informative and instructive; hence, the discussion is laced with examples from general Broadway history (and my checkered twenty-five years on and around Forty-fourth Street).

Nathan described his series as "a complete and detailed history of the theatrical year illuminated by critical comment that rids statistics of their conventional dryness and translates bald factual information into stimulating reading." That sounds pretty good to me, and it is in this vein that I have undertaken the new *Broadway Yearbook* series. What were the shows like? How were they received, by both the critics and the audiences? What other factors contributed to the shows' success or failure?

It is in hopes of answering these questions, for today's theatregoers and tomorrow's readers, that we offer *Broadway Yearbook*.

Broadway Yearbook 1999–2000 presents an analytical discussion of each show that opened on Broadway between May 31, 1999, and May 28, 2000. I have also deemed it fitting to include certain non-Broadway productions of importance, relevance, or general interest. These include an occasional off-Broadway production, like the year's Pulitzer Prize winner; so-called concert versions of old Broadway musicals, presented with full casts and orchestras; and even a "special workshop presentation" that was too important, historically, to omit. (The inclusion of all off-Broadway shows would make this book unwieldy, alas.) The shows are discussed in chronological order; an alphabetical arrangement might make it easier to browse through to find a specific show, but it seems pertinent to have the reader discover each show in the same order as the critics and theatregoers. As we'll see, timing—that is, the competition on the date of opening—was a significant factor in the reception and fate of some of this season's offerings.

The opening night credits and cast list are followed by a discussion of

the production. There follows a section of related data, starting with dates and length of run. Performance and preview totals have been compiled using information from the League of American Theatres and Producers. In some cases these differ from the "official" counts distributed by press agents; I consider the League tabulation—reported week by week, along with the grosses—to be more accurate. Profit/loss information comes from a variety of sources, including the invaluable *Variety*. Shows from nonprofit organizations have been similarly classified where applicable, based on an estimate of surplus income generated by the production. It should be understood that a show that ends its Broadway run with a loss might well make up the difference from post-Broadway income. Conversely, it is not unknown for a show to have recouped its costs but—due to an overextended run or unforeseen touring costs—to slip back into a deficit.

Shows that were still running on May 29, 2000—the first day of the 2000–2001 season—are so indicated. (For the sake of completeness, closing dates and performance totals are included for shows that ran into 2000–2001 but closed before this book went to print.) Next comes the critical scorecard, which gives the reader a general idea of the critical reception of each production. The scorecards are based on the opinions of seven to ten critics from major newspapers and magazines. The number of reviews varies; not all attractions were covered by all the critics. (In a few "special" cases, productions discussed herein were reviewed by only a handful of critics.) The scorecards reflect the opinions of the critics from the *New York Times*, the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, the *Newsday*, *Associated Press*, *Variety*, the *Village Voice*, and *New York Magazine*. Weekly magazines that offer occasional reviews, such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the *New Yorker*, were also included in some of the tabulations.

Reviews have been rated in five categories:

Rave	Overwhelmingly positive, enthusiastically indicating that the show should be seen
Favorable	Positive, indicating that the show is good though not outstanding; or that the show is good despite minor flaws
Mixed	Positive and negative aspects are presented, with no overall recommendation; sometimes the reviewer is simply unclear

Unfavorable	Negative, indicating that the show doesn't work—often despite positive elements or good intentions
Pan	Overwhelmingly negative, indicating—often with a hint of annoyance—that the show was downright bad

Quite a few of the reviews fall somewhere between two categories. I have called 'em like I see 'em, although a pollster would probably say that there is a two-point margin of error. No recounts, please.

A brief financial section gives the reader an idea of the show's economic performance. Figures, again, have been compiled using information from the League of American Theatres and Producers. Finally, Tony Awards (and nominations) received by the show and its personnel are listed, along with other major awards.

Following the main body of the book are six appendixes that, it is hoped, will prove a useful supplement to the discussion of the season.

And so the curtain rises, as they say, on the premier edition of *Broadway Yearbook*.

See you at the theatre.

Broadway Yearbook, 1999–2000

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The Shows

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AUGUST 12

Voices in the Dark

The new Broadway season. Excitement reigns along Shubert Alley; enthusiasm and expectations run rampant. Critics and autograph hounds sharpen their pencils, usherettes air out their white collars, and theatre lobby bartenders practice their noise-making techniques. Car service limos barricade the sidewalks, pushcart men dust off their pretzels, ticket scalpers dance in the streets on their cell phones, and eager out-of-work actors crowd the Equity lounge hoping to scare up complimentary tickets. The lights slowly dim as the curtain rises on a brilliant new American play.

Well, maybe next year.

Not this year, certainly. *Voices in the Dark* was one of those secluded-house-in-the-country plays, featuring an imperiled-but-plucky heroine—"It takes a lot to scare me," she says—and a psychopathic murderer on the loose. But a psychological thriller—even a psychological thriller about a psychologist—needs to have some psychology. *Voices in the Dark* hadn't much of anything; it was simply a noncredible, thrill-less thriller. The audience was greeted by a curtain with a high, oblong window, within which was painted a moody forest scene strangely reminiscent of Vincent van Gogh's *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, painted right before he sliced off his ear. (Knives and blades were to play an important part in the imagery of the evening.) As the lights dimmed, a disembodied voice over the loudspeaker welcomed us and warned: "If you rattle your candy wrappers, you will be shushed. If you allow your cell

A psychological thriller—even a psychological thriller about a psychologist—needs to have some psychology.

Cast (in order of appearance)

Caller No. 1 Nicole Fonarow
Lil Judith Ivey
Hack Peter Bartlett
Bill Tom Stechschulte
Caller No. 2 ?
Owen Raphael Sbarge
Red Lenny Blackburn
Blue John Ahlin
Egan Zach Grenier

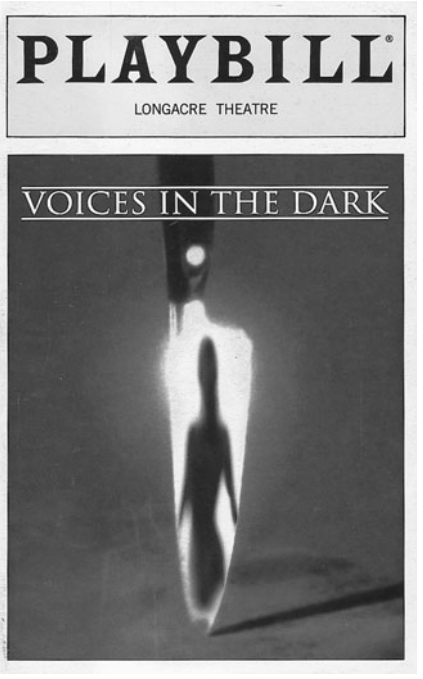
The play takes place in a radio sound studio and in a cabin in the Adirondacks over a November weekend.

phone to ring, you will be asked to leave. And if you reveal the ending of the show, you will be killed." The first line of the 1999–2000 season got a big laugh, only it was the best line of the evening. Then they raised the curtain.

Within minutes, our heroine was all alone in this suspiciously spooky house in the middle of the woods, perilously secluded from the world. But she wouldn't be alone for long. Mind you, she had already received a threatening phone call from some muffled fellow threatening to kill her; she was there in the middle of the woods, in the middle of the Adirondacks, in the middle of nowhere; and this overdesigned vacation house set was so ominous that there wasn't a person in the theatre who didn't know that it was going to start storming and thundering and raging as soon as the heroine's wisecracking agent drove away to his beach house in the Hamptons. Yet this primal reality therapist, with the number one radio show in the country—we know she has the number one radio show in the country because her agent says, "No wonder you're the number one radio show in the country"—she didn't say hey, get me outta here. She didn't say don't leave me alone, please stay until my lousy-husband-who-I'm-breaking-up-with shows up. What she said was: "It takes a lot to

scare me." So she sent her agent away, the only character in the play who could possibly help her or tell us a few more waspish jokes, leaving her stranded there all alone with nobody to keep her company but a maniacal psychopath or three. This is one of those plays in which everyone is painted as a suspect, which seems to be the only way playwright John Pielmeier knows how to paint.

Pielmeier then brought on the natives, and you wondered what TV sitcom he did his sociological research on. They seemed to be right off the old hayseed comedy *Green Acres*, which went out to pasture some twenty-eight years ago. One of these boys, who was mentally challenged, was rather offensively drawn. That's a minor complaint, given the rest of the evening. His buddy was an oafish sort with a literary bent; he gabbed on about "Stevie" King and "Johnny" Grisham, which gives you an idea of the verbal humor of the evening. He was also a fan of "Ernie" Hemingway. (How many Stephen King fans read Hemingway, I wonder?) Anyway, as the bumpkin chopped vegetables beside the prominently placed Cuisinart, he told us, "I lost the tip of my finger in the soup once. We had to throw the whole thing out."



Now, when you have a fellow walking around waving a knife in a mystery thriller with a heroine who has already been bombarded with death threats and he says something like "I lost the tip of my finger in the soup once" while chopping up vegetables beside the onstage Cuisinart—well, this pretty clearly telegraphs that the fellow's intestines are going to end up in the veal marengo.

Yes, a playwright needs to do a bit of foreshadowing, but Pielmeier stacked his play all too baldly with conspicuously pertinent bits of information. The heroine was reminded, early on, that if the power goes out in the sure-to-materialize storm, the cordless phones won't work; but don't

Voices in the Dark
Opened: August 12, 1999
Closed: October 10, 1999
68 performances (and 12 previews)
Profit/Loss: Loss
Voices in the Dark ($60 top) was scaled to a potential gross of $422,216 at the 1,086-seat Longacre. Weekly grosses averaged about $124,000, with the show breaking $135,000 in two of the first three weeks and slipping as low as $91,000 in September. Total gross for the run was $1,245,034. Attendance was about 51 percent, with the box office grossing about 29 percent of potential dollar-capacity.

Critical Scorecard

Rave 0
Favorable 0
Mixed 0
Unfavorable 0
Pan 7

forget, *there's a rotary phone upstairs on the balcony*. Now, would any character or playwright think to say such a thing if there were to be *no* storm, *no* power outage, and *no* reason for our put-upon heroine to desperately grapple her way up the stairs, in the dark, through flashes of lightning, to that rotary phone? Later, our heroine went into the guest bathroom to change her clothes. She didn't change in the onstage bedroom, or even in the living room of her empty house; no, she went into the offstage guest bathroom—but somehow managed to bring her lingerie back onstage and leave it on a table by the front door. Was this just an absentminded character at work? Or was the playwright clumsily setting up a piece of clumsy business for later?

This expensive-looking house had an outdoor shed offering free access to the house through the kitchen pantry, making it possible for the murderer to steal into the house without a key. Pielmeier had one of his characters tell us this, thereby informing us that some scare or other was going to intrude from the kitchen pantry. And what about that big, gray circuit-breaker box lying along the kitchen steps? It contained special high-power lines that would work even if the storm knocked out the rest of the power, we were told. Now, why on earth would there be a circuit-breaker box with special high-power lines lying on the kitchen steps—and why would this be so carefully explained to us—unless the playwright was going to use those very same power lines to electrocute the villain in the Jacuzzi? Pielmeier elaborately labored to set up everything with which he intended to scare us, but his labors revealed the sweat of his brow. It is a time-honored device in thrillers to cleverly plant bits of information that

serve to purposely throw you off the track. Pielmeier didn't throw us off the track; he laid out the track for us with tape that glows in the dark.

This was one of those plays where everyone's a suspect. Like the detective who knew a little too much about our heroine, eventually flipping out right before our eyes (aha!!) and chasing her around the house until he ended up with a knife in his back. Turned out he was not the killer; he was just a flipped-out detective who perfectly fit the profile of the play's psychotic killer and just happened to stumble upon our heroine the same night that the actual psychotic killer lunged after her, too. Just moments before the other killer bounded in, actually.

Pielmeier is known along Broadway for his 1982 mystery thriller *Agnes of God*. This was a dead-baby-in-the-nun's-trash can play in which the primary mystery was which of the three characters—Liz Ashley, Gerry Page, or Amanda Plummer—would chew up the most scenery. The ladies provided entertainment, at least, and managed to keep it running profitably for six hundred performances. Pielmeier's subsequent Broadway visits came with the 1985 Vietnam drama *The Boys of Winter*, which folded after nine performances, and the 1987 "suspense thriller" *Sleight of Hand*, which also lasted nine performances. *Voices in the Dark* forced itself through eight underattended weeks before calling it quits.

Historical note: This was the first show in Broadway history, as far as I can tell, that incorporated a real live porno movie on stage. *Forrest Hump*, according to the leading lady. The TV set was slanted toward the wings, but it was clearly viewable from where I was sitting. Poor Judith Ivey, who starred in this mess of porridge, is one of those accomplished performers who manage to keep your attention no matter what; but forty-five seconds of *Forrest Hump* were a whole lot livelier than *Voices in the Dark*.

They were selling not only a *Voices in the Dark* T-shirt and a *Voices in the Dark* coffee mug, but a *Voices in the Dark* shot glass as well.

Let it also be noted that they were selling, in the lobby, not only a *Voices in the Dark* T-shirt and a *Voices in the Dark* coffee mug, but a *Voices in the Dark* shot glass as well. Real collector's items by now, I imagine.

Some commentators commented that stage thrillers were no longer possible in our special effects–surfeited world; the sky was the limit in films, and you simply couldn't pull that sort of thing off onstage anymore. To which I say, no. You don't need machinery to surprise the audience, to

bring them to the edge of their seats. Just engage the imagination. Others concluded that the only mystery of the evening was why anyone bothered to produce this play. That's simple, folks. They thought they'd make a lot of money, like the producers of *Angel Street*, *Sleuth*, *Deathtrap*, and even *Agnes of God*. There is an immense audience for a good Broadway thriller, even a mediocre Broadway thriller. But *Voices in the Dark* was not a good mediocre thriller, not by half, just a contrived attempt at manufactured scare tactics.

And yes, I heard voices in the dark, all right. Midway through the first act, a fellow behind me said, "Well I guess we can leave at intermission."

"Hell," said his companion, "why wait?"

And they beat it up the aisle.

AUGUST 19

Kat and the Kings

Back in 1982 I was working in a theatrical office in the Paramount Building. At 11:00 every morning, in would pop a short, ancient man with a scrawny mustache in a dirty apron—a bootblack, I guess, is what you'd have called him. (In the South they'd have called him a shoeshine boy.) If you'd called central casting for a bootblack, this fellow is what you'd have gotten. He was already obsolete, but there he was in our series of interlocking rooms, moving door to door offering a "shine, sir" or "shine, ma'am."

This fellow had a good thing going, at least in our office. I'm a sneaker man myself, but this place was run by two highly successful producers who I think kind of liked the idea of having their very own bootblack "do" their pumps and heels every morning; it certainly impressed people who might be coming in for meetings, whom they would offer a shine. The office contained a bunch of bright young preppyish types working for next to nothing, who also felt half dressed without that daily shine on their shoes.

As the evening ground on it lost all sense of purpose, dissolving into a bunch of songs about this girl and that girl and don't get married, pal, who needs a wife.

One morning I had my papers spread out on the conference room table when in walked the bootblack with five pairs of shoes. He knew that I wasn't one of his customers, but I don't think he especially liked the big shot producer ladies or the young preppyish types who handed him their scuffed loafers as if he were a servant.

The office was just then producing a new musical revue consisting of 1950s rock and roll songs, which was in preview hell on the way to surefire

Cast (in order of appearance)

Kat Diamond Terry Hector
Lucy Dixon Kim Louis
Young Kat Diamond Jody J. Abrahams
Bingo Loukmaan Adams
Ballie Junaid Booysen
Magoo Alistair Izobell

Time: 1999 and 1957–1959
Place: Cape Town and Durban, South Africa

Original London Cast Album: First Night/Relativity 1809 (featuring four Broadway cast members)

flopdom. The stage manager came in to ask me something or other. The little old man piped in, as he slapped Griffin wax to the leather, that he, too, used to be in show business. With a top act, back in the 1950s. Me, I've always been quick to listen to old show business stories.

The Will Mastin Trio was his act. As it happened, I had actually heard of the Will Mastin Trio. (That surprised him.) They were popular on the nightclub circuit, specializing in energetic tap dancing mixed with song. They headlined at places like the Copacabana in New York, the Sands in Las Vegas, and the Fontainebleau in Miami Beach (back in the days when, as black men, they actually needed a pass to walk the streets of Miami Beach). The Will Mastin Trio even starred in a Broadway musical custom written around their act, which is why I had heard of them. Mastin was the nominal head of the act, accompanied by a guy named Sam and Sam's young son.

"You're not Will Mastin?" I asked.

"No, no, Will's dead." He told me his name, which was unfamiliar. But then, why would I know it? I supposed he must have filled in when one of the three had to miss a date. Or maybe he was part of their traveling com-

pany. Anyway, he sure looked like an ex-dancer (or an ex-jockey). There's something about show people that doesn't rub off.

Will Mastin's bootblack had totally slipped my mind long before I sat down at the Cort Theatre to see a final preview of *Kat and the Kings*. The curtain rose, and after a brief overture out bounded a charming middle-aged actor with a shoeshine kit, who informed us that he did shoeshines on the streets of Cape Town. But back in the 1950s he had been Kat, of the singing group *Kat and the Kings*. They had started small and grown to fame, but always in the shadow of apartheid, so much so that when they headlined at the posh Claridge's Hotel in Durban, they were forced to simultaneously serve as bellhops. The group finally disbanded, and Kat ended up performing shoeshines on the streets of Cape Town.

The show displayed great promise as the first act progressed, kind of like *Dreamgirls* but with friendlier material. As the evening ground on, though, it lost all sense of purpose, dissolving into a bunch of songs about this girl and that girl and don't get married, pal, who needs a wife. By the time they got around to the song about walking the invisible dog (and sprayed the good folks sitting in the front rows with noninvisible water), you realized that all they were interested in was a good-natured show with pretty singing and gimmicky staging. There is no reason that, once having brought up the question of apartheid, they needed to make something of it. But it seemed like a waste.

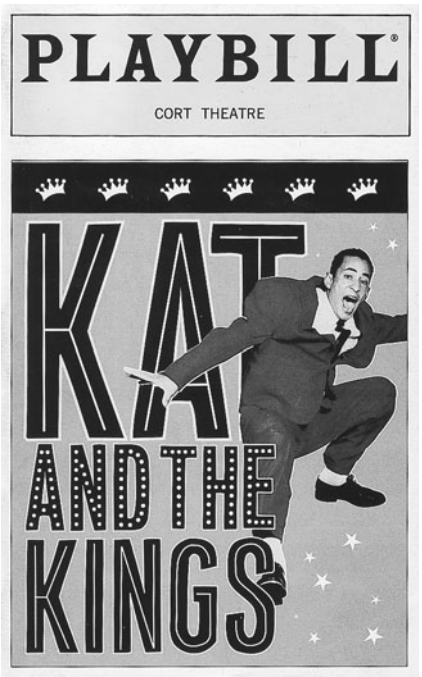
Kat and the Kings arrived on Broadway, in September 1999, with a 1999 Olivier Award for Best Musical. (That's the West End equivalent of the Tony.) This accolade—pasted across the ads and billboards—might have worked against the show's chances. For *Kat* was sweet, good-natured, and enjoyable in a lightweight sort of way. But Best Musical?? Broadway has seen inferior shows receive Tony Awards, for sure; "best" doesn't indicate "good," simply "better" than the competition. By prominently labeling *Kat and the Kings* "best new musical," the producers were consciously raising our expectations. We went in expecting to see something important. It turned out to be mere fun, and we ended up disappointed.

The 1999 Olivier Award for Best Musical—pasted across the ads and billboards—might have worked against the show's chances. For *Kat* was sweet, good-natured, and enjoyable in a lightweight sort of way. But Best Musical??

This was a miscalculation, folks, compounded by recent history: Conor McPherson's Irish play *The Weir* arrived on Broadway in April 1999, prom-

inently labeled as the 1998 Olivier Award winner for Best Play. *The Weir* needed something to help sell it perhaps, as it knocked Martin McDonagh's superior Irish play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* out of the Walter Kerr Theatre. *The Weir* received a staggeringly favorable review from the critic of the *New York Times*, but a majority of the critics looked at it and said: What? This was a play of great depths, depths so deep that many viewers decided that deep down underneath there was no there there. Again, the Olivier Award for Best Play raised expectations, perhaps too high; more than one critic wondered whether London audiences were simply taken in by all that boozy blarney masking a vacuum.

This is relevant in that two of the main *Kat and the Kings* producers also coproduced *The Weir*. For that matter, three of the *Kat* producers coproduced *Stomp*, a plotless revue from 1994 that's still going strong off-Broadway and around the world. Two of the same producers coproduced *Smokey Joe's Cafe*, a plotless revue from 1995 that amassed a substantial 2,036-performance run before closing in January 2000 (a week after *Kat*). *Smokey Joe* wasn't much of an entertainment, simply a market-driven commodity that managed to more or less find a market. *Kat and the Kings* was far more enjoyable, filled with an upbeat score (with original songs, unlike those in *Smokey Joe*) and an energetically likable cast. It simply wasn't in any way important, nor did it have one of those supertheatrical effects, like a falling chandelier or an onstage helicopter, that can make a British import run for years and years and years. All *Kat* had to sell, in effect, was its Olivier for best new musical, which turned out to be not much of a selling point. The show never counteracted its lackadaisical reception as the poorly received *Smokey Joe's Cafe* did, and it closed after New Year's weekend.



As for that singing and dancing elder Kat at the Cort, the role was played with great energy and charm by an actor named Terry Hector. The

Kat and the Kings
Opened: August 19, 1999
Closed: January 2, 2000
157 performances (and 15 previews)
Profit/Loss: Loss
Kat and the Kings ($75 top) was scaled to a potential gross of $506,927 at the 1,084-seat Cort. Weekly grosses averaged about $159,000, with the show breaking $200,000 on three holiday weeks. Total gross for the run was $3,418,286. Attendance was about 51 percent, with the box office grossing about 31 percent of potential dollar-capacity.

Critical Scorecard

Rave 1
Favorable 1
Mixed 2
Unfavorable 1
Pan 2

show was based on the experiences of a fellow named Salie "Kat" Daniels, of the 1950s singing group the Rockets. Daniels himself played the elder Kat in London; thus the former headliner-turned-shoeshine boy found himself back in the limelight, playing a fictionalized version of himself on the West End stage. Not only did "his" story win the Best New Musical Olivier, but he won one, too. (The entire six-person cast shared the Olivier for Best Actor in a Musical Award; Daniels, the four singing boys—who re-created their roles on Broadway—and Mandisa Bardill, who played the songwriting sister of one of the boys and will no doubt go down in history as the only actress to win a Best Actor Olivier.) Salie Daniels was set to repeat his role on Broadway, but illness forced his withdrawal; he died of cancer three weeks before the show opened here. At least he ended his life back onstage, with the roar of the crowd and the smell of the greasepaint and all that, rather than in an apron smeared with shoe wax and cream.

Which brings me back to that Paramount building bootblack. There he was, day after day, cheerfully offering spitshines to a building full of businesspeople in the entertainment business. Was he resigned to his lot? Or did he dream of a comeback? Would he have believed it if we told him that Salie Daniels of Kat and the Kings—an act that faced walls of prejudice similar to those scaled by the Will Mastin Trio—would have ended up starring in his own Broadway musical, if he hadn't died first?

I left that office almost twenty years ago and never saw that ancient little man again. Never even thought of him, either, until the night I sat watching *Kat and the Kings*. He presumably ended his days as a bootblack, and when he died—which he presumably has by now—there was no obituary in *Variety* to let me know. I never saw an obituary of Will Mastin

either, although he sure didn't wind up on the street with a shoeshine kit. Neither did his partner Sam. They both earned millions, though not from tap dancing. Rather, they signed a split-it-up-in-thirds partnership contract with Sam's kid, who fought his way from the hard time to the big time and became one of the biggest stars of them all. But, then, Sammy Davis Jr. was born in segregated America, not segregated South Africa.

SEPTEMBER 10

The Scarlet Pimpernel

The Scarlet Pimpernel originally opened to a scathing critical reception on November 9, 1997. "If it's pulse-racing suspense and derring-do you're after," advised Ben Brantley in the *New York Times*, "you would be better off watching tourists crossing against the lights in Times Square."

The following spring, as the Tony Award nominations came along, Broadway producer Pierre Cosette made explicitly derogatory remarks about the show to the press; this was quite remarkable because Cosette was the producer of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. I found his assessment rather severe. *Pimpernel* was pretty dreary, all in all, but it wasn't absolutely awful. But I suppose Cosette knows a bad show when he sees it. He also produced *The Civil War*. (Not the one in which the armies of the Union and the Confederacy slaughtered each other by the thousands; the one with songs, which was slaughtered by the critics and dropped millions.)

Within weeks of losing three Tony Awards, Cosette sold off his rights in the show to Cablevision Systems Corporation, one of those giant media conglomerates that buy up little mom-and-pop companies like Madison Square Garden and Radio City Music Hall. Cablevision's Music Hall Division took over *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and devised a campaign with which to reconstitute it as a major Broadway musical hit capable of running now and forever. They brought over one of their in-house staffers, a director-choreographer with the unlikely name of Robert Longbottom, to "fix" the show. Longbottom had only one Broadway show to his credit, the 1997 musical *Side Show*; a disappointing failure, but at least it failed nobly.

Cast (in order of appearance)

Marguerite Carolee Carmello
Chauvelin Marc Kudisch
Percy Ron Bohmer
Marie Elizabeth Ward Land
Armand Kirk McDonald
Tussaud David Masenheimer
Coupeau Stephonne Smith
Mercier David St. Louis
Ozzy Harvey Evans
Elton Russell Garrett
Dewhurst Ken Land
Jessup Charles West
Ben James Hindman
Farleigh Matthew Shepard
Hal Danny Gurwin
Robespierre David Cromwell
Prince of Wales David Cromwell
Opera Dancers, Soldiers, Prisoners, British Guests and Servants: Emily Hsu, Alicia Irving, David Masenheimer, Robb McKindles, Katie Nutt, Elizabeth O'Neill, Jessica Phillips, Terry Richmond, Laura Schutter, Charles West

Time: May into July, 1794
Place: England and France

Original Broadway Cast Albums: Atlantic Theatre 83079 (version 1.0), Atlantic Theatre 83265 ("Encore" version 2.0)

Longbottom oversaw a drastic reformatting of the show—rehearsing by day while the original version continued by night. The results (*Pimpernel* 2.0) were unveiled in September 1998, and they were a definite improvement. The original appeared to have been assembled from a how-to-write-a-hit-Broadway-operetta primer, circa 1922. Longbottom seems to have stuck a sign on the wall of the rehearsal room saying, "It's the story, stupid!" Out went the frills, out went the trimming, out went all the other French Revolution junque. *Pimpernel* 2.0 started with the heroine giving her final performance at the Comédie-Française—she's a singing

star at the Comédie-Française, but we'll let that pass—and within the very first number we were introduced to the three sides of the triangle that was at the heart of the plot. (As opposed to version 1.0, which started with a cheesy production number about the guillotine, entitled "Madame Guillotine.") We never lost sight of the central triangle in 2.0; the revised book focused on the trio so closely that at times we seemed to be watching a three-character play. The merry band of English fops was still there, although they were toned down to the extent that they appeared to be typical, decent men risking their lives in a noble cause. They also all appeared to have the same bootmaker. The large chorus was still there, too, but much of its material had happily disappeared.

The strength of 2.0 was in the playing of the leading actors. Douglas Sills had been the only positive asset of 1.0; the Broadway newcomer displayed a winning manner, a pleasing personality, and an indication that he knew the show was substandard, but it was his big break so he was going to try to entertain you anyway. By the time 2.0 opened, Sills—with a great set of 1.0 personal reviews and a Tony nomination under his belt—no longer needed to *try* to entertain you; he demonstrated that special sort of stage authority which comes from knowing that you know what you're doing and you know how to do it. The big surprise in the new version was Rex Smith as Chauvelin. Terrence Mann originated the role with plenty of grimaces and eye rolling, no doubt in self-preservation when he realized he was signed to a run-of-the-play contract in a stinker of a show. (Ten years after creating Javert in the Broadway company of *Les Misérables*, he was back on Forty-fifth Street in far more misérable straits.) Smith played Chauvelin straight and serious, with an undertone of in-character humor, bringing some of the dash of villainous Basil Rathbone in those old Errol Flynn–Warner Bros. swashbucklers. Sills and Smith, along with the personable Rachel York (in an impossibly unsympathetic role), managed to make version 2.0 bearable.

Most official communiqués from the production tacitly implied that *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was, indeed, a poorly received, ill-assembled show clearly in need of improvements.

The improvements, though, weren't enough to counteract a year's worth of poor business and bad word of mouth. The new producers spent a fair fortune on the expensive process of renovating the show from 1.0 to 2.0; on the massive operating losses suffered by 1.0 while preparing 2.0

The Scarlet Pimpernel
Opened: September 10, 1999
Closed: January 2, 2000
132 performances (and 0 previews)
All versions combined: 772 performances (and 39 previews)
Profit/Loss: Loss
The Scarlet Pimpernel "3.0" ($80 top) was scaled to a potential gross of $674,621 at the 1,366-seat Neil Simon. Weekly grosses averaged about $306,000, topping $350,000 on good weeks but falling below $200,000 on bad. (Version 2.0 ranged from $400,000 to $570,000 in its final eight weeks at the Minskoff.) Total gross for the run at the Neil Simon was $5,052,522. Attendance was about 58 percent, with the box office grossing about 45 percent of potential dollar-capacity.

Critical Scorecard

Rave	**0**
Favorable	**0**
Mixed	**0**
Unfavorable	**2**
Pan	**2**

(you have to expect a certain drop-off in business when you continue to sell tickets to a show which you have already announced is so bad that you're totally revising it); on the extensive marketing campaign heralding the arrival of 2.0; and, ultimately, on the operating losses of 2.0.

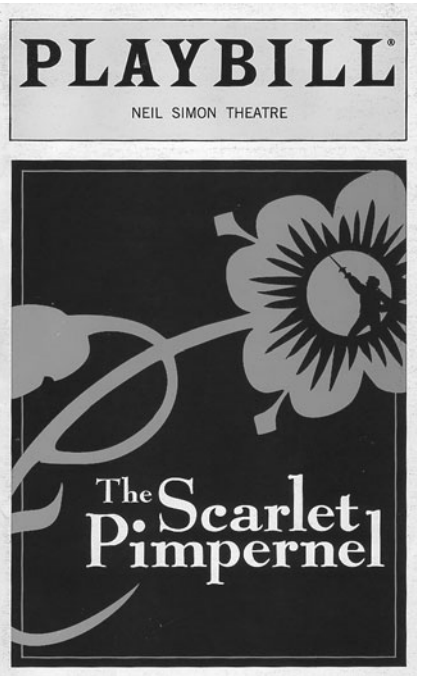
Meanwhile, the theatre owners decided that their real estate was underutilized and booked *Saturday Night Fever* into the Minskoff for the fall of 1999. Radio City Entertainment, somehow reasoning that a closed show with a big deficit was less desirable than a running show with a growing loss, decided to keep the show alive (as it were) and transfer it to another Broadway house. The Nederlander Organization, operators of the Minskoff, were glad to oblige with the Neil Simon.

Now, such a move required severe alterations to the show. The Simon stage could not accommodate the massive *Pimpernel* set, nor could the potential Simon box office receipts accommodate the large cast and stagehand costs encountered at the Minskoff. The rules of Actors' Equity specifically prohibit a reduction of the number of Equity members working on a Broadway show. The only way to accomplish this is to close down the show altogether, wait six weeks, and then start all over again. This is precisely what *Pimpernel* did, scheduling a three-city tryout tour before returning to Broadway. So 3.0, which some might see as a mere continuation of the original run, was technically considered a new production.

The Scarlet Pimpernel had always been overblown in cast and scenery, so artistically this didn't seem like such a bad idea. Financially, though, it

seemed almost as ludicrous as the transformation from 1.0 to 2.0. Clearly, Radio City was pouring out millions and millions of dollars with no practical hope of success.

And so it was that on September 10, 1999, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* 3.0 rode into the fire, as they say in one of the bouncier songs, and braved Broadway once more. The new show began with the 2.0 opening, which handily introduced the three main characters and got the plot off and running. It quickly became apparent that we would be faced with less stage-hogging scenery than at the Minskoff. For example, there had formerly been a heavy, stage-darkening prison set stretching across the wide Minskoff stage; at the Simon, the lower lever of the guillotine unit became the prison, much narrower but perfectly sufficient for the purpose. And there's something to be said for bare stage space, especially in a suffocating show. The library scene—in which the hero transformed his foppish friends into freedom fighters—played far better with less stuff on the stage.



It was also clear that there was a significantly smaller acting company, with forty-one card-carrying Equity members reduced to twenty-nine. This was no detriment at all. The original company, in 1.0, was stocked with folks who stood around like an old-fashioned operetta chorus singing bad songs; with less operetta-style numbers in 2.0—and no way, union-wise, to reduce their number—they had simply filled the large stage like cardboard cutouts. The 3.0 cast was unobtrusive, at least. There was also a reduction in the size of the orchestra, from twenty-five to nineteen pieces. Mr. Wildhorn's music, it turned out, sounded every bit as good with fewer musicians.

The *Pimpernel* publicity trumpeted the theory that the smaller stage of the Neil Simon proscribed these changes. This new downsized show was the perfect *Pimpernel*, according to Mr. Longbottom: "The up close and

personal version because we're in a smaller theatre, which would always have been my choice." It is interesting to note that most official communiqués from the production tacitly implied that *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was, indeed, a poorly received, ill-assembled show clearly in need of improvements.

As act 2 of version 3 came into view, though, it became clear that the new scenic concept was not all that conceptual; rather, it was simply cheap. Less scenery to build, fewer stagehands to maneuver it. The backstage area at the Simon is far smaller than that of the Minskoff, but there is plenty of room to shoehorn in a standard-sized musical. The final seaside scene, as presented in 3.0, was simply tacky.

But all the scenery in the world—or no scenery, for that matter—would not have made much of a difference. The show was, from the first, uninspiring and uninspired. The material, even with two major revisions, was pretty bad; while the scenery was no longer clunky, the score was. The dialogue? Well, the book uses words like "nincompoop" and April Fools' jokes as supposed laugh lines. (The action takes place in 1794, back during George Washington's first term as president.) And there's no point in going into the lyrics, although one can't help noting couplets like "I wasn't born to walk on water / I was born to rape and slaughter."

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If 2.0 was better than 1.0, 3.0 was a step backward, defeated by the absence of Douglas Sills (and Rex Smith). Ron Bohmer—a road company *Phantom of the Opera*—sang Sills's songs well but made for a rather humorless hero in a show, and a role, that needed all the charm they could get. All hopes were dashed without a dashing Pimpernel. The unanswerable question, though, is why anyone would buy a hopelessly unworkable musical and attempt to rework it. The initial producers of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*—or any new, previously unstaged musical—had no way of knowing it would turn out so badly, other than maybe by reading the script and listening to the score before plunking down millions. The Radio City people, though, were able to see it on the stage, survey the disgruntled audience members, and read the packet of devastatingly bad reviews. For the sort of money ultimately spent on *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, they might just as well have produced a new show from scratch. If you're determined to produce a bad musical, I suppose, it might as well be your own.