

The MT Dramaturg Presents *The High School Musical Podcast*
EPISODE #7: *Beauty and the Beast*

INTRO (plot summary)

You're listening to *The High School Musical Podcast*! I'm your host, Frederick Miller a.k.a. the Musical Theatre Dramaturg.

On last week's episode, we talked at length about *Chicago*—the Kander and Ebb musical that entered its second act in 1996 with a concert revival at New York City Center's *Encores!* This week, we're staying in the 1990s and chatting about a different kind of revival—a revival of New York City itself.

When today's musical premiered in 1994, it brought to Broadway a new kind of optimism about the city and Times Square specifically. It was a story of the redemptive power of love—truly a tale as old as time. Any guesses?

Today, we're chatting all about the Walt Disney Company's Broadway debut: the stage adaptation of their beloved animated film, *Beauty and the Beast*. Only, the stage adaptation was not as beloved by folks on the Great White Way. I hope you have that tea kettle going, because today we're spilling *all* the tea on why *Beauty and the Beast* became the most vilified production of the 1993-1994 Broadway season.

All this today and more on the *High School Musical Podcast*.

WHO WROTE THIS? (writer biographies)

In order to talk about *Beauty and the Beast*, the stage musical, we must go back a little further and chat about *Beauty and the beast*, the movie musical. You'll understand this why in just a moment.

In the 1980s, Walt Disney Studios was not doing so well. Their Golden Age had certainly come to an end—think of animated films like *Pinocchio*, *Peter Pan*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. The critical and commercial failure of *The Black Cauldron* in

1985 was catastrophic—the film grossed just \$21 million on a \$44 million budget. That’s not good.

For their next film, *Oliver & Company*, Walt Disney Studios brought in a man named Howard Ashman to write lyrics for songs. We’ll pause here to chat about Howard Ashman. He’s very important in all of this. Mr. Ashman had been born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1950 and started out performing in children’s theatre. He attended Boston University for undergrad and later earned a master’s degree at Indiana University in 1974. After college, Ashman moved to New York City to try his hand at being a playwright. While studying at the BMI Workshop, an educational program for aspiring musical theatre writers, Ashman would meet a man named Alan Menken.

Now, Alan Menken had been born in New York City in 1949. He developed an interest in music at an early age, taking piano and violin lessons. He originally wanted to just write songs and become the next “Bob Dylan.” If you don’t know who that is—ask your parents. Or your grandparents. Menken attended New York University and graduated in 1972. After graduation, he joined the BMI Workshop and developed an interest in writing musicals.

So now, we have Ashman and Menken testing out a possible partnership in 1979 with the musical *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Just a few years later, they would collaborate on a tiny musical called *Little Shop of Horrors*, playing Off-Off-Broadway in 1982. *Little Shop* would go on to earn Ashman a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Lyrics and even a Grammy nomination.

Back to Disney – Ashman was hired to write lyrics for *Oliver & Company*. The film comes out, it’s a huge success. Because of this, Ashman is offered a slew of projects at Walt Disney Studios. One project, *The Little Mermaid*, caught his attention. Ashman told Disney he wanted to bring his friend and collaborator Alan Menken onto the project. They said sure. This was new—before Ashman and Menken, Disney had always hired multiple writers to pen songs for their animated films. Here, we had two people writing *all* of the songs.

What was also so remarkable about having Ashman and Menken working on an animated film was that they brought their knowledge of Broadway musicals with them. Naturally, they treated *The Little Mermaid* as if it were a stage musical – each song was written to advance the storyline and reveal something about a character’s wants and desires.

There’s a famous story about a song Ashman and Menken had written for *The Little Mermaid*—a song for Ariel, the film’s protagonist. It was a song where she was alone in her grotto, talking about how she wanted more than anything was to go up to the human world and live with them. The producers of the film wanted it cut—they said it wasn’t important. But Ashman said, “No. It’s the most important song in the entire film. It tells us what Ariel wants. It’s her I Want song”—referencing the important song early in a musical’s dramaturgy that tells us the protagonist’s goal they want to achieve. Ashman almost walked off the project because of this. The producers finally agreed, and that song made it into the film. Do you know what song it is? “Part of Your World.”

The Little Mermaid would go on to be a critical and commercial success for the Walt Disney Company, sparking what many historians call, “The Disney Renaissance.” Because Ashman and Menken had been so instrumental in making *The Little Mermaid* a success, naturally they were offered any project they wanted. One project definitely stood out among others: *Beauty and the Beast*.

For years, the Walt Disney Company had attempted to adapt the French fairy tale, *La Belle et la Bête* into an animated film. Walt Disney himself had attempted an adaptation in the 1930s and the 1950s—with no success. In the late 1980s, a British director named Richard Purdum had been hired to adapt *Beauty*—this version was dark and most importantly, not a musical. After the success of *The Little Mermaid*, this dark version was scrapped in favor of a light-hearted musical.

Ashman and Menken were hired to write the score—and Linda Woolverton was hired to write the screenplay. Woolverton became the first woman to have written the screenplay for a Disney animated feature. Together, the three crafted an adaptation that focused on the relationship between the Beast, a prince who is magically transformed into a monster as punishment for his arrogance, and Belle, a young woman whom he imprisons in his castle. To break the curse, the Beast must

learn to love Belle and earn her love in return before the last petal falls from an enchanted rose gifted to him by the Enchantress who cursed him. Or else—he will remain a beast forever.

The film differed significantly from the original French fairy tale: Beauty was renamed Belle (which translates to “beautiful” in French); her father, Maurice, was no longer a sea merchant but instead an inventor; the character of Gaston was created to provide a villain and competitor for Belle’s affections; and the castle’s servants were rethought as magical household objects such as Lumiere the candelabra, Cogsworth the clock, and Mrs. Potts the teapot. The film’s cast included the voice talents of Paige O’Hara as Belle, Robby Benson as the Beast, Jerry Orbach as Lumière, and Angela Lansbury as Mrs. Potts.

During the development of *Beauty and the Beast* and unbeknownst to all, Howard Ashman was dying. He had contracted AIDS and was fearful that if knowledge surrounding his illness were discovered, he would be fired from the project due to the large “anti-gay” sentiment permeating the country during the AIDS crisis. When Jeffrey Katzenberg, chairman of the Walt Disney Studios, discovered the news, he promptly moved pre-production to New York to accommodate Ashman. Ashman later died in March 1991 due to AIDS-related complications, six months before *Beauty and the Beast* would be released. The film was posthumously dedicated to Ashman.

When *Beauty and the Beast* premiered in November 1991, it followed in *The Little Mermaid*’s footsteps as a box office success and became the first animated film to ever win the Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy. Perhaps more importantly, it was the first animated film ever to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1992. Although it didn’t win Best Picture, *Beauty* won the Academy Awards for Best Original Score and Best Original Song (“Beauty and the Beast”).

The story did not end there. We’ll be right back.

WHAT ABOUT IT? (production history)

In December 1991, just one month after *Beauty and the Beast* hit theaters, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich called Ashman and Menken's score for *Beauty* "the best Broadway musical score of 1991." Only the score wasn't on Broadway—it was in an animated film. This got Michael Eisner, chairman of the Walt Disney Company, to consider taking *Beauty and the Beast* to Broadway.

Now, in the 1970s and the 1980s, the number of new American shows being produced on Broadway decreased dramatically. We saw a large number of shows coming in from Europe, including *Cats* (1981), *Les Misérables* (1986), and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1987). These lavish spectacles dominated Broadway, leaving little room for American writers to bring their shows to 42nd Street. Additionally, the Times Square neighborhood where many of the Broadway theaters were housed had been overrun with crime, drugs, and high rates of homelessness.

Because of this, Michael Eisner was apprehensive about bringing a family friendly show to New York. The mayor at the time, Rudy Giuliani, was eager to get Disney to Broadway, hoping that it would help entice tourists back to the city. He promised Eisner that the crime and homelessness would be "taken care of." A little shady—but that's another story.

So, Disney made a buy for the New Amsterdam Theatre on 42nd Street—the New Amsterdam had once been home to the offices of Florenz Ziegfeld, a powerful Broadway producer in the early 20th-century. Almost fitting then that Disney would take over the theater decades later. The Disney company received a low-interest loan from the city in exchange for renovating the theater—and this didn't sit too well with many in the Broadway industry who had been trying the same thing for years.

Previously, Disney had been thinking about a stage adaptation of *Mary Poppins* to make their Broadway debut with. But the widespread success of *Beauty and the Beast* caused those plans to fall through and bring the Beast to Broadway instead. For this stage adaptation, Alan Menken would return to write additional music to flesh out the score, Linda Woolverton would adapt her screenplay for the stage, and a man named Tim Rice would be brought in to revise Ashman's lyrics and pen new

ones as needed. First time Broadway director Robert Jess Roth was hired from within Disney to helm the show—this was another thing that angered many people within the Broadway industry.

Now, with most musicals, you have a multitude of investors. They each get a stake in the show and the right to voice their opinions which can sometimes lead to issues. *Beauty and the Beast* didn't have that problem—because the Walt Disney Company was able to completely finance the show on its own, without any outside investors. Another reason why Broadway folks weren't too happy.

The cast starred Susan Egan as Belle, who would later go on to voice Meg in *Hercules* in 1997. Pretty cool. The creative team included Matt West (choreography), Stanley A. Meyer (scenic design), Ann Hould-Ward (costume design), Natasha Katz (lighting design), T. Richard Fitzgerald (sound design), David H. Lawrence (wig design), and Tyler Wymer (pyrotechnic design).

An out-of-town tryout played in Houston in late 1993 to sold out audiences, encouraging Disney that the show would be a runaway hit when it made it to Broadway. However—remember when I said that a lot of folks weren't happy that *Beauty and the Beast* was coming to Broadway? When the show opened on April 18th, 1994, at the Palace Theatre, these folks voiced their opinions.

Critics tore it apart. David Richards of the *New York Times* had this lovely thing to say: “As Broadway musicals go, *Beauty and the Beast* belongs right up there with the Empire State Building, F.A.O. Schwarz, and the Circle Line boat tours. It is hardly a triumph of art, but it'll probably be a whale of a tourist attraction.” Yikes.

Now, it's a little ironic that Richards wrote that *Beauty* was nothing but spectacle—remember how I said about those British musicals coming to Broadway in the 1980s? They were also nothing but spectacle—the crashing chandelier in *Phantom*, a helicopter landing on the stage in *Miss Saigon*, and a rotating barricade in *Les Mis*. The true anger of industry professionals was that Disney was a self-governing entity that didn't have to cater to the interests of private investors. Full stop.

And normal, everyday folks who were coming to New York City to see *Beauty and the Beast* didn't care either. Audiences turned out in droves.

Despite its critical shortcomings, *Beauty* was nominated for 9 Tony Awards at the 1994 Tony Awards, including Best Musical. But—it was shunned at the ceremony and Ann Hould-Ward was the sole recipient for Best Costume Design. Even though Broadway professionals criticized *Beauty and the Beast*, it didn't stop them from using the show's signature song, "Be Our Guest," in their commercial advertising the 1994 Tony Awards. Awkward.

The day after the Tony Awards, *Beauty and the Beast* broke the box office record for most tickets sold in one-day at a time. They beat *The Phantom of the Opera*'s previously held record by more than \$350,000, earning \$1,296,772 in one day.

Of course, the show was destined to have a long life beyond Broadway. The first national tour began in 1995, running for 4 years. During that time, a West End production opened in 1997. The show has been performed in more than 40 countries, including Argentina, Indonesia, Ireland, Lebanon, Norway, Qatar, Romania, Singapore, South Korea, Turkey, and Taiwan. Over 35 million people have seen the show worldwide.

Back on Broadway, *Beauty and the Beast* managed to run for 13 years, playing 5,461 performances when it finally closed on July 29th, 2007. But the story for Disney on Broadway doesn't end there.

WHY DO I CARE? (cultural relevance of the show)

Beauty and the Beast's commercial success encouraged Disney to establish Disney Theatrical Productions (or, DTP) and continue adapting their animated films for the stage. Disney followed *Beauty and the Beast* with *The Lion King* in 1997, the same year the renovations for the New Amsterdam Theatre were finally completed.

The Lion King was another smashing success for Disney Theatricals – and it managed to earn respect from many in the Broadway community with the help of Julie Taymor, an experimental theatre director who used puppetry to tell the story

of *The Lion King*. Taymor would go on to become the first woman to win the Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical. Other Disney musicals on Broadway include *Aida* in 2000, *Mary Poppins* and *Tarzan* in 2006, *The Little Mermaid* in 2008, *Aladdin* in 2014, and *Frozen* in 2018. Currently, there are plans for a stage adaptation of *Hercules* coming in the next few years.

Unlike film, which is forever marked as complete once it premieres in the movie theaters, stage musicals can occasionally be tweaked. In 1998, R&B artist Toni Braxton joined the cast of *Beauty and the Beast* after the writers promised to write her a new song for Belle in the show's second act. This song, "A Change In Me," became a permanent part of the show when it became a hit.

The emergence of Disney as a producing organization on Broadway led to a rise in what could be considered "The Corporate Era." This new era of American musical theatre history is characterized by large producing organizations investing in Broadway musicals, usually stage adaptations of popular movies, television shows, novels, and even pre-existing music (we call these jukebox musicals).

We have examples like *Wicked* and *Billy Elliott* (produced by Universal Studios), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Beetlejuice the Musical* (produced by Warner Bros. Studios), and *9 to 5* and *Moulin Rouge! The Musical* (produced by 20th Century Fox). The success of *Beauty* on Broadway paved the way not only for Disney to be an influential figure on Broadway, but for musicals like *Beauty and the Beast* to exist and thrive in general.

Music Theatre International acquired the amateur licensing rights to *Beauty and the Beast* in late 2004, allowing theaters around the world to produce their own productions. Since then, *Beauty and the Beast* – alongside *Beauty and the Beast JR*, a 60-minute adaptation for middle school performers – has been performed by tens of thousands of schools, community, and professional theater groups. Maybe your school is next. We'll be right back.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW? (tips and tricks about the show/dramaturgical analysis)

Beauty and the Beast is one of the most popular musicals for high schools to perform these days. This means this show gets seen a lot by communities all around the country—this also unfortunately means that folks come to see the show with expectations. But don't let that scare you away from making these roles your own.

The hero of our story is Belle. She's smart, strong, and not afraid to stand out. Belle loves to read and in the world of *Beauty and the Beast*, that makes her different. The people in the village where Belle lives say she's beautiful (they sing in the show's opening number, "It's no wonder that her name means beauty,") but that her wanting to read books diminishes her value somehow. Full stop—that's wrong. And gross. But Belle doesn't care. She's never been one to follow the crowd. And that's why we love her and root for her.

The Beast is another interesting character. He's a prince that's been cursed by an Enchantress for his arrogance—doomed to spend the rest of his days as this horrible creature unless he can learn to love. The thing that folks sometimes forget about the Beast is that he's actually really young in terms of maturity. He was just a boy when he was cursed by the Enchantress—so, while he may have gotten older physically, maturity wise he never really grew. That is until Belle comes along to the castle and softens him up.

Gaston is our villain, and he's supposed to be everything that the Beast is not. While the Beast is not beyond changing and growing, Gaston is definitely set in his ways. He loves to hunt, wrestle, and woo the girls of the village—these wouldn't be bad things, per say, if Gaston wasn't so incredibly self-centered. And that's his downfall. Of course, he doesn't know that and pursues Belle relentlessly. Because Belle wants nothing to do with him, that makes Gaston want her even more. Like all of the villagers, he's gross and needs to take a hint.

We have the Enchanted objects of the castle next—Lumiere is a suave and charming candelabra who is definitely a showman. He leads the entire castle in performing "Be Our Guest," to welcome Belle. He certainly isn't afraid to bend the rules unlike Cogsworth—our favorite uptight, right on time clock—no pun

intended. Cogsworth and Lumiere's chemistry is meant to be fun and light hearted—at least from Lumiere's perspective.

Then we have Mrs. Potts, who serves as a maternal figure not only to Belle once she arrives in the castle—but to the Beast as well. We don't know a lot about the Beast, but we can assume that his parents aren't around anymore. So, Mrs. Potts fills that spot for him.

Like how we mentioned “A Change In Me” was added to *Beauty and the Beast* long after it opened on Broadway, a few more changes have been made to the musical since the amateur rights were first released. In 2021, an edited version of *Beauty and the Beast* was released by MTI for theaters to produce. Some of the changes include: the “Silly Girls” that follow Gaston around the village are now called “Les Filles de la Ville” which translates to “the City Girls”; the song “Maison de Lunes” is now cut from the show to emphasize Gaston's character; and “The Battle” between the villagers and the enchanted objects are now cut. All of these changes were made by the writers to cut down the run time of the show and make it easier for theaters around the country to produce.

With that being said, a new national tour of *Beauty and the Beast* is set to launch in 2025. When this happens, licensing companies will sometimes restrict the rights to the show being produced. In early 2024, it was announced that the amateur rights to *Beauty and the Beast* would be temporarily restricted while the show toured the United States. Perhaps your school is producing it this fall before the December 31st, 2024, deadline? If not, don't worry. I remain confident that one day, *Beauty and the Beast* will be back and return as one of the most popular high school musicals being produced.