

The New York Times

It was the final audition for "The Full Monty." After 72 men had been reviewed for the roles of the 6 out-of-work, out-of-shape steelworkers who decided to strip as a desperate financial gambit, the show's choreographer asked each of the dozen finalists to take off his clothes.

"Even if they're not supposed to look good, they have to have a comfort level by the time they get to the final strip," said the choreographer, Jerry Mitchell. "They have to be comfortable being naked."

Even after the six lucky guys were chosen, Mr. Mitchell said he tried not to rush them during rehearsals ("Put on your G-string and come out when you're ready"), a sensitivity that quickly became unnecessary. "I was really protective at the beginning," he said. "Now I can't keep their clothes on them."

The journey of this musical -- from a tentative idea many called just another crass attempt to cash in on the success of a hit movie, to a confident show that looks to be the first bona fide hit of the Broadway season -- represents the clicking of various creative decisions that could have gone very wrong but, judging from the reviews, went just right.

While several critics took issue with the show's book, most gave high marks to the music and lyrics, and all conceded that "The Full Monty" was a winner that will be running on Broadway for some time.

In The New York Times, Ben Brantley called it "that rare aggressive crowd pleaser that you don't have to apologize for liking." Elysa Gardner of USA Today described it as "one of the most entertaining and exhilarating productions you're likely to see." And David Hinckley in The Daily News called the show "fresh, bouncy and downright delightful."

All this excitement has come although conventional wisdom holds that the musical is dying and producers are nervous about taking a chance on new talent. The story of how a 1997 movie that grossed \$256 million worldwide was turned into a new musical likely to turn its own profit -- a rarity on Broadway -- not only flies in the face of the doomsayers. The show is also a personal triumph for the various people involved in creating it.

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Among them are Lindsay Law, who left his position as president of Fox Searchlight Pictures, which released the original "Monty," to devote all his energies to producing the show based on it.

There is the director, Jack O'Brien, whose previous Broadway show, Rob Bartlett's "More to Love: A Big Fat Comedy," closed in four days in 1998 after being panned.

The writer of the show's book, Terrence McNally, also had a memorable theatrical experience in New York that year. His play "Corpus Christi" provoked bomb threats and an uproar in the theater world with its depiction of a Jesus-like figure having sex with his apostles.

The show's little-known composer, David Yazbek, had never written a musical, and its leading man, Patrick Wilson, survived his last two New York flops—"Fascinating Rhythm" on Broadway and "Bright Lights, Big City" Off-Broadway—with the knowledge that sometimes it's better not to read reviews.

The idea of a musical version of "The Full Monty," which opened on Thursday at the Eugene O'Neill Theater, was born about two years ago when Mr. Law was still president of Fox Searchlight, a specialty division of 20th Century Fox. After the film proved to be such a success, Mr. Law—who helped start the PBS series "American Playhouse"—said he fielded several offers to make a stage musical "Monty" but decided Fox should hold onto the material.

"I definitely felt a sense of responsibility for it," Mr. Law said. "If somebody had trashed it, we would have been the middle man passing it onto them."

Fox Searchlight is a producer of the show, along with Mr. Law and Thomas Hall, who also left his day job of 20 years—as managing and producing director of the Old Globe Theater in San Diego—to focus on "Monty."

To direct the show, Mr. Law called his friend Mr. O'Brien, who is also artistic director of the Old Globe, where "Full Monty" originated in a sold-out run last June. Mr. O'Brien said he loved the movie and felt that the material was natural for the stage.

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"I think it was Steve Sondheim who talked about whether a piece sings or not," Mr. O'Brien said. "I loved the up-from-the-mat quality of the material, and this piece clearly sang."

Mr. O'Brien then called his friend Mr. McNally, who had dealt with various states of undress in his 1994 hit play "Love! Valour! Compassion!," and now says he would have been furious if Mr. O'Brien had not invited him in.

Speaking of the story "Monty" tells, Mr. McNally said: "I love what it says about people and friendship among men. I love what it says about body image."

Mr. McNally said he watched the film only once after signing on, deciding to recreate "Monty" anew. Only a few lines from the movie remain. The setting was moved from Sheffield, England, to Buffalo.

For the score, Mr. O'Brien said, he and the producers wanted to "look forward instead of back." They approached the young composer Adam Guettel, whose musical "Floyd Collins" had been produced at the Old Globe. He was too busy but suggested a friend, Mr. Yazbek, who posed no small risk.

Mr. Yazbek had composed mostly for his obscure rock 'n' roll band, Yazbek, and his biggest credit had nothing to do with music: an Emmy for a comedy writing stint with David Letterman. Mr. Yazbek said he was not sure the idea appealed to him. But then he talked with Mr. O'Brien.

"Within a minute my head exploded," Mr. Yazbek said. "I saw it. I saw the project, and I saw the opportunity to write the kind of musical I've always loved, the 'Guys and Dolls' kind of musical. I could see elements of the plot and characters and how it would work. I could see the language that these guys would speak. It's my language."

Within days he was writing lyrics like those for the number when the guys are learning to dance through basketball moves:

When it's Michael's ball, you're dead, you're through,

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'Cause Michael takes the game to you.

He's in your face, you lost the race.

It's Michael Jordan's ball.

Completing the team were Mr. Mitchell, the choreographer, best known for creating "Broadway Bares," a burlesque show featuring Broadway dancers stripping as a benefit Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS; Ted Sperling as musical director; John Arnone as scenic designer; Robert Morgan for costumes; and Howell Binkley for lighting.

In casting, the creators say, they did not want stars. "We saw a lot of people," Mr. Law said. "What we were looking for were guys, someone you take your car to to get the spark plugs changed. People real and in their 20's."

Still, they found seasoned theater people for their onstage team. They include Mr. Wilson, 27, a lanky man with the beginnings of a beard who brings a rough-hewn earnestness to his portrayal of Jerry Lukowski, a young father in danger of losing custody of his son because of unpaid child support; John Ellison Conlee, who plays an overweight man who sings to his stomach; and Andre De Shields, who first made an impact in 1977 in "Ain't Misbehavin' " and now brings down the house nightly with his number, "Big Black Man."

Mr. Yazbek said that learning how to write for the stage was a challenge: writing to advance a story and collaborating when he was accustomed to calling the shots for his own band (which plays at the Knitting Factory on Nov. 27).

"There are some pop songwriters that get into characters and sing them," Mr. Yazbek said. "I do that very rarely. It's hard when it's a character you don't have a big piece of inside you."

Because Mr. Yazbek has a 6-year-old son, writing the song Jerry sings to his boy, "Breeze Off the River," came easily, he said. "I knew that was coming from a pretty intimate place," he said, adding that he kept choking when he sang the song for a demonstration recording.

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Although the orchestrations were done by a musical theater veteran, Harold Wheeler, Mr. Yazbek has brought his pop background to bear. "When I heard certain musical theater technique applied to my music, I tried to nip that in the bud as much as possible," he said. In advising Mr. Wilson, the lead, for example, Mr. Yazbek said he told him, "You're listening to Led Zeppelin in your head."

Once the show was being mounted in San Diego last spring, the composer occasionally had to come up with new numbers in record time. He wrote the song "Man" — about masculinity, sung by Jerry and his friend Dave -- in two days after two previous versions didn't work.

And when the beef comes out, you do the carvin'
You hate Tom Cruise but you love Lee Marvin
You're a man.

If there has been an overriding mantra for adapting "The Full Monty," its creators say, it is: Keep it simple and direct and, unlike many musicals, street real.

"These guys are uncynical," Mr. McNally said. "And that reflects how I feel these days."

Mr. Wilson said this philosophy made sense to him in trying to portray the group's ringleader. "That's the only thing I would strive for is, Do you buy it?" he said.

Although everyone asks him about the nudity, which is obscured, Mr. Wilson said it is fleeting. The lengthy scene where the six men play in their underwear is more difficult, he said, particularly given that he and a couple of the others are under bright lights in briefs, not boxers.

Knowing that New York can be a punishing place to give birth to a play, the producers insisted that the bulk of the work be finished before the show came to Broadway. Mr. O'Brien gladly gave it its premiere at his theater in San Diego, which Mr. McNally said it was crucial to the musical's development.

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"So many shows are opening cold in New York," he said. "It's just too hard. Theater is so delicate and difficult."

During previews at the O'Neill, there was only tinkering and tightening.

Now that the reviews are out and tickets are selling apace—Mr. Law said the box office did about a week's worth of business the day after the show opened but would not be more specific about figures -- the team behind "Monty" seems ready to enjoy the fruit of a successful gamble. Mr. O'Brien said he had girded for the worst after opening night: "You tend to clench yourself so much prior to the reviews that it's almost impossible to read them as positive because you expect them to punish you in some way."

He added, "Only now am I beginning to realize, 'Hey, this is big.' "

Robin Pogrebin

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