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# Max Weitzenhoffer on Broadway

-or-

## Whatever Happened to the Hero's Best Friend?

Every theatergoer knows the scenario. Hero meets Girl; Hero loses Girl; Hero finds Girl; and they live happily ever after. Ah, but what happens to the ever-present, ever-faithful Hero's Best Friend?

In our story, Hero's Best Friend, a stage-struck Oklahoma City boy named Max Weitzenhoffer, leaves the stage and goes on to become a Tony Award-winning Broadway producer, respected New York City art dealer and the University of Oklahoma's most valued show biz connection.

Max's story actually started the moment he saw his first play, but the plot began to pick up when he left the shelter of the OU School of Drama in 1962 to launch an assault on the Broadway stage. It wasn't long, however, before reality began to overcome youthful optimism. He wasn't going to be an actor.

"I wasn't good enough," he recalls simply. "And even if I had had the talent, I wasn't good looking enough or big enough to be a leading man. I always would have been the leading man's best friend; that wasn't for me."

So Max took the advice which years later he would give to other aspiring drama students: Do what you do best; go where you can succeed.

He gave up acting and turned to the business side of the two worlds he loved most, art and theater. He be-

*Max the actor, right, in summer stock at the LaJolla Playhouse, appears with the late Jim Hutton and Michael Walker in "Write Me a Murder."*

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*Weitzenhoffer with his gift to the OU art museum, the Hepworth sculpture.*

came a partner in the Gimpel-Weitzenhoffer Gallery on Madison Avenue, the New York branch of an old London firm of art dealers. He also began to teach himself the business aspects of the theater.

"I had to learn the theater business from scratch," he explains. "It just wasn't taught. One summer when I was working in summer stock in

California, by some fluke, I was made general manager of this playhouse. I haven't the vaguest idea why. I had to buy myself a book, start reading about box office statements and all that. But even that didn't begin to prepare me for putting shows together in New York. I just learned by doing it, having other people tell me what to do."

Weitzenhoffer began investing in other people's shows. While in London he saw a show called "Sleuth," which looked like a sure winner in New York. He persuaded the show's New York producer, Morton Gotlieb, to let him invest in "Sleuth."

"He was being really kind to me, you know," Weitzenhoffer laughs. "But I've always thought he needed the money as much as I wanted to invest it."

"Sleuth" was the first of several big hits which Weitzenhoffer backed. In fact, he was doing so well that Gotlieb came to him with "Same Time Next Year," suggesting that he take half the show and raise the money as coproducer.

"I thought it was the worst script I'd ever read," Weitzenhoffer recalls ruefully. "And of course it was one of the biggest money-makers in recent years. After about three years on Broadway, Clive Barnes (*New York Times* critic) re-reviewed it and said he didn't know why he had liked it in the first place because it wasn't really that good. That was some vindication, but I was so upset when it became a big hit that I could never bring myself to go see it." *continued*

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By CAROL J. BURR

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*Not even winning a second Tony Award could equal the thrill which Weitzenhoffer felt when his first Broadway hit, "Dracula," with Frank Langella, won.*

That lost opportunity notwithstanding, Weitzenhoffer had backed enough winners to be ready for the next step. "Producing seemed easy," he explains. "Why did I need to be just an investor?"

He acquired a property of his own, arranged the financing, selected the creative team to turn a script into a play.

"It opened off-Broadway and was a complete catastrophe," Weitzenhoffer says. "I decided that producing wasn't as easy as I had thought. Then I did a

Broadway musical called 'Going Up,' a revival of a 1919 musical. I took my wife Fran to see the show before we brought it into New York. She couldn't understand what I was doing with it, but I assured her that she didn't know what she was talking about. Needless to say, it was not successful."

Then along came "Dracula." Weitzenhoffer decided to give Broadway one more shot. Despite warnings to the contrary, he thought this stage version of the classic horror story was

great. This time he was right.

"Dracula," starring Frank Langella, won the Antoinette Perry Award — the Tony — as Broadway's best in 1979. The presentation of the Tony to the co-producers of "Dracula" was the greatest thrill of Weitzenhoffer's life.

"I wouldn't mind winning another one," he confesses, "but it could never be the same. To be recognized by your peers as having done something that is the best of that particular year is something you have the rest of your life, whether you can repeat it or not. It makes up for all the disastrous failures."

Last year another Weitzenhoffer show, "Pump Boys and Dinettes," was nominated as Broadway's best musical. The nomination pleased Weitzenhoffer, but he had no illusions about winning a second Tony.

"It's a very good show," he says, "but it's not a multi-million dollar musical. To win, you've got to have some sort of big powerhouse musical. 'Pump Boys' was such a dark horse that the other three nominated shows would have to have been blown up or something. If there had been only two nominees, we would still have been the dark horse."

Unfortunately, sandwiched between Weitzenhoffer's two biggest hits was "Harold and Maude," the one show he considers "an embarrassment."

"'Harold and Maude' was a complete and utter disaster," he states flatly. "I saw the show in Paris and loved it. I should have done what I had seen, but I mistakenly decided to improve upon it, and by trying to improve it, I ruined it. It was over-produced, badly acted and terribly directed, and that's the producer's fault, because he has hired all of these people."

Occasionally, however, even a critical flop can leave its producer with a feeling of pride. Last winter Weitzenhoffer did an off-Broadway play starring Tony Roberts, called "The Good Parts."

"The critics hated it," Weitzenhoffer admits, "yet it was done exactly the way I envisioned it from the time I picked up the script. It didn't embarrass me, unlike 'Harold and Maude.'"

"You have to be masochistic to like

the theater," he insists. "The theater is a terrible business. Oh, it's not the ultimate gamble. You can go to Las Vegas and have worse luck, and it's no more of a gamble than drilling an oil well. But there's something in success in the theater that is worth much more than the money and the effort you put into it. If you bring in an oil well — even if you make a lot of money — the well just sits there. But 1,500 people in a theater, going crazy when the curtain comes down on something that you had a part in creating . . . that's different."

The astronomical cost of Broadway shows — \$2½ to \$3 million for a big musical, \$600,000 to \$1 million for a play — has reduced drastically the number of shows in production and altered the way they are prepared for New York, the traditional out-of-town tryout being one victim of inflation.

"The trouble with the tryout," Weitzenhoffer explains, "is that you're exposing your show to the major critics and first class audiences immediately. You go out of town and get murdered, and you've spent the same amount as if you had done the show on Broadway. You're losing so much money that you really don't have time to make the significant changes that need to be made."

The growing trend among producers is to showcase or workshop their property in a regional theater to get a good idea of what it looks like, without all the costs of the major production, particularly scenery and costumes.

"Then you can either abandon it," Weitzenhoffer says, "or you can fine tune it step by step and not make your mistakes all at one time — mistakes that are irreversible."

"We did 10 performances of 'Pump Boys' off-off-Broadway," he says, "and then in another place before we brought it in. 'Nyne,' which won the best musical last year, was done in a big showcase/workshop for a year before it came to New York."

Weitzenhoffer had a show in workshop at a theatre in Richmond, Virginia, this fall which he decided not to bring to New York this season. The project was a mystery drama called "The Hiding Place," starring Weitzenhoffer's friend, Alfred Drake, who also was the author and director.

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*Weitzenhoffer describes "Pump Boys and Dinettes," also nominated for a Tony, as a very good show but not the kind of multi-million dollar production which wins.*

Drake brought the play to Weitzenhoffer originally because of their shared enthusiasm for murder mysteries.

"I read murder mysteries like crazy," Weitzenhoffer says, "and Alfred and I have exchanged books for years. Murder mysteries, if they are good ones, are always good box office, really good theater. They don't seem to be written very often, but every so many years, you get a 'Sleuth' or a 'Death Trap.'"

Rising costs and a lack of material

have curtailed sharply the activities of the independent theatrical producer in recent years. Since few independents are able to turn out shows year after year, Weitzenhoffer does not regard producing as a full-time job and wouldn't consider giving up his art gallery.

"Oh, I could get myself an office in the theater district," he says, "and I would spend 80 percent of my time looking out of the window or having lunch at Sardi's talking theater. But I can't stand sitting around doing noth-

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*Weitzenhoffer loved "The Good Parts," his off-Broadway show starring Tony Roberts, center, although the critics didn't.*

ing. I'm lucky that I like both the art business and the theater."

It was through the art business that he met his wife, Dr. Frances Weitzenhoffer, a native Kentuckian who recently completed her doctorate in art history at New York City University. Fran gave her first post-doctoral public lecture at the University of Oklahoma in September, and Max found it much easier to be calm and supportive on her "opening night" than he does when one of his shows opens in New York.

Even when he doesn't have money in the show, Weitzenhoffer finds each new performance an emotional experience.

"You go into a theater," he explains, "the house lights go down, the orchestra starts its overture, and you get goose bumps. Nothing can replace that feeling for certain people, and I happen to be one of them. It's like being an addict. When I talk to drama students, I tell them that if you don't get that feeling, then you had better find yourself another profession, because that's what keeps you going

through the hard times."

Weitzenhoffer contends that performers have to live on hope, just like the old 1930s movies — hope that someone is waiting just for them.

"Unfortunately," he adds, "in the theater it takes more than hope. As hard as it is for me to say, it also takes having made the right connections and being lucky."

Most of the directors he knows cast their shows with a preconceived idea of who is going to be in them. He considers "open calls" — with everyone getting an equal chance — to be a kind of fallacy.

"But if they do get that chance," he warns, "they have to be prepared. It only lasts a couple of minutes. They have to summon up all the technique, everything they have learned, for that one brief audition, to try to make an impression. When I've been at open calls, I've really been amazed at how lousy a lot of these people are. I don't know what they've been doing since they've been in New York, but they haven't been doing their homework."

While Weitzenhoffer the former actor may sympathize with the difficulties facing the young aspirants, Weitzenhoffer the producer insists that sentiment has no place in casting.

"It's a business," he says bluntly. "When people pay \$40 for a ticket, they don't want to see a friend of yours who can't do the job up on that stage. They just look up there and say, 'Oh, my God, where'd they get him?'"

For the past five years, Weitzenhoffer has been attempting to prepare OU drama students for the rigors of the entertainment world. As an adjunct professor, he makes annual visits to the drama school for classroom lectures and informal counseling. He doubts that many of the students really believe what he has to tell them at the time, yet it is one way he can repay what he sees as his debt to OU.

"Not only did I have a wonderful time — which is not such a terrible thing — but it was a rewarding intellectual experience. I don't think people realize how good the OU drama school really is — probably one of the

best in the United States — which is pretty fantastic when you consider that it's in an area that's theatrically barren."

His memories of his drama school days center largely on the legendary Rupel Jones — to whom good was never quite good enough — and a group of faculty who were completely devoted to their jobs and students.

"No one went around grumbling, 'I'm so good that I should be somewhere else,'" he contends. "I don't think that those whose hearts are on Broadway are going to be particularly good teachers. Yet many of the OU faculty are perfectly capable of succeeding on Broadway."

In addition to contributing from his 20 years of experience in the theater, Weitzenhoffer supports Sooner fine arts with more tangible gifts. He has given a number of contemporary works of art to the OU museum, including the Dame Edith Hepworth sculpture which stands in front of the Fred Jones Jr. Memorial Art Center. He also sponsors a scholarship in technical theater and plays host for OU alumni gatherings in New York. Two years ago he agreed to take qualified upperclassmen to New York for a professional semester in the business side of theater.

"Even if the students who come here on the professional semester decide that they hate it," Weitzenhoffer reasons, "it's a plus. At least they are not going to waste their time pursuing a career that they won't like."

Weitzenhoffer doesn't believe in loading up a show's payroll with student interns, however, unless they really can contribute. "I leave them alone so they can find out what areas of production particularly interest them, then they can concentrate in those areas. If the show lasts, and they can do the work, there's no reason why they shouldn't be hired, since you have to hire somebody."

The second OU intern, Henry Taliaferro, has returned to complete his degree after the fall semester in New York and with the Alfred Drake play in Richmond. His addiction to the theater still intact, Taliaferro plans to head straight back to Broadway in May.

The first student to take advantage of the professional semester in New York, Elizabeth Shepherd, '80 BFA in

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*Producer Weitzenhoffer, right, visits with stage star Alfred Drake at the opening of "Tickles by Tucholsky," which Max calls "my first off-Broadway flop."*

drama, worked out so well that she worked for Weitzenhoffer on several productions. Her internship actually lasted a year, since preparation for the ill-fated "Harold and Maude" bridged two semesters. When "Harold and Maude" folded after two performances, she found herself in New York with nothing to do. At Weitzenhoffer's insistence, she went out and found herself a job in the theater working for a press agent.

"A lot of young people don't want to take the kind of entry level work that's available," Weitzenhoffer says. "But if you get your foot in the door, you never know where it's going to lead."

In addition to working for Weitzenhoffer, Shepherd also directed two off-off-Broadway shows last year. "She raised the total cost — about \$1,200 from her parents and me and a few other people at a couple hundred dollars apiece," Weitzenhoffer explains proudly. "Surprisingly enough, on her first production, she got back half the money by selling a lot of tickets at \$5 each. She got a lot of ex-

cellent experience, because a lot of good, out-of-work actors are willing to work off-off-Broadway. They don't get paid, but it's work."

Weitzenhoffer never seems to tire of calls from OU drama graduates newly arrived in New York. In fact, he is disappointed that he doesn't get more. "I guess they're afraid," he says, "but if they are going to survive here, they can't be afraid of anything."

Twenty years after his own brief career as a struggling actor, he can understand their yearning for success and their fear of failure. But he also seems grateful that those painful times are behind him, that he has found what he does best and loves doing it.

In a business where you are only as good as your last show, Max Weitzenhoffer doesn't linger over triumphs or dwell on mistakes.

"If they can say, as your epitaph, that you were right more than you were wrong," he concludes, "that would be the best that could be said of anybody in the theater." 