

IT ALL BEGAN WITH A TICKET PROGRAM

Theatre writer Donald Yonker speaks with Michael Presser about the founding of Inside Broadway.

Over the years many people have asked Michael Presser, “How did Inside Broadway get started?” It certainly didn’t spring full-grown from his head like Athena from the head of Zeus. So here’s the “inside skinny” on Inside Broadway.

In 1982, Lee Silver, at The Shubert Organization, introduced Michael to Bernie Jacobs, President of The Shubert Organization. Michael pitched several ideas to Jacobs but they were no go and he thought, “Well, that was that”. But a month later Lee called and said Bernie had been impressed with Michael and had another idea and thought he might be the man to carry it out.

Bernie was bringing over a show from London, based on the unlikely source of T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* and the show was

simply called, *Cats*. He said his grandson had seen the show loved it and figured kids here would do the same. Thus Bernie’s plan: to allot 50 tickets every week for the show’s Wednesday matinee to New York City school children and he wanted Michael to be the conduit in facilitating the project which would also require the collaboration of the Mayor’s Office, the Board of Education and Shubert.

While the Winter Garden Theatre was being completely renovated inside to contain the set for the show, Michael went to work. Steven Krause at the New York City Youth Board, immediately recognized the value of such a program and introduced him to Ronay Menschel, a Deputy Mayor under Ed Koch, and Frank Macchiarola, Chancellor of New York City Schools, who brought in the proper administrators to push the project forward. It was decided that the project should focus on the city’s 110 high schools



Michael Presser with Bernard B. Jacobs, President and Gerald Schoenfeld, Chairman of The Shubert Organization, Inc.



The original logo of The Midtown Arts Project before it became Inside Broadway.



Original masks created by students attending performance of *CATS* on Halloween.



Michael Presser presenting Carol Channing with The First Broadway Beacon Awards, on stage at The Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, 1995.

and be open to students who were already involved in certain extra-curricular activities or were excelling in academic work. There would also be proper guidelines for theatre behavior, a strict request of Jacobs.

The program began the week of October, 1982 when *Cats* started preview performances. From then until the show closed 18 years later every Wednesday 50 orchestra tickets went to New York City school children. At the then \$40 top ticket price, this was quite a gift.

Then came an official City Hall press conference. There is a photograph commemorating the event: upfront are Bernie Jacobs, Gerald Schoenfeld, Mayor Koch, and Frank Macchiarola. Behind them is Michael, looking calm and centered with Lee Silver and Steve Krause in the back on City Hall’s front stairs- the creators taking a back seat to the movers. Two members of the *Cats* cast, Anna McNeely and Ken Ard also participated.

From then on Michael’s phone didn’t stop ringing. Parents and schools all were calling, wanting to know how they could get tickets to *Cats*. He knew he was really in business when Bernie Jacobs, so happy with the success of the *Cats* program, wanted to add Dreamgirls. It was an offer he couldn’t refuse and something he could never have foreseen, but he also realized if he was going to continue he needed an assistant. Here fate was with him. From Cincinnati via Yale came Paul Naish, a young arrival in town who wanted to get into the theatre as a prop man but understanding the importance of arts and education decided to throw in his luck with Michael and for the next 20 years became Michael’s right hand man.

Paul had a genius for management and was brilliant at cutting his way through the jungles of bureaucracy with both schools and the government while Michael concentrated on handling the theatre staffs, City Hall and Shubert. Soon Inside Broadway needed to incorporate in order to become a non-profit charity and though both had great street smarts, they had no idea how to create a legal corporation and what they were in for. Maybe that’s why they were so successful. They just learned it as they went along. They weren’t lawyers and had no money to engage lawyers, yet they managed to get non-profit status in an amazing ten months, something other organizations, even when they have lawyers, battle for years to obtain.

This brings us to another question Michael is often asked: “How did you find the name Inside Broadway?” The original name was the Midtown Arts Project and even today the official corporate name is The Midtown Management Group, which sometimes gets them calls for real estate projects. Even Jerry Schoenfeld could never remember the name and just called it “Michael Presser’s Project.”

How the company got its name was this: Rick Domenico, an energetic and enthusiastic young musician whom Paul discovered in the local copy shop, and who eventually went on to become the music director at a large church in Ft. Lauderdale, suggested the name for a program they were developing which took cast members from Broadway productions into the schools to discuss careers in the theatre. They all decided to call the seminars Inside Broadway and later everyone realized this was a perfect name for the growing company.

Paul even developed the company logo which is still in use. It was goodbye Midtown Arts and hello Inside Broadway. It's a name that others have tried to copy over the years but Michael guards it zealously.

So much more grew out of the *Cats* program than ticket distribution. *Creating the Magic*, which brings over 10,000 school children to Broadway each year also started with *Cats*. Three times a year "Creating the Magic" invites students to the theatre where a particular show is playing and they are given an inside view of how a Broadway musical works through demonstrations of everything from set design to lighting to props to costumes to stage management. The precursor to *Creating the Magic* was a 15-minute video, called *Broadway Backstage*.

Producing the *Broadway Backstage* video was a nerve-racking experience because not only did it include delicate fund raising but also even more sensitive negotiations with 17 theatrical unions. Michael had procured the services of a top-notch audio-visual firm which created the script and photography for the project, the basic concept of which was to be a behind the scenes look at all the people at the Winter Garden Theatre who kept *Cats* running every night. Bernie Jacobs had graciously committed to the first piece of funding for the project but the remaining piece of funding, which covered use of the music from the *Cats* record album, was missing. Not to be hindered, Michael decided to make a direct approach to David Geffen, owner of the record company that produced the album and who was also one of the show's producers. In his plea to Geffen he

emphasized the fact that children would be seeing *Cats* live through the ticket program and that the video would provide substantial background information for their theatre visit. He also mentioned the generous Shubert contribution and the cooperation of the theatrical unions for the project. Miraculously, a few days later a check arrived from Hollywood courtesy of Mr. Geffen, securing the needed funding to finish the video.

The official premiere of *Broadway Backstage* took place at the Winter Garden Theatre before an audience of excited school students, government officials, media representatives, and theatre industry guests. Subsequently, the video has been shown in hundreds of school and across the United States.

Even more popular than the video was The *Cats* Fun Book, the first study guide ever developed for a Broadway show. Beautifully illustrated with show photos, the study guide included interviews with the creators of the show, word games, T. S. Eliot poems, a makeup page and various other elements from the show. The *Cats* Fun Book proved so popular that it was distributed by *Cats* tours as they crossed the country.

The *Cats* ticket program was truly innovative and changed the perception of what arts & education could accomplish in schools and the role that the arts can play in children's lives. Arts in education is now considered an important part of the school curriculum and schools are very interested in having professional actors and theatre workers discussing various career possibilities in the theatre.



CATS students and cast members backstage at Winter Garden Theatre.

In 1989 Michael decided to take the popular video *Broadway Backstage* to students in Russia, specifically to Moscow and St. Petersburg. It wasn't easy to plan such a project since an invitation from a Soviet school was necessary. Though Russia was on the verge of Glasnost no one was much interested in helping them get there, particularly not the Soviet bureaucracy. By chance Michael saw an ad for a teaching position at the American School at the American Embassy in Moscow and through a series of disconnected and poor connection long distance phone calls he was able to reach the American School's principal Vera Nordell who was overjoyed to invite them.

When Michael and Paul Naish arrived at the embassy they experienced a bit of culture shock, for outside the embassy gates was an austere and Soviet city while inside it was as if Ohio had been plopped down in the midst of Moscow. The embassy had its shopping center, movie theatre and bowling alley and a fully functioning school that would rival any high school back in the states. It also had an eager audience of American children eager to learn about the new Broadway musical *Cats*.



Celebrating five years and 27,000 students backstage at CATS 1992.

Russian students from several Soviet enrichment programs which were called Pioneer Palaces were invited to the Embassy to watch the *Broadway Backstage* video and to hear about Broadway and American theatre. They greatly enjoyed the video and were fascinated with the technology used on Broadway but found it difficult to wrap their heads around the idea of commercial theatre since in Russia the arts are subsidized by the government. At a reception held after the session in the American Embassy Library, it was fascinating to watch the Russian students leaf through the American magazines displayed on the library tables since they were being exposed to a world they had probably little or no idea existed.

As Michael looks back over the last 35 years, he's amazed by what Inside Broadway has accomplished. He never thought at the beginning that the initial *Cats* program or Inside Broadway would last so long and still be going strong.

The challenges of starting a non-profit organization required hard work, creativity, and high motivation. To achieve what Inside Broadway has achieved also took perseverance and diligence especially since many changes have occurred over the years in the city, on



Wigmaker at *CATS* adjusts hair in Inside Broadway's Educational Video, *Broadway Backstage*.



Bernard B. Jacobs President of The Shubert Organization, Mayor Ed Koch and students celebrating 10,000th attendance of The Midtown Arts Project (the original program name of Inside Broadway).



1988 students in Moscow watching Broadway Backstage video.



Michael Presser addresses audience at Winter Garden Theatre during the premier screening of *Broadway Backstage*.

Broadway and at Inside Broadway itself. No longer is Inside Broadway the small arts project it was in 1982. Today Inside Broadway has three full-time employees, two part-timers, sixteen teaching artists, a 19-member Board of Directors and about 60,000 students in 100 schools throughout the five boroughs of the city. As Jerry Schoenfeld once told Michael, "We gave

you a kernel and you made a whole empire out of it." Coming from Shubert that was a big compliment. And isn't it serendipitous that Inside Broadway's 35th Anniversary happens in the year of Broadway's first revival of *Cats*, the show which started it all, those many years ago?

A TEACHER'S CATS MEMORIES

Vicki Singer Reflects On Morris High School's Trip To CATS

Vicki Singer first saw *Cats* in London, on opening night no less. Since she could only get an obstructed view seat for the ballet, she opted for *Cats*. Back in New York, at her job as a high school English teacher at Morris High School (the oldest high school in the Bronx), a fellow teacher told her that The Shubert organization was giving out free tickets for the Broadway production of *Cats*. Having loved the show in London, she thought this was something that the students should see. She immediately got on the phone to the Shubert office who told her that the ticket distribution was being handled by an organization called Midtown Arts Project (Inside Broadway's earliest incarnation). Vicki called them and got Paul Naish on the phone. "He was only 23 at the time and very authoritative," Vicki says. He told her she could only get tickets for her school if she had 100% attendance, or a literary magazine. Vicki told him the school was having a poetry contest and Paul relented.

After getting off the phone Vicki went directly to Carmen Russo, Morris High's Principal. "We're going to have a poetry contest," Vicki told her. "We are? Why?" Carmen asked. "So we can get free tickets for *Cats*," Vicki said. "All right, then, we're having a poetry contest," Carmen said. The poetry contest resulted in various poems by John Donne, John Keats, and Shakespeare, and there were also some surprisingly talented original pieces from the students.

Over the years, Vicki has run across students who have gone on to such careers as doctors, judges, college professors, high school teachers and one published poet. They come up to her to tell her they still go to the theatre because of her and what started with the *Cats* program. For her this is definite proof that Inside Broadway helped open up a world to these inner city students that they might not otherwise have known.

Vicki is retired now but has fond memories of Inside Broadway and she also has plans to go with her daughter and two granddaughters to the current revival of *Cats*. Including, her first time in London, seeing the show once here with her husband, and the eight times she took students, this will be Vicki's eleventh visit to the show.

2016-2017 PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

Manhattan

City Knoll Middle School
Hunter College Elementary
Manhattan Hunter HS
Renaissance School Of The Arts
P.S. 3M
P.S. 36M
P.S. 77M
P.S. 130M
P.S. 166M
P.S. 175M
P.S. 208M
P.S. 333M
I.S. 528M

Bronx

Ampark
Linden Tree
P.S. 14X
P.S. 20X
P.S. 41X
P.S. 47X
P.S. 71X
P.S. 72X
P.S. 78X
P.S. 100X
P.S. 108X
P.S. 112X
P.S. 153X
P.S. 182X
P.S. 196X
P.S. 304X
P.S. 567X

Brooklyn

P.S./I.S. 30K
P.S. 45K
P.S. 86K
P.S. 97K
P.S. 102K
P.S./I.S. 104K

P.S. 114K
P.S./I.S. 163K
P.S. 170K
P.S. 172K
P.S. 176K
P.S. 185K
P.S. 200K
I.S. 201K
P.S. 204K
P.S. 214K
I.S. 227K
P.S./I.S. 229K
P.S. 231K
I.S. 259K
P.S. 264K
P.S. 278K
Fort Hamilton HS

Queens

P.S. 7Q
P.S. 13Q
P.S. 20Q
P.S. 22Q
P.S. 37Q
P.S. 69Q
P.S. 106Q
P.S. 113Q
P.S. 115Q
P.S./I.S. 119Q
I.S. 126Q
P.S. 162Q
P.S. 163Q
P.S. 164Q
P.S. 169Q
P.S. 174Q
P.S. 186Q
P.S. 193Q
P.S. 220Q
P.S. 222Q
P.S. 224Q
P.S. 234Q

District 75

P 17X @ 43
P 17X @ 161
P 17X @ 385
P 17X @ 298
P 226M @ 76
P 226M @ JREC
P 226M @ 15th Street
P 226M @ 208
P 231K @ 30
P 231K @ 264
P 231K @ 80

Long Island

Robbins Lane

Staten Island

I.S. 51 RO

New Jersey

Weehawken HS

Senior Centers

Regal Heights Rehabilitation
and Health Care Center
Rockaway Senior Center