PALGRAVE HANDBOOKS

THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF MUSICAL THEATRE PRODUCERS

Edited by
Laura MacDonald and William A. Everett

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Laura MacDonald • William A. Everett
Editors

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Laura MacDonald and William A. Everett, February 2016

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Overture

CHAPTER 1

A Ballyhoo for Producers

Laura MacDonald and William A. Everett

Captain Andy knows how to make a show sound dandy, a crowd of potential theatre-goers exclaim while deciding if they want to buy tickets to see *The Parson's Bride*, *Show Boat*'s show-within-a-show. In the Florenz Ziegfeld-produced musical from 1927, Queenie, the *Cotton Blossom*'s African American cook, actually gives her boss some advice on the matter in 'Queenie's Ballyhoo'. Captain Andy learns what to do from his cook's 'ballyhoo', which Merriam-Webster defines as 'talk or writing that is designed to get people excited or interested in something' or 'flamboyant, exaggerated, or sensational promotion or publicity'.[1] As Captain Andy's travails demonstrate all too well in *Show Boat*, making a show sound dandy through ballyhoo—better known today as marketing and advertising—is just one part of any producer's job, and a key strategy for selling tickets. Harold Prince, profiled in this volume, is, like Ziegfeld, another legendary producer; he directed the 1994 revival of *Show Boat* on Broadway, which Garth Drabinsky's Livent company produced in true Ziegfeld fashion. Like Captain Andy, figures such as Ziegfeld, Prince, and Drabinsky have produced projects that excited them and managed to translate that excitement again and again to musical theatre-goers. They also recruited creative teams to bring musicals to the stage as well as casting and developing specific performers, often helping to turn them into stars. Captain Andy's show boat travelled with him, but many of the musical theatre producers investigated here built their own theatres, tailored to the needs of their particular brand of

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musicals. They may also have assembled financing when the costs of producing rose or when their musical theatre vision was more expensive than their own bottom line could sustain.

These elements of a producer's work—project development, the recruitment of collaborators, casting, marketing and advertising, budgets and finance—are topics that theatre scholars, especially musical theatre scholars, have not yet comprehensively charted and explored. Yet without these skills and the labour of producers around the world, musical theatre could not have progressed as it has for more than a century.

Musical theatre itself has looked to producers—fictitious and real—as characters. Kathryn Edney discusses perhaps the most famous of these fictional incarnations, Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom from Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (1968 film, 2001 Broadway, 2005 film) in Chap. 2. Mary Jo Lodge, in her chapter, also acknowledges *Curtains*'s (2007) Carmen Bernstein, who attests, in song, that 'It's a Business'. Ziegfeld himself features prominently in *Funny Girl* (1964), casting Fanny Brice and contributing to making her a star. He also makes his presence known in another biographical musical, *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991). An eighteenth-century Viennese impresario, Emanuel Schikaneder, the librettist for Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, built the Theater an der Wien, which would become a home for the Austrian producer Vereinigte Bühnen Wien. Schikaneder, who was in reality also a singing actor, appears in that company's musical *Mozart!* (1999) and sings about his ambition for a full house. So lively is the love story of Schikaneder and his wife Eleonore that VBW developed and produced a new musical, Schikaneder (2016) in which the producing couple sing to an investor about "Geld und Glück"—explaining how money pays for the happiness theatre provides.

More recently, as referenced in Kevin J. Wetmore's chapter on the Japanese producers Tōhō and Shiki and in Mary Jo Lodge's reflection in the final chapter, Broadway producer Harold Prince's professional life and reminiscences provide a structure for the revue musical *Prince of Broadway* (2015 Toyko, 2017 Broadway). Directed by Prince, in collaboration with Susan Stroman, the production features a Times Square Ballet in which an aspiring musical theatre performer auditions for a series of producers. She lands a job, culminating in an elegant pas de deux with a producer. Not only do musical theatre's own efforts recognize and represent the producer's role in making musicals, but Captain Andy's brashness, and the elegance of the Times Square Ballet, begin to suggest the vast spectrum of styles and approaches to producing. It is this history that our volume seeks to illuminate, celebrating the highs and lows of the passionate, creative, budget-conscious producers who have innovated and ultimately sustained musical theatre.

Many musical theatre producers around the turn of the twentieth century had financially lucrative careers in fields other than entertainment before turning to their passion projects, namely producing theatre, including musical theatre. Henry W. Savage (1859–1927), for example, amassed a fortune in real estate before turning to producing. In Boston, after the contractors who were building the Castle Square Theatre abandoned the project in 1895, he took over its completion and soon presided over the Castle Square Opera

Company, which successfully offered operas translated into English. He also ran his own Henry W. Savage Company, Inc. and produced turn-of-the-century musical comedies by George Luders and Frank Pixley, most famously *The Prince of Pilsen* (1903). Like George Edwardes in London (see Chap. 5), Savage scored commercial and critical triumphs when he produced English-language adaptations of Continental operettas in New York, including *The Merry Widow* (1907) and *The Gay Hussars* (1909). A sense of Continental élan characterized his work. Charles Dillingham (1868–1934) likewise began his career as a critic before turning to producing in 1902. He brought early works by Irving Berlin (*Watch Your Step*, 1914) and Jerome Kern (*Miss 1917*, 1917) to the stage.

In yet another example, Oscar Hammerstein (1846–1919), a German immigrant, became wealthy in the cigar manufacturing business and used his capital to fund his theatrical pursuits. He began as a theatre owner, erecting the Harlem Opera House (1889), the Manhattan Opera House (1893), and the Olympia Theatre (1895), among other venues. Hammerstein was passionate about opera and established his own company, the Manhattan Opera Company, in 1906 at a new Manhattan Opera House in order to compete with the Metropolitan Opera. Hammerstein presented the American premieres of several contemporary operas and sponsored and promoted the highly publicized American debut of Mary Garden. He also welcomed the noted soprano Nellie Melba to his company when she became disenchanted with the Metropolitan Opera. His productions, which exhibited extremely high quality stagecraft and singing, were also very expensive to produce. Bankruptcy loomed during his fourth season, and in 1910 his son Arthur effected an agreement with the Metropolitan Opera that it would buy out the Manhattan Opera with the stipulation that Oscar would not produce grand opera in the United States for ten years. The elder Hammerstein also oversaw Victor Herbert's *Naughty Marietta* (1910), an operetta starring Manhattan Opera soprano Emma Trentini for which he had his son Arthur take care of the day-to-day producing responsibilities. Hammerstein's model of theatrical ownership and high-cost productions return again and again throughout the story of musical theatre production. Furthermore, he championed the Times Square area as a theatrical hub and was instrumental in its development through placing several of his theatres there.

Oscar Hammerstein's two sons were both involved with the theatre industry. Arthur Hammerstein (1872–1955) worked alongside his father at the Manhattan Opera and became especially known as the producer of bubbly operettas by Rudolf Friml and Otto Harbach, including *The Firefly* (1912), *Katinka* (1915), and *Rose Marie* (1924). William (Willie) Hammerstein (1875–1914) managed theatres for his father, first the Olympia and then the Victoria, which he took over in 1904. (Both theatres, significantly, were in the area of what is now Times Square.) Willie made the Victoria the most popular vaudeville house in New York, and its profits helped underwrite his father's cost-guzzling Manhattan Opera House. Willie's son Oscar became a household name in musical theatre, especially after he began collaborating with composer

Richard Rodgers to form the lyricist half of 'Rodgers and Hammerstein' (see Chap. 18).

Owning theatres and sporting savvy business sense typified many producers of the 1920s and 1930s. The Shuberts (see Chap. 8) succeeded through a corporate model, which others, including the team of Laurence Schwab and Frank Mandel, followed. Laurence Schwab (1893–1951), a librettist, and Frank Mandel (1884–1958), a journalist and musical comedy librettist, created a partnership that produced several important musical comedies and operettas in the 1920s. Like the Shuberts, Schwab and Mandel's corporate portfolio included several different companies. In 1928, for example, they held six different interests: (1) Schwab & Mandel-Good News Company, (2) Schwab & Mandel-New Moon Company, (3) The Desert Song Corporation of Delaware, (4) Schwab & Mandel-Chanin's 46th Street Theatre, (5) Laurence Schwab & Frank Mandel, Inc., and (6) Malem Corporation.[2] Through these entities, Schwab and Mandel managed New York and touring productions of their highly successful shows (*The Desert Song* [1926], *Good News* [1927], and *The New Moon* [1928]), leased a theatre with the Shuberts (Chanin's 46th Street Theatre), and ran their enterprise.

Schwab and Mandel were not only involved with the business side of producing but also helped create a new operetta paradigm that was rooted in the contemporary in terms of story and music—they were creative forces as well as businessmen. With scores by Sigmund Romberg, the bitter-sweet sentimentality of Shubert-produced operettas such as *Blossom Time* (1921) and *The Student Prince* (1924) gave way to works like *The Desert Song* with happy endings and, even if the setting was historical, as in *The New Moon*, slightly syncopated songs and lyrical ballads to join luscious waltzes in the fashionable scores.

While operetta gave way to musical comedy and integrated musicals became the standard of Broadway's mid-century Golden Age, a new kind of musical theatre producer was emerging: the regional theatre. A derelict paper mill in Milburn, New Jersey was reopened as the Paper Mill Playhouse in 1938. Focusing initially on plays, by the 1950s the repertory theatre added more musicals and operettas to its programming and began casting film and theatre stars, the latter often recreating their Broadway performances. Its proximity to New York City attracted not only theatre-goers but also performers and other practitioners. Revivals in the 1970s included classics such as *Anything Goes*, starring Ann Miller. Though it burned down in 1980, a new theatre opened in 1982, with modern, accessible facilities. Robert Johanson was appointed artistic director, programming new works, revivals, and literary adaptations, including a *Show Boat* revival that was broadcast on PBS in 1989. Contemporary stars of stage and screen, including Anne Hathaway and Laura Benanti, trained or performed at Paper Mill in the 1990s, and the theatre released its first original cast album, Stephen Schwartz's *Children of Eden*, in 1998. The theatre struggled financially in the early 2000s, leading to community fundraising to

complete the 2006–2007 season and ultimately prompting Milburn Township to purchase the theatre and its facilities.

While Paper Mill continues to programme popular revivals, new commercial partnerships under the leadership of producing artistic director Mark S. Hoebee since 2000 have launched national tours of new musicals such as *Little House on the Prairie* and a twenty-fifth anniversary production of *Les Misérables*. Its greatest recent success was a partnership with Disney Theatricals to premiere *Newsies*—a surprise hit in 2011 for all involved (see Chap. 42). Subsequent new musicals developed at Paper Mill (and adapted from successful films) have included *Honeymoon in Vegas* (2013), *Ever After* (2015), and *A Bronx Tale* (2016).

A similar regional story unfolded in East Haddam, Connecticut, where in 1959, a derelict nineteenth-century theatre building, the Goodspeed Opera House, was saved by Goodspeed Musicals, a group formed by local residents. By 1963, the building reopened as a professional musical theatre. The not-for-profit theatre initially focused on revivals of rarely produced musicals, but it then began to develop new works, such as *Man of La Mancha* in the summer of 1965, prior to its premiere in New York City. In 1968, Michael Price became Goodspeed's executive director, leading the theatre until 2014. During his tenure, more new musicals were developed and tried out in Connecticut, including *Shenandoah* and *Annie*, but revivals of musicals such as *Oh, Kay!* and *The Most Happy Fella* have also transferred to Broadway from Goodspeed. The proximity to New York City allows Goodspeed to hire Broadway creative teams and performers but is far enough away to call itself a safe haven. Its smaller space, the Norma Terris Theatre in Chester, Connecticut, has since the 1980s focused exclusively on new musicals, and the East Haddam site has expanded into a large artists' colony campus with a musical theatre education centre, a musical theatre research library, programmes for local youth, and professional development opportunities for aspiring musical theatre professionals. Goodspeed was the recipient of a Tony Award in 1980 for outstanding contributions to the American musical and another in 1995 for distinguished achievement for a regional theatre. Michael Gennaro assumed leadership of Goodspeed Musicals in 2015, having previously worked as producing director at Paper Mill. Like many of the regional and not-for-profit musical theatre producers profiled in this volume, these theatres have succeeded by balancing revivals and new musical development, investing locally in training and professional development while also maintaining strong links to Broadway and its high-calibre performers and practitioners.

Moving between not-for-profit institutions and commercial production companies, brothers Tom (b. 1941) and Jack (b. 1948) Viertel have led eclectic careers and have left several important marks on musical theatre. Tom worked extensively in real estate and, since 2001, chairs the board of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, which supports new writers and composers. As part of the Baruch-Viertel-Routh-Frankel Group, he has produced musicals such as *Smokey Joe's Cafe* (1995), *The Producers* (2001), and *Hairspray* (2002), along

with many revivals. This group of producers caused a sea change in Broadway ticketing when they introduced $480 premium tickets during the run of *The Producers.* Claiming to cut out the scalpers who were already inflating ticket prices for hot shows (such as *The Producers*), Tom Viertel and his partners felt that they and their investors and creative team should be the ones benefiting from theatre-goers' willingness to pay, and not scalpers. Within a few years, the majority of Broadway producers were selling premium tickets, and box office grosses were increasing.

Tom Viertel's producing group also owns the New York supper club 54 Below, a venue championing musical theatre, in particular new writers, composers, and performers. In 2013, Tom was appointed executive director of the Commercial Theater Institute, a leader in training early-career Broadway producers.

Jack Viertel is a former theatre critic for the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* and former dramaturge at the Mark Taper Forum. He has worked for Jujamcyn Theaters since 1989, first as creative director and then as senior vice president, producing revivals and new musicals including *The Secret Garden* (1991), *Jelly's Last Jam* (1992), *The Full Monty* (2000), *Grey Gardens* (2006), and *Something Rotten!* (2015). Along with developing new plays and musicals for commercial runs with Jujamcyn, Jack has since 2001 been artistic director of the *Encores!* series (see Chap. 40) and has detailed aspects of the world of Broadway musicals in his book *The Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built*.[3] The Viertels' mobility across theatre sectors reveals not only the producers' transferable skills but also the close, complex relationships between commercial and not-for-profit producers in musical theatre.

Rocco Landesman (b. 1947), a veteran Broadway producer, has also seen his skills valued outside commercial theatre—in his case, on a national, public stage as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) from 2009–2012. He followed in the footsteps of producer and past NEA chairman Roger L. Stevens (see Chap. 21). Landesman grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where his family owned a cabaret theatre, and he eventually earned a doctorate in theatre from Yale. He began his career as an independent producer and was a member of Dodger Productions, where he was instrumental in developing and transferring the American Repertory Theater and La Jolla Playhouse musical *Big River* to Broadway in 1985 (see Chaps. 38 and 49). In 1987 he became president of Jujamcyn Theaters, purchasing the company in 2005 following the death of its founder James H. Binger. He later sold a 50 per cent share to Jordan Roth (see Chap. 50). It was Landesman who hired Jack Viertel as part of his effort to restructure Jujamcyn as a resident institutional theatre. He also initiated the renaming of three of the company's theatres—the Virginia for playwright August Wilson, the Ritz for theatre critic Walter Kerr, and the Martin Beck for iconic theatrical caricaturist Al Hirschfeld.

Producing since the 1980s, Barry (b. 1939) and Fran (b. 1928) Weissler have specialized almost exclusively in musical theatre, producing both revivals and new musicals. They refined celebrity casting to a science, using it to keep

a revival of *Grease* running for several years in the 1990s. They did the same with the Broadway transfer of the *Encores! Chicago* in 1996 (see Chap. 40), a revival still running at this writing, lasting longer than the original Broadway production and holding the record for the longest-running American musical in Broadway history. More recently the Weisslers have partnered with the American Repertory Theater (see Chap. 49) to help bring the *Pippin* revival (2013), *Finding Neverland* (2015), and *Waitress* (2016) to Broadway.

While the Nederlander empire, the second largest owner of Broadway theatres (nine) after the Shuberts, has primarily been known as a theatre operator with venues across the United States and in London's West End, the organization has occasionally invested as a co-producer of Broadway revivals and new musicals presented in Nederlander theatres. Its Nederlander Worldwide Entertainment (NWE) division has since 2000 produced Broadway musicals in China and Cuba and brought the Chinese martial arts spectacle *Soul of Shaolin* (2009) to Broadway. Marc Routh and Simone Genatt have also established an American producing presence in Asia, as executive producers of the Broadway Asia Company, a musical theatre licensor and producer. Beyond licensing the Rodgers and Hammerstein agency's catalogue of more than 100 musicals in a dozen Asian markets, Broadway Asia has presented tours throughout Asia and has more recently begun developing new musicals and immersive theatre productions. Bridging Broadway and Asia, Routh and Genatt are also an example for other producers seeking to bring the world's musical theatre to Broadway.

Partnerships have been key in helping Chinese musical theatre producers to rapidly develop a potentially huge market for musicals. Founded in 2010, the United Asia Live Entertainment joint venture saw state-owned Chinese companies China Arts and Entertainment Group and the Shanghai Media Group partner with the South Korean entertainment and media company CJ E&M. While English-language tours of Broadway and West End musicals began visiting China in 2002, the joint venture's 2011 production of *Mamma Mia!* was the first Mandarin replica production. It toured China for three seasons, followed by *Cats* in 2012. Partnering with each musical's original producer, Littlestar and the Really Useful Group (see Chap. 32), the Chinese joint venture brought in British creative teams to mount Chinese replica productions and in doing so, began to develop triple threat Chinese performers. Productions of original Korean musicals in China followed before the joint venture partners began pursuing other collaborations and independent projects as the Chinese musical theatre industry began to grow.

Around the same time, Yang Jiamin was working for a venture capital firm in Tokyo and observed the well-established, profitable musical theatre producer Shiki (see Chap. 28) selling musical theatre tickets in convenience stores. She later quit her job in Japan to return to China and founded her own musical theatre production company, Seven Ages, modelled after Shiki. With the

successful premiere of an English-language production of *Man of La Mancha* in 2012, she gained the attention of the private equity firm China Media Capital, and eventually secured nearly US$5 million in financing. Seven Ages has since produced and toured non-replica, Mandarin productions of *Man of La Mancha*, *Avenue Q*, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, and *The Sound of Music*. Still inspired by her initial observations of musical theatre marketing in Japan, Yang's Seven Ages has marketed its productions in Chinese convenience stores and sold tickets via mobile apps, striving to make musical theatre consumption as convenient as possible for China's millions of potential ticket buyers.

From the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, producers have been an integral part of the musical theatre landscape. These often larger-than-life individuals have largely been unsung heroes (with the notable exceptions of *fictional* producers Captain Andy, Carmen Bernstein, Max Bialystock, and Leo Bloom and the real Emanuel Schikaneder in Austria and Florenz Ziegfeld in New York City, all of whom actually *do* sing on stage), but their contributions to the global phenomenon of musical theatre have been immense. Some are individuals whose strong personalities infuse every production they mount while others exist as corporate entities. What follows is a cavalcade of producers, which, like Captain Andy's ballyhoo in *Show Boat*, invites us to explore the diverse, effervescent, and sometimes incongruous world of musical theatre in new and compelling ways.

Notes

1. 'Ballyhoo', simple definition and full definition 2, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ballyhoo, accessed 20 February 2016.
2. Malem Corporation was created as the production side of *The Desert Song* and was subsumed into The Desert Song Corporation of Delaware (see Seidman & Seidman, Certified Public Accountants, 1928 Audit Report on Schwab and Mandel Interests, 20 February 1929, Frank Mandel Papers, collection 844, box 10, University of California Los Angeles Special Collections).
3. Jack Viertel, *The Secret World of the Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2016).

CHAPTER 2

Actors Act. Directors Direct. Producers … Produce? Mel Brooks's *The Producers* and the Creation of an Archetype

Kathryn Edney

Early in the first act of Mel Brooks's 2001 stage musical version of *The Producers*, the character Leo Bloom sings 'I Want to Be a Producer'. Stuck in his office, he envisions a life that is vastly different from his humdrum existence as an accountant: sleeping late, selecting pretty girls for use in the chorus, perhaps having sex with those girls, wearing a tuxedo, and seeing his name in lights. The number then explodes into a fully-fledged fantasy. Once Bloom reveals that he wants his name to be seen and known all across Broadway, the office set splits in half with each section flying off-stage to reveal a stage occupied by Bloom and rapidly filled with an expanding line of chorus girls. Behind them all is a huge sign comprised of light bulbs proclaiming 'Leo Bloom Presents'. Since at this point in the musical Bloom is living within his fantasy, there is no indication as to what, as a producer, he is presenting (other than himself) or how the fantasy might be achieved. All Bloom can imagine is himself on centre stage, framed by his own name in lights, and surrounded by pretty girls. Bloom's imaginings are persuasive precisely because in contrast to ideas about directors or actors, the idea of what producers do has been relatively undefined. The work of a producer is a complete blank; the remainder of *The Producers* functions to fill in that blank.[1] In a similar fashion, the goal of this book is to expand on our existing definitions and understandings of what it means to be 'the producer'.

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Within popular discourse, the work of a producer—what they actually do—is vague at best and derogatory at worst. Writer/director Brooks used the confusion concerning the work of producers to his advantage, first in the 1968 comedy film *The Producers*, and then later in his two adaptations of that film, first as a stage musical in 2001, and then as a musical film in 2005.[2] Through the characters of Broadway producer Max Bialystock and accountant-turned-producer Leo Bloom, Brooks answers the question 'but what does a producer actually do?' and thus creates an archetype by showing Bialystock and Bloom at work securing and making money, assembling a creative team, and reassuring investors, albeit with unethical and misogynistic methods.[3]

This chapter will briefly examine *The Producers* in its most impactful incarnations—the original 1968 film and the 2001 Broadway musical—then discuss the differences between the 1968 film and the 2001 Broadway show versions. The 2005 film adaptation of the stage musical will be referenced in passing; there are few narratively significant differences between the two versions, and audience and critical responses to the film were lukewarm. While the 2005 film reinforced the idea of the archetypical producer, it did not have the same level of cultural impact of the earlier film and stage incarnations. According to Brooks and as evidenced through his version of *The Producers*, the role of the producer remains unchanged. His is an essentially static vision of a producer which inscribes, and then reinscribes, the individualist, white, Jewish, heterosexual male as the only true model for a producer.

The basic plot for all three versions of *The Producers* is essentially the same. A Broadway producer, Max Bialystock, has lately been producing nothing but flop shows. To supplement his income, he performs as a gigolo for old ladies and persuades them to give him cashier cheques.[4] An accountant, Leo Bloom, comes to Bialystock's office to do the books and innocently remarks that it would be conceivable for someone to earn more money with a flop show than with a hit. Bialystock and Bloom then enter into a partnership to find, and then stage, the worst Broadway show ever by overselling shares in the production to Bialystock's cadre of women. The play they find is 'Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden', authored by a Nazi, Franz Liebkind. Next, they hire a buxom Swedish secretary, Ulla. More importantly, they engage the services of the worst possible director for their production: the campy Roger de Bris. Finally, they audition a slew of 'Hitlers' in search of precisely the wrong actor for the title role. Unfortunately for Bialystock and Bloom, all of the wrongness—the wrong play, the wrong director, and the wrong star—comes together before a live audience to create a strange alchemy of rightness. 'Springtime for Hitler' is a hit and the pair land in jail when they cannot pay off their investors.

Within the plot of *The Producers* are important ideas about producers, what they do, and how they go about doing it. First and foremost is the centrality of *money*, the feelings of desperation associated with the need for money, and the lengths to which producers will go to obtain funding. Second is the idea that a primary job for producers is the act of *finding*; they find the right script, the

right director, the right actors, the right investors, and so on. At different stages of the finding process, producers must also engage in the process of *selling* the idea of the play as it is being built. For example, Bialystock and Bloom must sell the script of 'Springtime for Hitler' to the director who they want to hire, and they will say almost anything to make that sale. Brooks also creates producers who can never stop producing. Even after they land in jail, Bialystock and Bloom cannot seem to help themselves, and are last seen embarking on a jailhouse production entitled 'Prisoners of Love'. Finally, embedded within these representations of what producers do—although not entirely consciously—is a representation of who they are: male and Jewish. The Jewish male identity coupled with a fear of failure, and even emasculation, shapes the archetypal Broadway producer as conceived of by Brooks.[5]

As scholars on Jewish immigration have noted, Jewish definitions of manliness did not always fit easily within the Protestant/Christian framework of American social-cultural ideas of masculinity. As a result, Jewish American men were often characterized as 'feminine' or as sexually inept, but also adept at making and keeping money.[6] Some Jewish American performers—such as Woody Allen—embraced this socially constructed persona for comic effect, and the characters of Bialystock and Bloom fall within this rubric. But they also fit within larger discourses about, for example, producers like the Jewish American Shubert Brothers who are simultaneously celebrated for their business acumen and critiqued for their apparent lack of artistry.[7]

The Producers (1968) as a Film

All three versions of *The Producers* were career milestones for Brooks, with the original film version of *The Producers* serving as his first experience as a film director.[8] The origin story behind the film version of *The Producers* was told and retold by Brooks in various interviews after his musical stage adaption was clearly destined to be a huge hit. In short, after a series of false starts—*The Producers* was initially conceived by Brooks to be a book, then a play—*The Producers* became a movie, with Brooks managing to persuade a producer that he should be allowed to direct his first feature film.[9]

The film, starring Broadway veteran Zero Mostel as Bialystock and the then-relative newcomer Gene Wilder as Bloom, was initially a complete flop. Reviewers were frankly offended by the apparent trivialization of Hitler, and many were unimpressed with Brooks's efforts as a director.[10] However, after this inauspicious start, the film went on to earn two Oscar nominations, one for Brooks for best screenplay (which he won) and another for Wilder in the best supporting actor category.[11] *The Producers* has since earned a reputation as a cult film, in large part because of the performances of Mostel and Wilder.[12]

Mostel in *The Producers* never seems to fully relax, and his tension, coupled with Brooks's penchant for close-ups, often makes his performance uncomfortable to watch. While Mostel's level of anxiety manifests itself outwardly through copious sweating and a forceful vocal delivery, Wilder's performance

as Bloom forces the tension inward. Wilder, who reportedly was at times very intimidated by Mostel, reacts to what is going on around him through a series of behavioural tics and winces, including a childish need for his blanket whenever situations spin out of his control.[13] As Wilder himself noted 'I didn't have a lot of words, but I had a lot of reactions. And that was even better. I am the audience, whatever they're thinking I can show it. I remember thinking when we were filming it, this must be how the audience is going to react.'[14] Both performances, in their own way, reflect the high-stakes nature of producing, ideas about Jewish masculinity, and the shared fear of risk that producers must overcome in order to be effective.

While much of what Bloom must react to is Bialystock and his excesses, Bloom must also respond to the strangeness of late 1960s Broadway, including drugged-out actors and an explicitly articulated politically charged performance culture that did not always favour traditionally constructed plays and musicals. Bloom serves as the audience's avatar when responding to the various absurdities involved in producing as seen in the show-within-a-film 'Springtime for Hitler'. For as extreme as the concept of 'Springtime for Hitler' is, within the plot of *The Producers* the play serves as a representation of all plays that all producers attempt to stage. Any play has the potential to be either a flop or a hit, and all producers must go through the process of finding, funding, selling, and believing in that play. As Mostel demonstrates in his performance, the idea that producers are men with a strong personal involvement in the show they are producing is central to the archetype Brooks created in the film. Good play or bad, a producer's investment in a show is both financial and emotional, but without that latter investment, the primer for producing as articulated in the film will not be workable. That Bialystock and Bloom's belief regarding 'Springtime for Hitler' is in terms of it being a flop does not negate the step-by-step process of believing in and producing a play that Brooks schematized within the film.

The Producers (2001) on Stage

Although the fundamentals of the plot remain the same, there are some key differences between the original film version and the musical stage adaptation of *The Producers*; that the stage version contains extended song and dance numbers is only the most obvious. Less obvious is the impact on the characters in adapting Brooks's movie to the stage and how those changes subtly shade, but do not fundamentally alter, the definition of 'the producers' as established by Brooks in his film. The other significant alteration, although it might not seem so, is setting the story in 1959 rather than 1968. Although Brooks has not publicly commented on the temporal shift, one potential reason for the change is that the 1958–1959 and 1959–1960 seasons on Broadway were witness to the premieres of what came to be canonical musicals, including *Gypsy*, *The Sound of Music*, and *West Side Story*. In contrast, with the exception of *Hair*,