

# CRAIN'S

NEW YORK BUSINESS

CRAINSNEWYORK.COM | NOVEMBER 28, 2022

## GOTHAM GIGS



PRESSER fell in love with the theater after seeing a Philadelphia tryout for *My Fair Lady* when he was a kid.

### MICHAEL PRESSER

**BORN** Philadelphia

**RESIDES** Greenwich Village

**EDUCATION** Bachelor's in business, Temple University

#### FAMOUS ENCOUNTERS

Presser has worked with several big names in the music business, including Peter Nero, Hal Holbrook, Carlos Montoya and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. He has worked as a consultant with several European opera theaters.

**ART ACROSS OCEANS** Presser says his work has taken him to at least 10 countries around the world.

**CREAM OF THE CROP** If he had to pick a favorite Broadway play, it would be *Cats*, but he is fond of the entire Rodgers and Hammerstein repertoire and enjoys opera and classical music.

**OUT OF THE PARK** In his spare time, Presser enjoys watching baseball, in particular the New York Mets and Yankees.

## Letting kids look behind the curtain

Inside Broadway's founder seeks to educate students about the theater

BY SHELBY ROSENBERG

If you've ever walked past a Broadway theater, you've probably seen a large group of students on their way in or out. For many, it's their first time visiting the Theater District, and they have Michael Presser to thank for it.

Presser is the founder and executive director of Inside Broadway, a nonprofit that exposes city public school students as young as 7 years old to Broadway by operating an arts and education program in conjunction with theaters.

Presser's interest in theater began as a child in Philadelphia, when his parents took him to see the pre-Broadway tryout of *My Fair Lady*. He was enthralled and took every chance he could to see other performances that passed through town on their way to New York. He was interested in how the magic happened onstage every night.

When he attended Temple Uni-

versity, there was no arts administration pathway, so he pursued a business degree while continuing to attend performances in his spare time. He remembers when the Metropolitan Opera visited Philadelphia for a week of performances, coinciding with his final exams.

"I was determined to get to almost all of the performances," he recalled. "To this day I can still remember the operas and casts I saw, but I can't tell you anything about the exams except that I passed."

In 1973 Presser moved to Greenwich Village. In what he calls the mid-1970s version of LinkedIn networking, he mailed letters to every big name he could think of in the local theater and opera world.

He met several famous figures including conductor Leonard Bernstein, and even received a side-gig as an usher at the Metropolitan Opera. He met people involved in production, administration and casting who taught him about the complex-

ities behind productions.

From there, Presser joined a talent agency as an artist manager. Over several years he traveled to theaters throughout the U.S. and Europe, building his experience.

#### School program

In 1982 Presser met the late Bernard Jacobs, then-president of the Shubert Organization. Jacobs wanted to donate 50 tickets a week for students to see the musical *Cats* and asked Presser to create a program to make that happen. It was the beginning of Inside Broadway.

As the lineup of offerings gradually expanded, Presser drew on his arts management background to add an educational component by introducing students to the behind-the-scenes action of productions. Later, Inside Broadway began producing its own shows, including classics like *Smokey Joe's Café* and *Bye Bye Birdie*, which tour schools across the city.

Now in its 40th year, the program reaches over 90,000 students in around 100 schools annually. Presser estimates the program has introduced more than 3 million students to the theater since its founding.

Inside Broadway's offerings are free, funded primarily by city agencies including the City Council and the departments of Cultural Affairs, Education and Youth. This year it is projected to have taken in an estimated \$2 million in funding.

As Presser plans for the future, he's inspired by discussions about how the industry can be more inclusive. He aims to drive those efforts forward through his programming.

As he looks back, he says despite all his experience, he approached Inside Broadway humbly. "I thought if I could do [the ticket program] well, maybe they'd give me something else to do," he said. "[Late Shubert chairman] Jerry Schoenfeld always said that they gave me a kernel, and I built an empire." ■