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Inside *Inside Broadway*: Michael Presser Looks Back on 40 Years of Bringing Theater to Students

The nonprofit organization tours theater productions into schools to introduce children to the world of Broadway.

David Gordon | **New York City** | **November 23, 2022**

Nothing on Broadway runs for 40 years — not even *Phantom*.

Except, that is, for Inside Broadway, a nonprofit company that brings the joys and magic of theater to students throughout New York City. The organization, founded by Michael Presser, began as a ticketing initiative to get kids to see *Cats*. Now, it takes Broadway into schools to expose children to a world that they perhaps had never experienced before. Here, Presser looks back on the history, and ahead to the future.



Michael Presser

(© Elena Olivo)

This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Tell me the origin story of Inside Broadway.

We go back to 1982, and the concept, from the very beginning, was that it would be able to reach a wide, general student population, not children that were in performing arts organizations. Children who had never been exposed to Broadway. In 1982, it was specifically a high school program, and then it expanded to middle school, and today it starts at grade two in elementary school. As a matter of fact, we happen to be heavier these days in elementary and middle schools. But I never expected, 40 years later, that I would be here and the program would be here. That was not any objective of mine back then; I just thought it would be a nice activity to be involved with.

1982 was a loaded year on Broadway.

The Shubert Organization was in the process of bringing *Cats* to New York for its first American production. Bernard Jacobs, the late president of the Shubert Organization, asked me to put together a student ticket program that would enable children, courtesy of the Shuberts, to come to Wednesday matinee performances of *Cats*. The original idea, as Bernie had it in mind, was that a different high school would come each week, beginning with the first week that *Cats* was open, which was in October of 1982. Remarkably, we were with *Cats* every Wednesday matinee from 1982 to when the show closed in New York 18 and a half years later. A couple hundred thousand children got to go to Broadway courtesy of us and the Shubert Organization.

Eventually, the ticket program was expanded to other shows. We added *Dreamgirls* and *Miss Saigon* and *Les Miz*, *Phantom*, *Starlight Express*. When we finally stopped doing the ticket program, which was after the close of *Cats*, we probably had worked with every major musical that had played in New York during that period.





A scene from the original production of *Cats* on Broadway at the Winter Garden Theatre

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How did you morph from student tickets to going into schools?

Cats closed, but the schools were still very interested in activities that would expose children to theater, particularly Broadway. So we transitioned into teaching artist programs, which are a little bit more educationally oriented, giving students the opportunity to hear from Broadway professionals about careers in the theater. They would also have the opportunity to work with Broadway people to create a presentation that they could do in their schools. Today, we're in about 90 schools throughout the city, with more than 100,000 children participating each year. We have a combination of the teaching artist program, which is called *Build a Musical*, our *Creating the Magic* program, which is about careers in theater, and then we have our own Equity touring production, which is an abridged version of a classic Broadway show that tours the city schools. The children in our program are getting a whole variety of different activities related to live theater.

What's the most rewarding aspect been for you?

There are many things. When we were doing the *Cats* ticket program, many times, as

the kids were coming into the Winter Garden Theatre, I would stand in the back and watch the expressions on their faces, which were so heartwarming. And *Cats* was a junkyard, which transformed the whole Winter Garden into a scenic extravaganza. It opened up a young person to an experience that perhaps they never had before. Those types of experiences are the most memorable for me. That happened many, many times.



An Inside Broadway performance

(© Elena Olivo)

How are you marking the 40th anniversary?

Creating the Magic is going to be the focal point of the celebration. Many times, we would get requests from teachers to see if they could take their groups backstage to see how the show was put together. Unfortunately, that's not really possible, because in order to see anything, you have to be there at eight o'clock at night. Secondly, these buildings were not build for large groups of people; they are really small and every inch is used for some element of props or costumes or electrical equipment.

We came up with the idea of this program, in which we could take over a Broadway theater on the morning of a non-matinee day, fill it with children from our programs, and do a demonstration of all the things that are being done backstage during a show. They get to see the lighting, they get to see how the sets are automated. There will be members of the acting company. We will show them a whole variety of different jobs so they can see the kind of magic we can do on Broadway and introduce them to the careers and training they need. After the first of the year, we'll be touring our production of Duke Ellington's *Sophisticated Ladies* through February, March, and April.

When we started, the attitude in the Department of Education was that this was a nice activity. But now, there is an understanding of the tremendous impact that the arts can have on young people and their psychological and emotional growth. It's going to be a fun anniversary year.

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