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Arts 27.01.11

Spidey comes out fighting

With its delays, injuries and glitches, the \$65m Broadway musical Spider-Man looked set to be a glorious flop. But it's now making more money than Wicked. **Malcolm Rock** meets the man who made Spidey fly

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The cover of last week's New Yorker magazine featured a cartoon of a bustling hospital ward full of injured Spider-Men: one has both his legs in casts; another has a clamp holding his head together; another, who is bedbound, can only change the TV channel by firing out a web; another is swaddled in bandages and walks with a frame.

"I had that same idea a month ago," laughs Daniel Ezralow. As the man behind the airborne stunts in the Spider-Man musical that has yet to open on Broadway, Ezralow is taking choreography where it has never gone before. "I told Michael Cohl, our producer, 'Let's counter all this negative press. Let's photograph the cast in casts!'"

Ezralow is chatting over dinner at the Joe Allen restaurant on 46th Street, four blocks from Foxwoods theatre, where Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark - a \$65m (£42m) extravaganza with music penned by U2's Bono and The Edge - is making history as the most expensive musical ever staged, or not staged, as the case may be. Ezralow is keen to play down the scrutiny he and director Julie Taymor, creator of The Lion King, have found themselves under, thanks to the umpteen delays, injuries and technical glitches that have plagued the show. In October, for example, Kevin Aubin, playing the superhero in flight, slammed into the stage during a rehearsal and broke both wrists.

"You can break your ankle by slipping on a wet spot, it happens to dancers every day," stews the 54-year-old choreographer. "Of course, accidents that occur while you're flying across the stage are more newsworthy, but it's ridiculous for people to write that Julie Taymor should be stopped and the show cancelled."

The hotly anticipated musical has been shrouded in

secrecy, although stories have inevitably leaked out. Both the state department of labour and the occupational safety and health administration are keeping a close eye on things, in particular Ezralow's aerial battles that take place above the heads of the audience.

They have reason to be concerned. In November, Natalie Mendoza, playing the principal villain, Arachne, suffered concussion after an impact with a rogue rope. She dropped out of the production. The following month, footage of Spider-Man stunt double Christopher Tierney plunging 30ft from a hydraulic ramp into the orchestra pit was posted online. Ezralow has worked with Tierney for the last 10 years, and cast him in Taymor's whimsical cinematic salute to the Beatles, Across the Universe. Ezralow was shaken by the incident, which he attributes not to the machinery, but to human error.

"He wasn't hooked up," Ezralow says. "Every injury has been the result of human error. There hasn't been one fault in the fly system - not one breakage in the material. It's like someone dropped a bucket of cement from a renovation and hit someone in the street. Thankfully, Chris was experienced enough to make a safety roll." This fly system, which boasts 22 motorised winches with 75hp harness-wrenching capabilities, can propel multiple actors out over the crowd at terrific speed. Audiences will see Spider-Man leap from the stage, fly over the stalls, land on the upper balcony, and give the kids a thumbs-up before hurtling back down to tackle the Green Goblin in mid-air.

Taymor recently told US current affairs show 60 Minutes that nothing "really creative can be done without danger or risk". Certainly, Ezralow is no stranger to peril. In The Flying Dutchman, another collaboration with Taymor, he sent untethered performers



'It's a phenomenon!' ... Reeve Carney (standing) in rehearsals; (left) Danny Ezralow; (right) Spider-Man and his foe the Green Goblin

scurrying across Wagner's cursed ship while its decks rocked in opposite directions. "Talk about dangerous!" he laughs.

It's nine years since producers Tony Adams and David Garfinkle got the Spider-Man theatrical rights from Marvel Comics. In 2005, in what could now be seen as a portent, Adams had a stroke while Bono and The Edge were in the next room signing their contracts. It proved fatal, and Garfinkle, an entertainment lawyer, was left in charge. He struggled to come up with funds.

Scheduling proved a further headache. True Blood star Evan Rachel Wood, who was to play love interest Mary-Jane Watson, left after the March 2010 opening was bumped. (The premiere has been pushed back a



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further three times, to 15 March, meaning a total delay of one year.) Wood was followed by Alan Cumming, cast as the Green Goblin, who departed to film *The Good Wife* TV series. The original publicity team, Boneau/Bryan-Brown, walked away after three years spent fielding inquiries about the production's postponements. It was also reported that Erich Jungwirth, general manager of the 1,932-seater Foxwoods theatre, had contacted other producers in search of shows to put on at Foxwoods, in case *Turn Off the Dark* closed early or failed to open at all. Then, at a preview in November, Reeve Carney, playing the superhero, was left swinging helplessly above the audience. Stage hands had to drag him down.

The web takes on the webslinger

Soon a different kind of web began spinning as bloggers began posting wisecracks. "Taymor has always regarded human beings in her shows as inconveniences at best," posted RJ on the New York Times website. Sean Martin from North Carolina expected "nothing less than Sondheim-level brilliance for all the delays and easy PR it's been getting". And LJeanne from New Jersey made this point: "Community theatre companies fly *their* actors for productions of Peter Pan."



However hazardous and costly they may be, Ezralow is convinced the soaring action scenes make the show. He says that developing the right approach to the aerobatics and finding a venue capable of accommodating its equipment slowed the process considerably. "Three years ago, I coordinated a workshop in Los Angeles with designers and riggers. That's when I realised we didn't have a theatre that could accommodate the show. We asked ourselves whether we wanted to put it in a tent and avoid Broadway altogether. Either way, we needed more time."

Once new producers Cohl and Jeremiah Harris "got the brass tacks of production down", Foxwoods theatre was acquired and promptly gutted: 50 steel beams, 20ft in length, were welded to roof trusses to support pulleys. The fly system alone took three months to install, and that doesn't include the time needed to customise software to control each electronically synchronised manoeuvre.

Extraordinarily, after that first preview in November, the show has been playing to full houses, with tickets for these preview performances selling for as much as \$300. The show's publicists, however, have maintained an embargo on the admission of reporters until that official March

opening night, going so far as to publicly condemn two publications for jumping the gun and just running their reviews. "While we are certainly not naive about the media scrutiny attached to this production," read a statement, "this unprecedented new development [sending critics to previews] is troubling, to say the least."

Ezralow is strangely relaxed in the face of criticism. Some journalists have noted the weakness of the script, specifically its second half. I tactfully suggest this could be partly due to an overreliance on video projection: after the interval, the puppets and puppeteers, who have shared the stage and the action with the flying actors, are sadly absent. "I agree," Ezralow enthuses, "and we're editing. What we're playing with now is the balance between the first and second acts. The first is about the Green Goblin. We could easily finish there, but we want to do something the audience hasn't seen before, so we develop the character of Arachne - who, in the second act, conjures a world that's not real, a world of illusion. We haven't quite got it yet, but when we do I think it will jettison the show into another level."

Needed: \$1m a week

The most memorable scene in *Turn Off the Dark* takes place in the first few minutes. Six women hang from silk scarves and swing out across the audience. Further scarves appear and weave up between the oscillating figures, turning the proscenium into a giant loom. The weaving women eventually land safely. Were they scared? "Dancers like to be rooted," Ezralow explains. "They aren't trying to defy gravity. But in this show, they're picked up without their control, which is scary. A talented aerial performer makes it look natural, like he's doing it all by himself. The rest freeze up."

In spite of the published criticism, or perhaps because of it, the first week of January saw *Turn Off the Dark*'s seven-day earnings overtake those of *Wicked*, the highest-grossing show on Broadway. With weekly running costs of \$1m, it has to keep it up. As I pass by Foxwoods theatre later, on a night that's threatening snow, I see a shivering mass of people queuing up, few if any grudging paying full price for what is a work-in-progress.

"You have to admit it's a phenomenon," says Ezralow. "I think some of it is great. I think some of it still needs work. But, for a moment, forget how much we've spent. We are in previews. We've had negative press. We haven't even come close to what we really want the show to be - and we are selling better than the best show on Broadway. We don't ever have to open!"



'I told the producer: Let's counter the negative press - let's photograph the cast in casts!'