

Dinner and a Musical

The Broadway Palm tackles meatier fare

by Janina Birtolo

Opening photo by Nick Adams

Quick! What do you picture in response to the phrase "dinner theater"?

of busloads of...

The traditional reaction would likely be a vision



Will Prather, executive producer/owner of the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre

senior citizens arriving to watch some old chestnut of a show, something along the lines of *The Music Man* or *Oklahoma*. Pleasant, but perhaps not particularly exciting.

Will Prather, executive producer/owner of the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre in Ft. Myers, is out to change that perception. And he's doing it in a big way—by producing two recent Broadway mega-musicals. This spring, his theater presents *Miss Saigon*, complete with the show's trademark onstage helicopter. That production will be immediately followed by Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, an extravaganza that has delighted audiences worldwide.

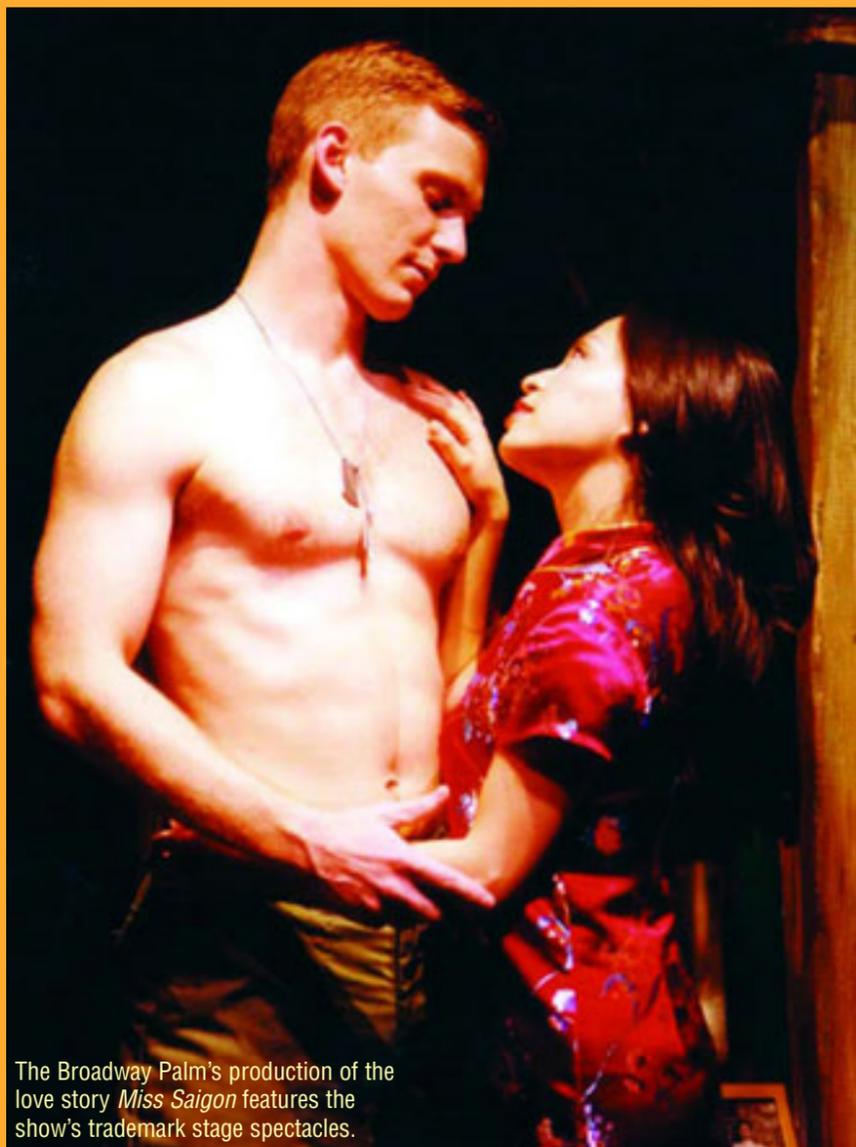
"Producing these shows reflects what I view as the future of my business, appealing to the baby boomers and yuppies," Prather explains. "I've felt the pulse of this changing audience base. There is still an appetite for classic shows, but there is also this new, adventurous customer out there. Hopefully, these shows will appeal to that market."

When the Broadway Palm opened a dozen years ago, the theater's seasons were a fairly typical mix of old standard musicals and lighthearted, farcical comedies. By the eighth season, Prather switched to an all-musical lineup. Five years ago, he started toying with the idea of presenting a nontraditional musical each year, producing both *Civil War* and *Jekyll and Hyde*.

Neither of those shows was a huge success, but Prather felt that was due to subject matter, not an audience unwillingness to embrace newer fare. So he followed those shows with productions of *Smokey Joe's Cafe* and *Footloose*, both of which were hits for the Palm.

"A lot of this stems from the philosophy I've developed over the past five years or so," says Prather. "I believe there is currently an evolution of the dinner-theater customer. With *Smokey Joe's* and *Footloose*, I began to feel the audience becoming very receptive. And I started waiting with bated breath for new musicals to become available."

Recent is one thing, but mega-musical is quite something else. Even with the rights available, you don't usually



The Broadway Palm's production of the love story *Miss Saigon* features the show's trademark stage spectacles.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BROADWAY PALM DINNER THEATRE

find local community or professional theaters willing or able to mount as spectacular a show as *Miss Saigon* or *Beauty and the Beast*. Typically, residents of Southwest Florida have to wait and hope that a touring-company version of such musicals comes to venues such as the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall in Ft. Myers or the Naples Philharmonic Center for the Arts.

What gives Prather the ability to take this kind of risk is his family's unique position as owner of three dinner theaters scattered across the country. "I

have the ability to launch a show at one of my other theaters and the opportunity to package it and take it to all three," he explains. "That presents economies of scale that make it more cost effective. *Miss Saigon* kicked off our fourth season in Arizona [last fall]. We operated at 80 percent with it and were real pleased. It was our litmus test, and it exceeded expectations." *Miss Saigon* has a company of nineteen, and, according to Prather, seventeen of the cast members from the Arizona production are scheduled to be with the show at Prather's other theaters



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BROADWAY PALM DINNER THEATRE

The theater hopes to attract both kids and adults when *Beauty and the Beast* takes the stage at the end of June.

in Pennsylvania and Ft. Myers.

Mounting essentially the same production at three theaters allows Prather to spend money on costumes and effects that might break a single theater's budget. He was able, for instance, to spend \$10,000 on *Miss Saigon*'s helicopter effect because he could split the cost three ways.

"In *Beauty and the Beast*, the levitation scene is still up in the air—pun intended," Prather says. "But we'll be replicating as much of the story line and costumes from Broadway as we can."

Despite his three-theater advantage, he admits there are limits. "If we spend \$2,000 on four new costumes, I have to ask, 'Will I make that money back?'" he notes. "That's really my role as executive producer. I spend a lot of time negotiating between the artistic director's vision, what the audience will think, and the cost benefit."

There are other costs that might not be expected. Prather took his entire production team—consisting of a director/choreographer, set designer, costume designer, lighting designer,

technical director, sound designer, and prop master—to the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire, Illinois, to see versions of the plays before starting work on their own production planning. "We're big fans of always going and seeing the shows on Broadway and in the big regional theaters," says Prather.

The costs and stress of moving the shows also need to be considered. *Miss Saigon* opened in Prather's Pennsylvania theater in March. As it moved to Ft. Myers for its late-April opening, *Beauty and the Beast* premiered in Pennsylvania for an eight-week run. After a ten-day break, the entire cast and crew of the second show arrive here for another eight weeks.

"We have five three-bedroom condos in which we house the actors here," Prather says. "The actors from *Miss Saigon* will move out on a Sunday morning. The *Beauty and the Beast* cast moves in Sunday afternoon. This is the first time we've moved two shows [back to back]. We have a great deal of trepidation and concern about whether this is

all way too risky a move."

And, always, there is the concern of how audiences will react to the shows, whether they will be attracted to and attend them. "We're really marketing *Miss Saigon* as a love story, selling that softer side of it," Prather says. "I feel we have a really wonderful production...but it's basically almost an opera. The [road] show played the Mann twice. The first time it was a monster hit. The second time it played only for a weekend and didn't do as well. But there is a knowledge of the show here. And I think we will most likely be introducing it to a brand-new audience.

"*Miss Saigon* will be presented during our shoulder season," he continues. "It's a strange time of year. We have to appeal to people who live here as well as to snowbirds. Hopefully, this show crosses over. It's so hard to find that musical that appeals to all our audience segments. This is a user-friendly production. It's not in your face."

Prather, obviously, has equally high hopes for *Beauty and the Beast*. "We're

Prather is committed to continuing to expand both the typical



The Broadway Palm has been entertaining Southwest Florida audiences for twelve years, boasting an annual attendance of more than 150,000.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BROADWAY PALM DINNER THEATRE

going to market the heck out of it to families,” he says. “It’s solid kids’ theater and family theater. But I think *Beauty and the Beast* is enough of an adult show that the seniors won’t run from it. They’ll come for the spectacle.”

Prather also expects to be helped by the decision of the Naples Dinner Theatre owners to forego a summer season this year. “This is the first summer we’re not going to have any major competition,” he notes. “We are now the only full-scale professional theater operating fifty-two weeks out of the year.”

While running three theaters provides Prather with advantages, it also makes for a very hectic schedule. During the 2004–2005 season, he oversaw the production of forty-two shows. At one point, he had eleven shows in rehearsal or production at the same time.

Yet he sees it all as worthwhile, just as he views producing these larger, more recent blockbuster musicals as the wave of the future. He talks excitedly about other shows he is considering, such as Elton John’s *Aida* and *The Full Monty*.

“We’ve aggressively started to pursue rights to shows as soon as they become available,” Prather says. “The big question becomes, when are they going to stop touring? We have two major pre-

sending houses in this area—the Mann and the Phil. After the touring stops, I want to make sure the rights become immediately available to me.”

Though Southwest Florida audiences have yet to experience it, Prather’s first foray into blockbuster productions was Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Cats*, chosen because of its name recognition and its long stint on Broadway. “It’s Andrew Lloyd Webber’s best show outside of *The Phantom of the Opera*,” Prather says. *Cats* played successfully for eight weeks in Arizona and ten weeks in Pennsylvania. “Both shows got a great audience reaction and strong word of mouth,” he says. And both became one of the all-time, top-selling shows at each theater.

Prather expects the same when *Cats* finally opens in Ft. Myers, an opening that was delayed by a touring-company production of the musical last March at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall. So he has put *Cats* on the Broadway Palm schedule for December

29 through March 4.

How the audience embraces these three mega-musicals will be “a very good barometer” of the future of the Broadway Palm, according to Prather. “If these are hits, and I think they’re going to be, it sets a good tone for the future,” he says. “It’s a tremendous opportunity for us to showcase the quality and level of theater we can produce.”

And Prather is committed to continuing to expand both the typical dinner-theater fare and the audiences that, he believes, are ready for something new and spectacular. “For the next couple of years, we’ll be thinking about how to grow, what our next step is,” he promises. Given Prather’s willingness to embrace great challenges, that next step should prove special indeed. 🍷

Miss Saigon opens at the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre on April 28 and runs through June 18. Disney’s Beauty and the Beast takes the stage on June 23 and continues through August 13. For tickets or information, call 239/278-4422 or visit www.broadwaypalm.com.

Janina Birtolo is a freelance writer based in Naples. She has been writing about Southwest Florida for the past fourteen years.



PHOTO BY NICK ADAMS, IMPACTUK.COM

Behind the Curtain

In 1987, Will Prather’s parents, Tom and Debbie, opened the Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. “They built it as their dream dinner theater,” says Prather. The couple had previously run a circuit of theaters in Pennsylvania before consolidating the business and moving the family to Lancaster, a popular tourist destination they felt had the right demographics for a dinner theater.

Prather started out at the Dutch Apple as a dishwasher, working his way up the ladder to food runner, busboy, and eventually waiter. He left Lancaster to attend Cornell University’s School of Hotel Administration, graduating in 1991, and then worked for a year for a hospitality company in Texas. “But I didn’t really gel with it,” he says.

So he returned to the family business with an eye on expansion. After a seven-month stint as the Dutch Apple’s food and beverage director, Prather “loaded up everything I owned” and moved to Southwest Florida. In October of 1993, the Prather family began a second enterprise, the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre, in Ft. Myers. Based on marketing studies and instinct, they had decided that “this community was ripe for what we do, for our product, for our dinner theater,” says Prather.

In 2001, the Broadway Palm West Dinner Theatre opened in Mesa, Arizona. Today, the Prather Family of Theatres grosses \$15 million annually, has 350 employees, and entertains half a million guests a year.

Prather serves as the executive producer/owner of all three theaters. “The best thing about my job is that it changes every couple of weeks when we open a new show,” he says. “We get to reinvent ourselves throughout an entire year many times over because we have new shows to market.”

Though Prather acted in plays as a child, these days he is content to remain behind the scenes. “In late high school, I decided that acting was not my forte and I needed to find another career path. I didn’t have the right skill set to be an actor,” he says with a laugh. “I like being the boss; I just didn’t like being one of the performers.” —Beth Luberecki

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