



BUCK STOPS HERE
Daniel Levine (plaid shirt) and ACT resident music director Bryan Perry share notes with their team during a rehearsal.

casting director and relays his casting needs. This sets in motion a two-week process filled with 300-plus Equity auditions, conducted by the Broadway casting director. Levine is then introduced to a smaller audition pool of 50 or so people. From here, director Levine and the producer, ACT executive director Katie Diamond, and the show's music director set the cast. Meanwhile, in the midst of all this prep, the current show is still running!

Aside from hiring a cast of roughly 20, each production requires 30-plus technical and design personnel. According to Levine, these are the most challenging people to find. Fortunately, Ridgefield's proximity to New York City provides access to a great talent pool.

Pre-production meeting commences, and some of the following unfolds. During this time, some of the following unfolds: building the set, developing the light plot, configuring the sound system, and contracting the musicians. All the people you don't see on stage—the light designer, scenic designer, sound designer, sound mixer, conductor, musicians contractor, director, resident mu-

Theater Magic

WHAT HAPPENS BEFORE A MUSICAL OPENS // BY MARGARET MAY

» YOU'RE SEATED, Playbill in hand, waiting for the lights to dim and that opening tune to break the anticipatory silence. Before the first note is sung and opening night applauded, there are months of planning, preparation, and palpitations.

Recently, I sat down with Daniel C. Levine, artistic director of A Contemporary Theater of CT, to get the behind-the-scenes scoop on what it takes to put on a Broadway-caliber play at the new space that on July 1 completed his first production, the wildly successful *Mamma Mia!*

How does a show come together? For starters, ACT has the ability to higher professional talent—like those seen in *Mamma Mia!* and to be seen in *Evita* in October—because it is a professional, union theater. A theater covered by the Actors' Equity Association is one that must hire professional actors and theatre personnel.

Because it contains many scenic and technical elements, a larger cast, and musicians, a musical is more expensive and more difficult to produce than a play. Each

of ACT's four annual productions requires a budget of about \$250,000.

So, how does a performance move from script to stage? About three months before any rehearsal can take place, Levine gets in touch with the theater's Broadway



Real Evita

"We felt strongly that our cast of *Evita* should be heavily comprised of Latina talent," says ACT artistic director Daniel C. Levine. "I can't wait for our audiences to see this ridiculously talented and diverse group of actors that we have put together for this production." ACT has also invited non-Equity child performers to audition for the children's ensemble, alongside the Broadway-caliber cast. Auditions will take place, by appointment, on August 22 at the theater. actofct.org

sis supervisor, choreographer, dance captain, prop mistress, make-up and wig person—are hard at work during this time.

Then, just three weeks before opening night, the cast is brought into town, and rehearsals start. During week one, they rehearse Act I. Week two, Act II. When week three arrives, all the elements previously worked on by the creative team are brought in (set, props, microphones, band and music, turn table moves, automation, sound, costumes, etc.) and Levine starts fine-tuning the interactions among all these elements. This is known as the technical rehearsal.

During this time, the creative crew also continues their production meetings, discussing the days successes, challenges, and alterations. Finally, it's time for the first preview: a rehearsal where the director gives notes, the actors can give their input, and whatever isn't working can be tweaked.

And then, just like that, opening night arrives, no more changes are allowed, and the show runs for the next month. "What people don't understand is that it looks so sleek and so smooth and so amazing on stage," says Levine. "But if you could take that away and see what

was going on backstage, it's controlled chaos. That's what I love about theater. It's amazing that it can actually work. There really is a thing called theater magic."

Working within a small playhouse such as ACT of CT does pose many physical limitations, but Levine sees these challenges as a plus. "What I love about our theater is that because there are specific limitations in terms of space and proximity to the audience and there's not a lot of wing space for set storage and prop storage and no fly rails, I think those limitations breed creativity," he says. Actors rave about

the intimate venue and tell Levine that such a connection with the audience is, indeed, magical.

However, some extra magic was definitely needed during the rehearsal of ACT's first production. Not only did the set have to be designed but so did the very building itself. "The most challenging thing to date has been rehearsing Mamma Mia! in a construction zone," says Levine. Imagine rehearsing while paint fumes invaded dress rehearsals and hammering interjected the melodies of "Money, Money, Money." Says Levine: "We'll never have to do that again."

As one performance ends, another begins. And this restart of a production means a new cast and creative team. Although this consistent change may seem daunting, Levine says it ensures each performance feels fresh. "Every production will take on a different personality," says Levine, which leaves him with a different feeling at close of each show.

Since ACT of CT is a working theater, something is always happening; so, regardless of the circumstances, the show must go on. And it always does.

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RIFFing It

>> **The Ridgefield Independent Film Festival** takes place

October 18-21. To hire staff, rent production equipment, and create hospitality, the organizers rely on donors, sponsors, and ticketbuyers. Sponsors include PepsiCo., Ancona's Wines, Ridgefield Storage Center, Urstadt Biddle Properties, IMG Digital, Hamlet Hub, the Thrift Shop, the Goldstones, Donofrios, Duncans, and Romers, and ECDC. Plus venue partners: Ridgefield Playhouse, Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield Library, Ridgefield Conservatory of Dance, and Keeler Tavern. The festival opens by awarding an emerging filmmaker named for the late Joe Consentino. Saturday evening will be capped off with a Lifetime Achievement Award presentation. Add to that a scavenger hunt, car show, popcorn tastings, youth filmmaking, and more. RIFFct.org



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