

CRAIN'S

NEW YORK BUSINESS

B'way producer stirs the plot

Brings crafty off-Broadway style, social networking to big stage, rankling old guard

By **Miriam Kreinin Souccar**

July 26, 2009 5:59 AM

In February, theater producer Ken Davenport sent out one of his numerous Twitter messages, telling the universe that he was busy raising money for *Blithe Spirit*, the Broadway revival featuring Angela Lansbury.

Shortly after, Mr. Davenport received a message from a total stranger who wanted to invest in the show. Seven days later, a \$25,000 check arrived in the mail.

"A lot of producers in this city, you can't get on the phone, let alone e-mail," Mr. Davenport says.

Though Broadway has become adept at selling tickets online, much of the way business is done harks back to the 1930s. Big theater owners still rule the roost, and producers rely on their passions and hunches when putting on a show, pooh-poohing market research for gauging audience appetite and techniques like online networking to get the word out.

New methods

Mr. Davenport, a successful off-Broadway producer who jumped on to the Great White Way this year, is trying to change the way business is done because he believes Broadway's future is at risk. Grosses are up, thanks to higher ticket prices, but audience growth has slowed and expenses are skyrocketing, making profits more elusive. Mr. Davenport says production costs must be reduced and the industry must modernize if it wants to survive.

"People are demanding more transparency and accessibility now, and if the theater industry doesn't embrace technology, we will be left by the wayside," he warns.

A technology buff, Mr. Davenport uses viral marketing to sell his shows and hires the Nielsen Co. to test material in the marketplace. A year ago, he created Broadwayspace.com, the first social network for theater-lovers. And he analyzes and questions everything the clubby industry does on his daily blog, ruffling more than a few feathers in the process. One blog entry, for example, takes on the powerful theater owners, complaining that they have all the control over who sells tickets to the producers' shows, and get a kickback from the ticketing companies to boot.

"Ken is not afraid to challenge conventional wisdom and do it publicly," says Leslie Barrett, director of integrated marketing at Serino Coyne, the biggest advertising agency focusing on Broadway. "He's controversial, and he throws stuff out there that nobody wants to talk about, but everyone reads what he has to say."

One practice he believes is ripe for reform: the use of expensive advertising agencies like Serino Coyne. For certain shows, he believes that bringing marketing in-house would be more cost-effective.

Mr. Davenport doesn't mind stirring the pot. "It's true that the average Broadway theatergoer—a 55-year-old woman—isn't using Twitter," he says. "But when the kids in college who grew up with cell phones and Facebook turn 32 and 42, that will change the face of everything we do. If we're not laying the groundwork now, we're going to be dead."



APPLAUSE: Ken Davenport's successes include *You're Welcome America*, with Will Ferrell, and *Blithe Spirit*, with Angela Lansbury.

Photo by Buck Ennis

The 36-year-old lifelong theater lover has the credentials to back up his rants. After managing numerous big-name musicals on Broadway, like *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, he started producing off-Broadway. With *Alter Boyz*, *The Awesome 80s Prom* and *My First Time* now up, he's the only independent producer to have three shows running simultaneously off-Broadway.

Good investments

This year, he stepped onto the big stage as a producer of four Broadway shows—*13*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *You're Welcome America: A Final Night With George Bush* and *Blithe Spirit*. His productions on and off Broadway have grossed more than \$100 million worldwide and are being produced in 25 countries. To date, six out of seven of Mr. Davenport's shows have recouped their original investment. In fact, had investors put \$10,000 into each of his shows, they would have gotten a 40% return on their money in four years, he says.

Mr. Davenport credits his success to his obsessive personality—"I am a control freak," he admits—and his willingness to try new things. When an employee suggested he close the money-losing *Alter Boyz* after 10 months and return the remaining 10% of investors' money, Mr. Davenport fired the staffer. He set about finding ways to keep the show alive, like moving advertising in-house and even having the spotlight operator sell T-shirts. Those and other efforts cut weekly operating expenses in half, to \$40,000, and the show became profitable in two years.

"His ability to continue to look at a problem and find a solution is exemplary," says Beverley Mac Keen, executive director of New World Stages. "He doesn't shy away from reality; he addresses things head-on."

His public airing of the industry's dirty laundry doesn't always sit well with people engaged in the world of make-believe, however. Mr. Davenport's blog, *The Producer's Perspective*, is becoming nearly as talked about in theater circles as Michael Riedel's snarky theater gossip column in the *New York Post*.

Tim Levy, a producer at Robert Boyett Theatricals who worked with Mr. Davenport on *13*—the only flop—admits he was nervous about the blog at first. "In the beginning, I wondered, 'How much of what's going on behind closed doors on a production is going to come out on his blog?'" Mr. Levy says. "But really what he does is distill the lessons learned and what he's going through."