



February 20, 2005

Broadway musicals tapping into the ticket-buying of young women

By Michael Kuchwara

NEW YORK (AP). Is girl power Broadway's not-so-secret weapon? Tapping into the female adolescent audience has been a boon for such shows as "Wicked," "Beauty and Beast," "Mamma Mia!" and even "Hairspray" and "Brooklyn The Musical." And now Broadway has "Little Women," the latest musical that has a special interest for girls and their mothers, aunts and grandmothers particularly those who are fans of the classic Louisa May Alcott novel about the spirited, would-be writer Jo March and her three sisters. It, too, is aggressively seeking those young women to fill seats.

It's no secret women buy more theater tickets than men. During the 2003-04 season, 63 percent of the Broadway audience was female, according to figures from the League of American Theatres and Producers. "Little Women," which opened last month to mixed reviews but raves for star Sutton Foster, hopes to capitalize on that female buying power.

"We have the wonderful advantage of having an unbelievably well-known and recognized brand," says Barbara Eliran, head of the Eliran Murphy Group, the musical's advertising agency. "Most new musicals don't have that luxury. People haven't heard of them, so they need to go out and establish themselves."

"Wicked," a tale of two witches in "The Wizard of Oz" before the arrival of Dorothy, is a show that managed to quickly establish itself. The musical found an enthusiastic audience in young women,

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

some of whom even paint themselves green in sympathy with the show's misunderstood heroine, Elphaba, a green witch.

"Brooklyn," in fact, subtly underscores a connection to "Wicked." Its star, Eden Espinosa, who once understudied the role of Elphaba and developed a following by doing so, figures prominently in many of the ads for "Brooklyn." The musical's story of a plucky young singer in search of her long-lost father has the fairy-tale appeal of a heroine overcoming impossible odds.

"Mamma Mia!" a well-established musical with 14 productions worldwide in seven different languages features three women in leading roles. It was created by three women producer Judy Craymer, book writer Catherine Johnson and director Phyllida Lloyd and features music by the Swedish pop group ABBA, who "write great songs for girls," according to Craymer.

"The show affects a broad spectrum of female audiences," she said. "There's a big emotional arc about its mother-daughter story that women can relate to but without the exclusion of men. And the men like 'Mamma Mia!' because the women are sexy." Craymer said that "Mamma Mia!" has great word-of-mouth among women, which makes it a good show for girls-night-out parties. Pre-wedding parties are popular, too, particularly in Las Vegas, where the musical is now in its third year.

"Hairspray" gets celebratory audiences, too, often of young women who have "Sweet 16" birthday parties. They cheer on its heroine, overweight teen Tracy Turnblad, who gets snubbed in high school and initially turned down for a teen TV dance show.

"The fact that someone who is so obviously an outsider and not self-conscious about that and, in the end, triumphs, is of great appeal to young girls," says "Hairspray" producer Margo Lion. "Not only does Tracy win sociologically integrating the dance show but also she gets the cute guy. Plus,

there's the good-natured generational conflict between mothers and daughters that also appeals to the young."

Rose McGovern, who works for American Airlines, gave a 16th birthday party for her daughter, Nicole, and 26 other young women at "Hairspray" some two years ago.

Nicole was a fan of the John Waters movie version and already had seen the stage show.

"But she wanted to see it again," McGovern recalled. "So we hired a stretch limo for 27 girls. My husband and I followed behind in our car as chaperones."

The group had dinner at a retro diner on Broadway. "We wanted a real 1950s-'60s scene," McGovern said. "The girls related to the show, especially the music and dance party. It was the best thing I could have done." Lion said it took a while for the show to filter down to a preteen and teen audience. At first, because of its positive reviews, "Hairspray" got traditional, older theatergoers.

"Many of those people weren't sure it was a family show," Lion explained. "As time has gone on, I see more and more kids in the audience. I remember when I had to first order booster seats (for the theater) and that was thrilling to me."

Unlike "Hairspray," "Little Women" has pursued a female audience, young and older, right from the start. Among the first was fashion designer Jennifer George, who wanted something she and her 10-year-old daughter, Emily, could see together.

"She (her mother) told me it was a real good movie and a book and that I would have to read it in college," said Emily, who originally did not want to go. Said mom: "It's an old-fashioned story, but, for me, the musical showed you could follow your dreams. I loved it." Emily, a theater veteran who already has seen "Hairspray," "Mamma Mia!" and "The Lion King," was equally enthusiastic after the performance.

"I liked the actress (Foster), especially when she was re-enacting her stories. I thought that was kind of cool and I loved the surprise ending," Emily said. "I told my friends at school it was really good."

Eliran is counting on that reaction multiplying. She said the musical is taking a line from one of its more favorable reviews "a must-see for mothers and daughters" and using it as their "lynch pin."

The line is being featured in the show's radio, television and print commercials. The 10-second TV spot features a drawing of the logo, as a female voice (actress Kate Burton) says, "a must-see for mothers and daughters."

The logo was designed for maximum use on posters, mugs, T-shirts, refrigerator magnets, the "Little Women" Web site and more. Created by Frank "Fraver" Verlizzo, one of Broadway's top design artists, it features graceful line silhouettes of women's profiles.

"We specifically went with a much more contemporary take on what anyone might think of 'Little Women,' keeping it simple and almost abstract," Verlizzo said in explaining the design concept. "The usual image for anything having to do with 'Little Women' is the mother sitting in a chair surrounded by her four daughters, but we wanted to give it a younger-looking spin."

And the TV ad will be shown on programs where it will have maximum impact, according to Eliran, such as "The Oprah Winfrey Show," "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," "Today" and "Good Morning America." Radio spots will be played by stations that primarily have a young or female audience.

Stories were pitched to magazines young women read Teen Vogue, Teen, Cosmo Girl, Scholastic and more, said Pete Sanders, the show's press rep. And editors of women's magazines, such as Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal, Redbook, Women's World, have been invited to see the musical, as have editors of the children's sections of metropolitan New York, Connecticut and New Jersey newspapers.

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

"This is a great time of the year for the show to open," Sanders said. "We are going into Presidents' Day holiday weekend, then school break, then Easter vacation and then summer vacation," all good times for young audiences to see the musical.

He said "Little Women" is considering selling family packs in late summer or fall, an idea that was used with the Rosie O'Donnell revival of "Grease." For that show, a packet of four tickets was sold for a discounted price. For "Little Women," the idea may be expanded to groups of six.

Can Broadway get too much of girl-power musicals, particularly when ticket prices range from \$25-\$100 for many of these shows? No one knows, but more are in the pipeline. Already planned for fall is "Princesses," a musical about a girls' boarding school putting on a version of "A Little Princess," another classic Victorian novel. Look for the musical, which has a score by David Zippel and Matthew Wilder, to tryout this summer at Seattle's 5th Avenue Theatre, Aug. 9-28.