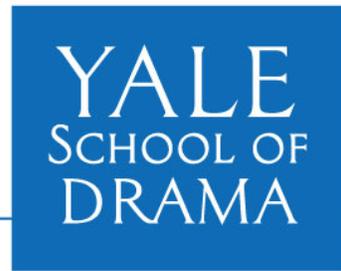


Theater Management Knowledge Base



Interview

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MICHAEL DAVID

Interviewed by Edward A. Martenson, December 15, 2010—In this conversation at Yale School of Drama, conducted in a classroom setting with students of theater management, Michael David talks about his career, producing for Broadway, and the state of Broadway in 2010. Michael David is a partner at Dodger Theatricals, a producing partnership made up of Michael David, Edward Strong, Rocco Landesman and Des McAnuff. Dodger originated at BAM in 1978, migrated to the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater, then off and on Broadway, where the group has shared in a host of Tony and Obie Awards. On Broadway, Dodger has been represented by Pump Boys and Dinettes (1982), Big River (1985), Into the Woods (1987), Prelude to a Kiss (1990), The Secret Garden (1991), Jelly's Last Jam (1992), The Who's Tommy (1993), The Music Man (revival, 2000), and Jersey Boys (2005), among others.

MARTENSON: As I understand it, you first started out in the theater by doing stagehand work, is that correct?

DAVID: I grew up in Michigan, I was the oldest of four children, and I was Davy Crockett in elementary school! [LAUGHTER] That was pretty much it! I became an intern at Local 38 when I was 16 years old in Detroit, and so each summer through the rest of high school and college, I did stagehand work. I began at the Gaitey Burlesque, which was an education of its own kind, but basically that's how I began to be backstage, and it was also just ridiculous kind of money for someone who didn't know what the devil he was doing—at the union rate! [LAUGHTER]

MARTENSON: When you entered Yale, why did

you choose the design department at the Drama School?

DAVID: It was manipulative, completely. [LAUGHTER] It was, 'How might I get in?' I had designed for school and had a professor or two who thought there was something there, so they were helpful. But if they thought I was a playwright, then I would have come in as a playwright.

MARTENSON: So what made you spend the extra time to audit the theater management courses?

DAVID: I don't think I was as good a designer as a lot of the people who were in my class. It was an amazing group of people who actually wanted to do this for a living. It was unbelievably edifying, but

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also, I couldn't draw. I would sort of set up draft sets, there used to be this little plan and you could layout perspectives on a piece of graph paper, I could do the ground plan really well and direct it.

MARTENSON: Did you discover that management and producing might be your path while you were in school, or was that something that happened later?

DAVID: No, it evolved out of wanting to just do projects outside of school. We discovered that we liked to make things happen. We formed a lighting company and ran a little lighting company that actually rented to the Dramat and some other groups. And we made a little 501(c)(3) and created this thing with the Black Panthers in the hills! It was, I suppose, what you would call producing—we didn't know what we were doing. We were naïve, but we were producing stuff, as best we could. Management was never really mentioned, you just sort of did what you did to produce these applications to the foundations and troupe around and do it. So anyway I think I just sort of backed into what is now called management, and I was here when the management program started.

MARTENSON: So that's the kind of work you looked for when you left here?

DAVID: Actually, I didn't look for any work. Harvey Sabinson, who taught here in the management program at the time, put me up for a job at a theater called the Chelsea Theatre Center in Manhattan. It was one of those great, underground, you-worked-for-nothing kinds of theaters, and grants were just starting to be made by foundations and government. They needed someone to help the guy who was doing it, and I was recommended for the gig, so I went down and got it. We then moved to BAM the year after I got there, and then the money really started flowing. It was a golden period because people like Rockefeller and Ford were giving money for what they thought was the work. I don't need to tell you those days are gone.

MARTENSON: So, skipping ahead to the founding of Dodger, I know you knew Rocco in the school. How did you get to know the rest of these folks—Des McNuff for example?

DAVID: The Dodgers all originated out of the Chelsea Theater Center. Des was the dramaturg for a year, who we had brought down from Canada when he had not done anything in the United States. He worked with us and we struck a friendship. Edward Strong was a student of mine while I was teaching at Yale, who ended coming to Chelsea, and Rocco Landesman and I had all known each other at Yale. Doug Johnson, an extraordinary illustrator, joined us, and then Sherman Warner, who was a production stage manager at The Public Theater, joined us too, all at Chelsea. So of the Dodgers, three were from the Drama School and three were outsiders. Everyone was sounding really serious with their names at the time, and we came up with Dodger—like the artful dodger, trolley dodger, Brooklyn Dodgers—it all came together as Dodger Theater and then Dodger Productions.

MARTENSON: Did you know at that time that you would be producing so much work commercially, or were you just doing work wherever you could?

DAVID: Producing anything commercially at that time was anathema to doing anything good. There were "bad" people and there were "good" people—the good people were people who didn't get paid much and were in the dirt doing the good stuff, and I must say there was a lot of good stuff being done in the dirt. Things were very political, too—it was a really juicy period in New York. And then there was Broadway. Broadway was an old boy's club: they were old and they were boys and they were white. And they were an exclusive club, so ostensibly, if you didn't want to be them, you had to do certain things to become one of them anyway. But it was what you did.

The distinction between for-profit and not-for-profit has become fuzzier and fuzzier. The difference between whether you raise money from investors to do it or you beg for money from donors to do it is almost nil. The differences are less demonstrative than they used to be.

MARTENSON: How did you find some of your first projects, like *Pump Boys and Dinettes*?

DAVID: With *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, we found this thing in a club and decided we would attempt to

do it the old-fashioned way and raise enough money to move it to the Collonades Theatre—from a 90 seat theater to 111 seats downtown directly across from The Public Theater. By the time the summer was over, we decided we greatly preferred raising money commercially. Everything was changing in terms of foundations. They'd found out that they had started all these institutions around the country and they were now needing to provide for them. So the foundations were pulling back like crazy, and government was pulling back like crazy, too. We simply found it a more appealing environment to raise money for things where someone might get it back, rather than raising it for non-profit productions, from people who weren't giving it for things to begin with.

MARTENSON: Do you remember *Pump Boys* as being a kind of turning point for you?

DAVID: I think *Big River* was the turning point for us. We bumbled our way into this community of people who didn't know who we were, in fact they didn't care who we were and didn't want us there. We got the rights, hired another Yale guy, Bill Hauptman, to do the book, Roger Miller agreed to do the music. I think Roger never read the book and never read the script, and still couldn't really write down music! You would sort of tell him the lyrics over the phone and he'd sing something and someone would transcribe it! At any rate, we were putting together our first musical! We went to Brustein, who we all got along with and fought with in a friendly manner, and he agreed to let us put it up at A.R.T. where he had moved.

And that was where Bob really felt that we'd made a terrible choice of composer, because Carly Simon lived near him on Martha's Vineyard and wouldn't that be a better choice for *Big River*? And then anecdotally, Roger, who had never been to Broadway and had never read Huckleberry Finn, came to Cambridge, to Harvard, to see his work done, and he came with a man and he stayed in a hotel, and a man sat outside his hotel room with a weapon the whole time he was there. Roger was just so intimidated by it and so afraid of what might be happening. So if you wanted changes done or whatever, you'd go through the man at the door. But anyway it was colorful!

MARTENSON: You talked about discovering that it was just more comfortable to solicit investors rather than donors, and made it sound like it wasn't really a philosophical choice.

DAVID: No, I think we just wanted to keep working. I think we were mentally ill. You know, you have to be mentally ill to want to do this. This is not a smart career choice for anyone! That's another perverse sort of way to discuss it. It's critical to be stage struck: it's like heroin. You need to be stage struck.

MARTENSON: What's the state of Broadway today, aside from the fact that you're sitting on top of a big hit with *Jersey Boys*?

DAVID: It's pretty deadly out there. Just looking at who is going to Broadway: 64% of people going are tourists, 30% of tickets bought are bought by 6% of the audience. That doesn't bode well for the future it seems to me. And now, because of this international monetary crisis, people who normally went to three or four things now go to one.

That means a few things: first, audiences are spending less on Broadway shows and Broadway tickets, and two, and this is in some ways more damaging, they're looking for something that gives them everything at once. They want a star, they want to see people fly, they want it to be a musical, and they want it to be important and about something. The thing they had gotten before in four bites they now want in one, leaving out the new, the fresh, the risky.

Basically, this economy and this audience in combination are deadly. We're already seeing that now, in at the end of 2010: there are a couple of wonderful plays on Broadway but there are no "stars" in them, so they're closing right off. Even with good reviews! It used to be that if the critics liked it—and you have to be okay with putting yourself in the hands of the critics—then you would have a chance to run. That isn't working so much anymore. There just aren't enough audiences to go around, there are too many things to see and there just aren't enough of them. Suddenly you're looking for a star because it's the only way to subsidize what you're doing. But in the case of *Elling*, which had Brenden Fraser and Denis O'Hare,

it had stars and that wasn't enough. They closed in three weeks. *A Life in the Theater* has Patrick Stewart and T.R. Knight—that's not even working. So it's really hard out there. And ticket prices are going up!

MARTENSON: How does it compare to when you got into it?

DAVID: We were so innocent and naïve at that time that I can't say exactly how it was. But we managed to have a lot of success in this place where no one liked us, knew us, or wanted us. Our first show, *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, ran three years, and our second one, *Big River*, won the Tony, and that ran for three years too. So, something had to be different because there are folks like us out there now and it much harder to do what we did.

The future of Broadway is in the hands of people that I don't know, from places I've never been. My psyche now tempers what I do, because passion has become cynicism in some ways. Success on Broadway really requires someone who wears blinders and wants to just get their show on and do it. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

MARTENSON: What is success on Broadway?

DAVID: Success on Broadway means that you've gotten your money back with no interest. That's success. And imagine that 89% don't reach that success, and only 11% do.

Student: Is there a space that we're missing between the non-for-profits and Broadway—for these plays like *Elling*—that used to be in commercial runs Off-Broadway?

DAVID: Absolutely. That's absolutely correct, Off-Broadway is now almost non-existent. We built a building Off-Broadway called New World Stages on 50th Street that is pretty much the only place now where things go, and it has been pretty successful. But twisted as things are, the two shows that are running best in the five theaters are the two Broadway shows that decided to become off-Broadway shows—which is not what the use of that space was intended to be. But even though there are still places where some activity is still bubbling up, Off-Broadway is just not a place where you can

think about making your money back anymore.

There are two other things to consider: there is no Tony recognition if you're not "on Broadway," and some people want that recognition. And the other thing is that on Broadway you get all sorts of attention from the media and the national market. So the question was, can a show as wonderful, artful, meaningful, temporal as this, support itself in this dangerous, expensive, unwelcoming, unsupportive place like Broadway? Or could you put it into a smaller, perhaps subsidized theater downtown and just have it run in perpetuity? When you look at a show like *Angels in America*, we had a real discussion about what to do, but in the end, the best decision was to ask the show to support itself, because on Broadway it would get the kind of outsized megaphone that it got. If it had gone downtown, it wouldn't have. There just isn't that alternative place.

MARTENSON: You talked about the line between non-profit and for-profit theater blurring, but your partners seem to have different thoughts about it. Des McAnuff has made a career of blurring the distinction, and Rocco Landesman has, in effect, said that the non-profits have not entirely lived up to the promise that they would be a true alternative to the commercial theater.

DAVID: The fact is the non-profits aren't getting the support that they need and have gotten in the past, so they're desperately looking out there for work that will bring them money. Many millions of dollars a year go to the La Jolla Playhouse because of *Jersey Boys*—it's the largest single donor that they've ever had in their life, and it happens annually. So there they are, feeling really good, setting up an endowment like the Public did with *Chorus Line*, in a context where everyone is licking the pavement. So you want your hit—you want your *Jersey Boys*, you want your *Chorus Line*. It's gone so far that a number of the non-profit theaters have formed investor groups among their board members and donors.

But for me, as someone who loves the theater, we're most excited about going back and finding that stuff that we can get really heated up about, rather than finding the stuff that is just accessible. So for me, the hope for good theatrical works in this

country is not on Broadway, it's out there in these places that theoretically exist to do what we can't: develop talent and be daring. That's what turns me on. And it's really difficult when you see non-profit people do the same sort of handicapping that we do in the commercial world about whether the show will work.

Student: Do you think that audiences don't want the artistically challenging work, or is it not being produced and so audiences aren't getting to see it?

DAVID: Well, success on Broadway has always been the mutual attempt to merge art and commerce. The difference is that the commerce part of it is the helium to keep the thing that's good or bad going. A show like *Gospel at Colonus*, which had Morgan Freeman plus a huge chorus of 70 people singing gospel music, was really great and some of the critics really loved it, but it just couldn't afford to pay for itself on Broadway. It had done wonderfully at subsidized places like the Guthrie and BAM, but that was not on Broadway, where it had to pay for itself.

MARTENSON: Is the relationship with your investors on Broadway changing?

DAVID: The investor thing is healthier than it used to be. It's hard to raise money on Broadway. People who have money used to just want to go to opening night and tell their friends that they were there. You would encourage an investor by promising them certain financial perks: 'You'll get a little bit of the profit. You'll get a little bit of the gross.' To get billing on the title page it used to be big, like \$500,000 to \$750,000 for a play, and a lot more on a musical.

What's happening is now the parameters have changed. The guy who used to put \$500,000 to get above the title is now the woman who can put up \$50,000, combines with her friends and they put up as a group: they're all above the title. Suddenly you'll see that there are 40 people above the title who, by the way, are called "producers" now, not investors. No one is just an investor anymore, everyone is a producer. It's the silliest thing I've ever heard of.

They want to be involved. Not only do they want to

be above the title, but if you win the Tony, they want to be able to go up on stage. If you've ever watched the Tony Awards, you'll see a stampede of people coming from the audience onto stage as producers to get the award. They want the right, contractually, to be at the ad meetings every week—they want to be there every week to put their two cents in. Now, Broadway is a lot of things, but a democracy is what it isn't. It used to be that if you wanted any sort of control, then you took a risk for the losses. In a limited partnership, those with the control are the general partners, and if you want to be the general partner, you put the money up and take a risk on the losses. Then, you are more than welcome to come to that meeting and have your two cents. But none of these people are general partners: they are protected. They lose only what they put into it.

Producing means you want responsibility for making decisions. For better or worse, you're happy to take information in, you're willing to collaborate, but in the end, the buck has to stop somewhere. You want these new investors to learn, and this is one way you can buy your way in to doing more theater, but it is a very unproductive way to keep anything alive when you've got to please 40 people in a room who've given you this and this and this.

MARTENSON: Is there such a thing as a typical investor?

DAVID: There are people who are relatively wealthy people who want to do this. When I grew up, there were young girls waiting to be debutantes. Similarly, there are people all over the world who are waiting to be Broadway producers. They have the money and they want to do it, and God knows Broadway needs them! And so it creates this situation. It's moneyed folks who need the spin—it's like buying jewelry. That's not to say that some of these people aren't stage struck—that really happens. But there's nothing worse than, during previews, having your partners at the theater every night hugging actors or giving notes. That can be suicidal.

MARTENSON: Is there a change in behavior of the same kind of people as before, or is there a change in the type of person?

DAVID: There are a lot of younger people investing. They have no experience with being a major investor or coming to opening night—they want in! There are folks who have let them in, so you can't stop it. Being involved is now one of the elemental expectations of investing in Broadway.

MARTENSON: Can you tell us the capitalization for *Jersey Boys*?

DAVID: Proudly. The Broadway capitalization was \$7 million.

MARTENSON: Do you recall how long it took to recoup?

DAVID: Significantly less than a year. But that's an anomaly.

Student: How many investors do you have?

MARTENSON: We're the only general partner. There are three small syndicates—the four of us above the title, and one individual investor, and then there are three others 'in association with'. So if we make a distribution, it probably goes to 45 people total. All of those other people besides us at Dodger, including the others next to us above title, do not and cannot go to meetings. We have other meetings with them, but they don't come to our weekly meetings. Almost every investor on *Jersey Boys* hadn't invested on Broadway before. We were grateful for them because it was a really hard raise—it was when jukebox musicals were getting a real hard rap. We had the good fortune of not spending a dime on it before coming into town because everyone was just ignoring us, which we thought was great, so audiences could just come on in and see if they liked it or not—and they certainly did, so it worked out well.

MARTENSON: If you had done it 20 years ago, can you guess how long it would have taken to recoup?

DAVID: It would have been less. *Big River* was done on a zero-based budget: how much can we raise? We were able to raise two and a half million dollars, so that's what it cost! There was some real benefit in knowing that you had the capital that you could spend. Had we not gotten good reviews,

then we would have been dead ducks. But \$7 million dollars now—that's nothing for big musicals, especially considering you have to pay. And now *Jersey Boys* is in its sixth year on Broadway. There are four sit-down companies and another on tour. The cumulative gross is past \$1 billion.

Student: How involved are you in the development of a show that you decide to produce?

DAVID: We are really hands on. *Jersey Boys* began with two guys who came to our office with an idea—they had an 80 page treatment and they said, 'Would you take a look at this?' It was called *Oh What a Night* and it was a fictionalization, kind of like *Guys and Dolls* meets *The Four Seasons*. We said, 'This seems interesting, but don't write another word, you need a director. And there's only one person, it's Des,' who happened to be one of my partners. They met, and it didn't work at all because Des didn't like the book. And I didn't either, but I thought there was something there. Des told me that he had an idea to make the show about the *Four Seasons*, and it'd be like a documentary. The music would be performance, not to advance the plot. I told Des that he should meet with them and tell them the idea. If they walk, they walk, but if they don't, then it will happen. So that second meeting happened, and I got the call from both of them saying that they thought it was a good idea and they could work together.

Then the project went off to La Jolla, where Des was artistic director. Any of these projects that to go to other theaters—we've already sort of put together these teams. They're embraced by the out-of-town theater completely, we give it to them, and then afterwards, we get them back.

Student: When you enhance a non-profit theater's production, are you also looking for them to produce sets that you can use for the commercial production, or create elements that can be used for future productions?

DAVID: No. Our aspirations from the beginning are to discover anything we can that is unquantifiable about that show—how does the chemistry work, does anyone like it, does our idea work. So we're putting money toward the

acquisition of wisdom. We put 6 to 9 months in between paying tuition to learn what you've got, to deciding whether to go the next step or not. And it does a couple of things, but one of the things it does is that it takes the pressure off that little theater. We tend to come with most of the team together, but then they cast it with us, and the minute they sign the contract with us, it's theirs. We don't want our name to be anywhere, or even thanked. It's not that they don't ask what we think, but the point is that our team is already in there, we stand away, we come to opening night—I went to two rehearsals of *Jersey Boys* at La Jolla—but I think because we want no tangible consequence, it's theirs.

Student: Do you see yourself as a venture capitalist?

DAVID: No. [LAUGHSTER] But someone once said, 'Do you gamble in Vegas?' And I said, 'Well I have a really big gamble in Vegas—I've got *Jersey Boys* running there!'