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Broadway in the desert: Defining success for the Broadway musical on the Las Vegas Strip

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BROADWAY IN THE DESERT: DEFINING SUCCESS FOR THE BROADWAY

MUSICAL ON THE LAS VEGAS STRIP

by

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ABSTRACT

Broadway in the Desert: Defining Success for the Broadway Musical on the Las Vegas Strip

By

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This thesis will focus on the Broadway musical and its introduction onto the Las Vegas Strip, its growth in popularity as a viable entertainment choice for the tourist industry, and its current affiliation with specific resorts. Several Broadway musicals will be examined in an effort to discover elements contributing toward their success. I will briefly reflect upon the history of Broadway musicals as related to the Las Vegas Strip. Next I will explore the recent trend of resort casinos investing in venues aimed at housing a specific musical. The majority of my research information will be obtained from interviews, local periodicals and the Las Vegas Visitor and Convention Center. When this data is compiled and evaluated, I hope that I will be able to define the elements responsible for the success or lack thereof, the Broadway musical on the Las Vegas Strip.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Las Vegas Strip has been dubbed "The Entertainment Capital of the World" and does all it can to live up to its moniker. By the time tourists reach the city limits on Interstate 15, they are assaulted with brightly lit billboards inviting them to experience all the city has to offer. Tourists arriving via McCarran International Airport hear celebrity voices above moving walkways. Riding the escalator down to the baggage claim area places the visitor in nose-hair closeness of an enormous billboard of (at the time I write) Celine Dion. Bags arrive while visitors gaze at billboards touting must-see entertainment and observe an enormous video panel continuously running clips (with sound) featuring the more exclusive entertainment choices....and that's just the beginning.

Shuttles and cabs promote entertainment, restaurants and anything else to do with Las Vegas by attaching small billboards to the trunks or sides of their vehicles. For first-time visitors, the initial experience of Las Vegas must border on sensory overload. Neon lights, enormous hotels and surreal architecture visually spar with each other as visitors pass musical fountains, a fiery volcanic eruption, and a variety of outrageous displays all intended to lure crowds into resorts. Las Vegas does all it can to introduce visitors to the plethora of fun and entertainment that can happen "Only in Vegas" (Cling, "Avenue Q Intersects").
The moniker "The Entertainment Capital of the World" combined with the new Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority campaign "What happens here, stays here," promises anonymity in a surreal world and encourages visitors to venture beyond the acceptable boundaries of their ordinary lives. I have personally witnessed tourists undergo this transformation while on a flight destined for Las Vegas. I was seated beside seemingly normal baby boomers intending to vacation in Las Vegas. Despite difficult jobs and obvious fatigue, they giddily revealed their plans that included gaming until the early hours of dawn and "checking out a show or two." This average looking couple viewed Las Vegas as an opportunity to step outside of their lives into the world of chance, indulgence and a dizzying menu of entertainment options.

Las Vegas promises wealth to visitors who gamble but in actuality it is the casinos who profit. In 2005 gaming revenue for Las Vegas was a reported $7.6 Billion- largely the result of 38,566,717 tourists who graced our city that year (Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority, "VEGAS FAQ SHEET"). In order to sustain the illusion of winning, the Las Vegas landscape is constantly in flux as it tries to find new and exciting ways to attract (and distract) tourists. The Las Vegas skyline manifests this idea. In the last ten years, The Strip has torn down so many resorts that imploding a hotel has become a kind of circus sideshow where locals and visitors gather to witness the event.

Las Vegas is probably the only city in the world intent on regularly recreating itself. Cities traditionally protect, promote and often revive their historical elements. This philosophy is practically antithetical in Las Vegas. What may seem ruthless to an outsider is actually just Las Vegas' simple response to profit and loss. Older structures on The Strip usually earn less revenue than those that have undergone upgrades or been
rebuilt. For example, Steve Wynn purchased The Desert Inn in 2000 and very quickly closed the resort, although he did keep a small area of the hotel open to display his art collection (Chris). Rather than improving an existing structure, Wynn imploded The Desert Inn and replaced it with his new, $2.7 billion resort, Wynn Las Vegas (LVCVA, “It’s a Wynn-Win”).

Las Vegas is a city short on sentimentality because its identity is driven by the gaming economy. Everything else is a necessary distraction. What does an erupting volcano, gondolas manned by opera singers, fountains synchronized to music, small versions of the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty, a beam of light so strong that it is visible from space and a 300 anti-gravity ride called "The Sure Shot" have to do with gambling? Absolutely nothing! Distractions in the form of entertainment dull the sting of losing money at a slot machine or a table. It is a necessary smokescreen needed to keep tourists happy and gaming revenue up. While visitors have fun at the tables and enjoying all Las Vegas has to offer, gaming executives study data that reflect crowd response in a myriad of ways, including how much money they’re gambling. Gaming revenues justify Las Vegas’ willingness to repeatedly spend millions of dollars each time it decides to change its image, be it a physical structure, aesthetic style or entertainment.

(Years ago I worked on a small cruise line called Sea Escape. The company was based in Florida where three small cruise ships offered day cruises into international waters. The ships provided a variety of entertainment, decent food, an array of fun activities and a very busy casino. Their business model gained them national recognition because of their reported gaming revenues. The owners understood gaming profits far surpassed the cost of other services provided on a day cruise. Traditional seven-day
cruises could never match the gaming profits achieved by Sea Escape. A friend who worked as a dealer on the ship revealed that her job on Sea Escape was extremely desirable because of the daily influx of "fresh" passengers. She noted that passengers were known for budgeting the same amount of money for gaming, whether it be a seven-day or a one-day cruise. Other than rough seas, nothing slowed down "play" on a Sea Escape cruise.)

Las Vegas has always been a city built on changing landscapes, literally and figuratively. Surrounded by the Mojave Desert, it offered water to Mormons and other pioneers headed to Utah. It defied prohibition laws and offered an escape for railroad workers and other laborers with saloons and dance halls. The 1940s introduced the Mafia and the beginnings of the Las Vegas Strip. And by the 1950s, Las Vegas was renowned for its entertainment, divorces and even quicker weddings (Moran 7).

Las Vegas scoffed at the brutality of the Mojave Desert and granted hotels names like the Tropicana and the Flamingo. Both offered enormous pools and spas with lush, tropical landscapes providing refuge for guests sunbathing in 100-degree plus summer temperatures. Time stood still in casinos where clocks did not exist and daylight was difficult, if not impossible to find.

When Frank Sinatra arrived in the early 1950s, Las Vegas appeared to be the final stop of his career. Instead, the Sands Hotel provided him with the opportunity to reinvent himself and shake off his image as a teen idol. Sinatra quickly learned that a hotel lounge was the perfect place for artistic experimentation. In no time, the teen idol was transformed into a classy crooner. Stars like Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr.
discovered that in Vegas, a new image could be created and The Rat Pack was born (Paskevich, "Stage Struck").

The same can be said for Elvis Presley. After his military service in the Korean War, Elvis and The Colonel traveled to Las Vegas in hopes of reviving his career. After a few wobbly attempts, he reshaped his image and earned the legendary title, "The King" (Weatherford 130-131). In 1969, Elvis signed a deal with the International Hotel (now Hilton) that was wildly successful and lucrative. "Elvis would set every record imaginable for consecutive showroom sellouts and his larger-than-life personality helped generate even more publicity for Las Vegas" (Paskevich, "Stage Struck").

By the 1980s, the glittery, rhinestone image of Las Vegas had tarnished. With "The Rat Pack" gone and topless productions like Jubilee and The Follies Bergere left to promote the classic, albeit dated, image of Las Vegas, the town was clearly in a rut. Around this time, Bill Murray created the popular character of Nick Winters on Saturday Night Live. Nick Winters was a "lounge lizard" who entertained his guests with a form of self-indulgent singing and was particularly fond of singing the theme to Star Wars (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Murray). Murray’s mocking of the Vegas nightclub act became legendary. The reference was clear; Las Vegas, once admired, was now passé. A city that prided itself for setting the pace in trends had stumbled.

By the early 90s, Las Vegas distanced itself from the "The Rat Pack" image and went after the Disney revenue by building a more family-friendly environment. Twenty-seven acres on the northern section of The Strip were made into a water park called "Wet N’ Wild" and MGM built a $200 million Adventure Park on thirty-three acres. Circus Circus offered the Adventure Dome with endless fun for kids, and New York - New York
provided arcades and a rollercoaster reminiscent of Coney Island. The Mirage offered *Siegfried and Roy*, a magic act involving Royal White Tigers. Treasure Island staged evening pirate shows complete with cannons; pyrotechnics and sinking ships and The Stratosphere built thrill rides atop its three hundred foot tall structure (Paskevich, "Stage Struck").

The attractions drew families but not the expected revenues. By the time the *Las Vegas Review Journal* reported "The counties' biggest [strip] clubs generate profit margins of about thirty-five percent better than the typical Strip Megaresort," resorts were already scrambling to recoup losses. Dave Berns' article also comments that The Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority "does not monitor spending at area strip clubs, believing that visitors would not be forthcoming about such expenses" (Berns). Besides reporting enormous profits, strip clubs were looking to upgrade their own image. For example, The Sapphire Gentleman’s Club opened at a reported cost of $30 million. Dennis DiGorio, then director of Operations at Club Paradise simplifies the issue: "Parents don’t drink as much, they don’t gamble as much and they like to go to bed early. The casinos have realized that and are now imitating strip clubs, not children’s theme parks" (Coman).

This collective metamorphosis continues today. MGM closed down its Adventure Park and replaced it with "one of the most erotically charged shows on The Strip—Le Femme" (Coman). Writer Liz Benston suggests this decision was a reaction to "high end nightclubs that have become important money centers for casinos after hours" (Megaclubs Go Mainstream). Resorts now entice tourists into clubs by displaying billboards of scantily clad women holding specialty Martinis. Treasure Island President
Scott Sibella admitted tourist behavior triggered the change in landscape: "Any time of
night there'd be a long cab line of people wanting to get away from the casino or go to a
dance club" (Benston). Ultralounges are now the desired evening fare. These sensual
nightclubs can be found in all the resorts and are filled with beautiful men and women
longing to see and be seen. To sit at a table requires the purchase of a bottle of alcohol
that usually cost a minimum of $250 and tables are in high demand.

Treasure Island became TI with the pirate battle recast as *The Sirens of TI*. Instead of
beefy pirates, salacious girl-pirates now battle with each other. At New York New York,
Cirque du Soleil opened *Zumanity* on August 14, 2003 (Clarke, "Cirq du Soleil"). This
loosely based plot explicitly considers multiple forms and practices of sexuality. This
production has been well received and fits the bad boy image embraced by both younger
and older crowds. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority 2005 Visitor
Profile Study reports that although the majority of tourists are still baby boomers "...the
number of Generation X visitors drawn to this destination is growing" (LVCVA,
"Visitors Getting Younger"). Resorts are competing for this market thus encouraging
more "adult" choices in entertainment.

It is said that a mayor reflects the flavor of a city. According to Mayor Oscar
Goodman, the flavor of Las Vegas is Bombay Gin. Once a defense lawyer for the local
Mafia, Mayor Oscar Goodman is as outrageous and as unapologetic as Las Vegas (Smith,
"Judge Rips Prosecutor"). In a world where sound bites can destroy even the most skilled
politician, Mayor Goodman is seemingly untouchable. Whether threatening to chop off
fingers of graffiti artists, sharing his love of alcohol with elementary school students, or
kicking the homeless out of public parks, Goodman still seems to maintain a popular
status (Wiendenkeller). In a city where the Mafia and The Rat Pack hosted all night parties, where gaming can be found on The Strip or at your neighborhood grocery, and where UltraLounges and R-rated late-night shows dominate the scene, Goodman's style embraces the "bad boy" element of a city that promises "What happens here, stays here" (Morrison).

Although family-friendly entertainment choices still exist, Las Vegas clearly caters to the adult community. The language referring to hotels on the Las Vegas Strip has been modified. "Resort" is the word used when referring to the entire property including the casino, hotel and surrounding land. "Hotel" now refers to the guest rooms and the "casino" refers to the gaming areas. This mature and more exclusive image of the properties on The Strip now include five star restaurants, including those winning the prestigious James Beard Award. Resorts offer personal pampering including day spas and international shopping. Entertainment has broadened to include large-scale productions by Cirque du Soliel, Celine Dion, Elton John, The Blue Man Group and major rock concerts while Mamma Mia seems to be the only example of a Broadway musical that has secured a place in "The Entertainment Capital of the World."

In February 2003, Mamma Mia opened at the Mandalay Bay (Weatherford, "Mamma Mia: On Track"). So far, it has defied gravity and continues to run successfully in its full form complete with two acts and an intermission. Anxious to recreate the success of Mamma Mia, resort owners have jumped on the Broadway bandwagon with Steve Wynn leading the charge. Wynn’s broad support of the arts continues with his commitment and investment to bring Broadway to the Wynn Las Vegas by successfully recruiting two
different sets of producers from Broadway to recreate their Tony Award Winning Musicals, *Avenue Q* and *Spamalot*.

With the combination of 38 million visitors traveling through Las Vegas (Las Vegas Visitor and Convention Center, 2005 VEGAS FAQ) and a population of 1.6 million in the Las Vegas Area (Clark County, Nevada Page), one would think the Las Vegas Strip could absorb more than one "resident" Broadway musical. But at present, *Mamma Mia* is the only production that has earned this title. In the past twelve months, *Avenue Q* and *Hairspray* have failed. *Avenue Q* closed nearly eight months after opening and *Hairspray* lasted a mere four months. All eyes are now focused on *Phantom – The Las Vegas Spectacular* while plans move forward to open *The Producers* and *Spamalot*.

The 2005 Las Vegas Visitor and Convention Center VEGAS FAQ Sheet report the average length of stay for the Las Vegas Visitor was 3.5 days. The average gambling budget per visitor was $627 (up from $545 in 2004) and the average budget for entertainment per visitor was only $49.93. This information raises important questions: How do all these $80-$125 shows (*Mystere*, *A New Day*, *O, Love, Mamma Mia*, etc.) stay alive? Is it a much smaller portion of the 38 million visitors who purchase tickets for large-scale productions? When this question was presented to one of the producers of *Hairspray*, Neil Miller, he suggested the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority's numbers suggested the average entertainment budget reflected a daily expenditure. If this is true, then each visitor spends closer to $175 per visit, which suggests visitors either spend the majority of their budget on a large show, or spread it out over the course of their vacation. What is not reported is the number of comps given on any night to employees, guests and vip's. Shorter stays might result in a faster turnover rate and
inadvertently improve ticket sales. It also seems that the traditional Las Vegas visitor is more likely to make impulse purchases since the environment alludes to the "chance" mentality, thereby increasing the likelihood of last-minute impulse ticket sales.

Originally, my thesis was to focus on the 2004 Tony Award winning Best Musical, Avenue Q (IBDB). Kevin McCollum, Jeffrey Seller, Robyn Goodman and the rest of the show's producing team chose to skip the expected national tour and accepted an open-ended engagement at the yet-to-be-opened Wynn Las Vegas. This decision caused a wave of reactions among the Broadway Community equivalent to a tsunami. The decision was unprecedented in the history of the Tony Awards. I believed this bit of Las Vegas history was worthy of documentation and suitable for this thesis. Avenue Q's move directly to The Strip created a positive discourse suggesting Las Vegas was beginning to "theatrically" catch up with the other major cities. In a city where public libraries house art galleries and theatrical rental space, Las Vegas has a reputation for treating art as an afterthought. The announcement of other musicals to follow and Steve Wynn setting the pace hinted that the Broadway musical would soon corner a significant portion of Las Vegas' entertainment pie.

This belief was reflected in an article written by Anthony Del Valle, drama critic for the Las Vegas Review Journal. He mused, "the lines between Vegas and New York grow(s) more blurred with each season" ("Venetian's Shorter 'Phantom'"'). This article was written before the opening of Avenue Q and Hairspray. Del Valle was referring to a tour brochure commenting that Mamma Mia, Avenue Q and Phantom of the Opera would be running in Las Vegas simultaneously with their Broadway counterparts. Although the
brochure proved incorrect, both it and Del Valle voiced a hope shared among many in the theatrical community.

When I attempted to gather information for my thesis, I quickly learned that no one within the Las Vegas production of *Avenue Q* would disclose pertinent information about the production. In a desperate moment, I made a cold call to The Wynn and was able to speak with someone closely involved in the production. Although my contact was unwilling to share specific information, he did give me valuable guidance. He requested anonymity and then identified a significant difference between Las Vegas productions and productions on Broadway. Las Vegas was not required to publicly disclose financial information specific to their productions unlike Broadway shows that disclosed weekly financial information to *Playbill*. He strongly suggested *Avenue Q* was not losing money and bluntly informed me that the focus of the thesis was wrong. To paraphrase my source,

"You're asking the wrong question. *Avenue Q* met its financial obligations, had a reasonable production budget, got wonderful local and national reviews, and was extremely well received by the public. On Broadway, we consider that a success. The question you need to ask is: how does Las Vegas define success for the Broadway musical? Even better, can a Broadway musical be successful in Las Vegas? *Is Mamma Mia* a measurable standard of success or an anomaly? That's what you need to ask."

My source was correct. No one had looked at the landscape and tried to evaluate the Broadway musical as a form of entertainment with definable elements. Gathering substantial information for this thesis has been a challenge. Information has been limited..."
with the majority gathered from local papers and sources that demand to remain anonymous for fear of losing their jobs. Two interviews I did manage to obtain were tremendously insightful and have become my most precious research items. Because resorts will not disclose basic questions regarding contracts and financial agreements, it is impossible to make specific comparisons of one Broadway musical in Las Vegas to another. This lack of disclosure is distinctly different from Broadway and although an impediment, must be recognized as an element specific to the Las Vegas Strip. Las Vegas is not Broadway and I suggest that the current perspective must be reexamined in order to better understand this situation.

This thesis has been developed in the midst of a trend wherein resorts attempt to incorporate the Broadway musical as a permanent choice for entertainment on The Strip. This thesis will examine the history of Broadway musicals on the Las Vegas Strip and then focus on more recent works that have attempted a "resident" status. I hope to identify related elements and observable patterns. This information might be a useful tool for producers considering the Las Vegas Strip as a location for their next Broadway musical. I also suggest this thesis might give the theatrical community of Las Vegas a more informed perspective in regard to this subject rather than one based in an emotional desire to see Las Vegas as the next "Great White Way."
CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF THE BROADWAY MUSICAL ON THE LAS VEGAS STRIP

The Las Vegas Strip has had a lengthy relationship with the Broadway musical reaching back as far as the 1905s. Mike Weatherford's *Cult Vegas: the Weirdest! The Wildest! The Swingin’est Town on Earth*, documents several Broadway musicals present in the 1960's. Weatherford notes in 1963 The Dunes produced *Guys and Dolls* starring Betty Grable and The Thunderbird produced a shortened version of *South Pacific* that ran for six months. In 1968, Caesars Palace produced a 100-minute version of *Fiddler on the Roof*. A very young Hal Prince directed the production and Theodore Bikel starred as Tevye (22-23). On October 24, 2006, Hal Prince visited The University of Nevada, Las Vegas and spoke for an hour to students in the Theatre Department. When queried about his experience with *Fiddler*, he remarked that the production had been surprisingly well received and that it actually ran for four years! (Prince Lecture). Twenty-seven years later, while performing the same role of Tevye at The Alladin Center for the Performing Arts, Bikel commented on the 1968 experience: "It was much harder than the full show, believe me...I did it twice a night, seven nights a week" ("Bikel Returns to Las Vegas").

In his book, Weatherford reported that the 1970 production of *Hair* ran for 200 performances at the International Hotel (now Hilton) (22). The musical's association with the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and concern that the production might incite civil
disobedience caused the City of Las Vegas to hire six additional policemen for the opening. No arrests were made. The Undersheriff reported his officers couldn't discern the performers from the crowd and defended his position "What would it look like if we busted in there and hauled off a bunch of screaming nudists...We would be playing right into their hands" (22-23).

In 1993, Les Miserables arrived at the Cashman Theatre and performed to sold-out audiences (Cling, "It Will Play in Peoria"). The overwhelming response to Le Miz hinted that Las Vegas might financially support a Broadway musical. Larry Griffith, the facilities manager for the Cashman Theatre (part of the Cashman Field Center), commented, "not only do we have a theatre to put these [musicals] on in, we have a market. People are starved for this sort of thing. We got so many calls after Le Miz asking, 'When are you going to do more?'" (Cling, "National Touring Companies").

An article written three years after this event quoted the executive producer and associate director of Les Miserables: "You never equate Las Vegas with this kind of entertainment...I've got to hand it to Las Vegas, they were tremendous in February '93" (Wetherford, "Groundbreaking 'Les Miz'").

On a personal note, from 1987 to 1988 I was in the National Tour of Singin' in the Rain produced by Troika. Las Vegas was a stopover where the entire cast, crew and musicians went a bit wild. In the opinion of our producers and from what we observed, Vegas was not considered a good fit for a Broadway musical.

The profitability of Les Miz convinced producers of Baci Management, a Baltimore-based touring company, that Las Vegas could be a legitimate stop on a tour route. Baci returned to the Cashman Theatre and offered a "Broadway Series Package" beginning
with *Evita* on December 26, 1993 (Cling, "National Touring Companies"). Regrettably, the shows averaged an audience capacity of 51 percent, well below the industry average of 72 percent, as defined by Greg Patterson, Director of Press for the Orange County Performing Arts Center (Cling, "It Will Play Peoria").

A 1995 article by Carol Cling of the *Las Vegas Review Journal* includes a comment by Robert Goulet, who starred in the 1994 production of *Camelot* that concluded the Broadway Series offered by Baci. His words illustrate the uncertain relationship between Las Vegas and the Broadway musical: "People are afraid of Las Vegas as a theatre town...A lot of people believe a legitimate show can't make it in Las Vegas, we have to change that...we can't be the only town with a million people and no theatre" (Cling, "It Will Play").

Ironically, Troika changed its opinion of Las Vegas in 1993 brought *Starlight Express* to the Las Vegas Hilton under a 5-year contract. All it took was 5 months of negotiations and a trip to London and Germany by Vice President of Marketing, Tom Willer. An article in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* quote's Tom Willer's intentions, "We want to run a showroom for 50 weeks a year." The facade of the Elvis Showroom was exchanged with $9 million dollars of renovation and replaced with Andrew Lloyd Webber's "high tech musical version of *The Little Engine that Could*." Willer admitted the 1500 seat showroom was too small for rock concerts and too big for the traditional Vegas Act. He believed it would be well suited for *Starlight Express* (Weatherford, "Starlight Express").

*Starlight Express* opened on Broadway at the Gershwin Theatre on March 15, 1987 and ran for 761 performances (IBDB). The Hilton's production was reduced to ninety-minutes but contained five more songs than to the original Broadway production. Set
Designer John Napier, also famous for the *Les Misérables* giant, turntable-like set, designed the Las Vegas production. Hilton executives hoped the spectacle of the show would give *Starlight Express* "a jump on the other high-tech attractions headed for The Strip" (Weatherford, "Starlight Express").

One "high-tech attraction" was *EFX*, created specifically for the *MGM* in 1995. This $50 million musical extravaganza starred Michael Crawford (of *Phantom of the Opera* fame) surrounded by a cast of leggy showgirls, an unmemorable plot and special effects that included a giant, hydraulic dragon (Paskevich, "Stage Struck"). Vice President of Marketing, Tom Wilier hoped that *Starlight Express* would provide the same kind of branding that Elvis had brought to the International (Hilton) in the 1970s. Wilier stated, "Word of mouth will sell this show...that's why you've got to build it big-it's like *Field of Dreams*" (Weatherford, "Starlight Express").

Looking back on the 90's, one can see how Wilier would believe *Starlight Express* could be a hit in Las Vegas. This large-scale musical provided high-tech bang, special effects, was written by the hugely popular Andrew Lloyd Webber and had both a Broadway and international reputation. It was appropriate for families (what kid doesn't love trains and high-speed chases?) and since the original Broadway version had long since closed and the only other productions of *Starlight Express* were running in Europe, it was an "exclusive" event. In an article written for the *Las Vegas Review Journal*, Mike Paskevich called the show, "flashy, family-oriented and features a hard-working cast in what is surely the most physically demanding show in town" ("Webber Show Prepares").

While the cast of *Starlight Express* literally skated circles around the old Elvis Showroom at breakneck speeds, other Broadway musicals found pockets of space on the
Las Vegas Strip. In a 1995 March issue of the Las Vegas Review Journal, Mike Paskevieh reviewed a "worthy production" of Guys and Dolls at the Sheraton Desert Inn. Paskevieh’s article suggested the reduction of headliner acts is "a reflection of the city's push toward a better rounded selection of entertainment options." Chief Executive Officer, Burton Cohen, was obviously testing the waters: "It's our intention to mix and match headliners with plays. If I find a show available such as A Chorus Line or Sophisticated Ladies, we'll go with it, but our intention is to keep stars as part of our policy" ("Number of Headliners").

In an effort to recoup previous financial losses in addition to refreshing the public’s memory of the marvels of musicals, Les Miserables returned to the Cashman Theatre in January 1996 (Weatherford, "Groundbreaking"). Recognizing that Le Miz was a cash cow, UNLV happily invested $385,000 to encourage the production's return. In addition, $17,000 had been invested in upgrading the acoustics of the Cashman Theatre and the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Center Authority contributed an additional $30,000 for other improvements (Weatherford, "Groundbreaking"). Although the Cashman Theatre was not located on The Strip, the financial investment reflected an expectation of future Broadway musical bookings. Producer of Les Miserables, Richard Jay-Alexander, spoke positively about the future: "I think Las Vegas is going to start getting a lot of theatre. You can't ignore it. It's not all gambling. There is an intelligentsia factor there. People used to fly places just to see theatre." When asked if Las Vegas was ready for another "resident" Broadway musical, he foreshadowed the future: "You couldn't run a Les Miz open-ended or a Miss Saigon. Perhaps you could a Phantom of the Opera just
because of the kind of mystique it has. *Les Miserables* is not the sort of thing you do and then hit the tables" (Weatherford, "Groundbreaking").

*Les Miserables* is the rare musical that speaks to all ages and types while creating an emotional impact. A rich score and a spectacular design enhance Victor Hugo's story of human compassion. The musical takes place during the French Revolution. *Les Miserables* was well received by the public and seemed incapable of failure. The success of *Les Miserables* was misinterpreted. It appears that members of the theatrical community in Las Vegas viewed *Les Miz* as a litmus test for theatrical profitability and erroneously believed that other musicals would be received with the same kind of enthusiasm. But even the producers of *Les Miz* understood the Las Vegas market and acknowledged that two successful runs at the Cashman Theatre did not mean that the Las Vegas was ready to fully embrace the entire Broadway culture. Jay-Alexander was right when he said *Les Miz* could never have an “open-ended run” on The Strip. However, his claim that The Strip has an “intelligentsia factor” may have been overly generous. People come to Las Vegas hoping to live outside of the common, traditional boundaries of life. And for those visitors who are well versed in theatre, I can't help but think their attitude would be, "Why would I go to Las Vegas to see a Broadway Show? I can see that when I go to New York. If I'm going to see a show in Vegas, it'll be a Vegas show or something by Cirque."

The closing of *Starlight Express* was announced in the fall of 1997, just one year shy of its five-year contract. In 1999, Carol Cling wrote an article interviewing Foster Wilson, then Vice President of Entertainment for the Hilton. Wilson doubted he would ever again consider entering into such a long contractual agreement with a Broadway
musical. But he added this caveat, "...this town changes so fast, it's in a constant state of flux...I think Las Vegas has become sophisticated enough that the Broadway Theatre can do pretty well on a short-term basis" ("Las Vegas Hilton"). This comment explains Hilton's decision to invite the touring company of Rent to use same venue only two years later.

Tom Willer's Field of Dreams reference isn't applicable when connecting the Broadway musical and the Las Vegas Strip. It is possible that Willer realized that the element of "spectacle" was a necessary draw for the Las Vegas visitor. But spectacle was not enough to keep the wheels of Starlight Express rolling. The Las Vegas visitor has become spoiled into believing the "wow" factor of a show must surpass all previous Las Vegas experiences. The Las Vegas visitor is so inundated with the spectacle of The Strip that this quickly becomes the "norm." Continuous exposure to spectacles may unconsciously raise a visitor's level of expectations when attending a production on The Strip. To put it simply, asking visitors to spend a hundred dollars and give up two or three hours of their precious time had better result in an experience that surpasses the amazing sights that can be observed just by walking up and down The Strip.

Most visitors depart McCarran Airport understanding that time restrictions will impact their vacation strategy. A carefully planned visit is usually executed by the more conservative person in the party trying to ensure that expenditures include a show and a nice meal, before blowing the rest on gaming. For those who prefer to be impulsive, The Strip exists to please. For those visitors who have a show they want to see, but can't get tickets, they simply choose another. Even the once-exclusive Cirque du Soleil has become more accessible because of the volume of Cirque shows now on The Strip.
Wilier's greatest error was that he believed Las Vegas visitors would automatically want to see a Broadway show while visiting. Wilier also misjudged the amount of time that Starlight Express should have remained in his resort. Although public information is not available regarding finances, I suspect Starlight Express was probably a less expensive venture than mounting an original production created and financed by the Hilton. It was the easiest financial solution when confronted with the Elvis Showroom dilemma.

An interview with one of the producers for the Las Vegas production of Hairspray, Neil Miller, revealed that the resorts do not heavily finance the majority of Broadway shows placed on The Strip and it is usually up to the independent producer to cover the majority of costs. If this theory is applied to the closing of Starlight Express, it is probably accurate to say that the musical was losing revenue and the producers were more than happy to close the show. (I attended the closing night party and I can confirm there were no sad faces in the crowd.) Low revenue would also encourage Tom Wilier to release Troika from its contract since Starlight Express was not developing a strong brand for the Hilton.

Chicago opened on June 3, 1975 on Broadway at the 46th Street Theatre and ran for 936 performances (IBDB). Although nominated for Tony Awards in nearly every category, it wasn't until the 1996 revival that Chicago received a coveted Tony. In 1997 Chicago was awarded ten Tony Awards including Best Revival of a Musical. The revival of Chicago opened on November 14, 1996 at the Richard Rodgers Theatre and presently continues its run at The Ambassador Theatre (Ku).
On March 2, 1998, less than one year after sweeping The Tony Awards, *Chicago* opened at the Mandalay Bay Resort (Paskevich, "Broadway Show"). The musical suited the bad-boy image of Las Vegas and ran eight shows a week in an 1800-seat venue (Weatherford, "Giving Regards"). *Chicago* is based on a true story of a Windy City stripper who shot and killed her boyfriend but skated away free in the 1920s courtesy of a devious lawyer, a result evoking parallels to a modern-day celebrity trial in which murder has become its own form of entertainment" (Paskevich, "Broadway Show"). Joel Fishman, Entertainment Director of Circus Circus, played a key role in bringing *Chicago* to the Mandalay Bay Theatre: "This is something that needs to be done in Vegas. The town is changing, audiences are becoming more sophisticated by the day, and people are expecting top-quality entertainment". Ticket prices ranged from $44 to $75 (Paskevich, "Broadway Show"). The show closed on February 27, 2000 and writer Mike Weatherford commented that the production provided "middling results." ("Giving Regards").

Although many Broadway musicals were not "resident" to the resorts, their existence demonstrated that opportunities were available on the Las Vegas Strip. In 1999, *Rent* ran for only one week at the Las Vegas Hilton. It garnered excellent reviews, and despite the $20 rush seats (a tradition originated while on Broadway and continued throughout its tour), *Rent* reportedly grossed one million dollars in ticket sales (Paskevich, "Stage Struck").

In September 2000, *Cabaret*, under the direction of Sam Mendes, spent a week at the EFX Theatre. Theatre critic Mike Weatherford praised the production, commenting, "In a city where new shows can have a very old feeling about them, a visiting tour
demonstrates how a 30 year-old musical can be recast as something entirely new" ("Recast Cabaret").

In 2003, two Broadway musicals opened on the Las Vegas Strip: *Mamma Mia* in February at the Mandalay Bay and *Smokey Joe's Café* in March at Caesars Palace. *Smokey Joe's Café* starred Gladys Knight and ran for three months at the Circus Maximus Showroom at Caesars Palace. Reporter, Carol Cling dubbed this Broadway revue of Lieber and Stoller music a "foot-tappin, finger-snappin hit parade of golden oldie memories" ("Café Transports"). Merald "Bubba" Knight joined his sister in *Smokey Joe's Café* bringing an additional "family" element to the production. The show was flexible enough that visiting guest artists were welcomed to join the cast on stage to sing a specific song. "R&B greats such as Ben E. King and Lou Rawls had stepped in to do only the songs they were known for..." (Weatherford, "Old-Time").

*Smokey Joe's Café* provided a rare opportunity for Gladys Knight. The production only ran during the week, allowing Knight to travel on weekends with her nightclub act thus freeing the space for weekend headliners. Although the run was limited, the popularity of Gladys Knight's popularity resulted in headlining at the Flamingo where she and her band performed until very recently.

*Mamma Mia* was the second Broadway musical to open in February 2003 (Weatherford, "'Mamma Mia': On Track"). In 2001, the Broadway production opened at the Winter Garden Theatre and to this day continues to delight its audiences at the renamed Cadillac Winter Garden Theatre. As of August 6, 2006, *Mamma Mia* claimed a total of 1,998 performances on Broadway (IBDB). *Playbill*'s report of Broadway Grosses
for the week of August 28- September 3, 2006 states that the percentage of attendance for *Mamma Mia* was rated at 100.7 with ticket sales reported at $945,910 (Ku).

Although it won no Tony Awards, *Mamma Mia* continues to be enthusiastically received both in Las Vegas and on The Great White Way. The musical was labeled "A catalogue show" because the creative team of *Mamma Mia* took the Swedish music of *ABBA* and invented a story that featured *ABBA*’s pop hits. The setting is a Greek island where a single, American mother is making wedding arrangements for her daughter. The daughter wants a traditional wedding complete with a father to give her away. In an attempt to discover her father's identity she reads her mother's personal journals discovering the names of three men who were her mother's romantic interests around the time of her own conception. These three men are invited to the wedding. The plot goes through a few simple twists resulting in a happy-ending.

When MGM executive Van Laast made the decision to bring *Mamma Mia* to Las Vegas, he clearly understood the risks. Broadway musicals had made some inroads but no single show had been able to grab a significant portion of the entertainment pie. In an article by Mike Weatherford, Laast commented, "I think there is a space in Las Vegas for this kind of show...I don't think there's space in Las Vegas for Shakespeare, but I think there is for something that's witty, accessible and touching" ("'Mamma Mia': On Track"). Laast's decision has served him well. When the show opened in February 2003, Mike Weatherford commented, *"Mamma Mia" looks like a hit at Mandalay Bay and who knows what that means for the future of The Strip"* ("Is Mama Just").

MGM executive Laast understood that he was living the *ABBA* hit "Take a Chance on Me." With national and world tours and the Broadway version still running, *Mamma Mia*
proved to be a huge hit. No one will ever describe *Mamma Mia* as a powerful piece and musical theatre snobs continue to look down on the production. But there is no denying that *Mamma Mia* has achieved a type of popularity rarely observed in the musical theatre genre. Mike Weatherford offers an explanation in an article written for the *Las Vegas Review Journal* on March 6, 2006: "*Mamma Mia* drew a new audience of theatergoers who may never have been fans of show tunes but who could still experience the thrill of recognition when a character breaks into a familiar song" (Weatherford, "Mama's Papa").

The *Mamma Mia* website, www.mamma-mia.com, is an in-depth look at the musical and confirms that the show has become a worldwide phenomenon. *Mamma Mia* has none of the expected bad boy elements suited to the Las Vegas Strip. Additionally, it refuses to reduce its form to the expected ninety-minute runs in full length complete with intermission. Mandalay Bay is on the far South end of The Strip, forcing visitors to travel either by cab or tram to the venue yet this has not lessened its popularity. The staying power of *Mamma Mia* has created its own kind of branding to Mandalay Bay similar to the way in which Celine Dion has become a brand for Caesars Palace. Successful branding of a show with a resort in Las Vegas seems to be equivalent to "word of mouth". On Broadway, good reviews and "word of mouth" is necessary for a production's success. Branding is a specific marketing tool popular with resorts in Las Vegas. It makes visitors to associate resorts with a show or performer and that is the way information is shared among other travelers. For example: "We're going to see *Mamma Mia*." "What's that?" "The Broadway musical running at the Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas." Branding is Las Vegas' equivalent to "word of mouth". *O* brands Bellagio. *Zumanity* brands New York New York, *A New Day* (Celine Dion) brands Caesars Palace.
But for some reason, the Broadway musical entering the Las Vegas Strip struggles to find branding opportunities, with the exception of _Mamma Mia._

Contractual agreements are not available to the public and a production that is world-marketed (like _Mamma Mia_ or _Phantom of the Opera_) suggests a financial cushion might be available to protect a production should it encounter financial difficulties. These factors in addition to the worldwide recognition of _ABBA's_ most likely contribute to _Mamma Mia_'s success.

I think _Mamma Mia_ continues to thrive because an enormous number of people long to be transported back to a time when they were young, invincible and had no responsibilities. It's a really fun blast from the past and if you're worried about being "outed" purist theatre friends, you can always use the excuse that you were "seeing a show in Vegas."

_Mamma Mia_ transcends the Broadway musical and has developed into an authentic piece of Las Vegas Entertainment. Neil Miller said it well:

"It's just a phenomenon. Lightning in a bottle. It just is...._Mamma Mia_ is masterfully done, whether you like it or not. The book is paper-thin but it's just enough to propel the story and get you to care and it's the right framework. The music is treated in a way, 14 or 15 of the songs are given incredible gravitas and fit beautifully in the score. Three or four or five fit less well, but they're o.k., they're a little less obvious, everyone just rolls their eyes. And the three or four that don't fit in at all, they just put in the encore at the end because they're fun. And THAT'S the secret.... If you just came down from Pluto last Thursday, you wouldn't know that score was written as
individual pop songs over a 20 year history and is now a score to a show" (Miller Interview).

Myron Martin, another producer for *Hairspray* agrees: "In the case of *Mamma Mia*, I don't know if the bulk of tourists even know it's a Broadway musical. They just know it's a big, fun show" (McKinley, "A Revised Phantom"). *Mamma Mia*’s lack of pretension, its willingness to embrace itself for what it is and not try to be something greater makes it endearing and accessible to all walks of life. It is appealing, non-threatening and fun. And those reasons seem to be good enough for the Las Vegas visitor spend to three precious hours at the Mandalay Theatre. *Mamma Mia* has become the gold standard for Broadway Musicals on The Strip and, so far, no other Broadway musical can match its success.
CHAPTER 3

AVENUE Q

_Avenue Q_ originated in an Off-Broadway at The Vineyard Theatre. This theatre is nationally recognized and has a history of supporting the development of new works. _How I Learned to Drive_ by Paula Vogel and _Three Tall Women_ by Edward Albee are just a few of the major works that had their starts at The Vineyard. The Vineyard webpage offers its own description: "The Vineyard Theatre is a non-profit, Off-Broadway Theatre Company which has consistently premiered provocative and ground breaking plays and musicals...Under the guidance of Artistic Director Douglas Aibel, The Vineyard is committed to nurturing the work of emerging playwrights and composers, while providing more established artists with a supportive environment in which to experiment, take risks and grow" (Vineyard Theatre Page). It is also the recipient of multiple theatrical awards and two Pulitzer Prizes have been awarded to playwrights Paula Vogel and Edward Albee as a result of works produced at The Vineyard. The Vineyard webpage includes a quotation from the _New York Times_: "The Vineyard has the longevity and track record of a theatre three times its size. Hardly a season goes by without the company producing a popular or critical success."

In the November of 2004, I had the good fortune to obtain a phone interview with the Artistic Director of the Vineyard Theatre, Doug Aibel. Aibel was instrumental in assisting in the development _Avenue Q_. I asked him to share the story of _Avenue Q_’s beginnings. He recalled that Robyn Goodman, a commercial producer and long-time
friend, asked him to read one of the first drafts of the *Avenue Q* script. Robyn Goodman was a commercial producer and long-time friend. Aibel remembered that he found the piece enjoyable but admitted it wasn't until he attended a musical theatre event where *Avenue Q* was coincidentally performed that he grasped the "whole puppet thing." He explained: "And so because the costs of musicals are really high, particularly this one, we created an alliance with a team of producers including Robyn, Jeffrey [Seller] and Kevin [McCollum] in order to put the capitalization together to make this happen. It was a very happy experience because the commercial producers were very respectful of the way we worked and developed the piece."

Having a director, a creative team and producers involved in the beginning stages of development was unusual for The Vineyard. Aibel commented, "It was unique for us because normally The Vineyard develops and produces work that we're involved in...This was a different kind of circumstance..." The experience became a true collaboration and the free exchange of ideas proved fruitful. "As a result, I think we were able to bring a lot to the table and help make a really good show even better." I praised the wonderful, witty comedy found in *Avenue Q*. Aibel had an interesting response. He said that although The Vineyard usually offers, "heavier fare, we've been known to occasionally have fun. But you know, I never saw it [*Avenue Q*] that way." He explained, "It is really about young people on a journey and that journey is charted emotionally through the show...I think there is something about really trying to explore not just issues, but the emotional life and passage among the young generation is what has really made it resonate with audiences today. It tells a strong story very well." Aibel believed this philosophy was reinforced with the role of Gary Coleman: "Gary became
not just a funny, quirky, offbeat kind of co-host for the evening, but was really what the character represents, you know, the basic metaphor of the show. Somebody sort of caught between childhood and adulthood."

*Avenue Q* is the story of puppet characters and a few humans trying to figure out their purpose in life. They all inhabit apartments in the same New York City Brownstone that happens to have Gary Coleman as a superintendent. *Avenue Q* is the only place where people and puppets, just beginning life's adventure, can afford to live. The musical weaves in and out of several story lines with one basic theme: "who am I and where am I going?" Witty songs, video [plasma] screens, smart choreography and clever puppetry unify the production. Puppeteers work onstage in black jeans and t-shirts with no attempt made to disguise or conceal their presence. The decision to expose the craft of puppetry became a unique element of the show. Watching the show, one witnessed a combination of a delightful musical and technical artistry. *Avenue Q* was racy and contemporary and, although it echoed images of *Sesame Street*, the subject matter was clearly adult.

The combination of puppet artistry and musical theatre talent created something that was more than just a coming of age story. Both kids and parents exposed to *Sesame Street* could accept this reality tilt. In addition, these same people, who may previously have had little exposure to musical theatre, might find this familiar touchstone worthy of attendance. *Avenue Q* manages to address issues like racism, pornography, objectification, gender issues and even consensual sex (albeit puppet-style).

Creators Robert Lopez and Jeff Mark tapped into the same concept expressed by Julie Taymor in an article found in *Stagecraft.com*. Taymor considered puppetry a useful tool "to achieve things that an actor could not." She said, "I would never do something with
just puppets...but I like the things that puppets allow you to do" (Brandon). This concept was obviously applied to Avenue Q. The creators hoped this off-color musical would be the perfect carrot for younger audiences while respect for its Tony Awards would attract older crowds. They admitted, "We were looking for a way to connect our generation with a musical…" Jeff Marx added, "People our age generally aren't into musicals. We wanted to find a way to write a musical that would appeal to people that don't already love musicals. Normal people who watch The Nanny [laughing] (Schmidt 23).

Avenue Q opened in March 2003 at The Vineyard Theatre and ran through April 6th of that same year. Theatre reviewer, Matthew Murray refers to

"...the true magic of Avenue Q, like the program it spoofs, it has important messages to share, and presents lessons from which everyone will be able to take something. Doing it with a strong sense of humor and splashy music goes far to hide the show's imperfections, but can do nothing to camouflage the heart and inspiring messages just beneath the surface" ("Off-Broadway").

When asked how New York audiences initially responded, Aibel gently defended his community saying they offered a "reserved" response. He recalls that even before the positive reviews, audiences "were always with it...there was an immediate connection that we felt." He offered, "I was really not surprised that it would end up having the trajectory it did. I just felt it resonating with people from day one." One of those people was Steve Wynn (Aibel Interview).

With twenty-two preview performances under their belts, the cast and crew of Avenue Q opened on Broadway at The Golden Theatre on July 31, 2003. New York Times critic, Ben Brantly declared it "a thoroughly infectious musical." When Avenue Q won the
Tony Award for Best Musical 2004, it was "considered a major upset" over the Stephen Schwartz-Winnie Holzman show, Wicked. The victory was largely credited to an innovative campaign in which the show's producers encouraged road presenters and other Tony voters to "vote with their hearts" (Portaniere). As a result, Avenue Q walked away with the Tony Award for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical and Best Original Score. This controversy was just the beginning of a turn of events unprecedented in the history of the Tony Awards. Five days later, the producers of Avenue Q announced they had signed a contract with Wynn Las Vegas. Avenue Q would have a $40 million theatre built specifically for the show with an unlimited engagement. In exchange, Avenue Q would be produced only on Broadway and in Las Vegas, foregoing the traditionally expected tour (McKinley, "Avenue Q").

Amy Schmidt interviewed creators Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx for Nevada Public Radio's Southern Nevada Cultural Guide 2005-2006. Although Marx and Lopez were surprised by the decision to move the show to Las Vegas, they admitted they didn't know much about the city: "...a town we didn't particularly know that much about, but had to quickly learn-we thought, well, that's going to be the next Broadway" (24). These New Yorkers believed the Las Vegas market would be similar to the New York City market simply because both cities manage about the same number of visitors per year. In 2005, New York City reported 42.6 million visitors while Las Vegas reported 38.5 million visitors (NYC Statistics and Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority 2005 Report, VEGAS FAQ). It appeared that Lopez and Marx believed the open-ended engagement of Avenue Q indicated the staying power of the Broadway musical on the Las Vegas Strip. With three major Tony Awards in hand, Avenue Q had already returned its original $3.5
million in costs; proving itself a worthy investment (Kuchwara). Having survived the brutality of Broadway, Lopez and Marx must have assumed that their production would be a sure thing in Las Vegas.

Lopez addressed the response of Tony voters angry that *Avenue Q* would not tour: "I think part of the scandal was that Tony voters-some of whom are also show presenters and theatre owners-use the Tony Award as a tool to brand their productions. But if they voted for us only because they wanted to brand [Avenue Q] as a touring show, well, sorry" (Schmidt 24). It appears that Lopez and the producers erroneously believed the same kind of branding would sell tickets on tour i.e, A Tony Award would apply to the Las Vegas market. After all, Lopez admitted he was unfamiliar with the Las Vegas landscape and clearly did not understand that the "Tony" brand would not create the expected flurry of ticket sales on the Las Vegas Strip.

*The New York Times* writer Jesse McKinley noted the producers' explanation:

"Their decision, the producers say, is justified by a number of factors. Like a successful tour, a Las Vegas company has the potential to gross perhaps twice the show's maximum Broadway take. But settling in Las Vegas would eliminate high touring expenses and would ensure this quirky, small scale musical a theatre well suited to it night after night" ("Avenue Q").

As of November 17, 2006, the Golden Theatre continues to house the Broadway production of *Avenue Q*. The theatre seats only 796 people. When asked to explain the decision to forgo a national tour, producer McCollum replied: "I am not convinced that our show would shine in a 4000-seat theatre where the stage and audience are in two different ZIP codes. You have to be on the 'Avenue' to enjoy the show" (Kuchwara).
This appears to be one of the first missteps by the producers of *Avenue Q*. Certainly a permanent home in Las Vegas would spare producers the costs of touring, but Wynn’s theatre was nearly twice the size of the Golden Theatre. What made them think that a 1200-seat theatre would be successful? And to make things even more challenging, the Las Vegas productions ran ten performances a week (with two different casts). As Neil Miller remarks:

"In New York, the theatre seats 729 people, that's all it plays to. So you bring it here and immediately you put it in a 1500-seat room. So you automatically expect it will do TWICE the business it does? Why would you expect that? Based on what? That you [Steve Wynn] really liked it? That it's got a great musical score, that it's bright and inventive and witty? All of that's true. But that doesn't take into account the nature of who comes to Vegas to enjoy entertainment" (Miller Interview).

Miller raises concrete questions that were clearly ignored when considering producing *Avenue Q* at the Wynn. In addition, Miller's suggested that the nature of the typical Las Vegas visitor might not be receptive toward *Avenue Q*. Miller's opinion is in direct conflict with *Les Miserables* producer, Jay-Alexander's belief that an "intelligentsia factor" exists in Las Vegas.

Wynn announced in an article on June 10, 2005 that *Avenue Q* would be housed in the yet-to-be-opened Wynn Resort and boasted, "*Avenue Q* will give our guests a broader range of entertainment choices, broader than at any property in Las Vegas. *Avenue Q* is a very primary, fundamental piece of theatre. It provides another element to enrich and intensify the emotional experience" (Simpson). Obviously, Wynn believed this funny, naughty, offbeat musical would be an excellent compliment to his new resort. In an
article written by Mike Weatherford in the Las Vegas Review Journal, Wynn defended his decision: "The reason I went after Avenue Q was because it was so counterculture to the Las Vegas tradition. I wanted that difference to be in my building. And I certainly hope that everyone enjoys it as much as I did. We'll see" ("Puppets for Adults").

Musicals have always played a minor part of Las Vegas Entertainment. But the staying power of Mamma Mia has created a tangible competition between resorts looking to find the next Broadway hit. Steve Wynn has always prided himself on taking chances and is respected for his daring successes. Because Wynn had given Avenue Q the royal nod and invitation, the producers whole-heartedly trusted his judgment. In an article in Playbill, producer Jeffrey Seller commented, "This is a unique show and Steve Wynn has ratified the quality and the value of our show by saying, 'This is a show I want in my $2.4 billion resort.' I can't imagine a stronger affirmation of the quality and values and marketability of our show. Steve's theory is that the people who come to Las Vegas are the people who come to New York" (Flatow). It appears Seller failed to consider that those who visit both New York and Las Vegas might prefer to see a Broadway musical in its original setting rather than The Strip.

Traditional attitudes toward The Tony Awards suggested that Avenue Q's Tony for Best Musical would have been enough to entice theatre-loving baby boomers to enjoy the hottest show on Broadway while visiting Vegas. Mike Weatherford suggested the youthful quality of the show might provide a marketing tool designed to cross demographics and attract the younger generation. In an article for the Las Vegas Review Journal he wrote, "I speculated Le Rev would target the affluent and international
demographic the hotel was courting while Q would make a play for, in shorthand, The Hard Rock/Palms Crowd" ("Youthful Shows").

A national tour gives the general public the chance to recognize a new musical, even if only by its name. Instead of creating an exclusive experience, placing Avenue Q solely at the Wynn Las Vegas burdened the resort with the challenge of promoting a new Broadway musical with no previous national publicity. In many areas of the country, a Tony Award confirms the worthiness of a show and positively impacts ticket sales. In Las Vegas, Tony Awards do not improve ticket sales. (We only need to look at Mamma Mia, a huge success on The Strip that never received a Tony Award.)

Avenue Q arrived directly from Broadway, Tony Awards in hand, and into the arms of Las Vegas' very own Golden Boy, Steve Wynn. The current "bad boy" landscape filled with sexuality and the promise of "What happens in Vegas..." made Avenue Q look like the perfect fit. This unique world of copulating puppets and songs like "Everyone's a little bit racist," "If you were gay, it'd be OK," and "The Internet is for Porn" was naughty and fun at the same time. Wynn described Avenue Q as "It's American theatre...It's a counterpoint to the elaborate productions everyone has and gives people a choice" (Simpson). The production was hilarious, R-rated and charming. It appeared that, once again, Wynn had pulled off another brilliant coup and "Avenue Q" had found a permanent home in Las Vegas.

The New York Times called the decision a "calculated gamble". Wynn was provided a $40 million dollar theatre designed just for Avenue Q in the middle of his "$2.5 billion, 235-acre resort offering 2,700 rooms, more than a dozen restaurants and an 18-hole golf course in a city that welcomes 38 million visitors a year" (McKinley). Avenue Q was
slated to deliver the perfect blend of culture, counterculture and edgy humor. Wynn boasted, "We felt there was no reason the center of activity and creativity shouldn't be in Vegas" (Cling, "'Avenue Q' Intersects"). Producer Jeffrey Seller added, "With Steve's enormous vision, we may very well be able to create not just Avenue Q but Broadway in Vegas. There's no reason that we can't." The praise continued, "Everyone recognizes how brilliant Steve Wynn is. For Steve to offer to build us a theatre for a long term engagement is just a dream come true" (Cling, "'Avenue Q' Intersects"). No one would deny Steve Wynn’s brilliance and his business acumen. Wynn’s hopes and enthusiasm swirling around the creation of his new resort may have blurred his judgment when choosing Avenue Q for Wynn Las Vegas.

Steve Wynn has a reputation of supporting the arts in Las Vegas. He opened The Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art in the fall of 1998, displaying his collection of masterpieces by 19th and 20th Century artists. His collection has earned the respect of art curators around the world and he continues to display his collection for public enjoyment at Wynn Las Vegas (Cling, "Art Appreciation"). Wynn has voiced great hope for this city: "We believe Las Vegas is a place that very well could be the top center for the performing arts in the world. We can offer better theatres and better audiences than New York and we can afford to take chances and try new things. [Musicals like Avenue Q] can help Las Vegas exploit its role as the real performing arts center. The more Las Vegas broadens itself, the stronger it is" (Simpson). And Wynn does more than spout platitudes; he puts his financial support behind his words, first with Avenue Q and now with Spamalot.

Marketing for Avenue Q included promotional pictures, interviews, articles in the Las Vegas Review Journal and an in-depth article in KNPR’s Southern Nevada Cultural
Guide. Traditional billboards displayed Avenue Q's fuzzy orange title and several local television stations featured interviews. (Advertising was strong but not equal to the marketing blitz of Hairspray.) Perhaps Wynn, along with the producers, believed that arriving in Vegas with a "still-warm" Tony Award for Best Musical would create the expected enthusiastic response. The exclusive, opulent style of The Wynn Resort implied there would be plenty of savvy, sharp people eager to see the show and fill the 1200 seats in Wynn's brand new auditorium. Even the business world was optimistic. Marc Falcone, equity analyst for Deutsche Bank Securities viewed the show as a success. "Steve Wynn has always been at the forefront of bringing new ideas to Las Vegas. He has a tremendous record..." (Simpson).

The director of Avenue Q, Jason Moore, voiced a little more caution. He intuited the differences of the markets and believed Avenue Q would require time to find its audience base. He called Avenue Q "a show that builds on word of mouth. As in New York, we have to kind of let it sit around a while" (Weatherford, "Puppets for Adults"). Again, the glitch in Moore's theory is that "word of mouth" in Las Vegas basically translates into branding. Branding is more immediate with a familiar product and Avenue Q was relatively unknown. Producer Seller expressed a far more enthusiastic opinion, calling Avenue Q "a fantastic, conventional musical absolutely appropriate for Las Vegas" (Weatherford, "Puppets for Adults").

The launch of Avenue Q on the Las Vegas Strip was marked by an onstage news conference complete with cast and puppets arriving in Bentleys and a special Steve Wynn Puppet participating in a song written by Lopez and Marx entitled, "Only in Vegas." Lyrics promoted their exclusive contract and poked fun at the Las Vegas stereotype of
silicone breasts and a downsized Eiffel Tower and Statue of Liberty. The Wynn puppet sang: "This show's hilarious and smart...it's a Broadway show with tons of heart! I saw it in New York and said, 'I've gotta have this show! They said they'd also like to tour but I said no! You're only in Vegas! And you're here exclusively! You wanna see it? You gotta go through me!'" (Cling, "'Avenue Q' Intersects").

The show opened to excellent reviews. To maintain the same artistic integrity as the Broadway version, the show was not reduced to the usual ninety-minute format. Business writer Rod Smith praised this decision: "Marketing pros are blessing local developer Steve Wynn's refusal to cut the Broadway show down to the standard Strip ninety-minutes is winning audiences over and luring guests. As a marketing move, it makes sense since the show is a smashing success in New York among exactly the market segment he's looking for to fill Wynn Las Vegas" (Smith).

Unfortunately, Smith's "market segment" proved more elusive than expected. By November 2005, an obvious although not admitted marketing push was under way, which suggested ticket sales were weak. Billboards and cabs covered with orange shag carpeting asked, "What's all the fuzz about?" (Smith, "As Money") And radio spots included snippets of the song, "It Sucks to be Me." The new campaign ignored the naughty element of the show, something that would have directly related it to the popular marketing campaign, "What happens here, stays here." Even cab drivers understood Avenue Q was struggling. One cabby, Eddie Markhouse, commented, "If Steve Wynn's Avenue Q is as big a hit as my car, there would be no problem" (Clarke, "Fuzzy Car"). Most people visiting Las Vegas were unfamiliar with Avenue Q and the marketing campaign did nothing to answer their questions. Rather, it asked a question believing this
would spark conversation, discussion and attendance. But if the majority of people are unfamiliar with the show, how can it be discussed? Friends of mine reported they overheard one visitor comment, "Well if it's a puppet show, why would I want to see that?" Both the producers and Wynn Las Vegas failed to acknowledge that many Las Vegas visitors are unfamiliar with Tony Awards. The eleventh hour marketing strategy failed because the show was not promoted in a way that would specifically appeal to the Las Vegas visitor. Neil Miller called Avenue Q "a terrible buy for Vegas. It's bright, smart, funny, too highbrow. You have to pay attention. You have to listen to every lyric. You gotta follow along- that's not 'entertainment'" (Miller Interview). At least, that's not traditional "Vegas" entertainment.

By January 5, 2006, producer McCollum was considering dropping the show's intermission. He admitted, "Las Vegas is a different animal than New York City." He added, in New York, "the show is the final destination. In Las Vegas, people try to get three or four things in an evening instead of just one" (Clarke, "Q' Weighs Change"). On January 19 2006, Weatherford wrote in the Las Vegas Review Journal that McCollum had reduced the show to ninety- minutes, dropped a few songs, altered a bit of dialogue and shifted a few scenes. Show times changed from 6:30p.m. to 7p.m. McCollum admitted, "People don't want to sit for an hour and 45 minutes...given there is so much to do in Vegas with casino restaurants and nightclubs..." (Weatherford, "Avenue Q' Responds").

Critic and writer, Mike Weatherford recognized the challenges of mounting a successful Broadway musical on the Las Vegas Strip. He mused, "The shaky status of Avenue Q and the ho-hum reaction to a non-Broadway musical, We Will Rock You, run
counter to the big bets on the coming titles" ("Giving Regards"). Weatherford was referring to *Hairspray* and *Spamalot* suggesting that visitors in Las Vegas respond less enthusiastically to a Broadway musical when vacationing in Las Vegas.

The closing of *Avenue Q* was announced on February 15, 2006. Instead of an admission of failure, the announcement was folded into the suggestion that Wynn had sacrificed *Avenue Q* for *Spamalot*, deciding that there were more useful things to do with space than build yet another theatre. To add insult to injury, Mike Weatherford's article for the *Las Vegas Review Journal* comments that the golf course, "a holdover from its days at The Desert Inn, apparently proved more popular than the underachieving Broadway musical ("'Avenue Q' to End"). *Avenue Q*, which rode into town with three Tony Awards and a blaze of glory, was now rated below a poorly-respected golf course. Despite the insult, producer McCollum loyalty praised the Wynn Resort and insisted that the show had done well: "We are making money and that's one of the reasons why we're staying until May 28. If the show were hemorrhaging money, we'd be closed next week. The proof is the fact that we're running as long as we can" (Weatherford, "'Avenue Q' Puts on a Happy Face"). In the same article, McCollum defends *Avenue Q*'s worth and implied that weak ticket sales should have been offset by the show's low overhead: "I would have loved to have sold a million dollars [worth] of tickets a week. But in New York, I can only sell $500,000 a week. That's exactly what I was doing in Vegas." This begs the question; did the producers have any input in regards to the size of the theatre designed at Wynn Las Vegas? Although McCollum voiced concerns about *Avenue Q* performing in touring venues disproportionate to the size of the production, he was silent
regarding to the 12000-seat Wynn Theatre. Had this issue been considered when
designing the theatre, the outcome might have been different.

While Avenue Q was not able to succeed on the Las Vegas Strip, it continues to run
strong on Broadway. Playbill.com listed the Broadway Grosses of the week of August
28-Sept 3, 2006. Avenue Q grossed $440,202 with a 98.6% capacity. The average ticket
price is $69.92 and the show continues to perform at The Golden Theatre (Ku).

The combination of Tony Awards, original cast members (Rick Lyons and John
Tartaglia), an exclusive engagement and tourism nearly equal to New York City's could
not to keep this unique musical running on the Las Vegas Strip. It appears the producers
might have benefited from research focusing on why visitors come to the Las Vegas Strip
before Wynn's offer was accepted. In fairness, it is easy to understand the producers'
decision to come to Las Vegas when faced with the legitimate concerns and challenges
regarding a national tour. And with the adrenaline rush of an unexpected Tony and Steve
Wynn promising a custom theatre for your production, who could refuse?

The closing of Avenue Q was a disappointment but not a surprise. Las Vegas is not
"The Theatre Capital of The World," it's "The Entertainment Capital of the World." The
spectacle and entertainment of The Strip exists to enhance and promote the gaming
economy. A production that has poor ticket sales does not bring enough people into the
resort, which negatively impacts anticipated collateral profits. Smart people involved in
the Las Vegas Strip know when to cut their losses. The failure of Avenue Q to create
strong profits resembled a game on the casino floor. Avenue Q producers and resort
owner Steve Wynn walked away from the Avenue Q table early because there wasn't
enough action in the game. They did what most players would do, they moved on to the next table named *Spamalot.*
CHAPTER 4

HAIRSPRAY

Hairspray opened July 18, 2002 at the Neil Simon Theatre (IBDB). The musical was based on the John Waters' film, Hairspray. The film launched Waters career from cult status into the mainstream and introduced the general public to the unique talent of Divine and the young Ricky Lake. Hairspray walked away with eight Tony Awards including Best Musical. It also won two Theatre World Awards and ten Drama Desk Awards that same year (IBDB). As of November 17, 2006, Hairspray continues to run on Broadway at the Neil Simon Theatre. Playbill.com reported its Broadway gross of $679,168 for the week of August 28-September 3, 2006. The average house capacity was 87.8% and the average ticket price was $67.68 (Ku).

The marketing for Luxor's opening of Hairspray on February 15, 2006 used the identical Broadway billboard advertisements. The close up shot of an adorable, pudgy 1960's girl complete with a large, blue, beehive hairdo convinces the viewer that this non-traditional girl is going to be loads of fun. The familiarity of the film and the long-running Broadway musical with its accompanying Canadian and national tours suggested Hairspray might be the next successful Broadway musical on the Las Vegas Strip. The advertising blitz included an enormous promotional sign so large that it covered one face of the Luxor's black pyramid. The producers of the Las Vegas production of Hairspray
understood that even an award-winning Broadway musical, packaged with the original stars and production team, needed strong advertising.

The story takes place in Baltimore; the time is 1962. The heroine, Tracy Turnblat, is a chubby white girl who loves to dance and "spends her young life pining to be on The Corny Collins' Show" (Weatherford, "Let Us 'Spray'"). Through a series of events, Tracy realizes her dream. Knowing that she learned the dance moves which earned her a spot on the show from her black friends, Tracy impulsively challenges segregation issues and invites her black friends to join her to dance on The Corny Collin's Show. Themes of racism, intolerance and integration are delicately interwoven with infectious choreography and upbeat songs.

Luxor's version was ninety-minutes long with three songs cut and a thematically less substantial production. Director Jack O'Brien defended the decision: "We don't want to hit anyone over the head [with the message] but it's hard to extricate the underpinnings of the show which gives it ballast (Weatherford, "Let Us 'Spray'"). Mike Weatherford bluntly noted the reduced version of Hairspray "subscribes to the cynical notion that a Vegas audience can't sit still for long because it wants to get back to those slot machines and pricey Ultralounges" (Weatherford, "Hairspray"). In a review of Hairspray's opening at the Luxor, Weatherford gives it a B+ and commended Fierstein and Fran Jaye, "for throwing enough weight into the Broadway musical to keep it from floating away." Weatherford continues, "The Luxor's new production of the Broadway hit is so impeccably produced that it hits the wall only with the limits of the musical as written, one that tries so hard to be fun that it eventually forgets about everything except trying to be fun" ("Blue Man Group").
Contrary to Weatherford's opinion, I believe that the producers understood the market and were adapting to the time pressures unique to the Las Vegas Strip. The producers were sensible, not "cynical." Neil Miller: "You have to serve the mastery of hotels and conventions which means by nature, you’re not doing 2½ hour evenings of theatre. You’re doing 75-90 minute evenings" (Miller Interview). Why insist that Las Vegas adhere to running times designed for Broadway? Las Vegas is not Broadway and functions differently. If it did function like Broadway, there would be numerous Broadway musicals on The Strip, and *Mamma Mia* would not be considered the only successful survivor. One can argue that *Mamma Mia* has managed to maintain its aesthetic form with an intermission. But that doesn’t mean this decision was part of the formula for its success. If Las Vegas wants a Broadway musical to be successful, as Miller said, we must know our customers and accept that they are different from those who visit New York City.

Jack O'Brien, winner of the 2003 Tony Award in Best Direction for *Hairspray*, arrived to direct the Luxor's production. When asked how he thought *Hairspray* would do on the Las Vegas Strip, he responded, "I think it's going to be great here" (Weatherford, "Let us 'Spray'†"). The original set designer, David Rockwell, transferred his work to the Luxor along with William Ivy Long delivering costumes. Both gentlemen were awarded the 2003 Tony Award Best Design and Best Costumes for *Hairspray*. Jerry Mitchell, nominee for the 2003 Tony Award in Choreography and winner of the 2003 Drama Desk Award in Choreography for *Hairspray*, also joined the team. A reported $12 million was spent on the production and to upgrade the Luxor Theatre, which was "customized to play in the back rows of the clumsily large
The original Broadway vision was complete with Harvey Fierstein reviving his role of Edna Turnblat, which earned him the 2003 Tony Award winner for Best Actor in a Musical and Dick Latessa as her devoted husband, 2003 Tony Award winner for Best Supporting Actor in a Musical (IBDB). Both actors were hired to perform for the first twelve weeks of the show. When Fierstein was asked about his experience performing theatre in Las Vegas, he commented, "Theatre's theatre wherever it's played, and being back in Edna's bras and the arms of the ever-adorable Dick Latessa remains as divine as ever" (Clarke, "Fierstein's Sin").

Fierstein's comment is questionable. Theatre is not theatre wherever it's played. Different regions of the country respond differently to a show. I learned this while performing throughout the U.S. and Canada with the national tour of Singin' in the Rain. California audiences were very, very quiet. West Virginia audiences talked back to the actors on stage and the Montreal audiences stood on their chairs at the end of the musical and sang the title song, along with the cast, in French! Audience response reflects the surrounding environment and a Broadway musical on the Las Vegas Strip is no exception.

The preview performance of Hairspray had a fun pace, comedy, dancing and production values to be perfectly suited to The Strip milieu. The ushers were dressed in 1960s skirts and wore beehive hairdos. The Luxor theatre was transformed into a youthful world full of fun. It may be true that the powerful themes of the show were weakened by this ninety-minute version, but I never felt cheated and still found it
wonderfully enjoyable. The group that attended the preview with me were not devout theatergoers but everyone had a great time. One very conservative male in our group couldn’t stop laughing over Fierstein’s drag performance, so much so that I missed several funny lines because of my friend’s constant chuckling. More than my own opinion, I found my friends to be a litmus test of *Hairspray*’ success. At the final bows we were all on our feet and the audience around me appeared enthusiastic. The show was funny, silly, and full of great music and dancing. It was light-hearted, had a happy ending and was only ninety-minutes long. Who wouldn’t love this show?

Although the show was critically well received, Weatherford reported in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* that problems were on the horizon. Producer Myron Martin remarked that getting a secure toehold on the entertainment market proved to be "not nearly as easy as we thought it would be" (Weatherford, "Blue Man Group"). Weatherford wrote, "Despite a media blitz that put the musical’s logo on buses, billboards and even on the side of the Luxor pyramid itself, the producers now seem resigned to building the show by word of mouth" ("Blue Man Group"). Since I suggest "word of mouth" translates to "branding" on The Strip, it appeared that *Hairspray* was not a good match for the Luxor. An interview with Neil Miller offers further insight as to why *Hairspray* failed:

**Walsh:** Really simply, why do think *Hairspray* didn’t work?

**Miller:** A number of reasons.

**Walsh:** Can you share them?

**Miller:** Yeah, my opinion is my opinion. I think the hotel was a problem in several senses. Number 1: location, location, location. Nobody goes to the Luxor. It’s not on
anybody’s list. You go there as a destination if you have to go there, you don’t go there like you go to Caesars, like you go to the Venetian, like you go to the Wynn, you don’t. Number 2: The hotel didn’t really want the show. The deal was done with Mandalay who were the previous owners at the time of the merger. At the time that the merger was complete, they inherited the project and as a result…

Walsh: They didn’t do anything to help it.

Miller: Didn’t do a thing! Two concrete examples: you could not buy a ticket to the show at any other MGM Mirage or Mandalay properties.

Walsh: You’re kidding!

Miller: You could only purchase them at the box office in the Luxor. Number 2: They’re responsible for group sales. Do you know how many group sales they effected? Zero! No group sales! So, no, the hotel was not a happy, willing, involved partner.

Walsh: That’s such a shame. I really think the show could’ve worked.

Miller: Even the New York Producer, Margo Lions, said she liked this version better than New York. It moves, it’s breathless, it screams through, yes you cut the part of the character Mosley, a little. Yes, you lose some songs. But at the end of the day, it’s breathlessly entertaining. And the cast was terrific. Wonderful cast. Band was great. We discussed the Harvey thing. In a vacuum, not a bad decision to have Harvey. Would, I, if I were the [line] producer, have spent the money on Harvey? I would not have. It doesn’t mean it’s wrong. It means that I would not have done that. Just given the amount of money, the cost it would have taken to get them
there... no. Do you know how many tickets I have to sell to make that worthwhile?

(Miller Interview).

Martin defended his decision to bring in Tony Award winners Fierstein and Latessa despite accusations that their exorbitant contracts caused financial difficulties. He claimed it "was the only way to brand the show as the real deal, not just a 'tab' version for Vegas" (Weatherford, "Blue Man Group"). The producers stumbled on this point. Although they wisely accepted the fact that audiences here were different than New York's and willingly reduced the show's running time, they failed to see that the Las Vegas audience is not "wowed" by Broadway talent. Tourists who value a Broadway star traditionally attend New York productions. Miller's contention that Fierstein was an investment that probably didn't deliver the expected financial return has merit. Miller also explained that Fierstein and Latessa were a package deal. He used recent history to defend his opinion:

"In this town, Broadway talent does not sell ticket number 1, witnessed by Michael Crawford and Tommy Tune. It's a cost/value benefit. Not that they're [Fierstein and Latessa] not a wonderful team, not that they did not do a wonderful performance. But at the end of the day, it's not worth the money" (Miller Interview).

In an effort to improve ticket sales, producers moved the 10 p.m. weekend show to a 4 p.m. matinee, believing this would appeal to guests looking to spend late evenings elsewhere. When I asked Miller if the trend toward a sexier Vegas might negatively impact productions, he made an interesting comment: "All of the clubs have created a problem because that is now the preferred late night entertainment. That has definitely made an impact... It's all competition. Come 10-10:30, no one wants to sit in a theatre,
they want to be sitting in a club somewhere" (Miller Interview). Poor ticket sales for the 4 p.m. matinee was became evident when The University of Nevada, Las Vegas received free tickets for students to attend the matinee performances of Hairspray as a way to fill the Luxor theatre.

On June 5th, 2006, thirty minutes before show time, the producers announced to the cast and crew that Hairspray would close on July 11th. Martin remarked, "As a production we couldn't be happier but we just never found the audience. It's very sad" (Clark, "Hairspray"). New York Times writer Cambell Robertson reminded his readers that Avenue Q closed only three weeks before the announcement of Hairspray's demise (Robertson, "Hairspray"). Both shows earned the Tony Award for Best Musical, received great reviews and arrived with original cast members. They approached Las Vegas intending to create a Broadway musical experience but could not survive on The Strip.

My advisor, KC Davis, suggested that I explore the idea that the Broadway musical may be just another form of a "loss leader". A 1997 dissertation by Edward E. Baldwin for the University of Nevada Las Vegas, titled Las Vegas in Popular Culture, recounts an excellent example of a "loss leader." He refers to a 1992 article in Business Week written by Ronald Grover entitled, Wynn's World: "Wynn's success in staging boxing matches at his properties is also noted, as his 1990 fight between Evander Holyfield and Buster Douglas is reported to have lost $2 million, but the take at the casino from high rollers attending the event made up for this loss several times over" (162). However, Neil Miller and another (anonymous) source have assured me that although the concept of a "loss leader" may have been true in the past, shows now must have independent producers and be able to financially support themselves. Levels of support by the resort may vary per
contract but most resorts will not absorb financial losses of a production. If a show has worldwide recognition and attains "brand" status, it then becomes a specific marketing tool for the resort. Only then might the resort tolerate a certain amount of financial loss. (This information is confirmed by an anonymous source within the executive level of one of the larger properties.)

Myron Martin offered his explanation of Hairspray’s closing: "To compete with $150 million production of Cirque du Soliel, Celine Dion and others when somebody has one night to see a show proved a little more challenging than we thought...the truth is nobody knows" (Robertson). Hypothetically, if Martin produced Hairspray on Broadway he would be competing with twenty-three different Broadway shows. Hairspray had only one other Broadway musical to compete with for ticket sales, Mamma Mia. And Hairspray continues to flourish on Broadway. If Martin was suggesting that Hairspray could not compete with a Cirque show or Celine Dion because of their extravagant production values then attempts to produce Phantom of the Opera, The Producers or Spamalot might be acts of folly. Miller’s opinion differs: "It depends on the property. I don’t think you can make a blanket statement that Broadway works or doesn’t work. Individual shows work. It sounds trite but there’s a big difference between the two. Because... whatever works on Broadway does not translate to being a hit in this town" (Miller Interview)

Tony Awards, the original design staff, Broadway stars and great reviews could not hold up Hairspray. Failure of this show had little to do with the production or its general marketing, although producers may have overestimated the draw that Fierstein’s name would have on ticket sales. The real fault lies in the resort’s new management and its
unwillingness to promote the musical. A source that works with ticket sales on The Strip implied that most tickets are last-minute purchases, adding that visitors often verbalize being torn between seeing a show or spending the time gaming. Forcing visitors to purchase tickets only at the Luxor had an obvious negative impact.

_Hairspray_ had many elements similar to _Mamma Mia_. It was well marketed, fast-paced, enthusiastic, fun, and the music made you want to get up and move. The story had been lightened up a bit but held onto enough gravitas that you continued to remain engaged. And you absolutely didn’t feel that you were “stuck” in the theatre. It was even shorter than _Mamma Mia_!

Both shows had national tours, and continue to run successfully on Broadway. One significant difference was _Hairspray_ was not a catalogue show, which be the primary reason why _Mamma Mia_ survives in Las Vegas. _Hairspray_’s early demise was caused primarily by the Luxor’s unwillingness to make ticket sales easily accessible. Opening a new musical at a resort where new management does not want your production can only be chalked up to bad timing. Just like the theatre itself, when producing a Broadway musical “timing is everything.”
CHAPTER 5

PHANTOM - THE LAS VEGAS SPECTACULAR

 Phantom of The Opera opened on January 26, 1988 at The Majestic Theatre on Broadway. As of August 6, 2006, the musical has performed a total of 7,725 times. It swept the 1988 Tony Awards claiming seven awards including Best Musical and Best Direction of a Musical for Hal Prince (IBDB). As of May 28, 2006, cumulative grosses for Phantom of the Opera are a reported $612,009,225.03 (Gwertzman). The musical is also responsible for launching the career of Sarah Brightman and reviving the career Michael Crawford. An article by Mike Weatherford reported "as of January 9, 2006, the Andrew Lloyd Webber melodrama became Broadway’s longest-running hit. It has grossed more than $3.2 billion worldwide and has been seen by 80 million people" ("Current and Possible Broadway").

On July 27, 2006, The Venetian announced it would bring The Phantom of the Opera to Las Vegas with Harold Prince directing the production. "The new Las Vegas production of The Phantom of the Opera will be showcased in a brand new, $25 million dollar, state-of-the-art theatre being designed and built specifically for the musical production"(Reese). This announcement implied the show would be adapted to serve Las Vegas' ninety-minute rule. Writing for the Las Vegas Review Journal, critic Anthony Del Valle suggested that reducing the show might actually be an improvement: "It's also a good idea from the marketing standpoint. What theatergoer has not seen Phantom? This
new version will be something to experience in addition to the original" ("Venetian’s Shorter Phantom"). During his guest lecture at The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Hal Prince admitted that producing shortened versions of *Fiddler on the Roof, Pajama Game* and *Damn Yankees* in Las Vegas over forty years ago provided him with helpful tools when he began the task of reducing *The Phantom of the Opera* for Las Vegas. He also remarked that his personal involvement with the show helped when considering where to cut the show: "After all these years, think how well I know the show. I can’t find them [the cuts] anymore… a lot of the stuff going on here I prefer" (Prince Lecture).

Prince indicated he was well aware that the Las Vegas Strip is very different from Broadway. He collaborated with Webber to bring this shortened version and its new title to The Venetian. "There’s no point in presenting here just a replica of something that’s been done before… you need to have a production that is entirely made for the town, as it were" (Weatherford, "Composer Ready").

The famous crashing chandelier moment has also been altered. "The new chandelier begins in four fragments and assembles in front of the audience with the aid of 32 winches" (Weatherford, "Lifting the Mask"). Hal Prince voiced his annoyance regarding all the attention that has been given to this now-infamous chandelier. "The chandelier’s gotten more publicity than any prop in the history of mankind, and I resent it, totally" (Weatherford, "Lifting the Mask"). But his wit shone through during guest lecture. He recognized that visitors on The Strip would have certain expectations for *Phantom* and admitted that when he began work on the Las Vegas production, "I thought we better make it a show about a chandelier!"
Prince also disclosed the fact that when Phantom was originally created, he and Webber worked with the designers to find places in every scene where some kind of surprise would be revealed. He planned to use this same technique in the Las Vegas version. Mike Weatherford quotes Hal Prince: "I discerned that we should have a huge surprise right at the beginning of the evening so that the audiences who have known or have seen Phantom will say, 'oh, this is going to be different.' And those surprises then continue right up to the end" ("Lifting the Mask").

The set design was praised by critics: "Architect David Rockwell has surrounded them [the audience] with 18th century atmosphere. Look up and you will see side boxes occupied by mannequins in period dress, 'giving this sort of ghostlike thing that's hovering; the ghosts of the people who have been in this Paris Opera House' notes Antony Crivello, one of the two actors alternating the role of the Phantom" (Weatherford, "Lifting the Mask"). Prince was pleased with the outcome: "Spilling the show out in the house solved a lot of problems" (Prince Lecture). Rockwell intuited that Las Vegas invites this kind of spectacle. Merely entering the Venetian Theatre creates an experience of spectacle even before the show begins.

"Actors Anthony Crivello (Phantom), Brent Barrett (Phantom), Elizabeth Loyacano (Christina), and Tim Martin Gleason (Raoul), bring talent and experience to the roles they portray in Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular (Weatherford, "Tony Award"). The show has double-cast the roles of Christine, Carlotta and the Phantom to maintain an "ambitious ten show schedule" (Weatherford, "Spectacular").

In an article written the day after opening night, Weatherford suggested Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular might have been better named "Version 1.5." "The Las Vegas
edition...is not so much as a drastic rethinking of Andrew Lloyd Webber's blockbuster as one that shows us how the Broadway original might have looked from the get-go if it had opened in a custom-designed theatre" ("Spectacle"). Despite the fact that Weatherford goes on to call the musical a "shameless melodrama," he praises the trimmer Phantom and gives it an "A" rating.

The reduced size of Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular did not translate into reduced costs. Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular is considered the most expensive musical ever produced. Base Entertainment is the theatrical division of Clear Channel and is producing this show to the tune of $35 million. The Venetian has invested a reported $40 million into the theatre itself. Previously, The Lion King was considered the most expensive musical on Broadway costing reported $20 million to produce. The cost of Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular is a reported $75 million, more than three times the cost of the most expensive musical produced on Broadway! (McKinley, "Revised Phantom").

Clear Channel made this investment because of their strong belief in Las Vegas as a viable option for the Broadway musical and that Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular will be a success. Chief executive of Base Entertainment, Scott Ziegler: "We understand the power of a universal and marketable brand. We've seen Las Vegas emerge as the second-largest live entertainment market in North America, after New York, and we believe that Phantom is perhaps the most popular entertainment property ever. So we think it's a perfect match" (McKinley, "Revised Phantom").

Ziegler recognizes the importance of "brand" in Las Vegas and believes that because Phantom is world-renowned, it arrives in Las Vegas with a "brand" already in place. "I
can honestly say that of all the theatre pieces in the world, *Phantom of the Opera* is the 800-pound gorilla" (Weatherford, "Phantom, Beatles"). In this regard, *Phantom of the Opera* is definitely more on par with *Mamma Mia* than any other musical studied in this thesis. "Brand" is an element necessary for the success of a Broadway musical on The Strip. But considering its enormous financial investment, is *Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular* enough of a "brand" to recoup a $75 million investment?

Beliefs that the Las Vegas Strip and Broadway are becoming a synonymous experience was suggested by writer Jesse McKinley: "...the move [referring to *Phantom*] seems to signal a rapidly evolving relationship between Broadway and the Las Vegas Strip" ("Revised 'Phantom'"). The League of American Theaters and Producers echoes this sentiment: "'These hotels are under such pressure to differentiate their brand because gambling is the same everywhere,' said Jeff Bernstein, the president of the League of American Theaters and Producers. 'So what helps them be different is the entertainment, and Broadway has become that type of popular entertainment currency'" (McKinley, "Revised 'Phantom'").

Is this comment accurate or wishful thinking? Less than four months ago, two tremendously successful musicals that are still on Broadway were incapable of surviving on The Strip and closed in less than twelve months. Now *Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular* opens at the unprecedented cost of $75 million and this convinces the League of American Theaters and Producers that Broadway on the Las Vegas Strip is the most "popular entertainment currency?"

Neil Miller had a different view:
"I would never have made the Phantom bet. Not in a million years. And I don’t
think they’ll ultimately make it. They’re not doing well now. Phantom might have
done ok if you buy that it’s a brand and no longer about a show. Ok, but if you buy
the press, ok you say you do. You’ve got to put somebody in it, Number 1. Number
2, I don’t see how, knowing what the numbers were, and trying to negotiate with The
Venetian… I don’t know how you make a nickel with a $35 million investment for
the show. But a $15 million investment, at a Broadway level, that’s one bet, but two
and a half times that? I just don’t see how, I just don’t see how. Lloyd Webber and
the author, they all get their money, the hotel gets their money, and then you as the
producer, Base Entertainment, you get anything left? I don’t see how it’s profitable.
How it can pay for itself? And at the end of the day, I don’t think its doing well and it
will certainly not run for a long time. I think it’s an odd choice at best. I think”
(Miller Interview).

The Majestic Theatre in New York City seats 1,665 which nearly matched the
Venetian Theatre which seats 1,800 seats. It remains to be seen if the production can fill
the theatre twice nightly. Base Entertainment sizeable investment makes Phantom - The
Las Vegas Spectacular a game for high stakes players. Brian Becker, Clear Channel’s
chief executive admitted, "We are all making a very big bet on the success of the venture,
but we clearly see Vegas as a place we want to be involved in for a very long time"
(McKinley, "Revised Phantom"). Time will determine if their bet to produce Broadway
musicals on the Las Vegas Strip will benefit a company whose core businesses are
billboard advertisements, radio stations and concerts.
CONCLUSION

Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular is open and the arrival of Spamalot and The Producers is less than six months away. According to the Spamalot website, the Las Vegas production plans to open in March 2007. At this time, The Wynn Las Vegas website offers no information regarding the much anticipated production of Spamalot.

Spamalot is a musical adaptation of the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail written by Eric Idle and directed by Mike Nichols. It opened on February 14, 2005 at the Shubert Theatre and won three Tony Awards that year, including Best Musical (IBDB). The Las Vegas production intends to perform twelve times a week in a ninety-minute format (Weatherford, "A Lot of Spamalot"). Because the musical caters to Monty Python fans, it reaches out to those who might not traditionally attend the theatre. Myron Martin, a producer for the recent Las Vegas production of Hairspray and president of the Las Vegas Performing Arts Center Foundation, shared his opinion regarding Spamalot's arrival to the Las Vegas Strip: "I think it will be a big success. There is a great buzz on this show. People leave the show loving it. And there are tons of Monty Python fans around the world" (Weatherford, "A Lot"). Neil Miller, also one of the producers of Hairspray, offered a different perspective:

'I'd make the bet on Spamalot because of all the egos involved. Because of Mike Nickols and Eric Idle. They will keep it afloat because they can. The key to Spamalot's success in New York was not that it was a wonderfully inventive, brilliant, creative musical, it's that it tapped into a theatre-going public that is otherwise not a
theatre going public. The guys who are in love with Monty Python and the whole demographic of current and former frat boys who would never think of walking into a Broadway theatre, happily go in to see Spamalot because it’s Monty Python… especially given the level of conventioneers and all of that other stuff. Yeah, my gut would say, that’s probably an OK bet. Not by subject, but because of literally of who it’s been created to appeal to, it’s probably OK” (Miller interview).

Both viewpoints have merit. Should Las Vegas cater to The Strip visitor who is here to participate in the more "traditional" activities on The Strip? Or should this cultural element of Broadway musicals be added thereby nurturing a different kind of Las Vegas visitor? This discourse arose during an interview with Anthony Del Valle, theatre critic for the Las Vegas Review Journal. He recounted a 1999 conversation with a woman in the Public Relations Department of the Rio. A visiting exhibit titled Treasures of Russia Historic Art Display had been well received. Much to her surprise, a number of visitors disclosed that this exhibit had been the primary reason for making the trip to Las Vegas (Masilow). The Guggenheim also had a respectable presence at the Venetian in 2003 featuring The Art of the Motorcycle (Snedeker). Del Valle remains optimistic and rightly suggests that the Las Vegas Strip is continuing to change and grow. He believes that as long as there are "pioneers" like Myron Martin and Steve Wynn, eventually Las Vegas will have a respectable number of Broadway Musicals on The Strip. Del Valle believes that this kind of presence will inevitably add a new dimension to the image of Las Vegas.

Del Valle identified a marketing challenge not previously considered. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority has the ability to create a campaign encouraging visitors to consider Las Vegas as an alternative to traveling to New York to see a
Broadway musical. However, it will take a more firmly established landscape of Broadway musicals on The Strip before The Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Center will commit to this type of marketing campaign.

Del Valle’s optimism is admirable but I think a certain amount of practicality is needed when considering the Las Vegas Strip as a location for a Broadway musical. It is also possible that introducing Broadway musicals designed to appeal to the typical visitors could provide the catalyst needed to make the Las Vegas Strip more welcoming toward other Broadway musicals.

If the visitor on The Strip is geared toward having a good time and experiencing something that is both fun and familiar, *Spamalot* may be a better fit than most. Although I was not able to find data to support this theory, it seems that those attending conferences and conventions during the week are predominantly male. *Spamalot* may appeal to this niche market of visitors. And because *Monty Python* is nationally and internationally recognized, it arrives with its own brand in place.

Mel Brook’s musical comedy, *The Producers*, is due to arrive at the Paris Las Vegas on January 31, 2007 (Harrah Page). As of November 10, 2006, there is no reference to this opening on *The Producers* website. *The Producers* opened on Broadway on March 21, 2001 at the St. James Theatre. As of October 29, 2006, it has run for a total of 2,302 performances. The musical broke all records by winning an amazing twenty-four Tony Awards in 2001, including Best Musical. (IBDB) *The Producers* Broadway gross for the week of September 25th to October 1st was a reported $534,251 (Ku). Mel Brooks also wrote and directed the original movie, which inspired the musical *The Producers*. The creative genius of Brooks combined with the talented director, Susan Stroman has created
a blockbuster hit. An article written by Mike Weatherford on August 31, 2006 explains the delay in the musical's opening in Las Vegas: "Paris officials cited the busy schedule of writer Mel Brooks and director Susan Stroman, and say there is no point in opening the musical just before the December slowdown on The Strip. It's also no secret the producers are seeking a name star, or stars, so there might be a casting announcement just before tickets go on sale. ..." (Weatherford, "Echelon Place").

On November 2, 2006, Playbill and a variety of other sources announced that David Hasselhoff will perform the role of Roger DeBris in the Las Vegas production of The Producers. Baywatch may have made Mr. Hasselhoff a television star but he has also pursued a musical theatre career performing in Jekyll and Hyde and the West End production of Chicago. Mel Brooks praised Hasselhoff's talent, stated he was "overjoyed" with the casting and quipped, "And by the way, he has great legs for that dress" (Jones). Other than this information, little has been released concerning the upcoming production. Will The Producers be a success? It could have a strong run if the Las Vegas visitor gives it primary consideration when choosing entertainment options while on The Strip. Of course, that remains to be seen.

When asked if a Broadway musical was even a viable option for the Las Vegas Strip, Neil Miller was quick to come to its defense, adding, "You've got to be very careful of your choices." When I pointed out to Miller that the formula for Broadway doesn't work in Las Vegas, he retorted, "Because the fundamental difference is 'ART NOT SPOKEN HERE'. If anything, we need a tee shirt that says, 'Fuck Art, Let's Dance.' I mean, it's about commerce; it's not about art. I think that's the fundamental difference."
Miller suggested that the typical Las Vegas visitor wants to attend an event that can only be seen in Las Vegas. "If you can see it somewhere else, it already doesn’t make it to the first box on the list of things you want to check out in Vegas" (Miller Interview). If this theory is correct then any musical on the Las Vegas Strip concurrently running on Broadway is at an immediate disadvantage. This also suggests visitors who come to the Las Vegas Strip consider the Broadway musical as something to do once you’ve seen everything else. The Broadway musical may never overpower the Las Vegas Strip like Cirque du Soliel, but the recent attempts of Avenue Q and Hairspray demonstrate that this situation is continuing to evolve. Miller suggested that Cirque shows have saturated The Strip and this will eventually result in a form of "cannibalism." Resorts may be extending invitations to Broadway musicals simply because they recognize Cirque’s over-saturation and are seeking alternative forms of entertainment.

The combination of producers willing to invest in Broadway musicals on The Strip and the willingness of casinos to provide theatrical venues creates a unique opportunity not usually available in most cities. Because producers provide the financial support for the actual production and resorts now invest in the actual theatre, it is an appealing proposition for both parties. If the show succeeds, the resort gains an additional brand. If the show fails, the resort has an upgraded theatrical space and can easily find replacements.

This brings to focus the fact that producers and visitors view The Strip differently. Producers realize that the Broadway musical can be easily created in Las Vegas. The structural limitations of traditional Broadway theatres do not exist in Las Vegas. Although we do have a local 720, our union exists in a right-to-work state, which seems
to affect a more cooperative union. And we have a built-in industry [gaming] willing to
finance theatrical ventures because their profits depend on happy customers who visit Las
Vegas intending to game and enjoy entertainment on The Strip.

Although Neil Miller expressed a pragmatic view, he offered a vision of The Strip
that I had never considered:

"To mount a Broadway show in New York is probably the most expensive, archaic,
arcane, ineffective place you could ever try to do it. Why? The union, it's the cost of
doing business and the Good Old Boys Club. Which is really a slightly different
membership but it takes so long to become a member of that club that by the time
they finally get the membership the primary goal becomes to not piss off anyone else
that's in the club. Therefore the answer generally is always, 'why do we do it this
way? Because that's the way we always did it.' Whereas, the thing that never
happened here is, being a right-to-work state, having large venues, having a skilled
labor force, having decent performing resources, This should have been a place where
stuff was created, tested, tuned, started and exported to other places as opposed to the
place where things that are tried and true in other places are brought here. It should
have been just the opposite" (Miller Interview).

During an email exchange with writer Mike Weatherford, he mused over the idea of
Las Vegas moving "higher in the creation cycle" of musicals. Like Miller, he suggested
that Las Vegas has the opportunity to host new productions, which might then move to
Broadway, similar to the way in which regional theatres have provided venues for
productions that eventually moved to Broadway such as Smokey Joe's Café and Dirty
Rotten Scoundrels. Chicago Tribune arts critic Chris Jones seems to be of a similar
opinion: "The impact of Vegas on the future of commercial legit might be greatest in terms of aesthetics, not money. Broadway theater owners are loath to admit it but as more people see Vegas megahits, crowds in New York will start to chafe at the aesthetic restrictions posed by the Victorian-era shells in which Broadway musicals must always be staged. So will the talent" (Jones).

Producers and resorts may define success differently. A resort may consider a Broadway musical a success if it embellishes their brand and/or increases the number of people who game at their resort. A producer may view the success of a production as defined by a long run with reasonable financial returns. Additionally, Las Vegas differs from Broadway because the success or failure of a musical on The Strip is not heavily impacted by a critic's review.

Those who visit Las Vegas are intent on experiencing The Strip and everything the image suggests: gaming, dining and the overall experience of just being in Vegas. Visitors arrive expecting their experiences to be unique including their choice in entertainment.

As witnessed by the failure of Avenue Q and Hairspray, elements necessary for success on Broadway cannot be applied to Las Vegas. On Broadway, Tony Awards (particularly for Best Musical), strong financial backing, great reviews and strong tickets sales equate "success". Avenue Q and Hairspray had all of these elements and still failed in Las Vegas.

Mamma Mia has been able to claim “resident” status on The Strip simply because it’s fun and easy entertainment. It just happens to be a Broadway musical. Although Prince and Webber accurately recognized that The Strip requires a different approach to an
established Broadway musical, the significant financial investment in *Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular* will play a large part in determining its success. Critic Anthony Del Valle suggested more Broadway musicals produced on The Strip might eventually convince theatergoers to consider Las Vegas as an alternative choice for legitimate theatre. If Del Valle's "safety in numbers" theory is correct, then the opening of *The Producers* and *Spamalot* can only benefit *Phantom - The Las Vegas Spectacular*.

Will Las Vegas become the next Broadway? No. There is certainly room for other Broadway musicals on The Strip but as long as gaming remains the leader of Nevada's economy, gaming, not the Broadway musical will determine why the majority of visitors come to Las Vegas. Visitor statistics may appear nearly equal to New York City but Las Vegas visitors have not fully embraced the Broadway musical as an essential element of the Vegas experience.

So, what are the elements that contribute to the success of a Broadway show on the Las Vegas Strip? I suggest the following: The production needs to entertain; it needs some element of story or music that provides a sense of familiarity to the general public; it must contain enough spectacle to fit in with Las Vegas environment; and it must not intimidate the Las Vegas visitor who doesn't attend theatre. Most importantly, the production must remain open long enough to achieve brand status, finally, the visitor must believe that attending this production is unique to Las Vegas.

*Mamma Mia* has cornered the market on almost all of these elements with the exception that it is not unique to The Strip as it continues to run on Broadway. Because it has had a long run at the Mandalay Bay, it has developed a strong brand and, as Myron Martin suggested, "I don't know if the bulk of tourists even know it's a Broadway
musical" (McKinley, "Revised Phantom). If people are unaware of this fact, distancing itself from Broadway may be an unexpected benefit for *Mamma Mia* because those attending the show may consider it an authentic Vegas experience.

When Kandor and Ebb wrote, "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere. It's up to you New York New York," clearly they had never tried to produce a show in Las Vegas (Wikipedia). Although producers and resorts that bring Broadway musicals to the Las Vegas Strip obviously have the greatest collective impact on this form of entertainment, the final outcome has yet to be determined. The elements of success for a Broadway musical on the Las Vegas Strip are only beginning to be defined. Although I have been able to identify several, only the passage of time will reveal more.
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