



Ben Schmitt



MAGICMAN

Once upon a time, Dan Fields C'88 was *this close* to bringing his acclaimed production of a “lost” Arthur Miller play to Broadway. Now he creates live entertainment for Disney theme parks, resorts, and cruise ships. The professional distance from one to the other, he insists, isn't so great. **BY ALYSON KRUEGER**

Happy. Very happy. So damn happy.

That's the vibe coming from the several hundred toddlers and their caretakers—plus one entranced freelance-writer—at this performance of *Disney Junior Live on Stage* at Disney California Adventure Park, the newer park next to the original Disneyland in Anaheim.

The plot involves preparations by Mickey, Donald, Goofy, and Daisy to put together a surprise birthday party for Minnie—assisted along the way by less iconic characters from shows currently airing on Disney Junior, a cable channel geared to the preschool set. The audience—*guests*, in Disney parlance—are totally drawn in, jumping to the music, running around to catch falling bubbles and confetti, and shrieking with delight as each character makes his or her debut.

But it's not just two-year-olds who love Disney. If you've ever visited a theme park, or cruise ship, or resort, you've seen it: 10-year-olds embracing Cinderella, Belle, and the other Disney Princesses as if they are long-lost BFFs; parents beaming as widely as their kids while watching expertly choreographed parades; lovers completely absorbed in spectacular fireworks and water shows. A twenty-something friend of mine had her bachelorette

party at Disney World in Orlando, and another friend—even older!—made a pilgrimage to Disneyland Paris when he was in France for only a few days. I brought a Goofy doll home with me after my recent visit. While some are certainly immune (or even allergic) to the Disney Kool-Aid, it's drunk by people of all ages.

And when it comes to live entertainment, Daniel Fields C'88, executive creative director at Walt Disney Imagineering Creative Entertainment, is one of the key purveyors of that distinctive refreshment. Fields is part of a team of about 1,400 employees called *Imagineers*, who are charged with developing creative new ways for visitors to get swept up in the wonderful world of Disney.

We are “basically the branch that thinks of all this stuff,” explains Elissa Hogan, who worked with Fields on the production of *Disney Junior Live on Stage* (and, she says, cried the first time she saw the show). That includes everything from parades and fireworks shows, to large-scale stage productions, to character meet-and-greets, the timing, script, and locations of which are choreographed down to the second.

Or, as the Disney Imagineering website, puts it: “We make the Magic.”

Besides the *Disney Junior* show, which is performed at a number of parks, Fields has created events at Hong Kong Disney and Disneyland Tokyo inspired by *Toy Story* and other Disney properties. When the company launched its newest cruise ship, *Disney Fantasy*, in early 2012, Fields was creative director for *Wishes*, a 45-minute Broadway-style show that debuted on its maiden voyage. Including original songs and familiar Disney tunes, the show is built around three friends, who first met at Disneyland when they were little and are now about to graduate high school. Paying a last visit to the park, they wish themselves into a magical journey of self-discovery and—cue *The Little Mermaid*'s “Kiss the Girl”—a bit of romance as well. Fields is currently assigned to the company's biggest and most lucrative property, Disney World in Orlando, where he oversaw last summer's *Monsters University Homecoming Party* at the resort's Hollywood Studios park.

Before joining Disney, Fields spent years working in regional theaters and on Broadway. He looks at his job as much more than simply showing guests a good time. He has to make sure they connect to the world of Disney on a very deep level.

“We have a lot of work to do,” he says. “Because how much the guests love their experience has to do with how often they will come back and what level of commitment they will bring back ... and more importantly, how deeply they feel connected, and I truly mean this, to our stories and to our characters and how they relate them to their own lives, and how they transmit that to their children.”

WDI's office in Glendale, California, is about an hour's drive from Disneyland on a good traffic day, but it might as well be inside the park walls. Statues of Mickey and Minnie greet visitors at the front door. Inside, desks are topped with Disney-character stuffed animals and toys, and the colorful furniture is straight out of a kid's fantasy playroom. The walls are adorned with vintage Disney posters and elaborate sketches of parades with carriages, dragons, and other mythical creatures falling in line.

“To be surrounded by truly creative people in an atmosphere that says creativity is important, imagination is key, all of this stuff is crucial in order to make

the best product in order to make our guests happy and bring happiness to everybody,” says Hogan. “That's awesome! That's where you want to be!”

Contributing to this level of zeal may be the fact that the imagineers have so many resources to work with. As Fields notes in a short YouTube video about *Wishes*, “We have a director-choreographer from Broadway, we have a set designer from Broadway and television, we have a costume designer from the world of film, and they've all come together to lend their talents to create [this show].”

Beyond that, they are allowed (encouraged, in fact) to pursue projects that may not have a specific purpose or objective. “We call that true blue sky,” says Fields. “It's when we say, ‘You know, I kind of want to spend time dreaming up something, or there's this new technology and I really just want to get my hands on it and play and see if it's useful for us.’ That's a real gift.”

But if Fields has a dream job now, it's one he never even knew he wanted. And one that took a long and sometimes bumpy road to reach.

It was at Penn that Fields first realized that he had a desire to create theatre, during a year-long introductory class that forced him to both be in plays and practice staging them. While he never really “thrilled to the idea of being the person on stage,” serving as director was another thing entirely.

He already knew he had the most fun when he was calling the shots. At his high school in Portland, Oregon, “Whatever things I did, I liked to end up in charge of,” he says, laughing. “That just seems to be the way I like to get involved.” Besides editing the school newspaper, he was also international president of his Jewish youth group, B'nai Brith Youth Organization. (He deferred college for a year to travel around the world for the group.)

Fields also took classes at Penn with the late playwright Romulus Linney, who was on the faculty then, and theatre critic and historian Cary Mazer, associate professor of theatre arts and English, who opened his eyes to the world's best dramatic works. Fields loved going line by line, seeing how playwrights structured their scenes so deliberately, and then imagining how he would execute those words on stage. “Because I liked

the literature of theatre so much, being the director meant that in some instances I would get to choose the material, or at the very least, if someone else chose the material, to interpret it,” he says.

Besides his classes, Fields also got directing experience through his involvement with Penn Players and UTV, the student cable-TV channel, which “I don't know for a fact that anybody watched”—but which was invaluable, Fields says. The students tried to do a show called *Penn PM* live, “which is ridiculous, because this is a bunch of volunteers,” he recalls, but “we were doing stage-management, production-management, design ... We were moving scenery; we had to make show transitions; we had to make a production schedule. All these things were essentially theatre in the name of doing this crazy TV show.”

After graduation, Fields headed to Seattle's “booming fringe-theatre scene,” intending to open a theatre of his own—which, of course, he adds, “I didn't know anything at all about.” While that didn't happen, Fields found ways to get an education in the theatre world.

During the day (and to pay the bills) he got a job at the Seattle Repertory Theater as an intern and later assistant to some of the city's leading directors, including Dan Sullivan and Doug Hughes. In the evening he worked at the 99-seat Annex Theatre—a fringe theatre where young Penn and Yale alumni went to “find cool plays and do cool stagings of them,” he says—along with playwright Glen Berger C'89 [“Glen Berger's Amazing Spider-Man Experience,” July/August 2013] and Wier Harman C'89, now executive director of Town Hall Seattle.

For Fields, this was a perfect combination: “I would observe really fantastic, highly experienced directors by day, and then at night, figure out how to do it myself.”

During the summer of 1994 Fields received a recommendation to be an assistant director at the well-regarded Williamstown Theatre Festival, on the campus of Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. As luck would have it, he got placed as an assistant to Michael Greif—later the mastermind behind Broadway's *Rent* but at the time a theatre director in La Jolla, California—who was staging a production of Chekhov's *The Sea Gull* starring Christopher Walken and a 20-year-old Gwyneth Paltrow. Fields calls Greif “a great guy and a really terrific men-

tor,” and the two got along so well that the director invited Fields to come to La Jolla and be the assistant director for *Randy Newman’s Faust*, the first stage musical by the singer-songwriter and film composer, which was the La Jolla Playhouse’s next production.

From there, Fields headed to New York to try and make a name for himself on Broadway. Using a contact he’d made in La Jolla, he landed a job at Disney Theatricals, where he was first attached to a planned musical about the life of King David. But that production was put on hold six weeks later, which left the ambitious young director available for another project the company had in the works.

Rumors had just been confirmed that Disney would be producing *The Lion King* on Broadway with Julie Taymor, one of Fields’ favorite directors. “Almost as an afterthought, I asked [my] producer if I could at least go and meet with [Julie]—because maybe she needs the help and I’m available and you are paying me for the rest of the month, anyway,” remembers Fields. “So they set up the appointment, and we went and had lunch the next day and we totally hit it off, and she basically said, ‘I need you to start researching for me, like, yesterday.’”

Serving as Taymor’s assistant wasn’t easy. His job was to do anything the director needed, from finding office space near Union Square for the producers to meet (“I felt like a real estate agent,” says Fields) to studying a videotape of *The*

Lion King movie so he could tell her exactly how many wildebeests there are in the wildebeest stampede.

(When asked how many, Fields responds, “Oh God, I can’t remember ... Because the next day she asked me—I need to see every picture [that exists] of a giant cat.”)

It was certainly rewarding, though. Fields worked on staging *The Lion King* performance at the 1998 Tony Awards, where the show won Best Musical and Taymor took the award for Best Direction of a New Musical. And when Taymor left to take her production to Japan and beyond, Fields got to stay and direct the show in New York City, which was “an honor,” he says. “There is no one on the planet that was paying attention to theatre who didn’t know about this show, and I was part of that family.”

Still, he hadn’t achieved what he really wanted, which was to be “the guy,” the person directing the show.

“Like few artists I know, Dan understands directing’s not only about rallying people to his vision, but forging a collective vision among talented artists you respect,” says his old Annex Theater colleague Wier Harman.

After three years working on *The Lion King* Fields headed back to California to try to direct a show of his own. He fixed on Arthur Miller’s little-known first play, *The Man Who Had All The Luck*—little-known because it flopped horribly on Broadway, closing after just four performances in

1944. (Its failure was said to have led Miller to temporarily abandon the theatre for novel-writing, before achieving Broadway success with *All My Sons* a few years later.)

Someone had pitched the play to the Seattle Repertory Theatre (which turned it down) while Fields was working there as an intern, and he had fallen in love with it. He was attracted both to the plot—about a man who couldn’t relate to his family or friends because nothing bad ever happened to him—and the intense emotionality of the characters. “I decided [in 1990] that would be the play that I would produce if I could get the rights to do it,” he recalls.

The question, a decade later, was whether he could get Miller’s permission. The play had never been revived in the US since its disastrous opening and, Fields says, “at the time hadn’t even been republished.”

Having used his contacts to wangle an invitation to the author’s house to discuss the possibility of a revival, he rented a car, stopped at H & H to get a dozen fresh bagels, and drove to Arthur Miller’s house in Connecticut. “I sat down with him in his study, in his writing room, and I told him about my passion for this obscure play,” Fields recounts. “And when we finished the conversation, he said, ‘You’ve got to do this play.’”

When *The Man Who Had All the Luck* opened in 2000 at the Ivy Substation Theatre in Culver City, California, Fields thought he had finally struck it big in the world of the-

Dan Fields in the workshop of the Imagineering offices.



atre. “Honestly, we got the most amazing reviews I’ve ever gotten for the production itself, for the performances, and for the revival of this piece that nobody had ever—‘an Arthur Miller play I’ve never heard of?’ That kind of thing. And it just went crazy!”

Time called the piece a “smart, wonderfully acted production,” and *NPR* spotlighted the revival on *All Things Considered*. The show was so popular that its performance run was extended twice.

But while *The Man Who Had All the Luck* got Fields some attention, he couldn’t find a backer to help him bring it to Broadway. “I got all kinds of enthusiasm, but I couldn’t get anyone to basically trust me at my age and level of experience to take this to where it belonged, which was basically a Broadway play.”

The final blow came when one of the producers he had asked to help expand the play’s reach actually did stage a version of the play—with another director—at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, which went on to play briefly in New York in 2002. “That was disappointing, as you can imagine,” Fields says.

For the next several years, he continued looking for projects of his own to pursue, but mostly ended up holding assistant positions for Broadway shows like *The Graduate* and *In My Life* (a troubled production that ended in the composer committing suicide). He also applied for positions as artistic director at small companies, but was turned down because he had moved around so much in his career, he says. When another former colleague put him up for the Disney position at the end of 2006 and told him it would include the resources and freedom to create his own work, Fields jumped at the opportunity.

On his first day at work, Fields met with Disney’s vice presidents of entertainment from Paris to Tokyo to Hong Kong to Florida. “They just threw me in cold, which was great,” he says. On his second day, his boss handed him a “fat, red script” that turned out to be the not-yet-released screenplay for *Ratatouille*, and asked him to pitch ideas for how to turn the movie into a theatre piece. On his third day, he received the assignment to turn *Playhouse Disney*, a puppet show for toddlers, into *Disney Junior Live on Stage*, an updated and much more engaging performance. “I instantly loved my job,” says Fields.

Fields was also placed in charge of “long-

term, master planning” for the Hong Kong Disneyland and Tokyo Disney resorts, which involved ensuring the quality of all live entertainment and adding more attractions in the future. At the time, Hong Kong Disneyland had just been expanded to include three new lands—Toy Story Land, Grizzly Gulch, and Mystic Point—for which Fields designed the entertainment.

Some of his favorite additions include Cubot, a robotic toy that drives around Toy Story Land, spinning itself around and then being put back together as a Princess or a Spaceman or a Cowboy; a Toy Soldier Boot Camp Show for Toy Story Land; and the Grizzly Gulch Welcome Wagon Show, in which residents of a simulated mining town come out to welcome guests as if they are the settlers.

In September 2012 Fields got moved to the Walt Disney World portfolio, perhaps a more challenging assignment because it is so much bigger than the other parks, brings in a much greater percentage of business, and has many more “cooks,” he says.

This past summer, Fields was creative director for the *Monsters University Homecoming Party*. Inspired by *Monsters University*, Pixar’s sequel to *Monsters, Inc.*, the show played evenings from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. at Hollywood Studios in what Disney refers to as “Limited Time Magic.”

The main characters from the film—short, green, one-eyeball-shaped Mike, and the blue, furry, hulking Sully—were “the heroes and hosts of it,” says Fields, “and there is sort of a house-band [Scare Supply] that goes around and plays. There are monster cheerleaders and fraternity and sorority games, and food and beverages that are tied into the theme.”

Many of the projects he is currently working on are still under wraps, but Fields hints that a lot have to do with Disney’s recent acquisitions of Marvel Comics, with its hugely popular *Iron Man*, *Thor*, and *Avengers* film franchises; Lucasfilms (home of *Star Wars*, of course); and the rights to *Avatar*, James Cameron’s science-fiction epic.

“There’s been no question that the company wants to put those assets into the parks,” he says. Disney announced plans for an Avatar Land in Disney World’s Animal Kingdom park back in 2011, and released the first concept art for the project this past October, and there are rumors that Star Wars Land is coming to Hollywood

Studios and perhaps other locations.

Fields says that one of the reasons Disney hired him was his vast network of artists from past endeavors, and they encourage him to bring anybody on board who might help with a project. He also has access to Disney’s state-of-the-art digital technology to help him design and visualize what he is working on. Teams of media designers illustrate what a show or parade will look like when particular characters, sets, lighting, and other components are put in place. “In the old days, you would build a model with glue and foam cork,” Fields reflects.

And while he will surely keep busy with his Walt Disney World portfolio and individual projects for other resorts, Fields also has his “true blue sky” funds. Last year he brought a young woman—he’d heard her singing at a musical-theatre conference and was instantly struck by the emotions in her voice—to Disney World to create new music for Pixar characters who didn’t have songs. And his dream for the future is to create a purely visual spectacle. “I come to theatre from the words, and not the image,” he says. “I think it would be a really fascinating challenge for me, and I think it would stretch me in some new ways and create some collaborations with new artists.”

And then he utters something that perhaps only a Disney imagineer could say with such confidence: “It is one of my dreams; I’m sure I’ll get the chance.”

Looking back on his time working in regional theatre, on Broadway, and in his current job with Disney, Fields sees mostly what they all have in common.

Entertaining two-year-olds or the theatre critic of *The New York Times* is “exactly the same,” he says. “You have the same challenges. You have whatever your set of limitations are rubbing up against what it is you aspire to do. You have a certain amount of time to perform it in, or certain limitations to your budget, but at the end of the day, the lights are going to go off, and then they are going to come up and someone has to be drawn into a world. Right? They have to suspend their disbelief and buy into what you are presenting.”

In other words, it’s all about making magic. ♦

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