

Glen Berger's
AMAZING
SPIDER-MAN
Experience





What happens when a playwright best known for a one-man show about a seriously overdue library book gets involved in creating a blockbuster musical about an iconic superhero? In one word:

KAPOW!

By Alyson Krueger

Here's something that not one of the 2,000 people packed into the Foxwoods Theater to see the Broadway musical *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* is probably thinking about:

Did Glen Berger '89—a respected but little-known playwright—betray director Julie Taymor—who had personally chosen him to write the script—by siding with the producers against her in scrapping their original story and writing a new, more audience-friendly version? Or was his action a necessary sacrifice that helped save the show? Is he a hero or villain?

Whatever the answer—and since neither real life nor the actual business of putting on a multi-million-dollar Broadway production operates like a comic book, it's a little bit of both—there's no doubt that the *Spider-man* now on stage is a rousing, crowd-pleasing success. At the performance I attended this past spring, the audience sat stunned at the end before breaking into a standing ovation. We'd just seen Spider-man literally over our heads, dashing from the balcony to the rear of the orchestra to the side boxes as he battled the evil and just-as-elusive Green Goblin. Lights flashed. Spidey's trademark webs fell from the sky onto our laps. There were thunderous crashing sounds. And then, all of a sudden, a huge mass of green fell onto the stage, and a comic book bubble blew up displaying the word, *SPLAT*.

Scenes like this one—involving technical feats more akin to Cirque du Soleil than the “legitimate” theater—have been drawing record crowds. In January 2012 the Broadway League, an industry trade group, announced that the production had made more money in a week (\$2,941,790 over nine performances) than any Broadway show in history—a record it held for nearly a year before being topped by the long-running *Wicked*'s take of \$2,974,172 during the week ending December 30, 2012. Even before the performance began you could feel the excitement, with six-year-olds and twenty-something professionals alike telling each other, “I can't wait for the flying. It's going to be so awesome!”

But if the audience is caught up in the general awesomeness of this production, Berger has a hard time watching it. He can't forget what it took to get there—and what got lost along the way. “I actually went insane,” he says. “When pressure gets insane, people go insane. It was fas-

cinating to watch. Unfortunately, I wasn't just watching; I was in it.”

When Marvel first announced plans to make a musical version of Spider-Man in 2002, it seemed like a great idea. Rockstar Bono and his U2 band-mate The Edge agreed to do the music—prompted in part, according to a story in *The New York Post*, by a joking thank-you from Andrew Lloyd Weber to his fellow musicians for leaving Broadway to him. “We've decided to give Andrew a little competition,” Bono said at the time. And Julie Taymor, who had received wide acclaim for transforming Disney's animated film *The Lion King* into a unique, riveting—and hugely profitable—theatrical experience, was hired to spearhead the project. Support poured in. “We had always been told, ‘The one thing you don't have to worry about is money.’” Berger recalls. “People were lining up to invest.”

What followed, though, was nearly a decade of bad luck, financial reversals, technical snafus, artistic and personal differences, physical injuries, and a media snark-fest that would culminate in a *New York Times* headline announcing that “‘Spider-Man’ Isn't Just the Talk of Broadway, It's the Punch Line.”

To make a long story short: In October 2005, the show's original producer, Tony Adams, died suddenly from a stroke, leaving less effective successors to pick up the pieces. As the Great Recession hit, investors backed out, leaving the show almost penniless by 2009. Most damaging of all, much of the technology that Taymor and Berger had expected to rely on to create comic-book-worthy feats on stage just would not work the way they wanted it to. Delays caused some star actors to leave the show for other jobs, and five cast members were seriously injured as a result of on-stage malfunctions during the show's legendarily troubled previews in early 2011. Taymor was against making major changes to the plot that she and Berger had developed—largely unconnected to the universe of the Spider-man comic—but the producers (and Berger) felt such changes were desperately needed to salvage the show. Taymor was fired and replaced by a new director, Philip William McKinley, while Berger stayed on to help craft a fresh plot (that many critics dismissed as plain vanilla) in the three weeks before *Spider-Man* finally opened to the public. In the

end, a production that was supposed to open on February 18, 2010 with a budget of \$31.3 million, instead opened on June 14, 2011 at a cost of \$75 million.

Berger, who's been there through it all, sees the toll the show's various hardships have taken. The money issues, the faulty technology, the in-fighting among writers and producers reduced every aspect of the show, from the story line to the acrobatics, into shadows of what they could have been. “It's difficult to watch because there is so much that we wanted for it, and so much that could have been there,” he says. He calls the experience “a profound examination of the nature of collaboration.”

Berger could almost be a comic-book character himself, with a squeaky voice and Einstein-wild hair. Perhaps alone in the theatrical world (except for Taymor), he did not consider himself an unlikely candidate for writing the *Spider-Man* musical. He says that his initial thought, on being asked to take on the project, was, “Well, it's about time!”

From the age of five, “I had this inflated sense of myself,” he jokes (maybe). “I was feeling then, and for years, like, ‘Why wasn't I getting the absolutely tremendous gigs!’”

After all, he'd been writing plays for a very long time. There was the one he wrote in the third grade about the Continental Congress (“That was epic”), and the comedy sketches he created and performed in high school in northern Virginia, where he grew up with “a typical suburban lifestyle, I suppose.”

He joined Mask and Wig his freshman year at Penn, receiving a “real education in sketch comedy,” he says. “It was ridiculous. [Mask and Wig] was peopled with just crazy people. I think they were mad! And, you know, I was this young, callow freshman, and they were these older guys who in their own kind of warped way did act as mentors.” He wrote and performed with Mask and Wig for all four years at Penn. One of his favorite pieces was about a guy who did impressions of vegetables, which still breaks him up. “Yeah, he was a terrible impressionist,” he says, between bouts of laughter.

He was pre-med at Penn—for all of one month. After that he switched to English, including taking playwriting classes with the late Romulus Linney, a playwright and fiction writer (and the father of actress Laura Linney) who was on the faculty from 1982 to 1995.



Dan Fields C'88, a friend of Berger's since Penn who is now executive creative director at Walt Disney Imagineering Creative Entertainment, remembers him in Linney's class. "I really got to know his true desires, sort of the depths that he wanted to write at" then, he says.

Fields moved to Seattle after graduation, and a year later Berger followed him there. Along with classmates Wier Harman C'89 (now the executive director of Town Hall Seattle) and playwright Suzanne Maynard Miller C'89, they worked in the 99-seat Annex Theatre, run by Penn and Yale alumni who wanted to produce fresh art. Seattle in the early 1990s was an up-and-coming city—"My parents would call me and say, 'When you come back and visit, will you bring me some Starbucks coffee?'" Berger remembers. The group of aspiring writers, actors, and directors at the Annex—all volunteers—worked non-stop to produce new shows every month. "It's sort of exactly what you're wanting at that time, which is to generate a lot of work," says Berger. "And it's raw and sloppy and inspired and terrible."

"I can't tell you how many nights we stayed up all night literally tearing our hair out, arguing about the creation of the structure of the play," Fields adds.

"In Seattle, I found what you could say is a voice," Berger sums up his experience with the Annex. After completing three full-length plays and five one-acts there, he decided to try out that voice in New York.

In 1997 he finished a full-length play called *Great Men of Science, Nos. 21 & 22* which was "light years beyond what I had written up to that point," he says. "It was just an entirely different and, you know, more mature way of writing, one that really was not just a representation of my soul but had plot points you could follow." Circle X Theatre in Los Angeles picked it up, a huge triumph for Berger because "literary managers at regional theatres talk to other literary managers," and that led to other commissions.

Over the next decade Berger's works—ranging from *The Wooden Brecks*, a performance about burying people alive, to *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, a musical adaptation of a 1907 Yiddish play written by I.L. Peretz—were staged across the country. He was also hired by WGBH, Boston's public-television station, to write episodes of the animated shows *Arthur*, *Curious George*, and *Fetch*, for which he was nominated for a total of 12 Emmy Awards and won two of them. "It is a daytime Emmy," Berger says. "But

Glen Berger C'89 describes working on the *Spider-Man* musical as a "profound examination of the nature of collaboration." His book about the process is scheduled for publication this November.

it looks exactly like all the other Emmys."

It was his play *Underneath the Lintel*, a one-man show about a Dutch librarian who becomes obsessed with finding the owner of a book returned more than a century after the due date—which ran for 450 performances in New York before premiering all over the world—that attracted the attention of Julie Taymor.

"It was no surprise to me that Julie gravitated to Glen and wanted to hold him close as a collaborator and a colleague and a confidant, because he's a unique person, and his writing is unique, and she's a unique person, and her visuals are unique," says Fields, who before joining Disney worked with Taymor on the original *The Lion King* on Broadway. "Only someone like Julie, honestly, would take the chance on someone who was as offbeat—and, in that realm, unproven—as Glen. He had a lot of success around the country for his quirky, small plays, but no one was imagining he was going to write the next Broadway musical."

The first thing Berger did to prepare for his work on *Spider-Man* was listen to U2's music—which, although of course he never let on to his new collaborators, he knew nothing about. The band's first top 40 hit in the US, "(Pride) In the Name of Love," came out in 1984, while Berger was in high school, "so it should have been a perfect time to get to know U2, but I totally ignored it!" he says.

Better late than never, though. On attending his first U2 concert, which he immediately made a point of doing, he was "amazed," he says. "The reach and the sort of earnest impulse of their music are just so inspiring!" He bought all their albums, and listened to them in a row—becoming, "like, a U2 scholar"—and now considers himself a true fan, he says.

His admiration was only enhanced by working with Bono and The Edge in person, staying up all night at their residences in New York or Dublin to write song lyrics and map out the plot.

In Dublin "Bono and Edge live really close to each other, which is really endearing," he says. "They both have old manor houses, but Bono's is more like that kind of 18th-century charm, and Edge likes a more clean, modern line, I would say."

Not only were the rock stars the "smartest, most collaborative, imaginative," people he had ever worked with, but they were also fun and down to earth. "I work with so many people who are not of their caliber, and yet, they put on such airs and treat people with such disdain," he says. "If Bono and Edge don't do that, then really, who are these other people who feel like they can?"

Though she would come to have some pretty harsh things to say about him, Berger insists he also cherished working with Taymor, whom he describes as "a force of nature." He had seen her work for the first time in 1985, when her production of *The Transposed Heads*—a musical adaptation of the Thomas Mann novella in which two friends behead themselves and magically have their heads restored, only to each other's bodies—was presented at the Annenberg Center, and was as taken with her then as the first day he met her during the *Spider-Man* auditions.

"She's all art, all the time," he says. "Our first meeting together, without a break we spent like 14 hours just riffing. That's how I like to work, and I hadn't

seen that kind of fire in anybody in my life with quite that intensity."

At first this dream team did "swimmingly," as Berger puts it. It was a rush to stay up all night, "spinning out the story," their own interpretation of this iconic classic. They wove a tale in which mythological creature Arachne—a mortal weaver who had been turned into a spider after boasting that her skills were greater than the goddess Athena's—tries to get Spider-Man to use his powers to transform her back into a human. Of course, she wreaks havoc on society in the process, which Spider-Man has to set right again.

The team held workshops where they tested the plot on various audiences—who responded enthusiastically. They journeyed to Los Angeles (to the same soundstage where *The Wizard of Oz* was filmed) for a "flying" workshop, where they saw what kind of impressive acrobatics could be used in the musical. "Oh my gosh, it was amazing!" Berger recalls.

Imagining a show and implementing it are very different things, however, as Berger and his collaborators quickly learned. As the production entered rehearsals and then previews in 2010—financial troubles had already delayed the originally scheduled 2009 start—it was clear that many parts of the show that they had planned on just weren't going to work.

First, many of the technologies upon which the show relied had serious kinks.

"Spider-man is the most technically complex show ever on Broadway," wrote Patrick Healy, a theater critic for *The New York Times*, "with 27 aerial sequences of characters flying and scores of pieces of moving scenery, some of which are among the biggest on a New York stage right now."

Some of the flying rigs could only move front to back and others side to side, meaning the whole plot and staging had to be worked to accommodate these restrictions. The one thing Berger and Taymor really needed to work was a metal ring with a funnel-shaped web, which was going to drop over the audience and provide the stage for the final battle between Arachne and Spider-Man. "And it wasn't until it was built and installed and we were in tech that it became clear that it wasn't going to work," says Berger. "So it's like, what do you do? There was another plan and that didn't work. And there was another plan that was just a

shadow of the second plan. And what you were left with was something that kind of didn't even make sense."

On top of these troubles five actors were injured (broken wrists, internal bleeding, concussions, even cracks in lumbar vertebrae) from mechanical glitches, which resulted in drastic cast changes and bad press. (*The New Yorker* famously spoofed these injuries on its January 17, 2011, cover.)

Another major problem was that preview audiences didn't seem to like—or even understand—Taymor and Berger's vision of *Spider-Man*.

"I think it became apparent that the story that was on stage was not the story the audience was walking in and expecting to see," says McKinley, who saw the show multiple times before taking over as director. "Whenever you deal with pop culture, I think you have to be very careful ... It's an iconic comic book! So when the audience walked in they wanted to see Peter Parker fall in love with Mary Jane, transform into Spider-Man, and then rescue her." Elisabeth Vincentelli, a theater critic for *The New York Post*, agreed: "It was a completely demented show. It was a real mess."

As the problems mounted, so did the pressure on Taymor and Berger. (Bono and The Edge were on tour at the time.) The show's official opening was delayed six times to work out the issues. Besides costing the producers and investors money, the unprecedented length of the preview period wore out the patience of the media and critics. Rather than following the custom of waiting until opening night, they began reviewing the show—and those reviews were overwhelmingly negative. StageGrade.com, a website that gives productions a letter score based on many critics' reviews, gave *Spider-Man* an F+.

It didn't help that the show's travails were happening right there on Broadway, directly in the glare of the New York press. Most Broadway shows start out of town, so they can gauge audience response and fix a show's weaknesses away from the spotlight. But the size of this production made that impossible.

"If we were in Chicago working it out, that would be one thing," says Berger. "But instead we're staring down the barrel of a gun ... It was like we were in this machine and the intensity got greater."

McKinley reiterates what a tough position they were in: “Nobody wants to work under that [pressure],” he says. “It was such a public, what do I want to say ... trial. It was just on trial on a daily basis.”

In February 2011, after the show’s sixth delayed opening, the *Times*’ Patrick Healy wrote the piece with the headline about *Spider-Man* being the punch line of Broadway. It began: “Joan Rivers gave a suggestion to the director Julie Taymor the other night: ‘Hire a stunt person to fall on someone every three or four weeks—that’ll keep audiences showing up.’” Some critics doubted the show would open at all.

By this time, everyone involved in the production knew that they had to do *something*, but they couldn’t agree on how to move forward. As Berger says, the collaboration just got “wonky.”

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He proposed implementing a more traditional *Spider-Man* story plot as well as an exciting ending that would work within the parameters of the technology they had already tried and tested. “I was really lobbying for changes because at that point, I was the one who really saw the show wasn’t able to close, and the onus was on the writer of the script,” he says. “So I did whatever I could to convince anyone who needed convincing that this needed to happen.”

Taymor, on the other hand, was fighting to keep her storyline, arguing that with a little more work they could sort out the kinks in the plot and the technology. Berger says he completely understands why she felt this way. “As much as it meant to me, and as much as I pour my heart and my life into it. I don’t think it was my soul quite as much as it was Julie’s,” he explains.

“The producers were in a very, very tough situation,” says the *Post*’s Vincentelli. “Because they had a huge budget, and they clearly felt they were at some sort of stalemate; they had dissension within the creative team. They couldn’t agree

on which direction to take and someone had to go. And Julie was on the losing end of that power play.”

Taymor was fired in March 2011 and replaced by McKinley. Berger was kept on—because, says McKinley, “He was willing to make changes ... he didn’t have the bitterness of somebody who didn’t know it wasn’t working.” Along with the new director and another writer who was brought in (Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa), Berger was given three weeks to write a new “simpler” script that audiences would like and that the technology would support. The show finally opened—before a packed house—on June 14, 2011. The crowds have kept coming ever since.

But Taymor’s firing set off a legal battle that didn’t end until this past spring. In November 2011 she sued the producers

and Berger; the producers countersued. Taymor charged that the production was using her original material without permission; as for Berger, her suit emphasized his junior position in their collaboration and accused him of going behind her back in making changes to the script.

A *New York Post* story reporting on the suit portrayed Taymor as having created an art-piece in which puppets representing the show’s producers, composers Bono and The Edge, and Berger were trapped in the Ninth Circle of Hell from Dante’s *Inferno*—the deepest one, reserved for traitors. In the same story, an unnamed source claimed that Taymor “hated [Berger] more than anyone ... She feels he’s the architect of all that’s happened.”

But in April the various parties reached a settlement, and Taymor released a statement that she was “pleased to have reached an agreement and hopes for the continued success of *Spider-Man*, both on Broadway and beyond.” Berger, for his part, says now, “I’m just glad it’s over, and I hope for the best for everyone.”

Unsurprisingly, when he talks about his experience writing *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, Berger doesn’t have the same lightness of tone or humor that he does when talking about his time in *Mask and Wig* or *Seattle* or even as a rising playwright in New York City.

Still, he believes this experience was important for helping him decide what kind of playwright he wants to be. “It’s an interesting thing,” he muses. “You write this thing, and you’re lucky if you can get it to a place where it’s christened. And then it enters the real world of directors and actors and theatres and budgets, and if you’re really lucky it retains that kind of purity, and it even has added layers of richness. But often it’s, ‘This actor isn’t quite right, and this director completely misunderstood this aspect of the show,’ and you end up with something less than perfect. But then, be a novelist if you can’t accept this might happen.”

Berger does have a book coming out—not a novel, but a non-fiction account of his *Spider-Man* experience that he promises will be “beautiful,” “compassionate,” “funny,” and “profound.” A deal with Simon & Schuster was announced in October 2012, and the publication of *Song of Spider-Man: The Inside Story of the Most Controversial Musical in Broadway History* is scheduled for this November.

He is also working on new musicals—including a movie adaptation of a musical for Warner Bros. (he can’t reveal the title) and a musical about the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War for the Manhattan Theatre Club—as well as a new play. The premise of that piece is “a folk trio in a cabin trying to make one last album before they kill each other,” he says. “I’m sure everything I’ve gone through just gets turned up again.”

And then, just as he finishes analyzing what transpired while writing *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, the most expensive and perhaps chaotic show in Broadway history, he pivots into a story about how he recently took his 10-year-old son’s entire class to the play, “and they were just thrilled by it.”

“I’ll never be completely happy with it,” he says after a pause. But “it works. And that is a very gratifying thing.” ♦

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