

FALL 2019 // WINTER 2020

THE INAUGURAL ISSUE

# Cirque in the Burque

## How to Create A Blockbuster Musical

# Mighty Pies

WAITRESS TO SERVE SWEET  
SLICES IN POPEJOY

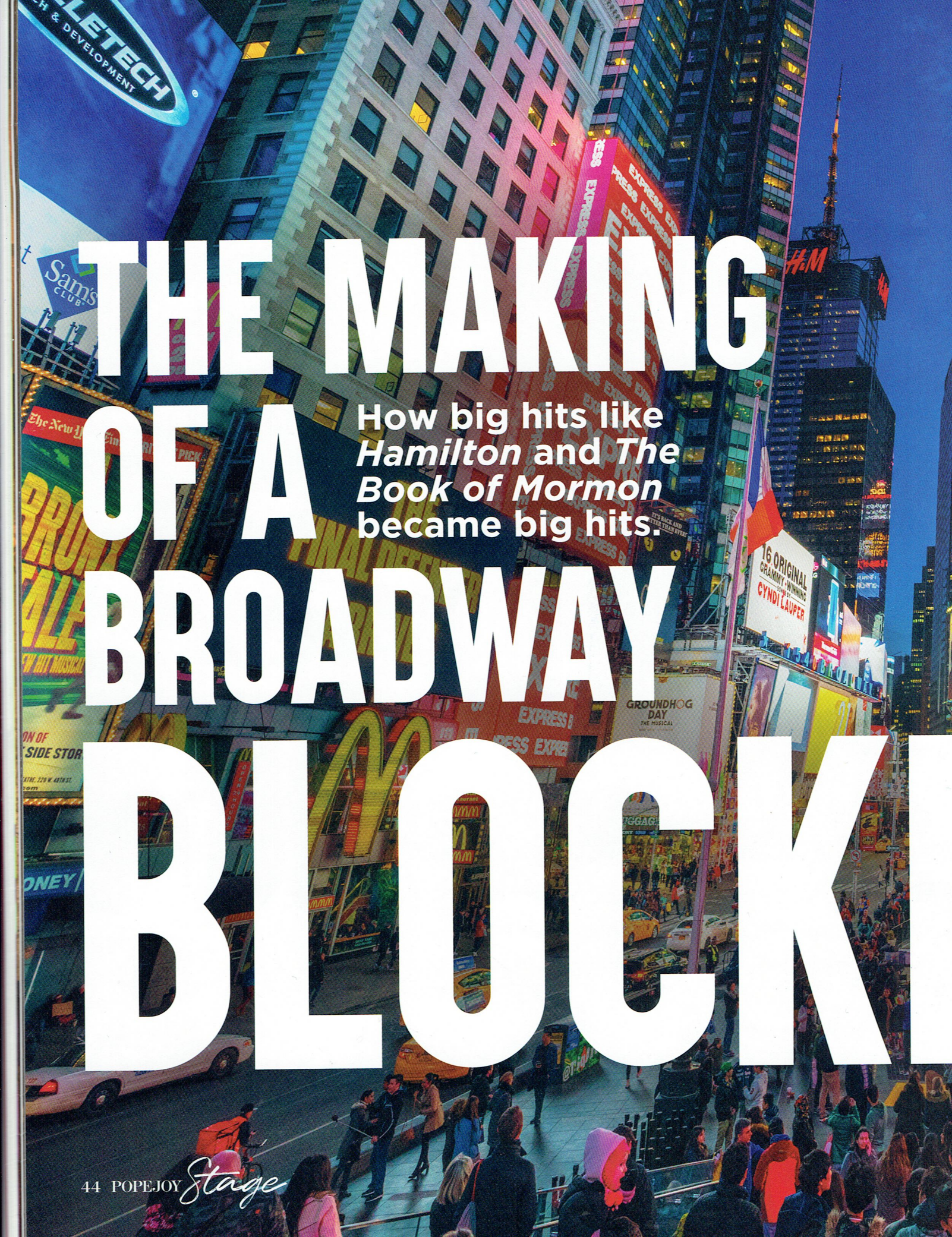
## All Aboard the Satellite of Love

POPEJOY

# Stage



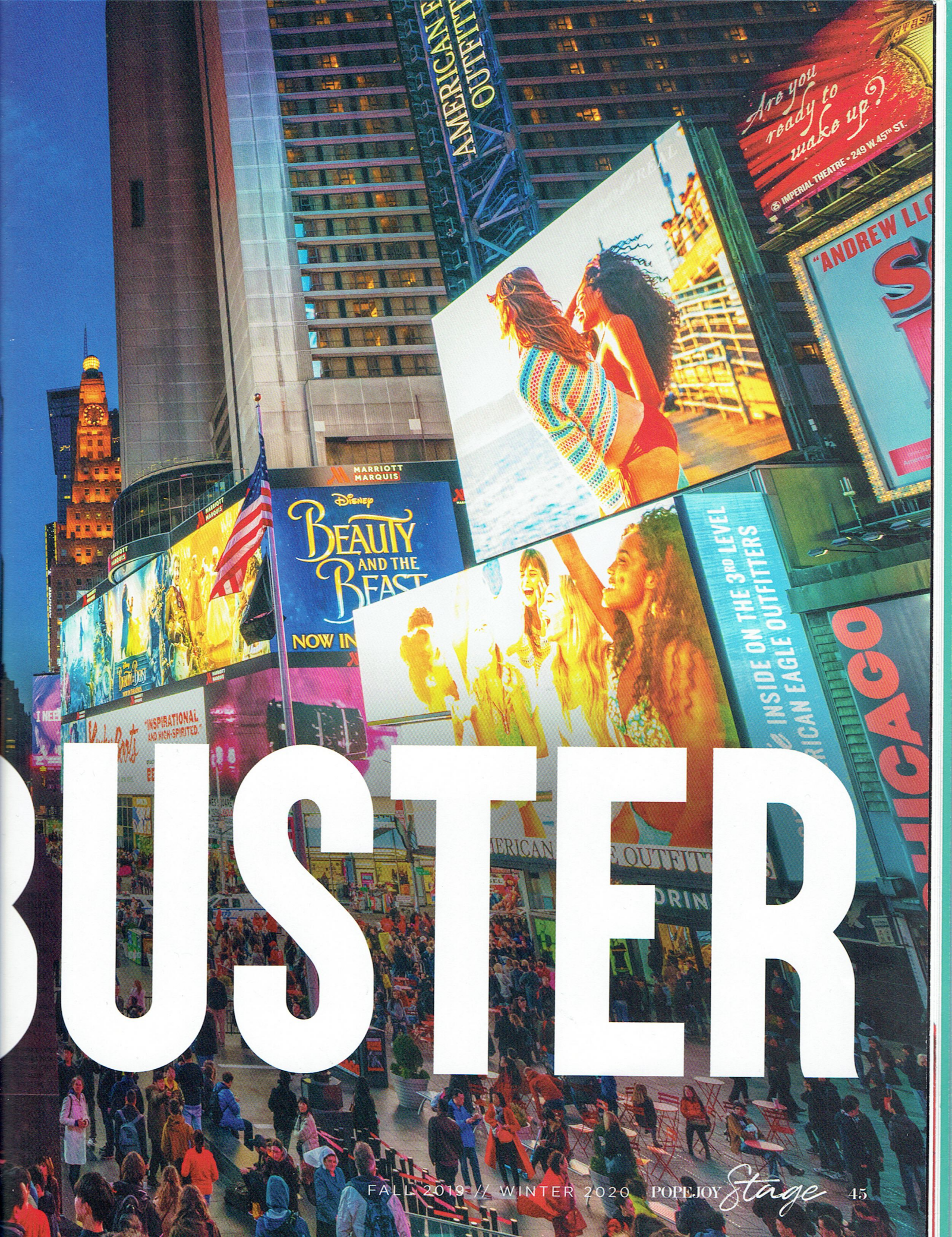




# THE MAKING OF A BROADWAY BLOCK

How big hits like  
*Hamilton* and *The Book of Mormon*  
became big hits.





# BUSTER



Joseph Morales as Hamilton in the national touring company. *Hamilton*, written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, opened to rave reviews, won 11 Tony Awards, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and became an almost instantaneous box office success. It has sold out every performance since it opened in previews on Broadway more than four years ago. In its short life, it has already landed in the top 50 longest running Broadway shows.



JOAN MARCUS



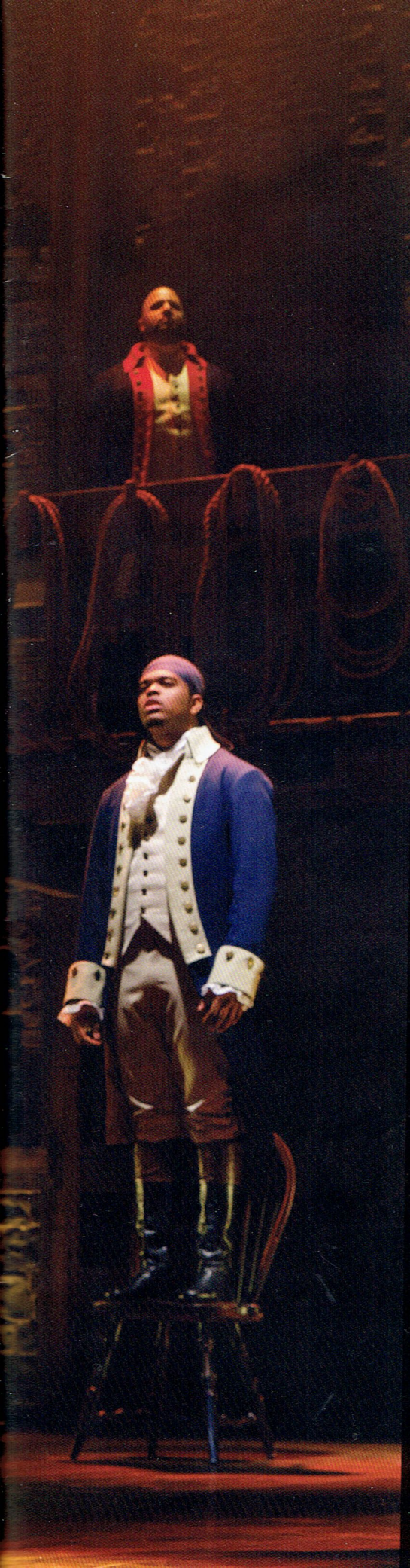
**W**hat makes a show successful? The amount of awards won? Not necessarily. While *Hamilton* took home 11 Tonys during the 2016 ceremony and *The Book of Mormon* pulled in nine in 2010, *Beauty and the Beast* won just one for costume design in 1994 and still ran for 5,461 performances. (That's 13 years of "Be Our Guest" for those keeping track.) So what's the secret behind super-hits like *Hamilton* and *The Book of Mormon*?

It's not just box-office triumph. Some shows certainly become hits, earning a profit for investors and sometimes receiving critical kudos. A blockbuster surpasses a hit's reach and runs for years, often creating a cult following with people seeing the show multiple times (think *Wicked* or *A Chorus Line*). While there's no magic formula, factors such as timing, originality, universality and brand recognition come into play, according to Oliver Roth, producer/CEO at OHenry Productions (*Kinky Boots*, *Escape to Margaritaville*).

"Broadway defies generalization in regard to predicting commercial success," said Philip Boroff, editor of "Broadway Journal," an online news site about the business of Broadway. "That's one reason that there are so many failures. And musicals have any number of moving parts and ways to go wrong. To some extent, I believe the first pre-requisite of blockbuster status is making magic onstage."

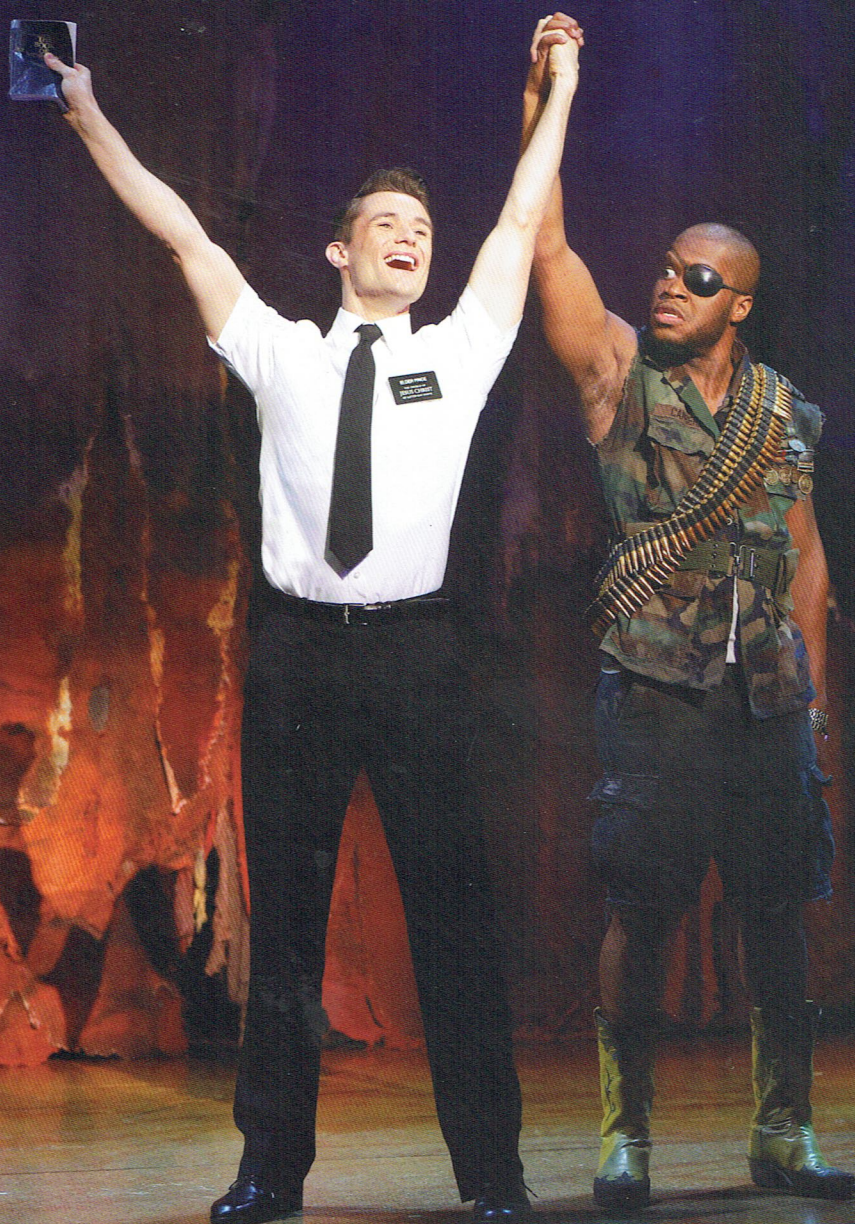
Executive Director Phil Santora of TheatreWorks Silicon Valley, recipient of the 2019 Regional Theatre Tony Award, agreed. "A blockbuster occurs when the right alchemy comes together - great music, brilliant direction, riveting performances, and a story that resonates with the audience at the right moment. No one would have predicted *Hamilton* would be on the covers of magazines as opposed to living on the arts pages of newspapers. Conversely many of the recent musicals based on beloved films have struggled to find an audience, despite strong title recognition."

Every show follows its own journey to Broadway. While developing a production is a unique process for each, there are a few core moments. First the script and score come together. Then there's a reading so the creators can hear the work (since plays and musicals need to be experienced, not consumed on the printed page) and make necessary changes. At some point, the show is placed before an audience either in a workshop or for out-of-town development like at a regional theater. Then "they come to Broadway and that's when the fate is cast," said Ken Davenport, Tony Award-winning producer and founder of The Producer's Perspective blog.





Ryan Bondy and David Aron Damane in the touring production of *The Book of Mormon*. The show has sold out all but the first two weeks of its Broadway run, when it was still in previews, won nine Tony Awards, and is now the 14th longest running in Broadway history.



JOAN MARCUS

The whole process can take several years. Once in previews on the Great White Way, shows are sometimes worked on until opening, with songs added and cut, new scenes written, dance numbers re-arranged, etc. — and changes can be numerous. “I always ask my directors and writers, what do you do during the preview process,” Davenport said, “and the most common response I hear is, ‘I listen. I listen to the audience. I listen to where they’re laughing, where they’re clapping, where they’re crying, where they’re coughing. I listen to what they say outside of the restrooms ... and then I try to ... solve some of those issues.’”

Some shows are more fully built before coming to Broadway. “I would say that the successes I’ve been associated with

had in common that, in addition to being good ideas — ideas that had popular appeal and also mattered to people — they were carefully developed, and didn’t go into rehearsal until they were quite close to being in final form,” said Jack Viertel, senior vice president of Jujamcyn Theaters, which operates five Broadway houses. “Once the production process has begun and the set has been built, etc., it is difficult and expensive to make changes, so when things go wrong, the show usually sinks. Preparation is the key.”

An audience’s familiarity with the material helps success, but doesn’t guarantee it. While many blockbusters have a well-known story (*The Phantom of the Opera*, for example) or, a parade

of promotional products behind them (Disney’s *The Lion King*), there are truly innovative blockbusters that appear.

“What is interesting about *Hamilton* and *The Book of Mormon* is that they pushed the boundaries of what people thought could be a blockbuster,” said Santora. “Once these productions demonstrated audiences would not only accept these shows, but would clamor to see them, the perceived artistic boundaries were pushed back a bit.”

Tourism helps, too, with propelling a blockbuster forward. Nearly two thirds of Broadway audiences are made up of out-of-towners who look for “must-see” shows as part of their New York experience. “The real, indisputable blockbusters attract tourists,” said Derek



Miller, John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. "They speak a more spectacular theatrical lingua franca that can easily cross linguistic borders. There aren't enough theatergoers in New York City to sustain a show 10 years."

Out-of-the-box shows like *Hamilton*

(opened in 2016) and *The Book of Mormon* (2011) may not benefit as much from tourists in the long-run, though, because their topics and complex (and, in some cases, foul) language might intimidate travelers more than something they've seen in book or film form, hypothesizes Peter Boggy, a

theatrical general manager and author of *Broadway General Manager: Demystifying The Most Important and Least Understood Role In Show Business*. While both shows bring a non-traditional audience to the theater, currently sell well, and appear throughout the country in touring companies, whether their Broadway-run will reach the longevity of mega-musicals such as *The Lion King* (1997) or *Phantom* (1988) can't be determined yet.

Timing matters in a show's success. In a season without much competition, Viertel points out, "a modestly good show like *Big River* can win a slew of Tony Awards" and become a hit. However, this doesn't produce blockbusters, just successes that might have failed in a better year.

More often timing can dramatically help (or hinder) a show in sync (or not) with the times. *Hamilton*, for instance deals with immigrants and governance — something the country was talking about at the time it opened.

When *Chicago* opened in 1975, critics and often audiences thought it was too cynical and it ran for only 936 performances. Yet, when it was revived in 1996 as the O.J. Simpson trial was stirring national outrage and conversations about celebrity supplanting justice, it became the longest running musical revival in Broadway history (and is still playing).

Ultimately, hit or blockbuster, when an audience visits a theater they experience something special. "We know that comedies are funnier when you're in a room full of people laughing," said Sartora. "Hearing a live orchestra and cast create a song just for you is truly special. And when did you leap to your feet for a standing ovation after watching a great television show? There is great art and entertainment all around us, but going to the theatre is a live community experience that can thrill like no other."

Popejoy will present *The Book of Mormon* from February 4-9, 2020, and *Hamilton* in their 2020-21 season.

**Ginna Claire Mason and Mary Kate Morrissey in the national touring production of *Wicked*. *Wicked* is routinely selling more than 90% of its seats nearly 16 years after it opened, even though it only scored three Tony Awards. It ranks sixth on the list of longest running Broadway shows.**



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