

Big Shoes to Fill



By Sheryl Kahn

Director Mike Ockrent and choreographer Susan Stroman during rehearsal for *Crazy for You*. Joan Marcus

Putting together a \$10-million musical is no honeymoon—just ask choreographer Susan Stroman and director Mike Ockrent. The pair, who worked together on *Crazy For You* and *A Christmas Carol*, were married this New Year's Eve and reported to a rehearsal hall the next day.

"Some couples go to Bermuda," Stroman laughs. "We went to work." Most projects could have waited for the newlyweds to return from a week-long vacation, but this one was *Big*—in name, size, and expectations.

"When you make a musical that is based on a widely seen, widely liked film, you have some big shoes to fill—no pun intended," says Ockrent. "And there's also the pressure to make it uniquely your own, expand it, take it further than the movie could and explore the depth of emotions musically."

The Penny Marshall film starring Tom Hanks seemed like a good bet for Broadway success. It tells the story of

Josh, a teenage boy who yearns to be big and avoid all the angst of adolescence. A carnival fortune-telling machine grants his wish—but it's more than Josh bargained for. He struggles through the bedroom and the boardroom, making numerous faux pas while charming business execs (including a love interest played by Crista Moore) with his candor and creativity. Yet all through this fantastic adventure, Josh feels like he's missed out on something: He's rushed his life away.

"It appeals to all ages," Stroman explains. "There is a tremendous sense of longing, fear, excitement, and confusion. These are feelings we all go through as adolescents, and sometimes now as adults as well. There is a lot of magic in this story," Stroman says. "It touches on so many wonderful themes—love, growing up, responsibility and regret."

The pair jumped at the challenge from two different angles: Ockrent wanted to strengthen the plot, creating more drama and Stroman wanted to further it through

the use of explosive and innovative dance.

"While I was making sure we weren't losing the heart of the story, Susan was trying to find a way to communicate the spirit and energy of it," Ockrent says. But the biggest problem with *Big*, he admits, is that people might have a hard time accepting anyone but Hanks in the lead role. "We knew right away people would expect Tom Hanks in the character, expect him to be dancing across the stage. But I think we've overcome that. From the first scene—you're just swept away."

Ockrent was also undaunted by the fact that most movies-turned-Broadway shows never make it: *Goodbye Girl*, *Nick & Nora*, and *My Favorite Year*, are a few of the more recent flops in this genre; and *Sunset Boulevard* and *Victor/Victoria* flounder without big-name stars.

"I think *Big* is a different thing entirely," he says. "It struck me right away as a story that could be told better through music. We didn't do this show because we thought people would remember the

movie and pay \$70 to see it on stage. We did it because it was a wonderful story that should be told and could be told bigger and better.”

Backers obviously believe him—FAO Schwartz, the toy store featured in the film and show, has reportedly invested \$1 million in the production and recently launched a *Big* marketing blitz. A replica of the show’s fortune telling machine dispenses Telecharge tickets.

But there’s no denying that despite the hoopla for the musical, the movie is a hard act to follow—it grossed over \$100 million at the box office and millions more on video. The show’s creative team decided to cast a virtual unknown in Hank’s role—33-year-old Daniel Jenkins (*Big River*). “He simply makes you believe,” Stroman says. “Even the kids in the show think he’s one of them.”

Working with nine teenaged dancers, Stroman has employed hip-hop, break-dancing, and more traditional moves with props ranging from basketballs to the giant electric keyboard featured in the movie.

“These kids are amazing,” Stroman marvels. “They really put me through my paces as a dancer. They are fearless. Doing this show has given me a new energy, a new joy I forgot I had in me. They give more than most adult dancers.”

But the techno-wizardry (complete with an elaborate recreation of the FAO Schwartz toy store) has also caused some big problems with dance numbers and staging in general: In Detroit tryouts, new machinery had to be ordered due to technical difficulties. And the first Broadway preview was cancelled.

“You find that every show has its glitches in tryouts,” Ockrent explains. “But rest assured, we’re up and running. We have a great team.”

While William Ivey Long is aboard for costumes, John Weidman (*Pacific Overtures*) for book, and Robin Wagner for sets, Ockrent is partial to one partner in particular. “Susan and I work very well together—but it’s hard sometimes not to take homework home. Especially when we both are so excited about it,”

“In rehearsals, we have the ultimate respect for each other’s talent and knowledge,” Stroman adds. “Being Mr. and Mrs. doesn’t affect our working relationship at all,” She pauses and laughs. “I guess you could say it’s no big deal.”



Above: Crista Moore and Daniel Jenkins in a scene from *Big*, photographed by Joan Marcus.
Below (L-R): Patrick Levis, Barbara Walsh, and John Sloman in *Big*, photographed by Joan Marcus.

