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# Broadway Pulls On Some New 'Boots'

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By DANIEL SCHEFFLER



Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal

Jerry Mitchell, Cyndi Lauper and Harvey Fierstein of 'Kinky Boots.'

Given the ongoing economic stalemate, even Broadway producers these days are looking to mix in some real-life distress stories along with the usual helping of high-flying comic-book heroes and story-book princesses. From "Newsies" to "Annie" and the coming "Hands on a Hardbody," the Great White Way is scoring financial hardship with several working-class-themed musicals. Perhaps the most unexpected entry is "Kinky Boots," which began previews Sunday at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre, ahead of an April 4 opening.

Based on a true story and adapted from the overlooked British film of 2005, "Kinky Boots" tells the story of two unlikely friends: Charlie (Stark Sands), the heir to a dusty, traditional English shoe manufacturer, and Lola (Billy Porter), the enterprising drag

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queen who helps save the business. With the factory heading for collapse, the all-dancing, all-singing Lola encourages a profitable revision from men's sartorial shoes to tall, sequined drag-queen boots. The show, said director Jerry Mitchell, is "the ultimate bromance."

Its story of triumph notwithstanding, though, "Kinky Boots" might not have reached the stage without the collective clout of its creative team. Enter pop star Cyndi Lauper, who wrote the music and lyrics; Tony winner Harvey Fierstein, who penned the book; and Mr. Mitchell, also a Tony winner, who directed and choreographed the show. The trio, which guided the production through a pre-Broadway run last year in Chicago, sat down recently with The Wall Street Journal to discuss bringing "Kinky Boots" and all its challenges to Broadway.

### How did the three of you come to team up to make this musical?

Mr. Mitchell: [Producer] Daryl Roth asked me first and so I immediately wanted to find an amazing book writer, and that led me straight to Harvey of course. From there, Harvey's brother suggested we use Cyndi, and since I had prior experience with her—choreographing her performance at the 1994 Gay Games—I just knew I wanted to work with her again.

### What were the challenges in mounting a musical based on a film that didn't do very well at the box office?

Mr. Fierstein: The biggest challenge is always the idea. Copying a script straight from the movie would be stupid. There are shows that do that, but I find them very boring. Once you have the concept, then it's finding the composer and finding that voice.

Mr. Mitchell: For me the dance part was easy. But I wanted to really get my hands dirty so I spent time in Northampton, England, going to the factories and understanding exactly how people really live. I come from a similar family, so I could relate very strongly. I came from a cornfield in the middle of Michigan and discovered



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Broadway at age 18. So it wasn't in my family's wildest dreams that I could go into theater, and it was very far from their ideals.

### Ms. Lauper, with your pop instincts, how did you fit into the process?

Ms. Lauper: It was really freeing, because I could really write. Normally I write but I have the guy from the record company saying, "Where's the hook?" all the time.

Mr. Fierstein: She has intelligence and it's not a training thing. It's an innate thing. She loves drama, like Rodgers and Hammerstein, but she never thought about why she loves it. Sometimes I would just have to find the vocabulary to get her to understand. For instance, how putting on lipstick isn't just putting on lipstick. First there is the moisturizer, then the outliner and then the shading. Cyndi would write a song and I would say, "That's great but I need it to move us from A to D by going through B and C." A song must tell the story. She would go back and write that. It was just finding the language between the two of us.

### What about "Kinky Boots" is going to attract audiences?

Ms Lauper: This is a real story, about real people. And somebody thought outside of the box. And that's me. I've always wanted to think outside the box. I relate to the characters. I think that the people, when they see it, will understand it's good to think out the box, especially in this day and age and this economy. Everybody's going the old way, but let me tell you something, the old way is not going to help you anymore.

Mr. Mitchell: For me, the sense of reality is where the story really shows heart. It is a universal story about how to accept someone and even change your mind about someone who you previously judged. The whole show has been completely rewarding when in Chicago I saw grown men sitting in the dark crying while holding their girlfriends' hands.

### What's the significance of the boots?



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Mr. Mitchell: Oh, the boots. Well, that's just sex. When the characters wear these red boots they are taller, prouder and sexier. When the first pair comes out onstage, audiences go wild.

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