

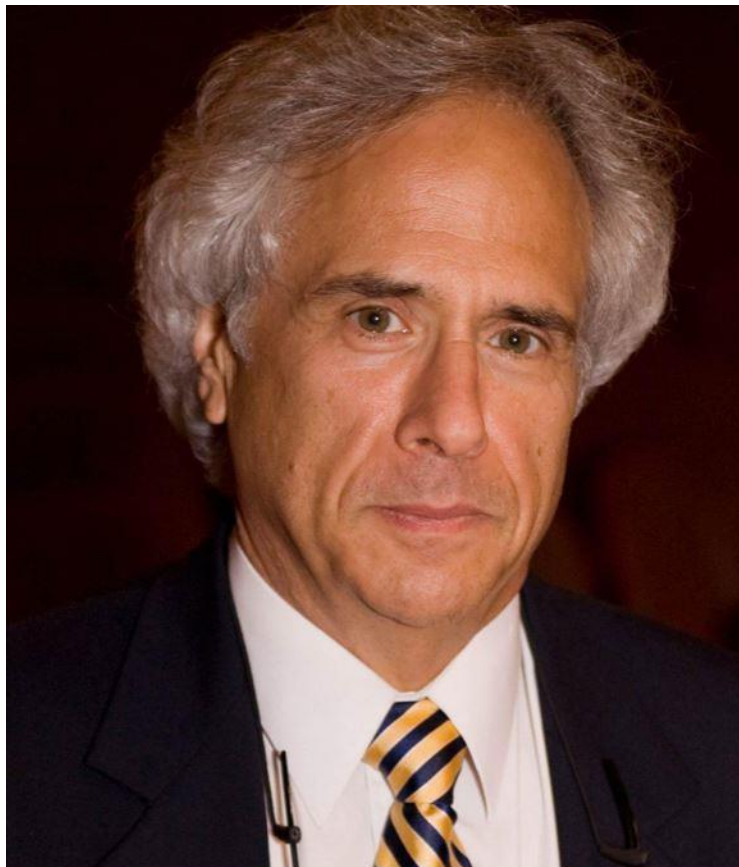
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How One Man Helped Transform Commercial Theater In Chicago



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Lou Raizin's deep devotion to theater extends as wide as Lake Michigan, if not wider. "When you are bitten it's hard to turn in the other direction," he says. In fact during high school, his ferocious passion even led to being thrown out of high school. (Well, just temporarily.)



LOU RAIZIN, BROADWAY IN CHICAGO

Raizin and his director-pal were working on their high school's spring musical, *Sweet Charity*. Their technical rehearsal was looming and scheduled for the following day. The director, who was a fellow student and Raizin, the show's technical director, sensed trouble. "We came to the understanding that there was no way the set was going to be ready for rehearsal without us working into the night," says Raizin. "So the two of us decided we were going to sneak into the school and stay overnight to work."

So Raizin told his parents not to expect him to come home that night because he would be at school working. However, at 5am the teacher, who oversaw the theatrical department, found them sleeping in the orchestra pit. (The director didn't tell his parents that they planned to stay over at school.) "In our show when Charity fell into the water, she would actually jump into the orchestra pit on top of mattresses. So that is where we slept," he recalls.

The next day they were summoned to the principal's office. He said "I don't know what to do with you guys. Get out of here!" Undeterred, a few hours later they were back at school working on the musical once again. "I'm assuming it is in my permanent record somewhere," jokes Raizin.



The Cher Show recently had its pre-Broadway world premiere at Broadway in Chicago's Oriental Theatre. (From left) Teal Wicks, Stephanie J. Block and Micaela Diamond. COURTESY BROADWAY IN CHICAGO

Raizin's fervor for theater continues. A Detroit native, his first theater job was a summer gig as an usher at Pine Knob Music Theatre. He worked his way through school at Michigan State. By the end of the season he was placed in charge of the ushers. After college he worked in the concert business creating large-scale 25,000-seat amphitheaters throughout the country. He can distinctly remember an old television commercial for the Peace Corps. It said "You're underpaid and overworked, but love every moment." He adds, "In a lot of ways, that is the theater business."

As the President of Broadway in Chicago, Raizin has been instrumental in helping transform theater in the Windy City. With five different fetching and historic stages ranging from 550 to 2,200 seats, Broadway in Chicago serves two million patrons a year. In fact, the hit musical *Hamilton* is permanently playing at their CIBC Theatre. And many shows, most recently *The Cher Show* and *Pretty Woman*, have played on their stages prior to coming to Broadway. Blockbusters like *Movin' Out*, *The Producers*, *Monty Python's Spamalot* and *Kinky Boots* had their pre-Broadway debuts there. "One of the things we have been striving hard for is to bring tax credits into Chicago," explains Raizin. "The state supports pre-Broadway shows because they understand how to distinguish Chicago from the rest of the country. They understand the economic impact it has on both the city and the state."

Broadway In Chicago alone has presented over 300 productions and brings an economic impact of over \$750 million annually into the city and state of Illinois. Plus it supports more than 9,200 local jobs. As Raizin explains, before Broadway In Chicago commercial shows were few and far between. And when they took place they were typically two week runs. "The Shubert Theater was the one operating commercial theater in the city," says Raizin. "Now Chicago is the third most important city in the world for commercial theater behind New York and London."

In fact, the theater scene in the city so prosperous, Chicago has been called the Silicon Valley for theater. There are more new startup theaters in Chicago than anywhere in the country as audiences embrace new work. “That is part of the reason we are so successful with our pre-Broadway shows,” explains Raizin. “Yes, we have the lure from a tax credit standpoint. But we also have receptive audiences. Our critics understand that the way to treat a pre-Broadway show that is a work in progress is by being constructive rather than destructive. These things make up the fabric of theater in Chicago and ultimately the culture of Chicago.”

Raizin also used his ingenuity to head up a Lighting Framework Plan to use lighting to transform the city. “It’s not about lighting Chicago like Shanghai or Paris,” he says. “What can we do that is authentic to Chicago that encourages tourists to stay out longer into the night and to expand our tourism season into the shoulder months? There is economic viability how you can engage with the public by expanding the day into night.”

To that end they had 110 companies form teams around the world to compete and think about how to engage lighting in Chicago. “It was a laborious process, but now we have a \$9 million permanent art lighting installation going up on the back wall of the Merchandise Mart, called theMart,” reveals Raizin. “We also have a lighting installation that will be going up on the back wall of the Lyric Opera and one tied to the Bicentennial at McCormick Place planned in the not too distant future.” Also, on August 13 Broadway in Chicago is holding its free Broadway in Chicago Summer Concert. This year, Tony Award nominee Santino Fontana, who stars in the upcoming Pre-Broadway World Premiere of the new musical comedy *Tootsie* will be a special guest as performers from other upcoming shows including *A Bronx Tale*, *Anastasia*, *Book of Mormon*, *Come From Away*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, *Miss Saigon* and other shows offer a taste of their productions.

Meanwhile, his many hats keep Raizin fulfilled. “There are challenges that come out of every single day, but it’s ultimately the rewards that keep me driving forward,” he says. And does he have a favorite part of his job? It harkens back to high school and the opportunity to help create theater. “I’m the guy behind the curtain,” shares Raizin. “I get my joy watching audiences. I reap the reward of their thrill being invested in the performance.”

Jeryl’s book, *My City, My New York: Famous New Yorkers Share Their Favorite Places*, where hundreds of notables share their favorite NYC locales, can be found [here](http://jerylbrunner.com). Visit jerylbrunner.com.