

INTERVIEW

LIKE CLOCKWORK

Behind-the-scenes "magicians" create the spectacle of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*

by Suzanne Sigmund

Mention a Broadway show and most of us experience an immediate boost to the heart rate as we clutch those coveted theater tickets. For the unabashed hedonists among us, a good, meaty musical offers everything on a silver platter: terrific singing, gorgeous costumes, brilliant choreography and a story line that gets us teary-eyed at midpoint and giddy with an over-the-top finale. Currently in the middle of its U.S.

Theater

tour, Disney's storybook romance musical *Beauty and the Beast*, presented in conjunction with Portland Opera, is no exception. It's a lavish treat for the eyes, but what makes a show like this come together?

The professionally trained "cast of characters" behind the scenes (70 of them!) make this show run like a well-oiled motor. In town for the Portland run, star dresser for the Beast, Gene Lauze, spoke with *Just Out* about his role in the knockout production.

Lauze says that getting the Beast (performer Fred Inkley) ready for his stage entrance really requires a team effort. There's Mark Rampmeyer, the Beast's hair stylist, Tiffany Hicks, the creature's makeup artist and Lauze himself as the Beast's dresser. Together, they work for an hour and 15 minutes to get the hulking Beast ready for show time.

Lauze is no stranger to dressing Broadway stars for entrance stage left; he's been wardrobe expert and star dresser for a plethora of Broadway shows including *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Gypsy*, *Crazy for You*, *Secret Garden*, *Tommy* and *Shogun*, *The Musical*. Lauze has been with Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* production since it opened in Houston three years ago.

Originally from New Hampshire, Lauze, 33, graduated from college in '86 with majors in both musical theater performance and psychology. "And I use both of them every day, let me tell you," he quips.

After graduation, Lauze went straight to New York, worked for a year as a singer with the Light Opera of Manhattan and then became the company's costumer. "When I got to New York, things just changed. Your direction changes and opportunity presents itself," Lauze recalls. "And I was making much more money as a costumer."



Fred Inkley (center) as the Beast

Before joining the *Beauty and the Beast* team, Lauze did a stint as wardrobe supervisor for the MGM/UA movie *True Love*.

Getting the Beast decked out in sartorial splendor requires a mind-boggling amount of finesse behind those mysterious stage curtains. Lauze readies the actor-turned-Beast by getting him fitted into a series of latex muscle pieces to build up his thighs and arms, plus, thanks to the latest technology, costumes with sleeves made of a new "hair cloth." Rather than use fun fur to approximate the hirsute Beast's shaggy mane (which would be way too hot for the layer-laden performer under hot stage lights) Disney productions consulted a Massachusetts company called Hair Technologies to develop the new "hair cloth," a more comfortable product for the performer because it actually breathes and has some stretch.

After the tail is applied, along with the latex chest piece, Lauze is ready to get his brawny Beast into the resplendent stage finery which could be any one of five costumes he wears for the show. "Anything from the first act where he dons

a pair of pants, boots, gloves and a cape," says Lauze, "to the formal scene where he's dancing with Belle and she's in her beautiful yellow gown and he's in an incredible jeweled velvet coat and gold pants."

The show involves a number of quick changes—some of them so intense time-wise that the Beast team must work tightly in unison to make it all come off seamlessly. In fact, the choreography is just as exacting backstage for the Beast's dresser team as it is for the performers on stage.

OK, I've got to ask. Any juicy anecdotes about moments when things may not have gone quite so smoothly behind the scenes?

Oh yeah. Lauze rolls his eyes. Episodes include Inkley splitting his pants on stage and his wig coming loose, times when the Beast has lost hair pieces and fake teeth on stage, and one occasion when a whole Beast foot was lying on stage after spontaneously disengaging itself.

Lauze remains unruffled by the catastrophes: "That's what makes live theater fun. It keeps us on

our toes. I've done this thing 1,400 times and if they all went perfectly, my God, I'd be in the ground by now, it'd be way too boring."

One of the perks of Lauze's profession is that it allows him a terrific way to see the country; in fact, while in Tempe recently with the show, he fell in love with Arizona and wound up buying a house in Phoenix. His husband and life partner, Seth, lives there now. Seth works in education, so he's able to spend quite a bit of time with Lauze over the summer months. Though it's a hardship being apart, the two talk every night on-line or on the phone.

As for the show-biz lifestyle, Lauze wouldn't have it any other way, at least for now. "I love being a performer and I love being backstage, too," he asserts. "I get the same thrill walking through the stage door to dress a show as I did when I was performing. I like the thought that we're entertaining people and taking them away for two and a half hours. I see a lot of theater; if I take a vacation it's to London to see theater. I'm very fortunate in that what I do is what I love."

The multitalented star dresser certainly hasn't left his performing days in the dust; he's still at it. In fact, he and his colleagues are working closely with Portland's theater and gay communities to mount an AIDS benefit concert production of the Tony Award-winning musical *Falsettos* on June 9. Originally two one-act musicals by Bill Finn, *Falsettos* is about a gay man who leaves his wife and son and takes a male lover. Twenty-two cast members will take part. Proceeds from the show will be split between Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS and Cascade AIDS Project.

As an enthusiastic Lauze points out, Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS has managed to raise millions and millions of dollars in recent years producing benefits on Broadway. Touting the newest production of *Falsettos*, Lauze says, "People really love it; it's a great evening. We should try to make sure we get everybody there!"

For tickets to *Beauty and the Beast*, which runs through June 15, call the Portland Opera box office at 241-1802. And don't miss Gene Lauze in the June 9 benefit performance of *Falsettos* at Panorama, 341 SW 10th Ave. Doors open at 7 pm, the show starts at 7:30; there will be cabaret-style seating and full cocktail service. Advance tickets are \$15, available from Panorama, Boxxes, The Brig and TicketMaster 790-ARTS.

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