

THEATER & TELEVISION

Broadway's Star Architect



Allison Mitchell/Greenstein for The Wall Street Journal (above); Matthew Murphy (below)

BY STEFANIE COHEN

ARCHITECT AND DESIGNER David Rockwell is known for world-renowned projects such as the JetBlue Terminal at Kennedy Airport, the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood and a global constellation of high-end restaurants and hotels.

Less famous: a rundown shoe factory in Northampton, England on the brink of bankruptcy.

The factory is the set of "Kinky Boots," a new Broadway musical opening April 4. The show, written by Cyndi Lauper and Harvey Fierstein, is about a shoe manufacturer who brings his factory back to life by designing boots for an underserved market—drag queens.

Mr. Rockwell has made a fortune with his 150-person architecture and design firm The Rockwell Group, with offices in New York, Madrid, and Shanghai. But he's also been designing behind the scenes on Broadway for over a decade because, he jokes, "the meetings are a lot shorter."

"It's a lot less hierarchical than architecture, and there are a lot less people involved. I like the immediacy of it," he says. "Plus, buildings can't dance and move like a set can."

This season he designed the sets for "Kinky Boots" and "Lucky Guy," the Nora Ephron play about Pulitzer-Prize winning tabloid reporter Mike McAlary which opens at the Broadhurst



Theatre April 1 and stars Tom Hanks.

Mr. Rockwell founded his firm in 1984, starting out with residential commissions, hotel and restaurant work. Eventual projects included the W Hotel chain and Nobu restaurants around the globe. The commissions grew larger—the Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco, the Mohegan Sun Casino in Connecticut and The Montefiore Children's Hospital in the Bronx.

But his interest in theater precedes architec-

ture. Mr. Rockwell's mother, Joanne, was a vaudeville dancer who ran a community theater in Deal, New Jersey. It "was literally one step away from 'Waiting for Guffman,'" he says. "The local dentist was in it, the local life guard and cub scout troop leader Jack Bliss starred in all the productions." (Mr. Bliss still attends Mr. Rockwell's shows to this day.)

All the Rockwell boys (there were five) either worked backstage or onstage. David Rock-

IF YOU BUILD IT David Rockwell, a top hotel and restaurant designer, says his true passion is the theater. Below, the set of "Kinky Boots."

well helped paint the set for "The King and I"—some "dinky little canvas flats." He continued, "It was just this little production on the Jersey Shore but I remember it being the most glorious thing."

Dinky canvas flats don't figure in to "Kinky Boots." Instead, Mr. Rockwell designed a brick factory that looks as though workers have been churning out shoes there for a century. Dirty windows and rusted heavy machinery fill the stage.

Men's loafers glide off the conveyor belts with a dull consistency. Until, of course, Lola shows up. She's the drag queen in need of a pair of high-heeled boots strong enough to support her large frame. When Lola arrives (with a crew of chorus drag-girls in tow), the factory becomes electric—rivets in the trusses suddenly turn neon blue, the windows glow red, the factory office turns into a stage under a red glittery curtain. Soon, the conveyor belt is spewing pairs of very kinky boots.

"Other people would say the room could stay the same when Lola walks in but not David," says "Kinky Boots" director and choreographer Jerry Mitchell. "That's his great ability—to change something realistic into something theatrical. He connects with the emotional heart of the story."

Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Rockwell have collaborated on six shows over the years, including Mr. Rockwell's first foray into Broadway, "The Rocky Horror Show," in 2001. Mr. Rockwell had been talking to producers and directors for years about designing a set, and was up for the musical "Seussical," (a job he didn't get). But when he was offered "Rocky Horror," he says he hesitated. "I was thinking something more along the lines of 'The Cherry Orchard,'" he says. He was convinced by thinking about the transitions needed to move from the different worlds of the show. "The movement of the set resonated with me," he says. In 2003, he received a Tony nomination for his "Hairspray" designs.

For 2007's "Legally Blonde," Mr. Mitchell said he wanted the sorority house to look like a doll house. Mr. Rockwell purchased every doll house he could find in New York. One, a Polly Pocket, had a special feature—the doll could slide down a fire pole in her nightgown. By the time she hit the bottom, she was clothed in a fabulous outfit. "I said, 'We're putting that in the show,'" says Mr. Mitchell, and it ended up in the opening number.

For "Lucky Guy," Mr. Rockwell used projections to evoke 1980s New York, the nameplates of the Daily News and Newsday flash across the backdrop, along with headlines from reporter McAlary's salacious stories. Famous journalist hangouts, like Elaine's, feature prominently in the set. Heavy steel desks and boxy computers make up the nicotine-stained newsroom.

Mr. Rockwell, who has also designed the New York restaurants Rosa Mexicano, Kittichai, Strip House and the National, is currently working on eateries with Stephen Starr, Bobby Flay, and the Tao Group.

Mr. Rockwell says he approaches restaurant design in the same way he works with Broadway directors. "I talk to the chef and try to find out what their history is and what the story of the food is," he says.

A key difference is the budget. He makes about 40 times more per year on architecture projects than theater sets, he says. But the theater pays in other ways. "I believe designing for theater makes my architecture better," he says.