

## The siren song of Broadway

MICHAEL D. REID / TIMES COLONIST DECEMBER 5, 2015 02:34 AM



Broadway casting directors Duncan Stewart, left, a former Victoria resident, and Benton Whitley. Photograph By Luke Fontana

Sitting in a Cook Street Village coffee shop, Duncan Stewart found himself in a sentimental mood sparked by flashbacks to a time and place where he planted the seeds for his successful showbiz career in New York.

“I sort of willed our partnership into existence over there,” said the Broadway casting director, motioning toward his former apartment on Southgate Street from his seat at Starbucks.

“I used to sit and write in my journal for three hours there every morning, thinking ‘What is my next step?’ ” he recalled. “I didn’t want to rush away from Victoria, but I wanted to do something on a bigger scale.”

Two decades later, the former Canadian College of Performing Arts student who once performed at Butchart Gardens and venues from Vancouver Playhouse to the Shaw Festival, has surpassed those expectations. And it was that success in the Big Apple that recently brought Stewart back to where it all began for a whirlwind visit.

He had just enough time to reconnect with family, including his father Douglas Stewart, the retired federal Liberal MP, and show his business partner, Benton Whitley, his old stomping grounds on their way to Seattle for business.

In a couple of days they would be backstage at the 5th Avenue Theatre, where a production of *Waterfall*, a Broadway-bound musical the duo is casting, was opening.

“This is such an interesting piece,” said Stewart, reflecting on his experiences working on the show with book and lyrics by Richard Maltby Jr. (*Ain’t Misbehavin’*) and a score by David Shire.

“We’ve been working on it for two years now. We cast it top to bottom, there have been numerous workshops, and the libretto has changed and morphed. We sat in the trenches with this one.”

Set in 1930s Bangkok and Japan, *Waterfall* centres on the forbidden romance between a Thai student and a Thai diplomat’s American wife.

“We have this Thai superstar, Bie Sukrit, as the lead,” said Stewart, who worked with co-directors Tak Viravan, a Thai impresario, and Broadway director-choreographer Dan Knechtges (*Lysistrata Jones*). “It’s an English musical, so Bie had to learn speech patterns. We had to be careful about getting the right tone, the right actor.”

After first working as a casting associate with Playwrights Horizons off-Broadway, Stewart became casting director for Broadway producers Barry and Fran Weissler before putting up his own shingle with Whitley, a kindred spirit who, like himself, had an acting background.

After being told by Broadway veterans he had an uncanny eye for talent, Stewart launched Duncan Stewart and Company with Whitley. The theatrical casting agency, since renamed Stewart/Whitley, became known principally for its “star casting” where a roster of film and TV stars are cast in shows on Broadway, London’s West End and touring productions.

Before *Modern Family* turned Sofia Vergara into a household name, Stewart cast her as Matron “Mama” Morton in Broadway’s long-running revival of *Chicago*. His company has also cast Christie Brinkley, Kelly Osbourne, Michelle Williams, Jennifer Nettles, Brandy and Rumer Willis in *Chicago*, and George Hamilton, Kelsey Grammer and Harvey Fierstein in productions of *La Cage Aux Folles*.

And that’s just for starters.

The showbiz partners inextricably linked to Chicago have since become as well known for casting Broadway blockbusters, including Stephen Schwartz’s Tony Award-winning musical *Pippin*, *Natasha*, *Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812*, the annual *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*, the West End and European tour of *Thriller Live* and national tours of *Once*, *Bullets Over Broadway*, *Shrek* and *Anything*

Goes.

They were still basking in the glow of their latest casting coup — the Broadway debut of American Ballet Theatre’s first African-American principal dancer, Misty Copeland, in the Broadway hit *On the Town*.

“Sometimes with a show you can star-cast it and it goes out with a whimper, but we went out with a bang. We closed on a high, classy note with Misty, and we got tons of press,” Stewart said.

When the partners rebranded last year, they also broadened their agency’s scope and staff, which now includes a casting associate, office co-ordinator and a U.K. talent consultant.

“It’s more about connecting creativity now,” said Whitley. “Casting directors for a long time only had the job description of being the guys who hired the talent, and we realized we’ve morphed into more than that.”

They cultivate relationships by connecting creative people such as emerging directors, choreographers and producers with newfound acting talent.

“We’re almost like a law firm now,” said Stewart, who still takes calls at midnight but relies on associates for tasks they once handled themselves.

“ ‘What’s going on with the swing situation in *Shrek*?’ ” Stewart said, offering an example. “I don’t know — ask Andrea Zee, our casting associate.”

On any given day, said Stewart, his staff could get a call from a London agent inquiring about a client’s audition for a Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines production of *We Will Rock You*, “a call from Betty Buckley complaining about the size of her dressing room in *Grey Gardens*,” or a call from Stephen Schwartz and Dreamworks about their Broadway musical adaptation of the animated movie *Prince of Egypt*.

“It’s never dull and never predictable,” said Stewart, whose creative partnership with legendary composer Schwartz (*Godspell*, *Wicked*) has flourished since they collaborated on *Pippin*.

The Tony Award-winner has become one of the duo’s biggest champions, and introduced them to his son Scott, artistic director of Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbour.

Their many current projects include director John Doyle’s Broadway-bound musical version of the 2007 film *August Rush* that was workshopped at Bay Street Theatre.

Stewart’s eyes lit up when he described another project that really excites them — a mammoth production of *West Side Story* to be performed March 4-6 at the Knockdown Centre, a restored factory in Queens.

The landmark musical, featuring a 54-piece orchestra and a massive choral ensemble, will anchor The Somewhere Project, an ambitious citywide Leonard Bernstein celebration.

Stewart and Whitley are casting both Broadway actors and fresh talent in the theatrical event, part of Carnegie Hall’s 125th anniversary season programming.

“I’m so thrilled that we have a fellow Canadian, Sean Cheesman (*So You Think You Can Dance*) doing hip-hop street dance among all this original Jerome Robbins’ choreography,” said Stewart.

The way they found their Maria was a classic “star is born” moment, he said.

“This 18-year-old unknown Latino gal from Long Island walked in the room when we were doing pre-screens and sang in the most glorious classical voice, all the repertoire of Maria,” he recalled.

“She is our nugget, our gem, our undiscovered Maria,” said Stewart. “And she looks like a [Franco] Zeffirelli Juliet.”

[mreid@timescolonist.com](mailto:mreid@timescolonist.com)

- See more at: <http://www.timescolonist.com/life/islander/the-siren-song-of-broadway-1.2126888#sthash.gODAVcQT.dpuf>