



Broadway is crazy with two things this spring: blossoms, and Hollywood headliners. Film and TV stars taking a turn on the boards is nothing new, but this March and April, as 22 new shows open (out of a year-long tally of 42), there's a particularly lush crop.

For many shows, one big star is the anchor: Daniel Radcliffe (Harry Potter, duh) in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*; Christie Brinkley in *Chicago*; Kathleen Turner (as a nun) in *High*; Robin Williams (as a tiger) in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*.

But in a significant number of shows this year, the stars also come in multiples:

Ben Stiller, Edie Falco, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Alison Pill share the stage in *House of the Blue Leaves*.

Frances McDormand and Tate Donovan match wits in *Good People*.

Jason Patric, Kiefer Sutherland, Chris Noth, Brian Cox and Jim Gaffigan match testosterone in *That Championship Season*.

Chris Rock, Bobby Cannavale and Annabella Sciorra outswear each other in *The Motherf**ker with the Hat*.

Ellen Barkin and Jim Parsons (star of TV's *The Big Bang*) make their Broadway debuts next weekend in *The Normal Heart*.

The Book of Mormon is selling out thanks to its off-stage stars: its creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, are the duo who bring us *South Park*.

"It's like Jiffy Pop," says Duncan Stewart, the B.C.-born director of casting for National Artists Management Company (whose current shows include *Chicago* and *La Cage aux Folles*), and the executive director of his own PR firm, Southgate Productions. "The number of stars has been rising for the last few years, and this year we're at an all-time high. There are so many openings, all splashy."

Stephanie Lee, president of Group Sales Box Office (a leading Broadway group-ticketing agency), and a lifelong ticket watcher - her father founded the company in 1960 - agrees. "This month and last are chockablock with star names," she says. "Especially compared to last fall, when the only shows we had to sell to big groups were *Spider-Man*, *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man*."

Charlotte St. Martin, executive director of the Broadway League (the national trade organization for the Broadway industry) says the increase started four years ago, when a screenwriters' strike drove a lot of underemployed Hollywood talent east. Their successes - Denzel Washington, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Scarlett Johansson all won Tony awards for the 2010 season - have inspired others to give it a try. And producers have made it easier for them, by putting together more and more shows with limited runs.

"There are 42 shows this year, spread among three not-for-profit companies and five Broadway theatres," St. Martin says. "Doing the math, you can see that theatres are changing their shows several times a year. This makes them better vehicles for Hollywood stars. Actors who don't want to take themselves off the market for an open run can do four or six or 11 weeks in a limited one."

A star's arrival isn't always great news. In an article this past Wednesday, New York Times critic Charles Isherwood lamented the lack of strong singing voices in many current musicals. But it sure makes sense (i.e., dollars) for Broadway. Spring ticket sales are up 3.8 per cent over the same period last year, and some of that is undoubtedly due to the headliners.

"It makes it 99.9 per cent easier to sell a show if it has a star," Lee says. "Three Days of Rain, for example, did not get great reviews. But the minute we said, 'It's Julia Roberts' Broadway debut,' people wanted to be part of it."

"When we announced that Christie Brinkley was doing Chicago, sales went up 30 per cent," Stewart says. "When Billie Joe Armstrong (lead singer for Green Day) is in American Idiot, the house sells out. When he's not, it doesn't."

Stars also attract a more diverse audience. "You may never have heard of The Motherf**ker with the Hat, but you've heard of Chris Rock," St. Martin says. "It builds brand awareness for that show."

"Daniel Radcliffe has young girls lining up every day," Lee agrees. "He's bringing in the next generation of theatregoers."

Stars bring in a lot of free publicity, too. Brinkley, for example, announced her Chicago run on The Oprah Winfrey Show, then followed up with Jay Leno, People magazine and the front of the New York Post. Stories about a star's relationship to a play - the fact that Ben Stiller's mother, Anne Meara, was in the original production of House of the Blue Leaves; or that Jason Patric's father wrote That Championship Season - make for juicy copy.

Hollywood and Broadway have always had a circular relationship. Lee maintains, though, that the "business-ification" of Broadway really stepped up a decade ago, with The Lion King. Many of

Broadway's top producers, including Scott Rudin and Jean Doumanian, are also film producers, and they cross-pollinate each with their favourite talents. Plays become movies - Roman Polanski's film of the Broadway smash *God of Carnage* is due next year. Steven Spielberg just optioned the current Broadway and West End hit *War Horse* - and vice-versa.

"This year, in addition to *Spider-Man*, we've got *Sister Act*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *How to Succeed in Business*," Lee says. "We're really aware of how often we're saying, 'It's based on the movie,' as we're doing our sales pitches."

Of course, the stars wouldn't flock to Broadway if there wasn't a lot in it for them, too. Doing a play can kick-start a career (Sofia Vergara was cast in *Modern Family* after a Broadway run), or bump it to a new level (Liam Neeson got the lead in *Schindler's List* after Spielberg saw him onstage in *Anna Christie*). It can refresh a flagging star (Brooke Shields's stage appearances gave her new cachet) or add colours to a pigeonholed one (Jim Parsons isn't just that *Big Bang* geek; Daniel Radcliffe is more than *Harry Potter*).

"Doing a six-week run on Broadway gives you something new to say," Stewart says. "You can reinvent yourself. People still revere Broadway as something special. Which it is."

That's probably the main reason pampered stars sign on: to prove, to others and themselves, that they can hack it. "Doing eight shows a week is a huge eye-opener for stars," Lee says. "It gets them out of their comfort zone, feeds them with that live audience energy, challenges them to give 100 per cent. It's a call to grace.

"But Broadway is unforgiving," she continues. "It's not like recording something, where you can fix a mistake. Stars who come here can turn their careers around. But if it goes badly, they don't usually return."