

The Universe of Theater



**An Interview with Philip S. Birsh,
President and Publisher, Playbill, Inc.**

EDITORS' NOTE Philip Birsh has been President and Publisher of *Racing Today Publishing Inc.* since March 1992. He also serves as the President and Publisher of *Playbill Inc.* From May 1989 to February 1992, Birsh was Senior Vice President and Director of the Private Business group of Kidder, Peabody & Co. Incorporated, and for nine years prior to that, he served with Drexel Burnham Lambert Incorporated, lastly as Vice President in the Mergers and Acquisitions department. He has been a Director of *Unitel Video Inc.* since April 1992 and also serves as Treasurer of *Broadway Cares*. He attended Washington University and Boston University.



Philip S. Birsh

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 1884 and based in New York City, *Playbill, Inc.* (www.playbill.com) publishes and distributes *Playbill*, a monthly magazine for Broadway and off-Broadway theater-goers. The company's magazine provides information on theater shows, including features, articles, and columns by and about theater personalities, entertainment, travel, fashion, and dining. It also operates *Playbill.com*, a theater-based Web site that offers theater news, Broadway and off-Broadway regional listings, features, and discount ticket and merchandise offers for its club members. The company also sells Broadway show souvenirs and theater gifts.

How has *Playbill* continued to innovate and remain relevant in its space?

Playbill didn't have to innovate until the world of media distribution changed. Nothing has created more complexities for media than the Internet, which exploded the hammerlock that historic media had on distribution to the public. In 1994, I put *Playbill* on a parallel track of historic media and new media, and we haven't looked back. It is the role of any media company to aggregate an excellent audience for an advertiser.

We cannot guarantee sales or product acceptance or popularity or effectiveness; all we can guarantee are eyeballs and ears. So we aggregated those in the universe of theater.

We began with *Playbill.com*, which is now the most successful Web site in the theater world, and expanded it over time to other

pockets of theater interest, like *Playbill Vault*, where people can search theater history.

This led us to build the *Playbill Memory Bank*, which allows visitors to keep track of their own show attendance. Through this outlet, I can provide advertisers with good value because I can tell them the percentage in the Memory Bank that have not seen their show and send them a special offer.

Word-of-mouth was always the strongest asset to a show. Now word-of-mouth passes faster than ever.

In 1995, I invented the *Playbill Club*, through which we began sending members special information. I would only let shows send my members a reminder if they offered a discount. So we invented the online theater discount and now we have over 350,000 members who get a daily e-mail and discounts every day to see Broadway shows.

Will the traditional paper *Playbill* always exist?

It's important that the printed *Playbill* remain strong and be honored for its history. For a lot of people, it's a collectible.

The more we create social networks of theater lovers, the more the advertising public respects the magazine. Because we are investing in new media and we are aggregating an excellent audience in traditional media, we have survived a lot of the decay that many magazines our age have gone through.

Why is there a limited number of new theater productions as compared to revivals today?

There are generations of people who haven't seen these great shows that are being revived.

There are also businesspeople who are involved with theater now who cannot take the same level of risk that they did in the past – a Broadway show can cost between \$13 and \$15 million; 40 years ago, during the Golden Era of Broadway, it cost under half a million to mount a Broadway show. It's a big business now.

Are there too many revivals? Not to those of us who haven't seen the show; also, these great shows can be seen many times and still be enjoyed.

In addition, Broadway and the creative arts suffered greatly from the AIDS era where,

sadly, early in the 1990s, I could have attended a funeral almost weekly. The men who were dying were immensely talented, theatrically driven, and creative people. We lost many to AIDS so we were driven back from the edge of creativity.

But theater is very creative today and the quality of theater is high. Many of our members are buying tickets to see their fifth choice show this year – the quality of all the shows is that high.

How much has *Playbill* expanded its reach?

We distribute four million *Playbills* a month across the nation from regional theaters to road tours, opera, ballet, and symphonies. We expanded in the '80s and '90s and our future is in building new and wonderful audiences.

We just started *Playbill VIP* – the virtual *Playbill* – which is an audience building tool, a fundraising tool, and a template to build your own *Playbill* program for your school or college production.

It's a remarkable product that allows performers to put together their own *Playbills*, which they can e-mail to friends or post on Facebook to build their audiences. We can also print for them at extremely low prices. In addition, we're talking to major American corporations who will consider paying for the printing if they can advertise in these local *Playbills*.

Did you know that you would eventually enter into this business?

I have a great role model in my father who built *Playbill* and made the brand impregnable. Because of that, I could build upon his hard work and brand empowerment when I took over.

In July, we are starting *Playbilledu.com*, which is *Playbill's* comprehensive guide to undergraduate degrees in theater, music, and dance. We were able to go in a direction like this because we have the brand that gives the public a sense of confidence.

What is it like to work for you?

I believe in the dignity of independence, so I hire mature people. If you trust someone and let that person take ownership of a project, it's common that you will get back not just the goal you wanted but 120 percent of the goal you wanted.

Whenever we hire people, we look for what they take their greatest pride in. If they take pride in things that require responsibility, they will be good employees. ●