

Q&A: Scott Zeiger

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Las Vegas reigns as the “Entertainment Capital of the World” and BASE Entertainment has staked a claim as one of the city’s key production companies.

Formed in 2006, it crosses corporate lines by producing shows at Las Vegas Sands’ Venetian and Palazzo, oversees shows and venues at Harrah’s Entertainment’s Planet Hollywood and MGM Resorts International’s Excalibur. The company also will open “The Lion King” at the Sands’ new Singapore resort in September.

BASE is headed by co-CEOs and founders Scott Zeiger and Brian Becker. Five-time Tony Award-winning producer Zeiger began working in the entertainment business with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and Walt Disney ice shows after graduating from the University of Florida. He has spent more than 20 years in the industry with big entertainment producers SFX Theatrical Group and Clear Channel Entertainment’s productions group.

Today, Zeiger oversees “Phantom — The Las Vegas Spectacular,” “Jersey Boys,” Wayne Brady’s “Making It Up,” “Defending the Caveman” and “Peepshow,” starring Holly Madison.

Zeiger talked with In Business Las Vegas about the evolving Las Vegas entertainment industry, the business side of Vegas shows and the competitive landscape in a city filled with headliners, Broadway musicals, several Cirque du Soleil shows and a big nightclub scene:

IBLV: Give us a short thumbnail sketch of the different operations of BASE Entertainment.

Zeiger: We produce and present shows, and we own and operate theaters in both North America and Asia. Here in Las Vegas, we are the producer of “Phantom — The Las Vegas Spectacular.” We are the local presenting partner and co-producer of “Jersey Boys” at the Palazzo. We are the producer and presenter of Wayne Brady at the Venetian. We are the producer of “Peepshow” at Planet Hollywood, and we also own and operate the Chi Showroom where “Peepshow” is performed. We own and operate the Theater of the Performing Arts at Planet Hollywood and routinely present concert activity at that venue. We also co-produce “Defending the Caveman” at Excalibur. All of that is here in Las Vegas. In Asia, we program two theaters at Marina Bay Sands owned by the Venetian’s parent company, Las Vegas Sands. Our first production in that brand-new venue is “The Lion King,” which we’ve licensed and we’re producing that show under license from the Disney Co. We haven’t programmed the second theater yet. We’re in the midst of vetting programming options for the theatrical venues that Sands owns in Macau as well. We also produce and present certain things in New York and other places.

Describe the process of how a Las Vegas show evolves, from the idea to the stage.

Unlike Broadway or London, the theater for the casino in which you ultimately play, which sometimes are one and the same, you must get the property to support and embrace the content idea. As a Broadway

producer — that's my background — if you're incredibly passionate about a project, yes, the theater owner has to ultimately approve it, but you're renting the building and you're on your own. Here in Las Vegas, it's very symbiotic, the content you choose for a venue and the hotel or the resort itself. Even though we had made a license arrangement with the Really Useful Group, which is Andrew Lloyd Webber's company for "Phantom," I couldn't just say, "Mr. Adelson, rent me your building." (Sheldon Adelson is the CEO of Las Vegas Sands). He had to meet Andrew Lloyd Webber. He had to understand what we were going to do physically to the space. He had to embrace the entire idea before we did this project together. Similarly with "Jersey Boys" at the Palazzo, we went through a similar process where he and his family came to New York, saw the show, understood it and embraced it. At Planet Hollywood with "Peepshow," we did a full-on presentation for (Planet Hollywood founder) Robert Earl at the time in New York. We did a preliminary presentation, and then we workshopped it and we showed it to Robert. And Robert ultimately embraced the concept, and we produced the show. Normally, you would not do that, so it's a little different.

You can see that these Vegas properties, which are extraordinary and amazing resorts, most of them have beautiful rooms and amazing casino spaces. What differentiates one from another beyond just the loyalty and the history of the brand is the content inside. So it's the restaurants, it's the retail, it's the spa, it's the gym, it's the shows. Those are the various elements in these resorts that differentiate one from another because they all have slot machines, they all have craps tables, they all have comfortable beds and showers. That's why our shows are an important amenity to these resorts.

It sounds like there are a lot of moving parts. Is it your job to keep all of it coordinated?

Our company manages every aspect of the show. So we have a production department that mounts the show — organizes rehearsals and hires the directors, pays for the cast and produces the show. We have an accounting department, we have a marketing department that sells the tickets. We have individual managers of the shows. All the various departments are managed inside their silos. My partner, Brian Becker, and I are really responsible for securing the content and organizing its placement.

Of the shows you have developed here, — "Phantom," "Peepshow," "Jersey Boys," "Defending the Caveman" and Wayne Brady's show — what was the most challenging and why?

Whatever I'm working on currently is always the most challenging. "Phantom" is clearly the most complicated. We're sitting here in the "Phantom" theater and you take a look around and we have really created an environmental space here that is unique and singular in the world. There is not another theater or production of "Phantom" like this anywhere. This chandelier that floats over the stage and the audience is an amazing, complicated, computer-generated contraption that takes smart people way more sophisticated than I in their area to figure out how it works. This room was a Guggenheim Museum when the Venetian was built. It was "The Art of the Motorcycle" exhibition. It was a Rem Koolhaas-designed space with Frank Gehry sculptures in it. We had to come in here and squint a little bit and figure out how we were going to remove all those elements and build an 1,800-seat theater that looks like the Paris Opera House. From a pure logistical perspective, this was the most complicated by far. Also, there was a big live orchestra, a huge cast and a world-class creative team adapting a show that was well known by millions of people around the world. (We had to put them) into a new physical environment and also a shorter running time. Very complicated.

Which of your shows in Las Vegas is most successful and why?

I like to think they're all successful. "Jersey Boys" probably has a better economic business paradigm than "Phantom" because it's cheaper to operate. The grosses are strong at "Jersey Boys," "Phantom" and

“Peepshow,” too. But “Jersey Boys” is a brand that’s a little younger than “Phantom.” What’s unique about “Jersey Boys” is that there are a lot less people to employ. The entire acting company, band and others are less than half the number of the people we have engaged for “Phantom.” From a pure economic perspective, “Jersey Boys” economics line up better.

How have show ticket sales held up during the recession? Have you had to lower prices to fill your theaters?

That’s rhetorical, I think. But the short answer is yes, just like every single hotel on the Strip has had to drop prices to fill their rooms. I’m sure when Aria did its investment overview it was not projecting \$125-a-night rooms. When we put our business plan together for all of our shows, we were not projecting that we were going to have to do material discounts. The recession is what the recession is. We’re bouncing back out of it and that’s exciting and terrific for us. But Las Vegas visitors have gotten darned used to this being a bargain hunter’s paradise. So there are extraordinarily deep-discounted rooms and hotel offers, restaurant offers and retail sales and show deals that in order for us to stay competitive and fill our rooms, we have to offer attractive price points. So our yields have diminished somewhat.

A recent development in the show ticket industry involves last-minute ticket sales through online sites and from kiosks on and near the Strip. How have these sales channels affected your industry? Is there a danger that as people become more aware of these opportunities, they’ll wait more and more until the last minute to get cheaper tickets and this lowers your overall revenue?

Last-minute ticket buying has become a fact of life, not only here in Las Vegas, but in New York and in London and pretty much anywhere there are open-ended engagements. If there’s a limited run — one night of Bruce Springsteen or U2 — and it’s a one-night experience in New York, Los Angeles or Denver or Dallas, people will line up and buy those tickets because U2 is moving on to the next city. We produce some of those one-night events. We did T.I., a famous rapper, over at the Theatre for the Performing Arts at Planet Hollywood. He’s here, and then on the next day, he’s gone. When you’re looking at open-ended attractions in relatively large venues, people know there’s not the same sense of urgency to purchase a ticket. When the economy was stronger, people booked their entire visit longer in advance because the hotels were getting full and theater tickets were scarce. Restaurant reservations had to be made in advance. We’ve all kind of suffered together. Restaurant reservations are almost always available today for tonight. You can book a room tonight for Steve Wynn’s hotel or Sheldon Adelson’s hotel or an MGM hotel. It’s just the way it is. It’s no different here in the theater. We have a good rock-solid advance for all of our shows, but there’s always inventory. Tickets don’t necessarily have to be discounted, but last-minute sales are a fact of life and we spend a lot of time critically evaluating sales trends and mathematical formulas. We know how many tickets we sell the day of show, what day of the week it is, whether it’s a check-in day or a checkout day, whether it’s a heavy convention period or a heavy (free and independent traveler) period, what time of year, whether it’s the holidays, whether it’s spring break or the summer. We know we’re going to spike more than in mid-January when there’s no convention in town and school is back in session and there are no tourists here. We know we have plenty of last-minute business and it’s discounted.

So there are a lot of variables?

That’s right. Over the Memorial Day weekend, we had plenty of inventory for all our shows and we knew all of them would sell out. All our shows would be sold out and our discounts would be minimal because with the holiday weekend, we knew it would be packed here. We just know that based on sales cycles and trends.

How do you gauge how well a show would perform for a Las Vegas audience? Is there a different mix by

financial background, culture, nationality or language? How do you know when a show is going to fly?

I don't. Do you?

No, that's why I asked you because you have a pretty good track record.

I have no idea. I think anybody in our business is a gambler by nature. I just don't gamble at the tables, I gamble in the theaters. There's no such thing as a sure thing. None. None whatsoever. Unless you're doing a strictly limited engagement with a major rock band or a superstar of some sort, when you're producing these open-ended shows, you vet them to the best of your ability. We're a business like every business. There are focus groups. There are interviews and trend analysis on what people are willing to pay. There are hunches and instincts. As I said before, unlike Broadway and London or Berlin, you have a symbiotic partnership with your host hotel. I would never produce "Peepshow" at Planet Hollywood unless the owners of Planet Hollywood say, "We really want this show. We believe in it. We're going to put it in our rooms. We're going to promote it heavily. We're going to steer people to your venue." If the owners of the Las Vegas Sands said to me, "We don't like Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons and we don't think 'Jersey Boys' is going to work," I'd be crazy to book it. You never know. Everything's a gamble.

Most of your shows are affiliated with the Venetian and Planet Hollywood. Is that by design or would the company entertain a deal at any property?

Definitely any property. Yes, we've got three shows at the Las Vegas Sands properties and we own the two theaters over at Planet Hollywood, which is part of Harrah's (Entertainment). But we also have "Defending the Caveman" at Excalibur, which is an MGM property. So we're Switzerland. We're an independent producer. We're opportunistic like any good entrepreneurial company. We are loyal to our partnerships, but we'll place the shows where they need to be placed. Hopefully before this calendar year is out, we'll be announcing at least one, probably two new projects.

You can announce those right now if you like.

We're in the middle of negotiations, but we hope to announce two pretty substantial projects.

Some critics say trimming scenes to produce a show in a 90-minute Vegas format is an artistic affront. Since "Phantom" falls in the category of a show that has been trimmed from the original length, what do you say about it?

I say yes and no. Certainly there are positive and negative examples to that question. I was a general partner and co-producer of the Mel Brooks show "The Producers" on Broadway. It was a screamingly riotous success of a project. It came to Las Vegas in a trimmed-down version, and it did not succeed. "Phantom" is something that we worked very, very hard to preserve the artistic integrity of the show. The way we did it was by, essentially, having the original creative team do it. If they couldn't do it we wouldn't have done it. Andrew Lloyd Webber, (Director) Hal Prince, (lyricist) Charles Strouse and the whole team were together and made this show what it is. The 95-minute format, at least with respect to the Broadway-style shows, is an Actors' Equity (Association) requirement. You can play up to 10 shows a week for the same cost structure as eight if you do 95 minutes or less. So you can do eight, nine or 10 for the same cost for the salaries.

It has nothing to do with the attention span of the audience or anything like that. We have "Jersey Boys" running just down the hall, and that show clocks in at two hours and seven minutes with an intermission. "Lion King" runs two hours and 20 minutes with an intermission. When we originally opened "Phantom," we shot for the 95 minutes and, quite frankly, for the first year that we were open we did the full 10 shows

a week, so we got our money's worth so to speak. And the audience did, too. I don't think that anybody interviewed felt that this show short shrifted the creative content in any way, shape or form. For "Jersey Boys," we had never any intention of doing more than eight shows a week, so there was no real reason for us to try to focus on doing a 95-minute show. We wanted it less because sometimes less than the full show in New York or wherever can be better.

Quite frankly, of the roughly 14 minutes shorter here than in New York, eight of them are the intermission. The intermission is eight minutes shorter here than on Broadway. The balance is the overture, the opening number is shorter and in "Jersey Boys" there is a girl band in the show. They sing a song called "Who Wears Short Shorts" that Bob Gaudio, one of the Four Seasons, wrote. On Broadway, the girls sing two numbers. Here, they sing one. It doesn't change the story at all. In "Phantom," the ballet on Broadway is a full-on ballet. Here, the ballet sequence is done in a much-abbreviated fashion. It still delivers the element of the story, but it doesn't take anything away from Andrew Lloyd Webber's music, lyrics, book or anything. Cirque du Soleil typically does its shows around two hours, and as it fixes it during its "fixation period" — which is what it call it — they trim it down, down, down until it figures it has the audience's rapt attention from start to finish, and it's usually around 95 minutes. There's no hard and fast rule.

Have you received any comments, positive or negative, about "Peepshow." Are topless shows still moneymakers?

(Laughs) Uh, yeah! I'll go backward. Topless shows are moneymakers, yes. When you talk about positive comments, our reviews have been pretty much across-the-board positive. Our audiences are building. Every week we do more than the week before. There are certain things that I've learned, such as if you're going to do a big show, like we have — a big striptease spectacular — it helps to have a celebrity in the show who can generate press and help extend the advertising message beyond paid advertising. If we didn't have Holly Madison in the show, for example, we'd be smarter to do a smaller production. But there is a big market for it. We average just under 1,000 people paid per performance for "Peepshow" and I would think that's pretty darn great. And, we have a reality TV show that premiered June 13 called "Holly's World" and it's Holly's exploits here in Las Vegas. She's shooting a calendar or running for mayor or buying a new house by day, but by night she's in "Peepshow," and we think that will further elevate our brand. Look at the show "Fantasy." How long has that been running? Twelve years? I'd say topless shows work. "Jubilee" has been running 28 years. So, yeah, if you create the right topless show, there's a market for it. You can't see anything like "Peepshow" anywhere else in the world. Maybe "Folies Bergère" or "Lido" in Paris. Surely nowhere else in America.

Should gaming regulators relax standards for nudity in shows produced in casinos?

I actually think the standards are fine because you can have topless women in shows. The standard that exists as I know it has more to do with the nightclub experience, the adult clubs. And that's not what our show is about. We do a full-on production performance. You'd probably better off asking a casino operator those questions than me because we have no interest in being in the adult-club business. We produce a beautiful spectacle show. We have a Tony award-winning director-choreographer, costume designer, set designer and composer. Everybody in our show is an award winner. Our composer is nominated this year for "The Addams Family" for writing the music and lyrics and he wrote "Peepshow." Jerry Mitchell just did "Love Never Dies" for Andrew Lloyd Webber in London and now he's working on new projects on Broadway and he created our show. I don't think that we're nearly in the same category. I think that the question you're asking is more about those strip clubs that are taking business away from the casinos. Lots of people who come visit Las Vegas want to go to those clubs and they're leaving these properties. If you talk to a casino president, he's going to want to do everything he can to keep them there.

What do you envision the Las Vegas entertainment scene to look like in the next five to 10 years? More blockbuster musicals? More production shows? More headliners? More small-stage productions?

That's a big question, and it's similar to the question of what makes a hit here. It's a tough answer. What people are looking for in Las Vegas in my opinion is something they literally can't see anywhere else. So yes, I think "The Lion King" can be successful, but it can be seen in other places. Will it run open-ended? I don't know. "Jersey Boys" is ultimately very successful because the operating expense business paradigm makes sense, and also there is a touring moratorium on the West Coast of the United States, so that helps us. It's also playing in only a 1,200-seat theater in New York and there's a lot of demand for that show. I think what works in Las Vegas are things you can't see anywhere else. So those big, incredible Cirque du Soleil shows that are unique like the Beatles show ("Love"), the Elvis show ("Viva Elvis") or "Ka" — that can't tour or can't play anywhere else — will always produce a market for a well-produced show. "Peepshow" can't be seen anywhere else. As long as something produced here is not really derivative of stuff you can see in your hometown and that Las Vegas stays unique, I think this will always be a great live entertainment hub. These hotels and resorts aren't replicated anywhere. You can gamble in Tampa, Fla., at the Hard Rock Casino, but when you go to Tampa, Fla., you're not at the Venetian. You're not at a megaresort with all that this place has to offer. Las Vegas is singularly unique in the world and as long as the producers of shows always remember that when choosing their content, that's where the future lies.

With seven Cirque du Soleil shows being staged and another celebrating the music of Michael Jackson in the planning stages in Las Vegas, is there a Cirque overload here?

I think Cirque is an amazing production company. I love its shows. I think what Cirque has done beautifully to evolve the brand is affiliating and attaching itself to other iconic figures. After it did "Mystere," its beautiful original show, and then "O," its water-based show, and "Ka," which is really heavy acrobatic and martial arts, and delving into Elvis and Chris Angel and the Beatles and, now, Michael Jackson, essentially what it has become is a brilliant producer. The fact is, it's not so much Cirque overload. I think it's really smart affiliating with these icons and differentiating the shows one from another. I think any producer — Cirque du Soleil, BASE Entertainment, AEG, you name it — if everything we do is derivative of the show we're doing next door, then, yes, it's going to be overloaded. Not Cirque, anyone and everyone. If I were to do another topless show, it couldn't be anything like "Peepshow." It would have to be very different. So I think Cirque has been really intelligent about choosing content and doing things that are unique and different. As long as the things they do can be easily identifiable, you could see a Cirque show every night and see something different every night. As long as there are tourists and people coming to town, I think there's room for as many as Cirque wants to do.

We've talked with several people in the nightclub industry who say the clubs don't have a negative impact on attendance at live shows. What's your perspective?

I think they're different audiences, too. I think the clubgoer is typically younger and typically goes out later. They're looking to party, they're looking to dance or meet people. I don't think that anybody going to the theater is looking to hook up and meet somebody. I think somebody going to "Phantom" is coming to see the show and keeping their eyes on the stage and not necessarily the person sitting next to them. So I think they're separate and unique and distinctive and different audiences. There's nothing wrong with a clubgoer coming to the theater or a theatergoer going to a club. But someone who wants to go to a club is not necessarily looking to go see "Jersey Boys," "Peepshow" or "Phantom." When we first produced "Peepshow," we had the idea that perhaps people would come see our show before they go clubbing. I would think that for maybe 25 percent of our audience, that's true. The other 75 percent, their entertainment

for the night is “Peepshow.”

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