



Dan Lauria as Vince Lombardi - Joan Marcus

## SPORT HITS THE STAGE

'Lombardi', the National Football League (NFL)-financed play telling the story of legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi in the 1950s and 1960s, closed on Broadway last month after grossing nearly four times its \$2.5 million budget. With the story of Magic Johnson and Larry Bird scheduled to be told on stage next year, **Barry Wilner** looks at sport as a new platform for success in Broadway theatre.

**VINCE LOMBARDI** conquered Broadway. Now it's Magic Johnson and Larry Bird's turn.

'Lombardi' was a huge hit in Manhattan: during its stint, it became the longest-running non-musical on the Great White Way before producers Tony Ponturo and Fran Kirmser announced it was closing on May 22.

The show is licensed to tour throughout the United States, with a likely first stop in Tittletown, the nickname Lombardi helped earn for Green Bay, where the franchise is publicly owned.

And in March 2012, an ensemble cast of six to eight characters will tackle the story of Magic Johnson and Larry Bird, as influential a pair of athletes to their sport as any in the last half-century.

"Lombardi created a certain credibility not only for us as a producing team but that there is an audience for these kind of shows," Ponturo says. "You are always only as good as your next idea and effort, but the reaction we have received from the press community about Magic-Bird is very positive.

"You can judge it against the reaction when we announced Lombardi, and there were people scratching their heads. So yes, that foundation of being reasonably successful with Lombardi has helped build a groundwork for future projects."

Indeed, sports themes are becoming somewhat frequent on stages across America. Noted author Mitch Albom recently wrote a play about popular baseball broadcaster Ernie Harwell, who died last year. "People who come to see the play will see and hear a part of their life on stage," says director Tony Caselli. "In their heads, they'll be laying around on a summer afternoon listening to Ernie on the radio."

Albom's work was a labour of love, but it also delivers something that he believes connects sports participants with fans - and, as an extension, theatregoers.

"When he died, I tried to write a play that would serve as a legacy," Albom says. "I started it as a one-person show, then I realised Ernie had no angst, no inner demons, the kind of stuff you need for a one-person show. Ernie wasn't Hamlet. I made it as a two-person show with a kid who got Ernie to basically broadcast his life, with his memories about everything from Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth to the 1968 and 1984 World Series, which people will get to see."

Another play about John Wooden, the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) basketball coach who won 10 championships, including seven in a row, is in its planning stages. Yet another icon of college hoops, Al McGuire, is the

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subject of a one-man play by Dick Enberg, a Hall of Fame broadcaster.

Then there is *Magic and Bird*. "Sport creates great human drama and we in the world get so wrapped up in the stories behind these athletes," says Kirmser, a long-time theatrical producer who has been involved with such hits as *'Hair'* and Tony-award nominee *'Radio Golf'*.

"There are so many stories to tell and they are so exciting and moving," Kirmser adds. "I had the idea for *Magic-Bird* because you can not come up with a more stunning relationship. I grew up watching the two of them play, and they were such rivals, so competitive. And yet you can tell there is such a great love and respect between them. It's a highly competitive relationship that is healthy, and one where no-one is tripping the other to get to the finish line."

#### **Lombardi paving the way**

The finish-line for getting the play to Broadway is March. The road there was paved by *'Lombardi'*, in which the NFL's involvement was critical to its success. The National Basketball Association (NBA) has similar plans for tie-ins with the *Magic-Bird* show. Both Hall of Fame players will have input on the final script.

"[The co-operation of the NBA] is a great help, it provides authenticity to the show as well as to the sports fan," says Ponturo, the former sports marketing wizard at Anheuser-Busch. "If you take Lombardi, we had the alliance with NFL to be able to use authentic Packers uniforms, and film from NFL films. And, perhaps most importantly, they trusted us as producers."

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Ponturo and Kirmser have experienced the same enthusiasm from NBA commissioner David Stern, his key assistant Adam Silver, and others at the league who wanted to embrace the show. The producers will be allowed to use the NBA trademark and get marketing input and help from NBA Entertainment.

Certainly Ponturo's background working in media and sports marketing for a quarter of a century helped convince the leagues this was no fly-by-night operation. Kirmser has been a part of the legitimate theatre scene for years and it makes for a unique partnership.

"Any company and sports league works very hard for their branding and trademark," notes Ponturo. "To lend that to a third-party in a

business situation, they have to have a lot of trust. The credibility we created with our work on both sides of the aisle brought that trust."

But what brought out the audiences in such steady waves? Rarely do sports-oriented plays have a huge impact on Broadway, with the exception of, say, *'Damn Yankees'* or *'Requiem For A Heavyweight'*.

Lombardi is not exactly a sports presentation, but, says Kirmser, "that is the approach we bring to it."

"We're open to telling stories we want to tell that grab us and the audience," he adds. "When you are telling stories well and in an authentic manner, you see the whole person and the entire story."

"It has been fantastic to see what is a 50-50 audience, half from the sports side and half from the theatre side. Vince Lombardi's character connects - his story is inspirational but he was human, a real person, one we can relate to, all of us, whether we are sports fans or not. And the relationships are so juicy."

It didn't hurt to have two accomplished veterans of the stage, Dan Lauria and Judith Light, portraying Lombardi and his wife, Marie. Nor did it hurt that theatregoers want to gain something from the experience, and they generally did from Lombardi.

"In one sense, it definitely is a sports play," says Kirmser. "Sure, there have been plays and musicals couched in sports, but really they are not about the game. This is really about the sport and this coach."

"It really is about life, however. Dan Lauria always says if we do our job right people walk out of the theatre feeling they want to be the best they can be. How often do we use sports metaphors? They fit in our lives."

For the play about Magic Johnson and Larry Bird, other dynamics will be at work. Race, for instance. And helping a struggling league recapture the interest and imagination of the sports world.

Ponturo says he and Kirmser won't change their approach to publicising their production: "We worked very hard from a marketing and grassroots and sales perspective to get the word out that this was a unique topic for Broadway. It has been a day-to-day aggressive effort to make people aware of the shows."

"The audience ultimately did respond to the performances by the actors and the direction of Lombardi. We're hopeful and optimistic the same will be true for *Magic and Bird*."

INSIGHT



**MATT CUTLER**  
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It may have been taken place in the shadows of the football and Olympic mega events scheduled for the same year, but the race to host Ryder Cup 2018 was just as fascinating.

Apart from a blip early-on that saw Sweden withdraw from the running - the Swedish Golf Federation said it was impossible to find sponsors to back top-level events in the years leading up to 2018 - the contest, in which France came out on top, was as smooth as an Ernie Els' drive.

A masterstroke by the European Tour was a bit of pre-emptive fire-fighting were Madrid not to win and the Tour be seen as "disrespecting" Seve Ballesteros' memory.

The Spaniard died from brain cancer 10 days ahead of the decision and before the luncheon announcement on May 17, the Tour shrewdly revealed plans to change the official logo to incorporate an image of the five-time major champion.

Significantly the Tour also dedicated a good amount of time ahead of the announcement explaining every stage of the bidding process with input from Olympic veteran Michael Payne, one of three prominent external advisers who assisted the Bid Committee's evaluation procedure since October 2008. Apt, given the cynicism everyone now holds in the bidding for major sports events.

France was a deserved winner. Le Golf National outside Paris is an established course, the bid boasted strong government backing and the pledge to build 100 urban courses funded, in part, by the country's 400,000-strong golf community, was more than persuasive.

France has done well to remain a significant part of the global sporting landscape after being edged out by London to host the 2012 Olympics back in 2005. Should Anney pull off one of the most spectacular underdog performances in Olympic history and pip Munich and PyeongChang to secure the 2018 Winter Games - UEFA Euro 2016, followed by the Ryder Cup and Winter Olympics two years later, is a serious turnaround of fortunes.