

# SHOW TIME

A look at what it takes to bring a show to the cruise ship stage

By Theresa Gawlas Medoff



Prepping to go on stage

COURTESY OF ROYAL CARIBBEAN INTERNATIONAL



Rehearsing at Carnival Studios

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**T**hey number some 60,000: the singers, dancers, musicians, aerial acrobats, ice skaters, high divers, comedians and other performers seeking to land a job performing on a Royal Caribbean cruise ship. They audition in 66 cities around the world, from New York and Vancouver to London and Rome to Sydney and Auckland. And they're all vying for fewer than 3,000 openings.

"It's quite competitive," notes Greg Graham, who directs musicals for Royal Caribbean. "[The actors in the Broadway-style shows] are often new to the industry, and their names have not yet been developed through casting agents and directors.... So, you get a lot of really great talent that's just on the cusp of breaking out in their own careers."

Increasingly, the major cruise lines are collaborating with top names in theater and music to stage the lavish and highly polished shows that guests can now see on their ships. Princess Cruises teamed with Stephen Schwartz, the Grammy and Academy Award-winning composer of *Wicked*, *Godspell* and *Pippin* to create four original production shows for its ships. And he brought in some friends, such as director Daniel Levine, whose credits include Broadway's *Mamma Mia!* and *Les Misérables*, and John Tartaglia, star of Broadway hits *Avenue Q* and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, who created and directed *The Secret Silk*, a work that uses life-size puppetry from Jim Henson's Creature Shop to tell an ancient Asian folkloric tale with modern spin. *The Secret Silk* debuted in mid-February on the *Royal Princess*. It followed the introduction by Princess and Schwartz of two other made-for-Princess shows: *Magic to Do* and *Born to Dance*. A fourth production is scheduled to take the Princess stage in 2019.



Among many other entertainment options onboard, Royal Caribbean guests can see nearly full-length productions of Tony Award-winning musicals, including such blockbusters as *Grease*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Hairspray* and *CATS*, *The Musical*. Graham is currently working on a new musical theater production for Royal Caribbean called *Showgirl*, which guests will be able to see on *Navigator of the Seas* as well as Royal Caribbean's newest ship, *Spectrum of the Seas*, set to launch in 2019.

### BRINGING A SHOW TO THE STAGE

Auditioning the cast is just the beginning, or actually, the middle of bringing a show to a cruise ship stage. "We like a good 18 months to produce a show," says Christi Coachman Orengo, director of Royal Caribbean Entertainment.

Long before the audition tour, the in-house executive production team begins by discussing a concept and determining how it might work and on which ship. Once that process has wrapped up, it's time to assemble the team: the choreographer, vocal arranger, costumer, scenic designer, lighting designer, etc. While they're designing the show, another team hits the road for auditions. But the cast members chosen can't be perfect for just one role; they have to be versatile to be able to do multiple shows on the ship.

"One show could be a pop rock aerial production, and the other could be musical theater, so it's more complicated than casting



for a Broadway production," Orengo says.

Once a cast is assembled, they're brought to the cruise line's rehearsal space. They'll live and work there for up to two months, learning and rehearsing the show six days a week before they're ready for on-ship rehearsals (while the ship is not carrying passengers). Once onboard, the cast and crew not only finalize the shows for their debuts, but also learn the maritime safety information required of all ship's crew.

"That cast stays onboard for about six to eight months, and then we start all over again with a brand-new cast," Orengo says.

### NEW SHOWS, NEW FACILITIES

Not surprisingly, producing a greater variety and higher caliber of entertainment requires bigger, better production facilities. Royal Caribbean International opened the doors to its \$32 million, 132,500-square-foot Royal Caribbean Entertainment Studios—"The Studios" for short—on Florida International University's Key Biscayne Bay Campus in Miami less than four years ago. The facility, said to be the largest rehearsal complex in the world, has 14 full-size-stage studios, 14 vocal studios, 15 vocal rehearsal rooms, an audio recording studio, a large in-house costume shop and a theater with seating for 300, so friends and family of the cast can preview the show before it debuts onboard a ship.



1. *Celestial Strings* is one of four Playlist Production revue shows performed onboard *Carnival Horizon*.

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2. Carnival's *Celestial Strings* show features a live string trio.

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3. New shows are previewed at Carnival Studios before being brought onboard a ship.

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4. The AquaTheater onboard Royal Caribbean ships wows audiences with high-diving thrills.

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In May 2017, Carnival Cruise Line cut the ribbon on its state-of-the-art 44,500-square-foot rehearsal space, Carnival Studios in Davie, Florida, near the company's Miami headquarters. The main theater stages in Carnival's fleet have been re-created within five full-size studios (one of which has an LED wall for rehearsing those high-tech shows), and every space within the creative hub is outfitted with latest digital sound, lighting and recording technology.

Carnival Studios is where shows such as the cruise line's popular Playlist Production works come together. Carnival currently has 17 of the song-and-dance reviews in circulation on its ships, with 3 more to be introduced next year. At any given time, 14 shows will be in rehearsals at Carnival Studios—that's in addition to the 17 Playlist Production shows in rotation on the ships plus all the other types of entertainment on Carnival ships.

Likewise, Royal Caribbean has some 100 entertainment productions either on stage or in the works at once for the 25 ships in its fleet. That's 3,000 performers working in the big theater shows, aqua shows, ice shows, themed

evenings and parades, all doing their best to entertain some 90,000 guests a night across the world's seas.

### UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

Producing entertainment onboard presents challenges not encountered on land, but it also offers opportunities and benefits to the performers and the audience members that you just don't get with a one-time performance.

"From a creative stance, our challenge is always space," explains Kerry Stables, creative director for Carnival Cruise Line. "Sometimes in Vegas, you would have a hotel being built... and they build the show space to fit [the kind of entertainment to be produced]. Theaters on the West End and on Broadway...are equipped with ample rooms and storage, and the [stage] wings and the space for props and set pieces is quite large. [On a ship], we have to be extra creative on how we design these pieces. We might have a scenic element that we use for one show that then you turn it upside down, flip it around, and it's painted differently for the next show."

The other big challenge? Rough seas. Every show on a Carnival ship has three different versions to be used depending on the weather. The A version is the normal, fully produced show. The B version has slight adaptations



5. *Grease* is performed in the Royal Theater onboard Royal Caribbean's *Harmony of the Seas*.

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6. Special effects, spooky illusions and goth-inspired costumes enhance the performance of R&B favorites in the Carnival Playlist Production *Soulbound*.

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7. *Hairspray* is performed onboard Royal Caribbean's *Symphony of the Seas*.

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for rougher seas, such as modifications or the elimination of lifts and spins for safety reasons. The C version is reserved for even rockier seas. “That version would be very simple; they sing the show with limited set pieces,” Stables says. “We do everything possible to still give the guests a show experience.”

The benefits offered by shipboard performances are all about the entertainers and audience members getting to know each other, Stables and Graham agree. “It’s a much more personal experience than you would get, say, seeing a show on Broadway,” Graham says. “The audience has a relationship with the entertainers because they’ll see them in other venues, whether it’s in a jazz performance in

one of the clubs or in another show. It feels personal, and I think that’s something that feels different from going to see a show on Broadway, because there are millions of people in New York. On a ship, the performance feels personal to that particular guest.”

Carnival Cruise Line creates opportunities for entertainer–audience interaction, such as photo ops, meet-and-greets and an after-party in the atrium following performances. On some ships, Carnival even offers tea time with the cast. If you do collect autographs and photos, you might want to tuck them safely away. You never know which of your favorite cruise ship performers might someday make it big!

8. *We Will Rock You* is performed on *Anthem of the Seas*.

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9. The Royal Promenade on *Oasis of the Seas* features Royal Caribbean’s Rockin’ Rhythm Nation Parade.

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10. Royal Caribbean’s *Blue Planet* show includes both dance and aerial acrobatics elements.

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