

THE 'GYPSY' DRAMA QUEEN

After a series of setbacks, Laura Benanti's back on Broadway **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

Tell actress Laura Benanti that her career on Broadway is filled with backstage drama and she responds, "Which drama are you talking about?" It's been that type of career.

There's the drama of the dangerous fall Benanti took during the 2002 revival of "Into the Woods" that broke her neck. Then there's the added drama of that dangerous condition being misdiagnosed. Benanti spent nine months doing physical therapy and wondering why she wasn't getting better — only to find out she was one jostle on the subway away from becoming paralyzed for life.

Then there's the time she offered to step away from Richard Greenberg's "The Violet Hour" in 2003 because it "didn't feel right" — and having her offer accepted by the producers, only to have some gossip peddlers report she was fired and couldn't act.

Not to mention her having to take medical leave from the Broadway musical "The Wedding Singer" for six weeks in 2006 — and then returning to the show almost the minute they announced it would be closing.

"I'm grateful," says Benanti, who is now starring in a Broadway revival of "Gypsy," opening Thursday at the St. James Theater. Benanti plays the tomboyish Louise, who transforms into the world-famous stripper, opposite Patti LuPone as the ferocious stage mom Rose.

"I'm not glad I broke my neck, but it did inform me. Had I experienced all these wonderful blessings and fortunate experiences, I don't know if I would have appreciated them as much if I hadn't had some of the crap on the other side."

For every setback, Benanti has definitely enjoyed a timely break. She was once rejected as being too adult to play Liesl in a revival of "The Sound of Music." But director Susan Schulman saw something

and made her the understudy for Rebecca Luker's Maria. It led to Benanti's Broadway debut at 19 when Luker left the show, and that resulted in Tony-nominated turns in "Swing!" in 1999 and "Into the Woods," as Cinderella.

Another break came when Benanti's friend, actress Mary Stuart Masterson, insisted she go to a doctor for a second opinion about that lingering neck injury while Benanti was in the midst of rehearsals for the musical "Nine." Benanti had to schedule surgery immediately, and through tears told the show's creative team that she'd have to leave the cast.

"They said, 'We'll wait for you,'" says Benanti, even though she wouldn't be available until the first performance.

"Who does that? That's amazing." And despite winning a major role as Jonny Lee Miller's love interest on the new ABC drama "Eli Stone," the show's creators allowed her to scale back her workload from six episodes to three so she could be in "Gypsy" with LuPone.

It allowed Benanti to tackle a juicy role in one of the most acclaimed musicals of all time — a character who suffers through almost as much backstage drama as Benanti has.

"Her loneliness really touches me," says Benanti about Louise. "Her desire and want for her mother's love, and how sad it is that she ultimately receives that love through an audience who's watching her take off her clothes.

"She has to change, she has to harden in order to live in the world that she's created for herself. She created Gypsy Rose Lee; she made her. But she didn't start out that way." ♦

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In "Gypsy," Benanti plays stripper Louise, the daughter of the ultimate stage mom played by Patti LuPone.



JOAN MARCUS

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