

Nothing can stand in their way

With 'Xanadu' a surprise hit on Broadway, its stars are believing in magic



BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Xanadu," the Broadway musical that seemed like a punch line waiting to happen, has become the Great White Way's nirvana central since opening this month. A reimagining of the sillier-than-thou 1980 movie starring Olivia Newton-John about L.A. skaters mingling with Greek gods, "Xanadu" flirted with disaster before opening to rave reviews.

Anchoring a cast that includes Cheyenne Jackson, Tony Roberts, Mary Testa and Jackie Hoffman is Kerry Butler, who sings and dances and does a wickedly broad Aussie accent — all on skates! — in the Newton-John role of the muse Kira. But Butler, who originated the role of Penny Pingleton in the Tony-winning "Hair-spray" and was in the cult hit "Bat Boy," is thrilled just to have got to opening night.

"When I was in rehearsals, I thought the producers were going to fire me because I couldn't do [anything] on skates," laughs Butler, a blond with a Cupid's-bow smile who has a daughter with her husband, "Sesame Street" writer and performer Joey Mazzarino. "I went home crying every day! They were supportive, but I think they were a little worried."

Truth be told, Butler's confidence on skates was probably the least of their worries. The calamities that dogged this show — from catty comments among Broadway's buzzmakers to multiple injuries — were enough to keep even an unfazed veteran like Testa a little unnerved.

Testa, Tony-nominated for "42nd Street" and "On the Town," plays Melpomene, the Greek muse of tragedy — a muse that sure was working overtime as "Xanadu's" curtain-raising approached. Most notably, the show's male lead, James Carpinello, seriously injured his leg two weeks before opening night, forcing Jackson (star of the Elvis musical "All Shook Up") to step into the cutoff jeans of Carpinello's character Sonny at the last minute. (Carpinello will return when his injuries permit, possibly in September.)

"It was such a freak accident," recalls Testa. "They were rehearsing the final number, and Carpinello, who's an excellent skater because he's a hockey player, was talking about a spot on the stage that he had been having problems with. And then his skate *did* get caught there, and he went down — and in such a way that he broke his leg in two places."

"Then, later that day, we had violent thunderstorms after all this happened, and the roof started leaking! [Director] Chris Ashley was saying, 'We need some-

one to mop up because the roof is leaking. ...' And I said, 'Is it blood?!' Because it seemed like the apocalypse!"

Other cast members have been injured as well, not to mention what Butler calls a "little fire" backstage. Did they have to make sacrifices to the gods to stop it all?

"Mary did!" says Butler. "Seriously, she walked around with this big flaming [stick], going around the stage in circles, going into all the dressing rooms. She said it was to get rid of all the evil spirits."

Clearly, it worked: "Xanadu" went from desperate-sounding Broadway dregs to an unexpected must-see with strong critical response.

"You never know if people will get it," muses Butler. "And if the critics had said it was horrible, everyone would have believed it — and we likely would have closed the next night." ♦

After a wobbly rehearsal period, it's been smooth skating for Kerry Butler (above, c.) and the cast of "Xanadu." Below, Butler and co-star Cheyenne Jackson, whose fate it was to fill in for James Carpinello, who broke his leg in a mishap.

