

So Driven, So Young

London's newest theatrical wunderkind has produced a string of urbane hits



Golden boy: Babani at the Jermyn Street Theatre, where his 'Closer Than Ever' (below) is playing

BY JANE HUGHES

THERE ARE PARTICULAR LINES OF work that produce prodigies. Music and sports thrive on youth: kids who don't yet shave or vote perform feats on violins and balance beams with depressing regularity. Most theatrical impresarios, by contrast, tend to have the decency to wait until they're out of their teens to shine.

David Babani didn't. At 19, London's youngest director-producer had already raised the money for and produced a much-talked-about revival of "Assassins," Stephen Sondheim's musical about American presidential killers. At 20, Babani has started work as artistic director at the newly refurbished London venue, the Jermyn Street Theatre. And his new production, "Closer Than Ever," a bittersweet look at urban life, has won critical acclaim as a thinking person's musical comedy. "There are bigger, broader, brassier musicals in London," wrote The Guardian's Michael Billington. "But this one shows that small can sometimes be significant as well as beautiful."

In the age of megamergers and multimedia synergy, Babani has found a quaint way to make it as a theatrical impresario: focus. While Babani's peers are busy designing cyberspace or spinning out film scripts, he's



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obsessed with an old-fashioned art, approaching it with the zeal of a Victorian missionary. Says Babani: "I find it amazing that just through sheer drive and ambition—and a little bit of skill and backup—you can make things happen."

Things began to happen startlingly early for Babani. At 9, the North Londoner was gripped by "the sheer glitzy spectacle" of the musical "Cats." By 11, he was reading the weekly entertainment-industry bible, *Variety*. By 13, he was using his student discount card to catch nearly every show put on in London's West End. "You can always learn something, no matter how good or bad the show," says Babani. "You store it

away in a mental directory and pull it out years later."

Babani used it even sooner: by the time he was 18, he'd designed lighting for about 100 school plays and professional productions. His school directorial debut was Anthony Shaffer's sleek and nasty "Murderer," which opens with a man drugging a woman and pulling her teeth. Sulfuric acid and marble chips, donated by the chemistry department,

created the effects of dissolving teeth. Even now, Babani often works on threadbare budgets. At the opening-night party of "Closer Than Ever," his mother and sister made the rounds with trays of homemade canapés. His fiscal rule-of-thumb on new productions: raise enough money to print posters, and pay the cast when the box-office receipts start rolling in. "I've never lost a penny," he says. "The trick is being able to start something with very little and get away with it because the show is a success."

He makes it sound so easy. But the flannel shirts and floppy hair hide the business acumen lurking beneath. Using profits from earlier productions, he bankrolled his revival of "Assassins" for a mere £20,000. When Sondheim first called him to discuss the production, Babani was driving 70 mph: "I wasn't expecting the call at all, so it was very exciting," he recalls. "I had to try and answer his questions about the tour at the same time as keeping the car on the road." The show, a fringe hit in London, is currently touring nationally and may transfer to the West End. "Closer Than Ever" is doing so well that it may also make a West End transfer. And Babani is planning his first "Off Broadway" season for the 70-seat Jermyn Street Theatre,

for which he will import American casts.

Few theatrical magnates live at home with their parents. But Babani lives with his mother, a professional bridge player, and father, a children's book publisher. He is on leave from drama studies at Bristol University to focus on his career, which he hopes will someday include a stint as artistic director at his "favorite place in the world," London's National Theatre. "When a 20-year-old comes in and says, 'I would like to produce your show,' you want to kick him out," says "Closer Than Ever's" lyricist, Richard Maltby. "He didn't sell himself to us at all. He simply told us what he wanted to do." And then he went and did it. ■