



Theater During COVID-19: how will the story be told?

GLST 287: COVID-19: A Crisis Examined

Tom Smith, Professor and Chair, Theatre and Dance



In the Chat,
please type...

- * if you've ever seen a play or musical
- ** if you've ever seen a Broadway touring show in your town
- *** if you've ever seen a Broadway show on Broadway





What We'll Explore Today

- What Broadway was before COVID-19
- A timeline of the closing of Broadway and the London's West End
- How theatre is being produced today during COVID-19
- The probable changes and outcomes for theatre post-COVID
- The intersection of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19

Theatre History is being written today.

And you are all a part of it.

What is Broadway?



- 41 theatres recognized by The Broadway League, American Theatre Wing and Actors' Equity Association
 - Located in Midtown Manhattan from 42nd to 53rd streets between 6th and 8th avenues
 - 500+ seats
- Broadway “season” is September through August
 - October and March are when most shows open
 - March tends to open shows with best odds of winning Tony awards (end of April is deadline for consideration)

Broadway's Numbers

- Calendar year 2019: \$1.758 billion revenue (2nd highest) and 14.8 million attendance (highest)
 - Tops attendance of the 10 professional major league sports teams in New York City and New Jersey combined
 - Add to these numbers Broadway touring productions
- January-March 2020: \$26.7 million revenue and 253,453 attendance
 - January-March 2019: \$30.2 million revenue and 271,052 attendance

Broadway's Economic Impact

In 18-19 season, Broadway contributed \$14.7 billion worth of economic impact to New York

Broadway supported 87,100 jobs
(12,600 direct and 74,500 indirect)

Broadway touring shows bring in additional 1.6 billion and 3.8 billion to the communities in which they play

March 11 - 12, 2020

- March 11: The Broadway League suspends all Broadway productions effective March 12 @ 5pm after mandate from Governor Cuomo
 - Producers wanted Governor Cuomo or Mayor de Blasio to order a closing: shows' insurance policies would provide coverage only if a closing were government-mandated
- On March 12, there were 31 Broadway shows running, with 16 more slated to open within 1 month (and 6 already slated to close)
- Shutdown announced through April 12, then extended to June 7, September 6, January 3, and currently through May 31, 2021

Previous Major Closures

- Weather (snow storms)
- Labor Disputes (19 days in 2007 and 25 days in 1975 and 30 days in 1919)
- 9/11 (2 days)
- As of today: 266 days
- By scheduled reopening: 447 days

- The last time theaters closed because of a pandemic was in 1592, when London theaters shut down as the Black Death ravaged Europe
 - Even during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, Broadway theaters stayed open



London's West End

- All West End theatres shut down March 16 (4 days later than NYC)
- Closed until December 3, 2020
 - Three shows were announced to open Nov. 14, 19 and 28 and 8 more in December but all were postponed as of Nov. 2 due to a month-long lockdown
 - December 4: *Death Drop*
 - December 5: *Six* and *Les Miserables*—the staged concert
 - December 7: *A Christmas Carol*
 - December 9: *The Play That Goes Wrong* and *Bring It On*
 - December 11: *Dick Whittington*
 - December 12: *Everybody's Talking about Jaime*

Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway

- Almost all closed with Broadway
 - Could have stayed open if under 500 seats and agreed to play with 50% audiences
 - Not financially viable; insurance coverage not the same as Broadway



PLU Theatre and Dance productions

- March 7, 5pm received word to immediately hold all productions for 2 weeks through the end of Spring Break
 - Alpha Psi Omega's production of *A Piece of my Heart* cancelled closing matinee
 - Musical *Urinetown* stopped their first technical rehearsal with intention to re-open two to three weeks later
- March 16, all productions cancelled for remainder of year

What Happened Next...

- Initially, producers planned for a 4-week delay, but within two weeks it became apparent this was not long enough
- Casts and crews were asked to wait it out
- It quickly became apparent this was going to last a while and some producers announced closings
 - 4 immediate closures, including *Frozen* (to preserve 2 other Disney shows)
- Tony Awards postponed indefinitely; nominations announced Oct. 15 but no ceremony date announced

What Happened Next...

- Small theatres, improv companies and academic theatres were among the first adopters of streamed productions
 - Live stream vs. Scheduled stream vs. Video on Demand
 - Some converted productions within weeks
- Play publishers put out call for “Zoom plays” and asked writers for streaming permissions
- Zoom and other platforms began upgrading their software to support educational and performance uses

What Happened Next...

- ShowTix4U contracts with the major publishing houses to distribute streamed content and to collect box office revenue
- Disney+ releases *Hamilton* (scheduled stream)
- Theatres who can perform outdoors begin to
- Actors' Equity Association creates policies for safe return

Actors' Equity
Association –
May 26

CORE PRINCIPLES TO SUPPORT SAFE THEATRE PRODUCTIONS

- 1. The epidemic must be under control**, with effective testing, few new cases in the area and contact tracing.
- 2. Individuals who may be infectious can be readily identified and isolated**, with frequent, regular and accurate testing with speedy results.
- 3. The way we audition, rehearse, perform and stage manage may need to change** and the venues we work in may need to undergo changes in order to reduce the risk.
- 4. Efforts to control COVID-19 exposure must be collaborative**, involving Equity members, employers, the union and all others involved in the production of theatre. There must be collective buy-in and ongoing evaluation and improvement of health and safety practices.

Actors' Equity Association – July 6

- Barrington Stage Company (MA) and Berkshire Theatre Group (MA) given approval for productions after lengthy plan
- Aug 7: Berkshire Theatre Group mounts *Godspell*, an outdoor production
- Aug 9: Barrington Stage Company opens *Harry Clarke*, a one-man show performed indoors



GARAGE

Actors' Equity Association

- Approves additional one-person performances
- Approves indoor filming of the Broadway musical *Diana*, with no audience, to be streamed on Netflix
- Other approved productions include small cast shows with massive restrictions (300 seat houses selling 40 tickets, etc.)



PLU Theatre and Dance

- Changed 2 productions
 - One to accommodate easier transition to streaming
 - One because streaming rights are not available
- Supplemented season with guest artists
 - Broadway performers and stage manager: Laura Osnes, Bryce Pinkham, Cherie B. Tay
 - Renowned dancer/choreographer Dana Wilson
 - Television and film actor Santino Jimenez

Biggest Challenges to Re-Opening



- Lack of audiences
 - 16% of Broadway theatergoers are over the age of 65
 - 45% said they'd wait 6 months or longer before returning (Shugoll Research)
 - Tourists make up 65%
 - 20% from abroad
 - 4 years for international tourism to bounce back after 9/11
- Smaller audiences can't cover costs
 - Weekly costs include rent, advertising, box office, salaries, etc.
 - Audience sizes would need to be reduced significantly (40-60%) for social distancing and shows cannot run at reductions greater than 15-20%

Biggest Challenges to Re-Opening



- Theatres too small
 - Many Broadway theaters are over 100 years old, and feature narrow aisles, seats arranged very close together and tiny bathrooms
 - Audience sizes would need to be reduced significantly to keep everyone six feet away from each other
- Backstage crew can't socially distance
 - Quick changes
 - Moving scenery
 - Offstage spaces
 - Dressing rooms

Biggest Challenges to Re-Opening

- Singing and many instruments are higher risk
- Will people pay same prices for less scenery, recorded tracks, no concessions, etc.?



Expected Changes - Broadway

New shows, which draw more locals, will likely survive longer than long-run shows

Discounted pricing to earn back trust

Less shows

Simplified production values

Salary reductions leading to professionals leaving the industry

Expected Changes – Regional and Educational

Discounted pricing to earn back trust

Less theaters (up to 35%) and less theatre programs

Stockpiling recordings of productions

New levels of safety protocols

Greater use of technologies

The Intersection of BLM, COVID-19 and Theatre

- The extended pause in theater has made space for overdue conversations and examinations of racist practices and the financial and production systems that have long fueled American theatre
 - All white creative teams
 - All white boards
 - All white staff
 - Tokenism in casting
 - “All-black” productions
 - Expectations of singing styles and vocal choices (belting; sounding “black”)
 - Pay disparity

The Intersection of BLM, COVID-19 and Theatre

- “We See You, White American Theater” (link in Weekly Content)
 - A collective of BIPOC theater makers to address the scope and pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and racism in the American theater
 - WSYWAT released a 29-page document of demands including mandatory, ongoing anti-racism training; union production teams made up of at least 50% BIPOC individuals; and a publicly available study examining pay disparity between BIPOC and white union members

The Intersection of BLM, COVID-19 and Theatre

Commercial theatre practices are being challenged and demands for change include...

- Pay equity (race, gender, position)
- More humane working hours
- Color-conscious--not color-blind—casting
- Increased production of plays written, directed and designed by BIPOC artists
- Making theatre accessible to all

The Big Questions – Theatre post-COVID

- When will theatre return?
- What will change?
- Whose stories will be told?
- How will the story of this time be told?
- Who will tell the story?

Questions?

Please feel free to ask questions through the chat



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