

An aerial photograph of a city grid, likely New York City, showing a dense pattern of streets and buildings. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text is positioned on the right side of the image.

# Broadway:

A YEAR ON THE AISLE BY MISHA BERSON

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or the past century, the word “Broadway” has conjured something greater than just the imposing boulevard that stretches from the lower tip of Manhattan Island 146 miles northward to the New York state capital of Albany.

To millions of people who have never been anywhere near the street, “Broadway” signifies the epicenter of America’s commercial theater world: the fabled midtown Manhattan precinct which begins around West 42nd Street at Times Square, encompasses roughly twenty blocks, and contains many of the most closely-observed and influential playhouses in the world.

This bustling district reached its peak of theatrical activity seventy years ago, offering throngs of show-goers a record 264 productions during the 1927-28 season. Back then, Broadway was an entertainment mecca like no other in the world, a magical swatch of urban geography ablaze with marquees and billboards, rooftop restaurants, and busy theaters. More than a place, this Broadway was a state of mind—an intrinsically American playground of raffishness and glamour, razzle-dazzle and poetry, an excitable blur of high, low, and middle-brow culture. And its milieu was democratic: the peons mingled exuberantly

with the effete, Shakespeare played next door to the follies, and art shared an uneasy yet dynamic collaboration with commerce.

Half a century later, when playwright and screenwriter William Goldman made a candid, critical study of a single season of Broadway theater in his book, *The Season*, the ambience had changed drastically. During the 1968-69 period Goldman chronicled, just seventy-two productions appeared on Broadway—a twenty-five-year high. Forty-second Street itself was deteriorating from a lively, welcoming boulevard of dreams, into a tawdry byway commandeered by hustlers, hookers, and street preachers. It was a time when movies held center stage in the American consciousness, and Broadway got tangled in economic and artistic identity crises.

Meanwhile, the more inventive playwrights and directors increasingly sought creative refuge in Off and Off Off Broadway, and in America’s expanding network of regional theaters.

Fast-forward three decades. After years viewing Broadway from my perch as theater critic for the *Seattle Times* (and previously for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*), I observed the entire 1997-98 New York season up close. This was, in one big sense, an easier task than Goldman’s: last season, only thirty-three new shows opened on Broadway.

That number says a lot about what’s happened to Broadway recently, but not everything. With many of the venerable midtown theaters long ago demolished to make way for hotels and movie cineplexes, only thirty-eight official Broadway houses remain—but all were booked solid, with new shows or holdovers from previous seasons. Attending the premieres of thirty productions, I found Broadway alive, kicking, and the subject of more media interest than in at least a decade.

But even a cursory examination of the year’s activity reveals a complex enterprise just as vulnerable to disaster, artistically schizoid and compromised, and in flux as it was in 1968, and astonishingly more expensive (production costs are 400 percent higher, on average). Broadway remains endangered financially and aesthetically.

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The only two genuine blockbuster musicals of the 1997-98 season were pre-groomed winners: *The Lion King* and *Ragtime*. Extremely different in tenor and subject matter, both were American-hewn spectacles (as opposed to Andrew Lloyd Webber's British-made extravaganzas—*Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, et al.). Both were produced by ambitious, high-rolling companies that are relative newcomers but major players on Broadway. Both were fine-tuned out of town. And both were the premiere attractions in handsome new West 42nd Street venues owned by their producers, showplaces which are major components of the Times Square real estate “renaissance.” (Or, to skeptics, the Godzilla-style corporate invasion of Times Square.)

The Disney Company and its chief Broadway rival, Livent, probably attracted more media attention and speculation than any other aspect of the season. Disney's magnificent restoration of the ninety-five-year old New Amsterdam Theatre, in all its art deco opulence, was one major story. Another was the massive entertainment conglomerate's willingness to entrust the \$20 million stage version of its most lucrative animated film into the hands of an inventive and idiosyncratic director, Julie Taymor.

Directly across the street, the opening of Livent's new Ford Center for the Performing Arts (in the spot where the Lyric and Apollo theaters had once stood) also caused excitement. As did Livent's serious financial woes and a partial takeover by (former Disney exec) Michael Ovitz from company founder Garth Drabinsky. (Livent's fiscal problems would worsen after the season closed, when Ovitz discovered the company had been misrepresenting its income and expenses by millions of dollars. In the subsequent scandal, Drabinsky was ousted and Livent's future grew blurry.)

None of this would have counted if *The Lion King* or *Ragtime* had gone bust. But together they raked in \$44 million within six months. And they probably deserved to.

The extraordinary visual and aural enchantment of Taymor's *Lion King* made an earlier Disney staging of *Beauty and the Beast* look like *Romper Room*. A brilliant mask and puppet designer, as well as a director with an innate sense of multi-layered spectacle, Taymor filled the New Amsterdam with a bestiary of creatures that were half-human, half-beast—gazelles and elephants, giraffes and monkeys, zebras and (of course) lions. She also conjured the landscape of Africa, and (with the collaboration of some terrific musicians, singers, and dancers) tapped the vibrant music and folklore of that continent. All this gilded a slight and syrupy story line about a lion cub growing up to avenge his roaring father. But no matter: the magic was undeniable.

As for *Ragtime*, there were weaknesses in the broad-stroke approach taken by director Frank Galati and his collaborators to bring E.L. Doctorow's ironic/iconic panorama of early twentieth-century Americana to the stage. But the show's intriguing subject matter, a first-rate cast, Galati's sure-handed staging, that ragtime beat, and a relentless flood of hype paid off at the bank.

Yet, with other critics, I share some qualms about a dawning age of corporate-minted spectacles. *The New Yorker's* John Lahr castigated *Lion King* for its aura of “Business Art” and the mushy Disneyesque message at its center: “[It] turns the predatory anarchy of nature into a fairy tale of harmony—an ersatz Eden, where the lion doesn't lie down just with the lamb but with an entire zoo.” And in *The New York Times*, after praising *Ragtime* as “handsome, literate and stately,” and *Lion King* as a laudable “singing and dancing show not quite like any other,” critic Vincent Canby worried that even aesthetically pleasing huge-budget hits would intensify a harmful big-is-beautiful mentality on Broadway.

## HIT MUSICAL REVIVALS

These days, Broadway most likes to bet on a sure thing. And what seems a surer bet than recycled shows from “the golden era”—shows many people have already hummed the score to, or seen in amateur productions, or viewed on video?

This year's crop of resurrections included two musicals that were part of a mini-trend of "revisals"—popular works set in Europe during the rise of the Nazis, but revamped to fit our altered sense of history.

So a heightened awareness of fascist evil informed familiar material in the 1998 remounts of *Cabaret* and *The Sound of Music*. Swabbing a patina of darker, more violent realism onto broad-appeal entertainments underscored a current Broadway dilemma: how to remount the tried-and-true old shows audiences lap up, while keeping in step with a more cynical Zeitgeist?

Making *The Sound of Music* more "realistic" is like trying to de-sweeten a vanilla ice cream cone. The 1959 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical centers on a brood of cute children (based on the singing Von Trapp clan) and their spunky governess, Maria. Consequently, the storm clouds of fascism on the horizon are often obscured by the blinding sunniness of catchy tunes and smiling little faces.

The show didn't need great reviews—nor did it get them—not with a mega-hit movie version circulating, and a score full of standards. Even a nasty off-stage battle of the now-elderly Von Trapp siblings over control of their family ski resort failed to dampen ticket sales.

The Roundabout's *Cabaret* tested just how far Broadway can go in darkening an old hit. The message was: pretty far. Never sugar-coated to begin with, Kander and Ebb's musical, based on Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, broke the Broadway rules in 1966 with a Hal Prince staging that nodded vigorously to Brecht. But as a sign of its own time, *Cabaret* had a two-track mind: on one step, the cynical, sexy shenanigans of the demimonde in Berlin's Kit Kat Club; on the other, a pair of spongy love affairs derailed by unplanned pregnancy and anti-Semitism.

The 1998 *Cabaret* exacerbated this tonal clash by pumping up the squalor and spinning out the domestic scenes by rote. But overwhelmingly positive response to the audacious acting, and to the naughty Kit Kat Club ambience ruled the day. A superior score and Oscar-winning movie version helped here, too.

Yet what does it take to shock a Broadway audience today? Adding a heroin-chic look to *Cabaret*'s Kit Kat chorus? The blatant bisexual carnality of Alan Cummings' emcee? Film actress Natasha Richardson's low-rent diva, Sally Bowles—no longer the blithe English bird, now a ravaged Weimar barfly?

Maybe, but you can see that sort of thing any old day in MTV music videos and *Vogue* ads. As the *Village Voice*'s Michael Feingold observed, the *Cabaret* revival alternated "the pathos of Weimar's lost souls...with today's crass disillusionment." So was it the heightened awareness of fascism that made the show so electric—or just the fashionably punkish decadence and grungy thrills?

The attractions of the well-received revival of *1776* were easier to divine. This 1969 show shamelessly gussied up a world-shaking historical event with jokes, romance, and song-and-dance numbers. But the event was the 1776 Continental Congress in Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence was crafted. And the show's writer (Peter Stone) and lyricist-composer (Sherman Edwards) were serious about animating and dignifying the significance of these events.

In 1997, *1776* was loved for its suspenseful, witty, and well-researched account of disparate men debating such knotty issues as liberty and slavery, not for its forgettable roster of tunes. The show also prospered from having a cult TV star (*Star Trek*'s Brent Spiner) and an old Broadway favorite (Pat Hingle) in the excellent cast. Moving up from the intimate Roundabout to the massive Gershwin Theatre, *1776* ran for less than a year, but it served as a helpful reminder that musicals can be intelligent, historically illuminating, and yet, still crowd-pleasing.

#### "MAYBE" MUSICAL HITS

The costs of even modestly sized and budgeted musicals have skyrocketed, thanks to explosive advertising, theater rent, and payroll expenses. So even a

“small musical” can cost \$3 million in today’s Broadway economy—about seven times what *Fiddler on the Roof* cost in 1964. But tickets are not 700 percent higher today. According to *Variety*, it now takes, on average, ninety weeks of selling ninety percent capacity for musicals to break even. (For straight plays, the average bottom line is sixty weeks of selling at seventy-five percent capacity.)

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Given that, one can’t yet know whether *The Scarlet Pimpernel* or *High Society* will last long enough to pay back investors or turn a profit. What both have going for them are their recycling pedigrees. What neither has going for it is any particular aesthetic distinction or hint of originality.

Of the two, *Scarlet Pimpernel* was the more synthetic—and the more likely to succeed. In *Theatreis* Ken Mandelbaum tagged this schmaltzy, picturesque 1998 songfest a “floperetta”—a cross between a civic light opera and summer stock vehicle from more innocent times.

Composed by Frank Wildhorn and produced by the team responsible for Wildhorn’s shlocky Broadway cult favorite *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Scarlet Pimpernel* is the musical equivalent of a Harlequin romance; it is to French Revolution what Wonder Bread is to brioche. And yet, perhaps because of the unabashed sincerity of its cheesiness, *Pimpernel* got off with a good-natured spanking in the press. Newcomer leading man Douglas Sills actually earned praise, and both he and the show nabbed Tony Award nominations.

In fact, though harmless in its superficiality, *Pimpernel* is an insidious prototype. It’s not the plethora of what Mandelbaum calls “sore-thumb pop ballads,” or the frou-frou look, or the unintentional howlers (e.g., wretched Bastille prisoners crooning their way to the gallows) that make it so. It’s the

pre-fab assembly, which conflates art with marketing so completely that there’s no difference between the two.

Exhibit A: Wildhorn didn’t generate the *Scarlet Pimpernel* project, but auditioned before he “knew what a scarlet pimpernel was” (the flowering herb, or the nineteenth-century French novel) or had seen the 1935 film on which the musical is based. In turn, Wildhorn “auditioned” Nan Knighton to write the lyrics and libretto. And immediately, the team cranked out enough “theme” songs for a “concept album” performed by pop singer Peabo Bryson and others.

*Scarlet Pimpernel* did not invent this merchandising tactic. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice started the lucrative pre-production concept-album ball rolling nearly thirty years ago with *Jesus Christ Superstar*. But at least Webber and Rice knew the crucifixion story before they wrote a musical about it. *Scarlet Pimpernel* is entirely a creature of “marketing synergy,” which fabricates theatrical events from familiar sources and pitches them to loyal fans who don’t mind the generic hokiness.

By contrast, *High Society* (the last musical of the season) was merely strained and lackluster. A Broadway musical based on a Hollywood movie musical that was in turn based on a classic non-musical movie (*Philadelphia Story*) adapted from a classy Broadway comedy, this latest recycle retained Cole Porter’s film songs, but not the élan and star-charisma that went with them. Still, it had enough name-appeal to endure into the summer.

#### CAPEMAN AND OTHER MUSICAL FLOPS

The new musicals that died aborning on Broadway were too expensive to write off completely, and their failures are indicative of the district’s brutal make-or-break economics.

No one blinked when the \$2 million-plus *Street Corner Symphony*, a desultory revue of 1960s pop hits, crashed after a short run. More ominous were the fortunes of two small-scaled, carefully crafted “book” musicals, *Side*

*Show* (costing \$3 million) and *The Triumph of Love* (\$2.5 million), and the behemoth loser, *The Capeman* (which bled \$11 million).

*Side Show* and *Triumph of Love* failed for a matrix of reasons: A) neither had a big celebrity hook in the cast; B) neither had a composer-superstar (Lloyd Webber, Stephen Sondheim) in the credits; C) neither was based on familiar source material—*Side Show* fictionalized the lives of Siamese twin vaudeville stars, while *Triumph of Love* gagged-up a sardonic eighteenth-century Pierre Marivaux romance, and D) neither won all-out critical approval, with *Triumph of Love* getting panned most harshly (and to my mind, most unfairly). Even the *Times*' Ben Brantley's salute to the dark-hued, vaguely Brechtian and very mawkish *Side Show*, as a "daring, enthralling production" couldn't save it. (That, in turn, points up a recent shift in Broadway's relationship to its critics. A boffo *Times* notice once meant an instant hit. But if an orchestra seat costs \$75, theater-goers want an odds-on guarantee that it will be worth it.)

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Broadway urgently needs fresh musicals to revitalize the American canon, and watching a couple struggle forward and expire quickly was painful. Much worse was the tanking of *The Capeman*, a spectacular bomb that lost twice as much money as *Side Show* and *Triumph of Love* combined.

*Capeman* seemed to have so much going for it aesthetically: a melodious song score by celebrated pop tunesmith Paul Simon, an esteemed choreographer-director (Mark Morris), a distinguished poet co-author (Derek Walcott), a brilliant set designer (Bob Crowley), and a cast headed by three Latin music superstars.

But the production was handicapped by bloated start-up costs. And the pre-opening press on the show was damning. A *Sunday New York Times Magazine* cover story detailed Simon's rabid "perfectionism," his firing of several directors before settling on Broadway novice Morris, his open contempt for showbiz traditions. Subsequently, many theatrical insiders expected and even rooted for his failure. Others just watched, mesmerized, as the tornado headed for the barn.

*Capeman* was inept, naive, and (to echo John Simon) "as much a moral fiasco as an artistic failure." The central sin was its groaning inability to translate the raw material of Salvador Agron's life, from homicidal teenager to worn-down ex-con, into sophisticated drama. Instead, in turgid tableaux and sing-songy recitative, *Capeman* blamed racism and poverty for Agron's crimes—a tactic that, as *The New Yorker*'s Nancy Franklin put it, "coddles the characters and panders to the audience." After a barrage of equally devastating reviews, New York's Latino daily newspaper *El Diario* fired off an editorial defending *Capeman* and accusing its detractors of cultural myopia. Meanwhile, crime victims' rights organizations protested the show.

*Que lastima!* Sadly, *Capeman* left behind a residue of ill feelings between the pop music world and Broadway, the Latino press and the mainstream media, Simon and nearly everyone.

#### THE HIT NEW PLAYS

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Contemporary homegrown plays are in big trouble on Broadway, and no one can figure out how to fix that. In the 1968-69 season that Goldman covered, twenty-five of the seventy-two opening productions (about 35 percent) were of new American scripts. In 1997-98 the number was four out of thirty-three (about 12 percent.) Patrick Graham noted in a recent study commissioned by the Broadway Initiative Working Group that if producers and theater owners don't find ways to reduce costs, expand audiences, increase new play production, and restructure ticket prices, "I am convinced Broadway will dwindle to 5 or 10 theaters filled with musicals." That means that future Tennessee Williamses and Eugene O'Neills will not get the national showcase they deserve, while *Lion King* and *Cats* will run forever.

During 1997-98, three of the four plays that turned a profit on Broadway were by foreign authors and were already proven moneymakers abroad. The most intriguing: Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and Yasmina Reza's *Art*.

Manhattan loves fresh young celebs, and these days it loves Irish writers, so the English-Irish McDonagh was a natural. A hip, movie star-handsome upstart of twenty-seven, he worships movies, and disses theater as a medium, “mostly frequented by older, duller, less rock ‘n’ roly kinds of people.” His plays meld an old-fashioned sense of dramatic structure with an almost flip-pant brutality in sync with the sensibility of his idol, American film auteur Quentin Tarantino (of whom more in a moment.)

Already a London and Dublin hit, *Leenane* first came with its original Irish cast to Off Broadway. An instant success, it soon moved to midtown—while *The Cripple of Innishman*, another McDonagh work, had a less artful mounting at Papp Public Theatre.

Where it counted most, *Leenane* got rapturous notices. Lahr pronounced this scathing mother-daughter tragicomedy, “a riveting winter’s tale—as chill and bleak and cruelly amusing as the pebble-granite impoverishment of the rural Irish cottage in which it’s set.” I, too, admired the play’s power to enthrall an audience, but wondered what was there under all the flashy manipulations.

*Art* elicited a more uniformly enthusiastic, if less impassioned, response. Written in French by the Iranian-born Yasmina Reza, *Art* also had a Brit pedigree from its triumphant London run in Christopher Hampton’s translation. But this highly articulate meditation on trendy art, intellectual one-upmanship, and the fragility of male friendship had a foreign aura. Some Americans also write elegantly about upper-class mandarins obsessed with status and aesthetics—John Guare, for one. Nevertheless, *Art*’s cool, briskly Euro-cerebral helped win it a Tony for best play of the year.

David Hare’s *The Judas Kiss*, benefited (along with Moises Kaufman’s successful *Gross Indecency* Off Broadway) from contemporary fascination with the life of Oscar Wilde. It also profited from having a bona fide Irish movie star in the lead, Liam Neeson. Neeson struck almost everyone as an odd choice to play a foppish homosexual, but his intelligent, reaching portrayal won warm respect. And certainly Neeson’s screen shimmer helped sell

Hare’s windy, polemical script, which reverentially depicted Wilde as a martyred fool for love.

The only new American hit play of the year was a one-man show, featuring a popular stage-screen performer. John Leguizamo’s *Freak* ran (by design) for less than a year. But the success it enjoyed, and the young audience it attracted, could make it (along with two long-running, youth-friendly shows, *Rent* and *Bring in ěDa Noise, Bring in ěDa Funk*) a bellwether.

Until very recently, New York commercial theater has catered mostly to a gray-haired clientele whose grandchildren would rather play computer games and see mall movies than tag along. But fresh statistics chart a welcome increase in younger theater-goers. A study for the League of American Theatres and Producers titled *Who Goes to Broadway?* found that 19.9 percent of the 1997 audience was under eighteen, as compared to 15.5 percent in 1991. (A somewhat mitigating statistic: a third of all ticket-buyers were over fifty.)

If reviewers like myself loved Leguizamo’s hyper-kinetic, fabulously mercurial acting more than his sometimes coarse and sentimental script, his youthful fans bought the whole package. They howled and screamed over his canny impersonations and descriptions of his troubled New York-Latino adolescence in an increasingly complex melting pot.

Whether *Freak* is seen as a one-shot triumph or as a symbol of how to tap into youth culture with spirited integrity, it brought many teenagers to Broadway for their first live-theater event. Solo shows are obviously cheaper to produce than multi-character dramas, but astonishingly, *Freak* recouped its \$1.2 million investment in two months—while pricing tickets as low as \$17.50 to bring in that coveted under-twenty-one crowd.

#### THREE OTHER NEW PLAYS: FLOPS OR NOBLE ATTEMPTS?

In a season so dominated by spectacles, revivals, and imported dramas, some serious new scripts by famed American authors Neil Simon, David Mamet, and David Henry Hwang fared poorly at the box office and variously with critics.

Though still a prolific writer in his seventies, Simon is no longer turning out the cranky hit comedies that flowed from his pen between 1961 (*Come Blow Your Horn*) and 1986 (*Laughter on the 23rd Floor*). The sardonic-sentimental comedy-dramas he's writing now are clearly out of sync with the tastes of today's tourist- and baby boomer-dominated Broadway audiences.

His 1998 work *Proposals* is a memory play narrated by Simon's first substantial black character, a maid for an upscale but troubled family. The show had a trendy young director (Joe Mantello) but was plagued by a creaky "straw-hat circuit" mentality (in *In Theatre's* Alexis Greene's words), trading in stereotypical characters "who are what they wear."

Simon may have helped invent this irritating/heart-warming form of "dramedy," but TV sit-coms now dish it up for free and in more digestible half-hour doses.

By contrast, *The Old Neighborhood*, a trio of semi-autobiographical one-acts, lodged a success d'estime for David Mamet—who hasn't had a Broadway credit since 1988. After a trial run in Boston, *The Old Neighborhood's* ruminative, elliptical encounters between middle-aged Mamet-surrogate Bobby and his boyhood pal, traumatized sister, and former lover divided critics. I found it sketchy and unsatisfying, but many agreed with Brantley that this was Mamet's "most emotionally accessible drama to date." Despite that and great reviews of co-star Patti LuPone, *The Old Neighborhood* lasted just six months on Broadway, and didn't earn a dime.

*Golden Child* (David Henry's Hwang's first Broadway splash since his Tony-honored *M. Butterfly* a decade ago) was the season's only drama to link domestic crises with wider cultural, political and historical implications—primarily, the Westernization of China in the early twentieth century. About the family of a polygamous Chinese merchant who converts to Christianity, the play debuted in 1997 at Off Broadway's Papp Theatre, traveled to regional theaters, and then to Singapore before circling around to Broadway.

Though revised along the way, *Golden Child* could not overturn its initially lukewarm New York reviews and folded in two months. It was

thoughtful and interesting, but not the smashing masterwork Broadway seems to crave.

#### THE PLAY REVIVALS

It was no surprise that revivals fared better than new dramatic material during the season. Most worthy of mention were a beguiling version of Eugene O'Neill's nostalgic comedy, *Ah! Wilderness*, which won praise, if not big profits, at nonprofit Lincoln Center Theatre, and a new look at Arthur Miller's Brooklyn docks tragedy, *A View From the Bridge*, blessed with a coiled, explosive performance by its leading man, Anthony LaPaglia. Simon's old yuck-fest *The Sunshine Boys* also had its admirers, and two appealing geriatric stars (Tony Randall and Jack Klugman).

But, distressingly, the most profitable remount was a lame version of the suspense play *Wait Until Dark*—popular largely due to the Broadway debut of movie director and would-be actor Quentin Tarantino opposite film star Marisa Tomei. Tarantino's amateurish turn as a chameleon-like psycho-killer earned notices ranging from terrible to vicious, with *Entertainment Weekly's* Owen Gleiberman dubbing him "the Madonna of male thespian wannabes." But Tarantino's casting paid off in a limited, largely sold-out run. It was a cynical marketing gimmick, a grotesque example of the selling power of Hollywood celebs in an arena where actors used to be judged largely by talent alone.

Probably the most controversial older play of the season was a "revisal" of the 1955 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Modern dramatist Wendy Kesselman added material from Frank's diary, and a graphic coda about the concentration camp deaths of Anne and others who had hidden with her from the Nazis in an Amsterdam attic to fortify Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett's cautious original script. The latter excluded anything "too Jewish" or too sexually candid for fear of offending 1950s audiences.

Designed in claustrophobic detail, directed sensitively, and generally well acted, the altered *Anne Frank* met with general respect. But many review-



ers noted that Kesselman's text, while an improvement, still gave off the musty aroma of stodgy dramaturgy. Meant "to be a show of respect," wrote Franklin in *The New Yorker*, the play represented instead "a failure of imagination."

In a more incendiary *New Yorker* essay, novelist Cynthia Ozick objected strenuously to any further stagings of a potent Holocaust document which, she argues, has been sadly misused. Whatever its drawbacks, for the six months *Anne Frank* lasted on Broadway it moved and enlightened thousands of young people who saw it for the first time.

#### SUMMATION

*Variety* judged Broadway's 1997-98 season a mixed outing economically. Alongside the few money-makers, the combined failures of *The Capeman*, *Triumph of Love*, *Side Show*, and *Street Corner Symphony* alone piled up losses of more than \$20 million. There were other expensive flops too—e.g., the soggy British play, *The Herbal Bed*, the sophomoric comedy *Jackie*, and a talky Australian divorce drama, *Honour*.

Yet, thanks to ongoing runs and those few new hits, there were also signs of financial resurgence. With all of its thirty-eight stages busy, Broadway regained some of its luster and prosperity, pulling in \$557,259,076 in 1997-98—the highest box office take ever, and an 11.6 percent increase over 1996-97. Even when you factor in the most expensive ticket prices in history—\$49.39 on average, compared with \$14.02 in 1978-79—the bottom line still looked good. To sell a record total of 11,283,378 tickets (79.8 percent of seat capacity) in an age when the cheaper diversions of movies, television, Internet chatting, and live sporting events have seized overwhelming supremacy in our culture is no mean feat. Add that to the \$794,144,642 in road revenues last year for Broadway touring shows, and you have a billion-dollar-plus industry that turns a tidy profit.

But, as *Variety's* Christopher Isherwood asked pointedly in his season-end overview of Broadway, "What of art? The concept, not the play." Oh, that.

Well, in a year of intensive theater going, few of my own artistic highs occurred in Broadway houses. I experienced the majority Off Broadway, and at such downtown theaters as P.S.122, the Performing Garage and the New York Theatre Workshop. Broadway still shuns frisky experimentation and even the more adventurous "well-made" American plays (e.g., Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning *How I Learned to Drive*, and Richard Greenberg's *Three Days of Rain*). And this season, Broadway neglected such established dramatists as Jon Robin Baitz, Sam Shepard, Tina Howe, and Arthur Miller, who all had new works produced Off Broadway.

There's more to it than rugged math, of course. But what? Are the plays not accessible or exciting enough; are the audiences conditioned to want imports, spectacles, old chestnuts? Happy to get their drama fixes from video and film? Are make-or-break New York critics too rough on somewhat imperfect material that fared better in regional theaters? All of the above, in various combinations. The result is that except in the case of a foreign novelty, like the highly praised transfer of Ionesco's absurd classic *The Chairs*, from London, Broadway shows must meet a brutal standard of commercial viability in order to survive a year.

Of course, Broadway never has been, nor can be, all things to all people—especially in an era of frenzied niche-marketing. But anyone who cares deeply about the fate of American theater wishes that our most fabled stage arena could spotlight at least some of the best native dramatic art and again become vital for its artistic energy, along with its flash and cash.

This would require a major economic paradigm shift, amid forces of greed and stasis that seem all but intractable. And it would mean challenging an accelerating corporate mentality that could easily turn Times Square into a high-gloss, low-risk theme park where art—the concept, not the title—is an accidental by-product, not a goal.