THE SHOW MUST GO ON:
CAN THEATER ENDURE IN A FRENZIED WORLD?

Like so many Americans at the outset of the 21st Century, I have become a sponge for sensation.

An Internet illiterate just two years ago, I am now an Internet obsessive. I check e-mail three, four, five, six times each day. I have my list of favorite places—newspaper, theater, entertainment and gossip sites—that I'm likely to peruse more than once a day, just in case something new has popped up. I read movie reviews and rush out to see the latest appealing releases, highbrow and lowbrow, because (beyond the fact that I love moviegoing) I want to be culturally conversant and do not wish to wait months until I can bring those films into my home via video. But I do watch videos and some television, listen to new CD releases, and read all about the aforementioned in magazines both traditional and electronic. Sometimes, in my frenzy to be entertained, informed and with it, I feel like the voracious plant in the Off-Broadway musical "Little Shop of Horrors," commanding the suppliers of sensation: "Feed me!"

How ironic, then, that I make my living writing about an art form that has been around since cavemen re-enacted stories of the hunt by the light of cooking fires, an art form that has been glorious for millennia, an art form that

has stubbornly refused to vanish in the face of competition from the cheaper, more pervasive, more populist forms of culture and entertainment that have made pessimists brand theater an endangered artistic species.

Theater—a.k.a. "The Fabulous Invalid" (the title of a 1938 play by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart in which characters moaned that critics, automobiles, films, radios and unions were killing theater; the phrase became shorthand for the fragile-yet-resilient art form itself)—has allegedly been dying for much of this century. In his 1955 book "How Not to Write a Play," critic Walter Kerr observed, "The most alarming thing about the contemporary theater is the absolute regularity of its march toward extinction."

We who love theater carry on fretting, with ample justification. First film, then television, then videos, now the Internet have all conspired to lure us away from the playhouse with faster, flashier, formidably enticing fare. We can cocoon at home where we can eat, drink and chatter to our heart's content, while simultaneously being bombarded with quick-cut images more suited to our frenzied age. We can partake of this bounty solo, at any hour of the day or night, without venturing outside our front doors—never mind that any connection we feel in doing so is transient, fleeting, ethereal.

And yet, theater artists and devotees would argue, there is nothing quite like theater, nothing that can offer exactly what it offers, nothing that can equal it for transcendent moments.

Paula Vogel, who won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for her play "How I Learned to Drive," got at theater's unique allure when she spoke with National Public Radio's Susan Stamberg on "All Things Considered": "[Theater is] a strange thing. It's really entertainment, but it also has a spiritual function, like a church. . .I think there's a great desire for community, and. . .theater creates virtual community in the performance of the play."

Beyond its artistic/spiritual component, there's another argument against theater's extinction—it is also big business, though not, of course, anything like the movie business, where one colossal film like "Titanic" can gross $1.6 billion worldwide. In the 1998-99 theater season, 11.7 million admissions to Broadway

shows were purchased at a cost of $588.5 million, and in cities around the U.S., an additional 14.8 million tickets for touring Broadway shows were sold, translating into gross sales of $716 million. A major Broadway hit can gross $500,000 to $750,000 a week. Long-running Broadway smashes such as "Cats" (which opened in 1982) and "The Phantom of the Opera" (which ended an almost 18-year run in the summer of 2000) have made their creators very, very wealthy.

When theater works well, it can entertain, enlighten, educate and, in rare instances, transform us. It can take us on a real-time journey that will

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never be precisely replicated. It can show us, through universality of feeling, how much we are alike people who appear to be different from us. It can take us to dangerous places—into the mind of a kid who has killed his schoolmates, for example, as in William Mastrosimone's "Bang Bang You're Dead"—to seek answers to the unanswerable. It can burn stage pictures into our souls: In my mind's eye are all nine exultant hours of the Royal Shakespeare Company's "Nicholas Nickleby," Derek Jacobi's exquisitely rendered death scene in "Cyrano de Bergerac," and Zoe Caldwell's painfully artful "conversation" between a needy Maria Callas and an emotionally abusive Aristotle Onassis in Terrence McNally's "Master Class."

Every art form evolves, of course, and though some standards are absolute, only the most hidebound and conservative devotees stubbornly resist evolution. Even so, as theater enters the 21st century, there is reason to worry. The Fabulous Invalid isn't about to expire, but it often seems to have taken a turn for the worse.

Consider Broadway and, by extension, the touring theater that most Americans see. Once upon a time, Broadway offered a healthy mix of new plays and musicals, revivals and revues. Now, as companies like Disney and SFX's PACE Theatrical Group are playing ever-larger roles on the Great White

Way, Broadway has come to resemble Las Vegas East, a tourist-friendly theatrical theme park. If we pay $80 for the privilege of seeing a Broadway show, the thinking goes, it had better be the biggest, gaudiest, most jaw-dropping extravaganza imaginable.

Broadway trades in passively received spectacle, with many dance-driven shows to serve the international tourist crowd, no intellectual engagement or language skills required. “Bring in ’Da Noise/Bring in ’Da Funk,” “Tango Argentino,” “Riverdance,” “Stomp,” “Tap Dogs”—the list of movement-propelled shows, the polar opposite of the great dramas Broadway once offered audiences, continues to grow. Likewise, Off-Broadway, the place serious theatergoers in New York must visit to seek out compelling new drama, finds dance, event and novelty shows (“Thwack,” “Blue Man Group,” “De La Guarda”) more box office-friendly than ever.

When Broadway does offer American drama successfully, chances are that it is vintage American drama, like the 1999 season’s “Death of a Salesman” and “The Iceman Cometh.” Brian Dennehy, who won 1999’s Best Actor Tony for his portrayal of Willy Loman in the Arthur Miller drama, lamented shortly before his Tony win, “This season could come right out of 1948 or ’49. It doesn’t say a helluva lot about the American theater that three of the most important plays running on Broadway this season are by writers who are essentially of the ’40s, who began more than half a century ago.

“Too much of theater now is the simplest and most basic form of diversion. I hope there will always be a place for serious theater, though it will be a smaller place. The success of “Salesman” and “The Iceman Cometh” proves that there is a market, a hunger for this kind of serious, provocative, challenging, stimulating artistic experience.”

Even that quintessentially American stage art form, the musical, is evolving in distressing ways. Yes, there are serious young composers—Jason Robert Brown, Michael John LaChiusa, Adam Guettel, Ricky Ian Gordon—who labor to create the next great musical. But despite some critical and audience appreciation for the results thus far (Guettel’s “Floyd Collins,” LaChiusa’s

"Marie Christine," Brown's "Parade"), none of these operatically styled musicals has become the kind of breakaway hit that fuels a career.

"There isn't enough nurturing going on in musical theater," said "Parade" director Harold Prince, America's most masterful musical theater director. "There's not enough attention being placed on where young talent can go to do a show, then where they do the show after that. What's going to happen for the next generation? Not enough. The whole generation before mine was very generous, welcoming and instructive. There were a lot more of them then."

Today, the heavyweight presence of corporate producers with the deepest of pockets is also changing Broadway and the musical, not always for the better. Disney jumped into the market in 1994 with a lavish theme park-flavored stage version of its animated hit "Beauty and the Beast." For 1997's "The Lion King," it created real art by hiring that extraordinary theater visionary, Julie Taymor, and gave the show an exquisite home in the restored New Amsterdam Theatre on 42nd Street.

On the other side of the street, the handsome Ford Center stands as a monument to the failed expansionist frenzy of Canada's Garth Drabinsky. Drabinsky, who founded the Cineplex Odeon movie chain in 1978, built it to 1,800 screens, brought in MCA and then had to resign because of bad accounting practices. He then essentially did the same thing with his theatrical company, Livent.

After getting the Canadian rights to "Phantom of the Opera," he spent a decade building Livent, where lavish spending, extravagant advertising and excess were common practice. Building theaters in Toronto, Chicago and New York, and launching projects like "Ragtime," "Fosse" and "Parade," Drabinsky won praise from his creative collaborators even as Livent bled money. The impresario brought in former super-agent Michael Ovitz in June 1998, and after an accounting review, Drabinsky was suspended in August. He is now under federal indictment and faces arrest if he returns to the United States. In 1999, the bankrupt Livent and its facilities were acquired at a fire sale price of $115 million by a new theatrical mega-player, SFX. Now

the world's largest diversified promoter, producer and venue operator for live events, SFX has already acquired Pace Theatrical, the major presenter of touring theater in the United States.

This far-reaching corporate presence creates a voracious demand for "product"—not necessarily theatrical art—which has led to the ascendance of the dance-driven shows, guest star-driven revues like "Smokey Joe's Café," theatrical "concerts" celebrating the work of the prolific Andrew Lloyd Webber and Frank Wildhorn, and Wildhorn's own pop-styled musicals.

The most successful American working in musical theater today, Wildhorn is the man who gave us "Jekyll & Hyde," "The Scarlet Pimpernel," "The Civil War" and, coming next season to Broadway, "Havana." Audiences tend to love Wildhorn's easy-on-the-ear, climax-heavy musicals as much as critics loathe them.

Moreover, SFX/Pace has the wherewithal to counteract negative reviews through heavy television advertising, a growing tactic that has diminished even the power of *The New York Times* to determine a show's fate. And so money, not merit, can keep a show going longer than it should—consider "The Civil War," almost universally damned during its brief run on Broadway last season, now being retooled for a run on the road, where vast subscription audiences may get it as part of their seasonal menu. Perhaps taking Livent's Icarus-like trajectory as an example, companies like Disney and SFX are trying to be more cost-conscious as well, "downsizing" (trimming cast and simplifying scenic elements) such extravagant musicals as "Beauty and the Beast," "Ragtime" and "The Scarlet Pimpernel." So even the over-the-top lavishness we have come to expect of Broadway may become a thing of the past.

Broadway is, of course, only the gaudiest and most commercial branch of American theater. Theater is created everywhere, from the regional institutions that bring new plays to life, to play-it-safe playhouses, to the smallest storefront spaces where risk can far outpace costs. The challenges these theaters face are myriad: an aging audience, with a lack of theater-intrigued younger people to replace them; an audience that has grown accustomed to

the more frenzied pace and stunning technology of television, film and the Internet—and to the low-cost appeal of those media; a steady diminution in government and corporate funding for the not-for-profit arts; talented young writers who find more appeal and profit in writing for film and television; and the continuing difficulty that Hispanic, African-American and Asian-American playwrights have in reaching a diverse audience. Artists of all ages struggle with these realities and desperately seek solutions.

Prince observed, "There will always be a solid audience, but it will never be as it used to be. The incursions of television have caused movie and theater to downgrade their aspirations for creating art. Everyone is too concerned with demographics. There used to be an enormous snob appeal in theater, in the right sense. It was a part of an intellectual hierarchy in the United States. Now the only massive publicity you can get is when Nicole Kidman appears nude. There is less of an audience demanding great theater and less understanding it."

Keith Glover, a 34-year-old black director, actor and playwright whose "Thunder Knocking on the Door" won the 1999 Helen Hayes Award for the best musical produced in the Washington D.C. area, filters wide-ranging influences of the past into his own plays, which are heavily infused with jazz or blues. He tends to get great reviews, but his audiences are neither as diverse nor as young as he'd like.

"So many artistic directors are serving an audience that in the next ten years will be deceased or in wheelchairs. I mean, I love them, they care, and I'm not going to say this isn't for you old people," said Glover. "But you have to get the message out so you can mix the audience. As a director, I'm anxious to tap into new technology in sound and lighting, and to tap into audiences who haven't grown up on theater."

Miami-born playwright Neena Beber, whose short play "Misreadings" was one of the most talked-about works at the prestigious Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville several seasons ago, has written for theater, film and television. Though the latter two pay more, theater is where her heart is.

"Some theater responds to film and television by imitating them, some

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by breaking as far away from them as possible. I went to a one-act festival, and so many of those plays seemed like long film scenes to me rather than theatrical pieces. They were made for camera angles and closeups," Beber said.

"I see technology in spectacle, in event theater. With projected 'sets' [like those of Wendell K. Harrington], or the huge online chat room scene in [David Hare's] 'Closer,' I know designers and directors will incorporate such things more and more.

"But even as there are more ways to create theatrical magic, it will still be about actors and words—about the language, the authenticity and immediacy of the experience. Theater can create a world where heightened language works. Theater changes every night. It can never be replicated precisely. My experience in film and television has been that they are not about a creative process. You write in a group, or write according to a million notes from executives. You're a cog in a wheel. It is creating entertainment; there's craft involved. But it's not for the part of me that wants to create art."

Edwin Sanchez, author of such plays as "The Road" and "Icarus" (which debuted at the Humana Festival), writes from the point of view of a man who is gay and is of Hispanic descent. But, he argues, he is first and foremost devoted to telling stories that can draw anyone in—though producers and artistic directors often fail to appreciate that.

"I hope in the 21st century that there will be more casual diversity in theater," Sanchez said. "In 1998, only 1.8 percent of the plays produced were by writers with Hispanic surnames. I mean, roaches had more plays produced than we did.

"You try to write an honest play, not a Hispanic play. I felt 'Fiddler on the Roof' was about me, not just about those old white Jewish people. If a story pulls you in, it's about you."

What might we see in this early part of the 21st century, as theater struggles to adapt, appeal and underscore its vitality as virtual community becomes evermore prevalent and isolating? When we can do almost everything online, from shopping to schooling to wooing and worshipping, why should we

leave home to sit among strangers in that intricate exchange that is live theater?

With life at light speed and getting faster, theater gives us the chance to pause, reflect, contemplate—to celebrate our humanity, our flesh, our feelings. This happens not so much in the huge barns we call performing arts centers, where sophisticated sound systems change and channel the richness of an actor's voice, but in the regionals, where classics thrive and are reinvented for new generations, and where new plays spring to life. These theaters will continue as a grassroots training ground for actors, writers, directors and designers—and as a place where we can join them in exploring our lives.

Technological change will certainly affect theater, as projected sets become a new tool for creative designers, as we "attend" real-time plays on the internet, and as entertainment companies seek new ways to deliver theater to an audience. A new company, the Broadway Television Network, intends to offer sleek, high-definition pay-per-view theatrical productions along with interviews and profiles. Another, Broadway Digital Entertainment, intends to produce star-driven, limited-run Broadway shows that will subsequently be sold in a home-viewer subscription package.

And yet live theater, that experience that Vogel likens to church in its spiritual function, will resist filming, televising and morphing. It has to.

"Theater is an unmediated event between actor and audience," said Anne Bogart, the brilliant director who heads the innovative SITI Company. "Television is about the light that goes from the pixels into the eyes. I want to be in the presence of humans who are huge beyond daily life, who are fully dilated. We live so much in cyberspace now that going to the theater and breathing common air will be more unusual. A great theater event has a big streak of entertainment quality, but it also has empathy, spectacle, ritual, participation and magic."

When was the last time you felt that way about a movie, a television show, a book or a painting? Theater is rare, unique—an art form to be treasured, pushed and preserved. In 1891, Oscar Wilde wrote: "The stage is not merely the meeting place of all the arts but is also the return of art to life." More than a century later, it still is.