

INTRODUCTION: TOWARD AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

“What do I need from the theater—a cocka-mamie business where you get one roll of the dice from seven middle-aged men on the aisle, who hated Mickey Mouse when they were kids. I need them like a hole in the head. So what happens? I read the play, I write out a check for three hundred thousand dollars....”

- Moss Hart, “Light Up The Sky,” performed on Broadway, 1948-49

THE SPITFIRE WIT that made the city the capital of the smart set, the pizzazz that drew folks wide-eyed from the sticks, the glitter and schmaltz that put New York on the map and kept it there: all are associated with the traditions of New York theater. Chicago has beef. New Orleans has jazz. New York has theater.

In its variety of forms, New York theater—the anchor of the performing arts in the cultural capital of the world—faced mounting concerns in the days before Sept. 11, 2001. These included a deepening recession, soaring production costs, a real-estate squeeze, chronic union tensions and storm clouds over nonprofit funding, not to mention dependence on sky-high ticket prices and waxworks revivals, audiences drawn away to ever more seductive forms of entertainment and talented writers and performers similarly lured away to film and television.

The devastating attack on the World Trade Center paralyzed downtown New York, but the shock waves hit the city’s theater industry hard, too. The problems of a multi-million-dollar industry dependent on safe mass transit and public spaces and on the whims of audiences and funders quickly came into focus. New York remains theater’s “Wonderful Town.” But for the industry, the future is deeply uncertain.

For decades, “Broadway” has defined a culture, a language, an angle of vision, ironic and tough, as in *Variety*’s timeless headline on the

Crash of 1929: “WALL STREET LAYS AN EGG.” To Walter Winchell (the model for all-powerful Broadway columnist J.J. Hunsecker in the film classic “The Sweet Smell of Success”), Broadway was “a Circe’s cavern of lascivious and soul-destroying delights, an unholy place where producers are the seducers of women, where stars without talent are made meretriciously overnight... a Babylon, a Sodom and Gomorrah all within the confines of a garish district....”

Today, commercial theater inside the Broadway Box (bounded roughly by 53rd and 40th streets and Sixth and Ninth avenues, with a neck extending up Broadway to 65th Street) sells more than 11.8 million tickets a year, producing ticket revenues of \$666 million and an estimated economic impact, once visitor spending is factored in, of more than \$2.7 billion.¹

But theater in New York has long been much more than Broadway. One survey of the city’s nonprofit theaters yielded sales of 2.65 million tickets a year, \$54 million in ticket-sales income, and an economic impact of \$338.1 million.² And that study omitted more than two-thirds of the city’s nonprofit theaters, those that operate beneath the radar of record-keeping, as well as the burgeoning commercial off-Broadway segment.

The following factors fueled New York theater’s expansion off-Broadway in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s: daring producers, writers and performers of new works, the growth of audiences ready for them, demographics and economics. So did visionary funding from the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, as well as the New York State Council for the Arts, which under Governor Nelson Rockefeller began to channel six-figure grants to arts organizations, even small ones.

Off-off-Broadway! The NEA! Lincoln Center! The late 1960s and early ’70s marked the high tide of public investment not just in “the arts” as a kind of blue-chip stock or bond, but in raw creativity.

Three decades later, what remains of the connection between New York and the guts of theatrical innovation? How fares the foremost

of the performing arts in New York, with audiences increasingly fragmented in the digital age? How will it fare as the city recovers from the attack on its infrastructure? “What news on the rialto?”

To begin with, the theater industry faces a mind-bending mix of mutating economic premises and business practices. From commercial-blockbuster territory—where production costs have increased an inflation-adjusted 64 percent within seven years³ and labor issues fester—to the artistic creativity of nonprofits on the fringes, theater in New York was surprisingly successful in the 1990s. Broadway’s grosses have more than doubled in the last decade, while nonprofit theater has also seen marked income increases. But theater faces the most uncertain of prospects today.

New York theater has always worn two masks: the finely painted mask of art, and the bold-faced mask of commerce. Nevertheless, as actress Kathleen Chalfant said in June 2000 at the ACT II conference at Harvard University, the first gathering of commercial and nonprofit theater managers and creative artists in 26 years, “Theater is not an efficient way to make money.” This puts it mildly.

There are reasoned arguments that creatively, the last ten years have been, if not the best of times, then at least fertile ones. Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America” set a new standard of theatrical passion and daring. Jonathan Larson’s “Rent” signaled a wave of ensemble theater closer to the beat of modern life than to the old models driven by hierarchical producers, directors and “stars.” Off-Broadway, The Wooster Group and P.S. 122 reach their audiences, and theatergoers interested in the offbeat find what they’re looking for. New York

theater is crossing genres (“De La Guarda,” Mabou Mines), platforms (cable-television productions of “Wit” among others) and cultures (Repertorio Español and Pan-Asian Repertory Theatre), and the action is radiating rapidly toward Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. The bridge-and-tunnel traffic to Broadway for a night of familiar fare has also been heavy. Before Sept. 11, all the mesmerizing money and power of the film and television industries had not extinguished the lights of New York theater.

But the trends itemized above suggest a darker, “worst-of-times” picture. As ACT II established, the necessity of the commercial-nonprofit hookup is no less a contemporary reality in theater than in other spheres, and the issue has been the art of the deal. Work with “partners you know or who know the process,” “pick partners, not profits,” “don’t operate so as to get pulled out of shape”: these were lessons articulated at ACT II. As in other fields, the deftest of theatrical agreements tend to leave partners on both sides of the commercial divide concerned about distortion of mission, values, *raison d’être*.

For the playing field is neither rational nor stable. The “theater industry” is a mosaic of grand outfits, mom-and-pops and free agents. It is argued privately that before Sept. 11, the industry was too splintered to be able to make a difficult move in concert—even if such a move were in the industry’s collective long-term interest. In the sudden, life-and-death crisis of late 2001, the question of whether the industry could act in a unified manner became inescapable. The more difficult issue, looking past the immediate crisis, is whether the New

INSIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE

“New York theater is not an industry that has planned well for the future, but trends in funding, prices, costs and labor issues highlight the need for such forward, strategic thinking and planning right now.” - *Schuyler Chapin, commissioner, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs*

York City theater industry can set a sound course for the future. Are existing public policies toward theater adequate? Can reforms come into view, and then into play?

Meanwhile, theater remains highly dependent on media coverage of it—and industry leaders remain sharply critical of that coverage, even though it tends to be more positive than negative.⁴ In-depth, engaged dialogue between the two sides of the artist/journalist divide is almost nonexistent, which has inhibited the news media's efforts to cover the field in an informed manner. "Arts news" has tended to be feature-driven, heavy on previews and interviews, celebrity and celebration—and on sudden outbreaks of feuds and scandals. Despite the news media's own anxieties about the ascendancy of bottom-line dynamics in the news business, some of its reflexive tendencies toward arts coverage demonstrate at best a superficial, catch-up sense of the landscape, and of the tensions of complex issues such as commercial-nonprofit collaboration in arts and culture.

Because media outlets covering the arts have two roles—to report objectively, and to critique independently—more problematic issues arise than in news categories such as politics, business and sports. For critics need to know their freedom, or they're "kept." But unlike editorial writers, they may appear to speak both for "the paper," with all its implied weight, and for themselves alone. Arts journalism, therefore, is more contingent on the personality, taste and style of a shrinking handful of critics than is the case in other topic areas.

In the old days, this was not much of a problem, because the dialogue among articulate critical voices in every great city guaranteed a conversation, even an uproar. In today's real or *de facto* one-newspaper cities, that's history. The national newsmagazines have walked away from commitments to serious arts coverage. Network television never made one. Some new voices have emerged in new niches, particularly online, but the field remains narrow. And so theater organizations, like sellers of other wares, have been learning new communication and

marketing techniques that bypass the press.

In the report that follows, we explore many of the questions that make the future of theater so exciting, yet so unsure. These include: Is there a public interest in assuring a healthy balance between locally generated arts-and-entertainment creativity and "cultural-tourism" traffic? Does government recognize the importance of community-based arts to the cultural, civic and economic life of downtown and uptown neighborhoods far from Broadway, and in the outer boroughs? How will innovative real estate arrangements and ambitious development projects shake out?

How does the theater industry in New York work today, and how is it evolving? In an age of cross-platform, mixed-media, free-agency and entrepreneurship, the move toward commercial-nonprofit co-production is just one indicator of transformation. New alliances and productions are jelling among theater, film and television companies. Are alternative forms for exchanging news and information about the arts viable? How do we map a new industry—one part creativity, one part entertainment and one part marketing—that's taking shape before our eyes?

"Well, in a little while we'll take the curtain up.... We're sticking a Roman candle in the tired face of show business tonight, and the sparks that fly are going to light up the theater...."

- Moss Hart, *"Light Up The Sky"*

We attempt here to look at a piece of the heart of New York, in crisis: what it's been and how it's ticking, how it runs as a business, how it defines the city, brings us to our feet cheering and flops; how we think about it, pay for it and write about it. ■

- Michael Janeway, director, NAJP

¹ League of American Theatres and Producers, "Broadway's Economic Contribution to New York City 1999," 2000, and "Who Goes to Broadway 2000-01," 2002.

² Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York, "Economic Impact Study of New York City's Not-for-Profit Theatres," 2000.

³ League, "Broadway's Economic Contribution to New York City 1999," 2000.

⁴ See theater-media audit on pg. 78.

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