

NEW CREATIVE FRAMEWORKS

THE PROS AND CONS OF CO-PRODUCTIONS

SINCE AT LEAST 1976, when the Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC) mounted David Rudkin’s “Ashes” with the Public Theater, co-productions have been an increasingly visible aspect of New York theater. The structures of such ventures vary, from collaborations between two nonprofit theaters to those between a nonprofit and a commercial producer. But the notion itself—that a nonprofit theater can, in partnership with others, produce a play it might find impossible to mount alone, and in the process help its own bottom line—has become an integral, perhaps permanent, part of the city’s theatrical landscape.

Co-production income has skyrocketed in the past several years. One recent survey of national nonprofit theaters found that the combination of co-production and enhancement income jumped 120 percent between 1997 and 2000, making it the fastest-growing income item on the average nonprofit theater’s budget.¹ Along with this new income stream, naturally, come questions about how co-productions are changing the nature of nonprofit theater. Are they corrupting the small theater’s perceived mandate to remain separate from and less commercial than Broadway? Has off-

Broadway theater become a *de facto* farm system for the Broadway big leagues?

“If you put Zelda Fichandler, Gordon Davidson and the other lions of the LORT movement in a room in 1968 and said, ‘True or false: Your job is now to work for Broadway,’ they would have gone at you with pickaxes,” quipped League President Jed Bernstein. “The issue is now about the deal, not the artistic vision.”

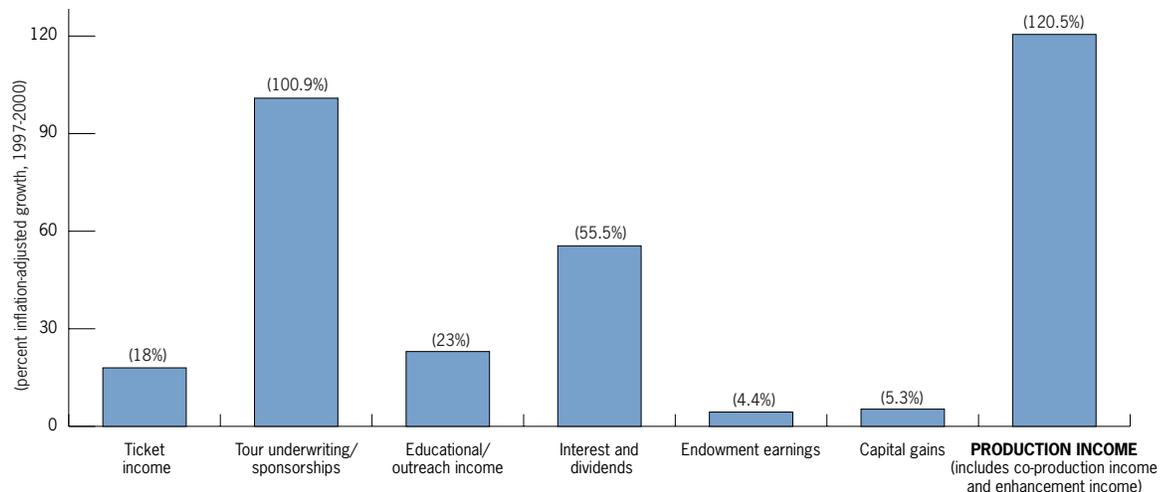
OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS

Not every co-production aims to go to Broadway, of course; many are presented on nonprofit stages or on commercial off-Broadway stages. In fact, most relatively commercial straight plays that used to be on Broadway are now off-Broadway. But the prospect of a Broadway jump can be appealing to presenters who seek to expand their influence. “They allow us to grow the theater, to pay staff and artists more,” said Barry Grove, executive producer at MTC, which moved “Proof,” “The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife” and “King Hedley II” to Broadway in 2001. “The plays also reach a broader audience than they would have had they been limited to short runs at MTC.

“I think we’re at the nexus of two worlds,” Grove continued. “We don’t see it as morphing MTC into some other entity. Quite

PRODUCTION INCOME SOARS

INCREASE IN INCOME CONSTITUENTS FOR NATIONAL NONPROFIT THEATERS



Source: Theatre Communications Group

the contrary—I think we’re very strongly a nonprofit institution. But we’ve been able to successfully build multiple relationships with the for-profit community.”

Co-productions have certainly helped the MTC increase its size and profile. MTC’s 1978-79 operating budget was under \$900,000; in 2001, the figure was \$11.5 million. MTC could not have grown so fast without its long and successful history of co-productions.

Other off-Broadway theater companies find that the financial benefits aren’t worth the artistic tradeoffs. James Nicola, artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop—which transferred “Rent” to Broadway and in 2000 moved “Dirty Blonde” to a commercial run in partnership with the Shubert Organization—suggested that co-productions imperil the original purpose of the nonprofit-theater movement. “The question is, ‘What is it to be a nonprofit theater?’” Nicola asked. “Is it simply to be a vehicle for the production of commercial theater product? And if so, why bother with even a charade of an organization about art, as opposed to commerce?”

Nicola’s partner at NYTW, managing director Lynn Moffat, agreed. “Jim and I have come to the conclusion that it’s not worth it,” she said. “It doesn’t serve the development of the work. When you start to talk to commercial producers, it’s really about developing a product, something that will have a commercial, tangible value that will give a return on the investment. And we’re not here for the return on investment.”

Still other theaters try to stake out a middle ground, arguing that co-productions with commercial producers can be healthy as long as they don’t distract from the nonprofit theater’s mission. “If your first question is, ‘Is it commercial?’ I don’t know if that’s the right question to ask,” said Neil Pepe, artistic director of The Atlantic Theater Company. “Commercial producers are looking for successful plays to put in their theaters. This is why so many of the plays are started in nonprofits: because the missions of the nonprofits are much more nurturing to artists.”

The Atlantic had a healthy experience with Martin McDonagh’s “The Beauty Queen of Leenane.” “We loved the play,” Pepe said, “and we thought the best way to do it here was with the original cast. We knew it was going to be the most expensive show we’d ever done, because of getting the actors in from London, higher Equity contracts for them, and so forth. So we started going around to commercial producers and saying, ‘Can you help us?’”

Pepe found six commercial producers to help move the production to Broadway, where it won four Tony Awards. “Clearly, more people wanted to see that play,” he said. “Maybe 10 or 20 percent of that audience would have come down here to our theater. But [a co-production] just opens it up. It just has to be a relationship where the commercial producers aren’t dictating to the nonprofits what their mission should be. You don’t want the tail wagging the dog. If the nonprofits are following their mission and choosing the kinds of plays they think are good, and if that works for the commercial producers, great.”

Co-productions can also bring another benefit that goes beyond the theater’s bottom line: a continuity that comes with multiple stagings over time. “We go to BAM [the Brooklyn Academy of Music] with a great sense of envy,” said Classic Stage Company Artistic Director Barry Edelstein. “So many of the shows they produce have been being performed for a year, and have a sense of familiarity and command that most new productions don’t. Our production of ‘In the Penal Colony’ has been performed almost a hundred times by essentially the same group of artists at two other theaters. It’s at a level of sophistication and nuance that it never would have gotten to if we’d started it from the ground-up here. That’s the way theater is: The more you repeat it, the better and the deeper it gets.”

FOR COMMERCIAL PRODUCERS, A WAY TO MITIGATE RISK

Certainly, commercial producers see great advantages in producing plays that have been successful elsewhere. Jack Viertel, creative

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director for Jujamcyn Theaters, calls it “a line-of-least-resistance issue.” Since plays are being developed by nonprofit theaters, commercial producers don’t need to generate them. “Why would you take an enormous risk on a script you may happen to like that other people may not, if you can fill your buildings with plays that have been proven at the Manhattan Theatre Club or the Goodman or someplace?” Viertel asked.

Even if someone gave him a script he felt passionate about, Viertel said, he’d probably offer it to a nonprofit, and then give it a commercial run. That scenario offers little risk, he said. “If it ends up not working and we don’t transfer it, at least a subscription audience has seen it, and the playwright has not been hurt by having a Broadway flop.”

This assumes that any agent would submit a straight play to a commercial producer. According to producer Elizabeth McCann, who transferred “Copenhagen” from London in 2000 and “The Play About the Baby” from two nonprofits last year, “Agents don’t even attempt to send a straight play to a Broadway producer, because they figure the nonprofit will put it on and then they’ll make a linkage with a commercial management. So very few scripts come. I don’t think there’s a play on Broadway this year that was not produced someplace else first.”

McCann understands the urge to play it safe. If she did receive a straight play from an agent that had never been produced and she fell in love with it, she said, “I’d probably be as scared as anyone else.” She’d send it to a nonprofit and strike a deal.

Co-productions give well-known actors and directors a chance to open in a low-pressure environment, McCann said, so that when the show transfers to a commercial run, they’re prepared. Most marquee television and movie actors who can entice Broadway ticket buyers tend not to have worked recently in the theater, in New York or anywhere else. Some may have little or no experience acting before a large live audience—away from the

safety net of multiple takes—or performing in long runs. By performing in a trial run at an out-of-town nonprofit before coming to New York, they can learn or re-learn how to act in the theater, and in doing so protect their reputations.

The financial rewards for actors are less clear, said Actors’ Equity President Alan Eisenberg. “You have this great collaboration between commercial theater and not-for-profit theater. Do any of the subsequent results of the production ever go to the actors or the other unions and guilds that participate in this collaboration?” Eisenberg asked rhetorically. “There’s been a complete refutation of any kind of principle that the actors should in any way earn something from a not-for-profit production that goes to a commercial production.”

FOR SMALL PRODUCERS, IT’S MORE THAN JUST THE MONEY

The financial boost that commercial collaborations provide disappears when one nonprofit producer hooks up with another. In those cases, co-productions must have goals that go beyond mere dollars. For the Pan-Asian Repertory Theatre, collaboration among theater companies has meant an opportunity to mix culture and aesthetics, said artistic director Tisa Chang. The Pan-Asian has produced shows with the INTAR Hispanic American Arts Center and Repertorio Español. But it’s not about trying to grow. “We elect to stay fairly small and independent in order to do the art,” Chang said.

For the New York Theatre Workshop, co-production offers some artistic benefits, if not many fiscal ones. When NYTW co-produced Susan Sontag’s “Alice in Bed” in 2000 with the Dutch theater company Het Zuidelijk Toneel, it spent more on the production than it would have had it produced a similar play on its own. “My experience with co-productions,” Nicola said, “is that they don’t save money; they don’t get cheaper. For a production of the scale of ‘Alice in Bed,’ we would usually spend around

INSIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE

“I think there’s too much safe theater in a not-for-profit environment. It’s their responsibility to say, ‘The best results have been when we have gone out on a limb. If we fail, we fail. Let’s wake up our subscribers.’” - *Fisher Stevens, partner, GreeneStreet Films*

\$100,000, but ‘Alice’ cost us twice that much.”

The entire tab, \$400,000, was split with the Dutch company, whose artistic director, Ivo van Hove, directed it. Nicola said he produced it mainly because “I think [van Hove] is a rather extraordinary artist, not like anyone I’ve ever seen, and I want his work to be seen here, not only in this theater but in this country and in this city. So we’re willing to commit a lot of resources to make that happen.”

Grove of MTC sees it the same way. “Co-production doesn’t often actually save money,” he noted. “It makes possible work you might not otherwise get. It also allows for multiple productions, which is good for the writer and for developing the work; August Wilson has been a prime example of that methodology of working.”

In the case of the Goodman Theatre’s production of Rebecca Gilman’s “Boy Gets Girl,” MTC wanted to bring it from Chicago to New York with original cast and design intact. “Bringing them here and housing them, paying them a per diem, etc., is a big expense,” Grove said. “On the other hand, the Goodman graciously gave us their physical production, which required a certain amount of modification. Maybe on balance, not needing as much rehearsal time or having to design and build a new physical production, the savings might have equaled the cost of bringing a fully rehearsed cast to New York.

In 2000, the Atlantic co-produced David Mamet’s “American Buffalo” with the Donmar Warehouse in London. “Co-productions with other nonprofits can be complicated,” Neil Pepe said. “How do people define co-productions? The question is always financial: ‘How do you cut the deal?’”

The arrangement the Atlantic made with the Donmar Warehouse was straightforward. The production was rehearsed in New York with an American cast (which included William H. Macy and Philip Baker Hall); those costs, plus the cost of designing and building the costumes, were borne by the Atlantic. The Donmar picked up the cost of transporting the cast and costumes to London, paid and housed the cast during the London run and built the set. After a five-week run in London, the company, clothes and set were returned to New York for a run at the Atlantic’s theater on 20th Street.

“There’s no denying it’s a complicated situation,” Edelstein of Classic Stage allowed. “The cost differential between doing a show out of town and doing it here is immense. The union agreements are complex, and our peer group of theaters is now facing these issues and making decisions about whether we’re going to approach Actors’ Equity with a proposal to change the ways those arrangements are made.”

At the nonprofit Women’s Project & Productions, which has moved “The Exact Center of the Universe” and “Saint Lucy’s Eyes” recently to commercial off-Broadway theaters and is working with Playwrights Horizons on a production of Sarah Schulman’s “Carson McCullers,” managing director Patricia Taylor said she is struggling to find a co-production arrangement that sufficiently compensates the smaller theater. The issue is not strictly financial; it’s a matter of credit and recognition for having developed the production. “We’ve put in so much money and so much effort, and raised so much money, to produce plays, and then what we see are little percentages of somebody’s gross,” Taylor said.

With public funding for the theater drying up, some nonprofits may count on commercial partnerships for their very survival.

“The commercial theaters are wonderful, but they did not produce the play. And so [their] taking it over and being able to put money into advertising isn’t quite the same thing.”

SCANDALOUS BEDFELLOWS?

While co-productions have become commonplace in New York, some question the appropriateness of nonprofit enterprises involving themselves in productions meant to earn a profit.

Though she is grateful to nonprofit theaters for developing plays she can transfer to bigger houses, Elizabeth McCann is concerned that nonprofits are turning increasingly conservative in their programming. Many have deliberately begun to look for plays they can transfer to a commercial run, thereby earning potentially hefty royalties. And because nonprofits are funded in part with taxpayer money, whether in the form of government grants or tax-deductible donations, McCann asked, “To what extent do they have a greater obligation to produce riskier works, newer works, more controversial works, more adventurous works than their commercial brothers?”

Some find it odd that the media has paid little, if any, attention to the potential perils of linkages between nonprofit theaters and commercial producers, and yet has been outspoken on the influence of money in the museum world. “*The New York Times*,” said Robert Marx of the Samuels Foundation, “took a very, very strong stand on the Saatchi investment in the ‘Sensation’ exhibit [at the Brooklyn Museum of Art]: that it was absolutely wrong that a nonprofit institution accepted money from a commercial entity which would benefit from the show. At the same time, they were running incredibly laudatory articles about enhancement money in the theater. In the same week! About how wonderful it is, for example, that Cameron Mackintosh’s production of ‘Martin Guerre’ is doing its out-of-town tryout at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, and the

Guthrie can make money from it. Well, why is it a terrible thing for a museum to take enhancement money, and totally appropriate for a nonprofit theater to take enhancement money? How do you balance this?”

Nonetheless, given commercial theater’s declining interest in presenting untested works, co-production arrangements may be the best way of ensuring that new plays get significant exposure. With public funding for the theater drying up, some nonprofits may count on commercial partnerships for their very survival. “I used to feel that the craving of many nonprofit theaters for a hit they could transfer to Broadway for a commercial run was a betrayal of the purpose of the nonprofit movement,” said Linda Winer, chief drama critic at *Newsday*. Recently, however, she’s rethought her position. “After seeing what happened to funding during the Reagan-Bush years, and after what happened to foundation funding and to general attitudes toward funding the arts, I’ve mellowed quite a bit. Now, I think that part of the mandate for nonprofits may be developing for-profit shows.” After all, she said, “The for-profit producers aren’t going to develop them.”

Michael Feingold, chief critic at the *Village Voice*, finds the current situation unhealthy. “What Broadway producers basically do is bloodhound for truffle-growers to whom they can give enhancement money. And there are theaters living on that money, or certainly choosing projects they would not choose if they were simply choosing plays to produce for their audience. It’s corrupted the whole resident-theater system.”

Still, co-productions are clearly here to stay. Rather than fight them, the best approach for nonprofit theater companies may be to use this mechanism selectively, striking a balance between ideals and viability. ■

¹Theatre Communications Group, “Theater Facts 2000,” 2001.

BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN STAGE AND SCREEN

TALES OF NEW YORK'S most promising theatrical talent being lured to California are as old as the (Hollywood) hills. "Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots," Herman Mankiewicz wrote in a famous cable to Ben Hecht 75 years ago, urging him to come west. Growing up, said Fisher Stevens, partner in New York-based GreeneStreet Films, "We all dream of going to New York to be great artists or actors or directors for the theater. All of a sudden, you get this film carrot dangled, this television carrot dangled. You have to make a decision after a while if you're going to stay in New York or beat it out to Hollywood."

Increasingly, though, the choice is less black and white. A new multimedia, multi-platform industry in New York is emerging, with nonprofit theater as its foundation as well as its talent pool. In New York these days, said Columbia University theater professor and off-Broadway producer Evangeline Morphos, "The writers, the actors, the producers and the directors in fact see themselves as belonging to a larger entertainment [realm] that includes film, television and new media."

Jack Viertel of Jujamcyn Theaters has a similar view of the landscape. "There's a tremendous ferment of young talent [in New York] that works both in independent film and in small theater companies," he said.

Leslie Urdang is an avatar of this new breed. She runs a hybrid company called New York Stage and Film, with offices in New York City and at Vassar College. "I'm always rec-

ommending to the students up at Vassar, 'Try to do both [theater and film], or try to do it all,'" she said. "It's interesting, it's stimulating, and it helps you financially. And each thing informs the other in a really healthy way."

For writer Theresa Rebeck, this mix of platforms works well, though "healthy" might not be the word she would use. "Television, film and theater are all solipsistic universes," she observed. "They're all dysfunctional in their own special way. The fact that I could bounce back and forth between them offered me a sort of psychic escape hatch."

Any fears that this jumping-around would confuse audiences intent on identifying someone as a "film actor" or a "television writer" are unfounded, according to *New York Times* critic Margo Jefferson. "You're always tracking the actors you love across the media," she said.

The primary source for this new industry continues to be off-Broadway theater, where fresh writing voices are developed before moving to the commercial theater, television or film. Many nonprofit theater companies in New York have struck commercial partnerships with film companies. Playwrights Horizons has had a long-standing arrangement with Steven Spielberg, whose film companies have helped commission plays for which Spielberg's entities retain the option for a screenplay. The Atlantic Theater Company has a similar arrangement with Tribeca Films and more recently has incorporated its own film company. Such arrangements do not necessarily lead to a hybridization or an imitation by one of the other, in Viertel's view, but rather "the industries existing side by side" and

INSIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE

"If the industry is looking toward off-Broadway, as it is, to develop the new work, that's where the tax breaks need to happen. That's where the concessions need to happen. That's where the marketing needs to happen." - *Evangeline Morphos, producer and Columbia University theater professor*

“invention rubbing off from one to the other.”

Still, many would say that despite some recent reintegration of theater and film in New York and the growth of Manhattan-based film companies such as Miramax, the movie industry still has ground to make up after having abandoned the city a generation ago. “When I started working 30 years ago in this business, we had Columbia here. We had Warner. We had Fox,” said John Breglio, chairman of the Theatre Development Fund. “Basically, every major studio had a big office in New York City. They’re all gone; they’re all in L.A.”

Morphos wonders how Hollywood could repay its debt to New York for serving as a training ground. “What does [the film] industry owe back to the theater? Is there a way to get film companies to relocate here? To begin to set up spaces that can be used in multiple ways for film studios? What is the flow back financially from this larger industry that the New York theater really feeds?”

Without this repricocity from Hollywood, writers and actors who stay in New York must pay a price. “It’s a choice I sometimes regret making,” Fisher Stevens admitted. “There is difficulty because of lack of proximity. Deals are made in parties and meetings in Los Angeles. Someone will say, ‘How you doin’? We need an actor. We need a writer...’ Often in New York, it’s not like that. You submit a script, and it sits in a pile in Hollywood for a couple of months and you hope that it gets chosen.” The writers and actors who do stay contend that New York offers a creative freedom and energy they can’t find in Hollywood.

It’s not only the artists who are crossing platforms: It is the artform itself. Many plays

that first surfaced off-Broadway are gaining renewed lives on the small screen, particularly on cable networks such as Showtime and HBO. Hollywood has a mixed track record, to put it charitably, when it comes to adapting work from the New York stage for the big screen. But more off-Broadway productions are finding their way to Broadway [see “The Pros and Cons of Co-Productions”] and on to a mass audience via cable. Margaret Edson’s Pulitzer Prize-winning “Wit” is one example; Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America” another. After efforts to adapt “Angels” for the big screen were scrapped, it is being revived at HBO by Mike Nichols, who also directed the cable version of “Wit.” “Angels” is beginning production with a cast that would make any Hollywood producer envious: Al Pacino, Meryl Streep and Emma Thompson, among others.

Some in the theater complain that young actors aren’t as interested in following the traditional career path from off-Broadway to Broadway to film as they once were. “Young actors today want to do movies, want to do television” from the start, Stevens complained.

But those who do begin on stage and then make it big often maintain a deep connection to the theater, one that simply does not exist to a similar extent in Los Angeles. Said Urdang, “One of the things I always find as a producer of a not-for-profit organization is that the biggest supporters of the theater are the artists who have gone on to make money in television and film. They are constantly asking me, ‘What can I do? When can I come back and work there? Can I give money? I’ll do anything for the theater.’” ■

IS THERE A “NEW YORK STORY”?

WITH HOLLYWOOD’S FILM and television industries presenting such financial allure for writers, directors and actors, what keeps so many of them in New York City? It may be the sense that New York offers the freedom to craft particularly direct or honest narratives. “Ultimately, it’s a decision based on storytelling,” explained Frank Pugliese, a writer for stage and film. If you’re drawn to a truthful and genuine way of telling stories, he said, “you’re sort of forced to stay in New York.”

New York stories have in common “a certain feel to them... a downtown, gritty feel,” Pugliese said. These definable motifs run through televised and theatrical productions as disparate as “Rent” and “Law and Order.” According to *New York Times* critic Margo Jefferson, “They have to do with quick, very sudden and intense crossing of disparities, be those class disparities, or ethnic, or racial. Or the speed of an experience—being in a very quiet, slow place, being in a park, and then suddenly having to go into the subway. It’s the way your senses get all jammed and cross-currented.”

The New York story, Jefferson continued, is located at “the cutting edge of whatever is a new political, social, sexual reality/fantasy. When we say we’re ‘anti-PC,’ we’re not reactionary. We’re anti-PC because we’re taking all kinds of different risks.”

New York’s mixture of cultures, genres and mediums, some feel, also means less willingness to wait around for the conventional artistic machinery to take its course. This urgency became more marked after Sept. 11.

Now, Pugliese said, “a lot of theater people don’t want to get into the cycle of doing the stages—going from off-off-Broadway to off-Broadway and then trying to get into a big house.”

The film and television industries, because it can take years for their productions to move from script to set to release, can’t respond with that kind of immediacy. That may be why Los Angeles felt alien last fall to New York Stage and Film’s Leslie Urdang, who spent most of September and October on the West Coast. “Obviously, the questions on everybody’s mind were, ‘What kind of stories do you tell now? What feels relevant?’” Urdang said. “Then you see that the biggest movies [at the box office] are still the violent movies, whether it’s ‘Training Day’ or ‘From Hell.’ So there’s a certain confusion about that. I don’t think anyone [in L.A.] knows what to do.”

The proximity of New York artists to the disaster forced them to grapple with it more quickly. “I’ve been struck these last weeks by how everyone’s trying to interpret the tragedy and put their own meaning on it,” Pugliese said. “I’ve found that people in New York just want the truth. They want collective conceits to disappear.”

Around the city, exhibits and performances responding to Sept. 11 sprung up within days. Pugliese participated in an attack-themed installment of “24-Hour Plays” (in which participants conceive, rehearse and present a 10-minute play in a single day). “It was an immediate, very visceral feel,” Pugliese observed. “People said, ‘Let’s do a play in a living room. We need to start telling stories right now.’” ■

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