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WHAT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC MEANS FOR THE FUTURE OF BROADWAY

By Michael Schulman August 24, 2020

Can Broadway Boom Again After COVID-19?

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John Lithgow, Christine Baranski, and other Broadway stars on finding creative ways to perform during the shutdown, and how the pandemic could end up changing show business.

The last time I attended a Broadway show—a buzzed-about revival of “West Side Story”—was on March 6th. Even then, a night at the theatre felt like a calculated risk: riding the A train, sitting close to strangers in the audience, going out for a post-theatre drink. The next Thursday, amid reports that a part-time Broadway usher had tested positive for COVID-19,

Broadway shut down completely. Theatre is ephemeral, but the idea of Broadway—a \$1.8-billion industry and a major part of the city’s (and the country’s) artistic lifeblood—disappearing like a soap bubble was hard to fathom. “It was unimaginable that New York would not have theatre, would not have shows on Broadway, and crowds in Times Square every night,” the actor John Lithgow says in the video above.

Since then, theatre artists and crews have been hard hit. The Actors Fund, which serves the needs of entertainment workers, received fifteen thousand requests for aid in the first three months of the pandemic, and has distributed some thirteen million dollars. Since theatre might be one of the last industries to come back, the financial impact on its makers will be incalculable. Even worse, the theatre community has sustained devastating human losses, among them the actor Nick Cordero and the Tony Award-winning playwright Terrence McNally, who was one of the first well-known people to die of the coronavirus, in late March. “The first thing I thought was, Oh, my God, the lights of Broadway won’t dim for Terrence McNally, because they’re already out,” the actress Christine Baranski says.

Nevertheless, theatre people are famed for their irrepressible spirit, and, in isolation, there have been fascinating attempts to figure out how “virtual theatre” can work. The playwright Richard Nelson has released Zoom editions of his “Apple Family” plays. A ninetieth-birthday concert for Stephen Sondheim, aptly titled “Take Me to the World,” brought a bounty of musical-theatre experiments, notably a booze-soaked rendition of “Ladies Who Lunch,” featuring Baranski, Meryl Streep, and Audra McDonald. (“We thought, This will either work and be very funny or it’ll end our careers,” Baranski says.) Other forms of lockdown theatre sprang up organically. Brian Stokes Mitchell, whose Broadway roles include Don Quixote, in “Man of La Mancha,” marked his recovery from COVID-19 by singing the musical’s anthem, “The Impossible Dream,” from his window, as part of the nightly cheer for essential workers. “This was just going to be a one-off,” he recalls. “And then the next day I came back again and I noticed, Oh, there’s a crowd of people gathering on the street. And then the crowd got bigger and bigger and bigger.”

The Broadway drought, which at this point seems certain to last into 2021, has coincided with another upheaval: the Black Lives Matter protests and the calls for change that they’ve inspired in the arts. Newly formed collectives such as Black Theatre United and We See You, White

American Theatre have demanded active measures to counter structural racism onstage and off. No one is cheering the prolonged pause, but the shutdown might help to open up space for a deeper reckoning than would be possible with Broadway in full swing. “Once it is possible to begin bringing audiences back, it may also be the case that we have to think about lowering ticket prices, and maybe we will have a younger audience, and maybe we will have a more diverse audience,” the playwright David Henry Hwang says. “Out of all this tragedy, there might be some silver linings for Broadway.”



Michael Schulman, a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2006. He is the author of “Her Again: Becoming Meryl Streep.”

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