“How the World Could Be in Spite of the Way That It Is”: Broadway as a Reflection of Contemporary American Sociopolitical Life

An Honors Paper for the Department of Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the plays and musicals of the 2018-2019 Broadway season, this thesis examines how theatre responds to the sociocultural, economic, and political conditions of society. Sociologists have largely overlooked theatre's cultural influence, but Broadway productions act as social reflection by reproducing the conversations and inequalities of their context. Access to Broadway is limited, in various manners, by socioeconomic class, race, gender, ability, and age. As conversations about equity expand and audiences increasingly demand diversified representation, Broadway begins to shed the restraints of its conventions. In many regards, the recent changes fail in meaningfully transforming the Broadway institution. Those who control the stories on Broadway stages—producers, directors, writers—are disproportionately white and men, and the stories themselves predominantly uphold white privilege and heteronormativity. Economic pressures keep Broadway producers focused on high profit and cultural capital, at the expense of artistic and political risk. Broadway has particular affective power, employing the uniquely provocative effect of live theatre for unparalleled numbers of people. This influence is accompanied by responsibility to contribute to society's progress rather than its stagnation, a responsibility which Broadway falls behind in fulfilling.

Keywords: sociology, theatre, Broadway, cultural reproduction, representation, artistic convention, social inequality

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INTRODUCTION

> Authors [of plays] are very prompt in discovering which way the taste of the public is thus secretly inclined. They shape their productions accordingly; and the literature of the stage, after having served to indicate the approaching literary revolution, speedily completes its accomplishment. If you would judge beforehand of the literature of a people which is lapsing into democracy, study its dramatic productions.
>
> —Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1840)

On May 12, 2009, playwright and actor Lin-Manuel Miranda performed the first song of his new musical project at the White House Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken Word. When he explained his concept, an Alexander Hamilton biography told through hip-hop, the audience laughed. Six years later, *Hamilton: An American Musical* was the hottest ticket around, a ticket which served as a status symbol, even for people outside of the theatre world. Those lucky enough to find tickets would purchase them for thousands of dollars, often a whole year in advance. Celebrities joked about how they, like everyone else, wanted and could not get a seat at *Hamilton*. The show broke into the mainstream in a way that musical theatre had not since the mid-twentieth-century "golden age" of Broadway and signaled a new era for Broadway in terms of public interest as well as rules for casting and content. The musical, which reclaims America's narrative with performers of color, shattered Broadway conventions while simultaneously nodding to its classic works. *Hamilton* made such an impact that it landed a spot on *The New York Times'* "33 Ways to Remember the 2010s." Number twenty-two reads, "'Broadway didn't throw away its shot': The show made a celebrity of its creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda. (Quick: How many other musical theater composers have become household names?) … Its success has been a major ingredient in a broader Broadway boom." In terms of attendance, grosses, and ticket prices—as well as recognition—Broadway certainly has experienced a post-*Hamilton* boom, recording the highest numbers in history.

Hamilton has remained a sensation since its debut in 2015; it has seen three simultaneous national tours, productions in Chicago and the West End, a book, a documentary, a mixtape, and even a museum. And there is no end in sight for the *Hamilton* phenomenon—a recording of the stage production with the original cast is set to be released in 2021, and a screenplay is ready for a future film adaptation. The musical has retained its popularity through major shifts in the sociopolitical climate of the United States. Miranda started writing *Hamilton* during the first year of the Obama administration, and it debuted in the last. It has remained on Broadway—and a smash hit—through the transition from Obama's America to Trump's America, and the dramatic changes in conversations about race and ownership of the national narrative. The same text and staging have taken on different meanings, representing different forms of resistance, as national dialogues have taken on new forms. *Hamilton* exemplifies how the signification of a play or musical changes with its context. Theatrical works are adaptive entities; this quality exists in a number of art forms but is particularly powerful for live theatre, which continues to be created and infused with meaning in real time, with each performance, as society evolves.

Sociologists have long considered the relationship between cultural products and the society which produces and consumes them. Artists produce work in response to political and socio-cultural events, impacting not only artistic worlds, by challenging conventions, but also the larger social world, by provoking conversation and deep reflection. Since ancient times, theatre has participated in this socio-artistic loop. Even though the centrality of theatre in society is not a new concept, the sociology of theatre remains a relatively unexplored field. Due to the increased polarization of the American sociopolitical climate in the era of Donald Trump and the rise of

political movements like Black Lives Matter[1] and #MeToo[2], it has become increasingly urgent to examine the theatre being staged in the United States through a sociological lens.

Focusing on the 2018-2019 Broadway season, this thesis investigates the dual role of theatre, both responding to and influencing contemporary social problems. Taken together, the plays and musicals of the season create a historical reflection of their sociopolitical moment. Scholars often look to literature, film, and visual art as the artistic response to and representation of a time, but I argue that theatre is overlooked in this capacity and offers a uniquely powerful effect. An embodied exhibition of human experiences, shared between people in real time and the same physical space, theatre produces an immediate, provocative, and personal impact. Broadway productions are both ephemeral, as each performance exists only in real time and will never be exactly replicated, and ongoing, as a version of the show is created eight times per week for the duration of the run. As the most visited and most advertised theatre destination in the United States, Broadway projects an image of American culture to the rest of the world. It therefore constitutes a strong case study on the interplay of theatre and society in the United States.

Sociology of Theatre

Apart from theatre studies scholar Maria Shevtsova's *Sociology of Theatre and Performance* (2009), works on cultural sociology tend to shy away from theatre. Sociologists have employed theatrical terms to make sense of the social world (Goffman 1956), but the social implications of theatre have largely been left to scholars in other fields, including theatre

[1] Started in 2013, Black Lives Matter responds to systematic violence against Black people in America, with particular focus on police brutality against black men.
[2] The #MeToo movement swept the nation in 2017 and calls attention to widespread sexual harassment and assault of women. It instigated serious reconsideration of treatment and representation of women, especially in entertainment.

studies,[3] cultural history, and cultural anthropology. As I argue throughout this thesis, theatre reflects society—its focuses, its inequalities, its priorities—and influences it in return. Ignoring the fundamentally sociological nature of theatre has left a hole in the field of sociology. Paying greater attention to the art form would offer a unique perspective on and impactful insights into the social world.

Broadway's Culture Industry

In "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944), philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer present the culture industry: the system of capitalistic control over cultural objects.[4] The culture industry reduces artistic works to a formula, ensuring profit through its dependability but stifling creativity. Jack Viertel wrote an entire book about this formula on Broadway, called *The Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows are Built* (2016). Each chapter explains a type of song: "Opening Numbers," "The 'I Want' Song," "Conditional Love Songs," and so on. Together, and in that order, the chapters' song types form the composition of just about every popular Broadway musical since *Oklahoma!*—the beginning of musical theatre as we know it—in 1943. Since *Oklahoma!* established this era of musicals, it is understandable that it set a precedent for the general form, but Viertel clearly exhibits that it goes beyond a guide—that Broadway musicals have the exact same construction, down to the content of each song. Musicals that stray from this model are considered experimental and rarely go beyond small theaters, especially to the point of reaching Broadway. Audiences have come to expect the experience of this precise model from Broadway

[3] Theatre studies scholars frequently employ sociological theory in their analyses of theatre. For example, Jacob Gallagher-Ross extensively draws upon the work of Max Weber to lay a foundation for his study in *Theaters of the Everyday: Aesthetic Democracy on the American Stage* (2018).
[4] I discuss the culture industry in more depth in the appendix.

musicals, making anything else feel wrong or disappointing. The success of the established composition results from its normalization on Broadway—its place in the culture industry. As a result, writers who want success compose these musicals and producers who want success invest in them. Viertel exposes that Broadway has essentially reproduced the same musical over and over again for the last three quarters of a century; the subject matter changes superficially, but the same plot structure, "surprises," and resolutions exist across the board.

Representation of Identity

Broadway's compatibility with its nickname, the Great *White* Way, is increasingly getting challenged. Felicia Fitzpatrick said, "Diversity and representation, inclusion, has been a conversation for a long time, obviously, but I think now people are taking more proactive steps to make that happen." Likely because of its success, *Hamilton* caused a wave of substantial pushback against the whiteness of Broadway and incited a wave of more diverse casting. It proved that a musical with actors of color can be a smash hit and that those performers can play any role.[5] Before *Hamilton*, actors of color were often left out of shows that take place in the past and revivals of classics because it would not be "authentic" for them to play those characters. Casting black, Latinx, and Asian actors as the Founding Fathers with great success debunked that excuse. Three seasons later, black actors played principal leads in *Oklahoma!* and *Kiss Me, Kate* without objection that they did not "look like" the original actors. In fact, most of the shows from the 2018-2019 season discussed in this thesis featured actors of color in principal roles. Musical theatre scholar Stacy Wolf explains that a character, "as inhabited by a performer … comprises innumerable additional identity categories, such as race, ethnicity, age, and even the body's shape

[5] It must be noted that, while *Hamilton* redefined possibilities for actors and characters of color, it received criticism for not challenging the legacy of two-dimensional woman characters on Broadway.

and size. What emerges in the musical as a character's 'personality' is inseparable from these identity categories" (210). The appearance of the actor influences the written character, especially as perceived by audiences, and "each actor remakes a character anew" (Wolf 220).

Anthropologist Jennifer Robertson noted, "Theatre is an influential site where gender ideals and roles are produced and performed: a laboratory where they can be naturalized" (165). Like with race, depictions of gender on Broadway have predominantly come from white men and reflected flat, generalized conceptions of women. The continued presence of these representations over the course of Broadway's history has normalized and reinforced them. Musical theatre scholar Stacy Wolf writes, "Whether or not a musical seems to be 'about' gender or 'about' sexuality, these axes of identity invariably organize a musical's message, its ideological work, and its emotional effects, since all of the characters in a musical can be identified and analyzed in terms of their gender and sexuality" (210). Wolf describes that within gender categorizations characters are classified by vocal range: "For women these include the ingenue, typically a soprano … the comic sidekick, or bitch, or witch, typically a mezzo … altos are sometimes middle-aged principals or older character roles" (211). As for men, "many male romantic leads are tenors … [but] male roles are less typecast by vocal range than women's" (Wolf 211). Traditionally, successful performance of gender in Broadway productions (particularly musicals) equates to fulfillment of heterosexual romance. "In this way," Wolf explains, "musicals tie together psychological development, gender, and (hetero)sexuality" (212).

Describing theatre as "the queerest art," theatre scholar Alisa Solomon claims, "The kind of mimetic experience offered in the theater can by its very process disrupt conventional patterns of seeing, of knowing, and, especially, of seeing and knowing bodies. That theater should be the

art potentially most offensive to social order makes obvious sense" (9). She asserts that both "theater and queer theory challenge ideas of fixed identities. Both break through the seemingly impermeable walls of gender and sexual categories by unmooring them from the idea that they derive absolutely and inevitably from an original objective source" (14). Theatre, according to Solomon, holds the potential to break down society's rules of gender, self, and social order on the whole. Despite theatre's queerness, and its high numbers of queer performers and audiences throughout its history, it lacks in onstage representations of queer people—especially diverse and meaningful ones. The majority of gay and lesbian characters that have existed on Broadway productions have served in a homonormative capacity, ultimately reinforcing heteronormativity (Wolf 216).

Representation of differently abled people on Broadway has also increased in recent years. In the 2015-2016 season, the same year as *Hamilton*, a revival of *Spring Awakening* transferred to Broadway from a 90-seat theater in California. The production, created by Deaf West Theatre Company, restaged the musical with both deaf and hearing actors. Its presence on Broadway contributed to visibility of deaf performers and marked the Broadway debuts of the majority of the cast. Also in that production, Ali Stroker became the first actor who uses a wheelchair on Broadway. In the 2018-2019 season, Stroker returned to Broadway in the modernized revival of *Oklahoma!* and added to her list of firsts for Broadway actors who use a wheelchair, winning a Tony Award for Best Featured Actress in a Musical. In her acceptance speech, which aired on news networks across the country after the Tonys broadcast, Stroker said, "This award is for every kid who is watching tonight who has a disability, who has a limitation or a challenge, who has been waiting to see themselves represented in this arena—you are" (*The 73rd Annual Tony Awards)*. Hopefully, that representation continues to expand.

It is imperative that we consider intersectionality and recognize the compounding effects of marginalization borne by women of color, for example. As Stacy Wolf notes, "Every character in every musical is racialized, whether or not race is marked, and a character's race/ethnicity inflects what gender and sexuality mean at every turn" (213). Black women are subjected to unique stereotypes (Collins 1999), which translate to the stage in narratives controlled, predominantly, by white men (more on this in chapter one).

Data and Methods

Why Broadway

Broadway began in 1750—before the founding of the nation—and comprises plays and musicals performed in Manhattan, New York City, in a theater which seats at least 500 people (Mancini).[6] Broadway has focused on profit since its inception—and with great success: the 2018-2019 Broadway season grossed $1.83 billion ("Broadway Facts"). This number has steadily increased over time, in conjunction with production costs and ticket prices. Broadway has the most in-demand artists and most expensive sets, costumes, and technology in the theatre industry, and it needs high revenue to offset the cost of its extravagance. As a result, the average ticket, for both plays and musicals, costs over one hundred dollars, and admission to the biggest-name shows can cost over one thousand dollars per ticket ("Broadway Season Statistics at a Glance"). This creates an environment of exclusion and elitism on Broadway, in which only people with expendable income and time can participate. Theatre as an art form traditionally carries high cultural capital, and the expensive tickets limit access to this capital to a privileged

[6] Forty-one theaters, primarily between 40th and 50th Streets, have this designation. Manhattan theaters with 100-499 seats are considered Off-Broadway, and those with 99 or fewer seats are Off-Off-Broadway.

and limited group. The high cost of Broadway affects production as well as reception, because only shows with wide-reaching appeal and strong financial backing can survive.

In *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama* (2006), theatre scholar W.B. Worthen recounts the history of the Syndicate, a group that created touring productions and gained monopolistic control over theaters across the United States at the end of the 19th century. He explains that the Syndicate "extinguished professional theater outside of New York as a source of new plays and productions; it also influenced playwriting, since the Syndicate developed plays only as commercial properties that could be successfully marketed to a general audience coast-to-coast." He goes on, "The parochial interests of the New York stage—where the shows of such organizations originated—became in practice the interests of American theater, and New York became the center of theatrical production and theatrical investment" (972). This history continues today, with New York City remaining America's theatre hub and with commercial theatre maintaining a stronghold. Plays and musicals that make it to Broadway have the chance to become enduring American classics and make millions of dollars. These stakes, and their associated costs, make producers invest cautiously, based on what they believe will appeal to the most people. Broadway productions must sell hundreds of tickets eight times per week to stay afloat in this competitive and costly environment. To do this, they have to attract audiences across class and regional lines.

Worthen notes, "Musicals remain popular with producers because the huge financial investment required to mount a musical can repay much larger returns for investors than any 'straight' play" (978). Producer Daryl Roth commented on the risk involved in that investment: "It's expensive to run a musical. The real important number is what it costs weekly to run it. The capitalization can vary. There are musicals from $9 million to $16 million to something insane."

As for that weekly cost, she said, “There's a certain benchmark that you want to reach in terms of ticket sales, and they call it the million-dollar club. If you're in the million-dollar club as a musical, you're in good shape. Anything over one million dollars for most musicals makes you feel successful each week.” The 2018-2019 Broadway included eleven original musicals and two revivals (“Broadway Season Statistics at a Glance”); of the eleven original, three were jukebox musicals (made from the existing works of a single musical artist), five were adapted from movies and books, and three were new stories (counting *Hadestown*, which technically adapts Greek myths). Familiar stories attract audiences, particularly those without much prior theatre-going experience, and boost Broadway attendance and profit, but reiterating established narratives to reduce financial risk limits Broadway’s social impact and fosters an institution susceptible to stagnation.

The commercial nature of Broadway does not completely empty its productions of substance and social significance, but it does make profitability a prerequisite for presence on its stages. Broadway cannot be as bold, subversive, or experimental as the not-for-profit theaters that can prioritize artistic expression over revenue. There exists on Broadway perpetual strain between conformity, in the interest of financial gain, and resistance, in the interest of artistic and social impact. Productions on Broadway must always accommodate the capitalist system. Social subversion on Broadway can and does exist, but it must first be established in other domains. In other words, Broadway shows can communicate a social message as long as that message has enough widespread support to keep seats filled and money coming in. It is this struggle between art and money that makes Broadway highly reflective of its cultural moment; it pushes against the society in which it exists while still having to be compatible with it.

Methods

Over the course of five weeks in New York City, in June and July of 2019, I saw twenty Broadway plays and musicals. During the shows, I took notes about content, individual and collective performances, staging, and audience reactions. I also conducted interviews with theatre professionals who could provide insight into particular productions and/or the state of Broadway as a whole. While in New York, I interviewed Damon Daunno, who played Curly McClain in the 2019 revival of *Oklahoma!*; Daryl Roth, ten-time Tony Award-winning producer of over ninety plays and musicals; Felicia Fitzpatrick, the first and current social media director of Playbill and the creator of *Call and Response*, a podcast that examines the intersection of blackness and the performing arts; Holley Fain, who played Caitlin Carney in the 2019 Tony Award-winning Best Play, *The Ferryman*; and Tyler Mount, who followed the pulse of Broadway with *The Tyler Mount Vlog*, served as digital correspondent and senior manager of video content for Playbill, and now produces plays and musicals on the West End and Broadway.

After leaving New York, I conducted a phone interview with Tony Award-winning director Bartlett Sher, who directed *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the 2018-2019 season and the reimagined revival of *My Fair Lady* in the 2017-2018 season; an email interview with Danny Burstein, who played Harold Zidler in *Moulin Rouge* (the first production to open in the 2019-2020 Broadway season); and an email interview with Santino Fontana, who won the 2019 Tony Award Best Actor in a Musical for his performance as Michael Dorsey/Dorothy Michaels in *Tootsie*. I supplement the interviews and my fieldnotes with quantitative data in the form of attendance numbers and grosses for individual productions and demographic information for the 2018-2019 season, all collected by The Broadway League.

Chapter Overview

The structure of this thesis will mirror the theatrical productions which it examines, with an overture, an entr'acte, and a curtain call. In between, my analysis will consist of four chapters, each using productions from the 2018-2019 season as case studies that illuminate aspects of Broadway as an institution. The overture will synthesize The Broadway League's research report, *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2018-2019*, to provide context for the reception side of this art world (H. Becker 1984). Chapter one will investigate embodiment, representation, and diversity on Broadway. Using *To Kill a Mockingbird, Tootsie,* and *The Cher Show* and considering various identity categories, this chapter will reflect on who controls the stories told on Broadway. Chapter two will examine *Oklahoma!* and *Kiss Me, Kate* to discuss the phenomenon of modernizing classic musicals. It will consider the incompatibility of mid-century shows and 2019 audiences as well as the limitations involved in attempting to bring the texts into the present. The entr'acte will look at attendance numbers and grosses. Chapter three will delve into socially conscious theatre on Broadway. Looking at *Hadestown* and *What the Constitution Means to Me*, it will explore the paradoxicality of how socially inflammatory theatre has more difficulty in reaching Broadway because of its financial risk but receives the most accolades because of the cultural capital which it carries. Chapter four will examine the unusual journey of *Be More Chill* as potential for a shift in control over what work exists on Broadway. Also incorporating *The Prom,* the chapter will investigate social media's growing impact while also illuminating the strength of Broadway's preexisting structures. The curtain call will comprise the perspectives of my interview respondents on the significance of live theatre. Finally, the conclusion will synthesize my findings and reflect upon their implications.

OVERTURE
DEMOGRAPHICS

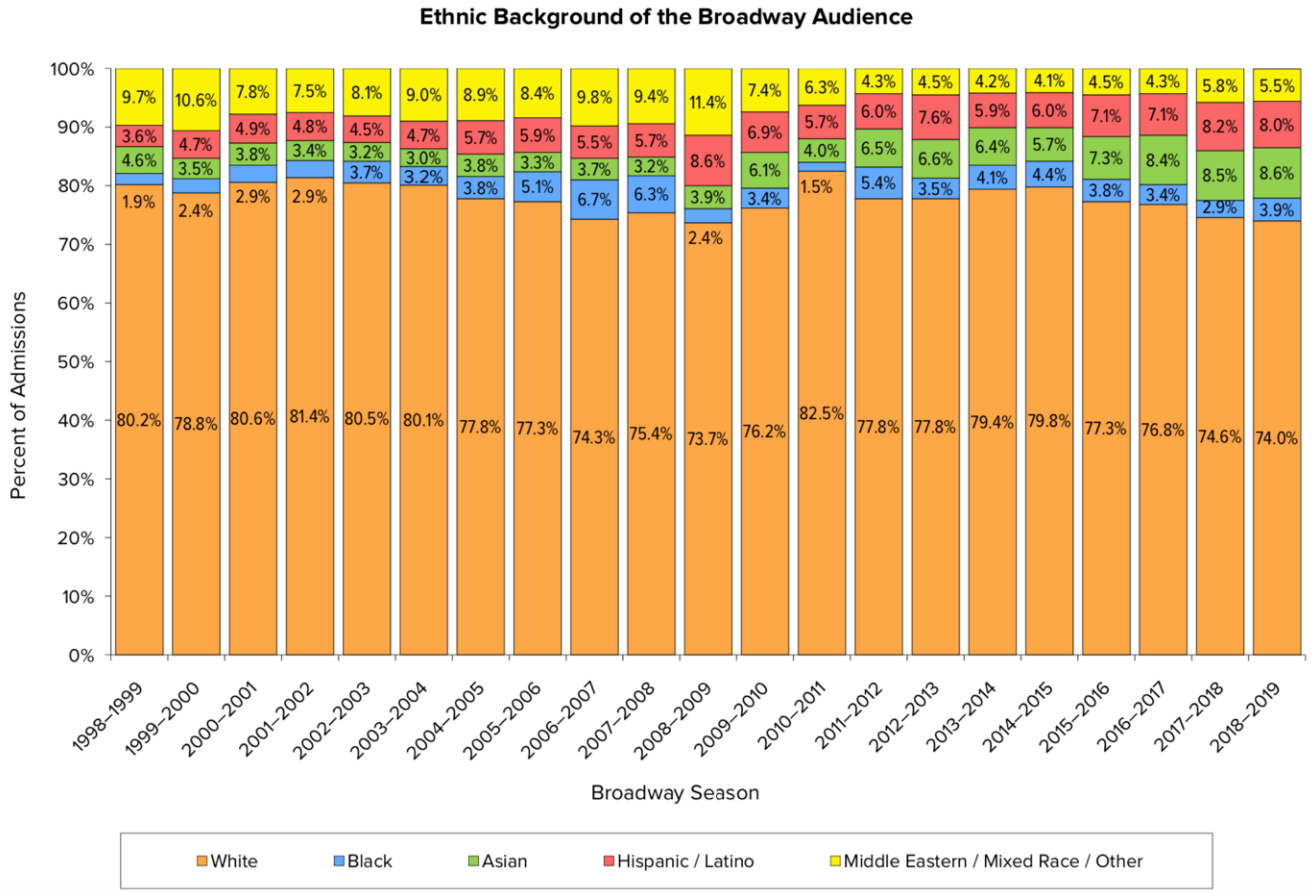
To understand Broadway productions—their content, marketing, and controversies—one must first understand who attends them. This section presents demographic information about the audiences of the 2018-2019 Broadway season and will provide context for the coming chapters. The following charts and statistics come from The Broadway League's *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2018–2019.* Unless tracing figures over time, all charts refer to the 2018-2019 season.

From the research report's methodology section:

> From June 2018 through May 2019, the League's Research Department administered surveys at 49 different productions at 98 individual performance times. We selected shows on a quarterly basis to represent what Broadway was offering that season (a proportionate number of musicals versus straight plays; revivals versus original works; and new productions versus long-running shows). We distributed questionnaires at multiple performances per show to account for variances in the weekday, weekend, evening, and matinee audiences. In total, we distributed 17,400 questionnaires and 8,972 were returned, representing a 52% rate of return.

Race and Ethnicity

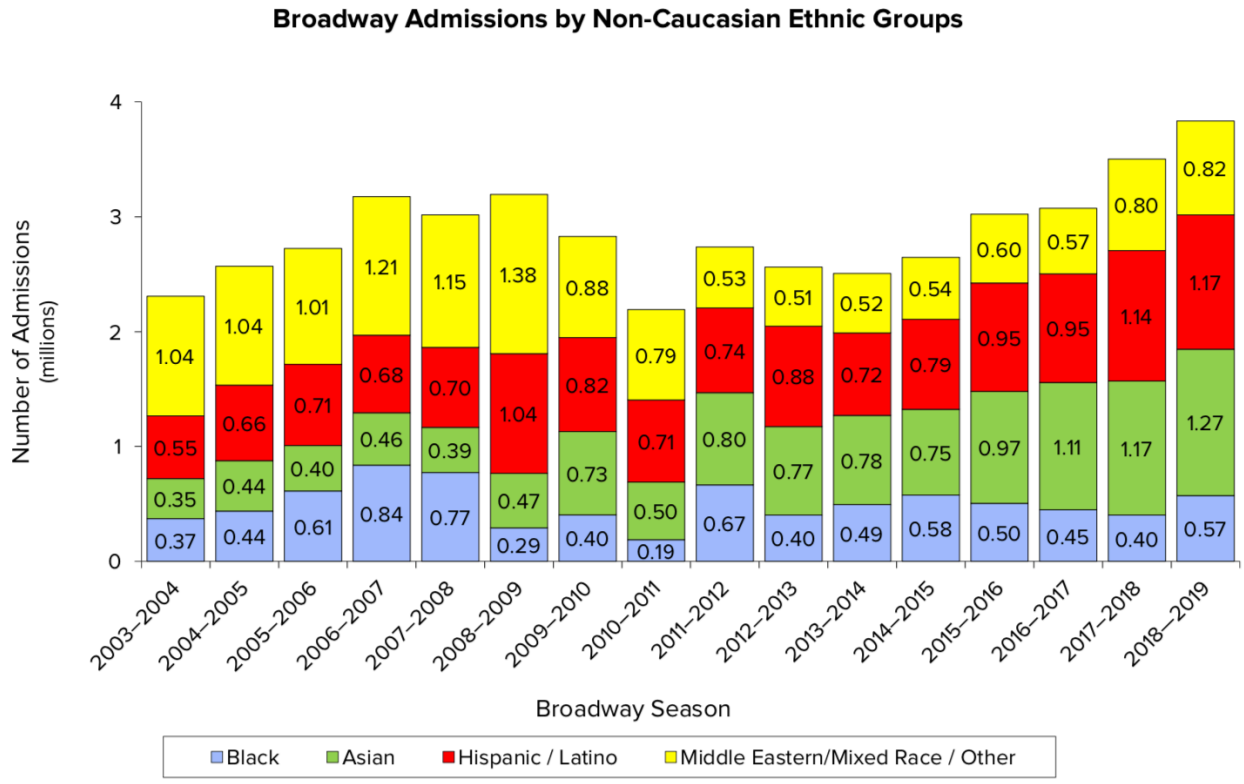
Among Broadway audiences, white and Asian people are overrepresented, compared to the United States population, and black and Hispanic people are underrepresented. In the 2018-2019 season, white people comprised 74% of Broadway audiences.



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

	Broadway Audience	U.S. Population[11]	Audience/Census Index
Asian	8.6%	5.7%	151.4%
Black	3.9%	12.3%	31.7%
Caucasian	74.0%	61.0%	121.3%
Hispanic/Latino	8.0%	18.0%	44.2%
Mixed Race or Other	5.5%	3.0%	183.3%

Source: The Broadway League, 2019



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Gender

Women make up over two thirds of Broadway audiences and men less than one third.[7]

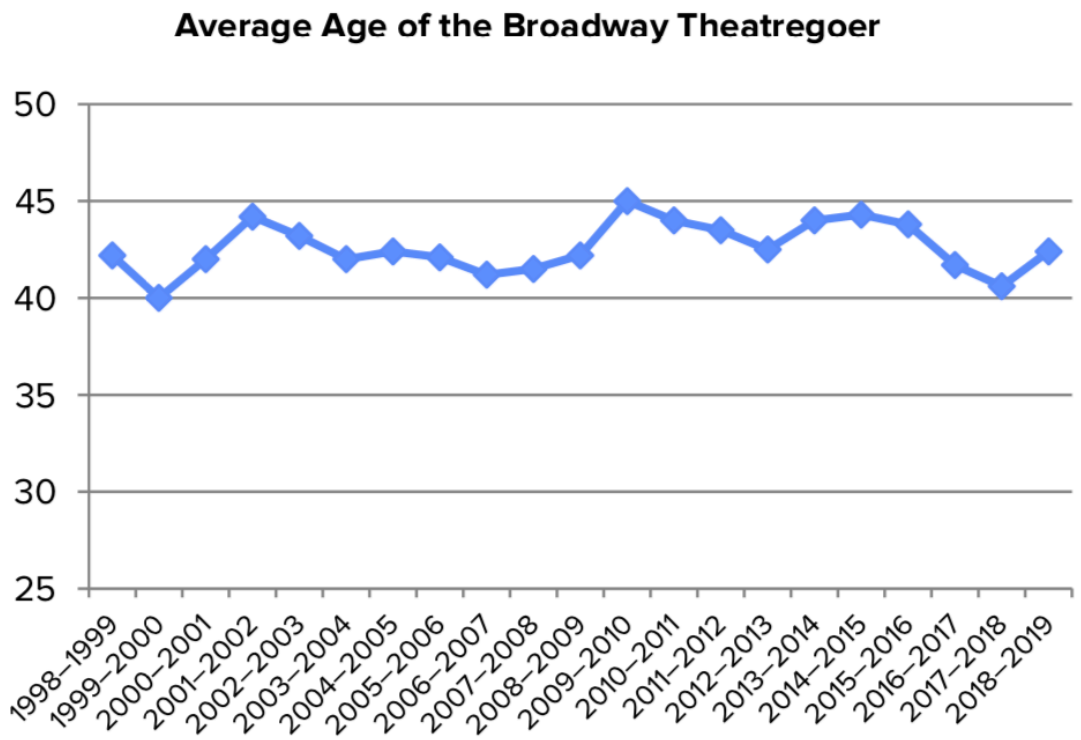
Gender	Broadway Audience	U.S. Population[9]	Audience/Census Index
Female	68.3%	51.0%	133.9%
Male	31.2%	49.0%	63.7%

Source: The Broadway League, 2019

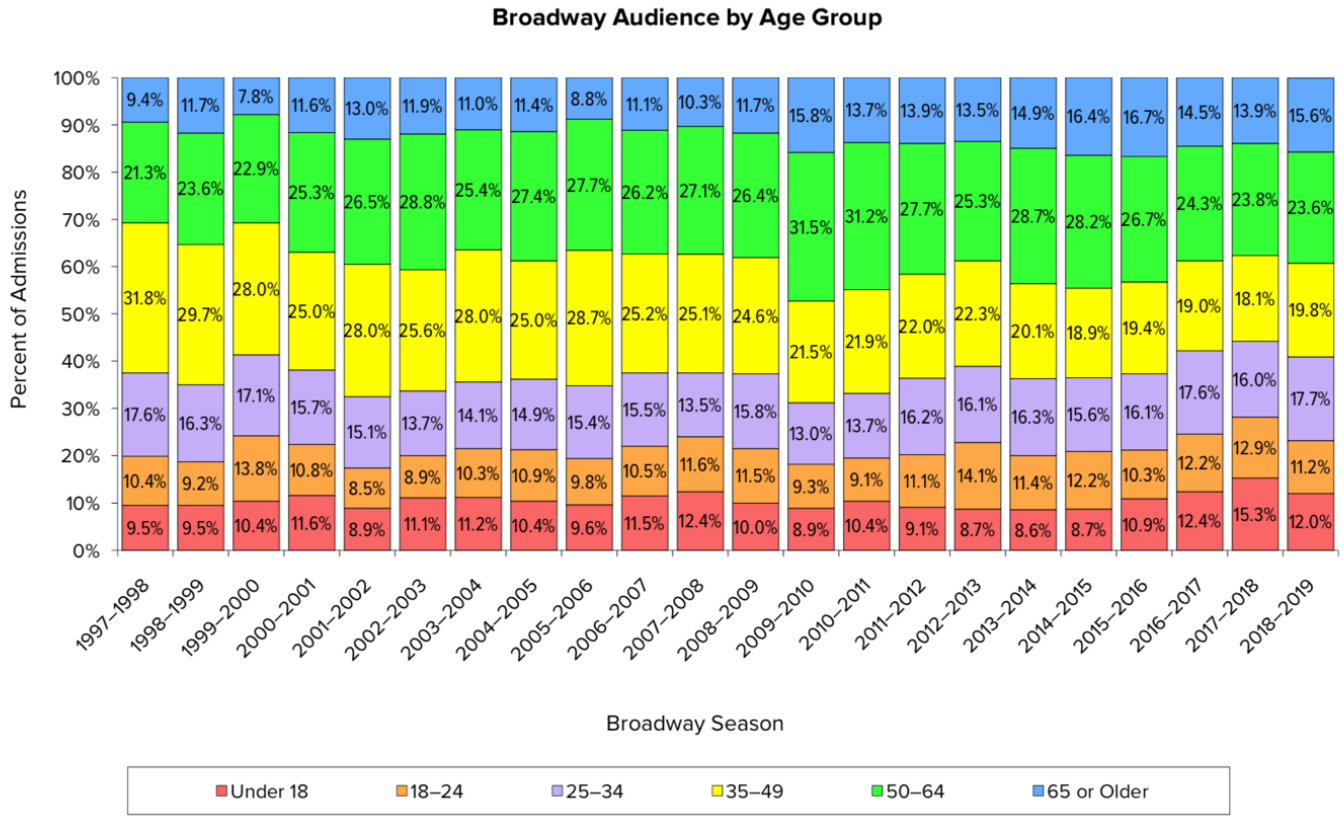
[7] Following Ball and Gledhill (2013)'s discussion of the gendering of cultural forms and genres, the high percentage of women in Broadway audiences may originate from the content and presentation of Broadway musicals, labeled as feminine by societal standards. However, post-labeling, the gender divide likely results primarily from the *connotation* of Broadway as an art form for women.

Age

In the 2018-2019 season, the average Broadway audience member was 42.3 years old—41.2 years old for musicals and 47.2 years old for plays—which is older than the average American.



Source: The Broadway League, 2019



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

	Broadway Audience	U.S. Population[10]	Audience/Census Index
Under 18	12.1%	24.0%	50.0%
18–24	11.2%	9.9%	113.1%
25–34	17.7%	13.3%	133.8%
35–49	19.8%	20.7%	95.7%
50–64	23.6%	19.0%	124.2%
65 or older	15.6%	13.1%	119.1%

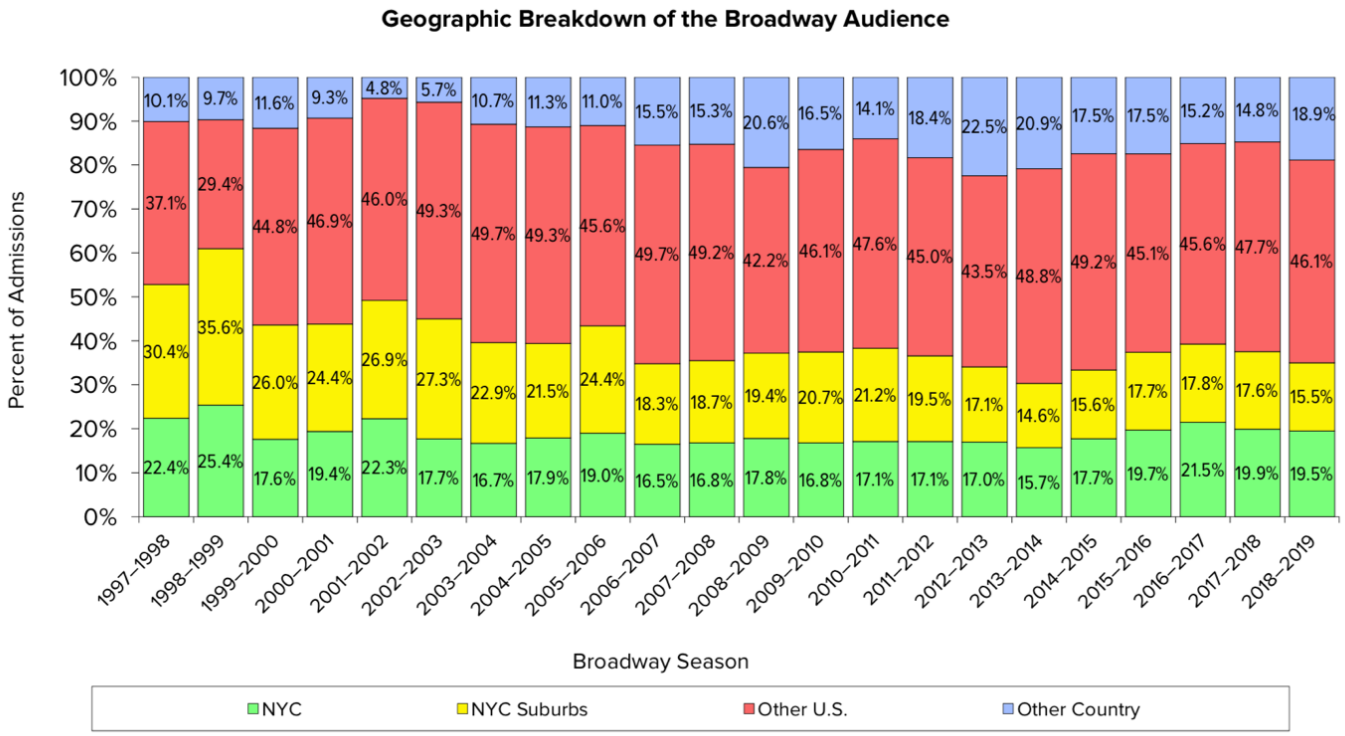
Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Residence of Audience	Average Age for First Broadway Show
New Yorkers	16.1
Suburbanites	15.9
Domestic Tourists	23.8
International Tourists	30.1

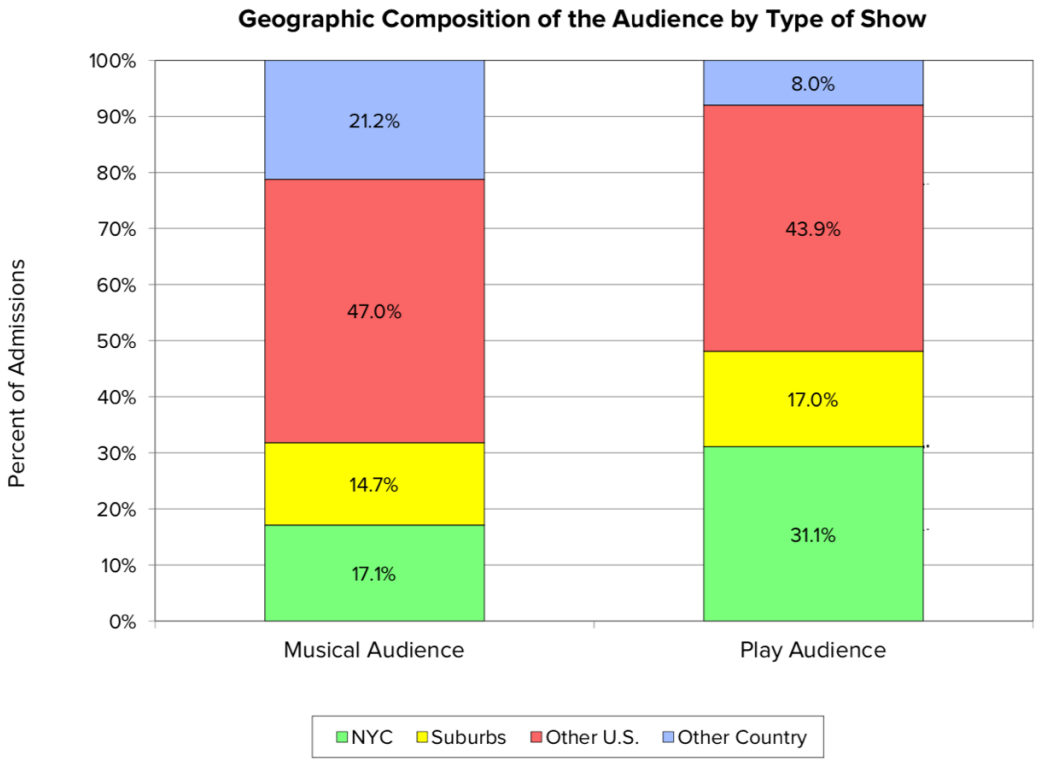
Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Place of Residence

Residents of New York City and its suburbs comprised 35% of Broadway audiences in the 2018-2019 season. For plays, they represented 48.1% percent of audiences (compared to 31.8% for musicals).



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

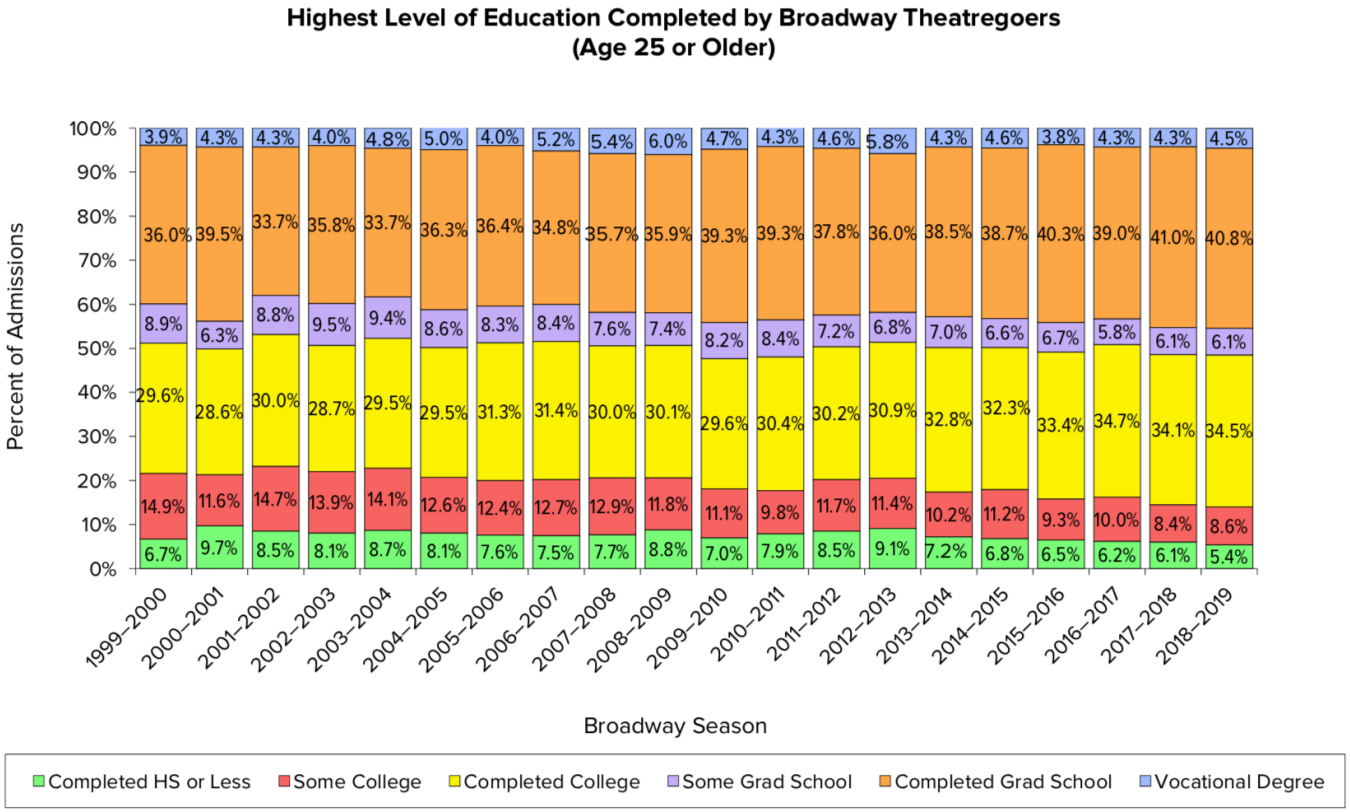


Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Education

The report notes:

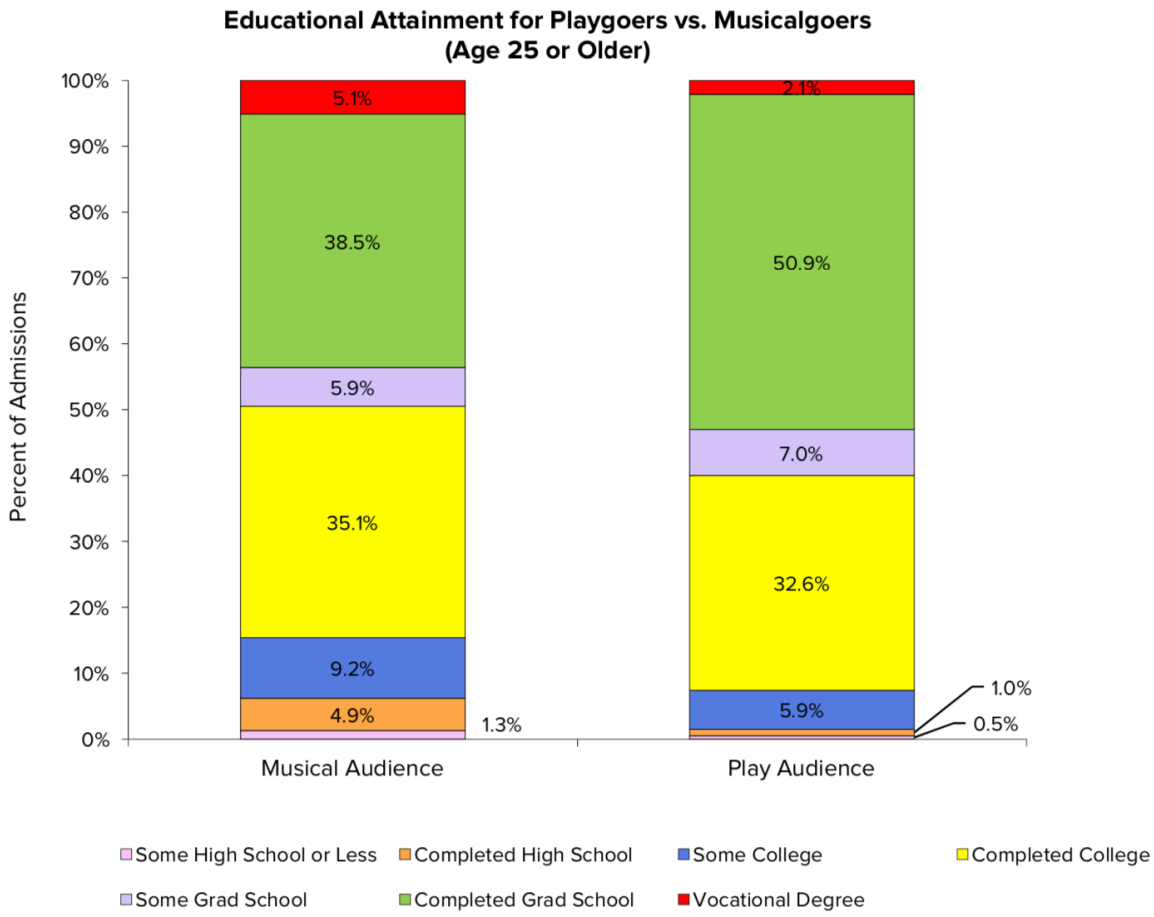
> Eighty-one percent of the Broadway audience finished college and 41% had some kind of advanced education, compared to 33% and 13% of the United States population … Theatregoers at plays had attained higher levels of education than those at musicals. At plays, 91% of audience members held a college degree and 51% held a graduated [*sic*] degree, compared to 80% and 39% at musicals. Theatregoers from New York City had completed more education than theatregoers from elsewhere.



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Highest Level of Education Completed (age 25 or older)	Broadway Audience	U.S. Population[12]	Audience/Census Index
Some HS or Less	1.1%	11.0%	10.0%
Completed HS	4.3%	28.8%	14.9%
Some College	8.6%	16.7%	51.5%
Completed College	34.5%	20.8%	165.9%
Advanced Education[13]	46.9%	12.6%	372.2%
Vocational Degree	4.5%	10.1%	44.6%

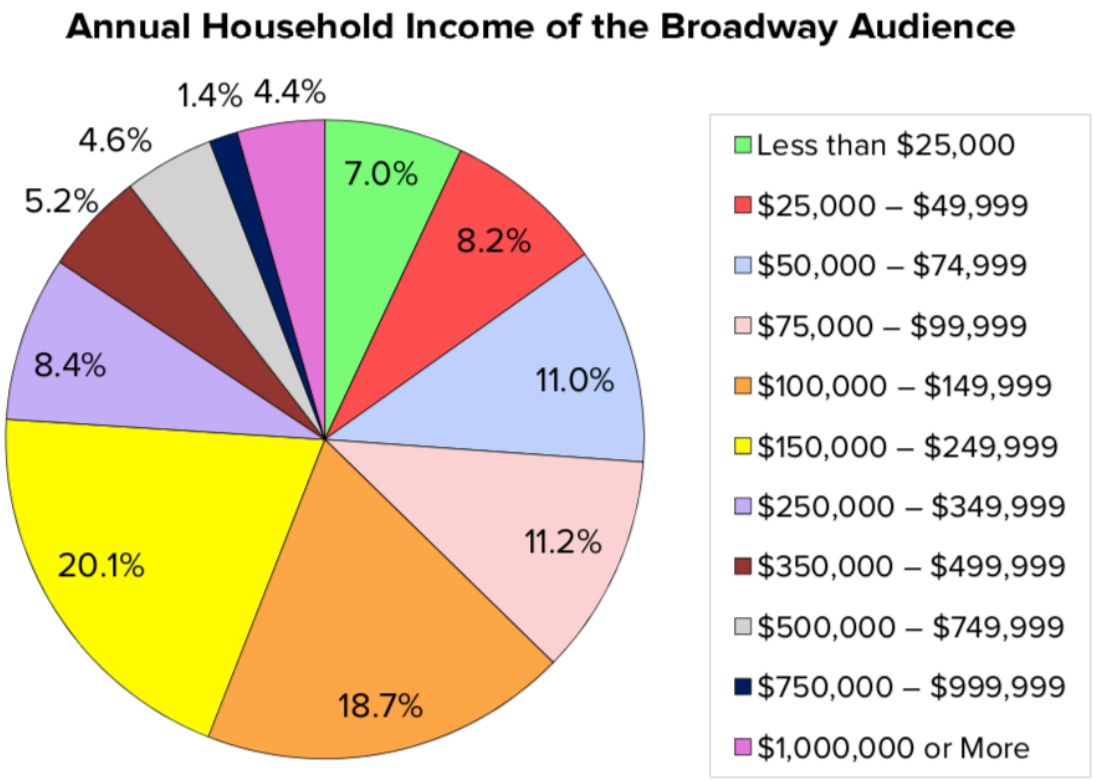
Source: The Broadway League, 2019



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Income

The average annual household income of Broadway audience members in the 2018-2019 Broadway season was $261,200.



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Annual Household Income of the Broadway Audience vs. U.S. Population

Annual Household Income	Broadway Audience	U.S. Population[16]	Audience/Census Index
Less than $25,000	7.0%	23.5%	29.8%
$25,000 – $49,999	8.2%	23.2%	35.1%
$50,000 – $74,999	11.0%	17.0%	64.4%
$75,000 – $99,999	11.2%	11.6%	96.8%
$100,000 – $149,999	18.7%	13.4%	139.5%
$150,000 and Above	44.1%	11.3%	389.2%

Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Number of shows attended

The average audience member saw 4.4 shows in the past year.

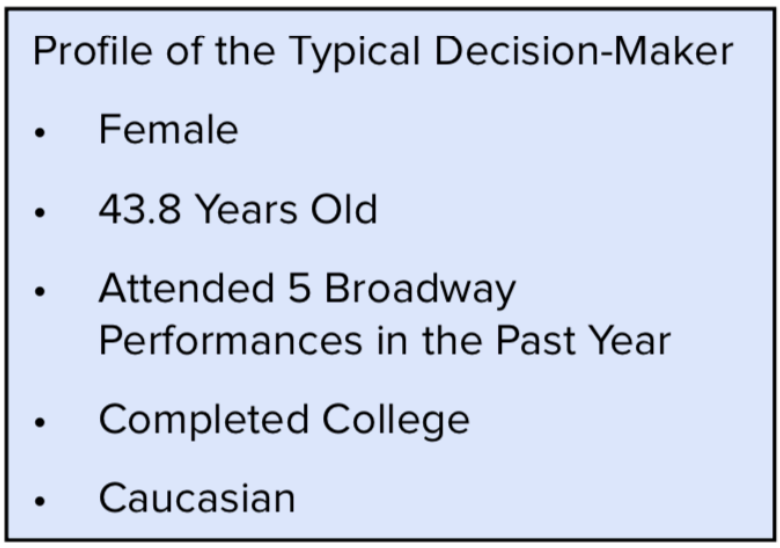
Number of Shows Attended in Past Year	Percent of Theatregoers	Percent of Theatre Visits
1	38.6%	9.1%
2–4	38.6%	27.3%
5–9	13.4%	22.1%
10–14	4.7%	13.3%
15–24	2.2%	10.4%
25 or more	2.5%	17.7%

Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Number of Performances Attended in Past Year	Average Age
1–4	40.6
5–9	46.6
10 or More	49.2

Source: The Broadway League, 2019

In Sum…



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

Generally, this is the group to whom Broadway caters. The selection, production, and marketing of shows are designed to interest this audience. This understanding informs the discussions in the following chapters about how Broadway operates.

CHAPTER ONE
THE GREAT WHITE WAY: *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, TOOTSIE,* AND *THE CHER SHOW*

> The plays of a real Negro theater must be: *One: About us.* That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. *Two: By us.* That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. *Three: For us.* That is, the theater must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. *Fourth: Near us*. The theater must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.
>
> —W.E.B. Du Bois (1926) (qtd. in Worthen 977)

Du Bois' assertion speaks to control over representations of one's identity as a reclamation of power.[8] As an embodied art form—that is, shared through the bodies of human beings—theatre is particularly grounded in the human and, as a result, in identities. The embodied identity of an actor of color, a woman, or a differently abled person may disguise control over the characterization by someone who does not share that identity. By portraying subordinated populations through lenses of bias and stereotype, dominant groups employ symbolic power and violence, thus reinforcing existing power structures (Hall, Lidchi).

Following *Hamilton*'s challenge to conventions of casting, and in light of recent social movements focused on equality for women, people of color, queer people, and other marginalized people, there have been pushes for more representation of these groups on Broadway. The last few seasons have seen more stories that consider identity-based inequality in America and more actors of color than ever before. However, this has not signified substantial change to the domination of Broadway by white men.

Broadway's nature as a white space (Anderson 2015) limits the narratives conveyed in its productions. In *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, sociologist Nancy Wang Yuen

[8] Theatre historian David Krasner explores the processes of this reclamation by analyzing the black theatre movement of the Harlem Renaissance in *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (1977).

explores similar themes in the film industry and reaches similar conclusions: "White male gatekeepers dominate Hollywood, breeding a culture of ethnocentric storytelling and casting." Since media and art are products of their social context, artistic industries contain the same biases and inequalities as their society. Character representations on Broadway are expanding to include more identities, but, for the most part, white men still control those representations. Therefore, the portrayals on stage (no matter how discursively diverse) represent preconceptions rather than actual experiences of identity.

Although more women than men attend Broadway shows, they have less meaningful representation in characters and creative teams. The 2018-2019 season had the first play written by an Asian-American woman in Broadway history. Of the season's thirteen musicals, *Hadestown* was the only one directed by a woman: Rachel Chavkin. When Chavkin won the 2019 Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical, she used her acceptance speech to say:

> [*Hadestown*] is about whether you can keep faith when you are made to feel alone, and it reminds us that that is how power structures try to maintain control, by making you feel like you're walking alone in the darkness, even when your partner is right there at your back. And this is why I wish I wasn't the only woman directing a musical on Broadway this season. There are so many women who are ready to go. There are so many artists of color who are ready to go. And we need to see that racial diversity and gender diversity reflected in our critical establishment, too. This is not a pipeline issue; it is a failure of imagination by a field whose job is to imagine the way the world could be. So let's do it.

Like in other areas of the American workforce, women face barriers to access on Broadway. Women are dramatically underrepresented in creative roles such as playwriting and directing, and even when they secure the positions—and create beloved, impactful work—they often do not receive the same level of recognition and consideration as their man counterparts. Composer Jean Tesori wrote the music for such musicals as *Fun Home* (2015) and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002). Despite composing complex and emotionally powerful music and making history when she "and her writing partner for *Fun Home*, Lisa Kron, were the first all-female writing

partnership to win a Tony Award," "Tesori's significant output on Broadway has received little in the way of serious critical musicological response" (Warner 151).

The lack of diversity particularly pervades in the realm of producers, who decide what goes on Broadway and, consequently, shape the character of the institution. Tyler Mount summed up the situation:

> There is a systemic issue on Broadway. It's the fact that there are only—not only—but the large majority of producers on Broadway are straight, old, white men. And that is because the majority of wealth in our country centers around straight, old, white men. That's just a statistical fact. There are obviously exceptions to every rule, but at the end of the day they have the money, time, energy, and effort to be able to be producers … A producer is the one who's in charge of getting a show to Broadway. They choose the show; they choose the creative team who then informs every decision that's made about production. So, if you imagine, for the large majority, only white men are deciding what's coming to Broadway and how that show's being marketed, produced, and performed, you can imagine the systemic issues that stem from that.

Filtered through the money and voices of white men, Broadway speaks to the zeitgeist as white men imagine it. The lack of diversity on Broadway limits its artistic potential.

Increasingly, actors of color are being cast in roles previously held by white actors. This increases the visual presence of people of color on Broadway, but putting an actor of color in a role written for a white person does not make for more diverse storytelling and does not change the institution. Fitzpatrick said that, instead of taking this approach:

> Telling those stories about marginalized communities and stories that we don't usually hear can be more valuable because … it's like, we're going to tell stories that are yours, that belong to you. I think there's value to both, but I think that's definitely a conversation that's happening of like, yes, casting is important, but it's more than just putting a black person in the ensemble. It's about telling these stories that are usually not heard.

Properly staging these narratives requires the inclusion of writers, directors, and producers of diverse ethnic and gender identities. Fitzpatrick said, "The talent is there. It's just a matter of the people in charge … [saying], 'We're committed to telling these stories, and we're going to give them money to be able to tell these stories.'" One barrier to this is Broadway's high valuation of

established theatre artists, which results from a desire for financial security. In an institution grounded in the hegemony of white men, favoring established people favors those white men.

Dominated Representations in the 2018-2019 Season

This chapter examines *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tootsie,* and *The Cher Show,* which evidence that Broadway is seeing stories with more developed woman characters and more characters of color but that white men still control those narratives. These surface-level changes mask the inequality that rules Broadway and individual productions within it.

To Kill a Mockingbird, the first Broadway adaptation of Harper Lee's classic 1960 novel about racial prejudice and the inequality of the American justice system, was written by Aaron Sorkin and directed by Bartlett Sher—both well respected artists, both white men. *Tootsie* adapts the 1982 film by the same name, in which a cisgender man actor, Michael Dorsey, dresses as a woman to audition for roles as Dorothy Michaels and finds success on Broadway (although it is unclear how presenting as a woman helps his career other than freeing him of his bad reputation). The *Tootsie* musical was written by David Yazbeck and Robert Horn and directed by Scott Ellis (who also directed *Kiss Me, Kate,* which I discuss in the next chapter)—all white men. *The Cher Show* uses Cher's music to tell her life story. The musical was developed in consultation with Cher but written by Rick Elice and directed by Jason Moore—both white men. I cite the writers and directors because the writers compose the words that leave the actors' mouths and the directors arrange the actors' bodies onstage; they control what the audience receives during a production.

All three shows in question take on the experiences of people in marginalized groups but through the words and staging of people who have not lived those experiences. This calls into question the efficacy and authenticity of the representations. Discussions of race- and gender-

based inequality have become mainstream in American culture because social mobilization has arisen out of public examples of systematic violence. Allowing people who do not experience that violence to put stories of marginalized people on display demonstrates that the goal of these productions is not inclusion or change but instead capitalization on a popular conversation topic and, consequently, capitalization on the subjugation of others. The performing arts communicate lived histories and represent an interpersonal exchange of experiences. When someone disconnected from those histories presents their perception of them, it contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes and deprives people with the actual experiences of the chance to share them in a genuine way.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Harper Lee did not appropriate another person's story with *To Kill a Mockingbird*; she based it on her own childhood experiences. The issue of representation with this play comes with the reception of the play as *the* play about race for the season. While *To Kill a Mockingbird* offers insight into racism and community, it is still a story written by a white woman and then rewritten and directed by white men. *To Kill a Mockingbird* had to be remolded to draw out connections to the current era. According to Bartlett Sher, the play has two main distinctions from the novel: structural adjustment to focus on the trial and a change in narration so that Scout, Jem, and Dill guide the story. The fact that the narrators are the white children is symbolic of the white control over this story of Tom Robinson's wrongful conviction and death.

To Kill a Mockingbird is a beloved pillar of American cultural history, and it was rewritten for Broadway partly because of that. It is characteristic of Broadway to resurrect a preexisting story rather than fostering new work by new, more representative artists. Sher said, "We're restricted to the period and conditions of our piece" and explained:

> It sort of goes into the category of the history play. It's not pretending to be a contemporary play. It's about a certain period of our history told from the point of view of a white woman in the '30s to the '50s … It's not necessarily the same way as if it was a contemporary piece, challenging other things. And there are great places where that happens. If you can go to New York Theatre Workshop or you go to MCC or you go to Off-Broadway, they may be a little bit less commercial and more ferocious and complex in their approach to questions. Or you may find some of that on Broadway as well, but it's a very expensive place to put on a piece of theatre and so you end up in a little bit more complex dynamic.

To Kill a Mockingbird includes a relevant narrative of racism in the criminal justice system, worsened by community prejudice. The play is consistently talked about in conversation with present-day race relations, particularly Black Lives Matter. Reviews of the production consistently use phrases like "in the age of Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movement" (Evans), note how the show is "rocketing the story to the Black Lives Matter era" (Dziemianowicz), and make claims like "this 'Mockingbird' is for the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter era" (Rodriguez). *To Kill a Mockingbird* does connect to Black Lives Matter, but not as explicitly as a contemporary piece, actually written in response to Black Lives Matter, could.

The child narrators in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are played by adults: "Scout, who ages from six to nine over the course of Mockingbird, will be played by 40-year-old Celia Keenan-Bolger. Jem, who ages from 10 to 13, will be played by 27-year-old Will Pullen. Dill, who ages from seven to 10, will be played by 29-year-old Gideon Glick" (Bonazzo). Sorkin explained that this change would reflect his reimagination of the story as a memory play (Bonazzo), but it also results from age-based estimation of performers. Jeff Daniels, who originated[9] the role of Atticus Finch in the play, said on *Today*, "The performances of the three folks—Celia [Keenan-Bolger] and Will [Pullen] and Gideon [Glick]—they make the show as far as I'm concerned. And it works. Besides you've got Aaron Sorkin dialogue. Find me a nine-year-old that can do that.

[9] Originating a role means being the first person to play that character.

They don't exist" (Fierberg, "Jeff Daniels"). Many a young actor has disproven this assessment—think of eleven-year-old Sydney Lucas enrapturing the theatre community with her 2015 Tony performance of *Fun Home*'s "Ring of Keys"—but Daniels is not alone in his evaluation of child actors. Broadway plays and musicals often give children small roles or leave them out entirely. Musicals almost always feature leads in their teens and early twenties, but the characters are often portrayed by actors in their late twenties and early thirties. Age represents another identity category restricted on Broadway.

A gender non-conforming actor, Nina Grollman, succeeded Keenan-Bolger as Scout, a character who defies and rejects gender roles. Grollman commented, Scout is "constantly confronted with these questions of her gender and how she's not quite fitting into the mold, and she's always wearing overalls. But the lovely thing is: she never really questions herself" (Fierberg, "Nina Grollman"). Scout's relationship with gender takes on different meanings in 2019, when she is perceived as genderqueer, than in 1960, when she was read simply as a tomboy. Grollman said, "Scout's queerness is not explicitly brought up or talked about, but lives in my performance because it can't help but live there" (Fierberg, "Nina Grollman"). Grollman's identity informs the performance of Scout's identity, once again demonstrating the impact of the actor on reception of the character.

Tootsie

Tootsie and *The Cher Show* both deal with the position of women in the entertainment industry. In light of the #MeToo movement and recent conversations about women having more respect and agency in the workforce, especially in entertainment, these stories are relevant in national dialogue and therefore attractive on Broadway. While these productions respond to #MeToo in content, they did not make efforts for meaningful inclusion of women in the industry.

Even when telling stories about women—and their experiences in entertainment—actual women get excluded from the process. *Tootsie* and *The Cher Show* both focus on empowerment and reclamation of the entertainment industry, but that message does not extend to its production.

Referring to *Tootsie* and *Kiss Me, Kate*, a Playbill article read, "This year, behind two great women is a great director: Scott Ellis" (Peikert). The same article, penned by a man journalist, synopsizes *Tootsie* as "about a difficult actor who disguises himself as a woman for an audition and ends up with an entirely new career and understanding of the female experience" (Peikert). What this leaves out is the fact that Michael gets to turn off "the female experience" at will. As a white, straight, cisgender man, he does not experience the emotional labor of being marginalized. Ultimately, Michael feels how women are condescended to, accused of hysteria, underpaid, and forced to toe the line between compassionate and overly emotional. Julie, Michael's romantic interest and fellow actor, reminds him that this is only a small part of what women face; he cannot understand the toll of rape culture and other forms of violence against women.

Tootsie is clearly a post-#MeToo show, with a director who pursues Julie and condescends to Dorothy. At one point, when adjusting the blocking, he physically guides an actor and makes the comment, "I am moving you, not touching you," in proactive defense against sexual harassment allegations (Horn and Yazbek). As Dorothy, Michael makes the show within the show feminist. He contributes to the show as he never did successfully as Michael, but this is not because of his presentation as a woman instead of a man; in fact, one would expect the opposite effect. It is because Julie and the woman producer—who outranks the director, since she provides the money—support his ideas for the show. In *Tootsie*, the moments of women's power come from women's solidarity, not privilege. What allows Michael to contribute his

artistic opinions is not his change in gender presentation but rather the openness to collaboration exhibited by the producer. The director mistreats Dorothy just as he has mistreated Michael in the past, but with an added touch of misogyny. Ultimately, it is not that the women are treated better but that the women treat people better.

The Cher Show

The Cher Show illuminates Cher's complex experiences with the entertainment industry and the challenges that she has faced as a woman. The musical chronicles men—husbands and directors alike—controlling Cher and her music over the course of her career. Three Cher characters represent different stages of her life, and the three selves support each other during the hard moments and when the men in her life mistreat her. The musical incorporates Cher's famous quote, "My mom said to me, 'One day, you should settle down and marry a rich man.' I said, 'Mom, I am a rich man.'" Above all else, *The Cher Show* is a story of independence, strength, and empowerment. It is an account of a woman taking control of her art and her life. This comes across even in the title, which turns *The Sonny and Cher Show* (the name of her 1970s television show with her husband) into *The Cher Show*. Now, it is all about her.

Of the three examples from last season, Cher is the only one with a say over the presentation of her story. Granted, she is the only fully non-fiction character, but also her fame and fortune provided her control over her story—a story about how little control many woman celebrities have over their lives and careers. Rick Elice wrote *The Cher Show*, but he did it under her supervision. When I saw the production, the actresses playing Cher had the entire audience on their feet and clapping during "Finale ('Believe'/'Strong Enough'/'Woman's World'/'All Or Nothing'/'You Haven't Seen The Last of Me')." *The Cher Show* is a story of ownership, and by the end there is no doubt that she owns the show and her story.

Discussion

Following recent pushes for increased inclusion and diversity, Broadway has seen more significant changes in casting than in creative teams. This shift is meaningful, but it does not transform the core of the institution, which is still dominated by white men. Broadway is desperately lacking in representations of trans and non-binary people, differently abled people, women, and people of color. The three shows discussed in this chapter, *To Kill a Mockingbird, Tootsie,* and *The Cher Show*, all adapted preexisting stories about marginalized people that never fully belonged to those people. Because of her position of notoriety, Cher did have oversight over the adaptation of her life story, but the characters in the musical repeatedly make it clear that her work, persona, and story were often controlled by men. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a classic American tale about inequality toward black people, written by a white woman and focusing on how Tom's trial and death affects a white family. *Tootsie* takes on the experiences of women in theatre, with creators and a main character who are men. *Tootsie* has been discussed as one of the shows of the season about women's experiences, even though its plot is about a man attempting to benefit from impersonating a woman. The show is a fitting metaphor for this chapter: white men attempting to benefit from the experiences of people who do not have their privilege. This applies not only to the writers and directors of these three shows but, more broadly, to the state of the Broadway institution. In the wake of *Hamilton*, the Broadway community called for more diversity and celebrated the increased presence of performers of color, but that inclusion did not break the surface of the Broadway institution. While more actors of color took the stage, producers and creative teams mostly retained their homogeneity. In Goffmanian terms, the front-stage progressed and the back-stage remained the same—*appearing* to change while retaining the same systems of control.

CHAPTER TWO
SALVAGING THE CLASSICS: *OKLAHOMA!* AND *KISS ME, KATE*

> "I think people are ready for more authentic voices and some more radical storytelling. I think people want to see progress, and this is a very progressive staging of this story—and it's a very progressive story—but I think they're ready for it."
>
> —Damon Daunno, on the reimagined revival of *Oklahoma!*

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Oklahoma!* (1943) and Cole Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), the only two musical revivals of the 2018-2019 Broadway season, both hold prominent places in musical theatre history and underwent changes to make their new productions more compatible with the sensibilities of 2019 audiences. The practice of altering texts and majorly reimagining staging has not been the norm on Broadway, but it is becoming more commonplace with increased conversation about the issue of reproducing and reinforcing outdated representations through revivals. The 2019-2020 season continues the trend of modernized revivals with reimagined productions of *Company* (1970) by Stephen Sondheim and George Furth and *West Side Story* (1957) by Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, and Arthur Laurents. This practice highlights Broadway's influence as a major source of culture—especially as one that operates through human portrayals—and the responsibility attached to it. The question is: can reimagined revivals of classic[10] musicals fit the values of 2019 audiences while preserving the essence of the original work?

Revivals are popular with Broadway investors because they have more financial security than new productions. Musicals that get revived have already proven themselves to be successful, and they have preexisting fanbases eager to get a ticket. Revivals also carry a sense of nostalgia for the era when the play or musical originally debuted or when a fan first encountered

[10] Broadway classics are understood to be the hit musicals written during Broadway's "golden age," between 1943 and 1959. This classification indicates the significance of Rodgers and Hammerstein's partnership, as the years of the Golden Age represent their first (Oklahoma!) to last (The Sound of Music) musicals together.

it. Most theatre lovers clearly remember their first experience with *Oklahoma!*, and for many it was one of the first shows which they attended, to which they listened, or in which they performed. The revival jackpot runs out, though, when audiences begin to see a show as outdated and problematic rather than nostalgic. Stronger pushes for inclusion and three-dimensional representations of women and people of color have caused many classic Broadway shows to fall flat for present-day audiences, resulting in criticism and low ticket sales. The concept of the modernized revival provides a solution; it maintains the classics—and the financial benefits of familiar stories—while being palatable for modern audiences. Reimagined revivals may even bring in more profit by appealing to artistically conservative audiences who want to see how their beloved shows are being handled and progressive audiences who applaud social consciousness. Those altering the musicals must find a way to appease both sides. The 2019 revivals of *Oklahoma!* and *Kiss Me, Kate* demonstrate two ways of approaching this: complete overhaul or minor changes. This was mirrored the year before with the revivals of *My Fair Lady* and *Carousel*.

2017-2018 Revivals

The 2017-2018 Broadway season saw three musical revivals: *Once on This Island* (Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, 1990), *Carousel* (Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, 1945), and *My Fair Lady* (Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, 1956). *Once on This Island* won the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. The musical's first revival, this production was staged in the round (at the same theater as this season's *Oklahoma!* revival) with sand and live animals on stage. It was a true spectacle. The other two revivals of that season, both revived multiple times in the decades since their debuts, set the stage for how to present classic musicals in the current era.

Carousel went on without edit, retaining the nostalgia of its 1873 tale on the coast of Maine—and its unchallenged elements of domestic violence. *Carousel*'s story involves carnival barker Billy Bigelow, who kills himself after an unsuccessful robbery attempt and ends up in purgatory. He can go back to the world of the living for one day to redeem himself, and when he does he meets his daughter, Louise. And he hits her. Afterward, she tells her mother, Julie, "He hit me—hard—I heard the sound of it—but it didn't hurt, Mother! It didn't hurt at all—it was jest [*sic*] as if he—kissed my hand!" (Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Carousel*, 175). Louise asks, "Is it possible, Mother, fer [*sic*] someone to hit you hard like that—real loud and hard—and not hurt you at all?" (Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Carousel*, 176). Julie responds that it is possible, and she knows because Billy has hit her too. Mother and daughter hug and go into the house. In the end, Billy goes to heaven, and no one questions how he has treated his wife and daughter. In the 2018 revival, this went unchanged, which garnered criticism. Additionally, this production featured Joshua Henry, a black actor, as Billy Bigelow, which did more to advance stereotypes of black men as violent than it did to promote racial inclusion on Broadway stages. This exhibits colorblind casting—as opposed to color-conscious casting, which actively seeks to subvert existing racial stereotypes. In "The Problem With Broadway Revivals: They Revive Gender Stereotypes, Too," journalist Michael Paulson writes about the revival of *Carousel*:

> Scott Rudin, the lead producer of the current revival, said the creative team, led by the director Jack O'Brien, would not be changing the show's text (other than a possible minor tweak to reflect the fact that Mr. Henry is African-American). "We're going to do it as written — it's what they wrote, and it's the truth of the characters," he said. "Julie does not stand for every woman, and Louise does not stand for every teenage girl." (The production declined to make Ms. Mueller [who played Julie] available for an interview.) Mr. Rudin, who frequently produces revivals of plays and musicals, noted that "half of the great works depict troubled relationships, and I don't think it makes any sense to whitewash them."

The 2018 revival of *Carousel* did not change or problematize Billy's relationships with his wife and daughter, which the created team defended by claiming fidelity to the original work.

The revival of *My Fair Lady*, on the other hand, reinvented the musical's moral. *My Fair Lady* is adapted from George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play, *Pygmalion,* about the Greek figure by the same name who detests women but falls in love with a sculpture of a woman which he has carved. To Pygmalion, women are only lovable if they are inanimate and moldable, and this translates to the character of Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. Higgins places a bet that, with his grooming, he can make a Cockney flower girl named Eliza Doolittle pass as a lady. He belittles Eliza and hurls insults at her throughout the show but begins to fall for her as she embodies his lessons. *My Fair Lady* has critiques of class and gender inequality built into its text; the musical simply has not been staged to reflect them in the past. As a result, the tone of the show could change in the 2018 revival without major alterations to the script. The primary change in this version was the conclusion. Instead of ending up with Higgins, Eliza leaves him, not out of rage but out of respect for what, she now realizes, she deserves. Journalist Tim Teeman noted in an article about the adjusted ending, "The majestic *My Fair Lady* has been given a #MeToo makeover. Or, more accurately, it has reclaimed the ending that George Bernard Shaw intended for *Pygmalion*" ("My Fair Lady"). The Eliza of 2018 is feisty, and she has space to be so because of the basis for it in the musical's original text.

The revival of *Carousel* ran for five months, while the revival of *My Fair Lady* ran for fifteen months and announced a national tour at the end of its run. These two productions opened only one week apart, but they handled the issue of reviving classic musicals very differently. *Carousel* only cut one song and, as mentioned above, had a "minor tweak" due to its casting. *My Fair Lady* changed its entire tone, while remaining true to the original script. The approach of the latter is arguably riskier in the Broadway realm, but it paid off with more praise and commercial

success. These two methods align with the revivals of the following season, *Kiss Me, Kate* and *Oklahoma!*

2018-2019 Revivals

Oklahoma! and *Kiss Me, Kate*, from the so-called golden age of musical theatre, are foundational works in the history of the genre. *Oklahoma!* is considered to be the first "integrated" musical—with music and dialogue flowing together to convey plot, the standard ever since—and the beginning of true musical theatre. It also marked the start of a legendary partnership, as the first Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. *Oklahoma!* was wildly popular in the United States, reaching far beyond theatre crowds. *Kiss Me, Kate* was Cole Porter's first integrated musical and won the first ever Tony Award for Best Musical. These two shows stand as cornerstones of Broadway and musical theatre history. Their songs remain beloved after the better part of a century, but both shows now feel problematic for many audiences.

To keep them alive and selling in the twenty-first century, both musicals received a makeover in 2019. For *Kiss Me, Kate*, this meant minor textual edits. *Oklahoma!* saw no changes to the script but underwent major adjustments to its staging to highlight the show's darker themes. Both productions were intended as limited runs on Broadway—meaning that they had a set closing date from the beginning, so the goal was not to run for as long as possible—but both ended up extending their runs. The two productions had different trajectories, though. *Kiss Me, Kate* went straight to Broadway. With a cherished story and a cast brimming with Broadway stars, it promised the most financial security possible for a Broadway show. *Oklahoma!*, however, had to prove itself because of its bold reimagination. Only after wildly successful productions at Bard College and St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn did the show transfer to Broadway. It was not intended for Broadway, which gave it the freedom to be so daring. As

W.B. Worthen noted, "Theatrical innovation has been spurred primarily by theaters outside the commercial mainstream, especially by small, amateur 'little theaters,' by university and college theaters, by community theaters, and by ethnic theaters" (972).

The revival of *Oklahoma!* received far more buzz than did the revival of *Kiss Me, Kate.* For the most part, this *Kiss Me, Kate* was just another production of the same show, while this *Oklahoma!* was something completely new. The 2019 *Kiss Me, Kate* branded itself as a feminist reimagining of the musical, and that branding got people in the seats, but ultimately it did not deliver on substantial changes. As the only two revivals of the 2018-2019 season, these were the only musicals nominated for the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. *Oklahoma!* won, even though its stripped-down performance did away with much of the classic Broadway pizzazz, most likely because it brought something new and different to Broadway.

Kiss Me, Kate

Kiss Me, Kate adapts Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. The characters put on a new musical version of the classic play, and their personalities mirror the characters in Shakespeare's work. The main couple is Lilli, in need of taming, and Fred, her director and costar who is the man for the job. *Kiss Me, Kate* does not criticize *The Taming of the Shrew* but rather adopts it. Lilli is a fierce and independent woman, but that part of her character is meant to make her off-putting, and Fred is meant to fix that about her. The 2019 revival leans into her fiery nature, but it still ends with her getting tamed and lets that be a happy conclusion. Tim Teeman writes in his review of the revival, "[Lilli] is nobody's fool, nobody's victim, but the show isn't so much rewritten that she stands up to her suffocating husband-to-be, nor does it explain how and why she settles for what and who she settles for at the end." He adds, "This is a conservative, conventional tweaking rather than audacious re-scaffolding of a classic, as in Bard

Summerscape's *Oklahoma!*" (Teeman, "'Kiss Me, Kate'?"). The new productions of *My Fair Lady* and *Oklahoma!* changed the meaning of the shows' endings, and that made a major impact on the overall message of the show. Contrastingly, this *Kiss Me, Kate* condones the original by still having Lilli kiss and end up with Fred.

Theatre performer and writer Amanda Green, who made the new edits to *Kiss Me, Kate*, explained, "I'm not re-inventing the wheel with *Kiss Me, Kate* … You can't erase it or pretend that 1949 is 2019, but there are things that you can adjust to make [Lilli] more of an equal [to Fred]" (Clement). The biggest textual change is to the song "I Am Ashamed That Women Are So Simple," which is now "I Am Ashamed That People Are So Simple." Beyond that, the adjustments are fairly minor. Lyrics such as "If she says your behavior is heinous / Kick her right in the Coriolanus" and "Oh, baby / Will you be mine? / Bianca, Bianca / You'd better answer yes / Or Poppa spanka" remain unchanged and unquestioned (C. Porter).

Both *Oklahoma!* and *Kiss Me, Kate* fell short in doing justice to their woman characters in 2019, but they got heralded as feminist simply by comparison to the original versions. The ditzy, sex-loving, comical contrasts (Ado Annie and Lois Lane) to the more shrewish but respectable leading ladies (Laurey and Lilli) are still laughed at in these revivals. As I discussed in chapter one, Broadway has a long history of empty, usually submissive, woman characters. Since the beginning of the #MeToo movement, there have been more conversations than ever about how women get represented on Broadway stages[11]. Just about every review of the revivals discussed in this chapter references #MeToo. The fact that these musicals are getting revived during this moment without fully correcting their gender portrayals demonstrates that Broadway lags behind in representing gender equality.

[11] While this has not been not the beginning of these criticisms, it has been the beginning of them having enough influence to affect marketability.

Oklahoma!

Oklahoma! tells the story of Claremore, Oklahoma, as the territory is on the verge of statehood in 1906. Its moral is best summarized by the sentiment, "the farmer and the cowman should be friends," bringing together everyone in the territory as one community. In "Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of 'Oklahoma!' in American Consciousness," musical theatre scholar Bruce Kirle writes: "In a larger sense, the focus on fragmentation versus community historicizes the isolationist/interventionist conflict that preceded and shadowed America's participation in World War II" (251). Until the 2019 revival, directed by Daniel Fish, the ostracization of farmhand Jud by the entire community represented good conquering evil for Oklahoma's fresh start as a state.[12] Fish's production, however, focuses on Jud's mistreatment, making the story about the overlooked exclusion of some in community-building. Describing *Oklahoma!* as "America's childhood," Damon Daunno, who played Curly in the revival, reflected:

> In order for a community to exist, they have to push somebody out. And if you look at this story as well—just at face value, just reading the words of the script—Jud really doesn't do anything wrong, you know? But everyone has chosen that he's the one that nobody likes and sort of just wish this guy would go away for reasons that you can't really always explain. It happens in school, it happens at work, it happens in popular culture. You either like someone and they may get a pass or you don't for no reason, even though we're all people and we all deserve love.

Undoubtedly, Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote Jud as *Oklahoma!*'s villain. Even though it left the script unchanged, the 2019 production reframed Jud's character, making him the victim. Patrick Vaill, who played Jud from Bard all the way to Broadway, recalled:

[12] A Persian peddler named Ali Hakim is the community's other outsider. In this production, his exclusion is played down and Jud's up. Ali loses his usual exaggerated accent and mannerisms so that nothing beyond the script aligns him with stereotypes. Even so, not changing the script, and therefore retaining such lines as "I got a brother in Persia, got six wives … I got another brother in Persia only got one wife. He's a bachelor" (Rodgers and Hammerstein), prevents complete detachment of Ali from stereotype.

> I was stuck on the traditional way this character is cast, as this large, imposing figure. I remember I got the part right before winter break, so I had six weeks to develop an idea of how I would play someone big and scary. I walked into rehearsal and Daniel [Fish] gently, quietly worked to release me from those constraints. The best thing about Daniel is that he treated *Oklahoma!* like a completely new play. So he encouraged us to look at the text simply for what it is. The character started to come alive for me in ways I wasn't expecting. Over time, he coaxed from me this very personal and tender portrayal of someone who is in profound pain. (Stewart)

In this revival, Jud is kinder, softer, more vulnerable. He exhibits violence only when pushed to it, which comes to a head in the ending, dramatically restaged in Fish's production. Traditionally, Jud comes to Curly and Laurey's wedding, starts a fight with Curly, and dies in a karmic moment by falling on his knife. In the 2019 version, Jud presents Curly with a gun, seeming to beg Curly to kill him[13], and slowly takes a step forward to give Curly a reason to shoot. Laurey and Curly both wear white, representing their innocence in the eyes of the community, and hold hands, representing shared culpability. When Curly shoots Jud, covering himself and Laurey in blood, no one gets up or helps. They only show emotion when the conversation shifts to Curly's accountability. They feed him defenses and "bend" the law to keep him free. Curly reprises his opening number, singing, "I got a beautiful feelin / Ev'rythin's goin' my way," which takes on a sinister new meaning (Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!*). The show ends with everyone singing "You're doin' fine, Oklahoma. Oklahoma, O.K." (Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!*). They deliver these lines directly to the audience, threateningly, solidifying that *this* is what their community is.

Even in death, Jud is cast aside by the community, but his recharacterization as the victim is complicated by his behavior toward Laurey. Laurey fears Jud and, textually, has reason to; he

[13] Earlier in the show, Curly tries to convince Jud to kill himself by telling him that the whole town would show their love for him at the funeral and finally treat him with compassion. This moment, as well as the entire community (and Laurey) repeatedly choosing Curly over him, makes him suicidal rather than homicidal at the end of this revival.

watches her and feels entitled to her. To maintain Jud's sympathetic image, Fish's production creates ambiguity in a scene of sexual assault, which has been staged with various degrees of violence over the years. In this production, the lights go out, we hear Laurey and Jud kissing, and then Laurey abruptly ends it. Jud still may have pushed Laurey beyond what she wanted, but it mostly comes across as a consensual moment followed by Laurey changing her mind, regretting her actions, and hurling unwarranted curses. The production puts Laurey at fault for provoking Jud's anger—and later makes her share the blame for his death—and it blurs the legitimacy of her fear after the incident. In the time of #MeToo and #BelieveSurvivors, with stories of sexual assault going unbelieved and unacknowledged, it feels irresponsible to prioritize the reinvention of Jud's character at the expense of Laurey.

For the most part, *Oklahoma!*'s two-dimensional representations of women remain in the 2019 revival. The exception is that Ado Annie, the comical foil to Laurey, claims control over her sexual actions. Her song "I Cain't Say No" goes from a declaration of passivity to one of sexual liberation through Ali Stroker's determined delivery. Still, Ado Annie remains the joke of the show, because that is what Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote her to be. As for the other woman characters, Laurey embodies a tomboyishness until she embraces her femininity by allowing Curly to love her. In this production, Laurey sheds her usual feistiness and floats through the musical in a dreamlike haze, exuding what could be either defeat or disinterest. Aunt Eller occupies a position of respect and authority in the town but only because she masculinizes herself. The only other woman character in the show is Gertie Cummings, who serves as Curly's back-up option and is defined only by her irritating laugh.

Aesthetic Changes

Rather than changing the text of *Oklahoma!*, the 2019 revival stripped it down aesthetically to bring out the show's inherent darkness. Damon Daunno explained:

> We're really trying, actually, to be deeply reverent to the source material and not change it. We haven't changed a single word. We honor all the melodies and things, and it's to really let this material be heard. Any changes have been stripping it down and cutting the fat and any potential distraction or more cartoony two-dimensional elements that keep it separate, audience and performer. This was meant to be a sort of distillation of its essence and let everybody come here and experience this thing together.

That distillation came in a variety of forms: the cast was reduced to essential characters only, a small band (set up on the stage) replaced the traditional orchestra, and the orchestrations were simplified. On all fronts, this *Oklahoma!* was made bare, putting all attention on human interaction, and not just among characters. As performance scholar Susan Bennett explains, "The physical arrangement of a theatre as well as the degree of contact between performers and spectators at this stage may well limit, or even determine, the interpretive strategies adopted by the collective audience" (139). For the revival, the theater was set up like a community center, even serving chili and cornbread to the audience during intermission. It was staged in the round, with some audience members actually seated on stage. The lights stayed up[14] throughout the show, allowing (and forcing) everyone in the room to see each other's reactions. Damon Daunno noted, "There's no hiding. It's full culpability for every single person and establishing the vibe of either support or disdain at any given moment. There's a really interesting thing that happens in more challenging moments of the show where not everybody's reacting in the same way, and so you see audience members potentially judging other audience members for their reaction." Closing the gap between audience and performer made the audience part of the community and, in turn, complicit in the characters' actions as bystanders.

[14] This, as well as all actors remaining on stage, grows less consistent over the course of the show, as the façade of community gradually breaks down

The last Broadway revival of *Oklahoma!* before the 2019 production, directed by Trevor Nunn, transferred from the West End soon after 9/11 and received "lukewarm reviews" because its publicity created false expectations of a "more sexually raw, gritty interpretation" (Kirle 272-273). Bruce Kirle remarks, "Perhaps Nunn's Broadway *Oklahoma!* was disappointing because it was not dark enough" (273). Seventeen years later, the darker, grittier, sexier approach proved successful. The 2019 *Oklahoma!* upped its sexual tension and leaned into its designation as the sexy revival, reposting sexy tweets about the show on the official Instagram account's story every week and referring to itself as #oklaheauxma. Patrick Vaill tagged each photo about the show with #thisoklahomafucks. In addition to its sexiness, the revival's dark tone appealed to 2019 audiences more than the original "buoyantly optimistic valentine to American community." (Kirle 272). On the adaptive and evolving topicality of Fish's production, Damon Daunno said, "We started it in 2015, and so there wasn't such an on-the-nose attempt to relate it to the current state of the world … The world has changed in a way that it was effective in 2015 and now it's even more effective, which only proves the point of its timelessness and the things we do as community and how we choose who's in and who's out." The depictions of exclusion relate to intense political polarization, xenophobia, and even cyber-bullying prevalent in 2019.

While critics and most audience members raved about Fish's vision for *Oklahoma!*, not everyone appreciated the show's new look. As Bennett explains, "The hypotheses which constitute an audience's immediate reading are inevitably influenced by, as well as measured against, the internal horizon of expectations of a performance. Where the text of the performance is known to some or all of the spectators, the *mise en scène* will likely be read against that knowledge" (141). From the admirers to the critics, just about everyone who saw this *Oklahoma!*

compared it to some other iteration of the show. Damon Daunno described the revival as polarizing and said:

> I think folks are either really into it and get to really hear these scenes and sounds in new ways that hopefully elicit a stronger emotional response. But then some folks are really defensive and sort of possessive of more traditional stagings of it and they think "this isn't *Oklahoma!*" and all of that. They want more of the shiny elements of it, but it's a dark story inherently.

Younger people in particular voiced appreciation of the moral reassessment, while many older audiences complained that the toned-down version was not as beautiful as the *Oklahoma!* that they love.

The Death of the Author?

For some, changing another artist's work presents a moral issue, which often serves as the justification for leaving classic musicals in their original state. Now, the conception is shifting to consider the moral issue of perpetuating outdated representations in productions seen by hundreds of people every night. It is one thing to stage *Carousel* in this era, and it is another to do so on the biggest scale in American theatre. Presenting inequalities and stereotypes without problematizing them threatens to normalize and reinforce them, and Broadway producers and receivers are giving increasing consideration to this danger.

So, to what extent does a revised revival change what the show is and alter its legacy? A stripped-down *Oklahoma!* that leaves audiences feeling sick instead of sing-songy may be *the Oklahoma!* for some people, perhaps even for an entire generation, especially if it becomes the new norm for staging the show. Directors that reimagine shows, like Fish, can change the meaning of works created by other people. By establishing the integrated musical, *Oklahoma!* made a place for all musicals that followed, but it lost its own place as society progressed. Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote *Oklahoma!* as a progressive show, and for the 1940s it was.

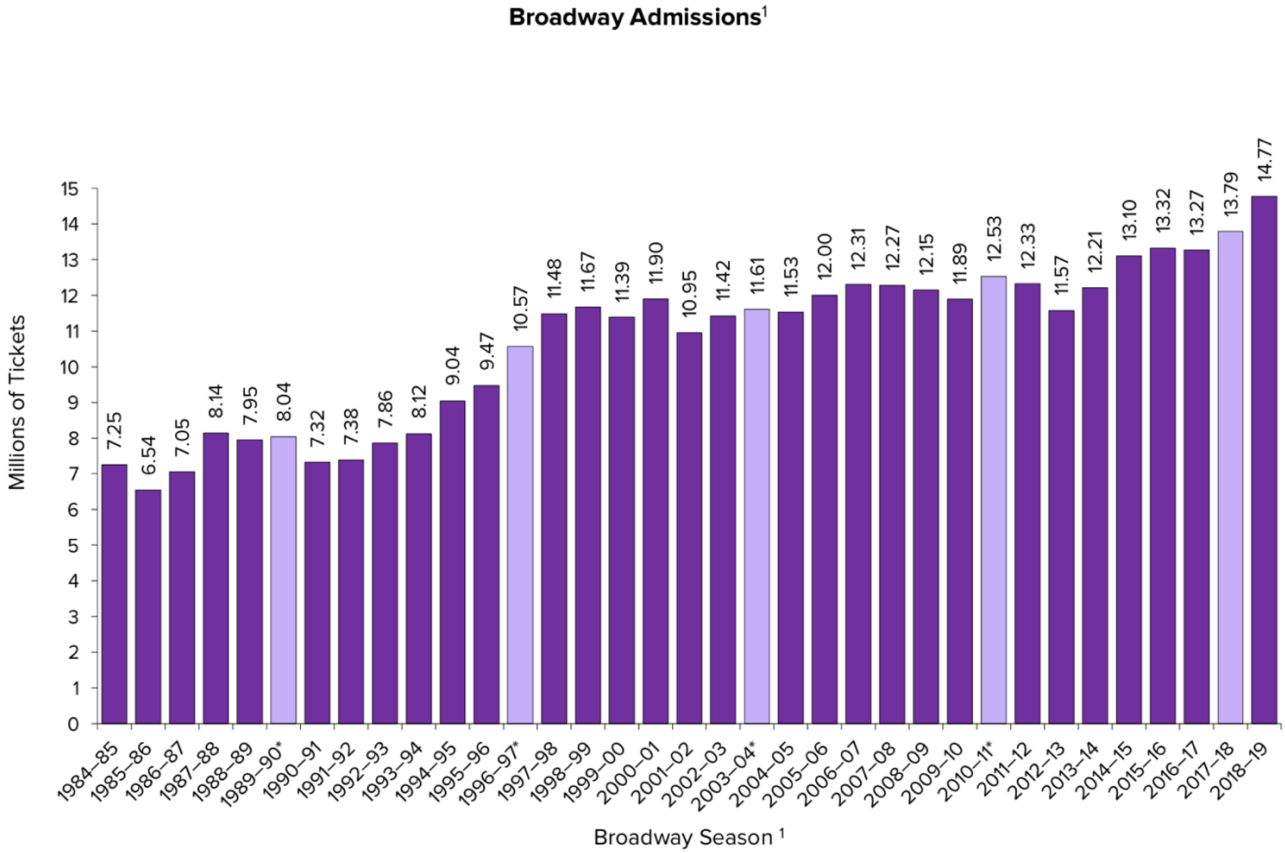
Arianne Johnson Quinn, a scholar on musical theatre and culture, writes, "Hammerstein played a key role in the representation of the post-war American political onstage, often challenging assumptions about race and identity in his plays and combining a strong sense of equality and progressive values (Most, 2000)" (75). As society shifted, *Oklahoma!*'s traditional staging lost that progressive effect. One must consider what truly does justice to the original musical: maintaining its staging or its effect as a work of social commentary. Fish's production put *Oklahoma!* back on the theatrical map as a relevant work rather than a historical artifact. It is once again at the forefront of theatrical innovation, now for how shows can be modernized. The success of its reimagined revival exhibits that, even though Rodgers and Hammerstein lived and wrote in an imperfect past, theatre-makers have a choice in whether or not they bring those imperfections into the present.

We must complicate the taken-for-granted relationship between classic works and timelessness. The classics endure because people continue to find them worth sharing. Reinventing them makes these products of a different time culturally accessible today, keeping them relevant. That is what makes possible a sort of timelessness. Reworking classic musicals reinforces them by contributing to their legacy, whether the new productions challenge or strengthen the previous composition of that legacy. Recent Broadway seasons have revised classic musicals for a new era, but the new era still overflows with inequality. The 2019 *Oklahoma!* may inform more progressive versions of the show in the future, or it may make people want to return to more conventional stagings. Most likely, it will do both. Reproductions of works on Broadway all build upon each other, changing in response to shifts in society. Classic musicals will continue to receive revivals and revisions, mapping a history of social evolution in the process.

Discussion

Reworking musicals is about salvaging what is meaningful about the original work. If done properly, it offers a means of maintaining classic and beautiful works without perpetuating their problematic elements. Amidst ubiquitous conversations about gender equality and the #MeToo movement, feminist revivals are marketable in this moment. However, living up to this label would require a complete overhaul of many classic works. The 2019 revival of *Kiss Me, Kate* advertised itself as feminist but only made superficial changes. This allowed it to retain the show's traditional fanbase but disappointed socially progressive audiences attracted by the marketing. Daniel Fish's *Oklahoma!* completely changed the energy of the musical and proved that, while altering a classic is risky, when done right it creates a successful combination of beloved and topical. The revival of *Oklahoma!* exhibited the power of staging in conveying the message of a musical. Even so, a show cannot be completely freed of its problematic material without meaningful alterations to the text. The stories discussed in this chapter were written in times when women and people of color received different treatment and portrayals than they (still imperfectly) do now, and restaging them cannot escape that legacy. Modernized revivals inevitably fall short in meeting standards of the present day, because a show truly *for* the twenty-first century must be made *in* the twenty-first century.

ENTR'ACTE
GROSSES AND ATTENDANCE



Source: The Broadway League, 2019

BROADWAY SEASON STATISTICS AT A GLANCE

	2018-19	2017-18*	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15
ATTENDANCE	**14,768,254**	**13,792,614**	**13,271,252**	**13,317,980**	**13,104,066**
Musicals	11,664,925	11,454,081	11,362,732	11,102,098	10,648,948
Plays	2,901,377	2,124,534	1,798,723	2,028,326	2,369,973
Specials	201,952	213,999	109,797	187,556	85,145
GROSS	**$1,829,312,140**	**$1,697,458,795**	**$1,449,399,149**	**$1,373,253,725**	**$1,365,231,853**
Musicals	$1,431,638,440	$1,439,742,237	$1,285,180,250	$1,173,304,393	$1,108,687,921
Plays	$336,912,077	$189,438,430	$153,763,124	$181,726,052	$247,567,402
Specials	$60,761,623	$68,278,128	$10,455,776	$18,223,281	$8,976,530
PLAYING WEEKS	**1,737**	**1,624**	**1,580**	**1,648**	**1,626**
Musicals	1,278	1,216	1,239	1,254	1,224
Plays	421	367	324	372	395
Specials	38	41	17	22	7
NEW SHOWS	**38**	**33**	**45 (incl 2 r/ e)**	**39**	**37**
Musicals	13 (11 orig, 2 rev)	10 (7 orig, 3 rev)	20 (13 orig, 6 rev, 1 r/ e)	16 (11 orig, 5 rev)	15 (10 orig, 5 rev)
Plays	21 (14 orig, 7 rev)	20 (10 orig, 10 rev)	20 (10 orig, 9 rev, 1 r/ e)	20 (9 orig, 11 rev)	20 (11 orig, 9 rev)
Specials	4	3	5	3	2
AVG. PAID ADMISSION	**$123.87**	**$123.07**	**$109.21**	**$103.11**	**$104.18**
Musicals	$122.73	$125.70	$113.10	$105.68	$104.11
Plays	$116.12	$89.17	$85.48	$89.59	$104.46
Specials	$300.87	$319.06	$95.23	$97.16	$105.43

(orig = original; rev = revival; r/ e = return engagement)

Source: The Broadway League, 2019

The 2018-2019 season had the highest grosses and attendance in Broadway history.[15] As The Broadway League's "Broadway Season Statistics at a Glance" shows, musicals garner higher grosses, ticket prices, and attendance than do plays. Even so, the 2018-2019 Broadway season had twenty-one new plays compared to thirteen new musicals, likely due to the higher cost, size of creative team, and rehearsal time for musicals. Disney musicals receive the highest grosses on Broadway other than *Hamilton*, for which many people still try to obtain tickets years after its debut. Between the 2018 and 2019 Tony Awards, *Hamilton* had a gross of $167,966,030.50 and attendance of 569,821. As of March 8, 2020, when Broadway temporarily shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, *Hamilton* had a total gross of $649,868,673.25 and total attendance of 2,608,540 (on Broadway alone, not counting its touring productions). *Hadestown*, the Tony-winning Best Musical of the 2018-2019 season, had great

[15] All gross and attendance figures from "Grosses - Broadway in NYC."

success. In one calendar year (comprising the weeks[16] from the beginning of its previews until the COVID-19 Broadway shutdown (3/25/19-3/8/2020)) *Hadestown* had a gross of $62,235,335.26 and attendance of 370,890. Even so, *Hamilton* brought in 2.7 times the revenue.

These financial figures serve to demonstrate the fiscal stakes of Broadway shows. Successful productions bring in millions of dollars per week. New productions have to keep pace with the success of other shows or lose their theaters to productions that can. The attendance figures personalize that success, representing the individuals who receive the messages and experiences of the plays and musicals on Broadway. In addition to financial gain, finding success and remaining on Broadway means continuing to share a particular story and impact with audiences.

[16] The Broadway League reports grosses and attendance by week, Monday to Sunday.

CHAPTER THREE
STAGING THE SOCIAL WORLD: *HADESTOWN* AND *WHAT THE CONSTITUTION MEANS TO ME*

> *Hadestown* … is what many people consider more like dark, brooding, quote/unquote, 'high art,' as opposed to something that's more fun, cheeky, and feel-good than a *Prom* or a *Be More Chill*. Not that one is better, not that one deserves accolades over the other, not that one is good or bad, but simply in recent years you'll see that Tony voters typically recognize those types of shows.
>
> —Tyler Mount

Arbiters of culture often dismiss musical theatre as fluff entertainment, but musicals have a long history of engaging with political discourse. As I have discussed, *Oklahoma!*, the beginning of musical theatre as we know it, advocated for American unity during World War II through its story of the farmer and the cowman in 1906. This interaction with social issues has continued in the decades since. In 2015, *Hamilton* found a place not only in pop culture but in politics as well. As the show gained attention, politicians began publicly attending it to advance their campaigns. The cast seized on this political visibility to express their concerns about Vice President-elect Mike Pence's forthcoming administration when he attended the musical, just ten days after the election. Pence exited the theater during the cast's speech at curtain call. Conversely, the cast invited Hillary Clinton backstage and took pictures with her when she saw the show. Who attended *Hamilton*, and how they were received, became part of the dialogue of that political season. Lin-Manuel Miranda expressed a message in how he wrote *Hamilton*, and the show remained a platform for social and political dialogue after it premiered, evolving with social and political changes in the nation.

Sociologists Richard Peterson and Roger Kern (1996) categorize "Broadway musicals" as a "middlebrow" music genre (901). Historian Joan Shelley Rubin explains the genesis of middlebrow culture, which originated in response to the binary of highbrow and lowbrow:

> The reference to the height of the brow originally derived from phrenology and carried overtones of racial differentiation. Transformed into a description of intellectual caliber, 'highbrow' was, in the 1880s, already synonymous with 'refined'; twenty years later, 'lowbrow' came to denote a lack of cultivation. Shortly thereafter, as is well, known Van Wyck Brooks commandeered both 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' in the service of social criticism. Condemning the division in American life between effete guardians of art and practical, vulgar materialists, Brooks looked in vain for a 'genial middle ground on which cultural life could thrive (xii).

The twentieth century saw the democratization of cultural products through radio and television, creating a cultural class in between the narrow categories of high and low. While show tunes exist in this middlebrow classification, attending Broadway shows constitutes an elite activity. I contend that organizations such as the American Theatre Wing—the body that organizes the Tony Awards—foster this sense of elitism by rewarding socially conscious plays and musicals, regarded as high art, to bolster Broadway's cultural capital, consequently raising ticket prices and revenue.

Brecht and *What the Constitution Means to Me*

Socially engaged theatre often aligns with the framework of Bertolt Brecht's "epic theatre." Worthen recounts, "Brecht became particularly important in the United States as the Vietnam War and widespread civil and social discontent spurred the theater in more agitational, political directions. Feminist theater, ethnic theater, and gay and lesbian theater have all at times availed themselves of Brecht's theater theory and practice" (974). Brecht (1898-1956), a maker and philosophizer of theatre, believed that theatre could and should serve a social function; done properly, it would drive audiences to political action. A German Marxist, Brecht used his plays to speak against the Weimar Republic and Third Reich. He aimed to "convert certain institutions from places of entertainment into organs of mass communication" (Brecht 42). His epic theatre uses individual stories to speak to greater social structures and relies upon *verfremdungseffekt*, the alienation effect. This effect acts as the opposite of escapism by constantly reminding

audiences that they are in a theater, by way of such techniques as bare sets and disjointed narrative. Brecht believed that if theatre offered an escape from society then it would ease the sense of urgency for individuals to correct the injustices around them.

What the Constitution Means to Me, written by and starring Heidi Schreck, exemplifies Brechtian theatre on a contemporary Broadway stage. For the most part, the play consists of Schreck speaking directly to the audience about the Constitution and historical examples of its failings. She explains that as a fifteen-year-old girl she earned her college tuition by giving speeches on the Constitution for American Legion oratory competitions. At the time, she loved the document, but she now understands the disparity between what it says and how it has been used for oppression over the course of American history. The play acts as an amendment to her old speeches, from her current perspective and in regard to the current state of society.

The play ends with a debate between Schreck and a high school student about whether or not the Constitution should be abolished. Two black, Latina high school girls currently participating in the American Legion oratory competition rotated performances. Whether Heidi or the student defends the Constitution is random for each performance, and the audience is encouraged to participate with cheers and boos throughout the debate. At the end, the audience decides to keep or abolish the Constitution. This is an extreme example of how epic theatre creates a reciprocal relationship between actors and audience. Brecht wrote, "Once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theatre's social function" (39). This exercise in *What the Constitution Means to Me* gives the audience a vote, highlights how

audience members perform for each other through their reactions, and demonstrates how each performance is unique in live theatre.

What the Constitution Means to Me was a successful but unconventional production. Without flashy costumes, sets, and stars, its success can be attributed only to its relevant and impactful content. Schreck created this deeply personal and emotional work as she grappled with centuries of systematic violence against women and people of color— sanctified by the Constitution—and how they continue to affect Americans, including herself and her family members. I saw the play in the summer of 2019, which saw: the beginning of a new election cycle with primary debates, the Mueller Report, the ruling of no federal charges in the death of Eric Garner (and backlash related to the Black Lives Matter movement), Brett Kavanaugh's first year on the Supreme Court (and backlash related to the #MeToo movement), twenty-five new abortion bans going into effect in the United States, and immigrant detention centers at America's southern border. These major events controlled the national dialogue and connected to Schreck's manifesto on unequal constitutional protections. *What the Constitution Means to Me* was so rooted in the reality of the moment in which it played, which created an active and enraged energy in the room. Ending with the debate sent the audience out with conviction and, in true Brechtian style, a sense of "and what are you going to do about it now?"

What the Constitution Means to Me shares important information about the nation's past and present, but it would not have found its success, or even a place on Broadway, without prevalent conversations about its topics. The content is bold, but more importantly for Broadway it is currently popular enough to be profitable. Daryl Roth noted:

> I always think that theatre holds a mirror up to society. I have said that for thirty years, and I believe that this year we're seeing that very blatantly … *What the Constitution Means to Me* is a good example. People are interested now in the politics of our world,

> and they want to see it on stage. They want to be able to talk about it in a way that's not, you know, just in the newspaper.

The success of the play indicates that that is what people wanted—and, I believe, needed—to hear in that moment.

As Brecht wrote, "Real innovation attacks the roots" (41), and *What the Constitution Means to Me* does exactly that. While productions that defy the artistic formula of Broadway's culture industry push Broadway forward, and ultimately get rewarded by organizations such as the American Theatre Wing, they pose a financial risk for investors and have the most difficulty getting to Broadway. *What the Constitution Means to Me* had multiple productions before transferring to Broadway as a limited run—likely due to apprehension over the play's unconventional nature—but it got extended multiple times after receiving positive reviews and continuing to sell tickets. It was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, received two Tony nominations, and launched subsequent productions in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Chicago, as well as a national tour.

Double Event, Double Presence, Double Role, Double Consciousness: Epic Theatre from a Du Boisian Perspective

In epic theatre, the alienation effect can be achieved by limiting the audience's association with the characters on stage, usually by making the actors visible as both character and actor. Brecht describes this as "appear[ing] on the stage in a double role" (194). Actors do this by breaking the fourth wall and engaging directly with the audience to convey the political message of the show. In *What the Constitution Means to Me*, Schreck does this constantly. At the beginning of the play, she acts as her fifteen-year-old self, in naïve adoration of the Constitution. She frequently steps out to speak in retrospect, showing the contrast of what she believed then with what she has learned and experienced since. When I saw the show, she stopped while

discussing the developing situation with immigrant detention centers and said, "I'm going to be myself all the time now" because she found it too painful and irresponsible to act out belief in equal treatment in the United States while that took place. Because Schreck wrote and starred in the play (which had limited staging, lighting, and sound cues), she was able to change the show as she saw fit, in real time. It was extraordinarily adaptable for Broadway, so Schreck could and did make each show a product of its exact moment. The production, like the Constitution itself, functioned as a living document.

The idea of a double role has evolved in theatre for a variety of concepts reminiscent of both Brecht and Du Bois. Julie Taymor, director of beloved stage adaptation of *The Lion King* (the highest grossing Broadway show of all time) conceived of the double-event, a puppetry technique which makes the puppeteer visible and stylized as a continuation of the puppet (Granger 41). In regard to casting, Susan Bennett explains, "With the presence of a 'star' on stage, the audience is inevitably aware of a double presence" (152). Theorizing on processing fiction and reality simultaneously, Bennett cites Karen Gaylord: "The spectator serves as a psychological participant and empathetic collaborator in the maintenance and 'truth' of the fictive world onstage … Thus the theatrical occasion involves a double consciousness for all concerned" (139). These examples indicate simultaneous awareness of the stage world and the social world during theatrical performances, strengthening the connection between onstage messages and real-world implications.

Cultural Capital and Elitism on Broadway

In his essay, "The Forms of Capital" (1986), sociologist Pierre Bourdieu outlines three types of capital that individuals and groups possess: economic, social, and cultural. Cultural capital exists in three states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. For theatre, the three

states of cultural capital exist in the following ways. The embodied state is cultivated by developing "taste" in relation to theatrical productions—learning, usually from an early age, to value the shows that qualify as high art. The objectified state for theatre exists in the ticket, the experience of attending shows. The institutional state represents the fact that society deems theatre valuable and considers it requisite to be highly educated and cultured. Within the realm of theatre, the labeling of some shows as high art and others as base entertainment constitutes the institutional state of cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, "The structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world" ("Capital," 46). Highbrow theatre, which elicits high cultural capital, reflects the tastes of the upper classes. Therefore, emphasis on raising cultural capital means emphasis on attracting the elite.

Much of Broadway's cultural capital results from the elite nature of attending its shows. The theatre district is located in midtown Manhattan, an expensive area of an expensive city. Easy access to Broadway has geographic, in addition to financial, restrictions. This creates an exclusive cohort of regular Broadway-goers. According to The Broadway League's 2018-2019 "Broadway Facts," "Broadway attracts repeat customers—62% of the audience attends at least two shows a season, and the average Broadway theatergoer attends five shows." Additionally, people who saw *fifteen* or more shows in the past year "comprised only 4.7% of all theatregoers, but accounted for 28% of all theatre visits" (*The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2018–2019*). Clearly, this small group has a significant impact on ticket sales, and therefore influence on Broadway as a whole. Analyzing the arts generally, Peterson and Kern assert, "A number of social processes at work over the past century make exclusion increasingly difficult. Rising levels of living, broader education, and presentation of the arts via the media have made elite

aesthetic taste more accessible to wider segments of the population, devaluing the arts as markers of exclusion" (905). This is true for art forms that can be publicly distributed, but for Broadway shows—cultural products confined to a single time and place—accessibility is particularly difficult to achieve.

On Broadway, there exists a hierarchy of cultural value within adaptations, which is tied to the capital of the source material's medium. Adaptations of books receive more serious consideration than those of films—and, within these categories, material that makes a social statement outweighs material that entertains. The scale of valuation for adaptations contradicts the likeliness to be staged. In recent years, productions from major media companies such as Disney and Universal Pictures have dominated Broadway. These usually come in the form of musical adaptations of well-known movies and television series that appeal to whole families and have a built-in fanbase. As Tyler Mount noted, "Everyone knows what *Frozen* is. Everyone knows what *Aladdin*, *Newsies* is. So you're already leaps and bounds ahead." Worthen explains, "The theater has sought to recapture an audience from film and television: by emphasizing the unique excitement of a dazzling live spectacle" (978). The major media companies that produce musicals on Broadway have the resources to create an extravagant spectacle and the recognition to profit from it. These pop-musicals reproduce preexisting stories (instead of encouraging the creation of new ones), advance the commerciality of Broadway, and diverge from theatre's designation as high art. While these musicals tend to attract the largest audiences, they rarely receive prestigious accolades like Tony awards. There is a disconnect between what makes the most money on Broadway and what receives the legitimizing recognition.

***Hadestown* and the Tony Awards**

Hadestown, written by singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell, premiered in its original form at a community theater in Vermont in 2006 and arrived on Broadway after twelve years, a concept album, and productions at multiple theaters (McHenry). After this long journey, the musical, based on the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice and Hades and Persephone, became the hottest ticket of the season, especially after winning the 2019 Tony Award for Best Musical. It was also the only musical of the season with a creative team comprised entirely of women. *Hadestown* tackles themes of capitalism and climate change and contemplates the viability of love and art in a world of class divides and industrial exploitation, which struck a chord with audiences. Daryl Roth said about *Hadestown,* "That to me is such a current story. Really, it is. It's about class, it's about the divisions in the world, and I think that's holding a mirror up to today."

Mitchell adapts the myth of Hades and Persephone to demonstrate how money corrupts values, poisons love, and affects the planet as well as its inhabitants. Mitchell characterizes Hades as a titan of industry. Hadestown is his underground "electric city," powered by the damned who have signed away their souls in labor contracts that never expire. Hades' factories have disrupted the seasons on earth, leaving the people above ground poor, hungry, and struggling to survive. Valuing art and love above all else, Orpheus acts as a foil to Hades, and perhaps an image of how Hades used to be. Orpheus tells Eurydice, "That's what I'm workin' on / A song to fix what's wrong / Take what's broken, make it whole / A song so beautiful / It brings the world back into tune" (Mitchell). Even though he is poor, Orpheus' art gives him the power to save the world. However, his art does not provide food and shelter for Eurydice, and Hades seduces her to Hadestown. Eurydice cries, "Orpheus, my heart is yours / Always was, and will be / It's my gut I can't ignore / Orpheus, I'm hungry / Oh, my heart it aches to stay / But the flesh

will have its way… You can have your principles when you've got a belly full / But hunger has a way with you / There's no telling what you're gonna do when the chips are down" (Mitchell).

Hadestown presents a cycle of cynicism and a hope of breaking from it. When introducing Orpheus, the narrator Hermes says, ""Orpheus was a poor boy / But he had a gift to give / He could make you see how the world could be / In spite of the way that it is" (Mitchell). In the end, before Orpheus famously turns around out of doubt for Eurydice's love and loses her forever, he sings, "I used to see the way the world could be / But now the way it is is all I see" (Mitchell). Mitchell gives new context to Orpheus' doubt; he not only contemplates Eurydice's love but also his capacity to free the condemned workers from their torment and uproot an entrenched system. Like Hades, Orpheus loses his optimism and love to the weight of industry. Despite this, Hermes reprises the opening number after Orpheus turns, this time with a more somber melody. He sings, "It's an old song / It's an old tale from way back when / And we're gonna sing it again and again … It's a sad song / But we sing it anyway / 'Cause here's the thing / To know how it ends / And still begin to sing it again / As if it might turn out this time" (Mitchell). He begins the story again, re-introducing Orpheus and restarting the cycle. At its core, Hadestown is a story of hope, of imagining how the world can change. The tagline of the musical is, "Come see how the world could be." Even though Orpheus loses that spirit along the way, Hermes will keep starting the story until that hope wins.

Hadestown's success on Broadway is paradoxical, as it condemns capitalism on a platform that reinforces it. It manages to thrive because of the high cultural capital that it earns by deriving its story from classical mythology and engaging with contemporary social issues. Additionally, it is complex both musically and narratively, operating as a multidimensional

allegory. All of this positions it as high art, contributing to its Tony wins and the consequent demand for tickets.

Availability of tickets, in addition to prices, can be an exclusionary factor for the most popular shows on Broadway. This level of demand is often connected to success at the American Theatre Wing's Tony Awards. The Tonys are not the only awards for New York theatre, but they are the only awards with a national broadcast on a major television network. The Tony Awards only consider Broadway shows, so a production has to have made it to the expensive and exclusive Great White Way to be eligible for the honor. This distinction exaggerates the hierarchy of Broadway, Off-Broadway, and Off-Off-Broadway in New York City. Tony awards bring a show attention, validation, and an advantage in the Broadway market. Additionally, theatre epochs are often defined by their Tony-winning productions.

Like the eligibility qualifications, the process of determining winners for the Tony Awards is exclusive. The first Awards took place in 1947, as a dinner gala at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York. In 1956, the ceremony was first extended to people beyond the walls of the gala in a telecast, but only locally. In 1967, the Tonys had their first broadcast on network television ("Our History"). It took two decades for the Awards to reach audiences outside of New York. Now, the Tonys are broadcast on six continents and available online, so people everywhere can see them, but they cannot have a say in their results. On the "Rules and Regulations" page of the Tony Awards website, the Wing explains, "When the Tony Awards were established in 1947, voting was limited to members of the boards of the American Theatre Wing and entertainment industry performer and craft unions. In 1954, voting eligibility was expanded to include other theatre professionals." These professionals, numbering over 800, come from the American Theatre Wing and The Broadway League—who run the Awards—as well as

Actors' Equity Association, the Dramatists Guild, and other long-established theatre organizations.

The American Theatre Wing maintains the high cultural capital of the Broadway institution and influence the economic capital of Broadway shows. Bourdieu outlines a direct connection between the awarding of institutional cultural capital and resultant gains in economic capital: "By conferring institutional recognition on the cultural capital possessed by any given agent, the academic qualification also makes it possible to … establish conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital by guaranteeing the monetary value of a given academic capital" ("Capital," 51). The American Theatre Wing has institutional power over Broadway, and theatre more generally, as it strongly influences the valuation of new productions. The organization prides itself on a position of high cultural capital and seeks to maintain it by granting Tony awards to shows that can add to that capital. Legitimizing more highbrow productions augments Broadway's institutional cultural capital, increasing individuals' desire to access it for their own cultural capital. What results is an influx of economic capital for Broadway productions—an important consideration for Tony voters who are involved in the productions.

There is a disconnect between what maintains Broadway's commercial needs and how Broadway professionals want to portray their industry. They reward the work that is (as much as possible on Broadway) bold and socially engaged, rather than the pop-musicals that draw in tourists. As a result, those more highbrow productions see increased ticket sales. This is exemplified by the 2018 Tony Awards, in which the four musicals nominated for the coveted Best Musical award were *Frozen, Mean Girls, The Spongebob Squarepants Musical,* and *The Band's Visit.* All four were adapted from movies, but all but *The Band's Visit* were pop-musicals

geared toward children and adolescents. Additionally, *The Band's Visit* had a social message: the coming-together of Egyptian and Israeli strangers through the power of music. *The Band's Visit* was nowhere near the most-attended musical nominated that season, but it won. It seems that the American Theatre Wing aims to change the perception of musicals as superficial entertainment, since the last five winners of Best Musical take on socially relevant and controversial themes: *Hadestown* (2019), *The Band's Visit* (2018), *Dear Evan Hansen* (2017, mental illness and suicide), *Hamilton* (2016), and *Fun Home* (2015, queerness). Even if most Broadway revenue comes from pop-musicals, they do not get Tony recognition because they diminish the cultural capital of the Broadway institution as a whole by moving it away from high art.

The Tony Awards, and by extension the American Theatre Wing, also play a role in determining which shows people pay to see. Theatregoers often base their ticket selections on what won the most Tonys that season, sometimes even waiting to buy tickets until the winners are announced. Because of the cost of tickets—and, for tourists, limited time in New York—most people cannot attend shows often and therefore want to feel secure that their money will buy them the best possible Broadway experience. They look to Tony results for this decision. How long a show runs (and is able to convey its message to audiences) depends entirely on how many tickets it sells. If shows do not continuously make a profit, they have to close. Oftentimes, producers will allow for a temporary loss until the Tonys, in case they win and get that post-Awards boost. Every year, there is a wave of closing announcements in June and early July, following poor performances at the Tonys. While the number of tickets sold does not necessarily win a Tony for a show, Tony wins strongly affect the number of tickets that a show will sell.

In recent years, voters for the Academy Awards, or Oscars, have come under fire for not representing public opinion, and the same issue applies to Tony voters. The Oscars and Tonys

both offer prestige, but the Tonys have a more tangible effect on the works that they evaluate. Movies have left theaters by the time Oscars are awarded, but Broadway shows, if they are lucky, are still running and trying to continue to do so. The Tonys not only determine what gets praise and a piece of the Broadway legacy but also what continues reaching audiences. With a stake in how their industry is perceived, Tony voters project their desired image of Broadway, even if it does not represent how audiences responded to that season's work.

Discussion

Theatre-makers can stage socially conscious theatre in a Brechtian spirit, to mobilize their audiences, to compel them to take social action by informing and reminding them of the injustices of their society. Or, they can do it for the recognition and status that accompanies highbrow social commentary on Broadway. Regardless of the motivations, both *What the Constitution Means to Me* and *Hadestown* highlight harsh realities in society as it exists, particularly related to identity- and class-based violence. The productions and the discourse surrounding them spurred and supplemented conversations about these issues—perhaps paradoxically, considering the capitalistic and exclusive nature of their platform. Orpheus and Eurydice's story in *Hadestown* demonstrates how the power of art can be constrained by financial necessities, and Broadway embodies this. Ironically, the American Theatre Wing rewards social commentary on Broadway, where that very commentary is also restricted. Like Broadway producers, institutions such as the American Theatre Wing act as gatekeepers, doing boundary work in the interest of creating and sustaining Broadway's cultural—and, by extension, economic—capital. As these forms of capital increase, so too do exclusivity and elitism. Even with these efforts to elevate Broadway's status, most theatregoers continue to enjoy productions simply for how they move them. As Brecht himself articulates, "Even when people speak of

higher and lower degrees of pleasure, art stares impassively back at them; for it wishes to fly high and low and to be left in peace, so long as it can give pleasure to people" (181).

CHAPTER FOUR
A MORE POPULAR BROADWAY: *BE MORE CHILL* AND *THE PROM*

> "There has been, certainly, a trend in the recent years of how people are consuming Broadway content, and that's digitally … So you see shows like *Be More Chill* actually making it to Broadway, not only because they're great shows, but because the fan response from an online engagement perspective is so wild. And ten years ago that could and would have never happened. *Be More Chill* could have been the same great musical, but it would have never gotten to Broadway."
>
> —Tyler Mount

Felicia Fitzpatrick said with a smile, "Musical theatre was nerdy … but now it's cool to like Broadway and it's cool to like musical theatre because of *Hamilton*." The year after *Hamilton*, *Dear Evan Hansen* (2016, music and lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul and book by Steven Levenson) kept the public interested in Broadway while also shining light on modern teenagers' experiences with mental illness and social media. Theatre has famously been a haven for ostracized adolescents, offering community, passion, and the ability to assume other identities on stage. Now, social media platforms such as Tumblr and Twitter extend a large and enthusiastic network of theatre-lovers to places where theatre is not popular and drama programs do not exist. It was this online community that allowed *Be More Chill*, a science-fiction musical about high schoolers, to reach Broadway, but it would not be enough to make it commercially successful. Broadway's core audience of upper-class adults did not buy the tickets to sustain the show financially. *Be More Chill*'s large and passionate fanbase was not comprised of the people with easy access to Broadway, so the show closed, Tony-less, after only five months on Broadway. This begs consideration of who measures popularity for Broadway shows and how.

Be More Chill

Joe Iconis and Joe Tracz adapted *Be More Chill* from a 2004 young-adult novel of the same name by Ned Vizzini. The musical follows an anxious and unpopular high school student

named Jeremy, who discovers a pill called a SQUIP, which contains a supercomputer that lodges in the brain and instructs its host how to behave in accordance with social norms. The SQUIP succeeds in making Jeremy cool, but it also makes him mistreat people close to him and eventually tries to take over Jeremy's entire school. In the end, after the SQUIP is overthrown, Jeremy learns to follow his inner voice. He closes the show by singing, "Might still have voices in my head," referencing pressures from society and peers, "but the loudest one is mine" (Iconis and Tracz).

Much of *Be More Chill*'s legacy rests in its unconventional path to Broadway. The show landed its spot at the Lyceum Theatre through the influence of a teenage fanbase on social media. *Be More Chill* premiered at a regional theater in New Jersey in 2015, after which it released a cast album. Even though the production had ended, the album grew wildly popular online, and suddenly the show existed beyond a limited run at a regional theater. Teenagers from all over posted about their love of and identification with the show, which generated enough buzz to catch the interest of investors. In 2018, three years after the original production and recording, *Be More Chill* opened off-Broadway, where it sold out and extended its run. This success convinced producers to transfer the show to Broadway (Skethway). Generally, individual audience members cannot choose what goes on Broadway, but their collective habits inform investments in future productions. *Be More Chill*'s fans challenged this by calling for active and real-time input.

Will Roland, who played Jeremy, recounted his favorite moment of *Be More Chill*'s run: "The day that we announced the Off-Broadway run, the internet went *nuts*. So many people had been begging for this show to happen, and it felt like everything was possible and the world had expanded just ever so slightly" (Skethway). Other than Roland, who had recognition from

originating the role of Jared Kleinman in *Dear Evan Hansen*, the cast was comprised of relative unknowns. Ordinarily, these actors would be replaced[17] for Broadway with more famous performers whose star-power could attract wider audiences. *Be More Chill*, on the other hand, retained its entire off-Broadway cast when it transferred to Broadway, likely because the fans' love of the production had become as much about the actors as the music and story.

Be More Chill garnered such fierce adoration from teenagers across the country because the story resonated with their experiences. The show addresses the struggles of high school, social media, anxiety and depression, and the major theme of being yourself in a stage of life so dominated by the opinions of others. The SQUIP, of course, is not realistic, but it represents very real situations and emotions.[18] The SQUIP tempts Jeremy, and subsequently other students, with fitting in effortlessly.

The SQUIP also represents the ubiquity of social media. The show includes a scene of spreading gossip called "The Smartphone Hour," and Iconis and Tracz write in the notes for staging the musical, "This number should feel impossibly huge. Please use as much of your cast as humanly possible" (8). As the SQUIP takes over more students, he tells Jeremy, "I'm synching their desires to yours. I now realize: my operating system can only truly be complete when everyone shares a social network" (Iconis and Tracz 93). The use of the term "social network" feels explicit, and the sentiment conveys that social media have more control over us as more people use them. When one student's SQUIP gets deactivated, the rest of them follow suit,

[17] It should be mentioned that Roland did not originally play Jeremy, and his casting in 2018 may have served to attract *Dear Evan Hansen* fans. Jason Tam, who played the SQUIP, also joined in 2018. Even so, the retention of the rest of the off-Broadway cast is noteworthy.

[18] While Jeremy's feelings in the show are relatable across demographic groups, I feel it necessary to acknowledge that Jeremy is a white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied boy, and his struggles exist within a position of privilege.

and the students start treating each other with more empathy. This indicates a connectedness and expresses a capacity to deconstruct social norms.

Be More Chill creates a space of positive identification for misfit adolescents. It is a show about the "loser"—a term used often—and ultimately a realization of the value of being one's true self. Iconis and Tracz write in the notes, "*Be More Chill* works best with a cast of diverse misfits who ooze personality and smarts. This isn't a musical for the popular kids, this is a musical for the Other kids" (8). Christine, Jeremy's crush and an eccentric theatre kid, sings a song entitled "I Love Play Rehearsal," about how she feels seen, happy, and at ease while doing theatre. When Jeremy tries to convince her to take the SQUIP, he tells her, "It tells you what to do! You'd never have to struggle to figure out what to say, or overanalyze some little gesture, ever again. You'd just know. Like play rehearsal. Only it never ends" (Iconis and Tracz 91). This captures how important theatre can be for teenagers as a place of belonging and comfort. When asked what lessons he learned from being in the show, Will Roland said, "I have been reminded of how much theatre means to people, especially to people who sometimes feel marginalized, ostracized, or disconnected from their communities … For so many people, *Be More Chill* is the closest they've ever come to seeing themselves on a stage" (Skethway).

The Prom

Be More Chill was not the only Broadway musical concerned with teenagers in the 2018-2019 season. *The Prom*, a musical comedy by Chad Beguelin, Bob Martin, Matthew Sklar, deals with Broadway actors whose show, *Eleanor!: The Eleanor Roosevelt Musical* (a clear reference to *Hamilton*), closes after opening night because *The New York Times* calls them narcissists. They look for "a safe, non-violent, high-profile, low risk injustice" (Beguelin, Martin, and Sklar 10) to take on in order to save their image, and they stumble upon a tweet about a teenage girl,

Emma, from Indiana whose school has cancelled the prom because she wanted to bring her girlfriend. The actors go to her town and disrupt more than they fix, partially because they are as closed-minded about Midwesterners as the parents at Emma's school are about queer people. Emma does not want to be at the center of a controversy. She sings to her girlfriend, "I don't want to start a riot / I don't want to blaze a trail / I don't want to be a symbol / or cautionary tale / I don't want to be a scapegoat / for people to oppose / what I want is simple / as far as wanting goes / I just want to dance with you" (Beguelin, Martin, and Sklar 28-29). The actors disregard her discomfort and use her for publicity, claiming to do it for her: "We're gonna help that little lesbian whether she likes it or not!" (Beguelin, Martin, and Sklar 12). Over the course of the show, the actors begin to care about Emma more than the publicity. They do not save her; in fact, she ends up saving them by teaching them empathy. *The Prom* follows more Broadway conventions than *Be More Chill*—big-name actors played the adults characters, the songs fit a more traditional Broadway style, and it had a regional production to prepare it for Broadway—but even so it ran only four months longer than *Be More Chill* and closed on the same day.

The Prom's juxtaposition of comedy and sentiment creates a powerful emotional experience. Beyond the over-the-top Broadway characters and jokes, *The Prom* tackles homophobia, specifically against teenagers. Emma experiences prejudice in a number of ways; some of which are only alluded to—like the principal of Emma's school mentioning that Emma's parents kicked her out of the house when she came out to them at age 16—and others unfold onstage to create heart-wrenching moments. Halfway through the show, the State's attorney orders the school to throw an "inclusive prom" because of media pressure. As he helps her get ready, one of the actor characters sings to Emma that "tonight belongs to you" (Beguelin, Martin, and Sklar 53). She arrives to find an empty gym, because the rest of the school has gone

to a separate prom, kept secret from her, and she changes the song to, "All along tonight belonged to them" (Beguelin, Martin, and Sklar 60). One of the Broadway characters says, "It's hard to believe this kind of thing still happens" (Beguelin, Martin, and Sklar 11). *The Prom* calls attention to a reality that seems far-off from a city that had a 5-million-person turnout at its 2019 Pride parade (Allen).

As I discussed in chapter one, theatre is associated with queer performers and audiences but has a history of omitting their stories. When queerness has received a place onstage, it has usually been reserved for gay men. *The Prom* is therefore significant as an earnest representation of a lesbian teenager in America. *Fun Home*, the 2015 Tony-winning musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, paved the way for this story on Broadway by achieving commercial and critical success with a lesbian coming-of-age story. Because of Broadway's prominence, its shows have more opportunities than those of other theaters to reach large numbers of people. The cast of *The Prom* performed at the 2018 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and made history with the first-ever queer kiss at the Parade (Binder), which had 23.68 million television viewers as well as millions of in-person spectators (R. Porter). This allowed the queer representation in *The Prom* to have an impact nationwide in addition to on Broadway. This power of traditional and social media to connect and advocate for people is mirrored within the show, as the Broadway actors find Emma on Twitter, news coverage pressures the State's Attorney to correct the situation, and Emma reaches millions of people by posting a video about her story online.

Toward Democratization of Access

Especially with the popularization of social media, Broadway productions and theatre news sources have increased their efforts and strategies to bring Broadway content to people who

cannot see the shows—a move that greatly affects adolescents. *Be More Chill* had a huge and devoted fanbase, but it was comprised of teenagers, who are less likely to have the funds for expensive Broadway tickets (and, for the many out-of-towners, transportation and lodging). As a result, many *Be More Chill* devotees never had the chance to see the show that they helped get on Broadway. Just as social media helped teenage devotees advocate for the show, it also allowed them to be part of the process. On Instagram alone, *Be More Chill* ran official accounts for the show, the band, and the stage managers. Through these, the actors' profiles, and fan accounts, followers could stay up to date on news, content, and behind-the-scenes moments from the show. It also helped build the community as followers of the show commented on these posts and created their own.

Before, Broadway shows only existed outside of the Theatre District as national tours, which were more accessible but still expensive and limited to major cities. Additionally, not every show gets a national tour, and not every national tour goes to every city. Now, theatre-lovers have more options, which are expanding all the time: social media, BroadwayHD (think Netflix for professional theatre productions), and BroadwayCon (that's right, a Comic-Con for Broadway). Recently, televised stagings of well-known musicals have also grown popular on networks including NBC, ABC, and Fox. These increase accessibility, at the cost of the immediacy and ephemerality that make live theatre uniquely powerful. Felicia Fitzpatrick said, "I love the live musicals they do on TV because I think it's a great way to reach a bigger audience than just people in New York." She continued, "Some of the most loyal Broadway fans, some of the most passionate Broadway fans, some of the biggest Broadway fans I've met don't live in New York and have never seen a show and just listen to cast albums or whatever. But that doesn't mean they love it any less. They probably love it more."

Even though *Be More Chill* and *The Prom* have closed on Broadway, their journeys and adoration have far from ended. Both shows landed a spot in Playbill's "Top 15 Musical Theatre Tumblr Fandoms of 2019" (Fitzpatrick), and have announced upcoming film adaptations. This is unusual for Broadway, but becoming more common, and speaks to the importance of medium for certain types of stories. *The Prom* and *Be More Chill* did not achieve many traditional indicators of Broadway success—a long run and a wealth of Tony Awards, for example—likely because of their younger target audience, but they broke norms and were loved by many. The choice to make movies of these musicals indicates the significance of their stories but also shows that they have the potential to be profitable, just not on Broadway. Movies are far more accessible—not site-specific and significantly less expensive—so they can reach the teenagers who most want and need to see them. The next chapter for these shows does not stop at the film adaptations; since closing, *The Prom* has announced a national tour and *Be More Chill* has moved to Chicago and London. Daryl Roth said about *The Prom*, "The story is worthy. I think where it will find its way is in regional theaters across the country. I think it will be done by every high school. I think it will have a great life. It's sad that it didn't have a more successful life on Broadway." Roth also said, "As for *Be More Chill* …I think it would have had a longer life if it were in a smaller theater where people could afford the prices more easily. I think it could have had a longer run off-Broadway."

"'What is that?' 'Drama Desk. You know what it is!'"

While *Be More Chill* and *The Prom* were well received by their audiences, they did not fit the category of elite theatre. As a result, both shows were snubbed at the Tony Awards, which very well could have contributed to their early closings. Across art forms, cultural objects embraced by teenagers are devalued and considered trivial. As discussed in the last chapter, this

classification is incompatible with the sensibilities of the American Theatre Wing. *The Prom* and *Be More Chill* announced their closings one day apart, a week and a half after the Tony Awards in June of 2019. *Be More Chill* received only one Tony nomination, for best original score, but won no awards. *The Prom* had six nominations but no wins. Despite *Be More Chill*'s Tony snub, 2019 host James Corden and past hosts sang a parody of the musical's most popular song, "Michael in the Bathroom," during the broadcast, without crediting the musical or its writers. Joe Iconis tweeted the morning after the Awards that he had not even been informed about the parody (Iconis). The Tony Awards capitalized on *Be More Chill*'s fan appeal but did not validate it. The YouTube video of the parody has over 375,000 views (as of April, 2020) (The Late Late Show with James Corden). Its top comment, with more than 1,500 likes, is "Michael In The Bathroom found its way to the Tony's one way or another." Even though Tony awards boost attendance and legitimacy, not winning them does not mean that a show will be forgotten. Some of the most beloved and legendary shows in Broadway history were overlooked by the American Theatre Wing (Dominick). Considering how *Be More Chill* and *The Prom* affected fans and challenged Broadway's status quo, their legacies will not depend upon Tony performance.

Both *Be More Chill* and *The Prom* won awards other than Tonys. These non-Tony awards carry honor and respect but do not generate the same prestige and economic benefits.[19] In addition to their Tony nominations, *The Prom* and *Be More Chill* both received nominations for the Drama Desk Awards, Outer Critics Circle Awards, Broadway.com Audience Choice Awards, Theatre Fan's Choice Awards. In total, *Be More Chill*'s Broadway run had thirty-eight non-Tony nominations and fourteen wins. *The Prom* had twenty-two non-Tony nominations and one win

[19] *The Prom* even has a joke about the hierarchy of theatre awards. One of the Broadway characters, Dee Dee, pulls out two Tony awards in an effort to get a better hotel room. Another character, Barry, follows her lead, presenting a different award. Dee Dee asks, "What is that?" to which Barry retorts, "Drama Desk. You know what it is!" (Beguelin, Martin, and Sklar 32).

(IBDB). *Be More Chill* had the most nominations and wins of any play or musical on Broadway at the 2019 Broadway.com Audience Choice Awards, including the coveted Best New Musical award (Broadway.com Staff). Unlike the Tonys, votes for these awards are public and online, where the *Be More Chill* fanbase has a voice.

Discussion

The season after *Hamilton* swept the nation, audiences and investors looked for the "next *Hamilton*" and expected to find it in *Dear Evan Hansen.* The musical focuses on a teenager's search for inclusion and experiences with anxiety, suicide, and the impact of social media. *Dear Evan Hansen* did not quite reach *Hamilton* status, but it got attention, filled seats, and brought in six Tony awards. Following that, it would make sense for *Be More Chill* to find similar success, considering the overlapping themes of the two shows. Surely, investors thought so, too. However, the shows share little beyond theme. *Dear Evan Hansen*, like *The Prom*, focuses on the adults as much as the teenagers and employs more traditional Broadway styles in its music. It is safer, because it appeals to more people than *Be More Chill,* in its unapologetic teen-ness.

Be More Chill's journey to the Great White Way seemed to signal a new era for Broadway, in which fans, no matter how much money they had, could influence what made it there. Unfortunately, what followed opening night showed that the institution would not change so easily. The structure of Broadway limits what kind of story can exist on its stages. In addition to the price of tickets, its grounded nature in New York City restricts who can gain entry. Musicals like *Be More Chill* and *The Prom* that tell stories about teenagers and appeal to younger audiences present a financial risk for investors, as teenagers have limited access and adults tend to discount the shows as juvenile. *Be More Chill* reached the Theatre District through a collective process that demonstrated the potential of social media as a vehicle to promote and advocate for

content on Broadway. When asked, "What message do you think *Be More Chill* will leave behind for Broadway?" Will Roland responded, "*Be More Chill* has shown this industry that the voices of theatergoers matter more than perhaps previously thought! This show happened because people loved the story, the songs, the creators, the characters—not because it featured a super-famous movie star, or a pop song catalogue, or because it adapted their favorite movie" (Skethway). The newfound power of social media allowed *Be More Chill* to reach people who identified with its story but otherwise would not have had access to it. *Be More Chill* broadened the scope of how Broadway can reach people in a digital age while also calling attention to how it fails to do so.

CURTAIN CALL
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BROADWAY, AS DESCRIBED BY THOSE WHO MAKE IT

I asked each of my interviewees why they care about theatre and what makes it important. The following citations are their responses.

Tyler Mount (producer, commentator):

> I care about theatre so much, ultimately because it is the thing that quote/unquote "saved me" as a child. I grew up in small-town Texas. I loved theatre. It was my outlet. It was my passion. It's what got me out of bed in the morning. It got me so excited, so passionate. It never felt like work. I devoted my entire life to it, and it is something about feeling accepted, feeling a sense of community that you don't feel in any other job. It's creating art. It's about doing something that really, really affects people in a positive way … You are able to be transported in a theater, and that's why I love it so much. You can be having a terrible day and then you can sit in the theater and be transported for two and a half hours. You can't look at your phone; you just have to be there, and there is something that is so powerful about text, music, dance combining together and culminating into something that you will only see that one time.

Bartlett Sher (director):

> The great thing about theatre in particular is that large groups of people have to shut off their devices, be in a room together, in some form of community they hopefully don't agree with or even know or even necessarily have to like each other. But they have to be in the same room and experience the same event together. And that kind of experience is quite ancient and quite important to the larger health of a society—especially one like ours, which has become increasingly polarized.

Damon Daunno (actor):

> I love live theatre more than anything because it changes every single day. Every single audience is different, and how you wake up every day is different. So that sort of 'who knows how this is going to go' element of it is super inspiring and keeps things super fresh. It gets people out of their house. It gets people communing with other people. There's something really profound about being in an audience. There's something really profound as an artist to be immersed in an audience when they're all coming together, or they're all really silent, or they're all really laughing, or they're all really moved. It's just a profound human connection that can get very lost in the digital age.

Felicia Fitzpatrick (commentator):

> I love theatre … because it's a tool for social change, because we can find new solutions to existing problems because people come together as a collective and experience a story—whether it's familiar to them or if it's something they're experiencing for the first time—and they're changed because of it, hopefully, moved by it, hopefully.

Santino Fontana (actor):

> You're giving people an experience that can only exist in their memory, and there is nothing more powerful than that.

Danny Burstein (actor):

> I can't imagine what I would be if I weren't a theater actor. There [*sic*] no other art form I can think of that is so immediate and thought provoking. That is so boldly daring from night to night. It is thrilling and relentless to do 8 shows a week and yet I can't imagine doing anything else in the world.

Daryl Roth (producer):

> I care about it because I do think it can make a difference in people's lives. I care about it because it can educate people, it can entertain people, it can enlighten people, it can make you feel you're not alone. You can relate to stories that are their stories that the playwrights are telling. You can relate to that, and you can feel less alone in the world. You can engage in a way that is real because it's live. You're listening to somebody on the stage who is a live person talking to you, and you are a person receiving that information, and you can digest it in whatever way you want, but it's different than sitting alone and reading a book. It's different than sitting in a dark movie theater and watching a film. There's nothing like live theatre. And for me that's the thrill, that you can create things or that you can, as I said, be a facilitator of stories that can make people just feel something incredible and have the experience, that exchange of what goes on when you sit in a theater and you receive what's coming at you from the actors on stage. I don't think there's anything like that.

Holley Fain (actor):

> It really is unlike anything else. When you're an audience member, you're part of a moment in time that is never recreated with the people who are on the stage … Every show is different for us on stage, and the audience is part of that—the audience is always different. There's no other art form like that, and I think having that still be alive in this city [New York City] is really important. Obviously, if you go see a good movie as an audience member you feel things, and obviously that's a part of it, but there's something different about being in a room with other live human beings right in front of you. There's an energy. There's a magnetism. There's a magic that's there that I think is really life-affirming. It reminds you what's important and what forces you to look at yourself and your place in the world in a more visceral way than other forms of art.

CONCLUSION

> I think our show will leave behind a beautiful legacy that involves art being a healing force, art inspiring art; that a good show that connects with real human beings can come back to life in spite of naysayers trying to keep it out, and that inclusive casting not only represents the landscape of our world, but has the power to inspire people who feel like outsiders to keep pursuing their dreams. There is a place for all of us and sometimes, you have to carve that place for yourself; but with a little help from good people, anything is possible.
>
> —George Salazar, on *Be More Chill* (Skethway)

Four years after the premiere of *Hamilton* and halfway through Donald Trump's presidential term, the United States was split between critics and supporters of the Trump administration in 2019. Even so, dismay over executive actions dominated the national dialogue, making it profitable to stage works that engage with the topic. In the 2018-2019 season, Broadway artists used both new and familiar stories to express, directly and indirectly, concern for the state of the union—from Heidi Schreck standing at the front of the stage citing figures of violence against women in the United States in *What the Constitution Means to Me* to *To Kill a Mockingbird* commenting on the American justice system failing black men through a story written over half a century before. The sociopolitical moment informed and molded both the production and reception for each play and musical of the season.

There exists a tension on Broadway between resisting and fitting the confines of capitalism, which limits the scope of artistic expression. The supremacy of financial gain creates dependency on the predictable, preventing social and theatrical trailblazing on Broadway stages. As a result, though, Broadway reflects the established popular topics of each year in the themes of its productions. My analysis of productions from the 2018-2019 season demonstrates that, despite its limitations, Broadway manages to produce impactful and meaningful work, and increasingly so.

Every show discussed in this thesis calls attention to identity-based inequality. Nevertheless, Broadway reproduces the inequalities of American society by telling predominantly white narratives from predominantly white artists, by privileging popular stories from established media companies, and by making attendance dependent upon socioeconomic class. While theatrical productions are inherently representational, the narratives staged on Broadway do not faithfully represent the whole of American society, largely because Broadway is grounded in tradition as much as capitalism (and the two have grown interdependent). The result is the reproduction of familiar shows and the selection of familiar (and mostly homogenous) artists. The practices which exclude new and underrepresented artists have been reinforced over the course of Broadway's history and are tied to inequities in greater American society, making them exceedingly difficult to break down.

Whether through reimagined revivals, diversified representations, musicals that appeal to younger audiences, or plays that prioritizes direct social commentary over spectacle, theatre is always measured against itself—how a play or musical conforms to or subverts expectations of its genre. Broadway productions are praised sometimes for adhering to conventions and sometimes for breaking from them. Before being trusted with a place on Broadway, subversive works must prove that they can bring financial success by upsetting the firmly established norms of the industry. In recent years, with record pushback from audiences and theatre-makers, Broadway's barriers have slowly started to come down, or at least take new shape.

Like in American society at large, the deeply ingrained norms and systems of control on Broadway resist change but do not completely prevent it. Change *is* happening on Broadway, and increased awareness of the institution's inequalities is pushing that change further. Socially engaged works like *Hadestown* demonstrate that, even while Broadway struggles to fix its own

inequalities, it still calls attention to those in society. This is paradoxical, and perhaps even a bit hypocritical, but it still sheds light on those injustices for the millions of people who attend the productions.

While the art on Broadway has limitations, the Broadway community creates a space for individuals to enact collective social action. The simultaneously personal and interpersonal power of theatre connects people over shared enthusiasm for the art form, extending its social impact. Artivism is alive and well in the Broadway community, in organizations such as the Broadway Advocacy Coalition, which brings together Broadway and social justice initiatives, and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights Aids (BCEFA), which raises awareness and money for those living with HIV/AIDS through a variety of events featuring Broadway performers. Initiatives such as these do not come from the Broadway establishment but result from the opportunity for connection which Broadway provides. In their collective action beyond the theaters, fans affect the character of Broadway. They, in contrast to those who control the institution, have chosen to promote a philanthropic spirit.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is limited in that it does not include interviews with the writers, performers, directors, and producers of each show discussed. Their contributions could have provided valuable insight into how and why they presented their works as they did.

Analyzing these productions in the year of their inception allowed me to ground them in their specific social context, but at this juncture one cannot possibly know their long-term impacts and legacies. One cannot predict how they will hold up over time or how they may be criticized or reimagined in the future.

This study considers reception only theoretically. If resources allow, future research should incorporate surveys and interviews that capture the reactions of audience members after attending productions.

As this thesis has demonstrated, Broadway productions encapsulate the context of their creation. Broadway reflects its society by reproducing it. Other forms of theatre, with more space for social and political resistance, can differently and more actively shape society. In all regards, theatre has a complex, active, and unique relationship with the society that creates it. As a sub-field, sociology of theatre represents relatively untapped potential for new understandings of social representation. Future research should continue to explore the sociological implications of theatre to further highlight its promise for the field of sociology.

APPENDIX
BACKGROUND

The following works inform this thesis by providing a theoretical foundation.

Culture

Sociologist Wendy Griswold discusses culture and how it affects the individual and the social world in *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World* (2013). She writes, "When sociologists talk about culture, Richard Peterson (1979) observed, they usually mean one of four things: *norms, values, beliefs, or expressive symbols,*" but "in common usage, the term culture often refers to the fine and performing arts or to serious literature" (3). Griswold notes that cultural objects and their creators all belong to a particular context (10). She presents a model called the "cultural diamond" with four points—social world and cultural object on the vertical axis, creator and receiver on the horizontal axis—and six links among them. Griswold explains, "A complete understanding of a given cultural object requires understanding all four points and six links" (11). This model unites production and reception as well as cultural products and the greater society.

Sociologist Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (1984) established art as collective action, asserting that those who consume and disseminate art, in conjunction with those we consider to be the artists, produce works of art. Becker's work broadened conceptions of artistic production and situated art within a collective process. There exists a multitude of art worlds, all governed by the players involved in the cultures in which they are situated.

In "The Depths of Shallow Culture" (1998), sociologist Joshua Gamson reflects on long-existing "disdain for such attempts to treat 'popular arts' to the same sorts of aesthetic and literary analyses as 'high arts'" (2). He notes that popular arts have their own metrics for cultural depth, as an art form accessible to all, not built on exclusion and hierarchization. Within popular

arts, Gamson explains, “a whole range of more serious issues seem to be brought into comprehensible, and unthreatening, view … Popular culture is here deployed for engagement with issues of deep concern, but in a manner safe from consequence. Only a form perceived as shallow, emptied of grave consequences, can serve this oblique, yet socially significant, application” (6). Divorcing art from a quest for cultural capital broadens its reach and facilitates the reception of its message. Broadway commentator and producer Tyler Mount reiterated this sentiment in his interview, describing, “Broadway influences society in the sense that you can get thoughts across and you can inform an audience without sitting them down and having them come to a workshop on the importance of diversity.”

Bourdieu asserts in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) that the cultural elite of a society dictate taste and what comprises high and low culture. Those with lower capital are subjected to that dominant taste, and that unequal control over cultural valuation constitutes class-based symbolic violence.

Sociologist Paul DiMaggio and management academic Michael Useem examine “the political economy of culture” in their article “Social Class and Arts Consumption” (1978). To them, culture is a tool for social mobility in advanced capitalist society (142). They assert, “The adoption of artistic interests, tastes, standards, and activities associated with a social class helps establish an individual's membership in that class” (143). High arts—a category in which they include theatre—belong to high classes, who learn how to appreciate those types of art (144). Access to that training, and to the arts themselves, has a positive correlation with the class hierarchy and higher education (149).

Constructing Meaning

Semiotics, a field largely developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, deals with the communication of meaning via sign systems. The sign vehicle (or signifier) represents the object (or signified) and creates an emotional, physical, or intellectual effect. A code captures the connection between sign vehicle and object to convey meaning according to the social conventions of its context.

The Prague School established the connection between theatre and semiotics in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1960s, semiotics took a central place in theatre studies theory (Bennett 12). Following that, "introductory essays on theatre as a sign-system and it's vocabulary include Barthes (1972), Eco (1977), Elam (1977), Bassnett (1980) and Pavis (1981b). For classifications of sign-systems see Kowzan (1968) and (1975); Pavis (1976) and (1985a)" (Aston and Savona 183). Theatre scholar Elaine Aston and semantic scholar George Savona put forth a methodology for theatre semiotics in *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (1991). In their system, everything in a theatrical performance constitutes a signifer. These signifiers fall into two groups: synthesis (related to items involved in staging) and kinesics (related to the actors and their movements). In this model, the playwright and director create the messages of the code system and the actors communicate them to the audience.

Susan Bennett also touches on semiotics in her book, *Theatre Audiences,* which I discuss shortly. She describes the audience's response to theatre as subject to "an extensive code system" (142). Marketing, she writes, acts as "overcoding," constructing expectations of works as dramatic or comedic (142). Theatrical codes affect reception—and therefore viability—of productions. Bennett explains, "That audiences generally concur as to what is a good play and what is bad merely evidences aesthetic codes as culturally determined" (155). She continues,

"While the collective response is nevertheless generally homogenous, the individual's response to performance undoubtedly constitutes the core of the spectator's pleasure" (155).

In response to theatre scholar Maurya Wickstrom's 1999 claim that "both film and stage version [of *The Lion King*] are commodities masked as art," theatre artist Brian Granger retorts,

> Her unexamined binary between commodity on the one hand and pure art on the other obscures the complex pleasures and powers of live theatre. It should be remembered that most Broadway musicals, as commercial entertainments, do not make a critique of consumption, and the lack of this particular critique within most musicals should not be the basis of aesthetic judgments made about them. Furthermore, when we consider the theatre as a code system, we need to understand that this type of consideration disassembles the sensory impact that theatre has on us as members of the audience, as argued effectively by Bert O. States in his important discussion of semiotics (States, 1987, p. 7). *The Lion King*, as an artistic work, produces code systems, and scholars have rightly identified some of these codes as being sexist, racist, and classist. But joining these codes are those produced in the phenomenological, sensory experience one has sitting in the theatre (37-38).

Here, Granger notes that theatre, especially on Broadway, exists as commodity and art simultaneously, and that that is not inherently problematic. In addition to codes of content, Granger reminds, there exist sensory codes that warrant acknowledgment as well.

In her article "Musical Emotions Across Cultures" (2014), ethnomusicologist Judith Becker, notes, "Music and emotion are culturally situated and embodied. Any given musical event is situated in a particular historical moment and place, performed by, and listened to, by particular people." Becker draws on Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* to describe a *habitus of listening*: "a set of conscious and unconscious musical propensities that affect how an individual reacts to music emotionally … One's own *habitus of listening* is dependent upon culture, personal history, and the total context of the musical event." She also notes that, while each person brings their own experiences, musical emotion at public events is shared among those in attendance. It will be useful to keep in mind these personal, collective, and cultural

considerations of musical affect when considering the experience of attending musical theatre performances.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall takes on meaning-making in terms of representation. In theatre, representation comes in multiple forms, from the portrayal of the social world in stories to the embodiment of characters by actors. Hall explains, "Meaning is *constructed by the system of representation*. It is constructed and fixed by the *code*, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system" ("Representation," 7). Additionally, "to belong to a culture is to belong to roughly the same conceptual and linguistic universe" (Hall, "Representation," 8). Therefore, people from the same culture will have similar understandings of particular representations. Hall writes, "Meaning depends on the relationship between things in the world - people, objects and events, real or fictional - and the conceptual system which can operate as *mental representations* of them" ("Representation," 4). Hall connects representation to philosopher Michel Foucault's conception of "discourse": "the production of knowledge through language … and how our knowledge about 'the social, the embodied individual and shared meanings' comes to be produced" ("Representation," 28-29). According to Foucault, control over knowledge is intimately connected to power, which commands meaning: "Knowledge linked to power now only assumes the authority of 'the truth', but has the power to *make itself true*" (Hall, "Representation," 33). Whoever controls representation controls the truth, which is significant with the overwhelmingly white and male control over Broadway which I discuss in chapter one. Foucault "places the body at the centre of the struggles between different formations of power/knowledge" (Hall, "Representation," 35), which makes the struggle particularly relevant for an art form which communicates meaning through the bodies of actors.

The Culture Industry

In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944), philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer present the culture industry: the system of capitalistic control over cultural objects. Within the culture industry, cultural products appeal to mass and popular interest since they serve to make profit in capitalist societies, and what results is an artistic formula designed by companies and reinforced by consumers. Straying from this formula creates financial risk, “infecting everything with sameness” (Adorno and Horkheimer 41). Companies endorse and produce the same works over and over again, which molds the public’s expectations and stifles originality.

Adorno and Horkheimer do not explicitly discuss theatre as they do film, but their analysis of the culture industry strongly applies to Broadway as a source of cultural production deeply grounded in capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer assert, “In film, any manuscript which is not reassuringly based on a best-seller is viewed with mistrust” (50), which rings true for Broadway’s reliance upon adaptations (of books and films) as well. The artistic formula affects both production and consumption on Broadway. Audiences accept and expect reiterations of the same shows, causing “the withering of imagination and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today” (45). Writers have to follow the formula for their work to be considered for multi-million-dollar productions. Adorno and Horkheimer write, “The more all-embracing the culture industry has become, the more pitilessly it has forced the outsider into either bankruptcy or a syndicate” (51). New shows have to fit the musical script to make money, and they have to make money to be on Broadway. What results, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is “ready-made clichés, to be used here and there as desired and always completely defined by the purpose they serve within the schema” and “the formula which supplants the work. It crushes equally the whole and

the parts" (44-45). The formula prevents artistic experimentation on Broadway, limiting the art's potential impact and the audience member's critical reflection.

The culture industry is built upon mass appeal, reducing individuals to the "the masses," "the public," and "audiences." Adorno and Horkheimer write, "Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human beings as what the whole has made them" (46). This results in a loss of agency surrounding the individual's assessment of cultural objects. To maximize profit, Broadway producers attempt to appeal to as many people as possible, but, as Adorno and Horkheimer explain, "The shamelessness of the rhetorical question 'What do people want?' lies in the fact that it appeals to the very people as thinking subjects whose subjectivity it specifically seeks to annul" (57). Because the Broadway industry depends upon the positive reception of millions of people, its customers must be considered in aggregate form. Therefore, social trends trump the interests of individuals. As Adorno and Horkheimer point out, though, the consumers are complicit in this process: "The mentality of the public, which allegedly and actually favors the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system, not an excuse for it" (42). By continuing to buy tickets and attend productions, Broadway audience members support the theatrical culture industry.

The Role of the Audience

Theatre Audiences (1997), Susan Bennett, serves as an example of a non-sociologist employing the sociological imagination in theatre analysis. She considers the individual spectator in relation to other spectators, actors, the creators of the work, and the dramatic and societal structures that govern it all. In the very final pages of her book, Bennett writes, "The interactivity that necessarily takes place between spectators as well as between spectators and actors suggests that the inquiries into drama's correlation with the social sciences are potentially fruitful" (211-

212). She also acknowledges Goffman and Shevtsova in the introduction to her book, commenting on the existing and ignored connections between theatre studies and sociology (10).

Bennett establishes that her work on the audience responds to a tendency to overlook the element of reception in theatre analysis. She notes, "Dramatic practice, unlike theory, has always been concerned … with the involvement of the audience. The playwright invariably shapes a text and the director invariably shapes a production to provoke particular expectations and responses within an audience" (18). Since audience response plays a central role in what gets to and stays on Broadway, Bennett advocates for more focus on them in the realm of theatre studies. "A performance can activate a diversity of responses, but it is the audience which finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product" (156), she notes.

Bennett considers audience members as individuals and products of society, and she examines them in terms of audience-stage interaction, audience-actor interaction, and interaction within the audience (151). She writes, "Above all, the role of the theatre audience involves the spectator's interaction with performance in both social (audience member) and private (individual) capacities" (125). According to Bennett, "How far the audience accepts the proposed receptive strategies will generally depend on some shared socio-cultural background between text and audience, director and audience, production company and audience" (142). Therefore, theatre-makers must work to relate to their audiences—who come from all over the world—for their show to be successful. These efforts must not stagnate because, as Bennett notes, "Both an audience's reaction to a text (or performance) and the text (or performance) itself are bound within cultural limits" (94).

Bennett explains that audience members, through a social contract, accept the reactive role of interpreting the action onstage (204). She writes, "Spectators are thus trained to be

passive in their demonstrated behaviour during a theatrical performance, but to be active in their decoding of the sign systems made available" (206). However, in the last century, "there have been many challenges and disruptions of the codes and conventions which demand passivity. These have led to the productive and emancipated spectator who is at the centre of this text" (4).

Representing Other Cultures

In "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" Stuart Hall focuses on the development and employment of stereotypes "in what Foucault called a 'power/knowledge' sort of game. It classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as 'other'" (Hall, "The 'Other,'" 248). Hall explains:

> Power, is seems, has to be understood here not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural terms or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way—within a certain 'regime of representation'. It includes the exercise of *symbolic power* through representational practices. Stereotyping is a key element in this exercise of symbolic violence. ("The 'Other' 249).

Hall describes stereotyping as a tool to designate boundaries which exclude those without power, controlling the social and symbolic order ("The 'Other'" 248). He cites: "The establishment of normalcy (i.e. what is accepted as 'normal') through social- and stereo-types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups … to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology" (R. Dyer quoted in Hall, "The 'Other'" 248). In sum, creating and depicting stereotypical perceptions of subjugated populations reinforces the power of the dominant population.

Henrietta Lidchi, a scholar of anthropology and cultural studies, analyzed portrayals of other cultures through an examination of museums, but her work applies to representation generally. In "The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures," Lidchi concludes that museums, controlled by those with power in a society, present other cultures in terms of "pre-

existing discourses," employing symbolic power—which Lidchi describes as "interdependent" with institutional power—over marginalized groups (156). Portrayals created by dominant groups "make certain cultures visible; in other words, they allow them to be subjected to the scrutiny of power … What allowed a human subject to be transformed into an ethnographic object was a particular relationship of knowledge to power in association with wider social changes" (Lidchi 170). According to Lidchi, "This anthropological—or more properly, ethnographic—discourse did not reflect the 'real' state of the cultures it exhibited so much as the power relationship between those subjected to such classification and those promoting it" (163). In terms of theatre, representations of demographic minority groups objectify their lived experiences, depicting perception rather than reality and exacerbating disparities in power.

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