

Through a Glass, Nostalgically: The Death and Life of Broadway

Jeffrey Eric Jenkins

Broadway is not necessarily geographic; it's not a physical locale. It's an idea.

Roy Somlyo, producer¹

Broadway is a wide New York City avenue bisecting Manhattan. It begins at the base of the island and continues north-erly for its entire length. For many consumers of American cul-tural production, though, Broadway in the past century is better known as the Great White Way, the Main Stem, the Big Street—synonymous with diversion, entertainment, stardom. This Broadway, the one that created and sustains American myths surrounding celebrity, has little to do with the wide street that once led to the northern gate of seventeenth-century New Amsterdam.

The “idea” of Broadway, as Roy Somlyo put it, began to coalesce as a term of art when an extravaganza, *Broadway to Tokio*, opened on 23 January 1900 at the New York Theatre in what is now known as Times Square. Although spectacles with women in revealing costumes appeared on New York stages at least as far back as *The Black Crook* in 1866, it was *Broadway to Tokio* with its “gracefully executed saltatorial divertissements” that codified the Broadway appellation as a signal of a theatrical ideal (“Dramatic”). The production was also celebrated by an anon-ymous reviewer from the *New York Times* for Fay Templeton’s winning performance “especially of an American ‘coon’ song” and “a new darky ditty” (“Dramatic”). The audience pleasure

On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way, Steven Adler. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

Gangsters and Gold Diggers: Old New York, the Jazz Age, and the Birth of Broadway, Jerome Charyn. Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2005.

It Happened on Broadway: An Oral History of the Great White Way, Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998; revised edition, 2004.

Kaufman & Co.: Broadway Comedies, George S. Kaufman with Edna Ferber, Moss Hart, Ring Lardner and Morrie Ryskind; edited by Laurence Maslon. The Library of America, 2004.

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Broadway Boogie Woogie: Damon Runyon and the Making of New York City Culture, Daniel R. Schwarz. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

taken in the performance of minstrel songs—whether performed in blackface or not—was a tradition spanning more than six decades by the beginning of the twentieth century, and it would continue for several more. Two members of the team that created *Broadway to Tokio*, composer A. Baldwin Sloane and lyricist George V. Hobart, later employed a familiar turn of phrase when they premiered *The Belle of Broadway* in 1902—a production that did not enjoy the success of their earlier “Broadway” collaboration.²

As the nascent century evolved, it was not long before “Broadway” became shorthand for the locus of cultural production as other theater artists employed it more frequently in production titles and as subject matter. Since 1900, at least 80 Broadway productions have included the term in their titles—a relatively small percentage, to be sure—but beyond the title the “idea” recurs frequently as theater artists reflexively celebrate the sporting world, the theatrical lifestyle, and the lives of artists. George M. Cohan’s iconic *Forty-Five Minutes From Broadway* appeared in 1906 and others followed with *From Broadway to the Bowery* (1907), *Broadway After Dark* (1907), *Mr. Hamlet of Broadway* (1908), *The Man Who Owns Broadway* (1909) and *Up and Down Broadway* (1910). Although these are but a few of the hundreds of productions in the five-year span of 1906–10, they demonstrate a growing affinity—in title and subject matter—with a lively theatrical demimonde that would later be exported nationally through the writing of columnists such as Damon Runyon and Walter Winchell, and in film representations of show business.

1

Yeah, well, artists are a lot like gangsters. They both know that the official version, the one everyone else believes, is a lie.

Jocko, a small-time gangster³

Recent books by Jerome Charyn and Daniel R. Schwarz examine New York’s Jazz-Age culture macroscopically and microscopically, respectively. Both authors recount the cultural milieu of the 1920s and 1930s, with Charyn tending toward imaginative leaps linking literature to actual events. Schwarz, however, grounds his argument in historical context and a close reading of a particular subject: the sportswriter and columnist Damon Runyon. Charyn’s *Gangsters and Gold Diggers: Old New York, the Jazz*

Age, and the Birth of Broadway (2005) is a tale of the Times Square area as it gradually evolved from the seamy Tenderloin into the glittering Great White Way. The author of more than 30 other books, Charyn is a journalistic writer with a facility for pulling pithy quotes from other works to help construct his narrative. Although he credits underlying sources in the scantest of end-notes, there is nothing in the text to point the reader to them. Examination of the notes and the bibliography reveal Charyn's debt to various essays in William R. Taylor's *Inventing Times Square* (1991). At times it seems as though readers might be better advised to read Taylor for a sharper picture of the ideas underpinning Charyn's narrative, but the swaggering prose of *Gangsters and Gold Diggers* sets it apart from the more serious urban-studies work in *Inventing Times Square*.

Charyn's cast of characters is readily accessible to the casual reader: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Florenz Ziegfeld, Al Jolson, Louise Brooks, Fanny Brice and Billy Rose, William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies, with Damon Runyon accompanied by a roster of glamorized criminals. The author's Broadway is a raucous frontier town where women are for sale, African Americans are nearly invisible—except in blackface performances onstage—and thugs are practitioners of a subcultural noblesse oblige. Using *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as one of his sources for reconstructing the era, Charyn draws parallels between Fitzgerald's characters and real persons. Indeed, the author repeatedly teases details from American cultural production, ties them to actual persons, and then critiques fiction's fidelity to reality. (In some of these commentaries, Charyn very nearly emerges as a frustrated film critic—or screenwriter.)

In the author's examination of the romance between William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies, he reveals a theme to which he often returns. Throughout the text, Charyn valorizes an ideal of women as objects of the male gaze in Florenz Ziegfeld's annual *Follies* and other shows where chorus girls were visual commodities. In a coda to the book, Charyn visits a movie theater in Times Square to see Rob Marshall's 2002 rendering of the musical *Chicago*. After a litany of complaints about the now "bloodless Broadway," Charyn loses himself in the film:

Legs abound, long legs, as female bodies dart across the screen like so many scissors. We're in some club that could be a Chicago version of Texas Guinan's El Fey, with a pint-sized stage that's packed with dancing daughters, every

single one a gold digger. . . . [It] is as close as I'll ever get to my Broadway. (236–37)

The author's consistent celebration of young female bodies foregrounds his particular Broadway interest. It is astonishing, though, that Charyn's Broadway does not consider the work—or person—of even *one* playwright at a time when American dramatic literature was in full flower. Eugene O'Neill received three Pulitzer Prizes in the 1920s, but the decade also marked the blossoming of George S. Kaufman, Maxwell Anderson, Edna Ferber, Philip Barry, Sidney Howard, George Abbott, and Ben Hecht—the last mentioned in passing, the others not at all. Even as these esteemed playwrights were creating an American dramatic literature, New York City authorities—unable to stanch the flow of illegal booze—attempted to regulate theatrical morality through license revocation, prosecution for stage indecency, and the use of censorious “play juries” appointed by the District Attorney. However, as Charyn might say, that Broadway would not be *his* Broadway.

In *Broadway Boogie Woogie: Damon Runyon and the Making of New York City Culture* (2004), Daniel R. Schwarz approaches the era from a more scholarly perspective. An English Professor at Cornell, Schwarz spends 322 pages working his way through salient points in Damon Runyon's life—an inversion of Horace Greeley's invocation to “go west”—as Runyon made his way from Colorado to New York. Although there is some overlap between Charyn and Schwarz, the latter tends to back his assertions with historical context, serious analysis, and careful notation. For most who think of Runyon and Broadway, the musical *Guys and Dolls* is probably what comes to mind, but Runyon's Times Square habitués descended from a long line of marginalized characters whose lives the journalist and proletarian poet had chronicled. Through imaginative use of dialogs enlivened by American dialects—soldiers in camp, souses in a bar, a pug fighter in negotiation—the Hearst-syndicated Runyon allowed readers throughout the country a glimpse of life lived at the fringe of society. Reading early magazine work of Runyon's, before his move to New York, it is possible even to imagine the writer as an inspiration to the incipient playwright Eugene O'Neill.⁴

In a 1907 Runyon story about a group of soldiers, published in *McClure's Magazine*, one finds dialog that wouldn't be out of place in one of O'Neill's sea plays from 1916 to 1917:

“Onct I belonged to the milish,” remarked Private Hanks, curled up luxuriously on his cot and sending long, spiral wreaths of smoke ceiling-ward.

"That's what I thought," said Sergeant Cameron. "I recollect the time you first took on—Plattensburg, '97, wasn't it? I had an idea then that you came from the state gravel wallopers."

"I'm kiddin' on the square," said Hanks. "I was an out-and-out snoljer with the milish two years ago out in Colorado. I helped put down the turrible rebellion in the Coal Creek district." (Runyon, "Defense" 379)

Runyon demonstrates the low regard in which state militias are held by regular Army "snoljers," but the story itself is a compassionate tale of the plight of coal miners published not long after labor unrest had roiled the mining industry nationwide.⁵ Schwarz argues that Runyon was a societal insider, a voyeur filtering life as "theater and spectacle" for his working-class readers (68). That his writing allowed Runyon to earn a handsome living, dress immaculately, and own many homes is a somewhat ironic side-effect (8–9).

Where Charyn focuses attention on the male gaze and a feminine ideal, Schwarz—also relying on Taylor's *Inventing Times Square*—notes the predominance of male relationships in Runyon's life (8). He highlights the characters tellingly absent from Runyon's narratives: In his world of "homosocial bonding," gay and African-American life are "ostentatiously absent" from Runyon's work (55). The author also notes Runyon's role in creating what Schwarz calls "trial reporting and spectator culture" (111). Runyon's reports on a number of spectacular trials—including Ruth Snyder's 1927 trial for murdering her husband, which was the basis for Sophie Treadwell's powerful 1928 play, *Machinal*—sketch the early outlines of today's voyeuristic mass media (120). Schwarz draws parallels to the "obsession with the O.J. Simpson trial, the killing of JonBenet Ramsey, or the disappearance of Chandra Levy," but he could as easily continue forward to recent trials of Robert Blake or Scott Peterson, and the disappearance of Natalee Holloway (113).

It was not until 1929 that Runyon began to write the so-called "Broadway stories," which imagined the subcultural Prohibition-era doings of gamblers, bootleggers, and chorus girls (Schwarz 9). Three years earlier, though, *Broadway* by Philip Dunning and George Abbott was an enormous hit in the 1926–1927 Broadway season, ultimately running 603 performances, an unusually high total for its time. It was the first big hit for the man known universally as "Mr. Abbott," but the "reportorial drama" is only obliquely about show business (Mantle 32). Its primary concern is a backstage struggle between a tuxedo-wearing

bootlegger and a scrappy song-and-dance man for the affections of “a jane” named Billie (Mantle 33–36). In the preface to the published text, Alexander Woolcott wrote that *Broadway* “perfectly caught the accent of the city’s voice” and that it was a “taut and telling and tingling cartoon . . . produced with uncommon imagination and resource” (qtd in Mantle 33). The point here, of course, is that *Broadway* engaged Broadway culture in ways that may have inspired the stories for which Runyon is best remembered.

In his passion for his subject, Schwarz occasionally indulges in Runyonesque hyperbole, suggesting motives or impact that the writer might have had, but that are not discernible from the record. That Schwarz sometimes strains his case does not undermine his careful analysis of dozens of Runyon’s stories and the ways in which those stories may be located in Broadway culture. One claim, though, does bear correction: “Network TV news did not debut until 1963” (69). Although Schwarz is making a point about the primacy of print journalism as a dominant force in news until recently, it is worth noting that Douglas Edwards of the CBS television network was “network television’s first anchorman,” beginning in 1948 (Hevesi). More telling than this editorial slip, though, is that Schwarz’s examination of Runyon’s Broadway culture neglects—as does Charyn’s—any discussion of playwrights or plays at a significant moment in the American theater. Schwarz’s project is more focused than Charyn’s, but how does New York City culture get “made” in the 1920s and 1930s *without* plays? It does not, and that is a weakness at the heart of both of these narratives.

2

Satire is what closes on Saturday night.

George S. Kaufman, playwright⁶

Theater historians often look to 1920 as a significant moment in the history of Broadway for reasons that have to do with a contemporaneous shift in thematics, style, and structure of American dramatic literature. It was a time when the codified structures of the commercial melodrama were giving way to influences of naturalism (environment), realism (verisimilitude), and modernism (consciousness). Eugene O’Neill’s 1920 tragedy, *Beyond the Horizon*, generally is credited as a marker in this shifting dramatic

landscape. O'Neill's family tragedy, set on a New England farm, reflected cultural dislocations not only in the drama but also in the 1920 American experience. Some of this societal roiling is mere subtext in O'Neill's first full-length play, but the cultural anxieties beneath the surface of *Beyond the Horizon* mirror concerns that resonated not only in Times Square but also far beyond the Hudson River. It was a time when the US population was becoming largely urban, with immigrants and African Americans more visible than ever. Tensions created by these demographic shifts led to the rise of political power for the Ku Klux Klan and to draconian anti-immigration measures in 1921 and 1924. All of this occurred just as Prohibition began, women gained universal suffrage, and Americans attempted to recover from the devastation of war, disease, and postwar economic hardship.

Despite the challenges facing Americans, the 1920s marked an era when Broadway theater seemed destined for ever-increasing highs, though two large obstacles loomed: talking pictures and the 1929 stock market crash. Although the number of productions offered in first-class Broadway theaters peaked in the 1927–28 season and never recovered, it is unlikely that the October 1927 premiere of the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, led to an immediate decline in new productions. Straitened financial circumstances that followed the stock market crash, however, certainly combined with the rise of talking pictures after 1927—and an increased demand for creative personnel in films—to help depress new Broadway production. Technological change similarly affected theater as radio grew in popularity and accessibility as a form of mass entertainment. Over the ensuing decades, Broadway's luster dimmed considerably as the number of new productions continued to fall and the excitement generated by Prohibition-era nightlife subsided with repeal and the lingering effects of the Depression.

Given George S. Kaufman's track record, theater historians might well proclaim the 1930s as the "Decade of Kaufman." The author, director, and producer had a hand in no fewer than two dozen Broadway productions in the 1930s. Historical studies of early twentieth-century theater, however, often privilege the burgeoning movement of "art theaters"—the Provincetown Players and Washington Square Players, for example—which presaged artistically inclined commercial companies such as the Theatre Guild and the Playwrights' Company. In a time of general privation and societal unrest, progressive theaters such as the Group Theatre (1931–41), the Federal Theatre Project (1935–39), the Mercury Theatre (1937–41), and more radical organizations such as the New Theatre League (1935–41) and Theatre Union

(1933–37) also had a powerful impact on theatrical culture. If Kaufman and his numerous collaborators represented a kind of material success, the more progressive companies—only some of which were denizens of Broadway—probed social and political consciousness through the form of a still-significant mass entertainment medium.

In choosing nine plays by Kaufman and various collaborators for *Kaufman & Co.: Broadway Comedies* (2004), Laurence Maslon includes a range of significant plays that construct and frequently comment on Broadway's cultural mystique.⁷ That the plays are mostly a delight to encounter (or re-encounter) is a bonus of this collection. Kaufman's collaborators on the nine plays include other fine writers such as Edna Ferber (*The Royal Family* [1927]; *Dinner at Eight* [1932]; *Stage Door* [1936]), Morrie Ryskind (*Animal Crackers* [1928]; *Of Thee I Sing* [1931]), Ring Lardner (*June Moon* [1929]), and Moss Hart (*Once in a Lifetime* [1930]; *You Can't Take It With You* [1936]; *The Man Who Came to Dinner* [1939]).

Among Maslon's collection only one notable collaborator is glaringly absent: Marc Connelly, who worked on eight plays or musicals with Kaufman between 1921 and 1924. It is a telling elision because Connelly and Kaufman enjoyed several substantial successes, and they wrote the same number of scripts that Kaufman created in his most successful collaboration, with Moss Hart. Kaufman and Connelly's hits together included their first collaboration, *Dulcy* (1921), a clever bourgeois satire that established both men as successful playwrights and made Lynn Fontanne a star in the title role. Yet even their productions of *Merton of the Movies* (1922), *Helen of Troy, New York* (1923), and *Beggar on Horseback* (1924) attained degrees of success that equaled or eclipsed several of the plays in the volume under review.

Maslon's choice to avoid the Connelly collaborations has a certain internal logic given the timeline presented by the Kaufman and Connelly productions in the 1920s. Most of the nine works in this collection premiered during a time of great economic challenge for Broadway theater and the nation—six premiered between 1930 and 1939. To properly appreciate these nine plays, today's readers need to avoid what some historians call "presentism": interpreting cultural production of the past through the prism of today's sensibilities. In these collaborations between Kaufman and his various associates, certain stereotypes of race, gender, ethnicity, and class are employed to occasionally chilling effect. There are scenes in *Animal Crackers* and *Stage Door*, for instance, containing racial stereotypes that would not be out of place in a

blackface minstrel show, and they leave a sour taste even when considered in context.

Although gender stereotypes also abound in these works, there is a gently rising arc of female empowerment in the collection as a whole. Beginning with *The Royal Family* (1927), a farcical take on the Barrymore and Drew theatrical family, women characters oscillate between strong matriarchs and hapless ingénues. Because women are a powerful theatrical commodity to audiences and managers, the women of the acting family in *The Royal Family* maintain a certain agency—despite attempts by men to control them. For a feminist spectator, it might be a dispiriting stroll through theater history, but as the collection unfolds women characters develop from mere objects of love interest or lampoon into near-subjective characters (who nonetheless are predictably “rescued” by male figures).

Setting aside the reification of gender stereotypes, with which Maslon reasonably does not concern himself in notes on the texts, Kaufman and his collaborators continue to be relevant today in their satires on American life—notably on the pretensions of the upper classes and the aspirations of striving, sometimes scheming, hoi polloi. Yet even as Kaufman and company skewer social behavior, they also juxtapose the artist and the making of art with those who commodify it—usually at the expense of the movie business. Along the way, the collaborators celebrate, by apposition, the hand-made craft of theater. There are, of course, tensions lodged at the center of these appositions of craft and commodity: the works of Kaufman and his collaborators were themselves commodities that allowed the writers to enjoy wealth and privilege—literally rags-to-riches in the case of Hart in his work on *Once in a Lifetime*.

The value of this collection is in the way it steeps the reader in a particular Broadway cultural moment. It spans the peak of Broadway output and its inexorable decline at a time before the American musical form had fully matured—*Of Thee I Sing*’s 1932 Pulitzer Prize in Drama notwithstanding. Surveying the lives of theatrical troupers, social aspirants, starry-eyed musicians, mindless movie moguls, political hacks, unethical businessmen, struggling artists, eccentric families, and obnoxious celebrities, these plays resonate far beyond their moment in Broadway’s heyday. The significance of gossip and the cult of celebrity, which appear in nearly every play, make these works all the more relevant in our current fame-driven culture. Maslon’s contextual notes in the back matter offer helpful pointers to clarify some of the contemporaneous names and occasional foreign terms used in the plays. He also discusses different versions of *Animal Crackers*,

showing a dynamic text in development and encouraging the reader to speculate on why one choice may have been made over another.

Given the challenges to theater production in the 1930s, it should not surprise that, in 1938, the team of Hart and Kaufman also presented an epic paean to the Broadway theater, *The Fabulous Invalid*, which is not included in this collection. When the team wrote the sentimental comedy about a theater's march into decrepitude and resurrection, the number of new productions opening each season on Broadway had been in a steep and steady decline for a decade. Featuring more than 70 actors playing upwards of 200 roles, the play was regarded as a too-nostalgic failure and closed after only 65 performances. Even though the play ends with hope for a new beginning sparked by a rising crop of artists—often thought to be the new Mercury Theatre of young Orson Welles and John Houseman—three generations of theater critics and writers have used the play's title (and the first production's failure) to symbolize whatever might be the current state of the theater.

As it turns out, Kaufman's famous remark about satire closing Saturday night might have been better applied to the nostalgia invoked in *The Fabulous Invalid*. Kaufman's satires often fared far better at the box office than did his sprawling plunge into theatrical memory. Hart first proposed writing the play after spending an insomniac night poring over back issues of *Theatre Magazine* and getting lost in the lore of early twentieth-century theater ("Fabulous"). His fascination with the theater of yesterday is understandable to anyone who has spent an evening transported by a text, a performance, or some combination thereof, and for whom the experience reverberates in the corridors of consciousness.

3

At age thirteen, I saw John Gielgud do the best Hamlet I have ever seen. . . . I was enabled at an early age to see the Holy Grail. I didn't have to wait until I was my present age [eighty-six].

Eric Bentley, critic

*As an art form that
vanishes even as it*

As an art form that vanishes even as it appears, theater is always involved with memory and its construction.

Marvin Carlson writes that theater is “the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts” (2). Yet, in the 70-plus years of Eric Bentley’s theatergoing, no actor has managed to surpass the performance of Hamlet rendered by John Gielgud when Bentley was an impressionable teen. Does Bentley’s memory follow the contours of Carlson’s argument for “adjustment and modification”? Are Bentley’s superior critical faculties exempt from Carlson’s theory? Or was Gielgud just that brilliant?

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David Lowenthal recounts Wordsworth’s return to Tintern Abbey after five years and the poet’s distress at failing to “recapture the immediacy of his first visit there.” “Retrieval,” argues Lowenthal, “falls short of initial experience” (210). However, a performance is not a relic of a bygone era, it is an artifact of a disappearing moment “always ghosted by previous experiences and associations” (Carlson 2). Although today’s reader may be propelled back in time while reading Maslon’s collection of the plays by Kaufman and company, when the works premiered they were crisp, satirical, and contemporary. Eight months before *The Fabulous Invalid* appeared, Thornton Wilder already had made a hit in the nostalgia market with *Our Town* (1938). Wilder, of course, did not invent the memory play—Carlson notes, in referring to Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1881), that one may argue that “every play is a memory play” (2)—but Wilder certainly popularized the form in this country.

Memory and nostalgia rise as topics for consideration in *It Happened on Broadway: An Oral History of the Great White Way* (2004) by Dartmouth oral historians Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer. Constructed from interviews with a cross-section of Broadway people, these personal narratives are well-rehearsed tales of Broadway when it was in its “Golden Age.” One is prompted to ask, though, “Which golden age?,” for each generation has its own. Lowenthal identifies the notion as “an imagined landscape invested with all [that nostalgists] find missing in the modern world” (25). Readers will be hard-pressed to find an interviewee in the Frommers’ book who does not believe the mid-1940s through the 1960s to be a golden age in Broadway theater. Will those working in today’s theater look back 40 or 50 years hence to some current “golden age”?

Although the authors also include tales from before and after the time period—notably in the cases of *Chicago* and *A Chorus Line*—the post-World War II era is when most of their interview subjects were beginning lives in the theater. In large part these tales are celebratory and wistful, but there are, in fact, other stories

that beg to be told. Most of the development story behind John Kander and Fred Ebb's *Chicago* (1975) is told from the perspective of producer Martin Richards, which circumvents the tortured relationship among director Bob Fosse, Ebb, and Kander. Fosse, who suffered a heart attack after the show was in rehearsal, fictionalized the process in his film, *All That Jazz* (1979). Ebb told an interviewer for the William Inge Theatre Festival, "The original *Chicago* was not joyous for me. . . . That one was just too hard" (Kander). Kander said of working with Fosse, "Life is too short. I don't care if somebody's a genius, I don't want to spend a year of my life in purgatory" (Kander). Although difficult stories are often painful to recall, there is a sense of lost historical opportunity at the core of the Frommers' interviews.

The golden age that the Frommers explore was a time when the top price of a Broadway ticket rose from about \$3 to as much as \$6.90 by the mid-1960s (Frommer 5, 34, 46; *South Pacific*). These prices seem a great bargain compared with \$80 top-price tickets for *The Lion King* in 1998, when the hardcover version of this book was released. The issue of ticket prices leads, by implication, to one frequently cited bit of conventional wisdom about commercial theater: that tickets were much more affordable in the "golden age." This is a common complaint heard among theater people, even if it is not argued overtly in the Frommers's book (LaChiusa 35). The truth of the matter is that the median four-person family income in 1949 was \$3,378—when the top ticket price for *South Pacific* was \$6 (United, *South Pacific*). By 1998, the median income for a family of four was \$56,061, more than 16 times the 1949 income, while the top Broadway ticket price had increased a little more than 13 times (United).

Concerns over the price of tickets and the loss of young people in the audience have haunted discussions about the health of the theater for years. In 2001, Richard Christiansen of the *Chicago Tribune* told a Miami theater audience that he thought concerns over young audiences were exaggerated.⁸ The veteran theater critic, who had witnessed extraordinary growth in Chicago's theater community, said that he had been hearing about this problem for 40 years. Theater, Christiansen argued, seemed only to be getting stronger. If theater audiences appeared to be aging, it was partly due to mature audiences' appreciation of the live experience—in addition to their having more disposable income. It seemed, Christiansen said, that audiences had always been older.

One can buttress Christiansen's case simply by considering Wilder's *Our Town*, a nostalgic trip to the past that ultimately shifts its audience's attention to the present. After bathing in the

glow of an early twentieth-century small town in New Hampshire, Wilder's audience is exhorted to live fully in the moment because "now" is forever becoming "then." The point is driven home when Emily, the young mother who dies toward the end of the play, is allowed to return to an earlier moment in her life. Upon arriving in her own past, she is immediately stung by the knowledge of how the future will unfold. After a few torturous minutes she returns to the town graveyard, where she joins the community of the dead. Despite its seeming nostalgia throughout, the final scenes force *Our Town's* audience to confront the modern dilemma. The narrator unsettles the audience when he asks, "And what's left when your memory's gone, and your identity, Mrs. Smith?" (88).

If one considers the play within its 1938 Broadway context, its allure for audiences comes into clearer focus. The omniscient narrator, "Stage Manager," takes the audience back to scenes set in 1901, 1904, and 1913, with a brief, but poignant excursion to 1899 in the play's final moments. It is reasonable to infer that many in the 1938 audience shared memories of those simpler times before World War I, Prohibition, the rise of Fascism, and the Depression. It is also fair to imagine that the issues addressed in plays such as *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)—to mention but a few works from the longed-for period under review in the Frommners' book—largely spoke to the dreams, desires, and fears of more mature audiences. Even among American musicals of note in the 1940s and 1950s, the most successful works tended to focus on what advisedly may be referred to as themes of mature interest: *Oklahoma!* (1943) celebrates the imperial impulse on the frontier, *Carousel* (1945) addresses class conflict and domestic abuse, and *South Pacific* (1949) confronts racial divisiveness.

It is not until *West Side Story* in 1957 that youth culture gets its due in the Broadway musical. By that time, though, subcultural elements of youthful rebellion had taken hold in rock music and in films such as *The Wild One* (1953), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Within a few years, "Broadway Is Dying!" was the cry in an advertisement for a 1961 television documentary, "The Three Faces of Broadway." When the program aired 15 May, it was near the end of what was called "Broadway's worst post-war season" ("Three Faces"). A few months earlier, Louis Kronenberger, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, noted a steady decline through the late 1950s. In true nostalgic fashion, Kronenberger, the *Time* magazine drama critic, hearkened back to the 1920s when Broadway offered "entertainment at all

levels, from the merely crude and trivial, to the wholly civilized and serious. . . . For all that was thoroughly trashy or inept, Broadway had a healthful climate, and American playwriting led the way, and the world” (18).

This unending nostalgia for the past by Broadway’s proponents may be understood when one considers Fred Davis’s perspective on the dialogic nature of nostalgia:

[T]o conceive of nostalgic experience as encompassing some necessary dialogue between past *and* present should not be taken to suggest that each voice or character in the dialogue is of equal strength, independence, and resonance. . . . While both characters must be present and engaged, as it were, for nostalgic feeling to be struck, in the ensuing dialogue it is *always* adoration of the past rather than lamentation for the present which captures and endears itself to the audience. (419)

Davis further extends the theatrical metaphor by referring to this dialectic of consciousness as “a playlet” (419). Perhaps nostalgia—as distinct from Carlson’s analytical, historicizing “memory”—is the “natural” condition of theater and theatergoing.

4

The Great White Way has always been about the green.

Michael John LaChiusa, composer

When it comes to Broadway these days, nostalgia itself has become the business of theater. What passes for a new play on Broadway usually has been fully vetted by a process of development in a variety of non-profit venues Off Broadway and around the country. In recent years, only a few new plays have opened in Broadway venues without first running elsewhere—and those plays were written by famous playwrights such as Edward Albee and Neil Simon.⁹ One might expect, then, that revivals of “golden age” plays and musicals would overwhelm the Broadway scene, but an examination of recent seasons shows that musical revivals—always on the calendar—are not the dominant agents in Broadway nostalgia. As Jesse McKinley noted in the *New York Times*, “the list of recent money-losers reads like a syllabus for a college musical theater survey: *Gypsy* (2003), *Little Shop of Horrors* (2003), *Man of La Mancha* (2002), *Oklahoma!* (2002),

Into the Woods (2002), *Bells Are Ringing* (2001), *42nd Street* (2001)” (“Hey”).

Today’s Broadway nostalgia has little to do with Charyn and Schwarz’s Jazz Age, the comedies of Kaufman and company, or the memories of the Main Stem’s aging veterans. Nostalgia now plays out in a theme-park version of Broadway—which was always a theme park, though perhaps an edgier thrill in those recalled days of guys and dolls. Broadway has become a tourist destination for people from across the country and around the world. A trip through Times Square in 2006 finds sidewalks choked with people craning their necks to see gigantic billboards as if they were visiting the Great Sphinx. Dozens of people stand with video cameras on the “bow-tie” islands in the center of the square to capture footage for later nostalgic constructions back home. The sidewalks are so clogged that locals often avoid the square altogether or walk briskly along the curb. Although tourism suffered a sharp decrease in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, a 2003–04 survey by the League of American Theatres and Producers—the Broadway theater trade association—showed that tourists accounted for more than 60% of ticket holders (McKinley, “Drawn”).

Steven Adler, provost of Earl Warren College at the University of California, San Diego, is a former Broadway stage manager who spent nearly three years interviewing dozens of people who work in and around the theater for a study on the changing nature of Broadway at the beginning of the twenty-first century. *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way* (2004) examines the way business is done at the top tier of commercial theater by intertwining the perspectives of Adler’s interviewees with the author’s own understanding of Broadway’s peculiarities. The choice of subtitle with its juxtaposition of art and commerce recalls a comment made by W. McNeil Lowry at the First American Congress of Theatre (FACT) in 1974, when he said, “There is not necessarily a dichotomy between Broadway and art, but there is a dichotomy between commerce and art” (Landesman). Lowry spoke as vice president of the arts division of the Ford Foundation, which was then, by his reckoning, the largest funder of non-profit theater in the US (Little 37). The quote, though, comes from an article in the *New York Times* by a young theater critic, Rocco Landesman, who would go on to become a successful theater producer and owner of five Broadway theaters.

Some of the turf covered by Adler will be familiar to those who have followed Broadway’s “invalid” status and its

oft-predicted death. It was nearly 35 years ago that producer Harold Prince said to the *New York Times*:

For the last 3,000 years people have been saying the theater is dying. The reasons for such gloomy predictions vary. . . . The fact is it's not dying. It really changes shape, as anything alive must to stay alive. As for the nameless nay-sayers, they have to belong in the category of the non-participants and are to be disregarded. (qtd in Funke)

However, Adler's book argues that independent producers such as Prince are jeopardized by rising costs and creeping corporate control. Adding fuel to the concerns of theater-business observers is the constant shifting that occurs within the corporate-producing landscape. As this is written, the media conglomerate Clear Channel has begun to reduce its stake in theater producing even as Disney continues its expansion.¹⁰

Adler guides the reader through a generic history of Broadway that gives short shrift to the impact of the early Off Broadway movement of the art theaters downtown from 1914 to 1919, focusing instead on experimentation that blossomed in the post-World War II era. Chronologies regarding "Off Broadway" and "experimentation" that privilege the postwar period are often a source of frustration to historians and historiographers. Despite what Burns Mantle listed in his early editions of the *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* series, and despite what is listed on the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com), the Provincetown Players and others of their ilk were what we would now call Off Broadway—or even Off Off Broadway. Adler also briefly notes the fitful relations between non-profit and commercial theater in the 1960s and 1970s that have been recounted in depth elsewhere. He uses those developing relationships to lay a foundation for this study, which eventually demonstrates how "Broadway theater" has come to mean "Broadway musical spectacle" to those tourists who throng Times Square.

Adler's concern is not that corporations have a more visible presence on Broadway, but that theater created by corporate-style decision-making may not be constructive in the long run. As Frank Rich says:

I guess I feel more and more that you have to take it on a case-by-case basis. Yes, I do think there's a lot to be said for the days of . . . a Hal Prince who had a vision and did it. But in the case of *The Producers*, probably the real muscle was (director-choreographer) Susan Stroman. It could not have

been done without her. . . . And so it doesn't really matter that there were eleven producers. (qtd in Adler 65)

Adler also takes note of the shrinking universe in which Broadway development takes place. Due to the Internet's proliferation of web sites and chat rooms, there is nowhere "safe" to develop new works (172). What the late Broadway manager Charles Willard used to call the Little Assassins of Broadway—people for whom *Schadenfreude* is a calling rather than a guilty indulgence—now have anonymous platforms from which they can spread gossip about works in development. Although the "Assassins" were once relatively limited to those who worked in the theater and patrolled the Rialto, nowadays anyone with a modem and money for a preview ticket can comment anytime about how a particular piece succeeds (or, more likely, fails). In such manner is buzz or word-of-mouth manufactured and disseminated around the globe before a show may have time to gel.

As a result of these types of challenges to Broadway commerce—about which Robert Anderson famously remarked, "you can make a killing, but not a living"—producers have begun to think (and argue) about how to market Broadway. Adler expresses concern over high ticket prices and the "relative inaccessibility" of Broadway theater in comparison to "movies, television, home videos and games, and Internet entertainment" (190). Although ticket prices and their stability as a percentage of income are discussed in the section above, there are alternatives to high-price tickets such as ticket-buying clubs that provide access to many shows for as little as \$3. These are not options explored by Adler, but his comments on forms of diversion that are more "economical" and "accessible" still deserve attention.

When one takes into account the cost of cable television, high-speed Internet connections (essential for video, games, and other entertainment purposes), and the widely reported decline in attendance at movie theaters, the argument about more economical forms of entertainment diminishes. The issue of accessibility will remain, however, until someone can package the living, communal experience of theater and send it through a cable or over the airwaves. That concession made, it must be noted that Broadway attracts 11 million paid admissions annually, which is more than the six New York professional baseball, basketball, and football teams combined.

Perhaps more significant to the discussion of nostalgia and Broadway's health has been the recent reliance of many musicals upon their audiences' knowledge of subject matter or underlying material: think of *The Producers* (2001), *Hairspray* (2002),

Mamma Mia! (2001), and *Monty Python's Spamalot* (2005). Each of these “new” musicals had a ready-made audience that reasonably could be expected to help generate substantial initial sales, repeat business, and enthusiastic word-of-mouth. In the cases of each of these shows, and of others such as *Avenue Q* (2003) and *Wicked* (2003), familiar thematic contours prey on nostalgia whether individual musicals celebrate lovably corrupt Broadway producers, the pre-assassination 1960s, the music of a 1970s pop group, notable Monty Python sketches, or even twists on *Sesame Street* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

In a controversial article for *Opera News*, composer Michael John LaChiusa bemoaned the current state of the musical, proclaiming it “dead” (30) in the first sentence and describing these recent successes as “*faux*-musicals” (32). LaChiusa’s comments stirred a debate in the Broadway community partly because the composer sharply criticized works that have been wildly successful. His own musicals, such as *Marie Christine* (1999) and *The Wild Party* (2000), are viewed as “serious” works that are long on ambition but short on songs with catchy tunes and witty lyrics. Adler argues that, while the failure of serious musicals may reflect a lack of adventurous audiences, musical creators must also be accountable: “The perception of a work as challenging does not mean, however, that it is artistically engaging” (212).

Finally, though, after the author discusses so-called “Disneyfication”—a theory of corporatized Broadway conflating a multitude of issues under a monolithic rubric—he notes that “Broadway resembles Las Vegas more than ever, and a vital and resounding voice in American theatre has been muted” (227). Unfortunately for Adler’s *cri de coeur*, if Broadway has come to resemble Las Vegas, the desert playground has now repaid the compliment. A few days after *Avenue Q* won the Tony Award for best musical in 2004, the show’s producers announced a deal with Steve Wynn for an exclusive run at his Wynn Las Vegas resort (McKinley, “*Avenue*”). It was not the first Broadway show to play Las Vegas, but the exclusivity of the arrangement drove a wedge between New York producers and the so-called “road presenters”—a sizable bloc of Tony Award voters—who felt betrayed by the agreement.

According to Felix Rappaport of the Luxor resort, though, road presenters (and Broadway producers) should understand that Las Vegas has shifted its perspective, “We’re no longer in the casino, or hospitality, or tourism business. Entertainment is our business” (Green). Rappaport’s assertion is partly supported by the theater building-boom in Las Vegas. Following five “lackluster months” at the Wynn Las Vegas, however, it was announced in February 2006 that *Avenue Q* would close at the end of May, after

playing to crowds that seemed “skimpy” (McKinley, “Sales”). The braggadocio of Las Vegas impresarios was vitiated by *Avenue Q*’s poor showing: Wynn announced that he would forgo a plan to build a new theater to house the Las Vegas run of *Monty Python’s Spamalot*, which would get the space vacated by *Avenue Q*. Just before the *Avenue Q* closing was announced, *Hairspray* began its desert run with other Broadway musicals on the way. Theater producers who dream of Las Vegas jackpots will pay close attention to the unfolding drama in the desert.

Broadway in Las Vegas is nostalgic indulgence not unlike the Nevada city’s re-creations of New York City and Paris. Is the theatrical experience “authentic” if the production is shortened to meet the assembly-line pace of ten shows per week? Does it even matter? In *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985), David Lowenthal suggests:

Replicas like replacements may be preferred to their prototypes. The nineteenth-century English view that “a happy imitation is of much more value than a defective original” has its twentieth-century counterpart in Walt Disney’s boast that Disneyland’s “Vieux Carré” was just like the original [in New Orleans], but “a lot cleaner”. (293)

Despite the cruel irony of Disney’s comment in light of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, it returns us to the American theme-park aesthetic, to a vision of life replicated and scrubbed of its imperfections.

Carol Channing told the Frommers that the great acting team of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne had once told her, “after the first two or three months in New York, you’re playing to Omaha anyway” (33). The Lunts meant that Broadway was a place of pilgrimage to which Americans were drawn. Despite the 11 million annual customers, the eternal Broadway fear is that those recalled Americans may disappear along with other illusions of the “good old days.” If the constant change in which we find ourselves feels like sand shifting beneath our feet, then perhaps the “idea” of Broadway is (and always was) an illusion. Or, given its burgeoning desert outpost, a mirage.

Notes

1. Quoted in Frommer and Frommer, *It Happened on Broadway*, 33.
2. It should be noted that “Belle of Broadway” and “Broadway” both had been used as terms of art to evoke a certain cultural *mise-en-scène* at least as early as 1829.

3. From Russell Banks, "A Novelist's Vivid Memory Spins Fiction of Its Own." Quoted in Schwarz, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 65.
4. A 1914 Runyon column reads as if it were notes for O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1946). See Damon Runyon, "At Their Mornin's Mornin'," *Washington Post* 28 October 1914: 11.
5. The story also includes what may be the first documented usage of the term *hep*, slang meaning well-informed, predating the earliest citation in the Oxford English Dictionary's most recent edition by nearly two years.
6. Quoted in Laurence Maslon, "Kaufman Chronology," *Kaufman & Co.*, 856.
7. In the interest of full disclosure, Maslon and I are professional acquaintances; we both teach in the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University.
8. Richard Christiansen, "Seeking Audiences of the Future," CityDialogues, City Theatre Company Series, Colony Theatre, Miami Beach, Florida, 11 February 2001. This was a panel of theater critics that included Mel Gussow of the *New York Times*, Jack Zink of the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, Christine Dolen of the *Miami Herald*, and the author.
9. The exception is Stephen Belber, whose play, *Match*, not only premiered on Broadway in April 2004 but also marked Belber's Broadway debut—a rare exception, indeed.
10. See Michael Riedel, "Tarzan New Line King" (*New York Post*, 21 September 2005) and "Unclear Channel" (*New York Post*, 16 September 2005).

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