Curtain Up!

After an 18-month hiatus, live theater has returned to the American stage. Alumni active in producing shows on Broadway and elsewhere reflect on the pandemic's onset, its impact on them and their industry, and what the future holds.

By JoAnn Greco

Betsy Dollinger C'90, an independent theater producer and entertainment marketer, vividly remembers the second week of March 2020. "I had *Mrs. Doubtfire* in previews, I had *Diana: The Musical* in previews," she says. "I was in theaters every night that week so I was staying in the city. There were dinners, there were parties. We were not hugging, but we were gathering."

Lori Fineman C'92 was busy too. She was finishing up a 12-year stint as executive director of off-Broadway's Transport Group Theatre Company so she could devote more time to her own fledgling production company. As the week kicked off, she started getting calls from actors who lived on Long Island and in New Jersey, who were uneasy about making the commute to appear in Transport's revival of *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*. That Tuesday, she attended an event celebrating women in the industry. "The theater was packed with hundreds of people, but there were hand sanitizer stations in the lobby and we were bowing to each other, joking about *'how do we greet?'* she says. "Everyone was talking about how the Scott Rudin productions [including *To Kill A Mockingbird, The Book of Mormon,* and *West Side Story*] were selling off tickets for $50. Other shows were already cutting back on performances. We were like, 'We're doing fine, we're going to keep doing the show.'"

Two days later, on March 12, Dollinger was still going strong, wearing her marketing hat and helping out with that evening's opening of the much-anticipated *Six,* a contemporary retelling about the six wives of Henry VIII. "Our interns were packing the gift bags when the lead producer left for this big meeting. We were all sitting there thinking, *'They're going to wait till Monday to tell us to close, all these people have traveled from London, they'll let us open.'* We were very naive. That afternoon, I think it was about 4:30, we got word that Broadway was shutting down. Tonight."

A few blocks away, Todd Haimes C'78 and the Roundabout Theatre were also anticipating show time. The next day, they expected to begin previews of another London musical transplant, a revival of *Caroline, or Change.* Haimes, the company's artistic director and CEO, wasn't completely surprised when he heard the news. "It all came about very precipitously, though," he says. "And certainly no one imagined that it would go on for 18 months. The magnitude of what was happening had not yet sunk in."

Things had been coming to a head throughout the week. That Wednesday, the National Basketball Association temporarily halted its season, becoming the first major organization to suspend operations. Early on Thursday afternoon, then-New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo announced a statewide ban on gatherings of more than 500 people and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio declared a state of emergency. A steady stream of New York cultural institutions—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New York Philharmonic—began instituting temporary shutdowns. The city's known COVID-19 cases still totaled under 100, and fewer than 1,500 had been reported across the country, but many experts and officials were cognizant of how quickly the numbers had jumped, first in China, and then in Italy, since the year had started.

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA PACHECO

Now all 41 theaters, which together comprise "Broadway," were closing—for a month. Deflated, Dollinger headed back to the suburbs that rainy Friday the 13th. Her body ached and she felt lethargic. "It turns out I had COVID that week."

Break a leg, indeed.

As Broadway babies headed home and the fabled Great White Way went dark, "ghost" lights everywhere were turned on: single, bare bulbs that illuminate theater stages while their doors are locked. One of our culture's primary symbols of perseverance and resilience—*the show must go on!*—had succumbed to a pandemic that would eventually kill millions and cripple the world's economy. For the industry, it would mean staff layoffs and result in thousands of unemployed artists. But it would also encourage new bouts of creativity, introduce new forms of mounting and distributing shows, and, concurrent with the racial reckoning of the Summer of 2020, welcome new faces to participate in a more equitable, diverse, and unquestionably changed profession.

Broadway had skipped performances before, of course. Usually, the shutdowns were brief and due to labor strikes; although the most recent—when stagehands walked out in 2007—had lasted almost three weeks. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, paused things for just two days. Even during the pandemic of 1918, which killed nearly 700,000 Americans (which the number of COVID-19 deaths exceeded earlier this fall), the 45 or so legitimate venues then in operation stayed open.

This time, the curtain would not rise so quickly.

Intermission Begins

Harold Wolpert C'88, then executive director of the not-for-profit off-Broadway company Signature Theatre, was very worried about how long it would take. He remembers constantly being on the phone. "You talk to enough people," he reasoned, "you get a collective knowledge. Some companies had doctors on their board, so I'd talk to those colleagues and ask *what are you hearing*? We were continually making contingency plans: if we opened now, if we opened three months from now … trying to game out the future."

He wondered about whether the company would make it through to the other side and what the impact would be on artists who were already living job to job and couldn't make money in the meantime by, say, waiting tables—and also about how the shutdown would affect audiences. "There were questions—not only about 'Would they come back?' but about the disconnection," he continues. "Would something be lost, would our audience grow, or decrease—or just shift? What does the audience look like after, fingers crossed, things settle down a bit and there's a regular season of live plays?"

They don't call it show "business" for nothing. According to the Broadway League, the national trade industry representing Broadway producers, presenters, and theater owners, in the 2018–2019 season nearly 15 million people attended a Broadway production—a record. The theaters grossed $1.8 billion, accounted for almost 100,000 jobs, and contributed $14.7 billion to the economy of New York City. That's not counting touring productions, the other 700-plus companies that constitute off- and off-off-Broadway, or the other 2,000 to 3,000 professional theater groups nationwide. They too shut down that Friday, or shortly thereafter.

The economic fallout was immediate. Several shows—including Disney's staging of its blockbuster movie *Frozen,* a revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf,* and musicalizations of the cult classic films *Beetlejuice* and *Mean Girls* became immediate casualties, announcing that they would not return once things settled down. (Earlier this year a highly anticipated new production of *West Side Story* also nixed its reopening.) The Roundabout, which is comprised of five venues (some Broadway, some off-Broadway), laid off 80 people while implementing pay cuts for those who remained. It kept up everyone's health insurance, though, says Haimes, and eventually invited everyone back. "The board of directors and our major donors in general have been unbelievably supportive," he adds. "They knew what we were facing almost without us having to ask. They stepped up right away." At the much smaller InterAct Theatre in Philadelphia, cofounder and producing artistic director Seth Rozin C'86 held on to his full-time staff of four. "Our finances have been a roller coaster," he says. "We went from a big deficit to a big surplus—we received some funding but didn't have as many expenses—but we may face another deficit." Many theaters received financial help from Small Business Administration-backed rescue plans like the Paycheck Protection Program and the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant program. Some, like InterAct, later earned supplemental income by renting out their facilities.

An emotional reset soon followed, as downtime allowed more room for contemplation about career, business, life. "It was the first time since 1983 that I hadn't worked every night and all weekend," Haimes says. "I have to admit it was nice, not getting emails till 11 p.m. every night. … It was kind of a respite for awhile."

Susan Bernfield C'86, producing artistic director at the off-Broadway company New Georges, found herself achieving her New Year's resolution, albeit in the most unexpected of ways. "In 2019, I saw 79 plays all over town. And it's at night and it's hard and it's exhausting," she says. "I love my job but for 2020 my intention was: *I have to see fewer plays!"* Forced to stop running around, her first instinct was to "relax—I wasn't pushing myself into the whole 'we're starting in April, no June, no September' thing."

An art form that is all about intimacy and immediacy, about packing big crowds into tiny seats, theater's reopening was continually delayed as the pandemic stretched on. While restaurants managed with a fraction of their tables, they were allowed to add seating by expanding out onto the sidewalk and street. For Broad-

From blockbuster musicals based on already beloved properties to brand new works that grapple with race and social issues, live theater is on its way back.

way productions, which cost millions of dollars to mount and then operate on slender margins, reduced occupancy just wasn't financially feasible.

Eventually, though, as the new reality set in, the players began getting restless. It was time once again to get to work.

Summer Stock

"By later that summer artists, being artists, began to emerge," recalls Bernfield. "There was a lot of reinvention and everyone was trying to figure out what to do next. Some people were starting to get better at multimedia and using the online tools, while others were doing these street theater or these socially-distanced in-person shows outdoors. It was just bliss."

Theaters and other arts organizations tried a variety of ways to stay in touch with their audiences—they dug into archives to share previously recorded productions, they presented conversations with artists and writers, they filmed new stage performances before empty auditoriums, and some livestreamed productions and even made movies, with their bubbled crews breaking out of their theatrical boxes.

Like everyone else, theaters also experimented with delivering readings through conferencing apps such as Zoom, but many soon found that much was lost in translation. "If Zoom productions aren't edited well, watching little people in little squares can be like watching paint dry," Haimes says.

At Signature, "we decided not to go the readings route," says Wolpert. "Our playwrights just weren't enthusiastic about doing Zoom plays. So we did something called SigSpace Summits, where the writers talked with leaders outside of their field. Like Lynn Nottage chatted with a meditation guru and Anna Deavere Smith interviewed the president of a local hospital to talk about public health."

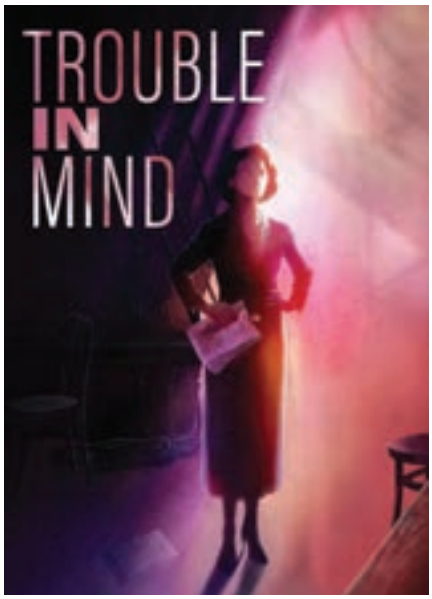
Rozin too steered away from Zoom presentations. "They're so much work for the actor," he says. "They're so micro, there's no audience, they're vulnerable to tech failures." InterAct instead developed a series of live "screenside chats" between Rozin and actors, designers, and others affiliated with the company. It considered showcasing archival work but, says Rozin, "they were recorded only as documentation, not to be publicly viewed, plus we didn't want to keep kicking the same plays down the road. We wanted to honor our commitment to our audience for the season, so we decided to go ahead and produce our final two shows, *Niceties* and *Steal Her Bones,* for streaming." While the company learned skills in transferring a live performance to film, the goal, says Rozin, was "always more about having our audience experience great examples of our work."

Bernfield's thoughts turned to the writers and performers with whom New Georges had built relationships. "This was such an identity crisis for the artists," she says. "We wanted to foster that feeling of still being who you are. We organized online meetups, we set up micro grants, and very early we commissioned new work for a new project, Tiny Plays in the Era of No Plays, where every week we emailed a one-page play to our audience."

Out in Colorado, far removed from the pandemic pandemonium on the East Coast, Jed Bernstein C'77, producing director for Theatre Aspen, decided that going ahead with the company's usual summer season made sense, especially since it's presented in an open-air venue. "But it would be different, consisting of cabaret performances and revues rather than traditional book musicals, because they lent themselves to smaller, distanced ensembles," he says. "We were one of the few companies in the country to put our chips on live entertainment." After a successful summer season, the Midwest and West succumbed to a COVID-19 surge, though, and, says Bernstein, "it really hit home for us then that life would continue to be disrupted for quite some time."

Waiting in the Wings

Across the nation during the summer of 2020, rallies and protests for social justice and racial equity shook things up in other ways. Theaters were quick to respond. "We've always paid attention to these issues," says Rozin, "but this year I think the plays we've chosen all have a new urgency and meaning." They include *The Chinese Lady,* about the first Chinese woman to set foot in America; *This Bitter Earth,* about an interracial gay couple; *72 Miles to Go*, a recent play about the Mexican border crisis; and a new work from Rozin



himself, *Settlements,* which examines the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through the meta-lens of a local theater production. InterAct also fine-tuned and expanded its equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives.

Roundabout took advantage of the producing lull to do the same, "more fully exploring an effort we had begun three years ago," says Haimes. "We've now introduced a formal plan that will change the complexion of the people on our stages, on our board, and in our audiences. I don't think we will ever do a show with an all-white cast again. It will always reflect the diversity of our city." The company's first two Broadway offerings, *Caroline, or Change,* set in Civil Rights-era Louisiana, and *Trouble in Mind*, an examination of racism in the theater that was written in 1955, will obviously include Black cast members.

The moment was also right for a brand new play, *Thoughts of A Colored Man,* to reach Broadway, a relative rarity in a world of musical revivals, movie adaptations, and jukebox revues. Fineman was involved as a coproducer. The show represents her first foray into Broadway and is also the Broadway debut for its writer, Keenan Scott II, and its director Steve H. Broadnax III. Its small cast—seven actors portray a disparate group of Black men whose lives intersect one day in Brooklyn—and modest set helped make it more appealing during a risky time. "Less cost, fewer variables, very contained," Fineman says. "It had been produced twice in 2019, in Syracuse and Baltimore, but the lead producers and investors felt this was a play that needed to be put before a wider audience. There was a sense of '*Let's rally behind this. Let's make sure it gets to Broadway.*'"

In November 2020, when the production team announced the show's upcoming Broadway opening, "things really started percolating," says Fineman. "There were ideas about the vaccine, and the election was settled." She remembers attending the virtual conference of the National Alliance of Musical Theatre that month. "Normally, there'd be 45-minute performances from each show in the festival, but in this case they did a 15-minute film for each one. Everything came across beautifully," she says. "Attendance for the conference was incredible, and there were networking opportunities with webinars and chat rooms. It felt like I was finally able to break out of the boundaries of my isolation and to connect with theater makers in all parts of the country and to see that our industry was still relevant."

Emerging from hibernation as the pandemic dragged on, others found themselves busier than ever, too. While Zoom might not be the best way to present shows, it proved the perfect platform for meeting colleagues and talent when travel was out of the question. "I have a whole new Rolodex of artists and writers," says Mark Kaufman C'89, executive vice president for Warner Bros. Theatre Venures, the company behind *Beetlejuice: The Musical*. "I must have had over 100 Zoom meetings." Kaufman—who oversees a huge catalog of titles from Warner Bros., New Line, Castle Rock, Turner, Hanna-Barbera, RKO, HBO, and Looney Tunes—also points out that he "got more requests for theater rights in six months than in the last six years," he says. "I think the creative juices just really started flowing."

With theatergoers deprived of performances and everyone else starved for content, even film and live theater forged what once would have seemed an unholy alliance. Filmed stage versions of still-running, still-touring Tony-winners were suddenly everywhere, with *Hamilton* streaming on Disney+ and on movie screens, Spike Lee's capture of David Byrne's *American Utopia* on HBO, and *Come from Away* on Netflix. *Diana: The Musical,* shot on stage in September 2020 with a small crew and no audience, began streaming last month on Netflix—six weeks *before* its Broadway opening. "Normally, there's a fear of cannibalization when it comes to airing a current show on the small screen," says Dollinger, one of the coproducers of *Diana*. "But I think this will be great for the show. The whole group of people who have become such devoted fans of [the multi-season Netflix streamer] *The Crown* will want to see this and, hopefully, will want to come in real life, too."

Back-of-the-house, things were also hopping. "We've been doing construction all along in our American Airlines Theatre," says Haimes. "We took advantage of being closed to tackle some things we had been planning." The Theatre has undergone more than $5 million in renovations, including replacing the roof and installing a new HVAC system. Meanwhile over at another Roundabout theater, Studio 54, a burst water heater caused $2 million in damage that had to be repaired. "When buildings are not occupied, bad things happen," says Haimes. "It was a total mess."

In Philadelphia, InterAct used the shutdown to address acoustic transfer issues—apartment dwellers above the theater had occasionally complained of hearing amplified music or theatrical sound effects (like explosions)—as well as to make some COVID-mandated adaptations. "We put in a new filtration system, changed the bathrooms so they were less touch-oriented, and installed a brand new HVAC system in our basement rehearsal room," says Rozin, adding that the renovations cost the small company more than $50,000.

Soon enough, with theaters COVID-proofed as much as possible, actors fresh and ready for action, and ghost lights once again dimmed, theater goers would be flipping down their velvet seats, opening their programs, and fishing out their cough drops. The curtain was about to rise.

Let's Put On A Show (Again)

In late May of this year, the Broadway League declared that its theaters would really, truly open in September. A few months later, the organization released a set of measures to ensure as smooth sailing as possible. Masks would be required for audience members and they, as well as performers, crews, and staff, had to be vaccinated. Other theaters in other cities—such as a consortium of 30 or so Philly-area theaters—announced similar measures as they prepared for fall and winter openings.

Actors' Equity Association, the union representing stage performers and managers, further required that productions entering into Equity contracts hire a dedicated COVID-19 safety manager. "The more you get into COVID prep, the more it's like peeling an onion," offers Haimes. "For the audience, we're all set with the regulations and the new HVAC, but for the artists, if someone gets COVID, they have to be quarantined. We have to test the cast three times a week. We've had to increase the number of understudies—who have to rehearse in a separate space—by about a third.

"It's been really complicated, expensive, and difficult," he says.

Still, as Kaufman puts it, the overwhelming feeling has been, "if it makes it all happen, then it's worth it." And when a few productions got frisky and moved up their openings to the summer, audiences were ready. Dollinger was right there with them. "The first show to reopen was *Springsteen on Broadway*, and I went in July," she says. "I had seen it already [the show originally ran from October 2017 through December 2018] but this time, it was even more exhilarating. Everyone needed to be vaccinated, but there were no masks. Then Delta hit in August, so it was like one step forward, two steps back. The good news was that we didn't re-open, shut down, re-open as London did—but now we needed masks. *Pass Over* was the second show to open, and when I saw it there was an energy that I don't remember ever seeing before."

But Broadway cannot live on New Yorkers alone. During its record 2018-2019 season, two thirds of audience members came from outside of the metropolitan area. That's a problem as tourism faces a challenging recovery: it plummeted by 67 percent, from 66.6 million visitors in 2019 to 22.3 million visitors in 2020, according to the Office of the New York State Comptroller. To drive ticket sales, the industry has unveiled an ad campaign, *This is Broadway*, featuring clips from dozens of shows and narration by Oprah Winfrey, and some companies are promoting steep discounts. In mid-September, Roundabout, for instance, offered Orchestra seats for its first two Broadway productions for as low as $148.

Elsewhere, trepidation is there, but so is optimism. Prepping for a post-Labor Day "subscription push," Rozin says, "the big question is the audiences, and we just don't know. We're not expecting lots and lots of people to try us out right now — what we want is our audience that loves us to come and be comfortable." Along with vaccination and mask requirements, he says, occupancy will be capped at 60 percent. Since all four scheduled plays are one-acts, "there are no intermissions, no concessions, no reason to take your mask off or cluster in the lobby," Rozin adds.

"Theater has a great emotional value that transcends its pure entertainment value and that has been proven over and over again," observes Bernstein. "It was true after the Civil War, it was true after the Great Depression, it was true after World War II. Americans turn toward theater because they want to be together, they want relief from sadness or fear, and I'm hoping that it will be a way out now."

Fresh from the announcement that Warners Bros. would bring back its Tony-nominated *Beetlejuice: The Musical* in 2022 after all, Kaufman too is feeling good. "We have to believe that the vaccine and mask mandates work," he says. "We're learning from London and the shows here that opened before us. We're trying to isolate right away if someone gets sick, trying to avoid an industry-wide shutdown. We're getting smarter and everyone is sharing information.

"There's no doubt that this has been a very unique time," Kaufman continues. "We will study it and learn from it for years—the lessons are yet to come. In a strange way, it opened many doors and allowed us to branch in all kinds of ways. I've aways tried to look at it in a positive way because there were certainly plenty of negatives."

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