

“No One is Alone”

A look into how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted and changed Broadway and the Arts

A Capstone Project for Masters of Arts- Theatre Arts Administration

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May this pandemic be nothing but a brief chapter in the entire span of our lives and may it reaffirm the importance and resilience of the arts in our society, as we move forward.

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## Introduction

Everyone who has lived through 2020 will have a story about where they were when the world shutdown at the mercy of the COVID-19 pandemic. I would like to start this paper by sharing my own.

In January 2020, I had just started an internship with Jujamcyn Theaters as part of my MA in Arts Administration program with Rowan University. Jujamcyn Theaters owns and operates five Broadway theaters including The St. James, The August Wilson, The Eugene O’Neil, The Walter Kerr, and The Al Hirschfeld. I had worked for Jujamcyn for two years prior as a full-time usher at the Walter Kerr for and occasionally at the St. James and the Al Hirschfeld. Through my ushering experience, I became curious about a career in house management and felt that this was a career path I would like to pursue after I completed my degree. Participating in the internship program with the company, in order to fulfil the internship course requirement for my program, seemed like the logical next step in my career and education trajectory.

I was excited to start and learn about the company from a different perspective. But about six weeks into the internship, things started to change. Rumbblings of a deadly coronavirus entering the United States were starting to appear in the news. Then, New York State had its first confirmed positive case on March 1<sup>1</sup> A big part of my internship was fielding customer service phone calls. More and more of the phone calls coming in were in regards to cancelling or exchanging theater tickets due to health and safety concerns about coming into Manhattan due to the virus. By that first weekend in March, the office culture grew more and more concerned about the possibility of a pandemic and what that meant for Broadway. Full theater meetings,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/coronavirus/person-in-nyc-tests-positive-for-covid-19-officials/2308155/>

with cast, crew, and front of house were held in each theater to talk about what Jujamcyn was doing to ramp up the cleaning procedures before, after, and in between shows and what other additional measures they were taking to keep the theaters clean and safe for all. Signs were posted in the restrooms for patrons with a reminder, and instructions, about how to wash your hands. Multiple hand sanitizer dispensers were placed in the lobby and on each level of every theater.

The crazy thing was that, for me personally, even while all of this was happening, and the concern about the virus was growing, it still felt as though nothing was happening. With the exceptions of a few more cleaning protocols, everything just felt like business as usual. When I had a night off from the theater, I took in a good handful of shows that week, as a patron; *Company*, *West Side Story*, *The Inheritance*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Diana*. The houses were still fully sold out. No one was wearing a mask yet. People were hugging and talking in the aisles. But then on March 11, the New York Times reported that an usher who worked at two Broadway theaters, the Booth, and the Brooks Atkinson, had tested positive for COVID-19<sup>2</sup>. Having worked as an usher myself, I know how many people you interact with on a nightly basis, and thinking about that could spread the virus to multiple people in the theatre that night, shocked and concerned me. That night I went to Radio City to see *Riverdance* with my friend, Meg. By the end of the show, we looked at our phones and had saw that the NBA had postponed the remainder of their season, due to multiple players testing positive for Covid-19<sup>3</sup>. Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson had also tested positive for COVID-19 while in Australia.<sup>4</sup> We both looked at each other and knew, this was going to be the last “hurrah” for a while. It was only going to be

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/theater/broadway-show-usher-coronavirus.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/sports/basketball/nba-season-suspended-coronavirus.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://time.com/5801534/tom-hanks-rita-wilson-coronavirus/>

a matter of time before Broadway was impacted by the effects of this virus.

The next morning, March 12, I had office hours at Jujamcyn. I remember feeling very unsettled and anxious as I was getting ready for work that morning. It was as if I instinctively knew something big was going to happen that day. I was worried about my safety, as it was clear this virus was in Manhattan. I was also worried about the effects it might have on my industry, my colleagues, my friends, and my future. When I stepped into the office, there was a quiet, somber, anxious energy. There were rumors and speculation about a possible shutdown and how long that might last for. But soon after I sat down; a flood of customer service phone calls came in about ticket cancellations, refunds, and exchanges. At that point, we could no longer deny what was happening. We understood the health and safety concern of the patrons. All we could say was that patrons had to contact their point of purchase (i.e the theater box office, Ticketmaster, or a third-party vendor), to receive a refund.

By 1:00 PM, I was called to rush over a stack of letters to the Al Hirschfeld Theater, home to *Moulin Rouge!* The production decided to cancel their matinee performance. Unbeknownst to patrons, the performance was cancelled due to a member of the company showing symptoms of COVID-19, and the producers had ordered a test. Patrons were outraged, confused, and disappointed. The house managers in the office that day were handing out the letters I brought over, that provided information for patrons on how they would receive a refund for their tickets for that afternoon's performance, while answering questions, and apologizing for the inconvenience.

By 2:00 that afternoon, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that all Broadway Theaters were to shutdown at 5:00 PM and remained closed until April 7<sup>5</sup>. We found out just when the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://broadwaynews.com/2020/03/12/all-broadway-theaters-to-shut-down-cuomo-orders/>

rest of the world did, which surprised me. I was checking my email all day, waiting for announcement to come from the company or from the Broadway League. But we found out on the news, like everyone else. I naively felt hopeful about April 7, thinking that this was a temporary hiatus to help stop the spread of the virus. I thought I would absolutely go see a show on that history making night when Broadway would return. I was even told by one of my supervisors to hold on until then, as the internship would resume again when Broadway reopens.

The rest of the day was bleak. Because this came as such an abrupt shock, there were many questions that still needed to be answered about payroll, letting company members back into the theater to collect their belongings, and so forth. I said my good byes for the day, but a part of me knew that it was a good bye for a long time. I walked down the streets of Times Square to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Street NJ PATH station, looking at all the theaters. The streets were empty and quiet for 6:00 PM on a week day. As I made my way down the stairs into the PATH station, I took one last look around my surroundings, just incase this was the last time I saw the city for a while. And it was.

About three weeks after my last day in the office, I received an email from Human Resources that the office was going to be closed for the foreseeable future and that my internship had concluded. It was not a complete shock, but still bitter sweet. On one hand, I felt relieved as I had already completed the academic requirement of the internship prior to the shutdown. On the other, I felt disappointed I did not have the opportunity to see it through until the end and felt robbed of the opportunity to grow into the role, just as I had been settling into it.

Sadly, my story is not unique. It is simply that; my story. Within the theatrical industry there are thousands; if not millions of other stories of arts workers, like myself, whose livelihoods, careers, dreams, and ambitions were turned upside down by the events of this

pandemic. To say that an industry wide shut down of this magnitude is unprecedented is an understatement. Throughout its history, there has never been a complete and total shutdown on Broadway of this epic scale. Even during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, theaters remained open; business as usual<sup>6</sup>. After the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, when New York City and the country were shaken to its core, Broadway reopened three days after, under the leadership of Mayor Rudy Giuliani<sup>7</sup>. There was the 2003 musicians strike, which closed Broadway for about a week.<sup>8</sup> There was also the 2007 Stagehands strike, which lasted nineteen days<sup>9</sup>. There has never been a period in time, where theaters anywhere have been shut down a prolonged period of time of this scale.

What originally started out as a perceived month long shut down, in an effort to combat COVID-19 has since turned into a nine-month shutdown and counting. The current projected reopening date is May 2021, which means Broadway will be shutdown for over a year<sup>10</sup>. The reality is even that is optimistic thinking. In an October 2020 interview with Jennifer Garner, Dr. Fauci said that theaters may not be able to open to full capacity, without restrictions, until a year after a vaccine is introduced to the general public.<sup>11</sup> This means theater may not be able to reopen until 2022. The industry that was one of the first to shut down, will be among the last to fully reopen, due to the nature of its business; large amounts of people gathering together in packed, tight spaces.

The past several months has been both historic and devastating. The economic hardships

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/theater/spanish-flu-1918-new-york-theater.html#:~:text=War%20plays%20were%20big%20on%20Broadway%20in%20the%20fall%20of%201918.&text=They%20flocked%20to%20see%20a,must%20have%20laughed%20and%20laughed.>

<sup>7</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/11/07/how-9-11-brought-broadway-to-a-standstill-until-nycs-mayor-revived-it/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/03/11/broadway.strike/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/29/theater/29cnd-stage.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/theater/broadway-reopening.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.playbill.com/article/dr-anthony-fauci-shares-outlook-on-theatres-eventually-reopening>

on this pandemic can be felt upon the performing arts economy and its workers, in addition to sub-industry economies, such as tourism, restaurants, and retail. A record number of unemployment claims have been filed, and businesses within and outside of the industry have closed for good. With no extended pandemic unemployment benefits extended since July 2020, industry power players have joined forces with Senator Chuck Schumer of New York to support the Save our Stages Act,<sup>12</sup> in hopes of receiving government assistance to save the industry from economic collapse. Fortunately, congress has just passed a new relief package, that includes relief for arts organizations. Yet, the package has cut personal PUA benefits of the last relief package in half. Within the field, we have seen workers adapt and respond to both this pandemic with resilience. Performers, producers and organizations have adapted to creating virtual performances out of respect and an abundance of caution for workers and audiences alike. With the industry on pause, a cultural shift has taken place to the fight on racial inequality, due to the events of this past summer surrounding the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement that swept the world.<sup>13</sup>

Over these past several months, lives have been changed, as workers in this industry have been trying to reconcile their passion, their art, and their creativity in a new era, while still trying to hold on financially. This paper will explore the ways the pandemic has impacted the Broadway and the arts. I will explore the economic impact of COVID-19, and the legislation that is being brought to Washington D.C to help alleviate some of that burden. I will discuss the resilience of theater makers to adapting to the virtual world to continue keep making art. I also intend to shed some light on how the events of this past summer has led to an industry wide

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.playbill.com/article/senator-schumer-and-the-broadway-league-unite-to-rally-for-save-our-stages-act>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-12-16/black-lives-matter-protests-george-floyd-coronavirus-covid-2020>

discussion on racism and racial inequality within the theatrical community. Finally, I will share a glimpse into the world we left behind and the world we may be heading towards heading in as we look towards a post COVID-19 future.

### **Economic Impact**

So much of New York City's identity is wrapped up in the arts and culture sector. Whether it's taking in a Broadway show, listening to the New York Philharmonic, or watching the breathtaking dancers of the New York City ballet, New York City is home to excellence in the arts. Then the pandemic hit, and everything was put on pause, forced to close within a single day. According to the New York Times, "Before the pandemic, New York State's arts and cultural sector contributed \$120 billion to New York's economy, or 7.5 percent of the state's economic output, and employed nearly half a million people, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis"<sup>i14</sup>. The losses; unfathomable. COVID-19 is, "the worst crisis that New York's arts community has experienced in living memory, worse than what followed 9/11 or the Great Recession"<sup>ii</sup> In a matter of four months since the shutdown began, about \$27.9 billion in sales "just disappeared," according to Michael Seman, an assistant professor of arts management at Colorado State University. This disappearance also led to a loss in taxable revenue from performing arts companies which fell "85% this spring compared to 2019, dropping from \$25.2 million to just \$3.8 million. That's among the steepest drops of any New York industry, according to the Center for an Urban Future."<sup>iii</sup> Another sign of the times; the iconic Playbill, which normally printed 1.75 million programs a month for distribution, has printed zero since the shutdown began.<sup>iv</sup>

In a survey conducted by the advocacy group Americans for the Arts, as many as 10

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/24/arts/new-york-fall-arts-economy.html>

percent of New York nonprofit arts institutions are not sure if they will be able to survive the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>

Across the nation, creative industries are estimated to have lost \$150 billion “on everything from tickets and concert merchandise to paintings and music lessons, with New York the hardest-hit metropolitan area” according to a recent Brookings Institution report.<sup>16</sup> Yet, it is important to remember that the economic impact of the arts reaches far beyond one industry. Other industries such as tourism, hospitality, restaurants and bars, transportation, and retail, all rely on arts audiences to keep their business afloat. “Darren Walker, the president of the Ford Foundation states, “Without the arts, New York City is not sustainable. Without the arts, New York City is not as attractive a place to live. And without the arts, there’s very little reason to visit.”<sup>v</sup> This means very little traffic coming in and out of the city. For those who work in different industries but choose to live in the city for the access to arts and culture, there is little reason to stay, let alone move in at the present time.

Because of its nature, people gathering, and even working, together in tight spaces, theater, which was one of the first industries to close will be among the last to reopen. Other industries, like restaurants for example, were put on a long pause, and were allowed to reopen after several months, with restrictions. While these industries certainly struggled to reopen, and continue to face hardships, there was at least a path forward, and creative ways to keep their businesses afloat while putting reasonable safety precautions in place. The business of theatre relies on the ticket sales of large audiences. “For most New York industries, quarantine resulted in a long pause. But for the performing arts, it’s become a deep freeze with no thaw in sight.”

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.americansforthearts.org/news-room/americans-for-the-arts-news/first-to-close-last-to-open-covid-19s-impact-on-the-arts-research-update-june-15-2020>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/lost-art-measuring-covid-19s-devastating-impact-on-americas-creative-economy/>

says Eli Dvorkin, editorial and policy director of the Center for an Urban Future<sup>17</sup>.

Prior to the shutdown, New York City boasted an astounding 280,000 jobs in a performing arts related field. That number encompasses the jobs onstage, backstage, and behind the scenes, and in administrative capacities. According a report from Brookings Institution, 153,000 of those jobs vanished between April and July of this year.<sup>18</sup> Anyone choosing to devote their career to a life in the arts knows that that life comes with a degree of uncertainty. With that being said, it was never uncommon for an artist to work multiple creative jobs at once and/or have a side job such as waitering, bartending, or temporary work in between gigs. Now, with multiple economies on pause, businesses having to let go of employees, and the interconnectedness of the different industries, artists are left struggling to make ends meet now more than ever before. It is a true crisis for those who have a gig- based income and live paycheck to paycheck. This also puts unemployment rates for artists at 63 percent nationally.<sup>vi</sup> That number is even higher for artists of color according to Americans for the Arts.<sup>19</sup>

The loss of Broadway has affected jobs all across New York City. Broadway itself employs roughly 10,000 people and claims to support 97,000 other jobs across the city in other industries across the city and contributed an estimated \$14.7 billion to the city economy<sup>vii</sup>. All of which is now gone. Performers, who have dedicated their life's work and countless hours of training to perfect their craft and trade, are among the most affected by the pandemic. Before the shutdown, Actors' Equity, the union representing theater actors and stage managers, had 1,100 members working on Broadway, on minimum weekly salaries of \$2,200. Off Broadway had members working on about another 50 shows, earning minimum salaries ranging from \$650 to

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<sup>17</sup> <https://nycfuture.org/>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20200810\\_Brookingsmetro\\_Covid19-and-creative-economy\\_Final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20200810_Brookingsmetro_Covid19-and-creative-economy_Final.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.americansforthearts.org/news-room/arts-mobilization-center/creative-workers-to-work>

\$1,600<sup>viii</sup> As a result of the shutdown, member's livelihoods were swept out from under them. Many have been looking for work, anywhere they could find it. Their own, and their family's health insurance is in jeopardy. Pandemic Unemployment Assistant (PUA), a federal benefit that provided those on unemployment an extra \$600 a week, expired at the end of July.<sup>20</sup> The question remains, with no clear plan or definitive return date, how long can people be expected to survive without income? As a result, how many talented people will leave the industry to find other sources of income, in order to survive?

The Actor's Fund provides financial assistance to those who work in the arts, in any capacity, through the generosity of its donors. At the beginning of the shutdown, the Actor's Equity Association donated \$750,000 for unemployed actors and stage managers to withdraw claims of \$1,000 a week. Within three weeks, that money was gone. Those who are freelance workers saw even more of a challenge.<sup>ix</sup> Theresa Buchheister, who manages a theater company in Brooklyn called Title: Point, had to permanently close their home base due to financial constraints. She then pivoted to helping artists perform and produce their work on the streaming platform, "Twitch" to help them raise money.<sup>x</sup>

While many organizations were able to were able to keep their employees on staff with support from the Paycheck Protection Program from the Federal CARES Act that was passed at the beginning of the pandemic<sup>21</sup>, smaller groups struggled to gain access. Many went to groups like the National Endowment for the Arts for grant funding, but eventually those grants ran out. Dancers from the New York City Ballet, some of the most talented, competitive, and sought out dancers in the entire world, found themselves in the same boat as everyone else struggling.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/advisor/2020/06/08/the-600-federal-unemployment-boost-is-set-to-end-july-31-heres-what-happens-next/?sh=1e25f69016ef>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/loans/coronavirus-relief-options/paycheck-protection-program>

Together, outside of the organization, dancers created a website asking for funding to cover the cost of “housing and other basic necessities.”<sup>xi</sup>

It is important to remember, when New York does get to the point of being ready to fully re-open arts organizations and theaters, it will be a matter of hundreds of organizations, across all five boroughs getting ready to reopen. It will not just be Broadway or some of the iconic venues that have become associated with New York. Every venue, and every arts organization contributes to the vibrant, rich, arts and culture sector that is the beating heart of New York City. According to a 2017 study, the University of Pennsylvania identified about, “4,700 nonprofit cultural programs in New York, and there are some 1,400 nonprofits that apply for funding from the Department of Cultural Affairs each year.”<sup>22</sup> A 2019 study from the New York City Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment found, “748 small theater venues and organizations operating Off and Off -Off Broadway created \$1.3 billion in economic output and more than 8,400 full-time jobs.”<sup>23</sup> Every organization in the arts, from Lincoln Center to the small off-off Broadway theater in the village, has suffered tremendous losses during this difficult time. Many have been forced to shut their doors for good. “I fear that this is more than a pause button,” said Eli Dvorkin, of the Center for an Urban Future. “There is a radical reshaping in New York, and some of the impact is on the arts.”<sup>xii</sup>

It is projected that mid-sized organizations will suffer the biggest impact as a result of the pandemic. “The middle will suffer the biggest contraction, but I think overall we’re going to see a reduction in the scale of every single institution.” Predicts Steven A. Wolff, the founding principal of AMS Planning & Research<sup>24</sup>. For example, “The American Ballet Theater projects

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<sup>22</sup> [https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=siap\\_culture\\_nyc](https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=siap_culture_nyc)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/mome/news/11202019-small-theater-study.page>

about \$20 million in lost revenue as a result of canceling six tours and two full seasons. Martha Graham Dance Company saw its annual budget shrink from about \$6 million to about \$3.5 million. The Secret Theater, a small venue in Long Island City, has closed for good.”<sup>xiii</sup>

With loss of revenue and budget cuts, arts administrators have had to dramatically refigure their business plans to recalculate how much of their income comes from “earned” sources (such as ticket sales or classes) and how much comes from donor contributions and gifts. Prior to the pandemic income for the Mark Morris Dance Group, was nearly two-thirds earned revenue and one third donations. Post-shutdown, those numbers have flipped with now with two-thirds of their income expected to come from philanthropy and government grants. The overall operating budget has fallen nearly \$3 million, going from \$9.7 million two years ago to \$6.8 million this year.<sup>xiv</sup>

While larger, name-brand institutions, like the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, have suffered insufferable losses as well, these institutions typically have safety nets such as endowments and wealthy board members who will be able to help them get back on their feet again. New York cultural institutional icon the Metropolitan Opera, will remained closed until at least September 2021.<sup>25</sup> This decision has led to over a \$155 million loss in revenue and putting over 1,000 employees on furlough. However, wealthy donors and online programs like “Met Stars Live in Concert” have helped the institution stay financially afloat and stay relevant while its doors remain closed and bringing in money and audiences. <sup>xv</sup>

Broadway too has reason to be concerned for the future, with one-fifth of its audience stemming from international tourism. It will likely take time, perhaps years, for international

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/09/23/916237335/met-opera-says-it-wont-return-until-fall-2021>

tourism to return to what it was pre-pandemic, causing about a 20 percent loss of business according to the Broadway League<sup>xvi</sup>. Real Estate is also a challenging concern, with organization losing revenue and not having enough money in the bank to pay rent, utilities, mortgages and other expenses. The Barrow Group, a nonprofit theater organization in Manhattan furloughed, and then made the difficult decision to lay off, most of their staff. “Despite \$250,000 in Paycheck Protection Program funds, a one-off \$325,000 donation, and some continuing revenue from online performance classes, it recently decided to give up its 12,000-square-foot space.”<sup>xvii</sup> Manhattan’s Chain Theater has also struggled to pay rent, utility bills, or its three full-time and seven part-time staff members. With the help of the League of Independent Theater, they are among about 250 seeking rent relief. If they don’t get it, at least 60 percent of the league’s members believe they will close their door for good. <sup>xviii</sup>

One glimmer of hope for artists in the city is a potential decrease in rent and real estate prices, and they can eventually replace the spaces they had to give up. “The pre-COVID New York was a city that was increasingly out of reach to the average artist,” said Darren Walker of the Ford Foundation. “Now, maybe that will change.”<sup>xix</sup> Many organizations took advantage of the warm weather over the summer months, with scheduled and pop-up performances. The New York Philharmonic hosted pop-up concerts around the city out of the back of a pickup truck, which it’s calling the “NY Phil Bandwagon.” Small theater groups like The Team held socially distant outdoor performances during the warmer months. If city and state safety guidelines allow for large group gatherings next summer, Lincoln Center hopes it might be able to open a 400-seat socially distant outdoor venue for music and dance events.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many organizations have transitioned their business and producing models to streaming performances online or to producing small outdoor events.

There are many wonderful benefits here such as bringing in new fans, potentially reaching audiences all over the world, and can serve as creative way for artist who have dedicated their life's work to live performance to make money during this time. However, one thing they do not have the great potential to do is bring in much money, or at least as much money as a live event, with a full one thousand plus seat house would. "How to monetize physical performances that are socially distanced outdoors, that's a thing that hasn't been figured out at all," said Tom Finkelpearl, a former commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. "That's the problem with performing arts. They're highly dependent on earned income, and they can't earn any income.<sup>xx</sup> Therefore, until this pandemic is over, only then will theatres and arts organizations be allowed to fully reopen and make the revenue they once were making, pre COVID-19.

### **Financial Relief, Government Assistance, and Advocacy.**

When the pandemic hit, and unemployment claims reached a record number, the United States Federal government unanimously passed the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) act on March 25. The act included many benefits to help Americans get through the unprecedented pandemic including (1) A tax credit of \$1200 to most adults or \$2400 for married persons. (2) \$377 billion loan program for small businesses (up to 500 employees) to help continue making payroll. A portion can be forgiven depending on how many employees the employer retains. (3) An increase in weekly unemployment benefits and an extension of the time period that a person can receive benefits. (4) Self-employed people and gig economy workers may also qualify to receive benefits<sup>26</sup> According to Art Net News, "Unlike unemployment benefits in the past, the act now makes it possible for freelancers, gig workers, and the self-

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.broadwayleague.com/covid-19-relief/employees/>

employed to apply for assistance, even though they don't have an employer who paid unemployment taxes on their behalf. It also allows those whose work was directly impacted by COVID-19 to apply for an additional form of emergency assistance."<sup>27</sup> There was also the benefit of Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), which provided an additional \$600 a week, in addition to unemployment, which expired in July.<sup>28</sup> Many relied on this benefit to help them survive when the shutdown began.

This type of bill was unprecedented in terms of the magnitude and scope of relief the bill provided, taking into consideration that all Americans have different means of earning a decent, respectful income. For arts workers, who likely work multiple jobs, for multiple employers, for various contract lengths, this type of relief and government assistance was, and still is, critical.

Various organizations and charities have also done whatever they can to help those in the arts community. The Actors Fund set up an Emergency Financial Assistance fund for those who were able to meet certain requirements including financial need (inability to pay next two month's bills); A minimum of five years of recent entertainment industry employment with earnings of at least \$6,500 for three out of the last five years OR a minimum of 20 years of industry employment with a minimum of 10 years of earnings of at least \$5,000 (please note that income from teaching does not qualify); Eligibility requirements for dancers—three years of recent dance earnings of at least \$2,000 a year.<sup>29</sup> Artist Relief, another organization, is able to distribute \$5,000 grants to artists facing dire financial emergencies due to COVID-19.<sup>30</sup>

Since the pandemic began, many have sought the services of the Actors Fund for emergency relief and assistance. Founded in 1882, The Actor's Fund has given financial

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<sup>27</sup> <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/unemployment-benefits-for-artists-freelancers-coronavirus-1832913>

<sup>28</sup> <https://dol.ny.gov/coronavirus-aid-relief-and-economic-security-cares-act>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.broadwayleague.com/covid-19-relief/employees/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.broadwayleague.com/covid-19-relief/employees/>

assistance to all those who work in the performing arts and entertainment industry, not just actors. With the understanding that a life in the arts can often be unpredictable, the fund was established to help those who may encounter financial instability or uncertainty throughout their careers.<sup>31</sup> Since March 18, 2020, “The Actors Fund has distributed more than \$17.9 million in emergency financial assistance to 14,581 people in (the) industry. This money is helping people cover basic living expenses, such as food, essential medications, utilities and more.” The Actors Fund COVID-19 relief fund has also supported other organizations, such as labor unions like all IATSE chapters, SAG-AFTRA, Actor’s Equity, Musicians Local 802, and more.<sup>32</sup>

The Actor’s Equity Association’s charity, Broadway Cares Equity Fights AIDS, has also been supporting the Actors Fund’s efforts by launching the COVID-19 emergency relief fund. Established in 1987, in response to the AIDS epidemic, Broadway Cares supports those living with HIV/AIDS and also supports various causes, natural disaster relief efforts, and more through its fundraisers, donors, and collections. The COVID-19 emergency relief fund not only helps those in the performing arts and entertainment community with survival expenses throughout the pandemic, but the program also supports the vital social service programs of The Actors Fund, including emergency financial assistance, health insurance, counseling and the operation of The Friedman Health Center for the Performing Arts.<sup>33</sup>

Since the pandemic shutdown began, requests for assistance have only continued to grow. As a result, more than 18,000 donors have supported the fund. Broadway Cares made an initial donation of \$250,000 to launch the COVID-19 relief fund, which has included two \$1 million challenges from groups of Broadway producers and a \$100,000 challenge from Broadway Serves

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<sup>31</sup> <https://actorsfund.org/about-us>

<sup>32</sup> <https://actorsfund.org/help-our-entertainment-communiity-covid-19-emergency-relief>

<sup>33</sup> <https://donate.broadwaycares.org/campaign/covid-19-emergency-assistance-fund/c276873>

matching donations dollar for dollar. Through numerous fundraisers, including streaming past performances and concerts, and generous donations, Broadway Cares has raised nearly \$8 million in COVID-19 relief.<sup>34</sup>

While programs and relief efforts of organizations, like the Actors Fund and Broadway Cares have helped members of the community during this time, there has still yet to be little government assistance or relief specifically related to the arts. On July 22, 2020, Senator John Cornyn of Texas and Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota introduced the Save Our Stages Act. This \$20 billion bill, co-sponsored by 56 bi-partisan senators, authorizes the Small Business Administration (SBA), “to make grants to eligible live venue operators, producers, promoters, or talent representatives to address the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on certain live venues. Specifically, the SBA may make (1) an initial grant of up to \$12 million dollars to an eligible operator, promoter, producer, or talent representative; and (2) a supplemental grant that is equal to 50% of the initial grant. An initial grant must be used for costs incurred between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, but a supplemental grant may be used for expenses incurred through June 30, 2021. Such grants shall be used for specified expenses such as payroll costs, rent, utilities, and personal protective equipment.”<sup>35</sup>

On September 18, 2020, in an effort to gain support for the bill, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer hosted a rally on the steps of TKTS. Sen. Schumer was backed by several leading members of the Broadway community, including Broadway League President Charlotte St. Martin, CEO of Disney Theatrical Group Thomas Schumacher and Broadway Star Laura Benanti.

In his remarks, Sen. Schumer said, “the grants would aid live venues in staying afloat

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<sup>34</sup> <https://donate.broadwaycares.org/campaign/covid-19-emergency-assistance-fund/c276873>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/4258>

until next spring when a vaccine could be available. If no vaccine arrives by then, Schumer said, he would seek to renew the bill. The senator requested that theater industry insiders utilize their subscriber and supporter lists to enlist patrons and fans in emailing senators to support the bill.”<sup>36</sup> Broadway League President Charlotte St. Martin stated that, “the bill would provide funding for rehearsals, the refurbishment of sets and venues, and to encourage the supply of new work “to the pipeline,” among other things.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally, on December 20, congress was able to pass another COVID-19 relief package that included the Save our Stages Act which will provide, “...around \$15 billion in relief to independent music venues and movie theaters.”<sup>38</sup> The deal is expected to be finalized on Sunday, December 26. In a statement on the passing of the bill, Senator Chuck Schumer said, “I am especially pleased that this bill will provide money for bars and restaurants, and \$15 billion in SBA grants for theatre operators and small venue owners through the Save Our Stages Act. These venues are so important to my state and many states across the country —they are the lifeblood of our communities. They were first to close, and will be the last to open. The bill gives them a fighting chance.” At least, as we head into 2021, the arts are entering the New Year with the long overdue financial support to survive this pandemic.

In addition to the Save Our Stages Act, several other pieces of legislation were sponsored by the house and senate to provide economic recovery relief to arts and culture institutions. They have yet to be voted on. Such legislation that has been brought forward to congress is highlighted in the chart on the following page.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://deadline.com/2020/09/save-our-stages-broadway-chuck-schumer-broadway-league-disney-theatrical-covid-coronavirus-federal-funding-1234579566/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://deadline.com/2020/09/save-our-stages-broadway-chuck-schumer-broadway-league-disney-theatrical-covid-coronavirus-federal-funding-1234579566/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/congress-agreement-stimulus-save-our-stages-1234867403/>

Bill	Sponsor	Date	Description
The CALMER Act (Culture, Arts, Libraries, and Museums Emergency Relief Act of 2020)	Reps. Maloney and Nadler	September 29, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides emergency relief bill for the arts &amp; culture non-profit community.</li> <li>• Accounts for loss in revenue resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which is upwards of \$6 billion and continues to grow.</li> <li>• This bill will give libraries, museums, and arts groups the assistance they need to pull through and continue enriching our communities nationwide.”<sup>39</sup></li> </ul>
The DAWN Act: Defend Arts Workers Now	Proposed and drafted by Matthew-Lee Erlbach, Carson Elrod, Jenny Grace Makholm, and Brooke Ishibashi,	October 2020	Authorizes the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), and the Small Business Administration (SBA) \$43.85 billion to make grants to the operators, employees, and artists of live venues, recording venues, cultural spaces, and related businesses to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on all Arts workers across the national Arts Economy. <sup>40</sup>
The ENCORES (Entertainments New Credit Opportunity for Relief & Economic Sustainability) Act	Introduced to the U.S. House by Rep. Kind and Rep. Kelly and then to the Senate by Sen. Carper and Sen. Tester in July 2020.	July 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims to provide relief to small, independent music and entertainment venues.</li> <li>• Will create a new tax credit for live entertainment venues with fewer than 500 employees to help cover the cost of refunded tickets for shows that were canceled due to the pandemic.</li> <li>• To be eligible for the credit, businesses must have offered a voucher to customers first, and customers opted for a refund instead.</li> </ul>
The HITS (Help Independent Tracks Succeed) Act	Rep. Sánchez and Rep. Estes and Sen. Feinstein and Sen. Blackburn	July 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created to help independent artists get back into the studio to create new music.</li> <li>• This bill permits taxpayers to treat as currently deductible expenses the cost of qualified sound recording productions not exceeding \$150,000 in a taxable year.</li> <li>• The bill defines qualified sound recording production as certain sound recordings produced and recorded in the United States.<sup>41</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>39</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/calmer-act>

<sup>40</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/dawn>

<sup>41</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/hits-act>

THE PLACE Act (Promoting Local Arts and Creative Economy Workforce Act of 2020)	Sen. Schatz	January 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aim to bolster local creative economies and empower workers to find sustainable jobs in creative and cultural industries.</li> <li>• Amend definitions to include the creative economy in state and local workforce plans, Native American Programs, Dislocated Worker Grants, Recovering Individual programs, Corrections Education, Career and Technical Education, Work Study, Economic Adjustment, prisoner training programs, and Veterans affairs programs under Title 38;</li> <li>• Provide technical assistance offered by small business development centers in order to foster strong business plans and the execution of those plans</li> <li>• Authorize Creative Economy Grants which incubate small business in their “startup” phase by allowing for wage subsidies;</li> <li>• Authorize Creative Economy Apprenticeship Grants under the Department of Education to helping teach the future creative economy workforce;</li> <li>• Update tax codes regarding deductions for artists’ works and the performing artists tax credit;</li> <li>• Include creative economy businesses in the existing New Market Tax Credit.</li> <li>• Allow those participating in the creative economy the same FEMA disaster benefits as other businesses.<sup>42</sup></li> </ul>
The RESTART	Sen. Bennet	May 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would give business owners who took out Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans the flexibility they need to utilize the PPP effectively.</li> <li>• Create a loan program to provide funding to jump-start the hardest-hit businesses for the remainder of 2020 and provide loan forgiveness as a backstop against ongoing economic challenges.<sup>43</sup></li> </ul>

As a result of the government’s inability to act quickly and provide relief, several advocacy groups have launched in an effort to raise awareness of the economic impact this

<sup>42</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/calmer-act-1>

<sup>43</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/restart-act>

pandemic has had on the arts. One of these groups is “Be An #ArtsHero”; a 100% volunteer run organization. Be an #ArtsHero is, “an intersectional grassroots campaign comprised of Arts & Culture workers, Unions, and institutions in the United States pushing the Senate to allocate proportionate relief to the Arts & Culture sector of the American economy.”<sup>44</sup>

Be an #ArtsHero seeks to urge elected officials asks the senate to/for<sup>45</sup>

- Extend Federal Pandemic Unemployment Benefits.
- Full COBRA Subsidy- To protect worker’s healthcare as millions of Arts workers face losing their health insurance due to lack of work in the midst of a global pandemic.
- Dedicated, Proportionate Relief- “amounting to 43.85 billion committed to direct relief to Artists, their Institutions, their Unions, and all others who comprise the Arts & Culture economic ecosystem.” European countries such as Germany and United Kingdom have already done so.
- Relief Administration Disbursal-administered by the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Institute of Museum and Library Services, Small Business Administration, and Corporation for Public Broadcasting.
- Paycheck Protection: Allow all nonprofits fair access to government economic support in the Paycheck Protection Program, including labor unions.
- Tax Deduction: Update the Qualified Performing Artist tax deduction, allowing creative professionals to keep more of their hard-earned money by deducting necessary business expenses from their taxes.

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<sup>44</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/>

<sup>45</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/our-asks>

Be an Arts Hero has rallied the call of artists, fans, and creative professionals to raise awareness and advocate for these causes. They urge advocates to write letters to their elected officials in the house and senate to press them to vote for these pieces of legislation in Washington D.C. Through the power of social media, they have encouraged advocates to post images and share testimonies that speak to the power of the arts and why they deserve relief.<sup>46</sup> The organization's website also provides action packets for individuals on how to effectively advocate on behalf of their organization<sup>47</sup>.

When it comes to the facts, one cannot ignore the impact this pandemic has had on the creative economy and on arts and entertainment professionals. With little relief or assistance from the federal government, artists will not be able to survive on unemployment benefits alone. While it is wonderful that the vaccine has begun being distributed in the United States, a definite return date of when the arts will return remains to be seen. On the whole, the arts contribute significantly to the United States economy. According to "Be an #ArtsHero"<sup>48</sup>

-The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that Arts & Culture accounts for, "\$877,809,406,086 and 4.5% of the U.S. economy, contributing 5,107,889 jobs."<sup>49</sup>

- From 2014 to 2016, the average annual growth rate in the contribution of Arts & Culture was 4.16%, nearly double the total U.S. economy's 2.22% growth rate, which outperforms the growth rate of the entire United States economy.

- For every \$1 of NEA funding, it leverages \$9 in private and public dollars. This creates a dynamic Cultural economy and in return, generates millions of American jobs.

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<sup>46</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/individual>

<sup>47</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tJFHBXZYfHG86l4jr2dFFS-KBtUkdcfewHDI9iVUyI/edit>

<sup>48</sup> <https://beanartshero.com/thestats>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/arts-and-culture#:~:text=The%20Arts%20and%20Cultural%20Production,5.3%20percent%20increase%20in%202016.>

- Arts & Culture add five times more value to the GDP than agriculture, \$87 billion more than construction, and \$265 billion more than transportation.
- Performing Arts companies and independent artists, writers, and entertainers added a combined total of \$52.2 billion to the U.S. economy in 2017.
- America's nonprofit Arts industry generates \$166.3 billion in economic activity every year, resulting in \$27.5 billion in federal, state and local tax revenues.
- In 2017 America exported \$72.6 billion and imported \$42.9 billion worth of Arts & Culture-- that's a \$29.7 billion trade surplus in Arts & Cultural commodities.

These significant numbers speak for themselves. A full year with no steady work for workers and no revenue for arts organizations will have grave consequences. Many organizations will be forced to shut down. Jobs will be lost as a result of the pandemic. Those who have dedicated their life's work, investing in training programs, and whose skillset will only serve them in this industry and this line of work, may be forced to abandon their craft and this industry entirely in order to survive. This will result in an immeasurable loss of talent. This is why it is so imperative that the arts receive government relief. Not just in the form of bailout, but for nonprofits, small business, and creative workers who need these benefits to keep their businesses afloat until the day comes that these businesses and this industry can safely reopen.

### **Virtual Theatre**

With the traditional in-person means of gathering together and sharing in the arts experience on pause, producers, performers, and audiences have taken to the internet to find connection and create art. 2020 has ushered in a new, unprecedented, form of theatre by means of "virtual theatre". Virtual theatre has served many different purposes throughout the pandemic. For producers and arts organizations, it has created a new means of generating revenue. For

performers, virtual theatre has given them a platform to not only perform, they are still able to make some income. The new platform has challenged them both creatively and technically as many have had to learn how to film and edit themselves using webcams and different editing software. For audiences, it is a way to capture a piece of normalcy. Charitable organizations, like the Actors Fund, or Broadway Cares, have used the internet to stream performances, both of the past and of the digital age, to raise funds. While virtual theatre cannot replace the experience of live performance, it has certainly served as a placeholder, until the day in person events can safely return.

Virtual theatre, as the New Yorker describes it is, “a sprawling category, more experiential than formal, which ranges from high-quality performance recordings, such as the recently released filmed version of *Hamilton*, to staticky live Zooms, and is unified as a genre only by its reliance on Wi-Fi—is still in its vulnerable infancy”<sup>50</sup> .. Virtual theatre has taken on many different forms throughout the pandemic. While not always live, “These productions have ranged from splashy, multi-camera films of existing shows to quick-response plays made on a shoestring and beamed into our living rooms as dramatized video calls, aural dramas, interactive Zoom plays and monologues about lockdown life”<sup>51</sup> There are obviously several major differences between the experience attending a performance in person versus watching a performance from home. There is no assigned seat, just find a comfortable spot in your living room to enjoy the show. There is no need to get dressed up. There is also no need to spend additional money on expenses like going out to a restaurant, or paying for transportation or parking; which hurts those economies and industries as well.

Many artists and administrators immediately jumped on the bandwagon to produce

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/12/how-are-audiences-adapting-to-the-age-of-virtual-theatre>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/sep/21/future-of-live-theatre-online-drama-coronavirus-lockdown>

virtual content as soon as the pandemic closed down Broadway. I had the opportunity to speak with one of my former colleagues Mary Dina, who is the Manager of Events and Partnerships for Broadway producer, Ken Davenport. Ken Davenport is not only a Broadway producer; he is also a podcast host, board game creator, author, blog writer, and owns multiple other theatrical businesses. Mary Dina is Mr. Davenport's in person events manager. She runs his annual theater makers conference, plans monthly mixers with playwrights and creative professionals, host quarterly weekend meetings with many of Mr. Davenport's top clients, manages his brand and social medial among other duties related to marketing.<sup>52</sup> When the pandemic hit, and Broadway was shut down in March. Mr. Davenport's office went virtual the following day, and have not gone back since. Certain projects were put on hold, and new priorities took focus. Soon after the shutdown, Ms. Dina received an email from Mr. Davenport, saying that he would like to turn his podcast, *The Producer's Perspective*, into a livestream daily talk show, and raise money for the Actors Fund while doing so. The project then became the entire focus of Ms. Dina's job. She resiliently put the show together over the course of one weekend, including everything from where the show would broadcast from, how the show would broadcast, what it would it be called, how it would be branded, even creating a website for it. Ms. Dina decided on using the software "Streamyard" to produce the show, teaching herself how to use it in a weekend. Beginning March 23, the show went live for 33 days straight, weekends included. The show then converted to a Monday through Friday format. It then took two weeks off as the conversation surrounding Black Lives Matter took to the Broadway industry, until coming back as a weekly show. The last episode aired in November.

In a typical theatrical endeavor, success can be measured many different ways be it

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<sup>52</sup> Mary Dina- Davenport Theatricals, December 2, 2020.

creatively, or most commonly, how much money or how many tickets you were able to sell. In terms of fundraising for the Actor's Fund, the show raised nearly \$9,000. The show ended up serving as a place of community during a time where everyone was apart. Guests included all different members of the Broadway community from actors, directors, playwrights, administrators, composers and beyond. Guests were able to talk about their struggles of being away from the industry, in a time where leadership within the Broadway community was at a chaotic standstill.

When it became evident that Broadway would be shutdown much longer than anyone could have ever anticipated. Mr. Davenport created the Streaming Stage Company. A big proponent of keeping the live aspect part of the theatrical experience, everything Mr. Davenport produces on streaming, is live, happening in that moment. Nothing gets pre-recorded ahead of time, unless it's an encore presentation. The company is brand new having only produced a handful of concerts and events. They began with *The Doo Wop Project*, a band consisting of cast members from the Broadway companies of *Jersey Boys* and *Motown the Musical*. The band came to Mr. Davenport wanting to produce a virtual concert for streaming. After both parties had invested money into the project, the concert was a go. They used Stellar Tickets, a new ticketing system from Goldstar, that would both sell tickets and grant access into the virtual event, all in one place. The show was streamed live from New World Stages in Manhattan, and was loaded in, and streamed live, that very same day. Remotely from home on her computer, Ms. Dina was able to watch the dress rehearsal, and to see how the show looked with the lighting, camera angles, and sound quality.

In an effort to both enhance the experience for the ticket buyer, and replicate the ticketing price tiers that Broadway uses (premium, orchestra, mezzanine, balcony, etc) , Mr. Davenport has added additional "VIP" experience options for attendees using tiers. In the case of *The Doo*

*Wop Project*, a ticket to livestream the concert was \$25 (Tier One). Early access to the show, the ability to were to participate in a virtual soundcheck, a signed photo, a face mask, and the concert was \$50(Tier Two). And then for \$75, you could access everything in the previous tier, plus have a meet and greet after the show (Tier Three)<sup>53</sup>. A unique feature of Stellar, the ticketing software, is that there is a virtual chat on the right side of the screen for attendees to engage with the performance through comments and emojis. Mr. Davenport also wants the performers themselves to see those comments as well, to keep that engagement of audience and performers.

This is just one example of the virtual events that the Streaming Company has produced. They have also produced a Wine Tasting with Broadway star Kate Rockwell (*Mean Girls*), father-daughter quarantine YouTube sensation “The Shaws”- a Father and Daughter musical act. What is unique about streaming is that these events can take place and stream from anywhere in the world. While *The Doo Wop Project* streamed their concert from New York City, “The Shaws” streamed their concert from Utah and the potential audience reach expands beyond one concentrated area. An event can reach anyone from anywhere in the world, truly reaching a global audience. Safety is always at the center of concern for producing these types of events. Ms. Dina said that whenever they work with a production company or venue, they always make sure there is some type of COVID-19 policy in place. All performers must get tested ahead of time, and quarantine before the event. As far as how long The Streaming Company will continue to produce virtual events for, they will keep producing them as long as people keep attending them for. Even when the pandemic is over, there may still be a market for virtual events as audience comfort levels of attending in-person events again may not return to the level that it was for quite some time- perhaps even years.

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/See-Charl-Brown-Dwayne-Cooper-and-More-in-THE-DOO-WOP-PROJECT-LIVE-IN-YOUR-LIVING-ROOM-20201023>

The ingenuity, and desire to help those in the industry who have been struggling have been at the forefront of this pandemic within the Broadway community. Livestream events played a role in helping to both entertain audiences and bring economic relief to the Broadway community. Immediately when the pandemic hit, Broadway composer and radio personality, Seth Rudetsky and his husband James Wesley launched a daily livestream talk show series, *Stars in the House* on March 1. *Stars in the House* is described as “combination of music, community and education.”<sup>54</sup> Nearly every episode has included medical experts with updated information on the pandemic to inform viewers. What began as candid live interviews with stars quarantined in their homes, has transpired into concerts, performances and headline-making cast reunions from the Great White Way to Hollywood. Those who’ve reconnected include the casts of *Night at the Museum*, *Scandal*, *Frasier*, *Glee*, *30 Rock*, and *Star Trek: Voyager*, and musical casts from *A Chorus Line*, *Rent*, *Spring Awakening*, *Les Misérables*, *Fun Home*, *Urinetown* and others.<sup>55</sup> Mr. Rudetsky and Mr. Wesley, with a team of 10 paid staffers and a handful of dedicated volunteers have produced over 300 episodes to date. As of November 2020, over \$570,000 has been raised for the Actor’s Fund.

Broadway Cares has also produced virtual content to raise money for the Actors Fund as well. They have released archival footage from their own past fundraising concerts such as the *Disney on Broadway 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert* from 2019, Bernadette Peter’s 2009 concert, and most recently the off- Broadway, one woman, holiday hit from 2017, *Who’s Holiday*; the story of grownup Cindy Lou-Who, where the fable of the Grinch leaves off. Access to watch these events are free, though donations in any amount are strongly encouraged and appreciated. Through these special streaming events, along with along with a one-night only telethon on NBC, and the

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<sup>54</sup> <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/rambling-reporter/stars-in-the-house-raises-575k-for-the-actors-fund>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/rambling-reporter/stars-in-the-house-raises-575k-for-the-actors-fund>

generosity of donors, Broadway Cares has raised nearly \$8 million for the Actor's Fund since the pandemic began.<sup>56</sup>

Actors and producers have been bringing theatre to audiences during this pandemic in the form of online play readings and concerts, to fill the void of live, in person, performances. In this format, the performer(s) performs remotely at home over zoom, while the show streams live to audiences at home. In a recent interview with Backstage, Broadway actress Alysha Umphress, (*Bring it On* and *On the Town*) reflected on the past several months. While she is grateful to have work at a time when it is hard to come by, she says the new artform has its share of challenges. According to Alysha "It's tricky because even though you're in the scene with other actors on Zoom, you can't really look at them, and you have to look at the camera lens but also look at your script," she laments. "[There's] just the missing link, the cohesion and bond you get from sharing the room with the cast and creative team. The personal connection isn't there. It's very isolating. Unnatural."<sup>57</sup>

It's true that virtual theater lacks many of the elements, most importantly the connection between actor and audience, that make theatre what is and as we know it. Yet, as theatre has since its inception, creators and artists have adapted with the times, making valiant, worthwhile efforts. Tony Award® winning Broadway producer Jeffery Richards, leaned into the new normal, and eight weeks into the pandemic, launched "Spotlight on Plays," a series of one-night-only live-streamed readings, with big names attached to them, to benefit the Actors Fund. The first three plays launched starting May 7 with David Mamet's *November*, starring John Malkovich and Patti LuPone, followed by Joshua Harmon's *Significant Other*. on May 14, which featured the original Broadway cast, and A.R. Gurney's *Love Letters*, on May 21, starring Sally

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<sup>56</sup> <https://donate.broadwaycares.org/campaign/covid-19-emergency-assistance-fund/c276873>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/virtual-streaming-theater-pandemic-2020-72309/>

Field and Bryan Cranston.<sup>xxi</sup> After the success of the Spring series, Richards produced another for the Fall, which concluded December 10. “One is limited in virtual theater with respect to scenic, costume, and lighting design, as well as special effects and use of projection. But the entrée remains the same: A good play is a good play,” he says, “and is enhanced with intelligent and sustained performances, and smart direction. I think everyone involved in these presentations misses having a responsive audience, but the richness of the texts has made it a rewarding experience.”<sup>xxii</sup>

“Spotlight on Plays”, was among the first theatrical series to emerge from the pandemic for the obvious reason that this work was already written, already in existence, and had been performed for a traditional proscenium audience. However, as time lingers on, and the months of being in the pandemic have gone by, a new type of work has been born; work written *for* virtual theatre. One of the most successful examples of this new type of work was the new play *Circle Jerk*, which was an online hit this past fall. While the play was and its creators Michael Breslin and Patrick Foley had been preparing for a pre-pandemic downtown run, they paused, and then shifted their focus to creating their new work, specifically for a virtual audience. While it was not the play they had originally envisioned, they began to explore the possibilities a virtual production could bring to the piece, specifically when the subject matter deals heavily with disinformation online. They also wanted to premier the work before election night 2020. With so much of our lives moving online; looking for connection on social media and after seeing how other theatrical works had been presented online successfully, it dawned on Mr. Breslin and Mr. Foley that perhaps that a virtual play may be the best version of their show- not just a “COVID compromise”.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Over the course of six livestreamed performances, the play, which was co-produced by

*Slave Play* playwright Jeremy O. Harris, sold upwards of 5,500 tickets on a sliding scale of \$5–\$50, generating a lot of buzz. With so much discussion in recent years about how to make theatre more accessible to a modern, digital audience, without it feeling out of place, Mr. Breslin says they might have the answer, after the phenomenal success of their show. “Our show sold thousands more tickets than we ever dreamed it would. Does that tell us something about what audiences want to see? About what we should even consider as ‘commercial?’<sup>xxiv</sup>

This new form of theatre has also brought about union concerns from the Actor’s Equity Union and SAG-AFTRA. Actors’ Equity Association represents stage actors and stage managers, while SAG-AFTRA represents screen actors. So therefore, the question is, are these productions considered stage performances or are they film works? After an arduous discussions and negotiations, a deal was compromised between the two unions, giving the theater faction, Actor’s Equity, more leverage, so long as the filmed piece is minimally edited and streams only on a platform that can cater to ticket-holders (meaning the show cannot stream on any major platform like Netflix or Hulu, for example). This deal will hold through Dec. 31, 2021, at which time it will be reassessed.<sup>xxv</sup>

The future of virtual theatre, post-pandemic, remains to be seen. A return date to live performances, at least in the United States, is unknown. We do not know what type of impact this will have on the industry and how live events are presented in the future. The other issue is will there be a need or a demand for virtual theatre once the pandemic is over and we can safely return to theatre as it was before? For some, like playwright Natalie Margolin, it has reaffirmed her feeling that theatre happens live, in person with a community. Time will tell how we look back on this period and categorize the work that has been created during this pandemic. “Perhaps it exists on a continuum between a play, a film, a TV episode, somewhere in between?” says Ms.

Margolin. <sup>xxvi</sup>

There are others who believe that streaming is the future of theatre and should hold the same value and seamlessly exist alongside of live performance. Streaming could be the industry's long-awaited response regarding how to make theatre more accessible. Sean Cercone, creator of "Broadway on Demand", compares this moment in theatre accessibility to the regional theatre movement of the 1940's and 1950's. From a financial standpoint alone, virtual theatre has the potential to change the economics of the business of theatre. Cercone says "It's been decades now that we've been saying, we have to serve underserved audiences," he goes on. "It's the same conversation over and over again without a meaningful plan to actually go and do it. What's the biggest problem? Money. There is a universe now where Steppenwolf [Theatre Company] could stream a live production to every high school in the Chicago area and the school wouldn't have to pay to get the kids on the bus. Why not? We have the capacity now."<sup>xxvii</sup>

There is also the potential for another market, different from works performed remotely; or works created specifically for virtual theatre. Live performances captured on film, inside an audience-less theater or on a set, captured professionally, and then streamed to audiences at home. This is much like the filmed production of *Hamilton*, which was filmed over four days both with and without an audience. The musical was captured with six cameras and presented exactly as it appeared on stage in New York, with the original Broadway cast. Although originally planned as a theatrical release, it was released over a year early on Disney Plus, due to the demand for more streaming content during pandemic. The film, which premiered July 3<sup>rd</sup>, drove Disney Plus subscriptions up 74% over its first weekend according to Variety.<sup>58</sup> Hopefully

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<sup>58</sup> <https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/hamilton-disney-plus-premiere-app-downloads-72-percent-1234698795/>

other streaming services took note of the demand for recorded live theatre.

The latter is not entirely unique to the pandemic. The National Theatre in London has long been capturing its productions on film for quite some time now. In some ways, it has become the best alternative to experiencing a theatrical production the way it was meant to be seen. In a full-scale production, with its company all together in the same place; minus an audience. But the question with this hybrid model is, how should it be labeled? Is it a play? Is it a movie? Is it a filmed play meant to be experienced as a movie? Cinematographer and editor Brian Petchers says, all of the above. “We are creating a hybrid type of film, which is not entirely a play captured on film nor a traditional film, but includes elements of both,”<sup>xxviii</sup> It is his hope that the audience feels connected to the performance they are watching, and it can emulate some of the intimacy of live theater, with the added benefit of having closeup and other editing perspectives. The goal is to capture the feeling of a live performance, in a way that is totally unique to each individual production.

Much like a traditional theatre production, every artistic choice in a virtual production must be made carefully made. The editing, directing, and playwrighting must cohesively fit this new medium in order not to feel out of sync. All of these choices should embrace the world of the play, and the un-comfortability that comes with a virtual world. This is exactly what playwright Natalie Margolin did with her new play *The Party Hop*. “It is easy to feel out of sync with someone when chatting on Zoom,” she says. “So, in my approach to writing the dialogue specifically, it was important to me to take advantage of—and embrace—the discomfort that’s inherently baked into a Zoom call. I knew I had the opportunity to use breakout rooms, to use the mute feature, to use the video-off feature, the background changing feature. I looked at all the features of this technical meeting app, and they suddenly became dramatically exciting tools to

build a world.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Mr .Breslin too embraced the virtual world rather than view it as an obstacle for his play. Not only did him and his creative team cut the length of the play down to an hour, to fit the internet attention span, but the virtual realm opened the door to new possibilities for the world of the play, that a traditional play could not. “We could finally add in a second location, which we were struggling to figure out how to use onstage,” he says. “We could go between pre-recorded content and live performance way more fluently, so we could solve a lot of dramaturgical issues by being like, Well, let’s pre-record it! Once we knew we had this whole other vocabulary—pre-recorded content, digital overlays, close-ups, and pans—the rhythm of the show really took off in an exciting way.”<sup>xxx</sup>

For actors though, their job has become more demanding than ever. Not only are they responsible for their own performances in this new medium, but they have also had to learn to become tech savvy as well. Often times, they are responsible for their own video, sound, and lighting. This was an issue Jeffery Richards came across when he first enlisted actors for his first series back in the spring. Yet, he applauds and admires all the actors who participated in his series for rising to the occasion to meet new challenges.

With the new COVID-19 vaccine just being released, the theatre industry, as is the rest of the country, is seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Yet, we are still many months away from returning to full pre-pandemic normalcy. Having a new medium of theatre in the virtual realm does not increase or decrease the value of a traditional production. Having the capacity to be able to do so is a wonderful, if not essential resource for theater organizations at this time, and quite possibly beyond. The Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey has created a fully virtual

2020-2021 season of concerts, and musical revues<sup>59</sup>. Whether this is a pandemic fad, or the way of the future remains to be seen. However, one cannot ignore that virtual theatre can in fact be an artful, financially worthwhile for any theatre organization. Whether they mean to increase accessibility by streaming shows, or are looking to create something new for the digital age; there are practical reasons for an arts organization to include virtual theatre in its seasons to come.

### **Black Lives Matter and the Great White Way.**

This past summer, in the midst of a global pandemic, the United States was forced to confront its complicated history with racism and police brutality. According to the New York Times, on May 25, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, after a convenience store employee called 911 and told the police that Mr. Floyd had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. Seventeen minutes later, a squad car arrived at the scene, with three police officers tackling Mr. Floyd to the ground to place him under arrest. One of these officers was Derek Chauvin, a White man. Officer Chauvin took it upon himself to place his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for eight minutes and fifteen seconds until he was unconscious and no longer breathing. Bystanders recorded the incident on their phones and it soon went viral online<sup>60</sup>. Major news media outlets picked up the video and this incident launched a worldwide outrage and demand for change.

Soon thereafter, protests and peaceful demonstrations erupted all over the country.<sup>61</sup> Activists, led by the Black Lives Matter movement, were demanding justice for Floyd, a mandate on Police reform, and once and for all, to solve the racial inequality crisis we have been

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<sup>59</sup> <https://papermill.org/shows-tickets/subscriptions/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>

battling for years. Corporate America took note of what was happening. Soon after, major corporations began releasing statements, in support of Black Lives Matter and pledging to reform their own company's work culture by creating a more inclusive, diverse, work place. PepsiCo announced a five-year, \$400 million initiative that includes the goal of increasing Black managerial representation by 30% and more than doubling business with Black-owned suppliers.<sup>62</sup> Sephora signed the "15% Pledge" and committed to devoting 15% of its shelf space to products from black-owned businesses.<sup>63</sup>

Conversations surrounding race were taking place across all parts of life and all different industries, including Broadway. As protests and demonstrations erupted around New York City, the Broadway community remained mostly silent for the first few days of protests. *Hamilton's* Lin Manuel Miranda was among the first to speak out in support of Black Lives Matter on May 30. In a statement, Miranda wrote, "We spoke out on the day of the Pulse shooting. We spoke out when Vice President Mike Pence came to our show 10 days after the election. And that we have not yet firmly spoken inaugural truth of Black Lives Matter and denounced systematic racism and white supremacy to our official *Hamilton* channels is a moral failure on our part. As the writer of the show, I take responsibility and apologize for my part in this moral failure. *Hamilton* doesn't exist without the black and brown artists who created and revolutionized and changed the world through the culture, music and language of hip-hop, it's up to us in our words and deeds to stand up for our fellow citizens."<sup>64</sup> Other shows, performers, creatives, and industry leaders soon followed thereafter.

Sadly, Broadway's response, or lack thereof, to the George Floyd murder, and subsequent

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<sup>62</sup> <https://justcapital.com/news/notable-corporate-responses-to-the-george-floyd-protests/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://justcapital.com/news/notable-corporate-responses-to-the-george-floyd-protests/>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/199382/lin-manuel-miranda-speaks-out-regarding-george-floyd-protests-history-has-its-eyes-on-all-of-us/>

Black Lives Matter protests, was not all that surprising to members of Broadway's Black community. Adrienne Warren, the title star of *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical* said in an interview with *Backstage* magazine, "The Broadway community always stands up for everyone else—we're always there for the LGBTQ community, anyone needs us, we are there, all hands-on deck. But when it comes to Black lives, there was so much silence. I think there was a stigma to the phrase Black Lives Matter; by saying so as an institution, you were making a political statement when in fact, saying Black Lives Matter is a statement of humanization. It doesn't make Black people special; it just makes us feel human."

Soon thereafter, many Black industry professionals began sharing their own experiences and pain when confronting racism on Broadway. In a Facebook post, shared on June 1, Cody Renard Richard, who worked as a stage manager on the Broadway runs of *Motown*, *Hamilton*, and *Freestyle Love Supreme*, described such incidents that he has confronted working in the theater, including, "a stagehand calling him "Trayvon" while he was wearing a hoodie and hearing the "never funny joke of 'smile, so I can see you' when standing backstage in the dark doing (his) job."<sup>65</sup> Renard Richards continued on to say, "I'm tired of walking out of the room when I feel uncomfortable because of you. I'm tired of laughing awkwardly when your racist jokes aren't funny. I'm tired of having to defend MY skin color, just to make YOU feel better."<sup>66</sup> Others called out Broadway's vague initial response and demanded a change in equity and in representation across all professions, creative and administrative, within the industry.

Warren Adams, choreographer of *Motown the Musical* stated in an Instagram post "Some of you expressed your heartache this weekend after the Black Broadway community demanded it of you. The words you wrote were very powerful and we thank you for it. But those are only

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/black-theater-workers-call-out-racism-on-broadway.html>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/199391/broadway-stars-spotlight-racism-in-the-theater-community/>

words. Your actions regarding this matter is what will really count. When you have an all-white producing team, CHANGE IT. When you have an all-white creative team, CHANGE IT. When you have an all-white staff at your organization, CHANGE IT. When you have an all-white board, CHANGE IT. When you're pitching a narrative steeped in ethnic culture with an ALL-WHITE TEAM - DON'T! JUST DON'T. When you have an only white ANYTHING, CHANGE IT.”<sup>67</sup> There are countless other stories like these that were expressed, and put out into the open once the dialogue surrounding racism on Broadway started moving forward.

Had there been a Tony Awards® ceremony this year (though nominations were announced this fall but a ceremony date has yet to be determined<sup>68</sup>), Playwright Jeremy O'Harris' *Slave Play*, would have been the likely frontrunner to take home many of the night's coveted prizes. He also is the only Black Playwright to be nominated this year. If *Slave Play* wins, O'Harris will be the first Black playwright in 33 years to win the Tony® for Best Play. In the 73year history of the Tony Awards®, only two Black playwrights have ever won Best Play. Across the five principal creative categories—book and score of a musical, director of a play and musical, and play—just nine Tony's® have ever gone to Black artists.<sup>69</sup> Stephen C. Byrd and Alia Jones-Harvey of Front Row Productions remain the sole Black lead producers working on Broadway. Sixty-nine acting Tony Awards® have gone to Black actors. In conjunction with these statistics, that is further proof of the ways in which white creatives have traditionally capitalized off of Black talent and Black stories in theater. These statistics highlight the inequality and inequity of black professionals on Broadway and the call to action of the industry to start making changes.

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/black-theater-workers-call-out-racism-on-broadway.html>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.tonyawards.com/nominees/>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/black-lives-matter-broadway-70891/>

With Black industry members in distress, White allies looking for ways to support them, and an entire industry shut down for nearly three months at this point, the Broadway Advocacy Coalition quickly announced a three-day forum called “Broadway For Black Lives Matter Again” to take place June 10-June 12. According to its organizers, the forum would be space for the "Broadway community to heal, listen, and hold itself accountable to its history of white supremacy while moving towards becoming an anti-racist and equitable space."<sup>70</sup> The Broadway Advocacy Coalition is an organization that, “builds the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities to dismantle the systems that perpetuate racism through the power of storytelling and the leadership of people directly affected. Founded in 2016 by members of the Broadway community as a direct response to the nation's pandemic of racism and police brutality, it has since grown into a multi-disciplinary organization uniting artists with legal experts and community leaders to have a lasting impact on policy issues including criminal justice reform, education equity, and immigration.”<sup>71</sup>

As part of my research, I had the opportunity to talk with one of the organizers of this forum, Dria Brown who is also Chief of Staff for the Broadway Advocacy Coalition. Ms. Brown is an actress who first came to the Broadway Advocacy Coalition at the beginning of the pandemic as a volunteer. Moved by the organization’s causes as calls to action, she has now taken on a more active role in the organization and has even discovered an exciting new career path, away from the stage, in advocacy.<sup>72</sup>

When designing the three-day forum, Ms. Brown said the organization knew that they wanted it to be grounded in the foundation of theatre; storytelling. They did so by organizing

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<sup>70</sup> <https://www.playbill.com/article/sign-up-now-for-bacs-broadway-for-black-lives-matter-again>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.bwayadvocacycoalition.org/about>

<sup>72</sup> Dria Brown- Broadway Advocacy Coalition. November 23, 2020.

panels, carefully selecting topics relevant to this moment and the change they would like to see, amplifying Black voices, and creating a safe space for everyone. Day one of the forum was a day of healing. It was a day exclusively for Black members of the industry to come together, express their anger, grief, and frustration, in a safe space with other members who shared similar experiences in community with one another. In the workshop, they worked on breath work, and spiritual meditation to help heal their minds and bodies from such high levels of anxiety and grief. Day two was a day of listening centered around the experiences of Black industry members. This day was for Black professionals to challenge their White allies to reflect and dismantle anti-Black bias as it related to institutional, structural, interpersonal, and internalized racism. According to Ms. Brown, listening is the most important step one can take in becoming an ally. They wanted the white industry members to truly hear their stories and listen to their pain and anguish. Day three was a day of accountability. It was a space to examine accountability within the Broadway industry for its past actions and plan to go forward. It was a space to manifest an entirely anti-racist theatrical landscape, while exploring actual, tangible steps towards reaching that goal. The organizers created a Public Accountability Pledge for non-Black members of the theatrical community to sign which has garnered over 7,000 signatures.

#### The Pledge Reads

*I pledge to be held publicly accountable in making Broadway and the larger theatrical industry an anti-racist, equitable community. I pledge to continue to show up in the coming months and years to learn about my role as an ally. I will actively create space for the community to continue to hold me accountable if and when I am not doing my part to stand up against structural racism. I will listen in order to understand, not to defend or deflect.*

*I recognize that the work will require a long-term commitment to identifying and addressing*

*racism, making necessary policy changes, building equitable and inclusive workplaces, and remaining accountable.*

*I pledge to insist that spaces where I lend my creative talent must actively pursue the work of anti-racism.*

*I pledge to lean into difficult conversations with individuals and institutions in the industry who have not made these commitments or who are failing to live up to them.*

*I pledge to examine and dismantle my own learned racism. I will sit in the discomfort this brings, and will not let my discomfort render me silent or derail the necessary work.*

*I pledge to use my social, cultural, and financial capital to amplify institutions and productions led by people of color, and to call out those that do not involve this leadership.*

*Signing this pledge does not take me off the hook. I am making a public, long-term commitment to these practices. Hold me accountable.<sup>73</sup>*

In order to move towards a more anti-racist theatrical landscape, the Broadway Advocacy Coalition is looking for a more equitable Broadway. Their philosophy is “those who are closest to the problem are closest to the solution.” A majority of the decisions regarding Black and Brown artists on Broadway are being made in rooms occupied by mostly White power players in the industry. To change that, there needs to be more diversity in these rooms. There needs to be more BIPOC in administrative and executive roles so that their voices are being amplified. There needs to be mentorship. There also needs to be more diversity and inclusion in the stories that are being told on stage. There needs to be more support of Black cis and transgender women, who have historically been overlooked, yet can impactfully organize to bring about change in all major movements throughout history. The country saw this most recently with the work Stacy

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<sup>73</sup> <https://www.bwayforblm.com/pledge>

Abrams did in Georgia to fight for fair elections and amplify the Black vote, and consequently, flip Georgia blue. They also believe in the power of youth, and their voices, who are often told to stay silent. The power to make change is in them

In reflecting back on the experience of organizing the forum, Ms. Brown is left feeling optimistic about the future. She recalls that day one- the day of healing, was very emotional. It was emotional to be in the same space, along with hundreds of her peers, who all understood the exact pain and experiences Black people had all gone through individually, yet collectively. On days two and three, she felt as though White people were listening and leaning in differently than they had before. There was a collective investment to do the work needed to be done in order to create a more equitable future, once Broadway reopens.

Since the three-day forum in June, the Broadway Advocacy Coalition has been doing work so that change is ready to be made once Broadway reopens. hosted additional virtual forums. There was the “Miseducation” forum centering around the experiences of Black students studying theatre in college at PWI’s (Predominately White Institutions) and how these programs can contribute to the institutional racism experienced in the industry today. They have also started a coalition of BIPOC lead organizations such as Broadway for Racial Justice, along with representatives from organizations such as Actor’s Equity and Disney Theatrical, who meet monthly to discuss the work that is being done to create a more equitable future, share resources and keep each other accountable. They also an Artivism fellowship for Black cis and transgender women, who are using their art as a form of activism. All of these are accountable, tangible steps towards creating a more equitable theatrical landscape. There is also the Cody Renard Richard scholarship which is awarded to BIPOC non-performance major students; students studying arts administration or stage management. They also created their own curriculum for a course on

reimagining equitable production process. Five Broadway casts will get to participate in the course. They'll be working with actors and producers from these five selected shows when Broadway reopens. The goal is to hit the ground running and move towards a more anti-racist theatrical landscape from day one

Broadway Advocacy coalition is just one of the many organizations doing the work to create a more equitable theatrical landscape. "We See You, White American Theater," launched on June 8, with a mission statement signed by over 300 theater-makers who identify as BIPOC. The letter is a list of demands that BIPOC theatre creators want to see changed. "We have watched you un-challenge your white privilege, inviting us to traffic in the very racism and patriarchy that festers in our bodies, while we protest against it on your stages," the letter reads. "We see you." Signees included Lin-Manuel Miranda, Tarell Alvin McCraney, Danielle Brooks, Billy Porter, and Sandra Oh.<sup>74</sup> Further amplifying the work that needs to be done to create more equality in American theatre.

While 2020 has been one of, if not the most challenging year, for theatre, Ms. Brown is grateful for the blessings and lessons this past year has brought. Had it not been for the pandemic, when the entire industry was shut down, and people were able to openly listen and pay attention to what was going on without the distraction of everyday life, these conversations may never have happened. It was a pause that Ms. Brown feels was needed. We learned many things but one of the most important was how to have difficult conversations. People now have so much more awareness of not only the history of these issues related to racism in America, and on Broadway, but also what an emotional toll and grief seeing instances of police brutality, like the George Floyd murder, can have on the Black community.

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<sup>74</sup> <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/black-lives-matter-broadway-70891/>

When Broadway reopens, Ms. Brown would like to see a space where everybody can be seen, heard, and protected at all times. She would like to see more powershifting in executive roles behind the table with more BIPOC leadership. She would like to see shows that reflect the time we are living in, and do not disrespect her ancestors on stage. Ms. Brown believes these are all things the industry is capable of achieving before reopening, and can already see the work that is being done to make it a tangible reality. The Broadway revival of *Company* has already pledged to begin a paid internship program for ten young Black men and women, in all departments, once Broadway reopens.<sup>75</sup> It is actions like this, not just performative allyship and statements, that will truly make an impact. It takes more people willing to join the fight, and not to settle for anything less. An actual community, that is different than the Broadway community left before the pandemic.

### **The Past and Looking Toward the Future**

Despite being so long into the shutdown at this point, it still feels slightly unsettling, considering how Broadway shut down in such an abrupt way. While there were rumblings of COVID-19 hitting New York and potentially impacting Broadway, no one was prepared for what was to come. On March 11, some shows unknowingly, played their final performance. This was the case for the Disney Musical *Frozen*, that had just entered its third year on Broadway at the St. James Theatre. I had the opportunity to talking with the house managers of the St. James, Brian Busby and Emma Acciani, about the weeks leading up to the shutdown, the announcement of *Frozen* closing, the process of doing a load out in the midst of a pandemic, and what the a COVID Broadway may look like.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/COMPANY-Commits-to-Hiring-10-Young-Black-Men-and-Women-for-Paid-Internships-When-Broadway>Returns-20200723>

<sup>76</sup> Brian Busby and Emma Acciani- Jujamcyn Theater- December 11, 2020

In the weeks leading up to the shutdown, there was talk of COVID-19 entering the United States. In the past there have been viruses or diseases, like Ebola for example, that had little impact on our lives. You heard about it in the news, and just thought everyone would get through it. No one was prepared for how COVID-19 would impact their lives or the fact that the entire world would shut down because of it. As the threat of the virus became more and more apparent, the house management staff began to take more precautions. They began ramping up more ways to keep the theatre clean, with a more rigorous cleaning schedule. For the audience, they began installing hand sanitizing stations in the lobby. To keep the staff safe with increased use of hand sanitizer, and personal small bottles of it. Though masks were not advised yet, the staff was given the option to wear black plastic gloves when they were on the floor. Still the future remained unclear.

There was an usher at the Booth theatre who tested positive for COVID-19<sup>77</sup> and that story was quickly circulating in the news. When Brian came into work on March 12, the cast of *Frozen* was onstage having a rehearsal. The stage manager had told Brian there were rumors of a possible shutdown, and he was dumbfounded. When the shutdown actually happened, Brian walked out of the theatre that night thinking that the shutdown would only be a month, never expecting it to go on as long as it has, and what a pandemic actually means.

Part of the job of being a house manager is taking care of the audience, and also leading the front of house staff, and supporting them at work, and at some times, within their own lives. In this case, the staff began growing concerned and asking questions about how the virus might impact Broadway. Brian and Emma could only give them information as they were receiving it, without keeping any secrets and being fully transparent. Through it all, the staff was in this

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<sup>77</sup> <https://www.playbill.com/article/broadway-usher-tests-positive-for-covid-19>

together. Any concerns that they had could be brought forward and dealt with in a supportive way. It was an opportunity to bond, without causing panic.

When the shutdown initially happened, there were immediately questions about pay, a return date, and what the plan for the future was. Unfortunately, no one really had answers. Everyone was figuring this new reality out day by day. Brian and Emma stayed in touch with their staff as much as they could, reassuring them that they loved them, they wanted them to be safe, while again, being transparent. From a management standpoint, they were challenged. As a manager, you want to have the answers for your staff that will help them figure out and plan their work and personal lives. In this case, they were figuring things out, and receiving information at the same time everyone else is. It also was, according to Ms. Acciani, an awakening as to just how big this pandemic was, and how truly everyone in the world was affected by it. It was going to take our government, and a collection of resources to figure out what the next step was. Brian and Emma also had to figure out their own process in dealing with this new reality personally and how it affected their lives. So often, their staff comes to them with various issues related to their job, whether it be with a patron or a fellow employee. In this case, everyone, staff and management, were going through the same crisis together, with the same amount of information, which according to Mr. Busby, created an opportunity to empathize and know exactly what each other is going through. At times, both managers felt helpless and useless and in some ways like a parent who wanted to help, but didn't know how to do so.

For Brian, Emma, and the staff at the St. James, many were with *Frozen* from the very beginning when it opened in 2017. Like every show, *Frozen* was a unique experience filled with many rewards, challenges and opportunities specific to that show. The staff was able to bond in a special way, and step up their game in terms of the level of customer service they were able to

bring to their work show after show. It was shocking and difficult to hear the news that the show was closing in the middle of the pandemic.

According to Mr. Busby, “In the life of a show, there is an experience that you go through at the end that provides closure, knowing that you are coming to an end of a run. In this case, there was not that closure. There was not that opportunity for the staff, the company, everyone involved, to go through those emotions and prepare for the show to close. To not go through that together, was very tough, and tough to also know that the group that worked on that show, will never be together the same way again”. The staff still keeps in touch with zoom, an maintains some form of communication since the shutdown. That communication was more prevalent in the early months of the pandemic. Since the announcement of *Frozen* closing, that communication has dwindled. However, Mr. Busby still maintains some the traditions of the theatre with his staff, though virtually. They had a virtual Halloween parade and Holiday party.

The next part of a show closing is loading it out of the theater. *Frozen* was the first commercial, large scale show to do this in the age of COVID so there was some added pressure to do it efficiently safely, and overall get it right, as a model for future shows who may be faced with the same process. Disney was very supportive of the company and crew taking their time loading out and doing it correctly. In a normal circumstance, there would usually be another show lined up, ready for when the current show closes. In this case, with no show coming in right away, *Frozen* was awarded a luxury of time. With COVID, they had to make sure the theater was equipped with appropriate PPE beforehand for multiple days, weeks, and months of work. Hand Sanitizer was full available in the back and front of house. They had to map out areas backstage that could be potentially crowded in tight spaces where there was no way to keep six feet distance from one another. Brian and Emma called this a, “pinch point.” The number of

people who could typically cohabitate in a particular space was reduced to 50% of an area's capacity. They wanted to create the feeling of safety and precaution so that when that first crew member arrived for work, they felt safe and taken care of.

There is now COVID compliance officer on staff. This is a new position that was created when the load out period began in June. Their responsibility is to screen everyone who enters the building via temperature checks and health questionnaires; to keep a log of who was in the building; and to keep track of the daily groupings of individuals in the event that there needed to be contact tracing so they know who was with who. The compliance officer supervised orientation for new crew members who were there on any given day. Willa Burke, the Vice President of Theatre Operations for Jujamcyn, relayed information and training she received from her meetings with IATSE (the theatre worker's union), CDC, and Department of Health, as far as what they needed to know for the process. The future of this training, and having a compliance officer on staff remains to be seen. Yet, Mr. Busby feels this will be with us until 2022.

While the Broadway League is now offering ticket refunds through May 31, 2021, that does not mean theaters will be ready to open by June<sup>78</sup>. For a Broadway show to reopen, it needs to be able to limit the possible spread of infection inside its theatre or wait until all its staff and patrons are either vaccinated or cured of the Coronavirus.<sup>79</sup> Most Broadway shows need to fill the theatre to at least 80% of the audience seats to break even financially. Being able to do so at the tail end of a pandemic, will prove to be very difficult, especially since capacity restrictions will still likely be in place. Even at 50% capacity a show would not be able to cover its own running cost, unless they doubled or tripled the ticket prices, which is highly unlikely.

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<sup>78</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/news/new-reopening-date>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/news/new-reopening-date>

Therefore, the most logical, and safest health and financial plan, is for Broadway to wait to reopen until the pandemic is completely over, which could set its new opening date as far back as December 2021, March 2022 or even July 2022<sup>80</sup>

With the future looking unclear, there is a glimmer of hope with the new incoming Biden Administration. The Biden/ Harris ticket was endorsed heavily by the Broadway, including the Actor's Equity Organization.<sup>81</sup> In a statement by Actor's Equity President Kate Schindle, the union felt that Biden, "understands that the arts are a critical driver of healthy and strong local economies in cities and towns across the country."<sup>82</sup> With his election, Arts workers have called on his support to not only help arts organizations in the midst of this health crisis, but to also create a cabinet level Arts and Culture agency. An open letter, on behalf of the nation's 5.1 billion arts workers, calls for the incoming Biden administration to support the arts in a way no other previous administration has. The letter states "We believe that at this critical time, as you lead the nation toward recovery from the gravest public health crisis in a century and its terrible consequences, arts and culture not only matter, but are integral to recovery itself. Arts and culture not only represent a vital part of the economy but speak to the mental and physical health of the American people." The letter goes on to highlight all the ways the arts contributes to society, education and the economy and has been signed by hundreds at this point in time

Washington Post Theater Critic, Peter Marks, called on Biden's administration to create a cabinet level arts position in a recent op-ed. In his view, this position, a Secretary of the Arts, would, "...coordinate arts funding, unite assorted agencies and underline the value of arts and

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<sup>80</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/news/new-reopening-date>

<sup>81</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater\\_dance/the-union-for-actors-on-broadway-and-in-regional-theaters-endorses-biden-harris/2020/09/21/5bb09170-fba0-11ea-9ceb-061d646d9c67\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/the-union-for-actors-on-broadway-and-in-regional-theaters-endorses-biden-harris/2020/09/21/5bb09170-fba0-11ea-9ceb-061d646d9c67_story.html)

<sup>82</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater\\_dance/the-union-for-actors-on-broadway-and-in-regional-theaters-endorses-biden-harris/2020/09/21/5bb09170-fba0-11ea-9ceb-061d646d9c67\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/the-union-for-actors-on-broadway-and-in-regional-theaters-endorses-biden-harris/2020/09/21/5bb09170-fba0-11ea-9ceb-061d646d9c67_story.html)

entertainment to the nation's financial, social and psychological well-being.”<sup>83</sup> Over 50 countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, France South Africa, Vietnam, Australia, all have some sort of cabinet level arts and culture position. This position has made a difference in not only protecting the arts, but pursuing their interest, especially during this pandemic. “Germany, for instance, the minister of state for culture, Monika Grütters, has been an ardent proponent of aid to artists during the COVID-19 crisis — a backing that helped secure a staggering \$54 billion in aid for those in cultural, media and artistic pursuits.”<sup>84</sup> The United States, on the other hand, operates the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities as bare minimum grant-makers, each with a budget of \$162.5 million.<sup>85</sup> Imagine how much more the arts could flourish, and how many arts workers would have had some resemblance of financial relief by now, had there been a position in government, looking out for their interest, and allocating the appropriate resources needed to survive this health crisis.

## **Conclusion**

As I conclude this paper, I struggle with how to conclude, knowing that the subject matter I have written about, has not yet found resolve itself. We still have an economy that is on holding on by a thread. Congress, only yesterday, passed a second economic relief package, Theatres still are not open and we are still watching shows virtually. The work is still being done to create a more equitable theater landscape for BIPOC. Broadway is still closed, and we do not yet know when it will reopen. These past nine months have been challenging to say the least. But

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<sup>83</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/biden-fauci-secretary-of-arts-cabinet-post/2020/12/01/a04f3bf8-2da3-11eb-bae0-50bb17126614\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/biden-fauci-secretary-of-arts-cabinet-post/2020/12/01/a04f3bf8-2da3-11eb-bae0-50bb17126614_story.html)

<sup>84</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/biden-fauci-secretary-of-arts-cabinet-post/2020/12/01/a04f3bf8-2da3-11eb-bae0-50bb17126614\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/biden-fauci-secretary-of-arts-cabinet-post/2020/12/01/a04f3bf8-2da3-11eb-bae0-50bb17126614_story.html)

<sup>85</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/biden-fauci-secretary-of-arts-cabinet-post/2020/12/01/a04f3bf8-2da3-11eb-bae0-50bb17126614\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/biden-fauci-secretary-of-arts-cabinet-post/2020/12/01/a04f3bf8-2da3-11eb-bae0-50bb17126614_story.html)

there is comfort in know that, although we have all been living mostly in isolation, and have yet to gather in the same space and participate in this art and tradition we call theatre, there is a hope, and there will be a day when this is pandemic is behind us. Even in isolation, there is a thriving, passionate, arts community, and an audience that is hunger for it. The very last show I saw before the pandemic was a high school production of Sondheim's *Into the Woods* in March right before the New Jersey shutdown. Act one is a fairytale, where everyone lives happily ever after. Act two is what happens after, and is filled with chaos, death, and destruction. A chilling foreshadowing of what was to come now that I look back. There was a meme circulating around the internet at the time "I wanted my life to be a musical. Act two of *Into the Woods* was not what I had in mind". Yet there is a beautiful song in *Into the Woods* sung by the four main character when it seems all hope is lost.

*Hard to see the light now*

*Just don't let it go*

*Things will come out right now*

*We can make it so*

*Someone is on your side*

*No one is alone*<sup>86</sup>

There is a light now. Science has prevailed and there is a safe and effective vaccine that is being distributed as we speak.<sup>87</sup> Economic relief is on its way. Theatre has survived pandemics, wars, recessions, and worse in the past, and it has always overcome. I believe it will do just that and people will look back at this time and admire the resilience of the arts to overcome its biggest obstacle. People will remember how the arts, helped them get through this difficult time.

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<sup>86</sup> <https://genius.com/Chip-zien-no-one-is-alone-lyrics>

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/14/us/coronavirus-vaccine-first-shot/index.html>

My greatest hope is that when theatre is allowed to return, everyone, whether you and arts worker or audience member, may never take it for granted, ever again and truly savor these experiences and relationships, we form inside these spaces. May we always treasure and value the power of a good story.

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