

THE (RE)BIRTH OF OFF-BROADWAY

HOW THE SLOW DEATH OF AMERICA'S GREATEST ALTERNATIVE PRODUCING
MODEL CAN LEAD TO THE REJUVENATION OF THE THEATRE
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
CHAPTER 1: THE BEGINNINGS OF OFF-BROADWAY.....	9
THE BIRTH OF OFF-BROADWAY: 1914 – 1929.....	9
THE ADOLESCENTS: THE 1930’s – 50’s.....	13
THE ADULTS: THE 1960’s – 70’s.....	19
THE OLD FAT CATS: THE 1980’s – 90’s.....	24
CHAPTER 2: OFF-BROADWAY’S GOLDEN AGE: THE 1980’s – 90’s.....	26
THE MEGAHITS AND THEIR CREATORS.....	28
TOP 15 LONGEST-RUNNING OFF-B’WAY SHOWS IN HISTORY.....	30
WHY SOME SHOWS BECAME HITS.....	32
NON-PROFIT THEATRE DURING THE 1980’s AND ‘90’s.....	34
CHAPTER 3: THE IMPORTANCE OF OFF-BROADWAY.....	36
CHAPTER 4 – WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE PAST 13 YEARS?.....	41
NUMBER AND TYPE OF VENUES.....	41
ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001.....	45
RISING COSTS OF PRODUCING.....	48
HIGHER COSTS EQUAL LESSER PROFITS.....	49
LOSS OF PLAYWRIGHTS TO OTHER MEDIA.....	50
DISCOUNTING AND THE VALUE OF THEATRE.....	52
THE FINANCIAL COLLAPSE IN 2008.....	56
DECREASING IMPORTANCE OF THEATRE IN AMERICA.....	57
CHAPTER 5: THE FINANCIALS OF OFF-BROADWAY TODAY.....	59
CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF NON-PROFIT THEATRE AND OFF-OFF BROADWAY.....	69
NON-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS IN NYC.....	69
OFF-OFF BROADWAY’S EFFECTS ON THE THEATRE SCENE.....	74

CHAPTER 7: CURRENT TRENDS IN COMMERCIAL OFF-BROADWAY –	
WHO IS TRYING SOMETHING NEW AND IS IT WORKING?.....	78
THE BROADWAY TO OFF-BROADWAY (RE)CYCLE.....	79
FEWER THAN 8 SHOWS PER WEEK SCHEDULE.....	85
THEATRE PRODUCER, MANAGER, AND OWNER – IN ONE.....	90
USING OFF-BROADWAY AS A LAUNCHING PAD.....	94
CHAPTER 8: THE FUTURE OF OFF-BROADWAY AND CONCLUSION.....	99
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED.....	103

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The New York theater economy is already unhealthily Broadway-centric, and the idea that bigger is necessarily better is a dangerous one. The development and creation of innovative new work, no matter how great its potential for popular appeal, is the bedrock of the Off-Broadway mission.

- Charles Isherwood

INTRODUCTION:

Commercial Off-Broadway is dead...or so we've been told again and again. Since the turn of the last century, there have been countless articles bemoaning the state of commercial Off-Broadway, and the word among today's industry insiders is not a whole lot better. This bleak picture wasn't always the case, though. There was a time in the not so distant past when Off-Broadway not only existed, but thrived – and not solely as a dumping ground for Broadway-branded shows or event-based spectacles. Off-Broadway served as a home for productions that were considered inappropriate for Broadway and showcased provocative work and emerging talent. It provided a rigorous training ground for young producers, artists and writers, hoping to break into the professional world. Off-Broadway also offered a way to present these exciting works with less money at risk than a Broadway production – and many of these productions even made a profit. At some point in the very recent past, however, things for Off-Broadway changed. The possibility of profit or even recoupment became a much larger struggle and as a result commercial productions started to dwindle. This paper will explore the history of Off-Broadway and what the terrain is like today. It will look at the reasons commercial Off-Broadway lost its footing and what it can do to regain its relevance to the New York City theatre scene. It will also consider if commercial Off-Broadway is worth revitalizing and if not, what could replace it.

The main focus of the paper is to explore what many consider Off-Broadway's "Golden Age" as compared with the temperature on Off-Broadway

today. Understanding the more distant past is also important. Therefore, in Chapter 1 we will look back to the beginnings of Off-Broadway to learn how it started, what purpose it was trying to fulfill both artistically and socially, how it evolved, and whether or not it has had to struggle for survival in the past. Chapter 2 will focus on Off-Broadway's Golden Age and the conditions that created such a fertile and rich place for commercial Off-Broadway productions. In Chapter 3, we will look at why Off-Broadway was and is important to the overall theatre scene and beyond in America. Chapter 4 will delve into how Off-Broadway and its surrounding landscape have changed since 2000, and why some of these changes occurred. In Chapter 5, we will then look at the financials of Off-Broadway in today's climate and consider if the financials are adding strain to Off-Broadway producers and artists. Chapter 6 will consider the role of non-profit theatres and Off-Off Broadway and decide if they have grown over the past 13 years and if so, what affects they have had on commercial Off-Broadway. We will then shift our focus in Chapter 7 to producers and managers who are currently working Off-Broadway and explore what they are doing to try and create success. Chapter 8 will then ask and attempt to answer the questions: Is Off-Broadway commercially viable today? What is the future of Off-Broadway? And is it time for a revamp?

Before we can explore these questions, we need to understand a few basic principles. First, what is Off-Broadway? Many people think of Off-Broadway as a gritty basement theater with no air conditioning and fold up chairs.

Those who attend theatre regularly know the diverse range of theaters that are classified as Off-Broadway. Off-Broadway is a technical term understood in the theatrical community, but one rarely understood by the common audience member. Broadway is simply defined. According to Playbill.com, there are 40 Broadway theatres¹ and to be eligible to be a Broadway house, the theatre must hold over 499 seats and be within certain geographical range in the borough of Manhattan, known as “The Broadway Box.” According to Offbroadway.com, a website owned and operated by the Off-Broadway League, Off-Broadway is any theatre in the borough of Manhattan with a seating capacity between 100 and 499 seats.²

The site lists some 41 Off-Broadway locations,³ but do not name all of the individual theaters. As some spaces are more like complexes with multiple theaters, the Off-Broadway League’s number of venues is conservative. Off-Broadway theaters are located only in the borough of Manhattan; there is constant confusion about this, however, as news outlets regularly mislabel a venue outside of Manhattan as Off-Broadway. Off-Broadway can be a commercial enterprise or a non-profit theatre institution. Additionally, Off-Broadway is harder to define than Broadway, because the theaters themselves change more often and the productions do not necessarily have to comply with union rules to be considered Off-Broadway. Broadway must adhere to union rules – there is no flexibility there. Although Off-Broadway must adhere to union

¹ “At This Theatre.”

² “What’s Off-Broadway?”

³ “Where’s Off-Broadway?”

rules in order to be eligible for Off-Broadway awards, such as the Lucille Lortel Awards, union rules are not necessarily enforced in order to consider a show Off-Broadway. Most professional productions, however, adhere to the definition of Off-Broadway as outlined in the collectively bargained agreement between Actors' Equity Association and the Off-Broadway League:

This Agreement is applicable only to productions presented in the borough of Manhattan unless Equity otherwise consents in writing, but may not be used in any theatre located in an area bounded by Fifth and Ninth Avenues from 34th Street to 56th Street and by Fifth Avenue and the Hudson River from 56th Street to 72nd Street, nor may it be used in any theatre having a capacity of more than 499. However, a bona fide member of the League may use this Agreement in the above-described area in theatres that are not Tony-eligible and have a seating capacity of 499 or less.⁴

For the purposes of this paper, we will define Off-Broadway simply as theaters in the borough of Manhattan that produce or present live theatrical work in a space that contains no fewer than 99 seats and no more than 499.

Now onto a more abstract idea of Off-Broadway - what does it do? What purpose did it and does it serve and is it still a thriving and viable alternative to create new works, turn a profit, develop emerging talent, and provide alternative entertainment to audiences – with high levels of production quality and talent? To answer these questions, we have to start at the beginnings of Off-Broadway and discover why it was created in the first place and look at how it evolved over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st.

⁴ "Actors' Equity Association Off-Broadway Rulebook."

CHAPTER 1: The Beginnings of Off-Broadway

In order to fully comprehend Off-Broadway's formation and progression, it is important to understand the world surrounding it. The establishment and growth of the regional theatre movement, Broadway's development, and large historical events will be touched on in the following sections to give a clearer understanding of how and why Off-Broadway evolved in the way it did. As with all the research in this paper, we will explore these topics through the use of Off-Broadway historical textbooks (the very few that exist), articles from the recent and distant past, and personal interviews.

THE BIRTH OF OFF-BROADWAY: 1914 - 1929

Trying to pin down the exact beginnings of Off-Broadway, like most artistic movements, is like trying to hold a cat in the bathtub. It's tricky and a bit slippery. The birth of Off-Broadway occurred in the early 20th century in New York City with a few ragtag theatrical groups that strove to present a diverse range of work not otherwise suitable for Broadway or the masses in general, and primarily focused their attention on plays, not musicals.⁵ The shows were not originally produced to turn a profit. The most important facet of production was the work itself – artistic merit was of the upmost importance.⁶ This work included the Classics (which upon these groups' formation were not being presented to wide

⁵ Price Pg. 2.

⁶ Little Pg. 31.

audiences), plays by emerging and unknown writers, as well as shows that were flops on Broadway but believed to be good works with a need for re-imagination.⁷

Broadway at the time, although established, was still very much in its early years and just beginning to identify itself as a place to escape one's worries through grand entertainment. This was an especially effective tactic after the end of WWI, when Americans sought out shows to escape from the harsh realities of the 20th century. As the 1920's progressed, the American economy was in full upswing and this was reflected in both the number of productions on Broadway and the number of theatres.⁸ By the 1927-28 season, Broadway presented 264 productions – the most in any one season to date and there were between 70 and 80 active Broadway theatres, roughly double what there is today.⁹ Broadway was beginning to explore some more serious topics as well, however light-hearted shows with music were the main draw for audiences. Arguably the first ever musical (a show in which the *story* drove the action – not the songs), *Showboat* was written and produced during this decade.¹⁰ Modern writers like Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein were finding their voices, while visual artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray were shocking the art world. WWI had changed the way many artists viewed America and modernity, and they used their art to express their anger and frustration with the consequences of

⁷ Little Pg. 28–29.

⁸ Sheward Pg. 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

industrialization and new technologies. This new way of making art was reflected in all media and theatre was an integral part of this movement.

Two of the earliest Off-Broadway groups were the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players.¹¹ Both of these groups were formed in the teens during this time of great artistic growth in America. These two companies were essentially created at the same time – the first being the Washington Square Players in 1914, followed closely thereafter by the Provincetown Players in 1915.¹² Both groups were formed as theatrical collectives, with many of the members serving multiple roles – administrative, managerial, and artistic – within the company. Many of the founders of these original Off-Broadway companies were volunteers or paid very little.¹³

The Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players are both credited with producing the works of many critically acclaimed writers, who were at the time unproduced or vastly under-produced. The most notable playwrights produced by these groups were Bernard Shaw, Eugene O’Neill, and Susan Glaspell, the latter being one of the original founders of the Provincetown Players.¹⁴ Two productions by the Provincetown Players went on to long runs – *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell and *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O’Neill.¹⁵

Both companies produced hundreds of plays throughout their lifetimes and retained relatively low overheads for all of the shows. When there were profits

¹¹ Little Pg. 28.

¹² Price Pg. 3-6.

¹³ Ibid. Pg. 4.

¹⁴ Little Pg. 32-34.

¹⁵ Ibid.

from a show, they went directly into the next production. Both groups operated much closer to what we would call today a non-profit model, although this tax status did not exist for the arts at this point, so for all intents and purposes these productions were run as commercial endeavors – even if most of the shows’ main principal was artistic, not financial.

In 1918, the Washington Square Players evolved, and formed themselves into the Theatre Guild, which went on to “set standards of dramatic excellence that were to influence American theatre for four decades.”¹⁶ The Provincetown Players officially disbanded in 1929, due to financial problems and the loss of their artistic leader, George Cram.¹⁷ Although both of these original entities have long been dissolved, their memory still exists, and many theatre professionals recognize their influence on the formation of Off-Broadway.

Off-Broadway’s inception is clearly rooted in a rebellion from the mainstream and the commercialism of big Broadway shows. As Stuart Little states in his history of Off-Broadway, “a revolt of some sort against the established theatre is at the root of all Off-Broadway movements.”¹⁸ This theme is apparent today among some of Off-Broadway’s most beloved theatre companies. Even the name Off-Broadway defines these productions more by what they’re not, than what they are. Off-Broadway is *not* Broadway, and it never has been.

¹⁶ Little Pg. 38.

¹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 36.

¹⁸ Ibid. Pg. 29.

THE ADOLESCENTS: THE 1930's – 50's

The next phase of Off-Broadway brought a lot of changes. For one, there were many more players in the game with new theatre companies cropping up all of the time. By the 1958-59 season, Variety estimated that over one million dollars of investment capital had gone into that season's 76 Off-Broadway productions.¹⁹ By the late '50's, there were at least "30 Off-Broadway theatres, where only a handful had existed a few years before."²⁰ There were far more than just two major theatre groups producing regularly and Off-Broadway saw its first long-running commercial hit during this period.²¹ Additionally, the type of work that was being produced Off-Broadway was expanding and the first official experimental theatre company in NYC was formed.

Broadway was also changing dramatically, both because of new artistic forces arriving to the Great White Way and in reaction to the vast changes happening in society. Firstly, the Great Depression following the heyday of the '20's took a great toll on the American people. Broadway remained strong through this decade though, as it was seen as "a treasure house of vital drama, enchanting comedy, and tuneful musicals."²² The '40's on Broadway were similar to the 20's in the sense that war drove people to seek out entertainment en masse as a diversion from the constant news of bloodshed overseas. The artistic reaction to WWII on Broadway brought a barrage of light comedies and

¹⁹ Litte Pg. 105.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. Pg. 81.

²² Sheward Pg. 33.

musicals and the most prolific musical theatre duo emerged during this period – Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein.²³ As the decade marched on, plays and musicals with more substance and probing subject matter began to pepper the seasons. By the 1950's, Broadway was experiencing its Golden Age with some of the best-loved and most well known musicals of all time being produced, such as *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Damn Yankees*, and *The King and I*.²⁴

Despite these now classic musicals and their commercial success, Broadway attendance did experience a slight decline in attendance with the advent and popularity of television.²⁵ This new technology would forever change audiences in America by creating entertainment competition that is both cheap and accessible -- a competition that still continues to this day.

The Antoinette Perry Awards, known simply as the Tony Awards, were also created in this period.²⁶ Established in 1947 as an award for the best on Broadway with no nominees and more like a private dinner party, the Tonys would soon become a full-fledged award ceremony by 1956 with nominees and trophies.²⁷

In the 1930's, the Off-Broadway stage became the ideal space – both physically and psychologically - for the presentation of highly controversial ideas and forms. As Broadway was entertaining audiences with light fare, Off-

²³ Sheward Pg. 33.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. Pg. 53.

²⁷ Ibid.

Broadway became a people's theatre, which was not interested in simple entertainment or commercial success. It sought to probe into underlying issues and challenges that faced society at large and to put into question deep assumptions held by its audiences. The productions did intend to meet the expenses of production; but a profit was an unanticipated bonus.²⁸

The first experimental theatre collective, The Living Theatre, was formed by husband and wife-team Julian Beck and Judith Malina in 1948.²⁹ Their group was far closer to an avant-garde theatrical troupe like those found across Europe at the time and they were greatly influenced by Antonin Artaud, the French playwright and theorist.³⁰ Falling in line with Artaud's philosophy, The Living Theatre's aim was to push the aesthetic envelope both through form and content. Like some other companies formed at this time, The Living Theatre held performances in nontheatrical spaces, using nontraditional seating arrangements to create new environments for spectators, forming an event more in line with the experience of the play itself. Off-Broadway during this period, with the help of companies like The Living Theatre, was beginning to establish itself as the hipper, more dynamic, and more "dangerous" little brother of Broadway. The Living Theatre's mission statement clearly puts this Off-Broadway company on the opposite end of the spectrum from what Broadway was doing at the time.

To call into question
 who we are to each other in the social environment of the theater,
 to undo the knots

²⁸ Price Pg. 15.

²⁹ Little Pg. 59.

³⁰ Ibid. Pg. 204-205.

that lead to misery,
 to spread ourselves
 across the public's table
 like platters at a banquet,
 to set ourselves in motion
 like a vortex that pulls the
 spectator into action,
 to fire the body's secret engines,
 to pass through the prism
 and come out a rainbow,
 to insist that what happens in the jails matters,
 to cry "Not in my name!"
 at the hour of execution,
 to move from the theater to the street and from the street to the
 theater.

This is what The Living Theatre does today.
 It is what it has always done³¹

The Living Theatre continues today and continues to push boundaries with their
 leaders Beck and Malina still at the helm.

In 1954, Joe Papp created the New York Shakespeare Festival, now
 known simply as the Public Theater,³² in a now-legendary story known by many
 theatre lovers and theatre makers. Papp's founding principle was that access to
 Shakespeare productions is a basic human right owed to all people no matter
 their economic background, ethnicity, or social status.³³ This revolutionary idea
 of free theatre for the people forced Papp to get very creative with fundraising, as
 there was no ticket income to rely on to fund the productions. The first
 rehearsals were not done in a theater, but in a church basement, before he was
 eventually able to move his free theatre to the East River Amphitheatre on Grand

³¹ Beck "Our Mission."

³² Turan & Papp Pg. 74.

³³ Little Pg. 261-263.

Street in 1956.³⁴ As can be imagined, the performances in the first few years of Papp's company were done for nearly no cost and at times were brought directly to people in disenfranchised neighborhoods all over New York City. His theatre quickly grew and acquired spaces through government underwriting and generous donations from charitable citizens. By the early 1970's, The Public Theater was generating more new American theatre than all of Broadway's theatres combined.³⁵ The Public Theater, a fully institutionalized non-profit, remains one of New York City's largest and most important Off-Broadway theatres.

Many other noteworthy theatre companies were formed during this time period as well. The Circle in the Square, helmed by Mann and Quintero, and The Phoenix Theatre, both established in the early '50's, are integral to the life and vitality of Off-Broadway during the '50's and well into the years to come. In many ways these two companies were following in the footsteps of the iconic Group Theatre. The Group Theatre was a collective created in 1931, by three Off-Broadway giants: Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg. In the Group's ten-year existence, they produced works by many emerging writers and adopted and recreated an acting technique, taken from Konstantin Stanislavski.³⁶

This decade also saw the first long-running hit. Off-Broadway's first huge commercial success, and probably the most important Off-Broadway production during this time period was *The Threepenny Opera*. It opened in 1956, at the

³⁴ Ibid. Pg. 261.

³⁵ Little Pg. 257.

³⁶ Clurman Pg. 17.

Theater de Lys in the West Village, and its star Lotte Lenya won a Tony Award for her performance.³⁷ Both Ms. Lenya and her co-star Scott Merrill were nominated for Tony Awards and remain the only Off-Broadway participants to ever be nominated for a Tony Award.³⁸ “As Off-Broadway productions proliferated, the Tonys shut them out of competition with Broadway shows.”³⁹ Although a monumental production, this was not the New York City premiere of the Kurt Weill Opera. It premiered on Broadway in 1933, but ran only 12 performances before shuttering.⁴⁰ This new production had the benefit of a much lower weekly running cost and far fewer seats to fill every night in order to make it financially viable. These assets, paired with rave reviews and Tony nominations, gave Off-Broadway its first hit. *The Threepenny Opera* not only became one of the hottest tickets in the city, but it put Off-Broadway on the map to the mainstream theatre audience, who until that point had been relatively unaware of its existence. When *Threepenny* closed, it had played over 2,600 performances and grossed over three million dollars – all on a capitalization of just nine thousand dollars.⁴¹ This was the first musical to sustain a long, commercially successful run Off-Broadway and would be the start of many copycat producers looking for the next big hit.

Ironically, during this time of tremendous expansion for Off-Broadway, the community was already beginning to see hints of its financial instability and

³⁷ Sheward Pg. 324.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Little Pg. 83.

potential demise. In April 1958, the New York Times printed an article entitled “Off-Broadway forecasting its own doom” and quoted a prominent theatre critic who predicted that “the only thing Off-Broadway has to fear is success.”⁴² The article acknowledged the help of the unions and theater and venue owners who curbed costs for these newly budding and struggling companies. This help, many predicted, would disappear as soon as Off-Broadway started seeing hits. In fact the assistance they were receiving was already starting to dissipate, as there were shows like *The Threepenny Opera* that were finding their audiences and turning a significant profit. This sudden turn of events for the little Off-Broadway that could is the primary event that set in motion the formation of the League of Off-Broadway Theatres,⁴³ today called the League of Off-Broadway Theatres and Producers, established officially in 1959. The primary goal of the League is to collectively bargain with unions to create fair and appropriate contracts for Off-Broadway.

THE ADULTS: THE 1960’s – 70’s

During the 1960’s and ‘70’s, Off-Broadway was starting to more seriously establish itself commercially, so it’s no surprise that this time period brought Off-Broadway’s longest commercial run to date. Off-Broadway to Broadway transfers also became a more regular occurrence and a few of the transfers were a monumental success both Off-Broadway and on. Additionally, smaller theatre companies continued to form, and young aspiring artists, composers,

⁴² Gelb “Off Broadway Forecasting its own Doom.”

⁴³ Ibid.

choreographers, and directors were moving to New York to try their luck not only on Broadway, but also in the many facets of the diverse New York theatre scene.

Some historians disagree with the notion that Off-Broadway started in the mid-teens in America, and believe Off-Broadway's more direct lineage can be traced back to the early to mid-1960's, as a direct revolt against the overhyped commercialism of Broadway at the time.⁴⁴ The earlier theatre companies of the 1920's and '30's were inarguably less professional than the majority of the companies that began to form in the early '60's.⁴⁵ However, for all intents and purposes, reaching further back into Off-Broadway's earliest formation more clearly demonstrates the urgent (and long-existing) need for artists to not only create their work, but to have it produced and showcased in a more intimate setting. Off-Broadway was a force that was already in motion and served more as an underground movement until this point. Off-Broadway can be seen as a more professionally and formally established entity starting in 1967, when Actors' Equity Associate created the first rulebook for Off-Broadway. By this time, however, the term "Off-Broadway" had been in use for at least two decades.⁴⁶

Broadway was no longer enjoying its Golden Age and the grand musicals of the previous decade were far removed from the growing societal tumult happening just beyond the theater doors. The Civil Rights Movement, now in full swing, was challenging people's view on racism and expanding the dialogue on

⁴⁴ Bloom & Vlastnik Pg. 99.

⁴⁵ Burney interview

⁴⁶ As can be proven through the publications like Max Anderson's book entitled Off-Broadway: Essays on Theatre" published in 1947.

true equality and freedom in our democracy. Fast on the heels of this movement were the sexual revolution of the '60's and the women's rights movement of the '70's. Broadway for the most part continued on its merry way with few diversions from mainstream entertainment.

The exceptions were important, though, and monumental in their own right. *Hair*, originally developed at the Public theatre was a new musical that pushed both form and content for a musical on Broadway.⁴⁷ *Hair* was so much of an artistic leap for Broadway, there is no way it would have seen the lights of the stage without the existence of Off-Broadway. This musical serves as a perfect example of the symbiotic relationship that can exist between Off-Broadway and Broadway. Plays such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* provoked audiences with harsh language and a brazen female lead. Although there were far fewer challenging pieces on Broadway, theatre in general was still the most boundary-pushing means of popular entertainment in the country at the time.⁴⁸

At the same time, the limitations of Off-Broadway were coming into focus, such as the rising rents, new labor restrictions, and increasing production costs. Off-off Broadway was created as a response to the impediments of Off-Broadway. As noted, professional Off-Broadway was now under the domain of Actor's Equity and certain restrictions and guidelines were placed on Off-Broadway shows because of it. Off-off Broadway, defined as theatres in New

⁴⁷ Sheward Pg. 161.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

York City containing fewer than 100 seats, was a place for artists to create and present new works on bare bones budgets and with no regard for financial success. The '60's was also the beginning of the regional theatre movement and completely changed the landscape of American theatre. With the new tax status of the 501(c)3 formalized in the latter half of the '50's, government approved theatres could be established in any city and receive tax-deductible donations from local patrons, as well as be eligible for contributions from large foundations and government grants. The National Endowment for the Arts, as well as massive charitable foundations with arts initiatives, such as the Ford Foundation and the Mellon Foundation, were established during the '60's. This not only created a whole new theatrical industry, but also created a pipeline for Broadway to obtain new material that could be moved to the Great White Way.

This shift would prove to be pivotal in the '70's, when Broadway was feeling the consequence of high production costs that drove ticket prices up and created an atmosphere less welcome to new and untested material. At this time, Broadway also saw a huge invasion of musicals imported from the West End in London. "The theatre of Off-Broadway, of London, and of the past became the lifeblood of Broadway during the 1970's."⁴⁹ The physical landscape of Broadway began to change in the '70's as well. "A veneer of seediness began to cover the surface of Broadway. The shops looked crummy. Many of them were in the pornography business."⁵⁰ Off-Broadway on the other hand has suffered far less

⁴⁹ Sheward Pg. 209.

⁵⁰ Atkinson Pg. 469.

from changes in neighborhoods, as it has always been seen as the scruffier kin to Broadway. Off-Broadway theaters in more remote locations only added to the reputation of Off-Broadway being “off the beaten path,” intended for the most dedicated theatergoer. As Times Square went into a major decline, Off-Broadway was producing some of its most exciting and groundbreaking work to date, as well as proving itself as a commercially viable means of producing.

On the heels of *The Threepenny Opera*, as if learning from the lessons of that production and shooting them to outer space, *The Fantasticks* opened at the Sullivan Street Playhouse in 1960.⁵¹ Composed by Harvey Schmidt, with book and lyrics by Tom Jones, it was mounted on a shoestring budget and consisted of a skeletal set and simple costumes, but like *The Threepenny Opera*, audiences connected to the story and music and the viewers poured in nightly. *The Fantasticks* played uninterrupted until January 2002, totaling over 17,000 performances. It remains the longest-running Off-Broadway musical in history and is the U.S.’s longest-running uninterrupted show of all time. This would have been a smash success for any show, however this was made even more unique as the production originally capitalized for only \$16,500.⁵²

There were also many widely acclaimed Off-Broadway productions during this time period that were transferred to Broadway for more substantial commercial runs. Off-Broadway had moved shows to Broadway in the past, however, these decades saw this type of transfer happen on a much more

⁵¹ Little Pg. 108.

⁵² Ibid. Pg. 107

frequent and grander scale, and with bigger financial payoff. This is a trend that has continued in a major way in the New York theatre scene. *A Chorus Line*, *Hair*, and *Godspell* – three of the biggest musicals of the ‘60s and ‘70’s were part of this trend. They were all created by Off-Broadway companies and subsequently transferred to Broadway for full commercial runs – *A Chorus Line* being the most fruitful of these three. *A Chorus Line* went on to be the longest-running musical on Broadway for many years, until it was outran in 1990. Broadway put these shows on the map, but Off-Broadway made them possible. These decades set the scene for what was soon to become the richest and most profitable time in the history of Off-Broadway.

THE OLD FAT CATS: THE 1980’s – 90’s

Off-Broadway at this point had diverged into two very separate entities. There were the non-profit institutions, like the Public Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club, The Atlantic, Lincoln Center Theater, Playwrights’ Horizons – the list goes on and on. These were the theatre companies that had mission statements to guide their artistic endeavors and could receive charitable tax-deductible donations and grant monies to continue that mission. These groups are really at the heart of the early history of Off-Broadway and the intentions that lay in the work that was being done in the first half of the 20th century.

The other segment of Off-Broadway was more commercially-minded and sprung from the long-running hits that Off-Broadway saw, such as *The Fantasticks*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and all of the transfers from Off-Broadway

which ran commercially on Broadway. The commercial works during this time were not necessarily any less artistically ambitious or provocative than their non-profit counterparts; they were simply trying to make a commercially successful production that was not seen as suitable for Broadway. The works were produced to create a profit for their creators and investors. The work flowed and this time saw such a period of growth and prosperity that it is still thought of by many long-time producers and managers as “the Golden Age of Off-Broadway.”

CHAPTER 2: Off-Broadway's Golden Age the 1980's and '90's

It seems that everything leading up until this point Off-Broadway was merely practice for the heavy-hitting commercial giants that were stepping up to the plate by the early 1980's. This Golden Age of Off-Broadway not surprisingly coincided with great economic growth in the U.S. during the mid- to late '80's and into the '90's, as well as a boom of spectacular imports from London to Broadway, bringing some of the biggest shows ever to New York City. As far as homemade Broadway shows, however, this time period saw a slew of unsuccessful shows as Broadway entered its darkest days.

On Broadway, the 1980's proved to be a decade of great loss. Three theatres were demolished during this period: The Bijou, The Morosco, and the original Helen Hayes Theatre on West 46th Street.⁵³ The AIDS crisis that brought death and pain to many communities across the country, hit New York particularly hard. Many artists died early deaths during the advent of the disease and the effects of those deaths are still felt today through the lack of a full generation of theatre makers and potential mentors for today's artists. The early '80's also brought economic recession to America. Although the adoption of laissez-faire economic policies adopted after Ronald Reagan's election stimulated the economy in the mid- to late '80's, Broadway took time to recover from the first half of this decade. The cost of producing on Broadway was continuing to climb and subsequently the number of productions continued to decline. In the 1979-80 season, only 66 productions were mounted on

⁵³ Sheward Pg. 261.

Broadway. By the 1989-90 season, the number was slashed by nearly half to 36.⁵⁴ This decline hit both plays and musicals; however, musicals received the brunt of the blow, as production costs are higher for musicals. It got so bad for musicals, in fact, that the Tony Awards for the 1984-85 season had to drop three categories: Best Choreography, Best Actor in a Musical, and Best Actress in a Musical.⁵⁵ There simply weren't enough shows from which to choose.

Additionally, the Best Musical category was filled out with nominations for shows that had been critical and financial disasters, like *The News*, *The Wind in the Willow*, and *Legs Diamond*.⁵⁶

This lack in production on Broadway gave way to a huge surge in Off-Broadway both commercially and in non-profit institutions. As Broadway was seen as increasingly too risky, more money began to be channeled either as investments in commercial runs or as donations to Off-Broadway theatrical institutions which were thriving in New York. Ken Davenport, now a major player in the Off-Broadway scene, remembers this time fondly.

When I first arrived to NYC, commercial Off-Broadway was cranking, with *Forbidden Broadway*, *Forever Plaid*, *Nunsense*, *And The World Goes 'Round*, and a whole host of others doing good business and running for years.⁵⁷

Ken Davenport's thought seems to be shared by every producer and manager who has been around long enough to remember this period. Off-Broadway was

⁵⁴ Sheward Pg. 261.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Davenport "An Off-Broadway trend that could be creeping into Broadway."

thriving and supporting more long-running commercial hits at one time, than at any other point in its history. To understand better how this came to be, it's worth looking at some of the productions during these decades and to discover how they came to be.

THE MEGAHITS AND THEIR CREATORS

In 1982, while *The Fantasticks* was enjoying its 22nd year anniversary in the Sullivan Street Playhouse in the West Village, *Little Shop of Horrors* was preparing to open in the East Village at the Orpheum Theatre on Second Avenue near East Eighth Street. *Little Shop of Horrors* was the second musical collaboration of composer Alan Menken and lyricist Howard Ashman.⁵⁸ The WPA Theatre (Workshop of the Players' Art), David Geffen, Cameron Mackintosh and the Shubert Organization served as producers. For those familiar with current producers, these are some of the biggest and most successful names in the industry. *Little Shop of Horrors* ran for five years and 2,209 performances.⁵⁹ It also won many of the significant awards for Off-Broadway, including the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics Circle Award – all for best musical.⁶⁰ There were offers for a Broadway transfer, however writer Howard Ashman believed it worked best Off-Broadway and a transfer would be less desirable.⁶¹ It's difficult to imagine someone turning down a Broadway transfer, especially an emerging writer who could have had a much

⁵⁸ Sheward Pg. 345.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Internet Off-Broadway Database.

⁶¹ Sheward Pg. 346.

bigger weekly paycheck from a Broadway production. Although it didn't get a Broadway production until 2003 (which did not recoup), it is in the top 10 longest-running Off-Broadway shows in history.⁶² The show itself was funny, dark, and completely original. The use of a man-eating, life-size plant created whimsy and fun on the stage. Ultimately, it was love story between two social outcasts who found each other in a grimy city. The musical was later made into a movie and has a cult following to this day.

Nunsense was another one of Off-Broadway's biggest commercial success stories. Originally developed for greeting cards, the "Nunsense" concept was created by David Goggin who went on to create a one-man cabaret show based on the material.⁶³ It was intended to run as a four-night event at the Duplex in the West Village; however, it was extended for 38 weeks due to popular demand. The mass appeal of the material gave Goggin the idea to create a fully realized show and produce it Off-Broadway. It opened in late December 1985 at the Cherry Lane Theatre, where it ran until it was moved to the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre. It went on to run for 10 years and play over 3,600 performances. It has also toured extensively and creator David Goggin reported that at one time, there were 56 productions in 10 languages playing simultaneously around the world.⁶⁴ For its time, it was a provocative and outrageous comedy that certainly wouldn't have been suited for a Broadway stage.

⁶² Internet Off-Broadway Database.

⁶³ Sheward Pg 350.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Perfect Crime opened in 1987, and has played nearly 9,000 performances over the past 25 years. Similar to *The Woman in Black*, which has played a similar length of time in the West End, *Perfect Crime* is a thrilling murder-mystery, which titillates and terrifies its audiences. *Perfect Crime* is now Off-Broadway's longest-running show that is still currently playing.

I Love you, You're Perfect, Now Change was a musical revue that opened at the Westside Theatre in the summer of 1996. The show had an unknown writing team and director. It was such an underdog, that Terry Byrne, the general manager of the Westside Theatre actually looked for alternative shows to line up in the space as she felt there was little commercial viability in the piece.⁶⁵ The show struggled for the first year of its run and held close to its breakeven, sometimes even playing at a loss. The producers believed in the show and after the first long year, the show found its audience and continued to play at the Westside until July of 2008 – for a total of 12 years and over 5,000 performances.⁶⁶ The musical revue was hilarious and sweet, and touched audiences by exploring the many themes associated with romantic relationships.

TOP 15 LONGEST-RUNNING OFF-BROADWAY SHOWS IN HISTORY

The list of commercially successful Off-Broadway shows produced during the '80's and '90's goes on and on – one can see why Off-Broadway seemed to

⁶⁵ Byrne Interview.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

be a gold mine during these decades. The chart⁶⁷ below displays the top 15 longest-running Off-Broadway shows of all time. The shows that are in bold are the ones that opened during Off-Broadway's Golden Age.

Show Name	Run dates	# of Perfs. or years played if # is unavailable
<i>The Fantasticks</i>	5/6/1960 - 1/13/2002	17,162
<i>Perfect Crime</i>	4/18/1987 - present	26 years
<i>Tony n' Tina's Wedding</i>	2/8/1988 - 6/25/2010	22 years
<i>Blue Man Group: Tubes</i>	11/17/1991 - present	21.5 years
<i>Stomp</i>	2/27/1994 - present	19 years
<i>I love you, You're Perfect, Now Change</i>	8/1/1996 - 7/27/2008	5,003
<i>Nunsense</i>	12/12/1985 - 10/16/1994	3,672
<i>The Threepenny Opera</i>	9/20/1955 - 12/17/1961	2,611
<i>The Donkey Show: A Midsummer Night's Disco</i>	8/18/1999 - 7/16/2005	2,496
<i>De La Guarda</i>	6/16/1998 - 9/12/2004	2,475
<i>Forbidden Broadway</i>	5/4/1982 - 8/30/1987	2,332
<i>Little Shop of Horrors</i>	7/27/1982 - 11/1/1987	2,209
<i>Godspell</i>	5/17/1971 - 6/13/1976	2,124
<i>Fuerza Bruta: Look Up</i>	10/24/2007 - present	6.5 years
<i>Gazillion Bubble Show</i>	12/15/2007 - present	6 years

As you can see, 10 of the longest-running 15 shows – or two-thirds – were produced originally in the 80's or 90's, during Off-Broadway's Golden Age. These shows were all very different in content, so there is no formula for what makes an Off-Broadway hit. Instead of asking, why these shows were so

⁶⁷ Unfortunately, unlike Broadway, there is no one single source to find out information such as the longest-running shows Off-Broadway. This chart was pieced together with data from the Off-Broadway database (iobdb.com), sites dedicated to specific shows, and Off-Broadway blogs.

successful – it’s better to ask – What brought people to Off-Broadway? What was it that drew them in?

WHY SOME SHOWS BECAME HITS

Some shows found a niche, which created a steady stream of patrons and made the performances feel less like a play or musical and more like an event. Shows like *Naked Boys Singing* and *The Donkey Show*, although different in content, became staples for Bachelor and Bachelorette parties visiting New York, which helped sustain their long runs. Additionally, shows like *Tony & Tina’s Wedding* had audience participation, and created an atmosphere closer to a party than a theatre.

Another void filled by Off-Broadway through shows like *Stomp*, *De La Guarda*, and *Blue Man group* is that of the non-English speaking tourist. All of these shows use music, dance, or non-verbal performance to tell the story, explore themes, and dazzle their audiences. It’s no wonder that two of these three shows are still running and all three of them have toured the world. While all of these commercial success stories have very different content in their shows – they do have one thing in common. All of these shows became the new “must-sees” of New York theatre for both residents and visitors. This was primarily due to the fact that they were all “off the beaten path” compared to a traditional Broadway show. *De La Guarda* didn’t even have seats for the audience members. The performers danced and catapulted off of the walls above the audience’s head and forced its spectators to find their best vantage

point and thusly create their own unique experience. These untraditional events created a feeling of danger and the sense that one was seeing something truly unique.

Blue Man Group, although seemingly mainstream now because of the wide reach of its tours, is at its essence a performance art group. *Blue Man Group* utilizes everyday objects to create bizarre music and theme-based scenes, and uses audience participation to create an environment, rather than simply a setting. *Naked Boys Singing*, like its name suggests, guaranteed full frontal to every paying customer – which has certainly never before been tried on Broadway, and would most likely not work on Broadway. These are the extreme examples of how different some of Off-Broadway was from Broadway in the '80's and '90's.

Off-Broadway also had many long-running plays that were less about a new or exciting form and solely about the high quality content, which included fantastic writing, memorable performances, and superior production values. Long-running plays such as *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Fool for Love*, and *Steel Magnolias*, received critical acclaim and substantial runs. Although the shows varied in content, nothing felt “cookie cutter” Off-Broadway and the range of works that could be seen during this time period was staggering.

Off-Broadway at this point, not only saw megahits and sky-high profits, but it also established itself as the place to see groundbreaking work. Additionally, the production values were higher than in decades past, so quality remained

integral – both in the commercial world and in non-profits. More and more audience members were discovering the allure of Off-Broadway and the range of the work presented during this time was very diverse.

NON-PROFIT THEATRE DURING THE 1980's AND '90's

As these independent shows thrived in the world of commercial Off-Broadway, the non-profit theatre scene was also growing in size, relevance, and clout. Companies like New York Theatre Workshop, The Public Theater, Roundabout Theatre Company, Playwrights' Horizons, and Lincoln Center Theater were growing exponentially and producing full seasons consisting of four to six shows a year, and sometimes more. It seemed non-profit theatres had laid their groundwork and were enjoying prosperity as well during these decades. Grant money and foundation funds were flowing and the general economic upturn later in this period helped stimulate individual donors. Because of this balance of a prosperous commercial scene and the thriving non-profit theatre environment, Off-Broadway theatre saw a plethora of wide-ranging productions and was able to provide thousands of theatre makers and actors a decent wage with benefits – and brought thousands of high quality productions to a wide and diverse audience.

Off-Broadway to Broadway transfers continued to be a very popular and profitable producing model during these decades. Many long-running shows (over 500 performances) originated Off-Broadway in either a commercial run or from a non-profit institutional theatre. *Torch Song Trilogy* and *The Heidi*

Chronicles are two examples of plays that started Off-Broadway and were transferred to Broadway for runs of over 500 performances.⁶⁸ Additionally, musicals like *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Sunday in the Park with George*,⁶⁹ and *Rent* started in non-profit Off-Broadway theatres and were moved to Broadway. This producing model – specifically the one involving a non-profit Off-Broadway show moving to Broadway for a commercial run, is no longer a trend but a common practice in New York. There are pros and cons to this model as will be discussed in future chapters; however, it has changed the New York City theatrical landscape.

Off-Broadway was really the place for plays – more than Broadway, certainly – and new plays and playwrights thrived in the non-profit institutional theatres. New plays were seen as too risky for Broadway and although there were long- running commercial Off-Broadway plays, for the most part the longest-running productions that commercially ran Off-Broadway were musicals, revues, or event productions, similar to those mentioned in the previous section. Some of the long-running plays that had commercial runs started Off-Broadway in non-profit houses. The shows that enjoyed success in these institutions could be transferred to a commercial Off-Broadway house, such as the Minetta Lane Theatre or the Lortel Theatre in the West Village. This was another way in which the commercial and the non-profit Off-Broadway worlds maintained a symbiotic relationship and worked in tandem to support the work itself.

⁶⁸ Sheward 279 & 309.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Pg. 293-294 & 288-290.

CHAPTER 3: THE IMPORTANCE OF OFF-BROADWAY

Commercial Off-Broadway brought many more benefits to the city than just another entertainment outlet. During its Golden Age in the '80's and '90's, Off-Broadway brought prosperity not only to the producers and investors of big hits, but to many hired by the professional theatrical community. Off-Broadway employed thousands of actors, designers, directors, and writers. Thanks to Actors' Equity Association, the Association of Press Agents and Managers (ATPAM), and the Society of Directors and Choreographers, who all had contracts with the commercial Off-Broadway houses, most of these union-affiliated artists were able to make a living wage while working under an Off-Broadway contract. (It should be mentioned that ATPAM had a contract with Off-Broadway until 2006 when the Off-Broadway League and ATPAM could not find a resolution to their Collective Bargaining Agreement and came to an impasse.)⁷⁰ For some of the writers, designers, and directors fortunate enough to work on hugely profitable Off-Broadway shows, the long runs provided sustainable income and gave them the freedom to pursue passion projects and shows with less commercial viability.

In addition to providing a decent, steady wage for many artists and managers, Off-Broadway created a rich training ground for young and emerging theatre practitioners. Not all artists want to work on Broadway; however, many move to New York and aspire to work in a Broadway house at some point in their career. Commercial Off-Broadway gives these artists a chance to “test the

⁷⁰ Hess Interview.

waters” in a tangible way. This is true of Off-Broadway in the past and today. While Off-Broadway budgets are usually substantially smaller than a Broadway budget, typically a good deal of money is funneled into the production elements of a commercial Off-Broadway show (as compared to an Off-Off Broadway show or a small non-profit show) and thusly, artists can dream big. Even with this fact, the capitalizations for Off-Broadway are far less than for Broadway, for a variety of reasons from vastly lower rents than Broadway to lower minimums for AEA actors and SDC directors and choreographers to greatly reduced advertising budgets. With less money on the line for investors, young and emerging producers are more likely to take a chance Off-Broadway than on. More importantly, these young producers could have more of a say in an Off-Broadway show, whereas they would most likely get lost in the background of a Broadway production because of their lack of experience or lack of access to funds. And as an Off-Broadway house is still substantial in size, a composer, designer, director, or actor can see more clearly if their work would translate to a bigger scale.

Additionally, those newer to the industry might be given a shot Off-Broadway, while they may not be chosen on Broadway. A lesser known actor for example with a lot of talent but less experience, may be given a lead role in an Off-Broadway musical, while this would be less likely to happen on Broadway, where casting directors might prefer someone who has been previously “tested” or is more widely known to the theatergoing audience. The same can be said for managers and administrators that work Off-Broadway. Since there are fewer

unions with domain over Off-Broadway, an individual wanting to jump a into company manager career track for example, could be given the chance to do so Off-Broadway, where she does not have to be part of the union. She could then transition to Broadway after gathering more experience, and subsequently gain a well-paying and fulfilling career in theatre. While managers may still have a shot at starting their careers Off-Broadway, the process of hiring emerging designers, directors, and actors is likely to happen less and less, as Off-Broadway budgets are expanding and thusly rely on proven talent. Producers wanting to raise money for their productions, may feel they need to hire a more experienced creative team in order to satisfy the insecurities of their investors. While there is nothing wrong with hiring talented people with a long resume, part of Off-Broadway's task has always been to find and showcase the new and emerging talent. Hiring new talent also gives the emerging artists a shot at making a living at their craft.

Off-Broadway also served and serves a role to its audiences. The material Off-Broadway is more daring as there is less money at risk and fewer seats to fill each night. It also provides a space to be more provocative and shocking, as Off-Broadway has been established as the reaction to Broadway – something darker or more risqué. Importantly though, it is the size of the house that creates a totally different environment for the work and thusly for the viewer. Terry Byrne best describes this unique experience that many believe only Off-Broadway can provide,

We're always going to come back to the fact that [Off-Broadway] is the richest environment that there can be – for plays. There's no better soil -- more fertile soil – for a play to work in – than these kind of intimate houses that we have....That intimacy of the houses that experience for the audience is unlike any other – Broadway kind of can't compete with it.⁷¹

Chris Burney, the Associate Artistic Director of Second Stage Theatre, agrees that one of the roles of Off-Broadway is to serve as a “training ground for writers to hone their voice, for directors to perfect their craft, for designers to understand the effects of what they're designing on the work that's being done.”⁷²

He believes it goes far beyond that. It even goes beyond the creation of a more intimate theatrical viewing experience – it's also very much about the work itself.

Chris elaborates on this by stating,

It's the place where audiences can find the stories and ideas that both support their worldviews and challenge their worldviews in a more immediate way. The role of Off-Broadway should always be to say something specific...it's that kind of direct connection that is its responsibility.⁷³

A professional training ground for artists, independent producers, and managers, a viable source of income for commercially successful Off-Broadway creators and investors, and an intimate and unique experience for its audience members for long-running shows, and of course the *type of work itself* – these are all important roles that commercial Off-Broadway has served and can serve – and are worth saving. They are worth saving, because although the theatre community in New York City is vast and varied, there are very few spaces where new and risky work can be done with the high-production values, as in an Off-

⁷¹ Byrne Interview.

⁷² Chris Interview.

⁷³ Ibid.

Broadway venue. And although the theatre around the country has grown, New York City is still the center of the theatrical world, and the work that is being done here has a ripple effect to the rest of the country – and beyond. Critically acclaimed shows that start Off-Broadway have, and do, tour the country and even the world. This not only creates an income stream for the creators of the work, but it influences the rest of the theatrical world. The more high-quality, thoughtful, intelligent, and thrilling work that can be done Off-Broadway, the more audiences will find a reason to get there – and the further the work will reach. This has been the case in years past on Off-Broadway, and it can be so again with the right new talent, creative producers, and managers.

CHAPTER 4: WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE PAST 13 YEARS?

When posed with the question “Is commercial Off-Broadway less financially viable now than it was in the ‘80’s and ‘90’s?” most of the producers and managers interviewed for this paper answered with a resounding “Yes!” And all agreed that at the least it *seemed* more difficult now. However, the issue of why is a lot more convoluted, and there are a multitude of potential answers. So we first have to ask, what happened? What has changed in less than a decade and a half that has created an atmosphere that is – or at least seems like – a far less welcoming one for commercial Off-Broadway producers? The short answer is, a lot. There are some practical and more apparent reasons and there are some less obvious changes. There are also some myths that are used as reasons, but are hard, if not impossible, to prove. Let’s start with the more practical examples, as they are easier to confirm and the simplest to understand in terms of their impact on the Off-Broadway terrain. Analysis, counter arguments, and justifications will be provided, as we consider each change.

NUMBER AND TYPE OF VENUES

One obvious but important difference has been the amount of theatres available to Off-Broadway producers. Since 1999, nearly a dozen commercial Off-Broadway houses have closed their doors – either to theatre or they have been demolished to make way for new development. The list of Off-Broadway theatres that have closed includes the Gramercy Theatre (2004), the Lamb’s Theatre (2007), the Variety Arts Theatre (2004), the Douglas Fairbanks (2005),

the original Circle in the Square Theatre (2004), the Promenade Theatre (2008), the John Houseman Theatre (2005), The Actors Playhouse (very recently renovated into a high-end nightclub), The Century Center for the Performing Arts, and the Sullivan Street Playhouse (the original home of *The Fantasticks* – torn down for luxury condos in 2005). In addition to these destroyed theatres, in 1999, the much-loved Lucille Lortel Theatre (formerly known as the Theater De Lys) was given over to the Lucille Lortel Foundation. This transaction ensured that the Lortel would only be rented by non-profit theatres; barring future commercial runs.⁷⁴ Remember, the Theater De Lys was the home of Off-Broadway's first long running hit, *The Threepenny Opera*. This managerial shift was a big loss, as the Lortel was thought to be one of the best commercial Off-Broadway houses. The Lortel, along with the rest of the theaters, bring the tally of commercial Off-Broadway houses lost to 11. Even for New York City, the city with more theatres per capita than any other place in America, 11 theatres is a substantial loss. To put it in perspective, it's the equivalent of 27.5 percent of Broadway houses being closed.

Additionally, the history in those theatres was significant and their demise degrades the historical importance of Off-Broadway. Broadway theatres are now protected as historical landmarks and cannot be demolished or utilized for any other purpose other than live theatrical performance. The newer theatres that have been built Off-Broadway, both commercial houses and non-profit houses, can't compare with the older spaces in old world charm and the sense of history

⁷⁴ "Lucille Lortel Theatre History."

one feels when she walks through the old doors. Charles Isherwood agrees and mentioned this in his article from March 2012 in *The New York Times*.

And an element in the appeal of the grander Broadway theaters, after all, is the history of prior performances that you feel has seeped into the spaces themselves. There's no reason the same shouldn't hold true for Off Broadway theaters.⁷⁵

There have been new theatres built in the past 13 years and it's worth delving into this further – but it's not a simple equation of how many theatres were left plus the new theatres that have been built. An article in *The New York Times* from 2007 mentioned some of these new theatres and reported feedback from the theatrical community regarding the spaces.⁷⁶ The new commercial Off-Broadway theatres that have been built since this time include the New World Stages complex (which contains five Off-Broadway venues and was originally called *The Dodgers*), *The Little Shubert*, *37 Arts*, *The Snapple Theater*, and *Theatre Row* (which houses one theater over 99 seats and four Off-Off Broadway theaters).

The *37 Arts* complex was built during the surge of new construction in 2000, but no longer exists as an Off-Broadway space, as the owners could not make the numbers fly after the space's 23 million dollar renovation.⁷⁷ The three-theater complex was created as a venue for both non-profit and commercial Off-Broadway productions, in hopes of expanding the scope of Off-Broadway.

Although, the space housed several positively reviewed productions, it could not

⁷⁵ Isherwood "For Off-Broadway Theater, the Perils of Prosperity."

⁷⁶ Robertson "As Off-Broadway Changes, Some Venerable Theatres Vanish."

⁷⁷ David "Off Broadway's Frontier Outpost Runs on Dreams"

meet its high overhead and was bought by the Baryshnikov Arts Center (a previous tenant) and the Orchestra of St. Luke's in 2008.⁷⁸ The space has since been renamed and is the full-time space for the Baryshnikov Arts Center, a non-profit that focuses primarily on dance.

Even with the new construction, more independent, commercial Off-Broadway theatres have been demolished than built in the last 13 years. More importantly, however, the newer theatres in general are much larger and have higher overheads. The costs of these new spaces due to the size of the theaters and real estate costs associated with newer development, make these theatres a lot pricier than their older and now deceased counterparts.⁷⁹ The majority of new Off-Broadway houses that have been built in NYC in the last 13 years have actually been non-profit theatres, and although commercial producers can rent these houses, their first purpose is to be utilized by and for non-profit productions. Because of the higher rental prices and need for producers to sell more tickets to fill out these newer theatres, it's easier to understand why the new theatres built do not create a one to one equation for the Off-Broadway theatres that have been torn down.

Fewer theatres mean several things – but firstly they mean more competition for Off-Broadway producers and potentially higher prices for the houses still left. The destruction of some of the more historically important theatres also sends a message to the theatrical community that the theatres

⁷⁸ Jones "Theatres of Off-Broadway's 37 Arts Now Owned by Baryshnikov and Orchestra of St. Luke's."

⁷⁹ Robertson "As Off-Broadway Changes, Some Venerable Theatres Vanish."

aren't worth saving. At the least, it says that a condo is more valuable to the city than a theatre that housed the original production of *The Fantasticks*. And in terms of revenue, a new condo development probably is worth more to the city than an old Off-Broadway house, but these theatres can't be measured in dollar signs alone. Some of them are as integral to the fabric of New York City's history as any other significant landmark.

Having fewer theaters give producers less options for a show that might have had the chance to run commercially Off-Broadway in the past. As Jeffrey Shubart recounts, that in today's climate – Off-Broadway producers that 20 years ago would have moved their play to a commercial Off-Broadway venue like the Lortel, now eye Broadway as the best place to turn a profit and find an audience. And to make it work on Broadway, they usually have to find a star that is willing to do it, as this is seen as the only way to really make a hit on Broadway with a play – a whole other artistic dilemma facing plays.⁸⁰ Attempting an open-ended run Off-Broadway is being seen less and less as a viable option for a show, as there are simply fewer theatres where one can make the numbers work.

ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

A very tangible shift that has also occurred with both measurable and immeasurable effects is the September 11th terrorist attack in New York City. In an interview with commercial Off-Broadway producer and manager of the Barrow Street Theatre, Scott Morfee stated that he believes the pinnacle of Off-Broadway

⁸⁰ Shubart Interview.

was the year 1999. This was pre-September 11th 2001, which Mr. Morfee attributes to the change in the theatrical terrain.

I think the height of Off-Broadway was 1999, which is pre-911. I think Off-Broadway was starting to feel a bit of a pinch before that, so when that happened, I think the pinch became very severe. And that forever changed the landscape – because a couple of things happened. People had to make big decisions – like if they were going to stay committed to their shows during that time – with no audience. And the world of discounting became really aggressive. Actually discounting a show is probably one of the single biggest things that happened [because of September 11th]. We sort of built our own monster. So what happens now is you have a higher price point but with a million discounts; whereas in the old day, the discount price were the preview [performances].⁸¹

Scott Morfee is not the only one to believe that September 11th changed the theatrical landscape in New York. Besides discounting – which we will address later, many shows had to close their doors after the tragedy. As audiences thinned out in the weeks after September 11th, some shows could not afford the major dip in ticket sales and weather that storm. Even shows with stellar reviews like *Tick, Tick...Boom!*, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Abridged)*, and *Bat Boy* could not hold out under the lack of ticket sales and were forced to close.⁸² Broadway suffered losses as well, and several large productions on the Great White Way closed quickly after the attacks.⁸³ Ticket sales have a clear and direct effect as they make or break a commercial production. The reasons for a venue closing are far more complicated; however,

⁸¹ Morfee Interview.

⁸² Pogrebin “How Broadway Theatre Bounced Back After 9/11; But Downtown Theatre Lacked the Right Ties.”

⁸³ Ibid.

one could surmise that the low ticket sales for many Off-Broadway shows in the months following the attack added to the immediacy of the theatre closings.

In addition to the physical changes to the Off-Broadway landscape, there was also a change in the psychology of the city after the tragedy – and this applies to Broadway, Off-Broadway, non-profit theatres, and all the rest of live entertainment in New York City. Immediately following September 11th and for years after, audiences stopped buying tickets as far in advance as they did prior to the tragedy. This is generally thought to have happened because the event made people feel less sure of what the future would hold, so they did not see the point in buying ahead of time. This is a far harder point to prove, but has been discussed by many theatre professionals, especially managers who keep a constant eye on theatrical grosses.

While this event arguably changed theatre in New York forever, one major difference between the responses to Broadway's post-911 problems versus Off-Broadway's was government support, advertising, and funding. A major marketing campaign and ticket buying initiative funded by local and state governments totaling over five million dollars went into effect in the months following September 11th.⁸⁴ If this kind of money and energy had been given to Off-Broadway producers, hypothetically it's plausible that at least some of the shows closed during this time period could have been saved. Regardless, this move sent a message to theatre makers that Broadway theatre is the only

⁸⁴ Pogrebin "How Broadway Theatre Bounced Back After 9/11; But Downtown Theatre Lacked the Right Ties."

theatre worth saving – despite the fact that Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway bring millions of dollars in revenue to the city and entertain millions of people each year.

RISING COSTS OF PRODUCING

The increase in cost of producing a commercial Off-Broadway production, especially over the past 13 years, is another common perception. This is not completely a myth. As outlined in the most recent Off-Broadway Agreement, the salary for an actor in the highest seating capacity theatres has been raised by over 27 percent since 2001. And in this same time period, the health payments have nearly doubled.⁸⁵ But costs have gone up on all fronts. The idea that the costs have risen enough to create an environment that makes Off-Broadway financially unfeasible is a stretch, especially with rising top-tier ticket prices. It's a stretch to pin *all* of the blame on this. If this were the case, all theatre would be suffering, as costs have gone up – especially on Broadway. Rising costs are a part of the problem, however, and the spikes in production can't be overlooked or brushed off entirely. To flesh out the idea of rising costs, let's hear from a highly experienced producer who has worked both Off-Broadway and on, and in the commercial and non-profit worlds.

Robyn Goodman, producer of *Avenue Q*, which is currently running at the commercial Off-Broadway space in New World Stages, believes it to be a mix of things that have created the rough waters for commercial producers. And she remembers how it used to be,

⁸⁵ From \$90/week to \$170/week – “Actors’ Equity Association Off-Broadway Rulebook.”

We were just talking about, Gordon [Edelstein] and I, of all the plays that we saw Off-Broadway – *Dinner with Friends*, *Three Tall Women*, all these wonderful plays when we were younger, when we just came to New York, that could work economically – that can no longer work. And it's probably for a series of reasons. Probably the union fees have gone up, probably the theatre fees have gone up, marketing fees have gone up – everything's gone up. And it's sad – I mean it's not sad, because there are all kinds of non-for-profit theatres that are doing them now and that's great. But for them to move - to Broadway - they have to have a star – unless they get over the top reviews, which doesn't happen [that often] – and even then it's hard. Because what - two and a half – three million? I raised two and a half million - but it's three now. And I think it's a loss"⁸⁶

Notice one thing Ms. Goodman doesn't mention here. She doesn't mention that an Off-Broadway show – even one started in an non-profit institution – could be transferred to a commercial Off-Broadway house as another tactic to keep a successful show running, as mentioned by Jeffrey Shubart. Perhaps that's because her assumptions about cost of producing commercially Off-Broadway are right, or perhaps it's the lack of space; most likely it's a combination.

HIGHER COSTS EQUAL LESSER PROFITS

General manager Terry Byrne echoes these challenges, but adds that it's not just the higher costs that automatically make it harder to raise the money – it's also the fact that these costs make the profit stream less substantial than it used to be. That seems like an obvious counterbalance to the higher costs of production; however, it's an intelligent issue to bring up. If the upside doesn't seem as high as it used to be, investors might not see the point in putting their money into an Off-Broadway production – even if they believe it is more likely to become a success. "I just don't think it's enough [profit] for people when it's a hit

⁸⁶ Goodman Interview.

Off-Broadway anymore.”⁸⁷ If the project is less about passion and more about profits, Broadway would seem the likelier candidate, as if it hits on Broadway, the money is much more substantial than Off-Broadway – especially the Off-Broadway of today. Additionally some investors are more interested in Broadway, because of the status that comes with it. Some of these investors may be “Tony happy,” looking for the best chance to claim they were part of a Tony-Award winning play or musical, something that an Off-Broadway show can’t offer. This conundrum may also push a producer to create a show that’s bigger in scale just so that she can get her show to Broadway. The Achilles heel in this point however is the type of investor that typically comes to Off-Broadway. Even more so than Broadway, most investors chose to put their money into an Off-Broadway show because of their passion for the material and the importance they see in it being produced. This is a harder point to prove, but most accomplished producers, when asked about this issue for this paper, agreed that investors aren’t really hindered from investing when they know there is only a small chance of getting their full investment back – and an even smaller chance of making a substantial profit. This makes sense, as we know Broadway also has a low recoupment rate, and yet investors still put their money in time and time again.

LOSS OF PLAYWRIGHTS TO OTHER MEDIA

Another thing that has changed in the recent past, according to Robyn Goodman, is our loss of quality playwrights to other media, like television and

⁸⁷ Byrne Interview.

film, which pay much higher rates.⁸⁸ Similar to the costs of production going up, this idea has the ring of truth. Theatre loses great writers to film and TV; however, this loss is not a new occurrence. In an article from the New York Times, the first line desperately pleads, “Where are the new playwrights?” It continues,

Gifted writers have turned to other fields because they refuse to plunge into the theatrical jungle. But there are those whose natural bent is for the stage, and somehow they must find the courage to continue. The theatre needs them desperately and will yet find the way to welcome them. Off-Broadway has done a little to make room for the newcomer, but like Broadway most of it is haphazard and discontinuous.⁸⁹

Just to drive the point home of this being a long-standing struggle, that article was printed April 2, 1961.

One could argue that the level of quality in television is much higher and more sophisticated than it was considered in the ‘90’s and because of this more and more writers are flocking to the higher paying, more stable jobs in Hollywood, where they still have the chance to write for creatively compelling shows. As Ms. Goodman simply states, “TV is better than theatre now.”⁹⁰ Many agree, but the number of writers that are lost now as opposed to 20 years ago just because TV is better cannot be substantial enough to bring one type of producing to its knees. It is a reality of the theatrical world, however, that theatre does not and cannot pay the high fees of Hollywood; this is a line that is repeated again and again by those in the professional theatrical community. Many younger playwrights like

⁸⁸ Goodman Interview.

⁸⁹ Taubman “Talent, Anyone?”

⁹⁰ Goodman Interview.

Adam Rapp and Carly Mensch believe writing for TV only helped the quality of their playwriting and don't see an issue with working on both coasts.⁹¹ In this multimedia world, it only makes sense to take advantage of any type of paid creative work, whether it is a web-series or a limited-run play Off-Broadway. And if TV work can provide a living wage for a playwright, why would that be a bad thing? I think it is more likely to assume that we lose more playwrights to poverty and their inability to survive on small wages than we do to TV and film. If writers want to write a play, they usually come back to write for the theatre.

DISCOUNTING AND THE VALUE OF THEATRE

Discounting and the rampant shift towards dozens of discount codes for a single show – is a difficult thing to pin as a direct result of one incident. As Scott Morfee stated, he believes discounting was a direct result of Sept 11th. One could also more easily trace it back to the rise in Internet usage and the fact that by the year 2000, nearly 42 percent of American households had at least one personal computer in their home with Internet access.⁹² This figure was nearly double what it had been in 1998.⁹³ The last census in 2010 demonstrated that 71 percent of American households are wired.⁹⁴ This rapid shift didn't just change the way we share and receive information, but it also completely changed the way Americans shop. As Chris Burney states,

It's not that the producing model has changed, unfortunately – it's that the consumer habits have changed. And it's not that the consumer habits

⁹¹ Zinoman "Playwrights Shuttle to TV and Back."

⁹² "Home Computers and Internet Use in the United States: August 2000."

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ "Fact of the Day #94: 20 Percent of American Household Don't Have Internet Access."

have changed just with art or with theatre. They've changed sort of globally with any product. And the commodification of art has become so much more rampant as a result of how consumer-buying habits have shifted, so theatre has had to respond over time.

And one way theatre responded is with discounting. There is now a separate code for every direct mail piece, flyer, and radio spot. Jeffrey Shubart notes that because of the omniscience of the Internet, today's consumers are far savvier and know to shop around for the better deal on any product – including their entertainment.⁹⁵ With sites like Broadwaybox.com, which publishes discount codes targeted for a certain demographic, and Groupon, users can search for the best deals Off-Broadway and take advantage of shows looking for new audiences.

Discounting, which has affected Broadway as well, has significant impacts, with pros and cons. One of the pros that Jeffrey Shubart mentioned was the advantage discounting brings to producers. Shows that might normally be “papering” or giving away free tickets to get audience can now at least make a partial profit. This practice could be seen more as a marketing effort than anything and can give producers a new tactic to tap audience members in order to spread the word of mouth. Indeed, some theatres use flash sales websites like Groupon, LivingSocial, and GiltCity and factor the losses they take on tickets as part of their marketing budgets.⁹⁶ There are negative impacts as well, however, and this gets us into the territory of the less obvious changes that have occurred over the past 13 years: the value of art.

⁹⁵ Shubart Interview.

⁹⁶ Hess Interview.

As Broadway ticket prices have continuously increased and the invention of premium tickets has altered what the richest of the rich are willing to pay for the best seats on Broadway, Off-Broadway has maintained a steady average ticket price. Although top tickets are higher than ever Off-Broadway, discounting has kept the average ticket price hovering in the same five-dollar range for the past decade.⁹⁷ Reported in Crain's in 2010, the average Off-Broadway ticket price was just \$37.50, while the average Broadway ticket was \$80.⁹⁸ However, the top ticket price without discounting for Off-Broadway can hover around the same price as a lower-priced Broadway ticket.⁹⁹ Many producers believe that this lack in discrepancy leads to audience members, unaware of discount sites, to buy a less desirable seat for a Broadway show instead of paying the top-tier price for Off-Broadway, as they think they are getting more bang for their buck with the Broadway show.¹⁰⁰ As the cost of production has risen, profits have shrunk for Off-Broadway, and this feeds back into the argument that a commercial Off-Broadway show is just too expensive to mount. The problem isn't just one of profits though – it's also a psychological one. Chris Burney believes there are some serious negative implications to getting a discounted or free ticket.

We live in a consumerist, capitalist country. As much as [some institutional theatre directors] would like to make us a socialist, communist utopia (which I realize is an oxymoron), we're so far away from that. So, I don't think people see free art as an

⁹⁷ Hess Interview.

⁹⁸ Souccar "Brand-new theaters planned for Off-Broadway."

⁹⁹ Gordon "Off Broadway survival tactics."

¹⁰⁰ Goodman Interview.

entitlement...they see it as a “deal” – as an opportunity. And it doesn’t feel empowering. It feels like “Look what I got!”¹⁰¹

This quote came out of a conversation about the non-profit Off-Broadway theatrical institution, The Signature Center and their \$25 ticket initiative, but the sentiment may hold true for commercial theatergoers as well. Marketing material with discount codes are generally directed to people who already attend the theatre. If people who regularly attend Off-Broadway shows and who would normally pay for theatre are simply receiving a discount, this undercuts the value of the work itself. “It’s shifting the perception of what we do is worth¹⁰²” and this is a difficult if not impossible challenge to overcome. Chris Burney goes on to describe inner city youth who may have low incomes but will pay upwards of \$200 for a pair of sneakers. This phenomenon is in affect primarily because the high-end sneaker industry created a value for their product and a demand for it simultaneously. They don’t mail a flyer to a potential buyer offering them the chance to be both the first person to buy the shoe and receive a discount. They place a premium for their product. Producers believe theatre lovers now expect a discount and there is no premium for being the first to see a new show. No one interviewed sees this trend as changing now or ever. As Scott Morfee mentioned earlier, when it comes to theatre discounting, we’ve created our own monster.

The problem with the discounting argument serving as a reason for Off-Broadway’s slow demise is that shows with a large following don’t have to discount – or at least not regularly. Sure, almost all shows create a discount

¹⁰¹ Burney Interview.

¹⁰² Ibid.

code for previews in an attempt to build an advance and grow an early audience base to create word of mouth or to fill out audiences during the slow weeks, but shows that find their following don't need 50 discount codes. As was stated throughout the interview process by many producers and managers, if people don't want to see a show – you can't make them. No amount of discount codes will convince someone to see a show that doesn't speak to him or her.

THE FINANCIAL COLLAPSE IN 2008

Another immeasurable, yet critical change of the recent past is the financial crash of 2008. Called “the worst financial crisis, since the Great Depression,”¹⁰³ the crash of multiple industries rippled outwards and has affected nearly every American in some capacity. Chris Burney, the Associate Artistic Director at Second Stage Theatre, one of New York's leading non-profit theatrical institutions, has considered deeply the affect of the financial crash on theatre in the U.S., as well as other entertainment.

You can't look at the theatre – professionally – the theatre community in an isolated way. You have to look at it globally – or at least nationally....Obviously with the financial crumble in 2008....all of the bubbles that were bursting are very clear because they're global. So we understand how the Internet sector burst, the financial markets burst, the real estate markets burst, the car industry burst -- 'cause those have much broader impacts. I think what no one is really thinking about is how the arts world has burst – how live-entertainment has burst. And we're also suffering or still trying to regroup from living beyond our means – trying to rescale what our community obligations are – and just the financial reality we can live under. And then you couple that with the way our audiences have changed their buying habits, the kind of entertainment they want, the kind of entertainment available to them. It's just kind of a perfect storm. So for me, it's not shocking, we're just part of everything else that is

¹⁰³ Holland “Obama: U.S. in worst crisis since Depression.”

crumbling. And I think if you look at it in an isolated way – I don't think you'll find a path to stability in the future.¹⁰⁴

Any intelligent theatre maker understands that the economy has a huge impact on the arts, especially funding. However, the psychological shift that occurred after the financial crisis in 2008 -- and the realization that many Americans were living far beyond their means, altered many people's priorities. When homes are foreclosed, theatre and the arts in general are knocked to the bottom of the list of concerns (and rightfully so). As the economy rebuilds and strengthens, we as theatre professionals shouldn't be asking how we can make more art in this time of rebuilding – we should be asking, how can we make theatre that truly speaks to people?

DECREASING IMPORTANCE OF THEATRE IN AMERICA

The final change in the landscape is the least easy to prove or demonstrate: the decreasing demand for theatre. In the last 13 years alone the variety of entertainment outlets, mainly due to new technologies, has skyrocketed. Netflix, Hulu, HBO GO, Video on Demand and DVR have revolutionized the way we watch TV and movies by creating an affordable and super convenient way for most Americans to see nearly any film or show they want – whenever they want. While this has been happening, studies have shown that fewer people attend live theatrical events than they did 20 years ago.¹⁰⁵ It's not a pretty picture and definitely not a truth that the theatre community wants to face.

¹⁰⁴ Burney Interview.

¹⁰⁵ NEA study reference on page 61

The elephant in the room that no one talks about is – there is decreased demand for what we are creating. And yet at the same time, there is more work being created...If you look at any consumer model, it's all about supply and demand and we are engaged in a somewhat losing battle – where demand is going down – I'm not saying it's precipitously – but...clearly if you talk to any of the subscription based houses, subscribers have been ticking down and yet we are generating more and more work. There are more theatres doing work consistently – so the gap keeps widening.¹⁰⁶

The “elephant in the room” is certainly something no one in the theatrical community wants to think about, but it must be addressed. Theatre is becoming less and less tied to our culture and our means of expression. This does not have to continue. The death of theatre is not imminent...yet, but the chances of it returning to the central form of popular entertainment are close to zero. We can make a shift and reestablish theatre as an exciting, viable, and relevant form of entertainment – and Off-Broadway is the perfect area to do it, but first we have to face the beast head on and decide not only what we're worth – but *what is worth saving*.

¹⁰⁶ Burney Interview.

CHAPTER 5: THE FINANCIALS OF OFF-BROADWAY TODAY

In exploring the myth that “commercial Off-Broadway is dead,” we have to explore the financials of Off-Broadway. The numbers are really the crux of the myth, as they are what can deter producers and investors alike from taking the plunge. Producer Ken Davenport wrote about this in late 2012, stating that by his count only six or seven commercial Off-Broadway shows have recouped in the past 15 years, and that it’s because producing now is harder than it was in the late 1990’s.¹⁰⁷ This number has been disputed by those with access to more reliable numbers, such as Jeffrey Shubart of the Off-Broadway League and the Lortel Awards. However, it is an elite group of producers that can call themselves lucky enough to have turned a profit in their commercial Off-Broadway endeavors of the past few years. The exact percentage of recoupment, while unknown, is generally thought to be even lower than Broadway’s rate of about 30 percent recoupment.¹⁰⁸ Hundreds of shows have been produced since 2000, so regardless of the exact percentage, it is hardly an inspiring statistic.

One of the reasons why it is nearly impossible to obtain financial statistics about Off-Broadway shows is because unlike Broadway, Off-Broadway shows do not have to report grosses, performances played, average ticket prices, or weekly attendance. Most of what is known about Off-Broadway finances is printed in press releases (typically when a show has recouped) or simply by word of mouth

¹⁰⁷ Davenport “It’s a Christmas Miracle - An Off-Broadway Show Recouped.”

¹⁰⁸ Healy “In Twist, Off-Broadway Looms Larger for Hits.”

passed along by industry insiders. The Off-Broadway League has been encouraging producers and managers to report their numbers for the past eight or nine years, but still only about half do¹⁰⁹. These numbers, when reported, remain private and are for use at the sole discretion of the League to measure financial success Off-Broadway – a task made nearly impossible by lack of data. Like Off-Broadway history and information, Off-Broadway financials are shrouded in mystery and remain primarily in the hypotheses and assumptions of those in the business.

Additionally Off-Broadway numbers are in some ways harder to predict than Broadway, because there is no such thing as a standard Off-Broadway capitalization budget. Because Off-Broadway theatres range so vastly in capacity, capability, and quality, rent alone varies largely from theatre to theatre. Additionally, Off-Broadway has collectively bargained contracts with only two of the unions, so there is more room for negotiating when it comes to rates for those not affiliated with Actors' Equity Association or Stage Directors and Choreographers. Broadway budgets tend to have a range, and although they can vary, unless your show is *Spiderman: Turn off the Dark*, you are probably looking at 8-15 million dollars for a musical and 1.5-3.5 million for a play on Broadway. Either way, it's a pretty penny.

Off-Broadway can be a lofty endeavor as well and there are many budgets that break into the seven-figure mark; however, there are also many shows done for much less. Reflect back to the numbers mentioned earlier during the

¹⁰⁹ Shubart Interview.

beginning of commercial Off-Broadway and its first big hits. *The Fantasticks* was produced for a measly \$16,500. That was in 1960, so if you adjust for inflation, the budget would be roughly \$126,000.¹¹⁰ Now that may sound like a lot more, but that is considered a very low budget for Off-Broadway. A show can be produced for that amount, as we'll see, but it's a far less occurrence nowadays. *Silence! the Musical* capitalized for only \$220,000 for the original production at Theater 80. Although *Silence!* is a musical and has a large cast for Off-Broadway, it has a simple set that can be easily moved and changed to transform the space for each scene. Although this is on the lower end for Off-Broadway budgets, this is by no means a small amount of money. And if recoupment rates are as low as Mr. Davenport suggests, creating the most conservative budget possible is the best way to give a new show the chance to find an audience without breaking the bank. This financial tactic allows a show to run longer until it finds its audience, or at least lose less money if its not speaking to an audience. The ability for Off-Broadway budgets to be a lot leaner and more agile is a good thing. This is a huge advantage when juxtaposed with the very high and fixed rates for almost everyone hired for a Broadway production. However, the idea of Off-Broadway being a lot more nimble and agile came up much less frequently in interviews than the notion that it is an epic battle financially.

¹¹⁰ Inflation calculator -

On the other end of Off-Broadway budgets, *Altar Boyz*, Ken Davenport's bible-based musical comedy capitalized for one million dollars.¹¹¹ *Fuerza Bruta*¹¹² (the follow up piece to *De La Guarda*) capitalized for two and a half million dollars. When *Avenue Q* moved to New World Stages to begin its Off-Broadway commercial life, it had a new capitalization of \$800,000.¹¹³ (Keep in mind, the show opened on Broadway in 2003 with a 3.5 million dollar capitalization¹¹⁴). Despite these higher capitalizations, all three of these shows recouped. Unfortunately, they are the exceptions rather than the rule nowadays. We will look at possible reasons why they recouped in the next chapter.

In addition to the wide range of capitalization budgets for Off-Broadway shows, operating budgets are equally diverse. An operating budget (or running-cost budget) is the cost to run the show per week. This budget includes the weekly rent, salaries for actors, stagehands, and managers, rental equipment, insurance, health care and workers' compensation, royalties to designers and directors, and everything else that keeps the lights on and the actors safe for the production. The wide range in operating budgets adds another spoke in the wheel of what makes Off-Broadway a confusing and challenging equation. For example *Fuerza Bruta*, the immersive, dance spectacle has a running-cost of 85 thousand dollars per week. On the other end of the spectrum, *Silence! the*

¹¹¹ Hetrick "Altar Boyz, 80's Prom, and My First Time Recoup Investments."

¹¹² Hess Interview.

¹¹³ Goodman Interview.

¹¹⁴ Gans "Avenue Q to Close in September."

musical had a running-cost budget of 46 thousand dollars, when it was in its original space, playing eight shows a week.

As previously mentioned, the only unions that have binding contracts with Off-Broadway are Actors' Equity Association and the Stage Directors and Choreographers union.¹¹⁵ This is not a recent development and although minimums have steadily increased for actors, directors, and choreographers, there have also been positive changes in the collectively bargained agreements that favor the producers. The Stage Directors and Choreographers union (SDC) seems to especially understand the difficulty of producing Off-Broadway and regionally and wants to enable more productions Off-Broadway. In recent negotiations with SDC and the Off-Broadway League, SDC made concessions to make it easier for productions to move to theatres across the country without paying the former rates to the directors and choreographers, if the shows were being mounted at a theatrical organization that had lower than standard minimums. This practice is common when a non-profit theatre wants a show and would like to have the original director stage the show for them, but cannot afford the fee as defined by the collectively bargained agreement.¹¹⁶ This may not make it easier to mount an Off-Broadway show, necessarily; however, it may tip the scales if the producer is thinking about the full life of the production, which ideally will include runs in other cities.

¹¹⁵ "Off-Broadway League: Labor Agreements."

¹¹⁶ Hess Interview.

Most producers I spoke with did not believe the raise in actor minimums were the breaking point for most Off-Broadway budgets. As Ed Gaynes, a theatre owner, producer, and manager states it bluntly, “Shows close not because they can’t pay the actors. It’s because they can’t keep up with the health payments.”¹¹⁷ He says this is a further problem and frustration as all the money producers pay into the actors’ health care fund – most of which is never seen by the actor they are making payments for, because many actors don’t work enough weeks per year to gain access to employer-paid health coverage.¹¹⁸

All of the producers interviewed for this paper agreed that the unions are not the ones to blame for making it substantially harder to produce Off-Broadway today. While there are disputes that arise about appropriate pay and other issues, no one blamed a union for making it expensive – at least not to the point that they can’t produce their show. Most of those interviewed about this topic spoke highly of the unions and their ability to negotiate with them on concessions and exceptions for their productions.

The issue of space and the type of space available, plays quite directly into the financials as well. Scott Morfee believes the top of the Off-Broadway seat limit is almost impossible to sustain financially. Although that might seem counterintuitive – more seats to sell equals more profit right? He believes 200 is a perfect number for Off-Broadway and is the number where you can “really make things fly.” Billy Russo agrees that the top-tier Off-Broadway houses are so hard

¹¹⁷ Gaynes Interview.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

to fill that if a producer wants to do an Off-Broadway show in a 499-seat house, she “may as well produce it on Broadway.”¹¹⁹ This enables the show to have the added benefits of being on Broadway, such as being eligible for Tony Awards, the clout of being on Broadway, much larger marketing budgets, wider accessibility to investment funds, more potential profit if it’s a hit, and more exposure simply by being on Broadway through the Broadway League’s efforts and other advertising outlets open only to Broadway.¹²⁰ Mr. Morfee believes that although selling around 200 seats a night is no easy task he does not know how to produce commercially Off-Broadway on any other level. He clarifies this point,

I have a 200-seat house right now and I am going to be *lucky* if I fill it up all the time. Let’s assume the next show is a big hit and everybody loves it. The word of mouth is fantastic. It’s like *Tribes* and it’s great...Getting 200 people eight times a week is really hard! So what I believe now, which is what happened since Off-Broadway got whacked a little bit after 9-11 and then after– is that there is only one Off-Broadway that I understand truly – with the exception of New World Stages [and the new model of Broadway to Off-Broadway transfers] – and that’s 200 seats – otherwise, either go down in size – or you’ve got a Broadway show.¹²¹

Scott Morfee’s Barrow Street Theatre happens to be right at 199 seats, so he may be partial due to his own limitations – but he is one of the exceptions to the rule, recouping a \$400,000, 23-person cast of *Our Town* in 2010¹²² and most recently recouping *Tribes* in 2013¹²³. He may have the advantage of managing his own space, but he also knows how to make the number of seats work for him and to how to recoup large, big-budget plays – which in this day and age is no

¹¹⁹ Russo Interview.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Morfee Interview.

¹²² Cox “Our Town makes it into the black.”

¹²³ Morfee Interview.

easy feat. Manager Jill Bowman believes the kind of budgeting that can be done Off-Broadway is where you can get the most creative. She's used her creative budgeting when taking on *Silence! The Musical* and each time it needed to change venues, and thusly shift its running cost budget.

Creating a capitalization budget and a weekly running budget can also be creative in a negative way. Ed Gaynes speaks to this point and calls some of the Off-Broadway budgets "bloated" and "unrealistic."¹²⁴ He believes a lot of these shows could be done for far less money. He believes these huge capitalization and running cost budgets set the show up undoubtedly to fail, because it cannot make its weekly nut and/or raise the initial capitalization. A few of the managers acknowledged that they believe this practice happens and describes those companies or producing entities as "fee happy." These managers are accused of looking out more for their own interests than the shows' potential life and the investors' money. Like Broadway, many Off-Broadway shows never see the light of day. Regardless, managers still get their fee to set up the business entities and do the initial development work, as they should. It is unlikely that there are managers making a career out of simply hiking up prices to turn a profit with no regard for the show, because at some point, these managers would be singled out and put out of business. However it is likely to believe that there are managers who are more liberal with fees for every party involved, and are thinking less about the longevity of the show, possibly because they know it's so difficult to recoup anyway.

¹²⁴ Gaynes Interview.

Another increasingly important, if not vital, financial piece that was talked about by many of the producers and some of the managers interviewed is the role of subsidiary income for Off-Broadway productions. Subsidiary income has always been a part of new plays and musicals in the sense that producers seek future lives for their shows to increase revenue and notoriety. But now more than ever, producers see Off-Broadway runs as a part, not the whole, of the life of their show. Thinking in this way can open up the idea of losses Off-Broadway, since producers could roll these losses into the gains of future productions. Of course, this is just as risky in some ways, because there is no guarantee of future income. Mr. Morfee believes thinking of an Off-Broadway run as only part of a show's life is not only important solely because of the potential income down the line, but for relationship and status building as well.

It's a thing that commercial producers really need to pay attention to – especially new ones...[that] the subsidiary side of things is significant – not to get rich. It's a significant way to boost your profile. So that then the next time you want to go option a play for example – and you think 'Oh I'm young and they're not gonna listen to me and they don't want me to have it.' All of a sudden – you can say, "But I'm the one who did Annie Baker's first play."¹²⁵

While it is difficult to say with any certainty that it is harder now than it was 13 years ago solely based on the finances associated with mounting and running a show, it is most definitely not easier because of the rising costs. This is not something that is likely to change, as costs of everything will continue to steadily increase. However, the glimmer of hope in the financial landscape is the ability

¹²⁵ Morfee Interview.

of producers and managers to think creatively to create more opportunities for the future of their Off-Broadway shows.

CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF NON-PROFIT THEATRE AND OFF-OFF BROADWAY

As we've touched on briefly in previous chapters, the growth of non-profit Off-Broadway theatrical institutions has been significant in the past 13 years. Off-Off Broadway has also continued to grow and thrive in the city using hundreds of small theatres, alternative performance venues, and found spaces. You might ask – can these two entities have a large impact on commercial Off-Broadway if their means to the end of producing are inherently different? Good question. The short answer is a resounding yes – and more than you might think. It is vital to look at both of these producing models not just as competition to commercial Off-Broadway shows, but also as a larger trend for producers and artists to find practical and accessible ways to get their works to an audience. It is also important to look at both entities juxtaposed with commercial Off-Broadway to discover their strengths and weaknesses.

NON-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS IN NYC

First let's start with non-profit theatrical institutions, which have seen a huge growth spurt since 2000, both by the number of companies and the growth of existing companies. This trend doesn't just apply to New York City, either. According to the most recent and in-depth study by the National Endowment of the Arts in 2008, between 1990 and 2005, the number of non-profit theatres in the country doubled.¹²⁶ The NEA called this growth an “unprecedented

¹²⁶ “All America's A Stage: Growth and Challenges in Non-Profit Theatre”

expansion across the United States” while simultaneously reporting that total attendance had dropped by 16 percent since 1992.¹²⁷ The number of non-profits hasn’t been the only change in the landscape or even the largest. Several large non-profit institutions in the city have made big changes to their organizations in size, scale, and impact. Roundabout Theatre acquired two Broadway theatres in the past 13 years: the newly renamed Stephen Sondheim in 2007 and Studio 54, purchased in 2003. Roundabout now has three Broadway houses, the first being the American Airlines purchased in 1998. Manhattan Theatre Club purchased the now-named Samuel J. Friedman Theatre on Broadway in 2001. And in 2008, Second Stage Theatre announced that it had acquired the rights to purchase the Helen Hayes, a Broadway theatre on 44th Street.¹²⁸ Although Second Stage has to wait until the show currently occupying the Hayes, *Rock of Ages*, closes before moving forward, they have every intention of buying the space.¹²⁹ When the transaction goes through, six out of the 40 Broadway houses, or 15 percent, will be controlled by non-profit institutions.¹³⁰

This type of acquisition can be viewed as a huge advantage for these theatre companies, as it gives them a large space with clout and a greater possibility of moving into the commercial world of Broadway, which as we know, has the potential for high revenue. As discussed in chapter 1, non-profits have been transferring shows to Broadway for decades, some with great success.

¹²⁷ “All America’s A Stage: Growth and Challenges in Non-Profit Theatre”

¹²⁸ “Second Stage: About Our Theatres.”

¹²⁹ Burney Interview.

¹³⁰ This number includes Lincoln Center who owns the Vivian Beaumont – the only Broadway theatre outside of the “Broadway Box”

Owning their own theatre does not ensure a direct Broadway transfer if one of their smaller shows does well. However it does give the non-profit institution a better shot at a transfer, as it guarantees a Broadway theatre will be available, as the institution is the theatre owner. The non-profit must still find a commercial producer to partner with before a transfer can be made. If the non-profit transferred a show to a commercial venue without a commercial producer(s), this would be a direct violation of their non-profit status, as a Broadway production is first and foremost a commercial endeavor – and would undermine the non-profit’s basic mission. A non-profit knows which show in its season has the most commercial viability and they partner with an outside producer to do an “enhancement deal.” A producer can also approach a non-profit with a specific show and propose a deal in that direction. An enhancement deal is when a commercial producer raises a large sum of money and brings it to a non-profit in order to “enhance” or help produce a show on a larger scale at a non-profit institution. This money is added to the institution’s budget, and in exchange, the commercial producer obtains the right to a commercial transfer, should they deem it necessary. This process has been going on for decades, however, it has recently been regarded with skepticism, as some institutions seem to be seeking shows *only* for their commercial viability. These enhancement deals and the subsidiary rights (when they occur), create a new and at times substantial income stream for these institutions. Commercial producers can abuse these deals as

well, as producing a show initially at a non-profit is far cheaper than producing it in a commercial house.

Non-profits owning Broadway houses has side effects that are less obvious. For one, it further blurs the line separating non-profit and commercial productions. With the potential high profits for the so-called non-profit companies, it can also put into question each company's mission to create work for their community. As these Broadway theatres have a high overhead, it also has the potential to put the administrative staff in a much more precarious position to decide between artistic integrity and commercial viability. Of course every artistic director wants the shows she selects for a season to be well received, well reviewed, and financially successful; however, at the end of the day, doing work that stays on mission is the name of the game. It's less of a catastrophe when a show fails financially in a non-profit institution, because there are other sources of revenue, such as grants and donations to offset low-ticket sales. If this freedom becomes strained, say by higher overheads or more pressing financial demands, it's possible that the play selection process could be affected greatly.

As an artist, however, working with an Off-Broadway non-profit theatre that owns a Broadway house is appealing as there is a direct path to transferring a show to Broadway. There is also a safety net of producing in the non-profit arena, as if the show doesn't work, an artist still has a chance to see a full scale production and receive feedback from the artistic and administrative staff about adjusting it for future productions. What is really happening here is that the non-

profits with Broadway houses are receiving the benefits of being non-profits (grant/foundation/donation money, tax-exempt status, etc.), but also have the advantage of commercial producers on Broadway (a secured theatre, a potential for high income, etc.). This paradox creates competition for audiences, of course, who have yet another option of high quality work. It also creates competition for new shows and writers, some of who might prefer to work with an institution that owns a Broadway house.

Non-profits haven't just been acquiring Broadway houses over the past two decades. They have also been building their own new, multi-million dollar state of the art theatres. There are at least a dozen new and renovated spaces all over the city, but the best and most impressive example of this trend is the \$66 million Signature Center. The Signature Center went from a small theatre space that housed one theatre with 160 seats to a 70,000 square foot building with three spaces (two theatres at 199 seats and one at 299 seats). These new spaces join theatres like the Claire Tow theatre built by Lincoln Center, The Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre renovated and run by Roundabout, and the massive renovation to the original Public Theater downtown. The new theatres were built to be used, of course; therefore, these giant institutions have established more programming, and this is where the role of commercial Off-Broadway is kicked down another notch. There are more shows and more tickets available to audiences. And to make it all the more difficult, many of the non-profit institutions have lower ticket price options for

students, seniors, and members. To use an example from the same institution, the Signature Center sells every ticket for every performance during a show's initial run for a mere \$25 through a heavily subsidized program.¹³¹ Commercial Off-Broadway can't compete with those prices. Although the idea that they *should* is still one to be pondered.

Nowadays it seems every producer wants to get her show to Broadway. Large non-profit theatres owning Broadway houses doesn't hinder commercial Off-Broadway shows from being produced – at least in theory. But this new blur in the line between commercial and non-profit theatre does create an unlevel playing field. Why would producers interested in creating a commercial hit, be as interested in starting a show cold Off-Broadway in a commercial venue, when they could spend less money and work with a non-profit? And if that non-profit already owns a Broadway house – all the better! Additionally, with more theatres being built by non-profits, more material is needed to fill programming and the race to find great, new plays and musicals is heated.

OFF-OFF BROADWAY'S EFFECTS ON THE THEATRE SCENE

As mentioned, Off-Off Broadway's roots are in the late 1950's, as a reaction to Off-Broadway's growing commercialism. With similar intentions to those that created Off-Broadway, Off-Off-Broadway was created out of a growing frustration to produce theatre on an intimate level without having to spend a fortune to do it. Many experimental theatres grew out of this time period, like the previously mentioned Living Theatre, Café Cino, and The Group Theatre. Many

¹³¹ "Signature Ticket Initiative."

groups were formed and some previously created began to establish themselves as Off-Off-Broadway, after the coining of the term.

Since then, Off-Off Broadway has been steadily growing, maybe because of Off-Broadway's rising costs and lack of space, maybe because of the plethora of young writers who want to be produced, and probably both. According to the New York Innovative Theatre Awards, an organization that celebrates Off-Off-Broadway, they indicate that over 500 Off-Off Broadway companies produce 2,000 productions, represent over 40,000 artists, and serve over 1.5 million audience members per year.¹³² Additionally the NY IT Awards conducted a study on venues and reported that between 2003 and 2008, there were approximately 200 Off-Off-Broadway venues, with 175 of them being used continually – more than the number of Broadway and Off-Broadway houses combined. These two studies are the first formal studies done for Off-Off-Broadway since its inception.

Off-Off-Broadway like Off-Broadway has its own agreement with Equity; however, unlike Off-Broadway, if an Off-Off-Broadway director wants to cast a show with some Equity and some non-Equity actors, he has that option. He can utilize what is called the Showcase Code. Tzipora Kaplan, an experienced Off-Off-Broadway manager, producer, and Jane-of-all-trades says that although the Showcase Code includes many restrictions like a maximum total budget of \$35,000, \$18 max ticket price, and 18 total performances, most Off-Off-Broadway producers tend to use it because it enables them to employ Equity actors for their Off-Off-Broadway shows, which they would otherwise be unable

¹³² "About Off-Off-Broadway." Nyitawards.com

to do.¹³³ These regulations, while seemingly limiting, actually provide a very doable way of producing new and experimental work in a more professional setting. Because of the low budget guidelines and rehearsal hour restrictions, the work tends to vary widely in quality; however, there are many Off-Off-Broadway companies that have gained traction over the past 13 years and are keeping pace with some Off-Broadway companies in terms of quality and number of shows produced. And with new creations such as crowd funding through sites like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, producers have an easier time raising money one dollar at a time from friends and family. In many ways, Off-Off Broadway has completely taken the place of Off-Broadway's original mission from the early 20th century, which sought to produce works not thought of as commercially viable and to present opportunities to emerging artists, producers, and managers.

How does this change the landscape for commercial Off-Broadway? For one thing, Off-Off Broadway adds another layer of competition for audiences. One way this is made possible is by keeping the ticket prices very low, generally speaking. This \$18 price point provides an entertainment option for many younger theatergoers and those willing to take a chance on a new playwright or company. Off-Off-Broadway also gives a producer a very affordable way to develop a new work, which means the budget for the Off-Off-Broadway production could be rolled into development costs for a future production of the same piece. This is a helpful alternative use of Off-Off-Broadway as recouping on a Showcase budget is next to impossible, and again not the point for the

¹³³ Kaplan Interview.

artists of Off-Off-Broadway. In Tzipora Kaplan's experience, she's only worked on one show that came near to raising and earning almost as much as it spent. Like the Off-Broadway of today, the numbers are not promising.

CHAPTER 7: CURRENT TRENDS IN COMMERCIAL OFF-BROADWAY –
WHO IS TRYING SOMETHING NEW AND IS IT WORKING?

It is generally thought that a commercial producer works as an individual. She seeks out material that excites her and approaches artists that she believes will create, design, and generate a production worthy of an enthusiastic audience. She may have a team of people whom she general works with – managers, writers, directors, designers, and the like – but each time she mounts a new show – the piece must be chosen selectively and the team assembled with thought and care. Additionally she has to line up the money from investors for each individual project. She also has to be simultaneously looking for a space that is best suited for the show and then hope the theatre is available and within budget. Then the team must be officially hired, paid initial dues, and management brought on board to follow through on these tasks. And this must all be done before the first rehearsal! Marketing and advertising are then put into place once these items are confirmed through the signing of contracts, which must have to be drafted by a lawyer – or other legally-qualified professional. This “typical” way of doing business presents a lot of obstacles and in some ways it’s a miracle shows get produced at all, when there are this many factors to consider and balance to get a show ready for its first paying audience member. And don’t forget, all of this costs money – money upfront that may never be returned or recouped.

But is this the only way to produce? And more importantly – is it the ONLY way to produce successfully on a commercial level? Let’s put it this way: if that were the case, I might agree with some of the industry insiders who say, “Commercial Off-Broadway is dead.” To find out the answer to this question, though, we have to look at what some are doing in the industry – including seasoned producers, creative theatre owners, and thoughtful managers looking to expand the business potential for their shows.

THE BROADWAY TO OFF-BROADWAY (RE)CYCLE

One new development in the past 13 years Off-Broadway has been the Broadway to Off-Broadway transfer. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, many shows have been transferred from Off-Broadway to Broadway, as they are seen as highly commercial endeavors with the potential for a huge audience proven by their initial success Off-Broadway. However, in the past few years, there have been shows that have done very well on Broadway and played strongly there for years and then subsequently taken a different path upon closing. Like every show, eventually the audience thins out until it is forced to close...or is it? With the new trend of Broadway to Off-Broadway transfers, productions don’t have to die forever when their audiences diminish in size on Broadway and make them no longer financially viable in large houses. They can find a smaller home, sometimes on the same block as their old one. This trend started in 2009 with *Avenue Q*. This show originated Off-Broadway through an enhancement deal with The Vineyard Theatre and independent commercial producers Kevin

McCollum and Robyn Goodman. When it transferred to Broadway in 2003, it quickly became a runaway hit and won the Tony Award for Best New Musical. *Avenue Q* enjoyed a strong six-year run on Broadway, recouped its initial investment and made a tidy profit for all those involved. In 2009, producers saw the audience dwindling for the show – and the weekly gross was beginning to get uncomfortably close to their running costs of approximately \$250,000 per week.¹³⁴ Instead of putting up the closing signs at the John Golden Theatre, Robyn Goodman and her team decided to take a chance and put up moving signs. They decided to relocate down the street to New World Stages, a commercial Off-Broadway venue just west of Times Square. By moving to an Off-Broadway space with fewer seats, the production costs came down by more than two-thirds to approximately \$80,000 per week¹³⁵ – because rent for a smaller space is cheaper and the production could save money by downsizing in all aspects (lighting, sound, etc). Additionally, the actors would no longer be subject to the Broadway Equity minimums, and they could be paid a lower weekly salary in accordance with the Off-Broadway contract. Advertising costs came down as well, although this was less of a worry for the team, as the show had been running so long and was strongly branded. Ticket prices came down too, of course, saving the audience money over the previous Broadway production, and perhaps even opening up the show to an audience that previously could not afford it. The weekly running cost of the leaner and meaner *Avenue Q* was

¹³⁴ Goodman Interview.

¹³⁵ Hedli “Peter and the Starcatcher finds new Life Off-Broadway.”

significantly reduced, and even with the average ticket price also coming down the producers can keep the show – which keeps a good number of actors, musicians and stage hands employed – running, while continuing a profit stream for the creative team, investors, and producers. In fact, since moving to New World Stages, *Avenue Q* has not had one week in which they have lost money (save from the week of the devastating Hurricane Sandy in the fall of 2012, when they were not able to play a regular show schedule).¹³⁶

This new creative producing model has now been emulated by other shows, including *The 39 Steps*, *Million Dollar Quartet* and the most recent transfer, *Peter and the Starcatcher*. This has proven successful for some of these shows (it's too early to tell for *Peter and the Starcatcher*) and there are several factors to why it might prove to be a successful model. For one, these Broadway to Off-Broadway transfers have already been proven on Broadway and run successfully for several years. This has established them as a brand and familiarized audiences with the shows. Many professionals in the theatrical community in New York City believe that audiences now seeing these Off-Broadway shows don't even realize that they are not seeing the Broadway version.¹³⁷ It seems especially easy to confuse audiences, as producers play up the "Broadway" aspect in advertisements ("Avenue Q - Broadway's Tony Award-Winning Best Musical!")¹³⁸. As these shows have been branded by their years

¹³⁶ Goodman Interview.

¹³⁷ Morfee & Hess Interview.

¹³⁸ *Avenue Q* sales brochure.

on Broadway and tours, producers do not have to spend as much money on paid advertising – thusly reducing their weekly running cost.

This producing model although possibly becoming a trend now, has been tried in the past. In the 1980's two shows, *Billy Bishop Goes to War* and *'night, Mother* were both given commercial Off-Broadway runs immediately following their Broadway productions.¹³⁹ With this history and with the success of *Avenue Q*, it's a wonder more producers haven't tried it. However, like all producing, it's not a simple formula. For one, a producer has to have a great show that *still* has an audience, even if it's a much smaller one. Robyn Goodman knew it was risky and took "chutzpah" as she says, but for her team and this show, it was worth trying. As far as this practice becoming a major trend for producers, she has mixed feelings about whether or not people should attempt a Broadway to Off-Broadway commercial transfer. "I think certain people will try it...but I think they should think long and hard as to whether they can get their costs down enough -- whether or not they can survive without much advertising. I think it's hard."¹⁴⁰

Robyn Goodman admits that there is a big difference between "moving *Avenue Q* to New World Stages and opening Asher Lev at the Westside [Theatre]."¹⁴¹ She clarifies this by stating,

Avenue Q is a Tony Award-winning musical that ran for five years and then moved – and had already toured the entire country. So in the theatre-going world – not in the huge, what people call 'Brand' – but in the theatre-going world, it had a huge reputation.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Hedli "Peter and the Starcatcher finds new Life Off-Broadway."

¹⁴⁰ Goodman Interview.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

The trend of “downsizing” a Broadway show is of course not workable for every producer. A producer first has to have a property that has been Broadway branded with a strong and positive reputation. The show also must be one that can be moved to smaller spaces and can enjoy playing in a smaller house without losing its original intent or energy. I don’t think *Wicked*, even when its audience does trickle down – will ever play in an Off-Broadway house for example – as the material is too big for a small or even medium sized space.

This trend in Off-Broadway has changed the landscape of commercial Off-Broadway in its own way. It sets up new expectations for audiences who regularly attend Off-Broadway shows. The audience members who do recognize the shows as a part of Off-Broadway are being given a new idea of what Off-Broadway is. For the first time ever, audiences may start expecting to regularly see Broadway-branded shows Off-Broadway – or may begin thinking of Off-Broadway as a mini-Broadway – “Broadway Lite.”

Many producers and general managers in the commercial Off-Broadway community, including Scott Morfee and Adam Hess believe this is good for Off-Broadway and theatre in general. And why wouldn’t this trend be a win-win for all? It’s one more tactic to create jobs for theatre makers. It keeps a show going that still has life left to give to its audiences and cast. And it adds revenue to the New York City theatre industry. It has also helped to keep New World Stages,

the new commercial theatrical complex, alive, which until this point had had a very hard time keeping a show.¹⁴³

Are there downsides to this producing model? Possibly, however they are more abstract and deal more with the artistic psychology of the theatre community. New York Magazine wrote about this topic, when the new, smaller version of *Rent* was about to hit New World Stages (not technically a transfer but a revival shortly following the Broadway show's closure and one that proved to be unsuccessful). NYMag predicted the possible dilemmas with this type of producing by stating that besides this trend possibly creating a new Off-Broadway that is merely a "fun-size" Broadway, "It could also create a traffic jam, as Off-Broadway's hothouses gradually fill up with downsized revivals, squeezing out more modest, potentially more inventive shows."¹⁴⁴ This is a real concern, as we know there are fewer commercial Off-Broadway houses and less possible places for a new and innovative show to live. This point, like so many arguments about commercial Off-Broadway, is more complicated. As New World Stages has a higher rent than some smaller and older Off-Broadway houses, the likelihood of a "more modest, potentially more inventive show" surviving at New World Stages is small. If anything, it seems like this is the only way to keep this type of venue open and thusly keeps these Broadway-branded shows out of houses where the lower-budget shows should live.

¹⁴³ Morfee Interview.

¹⁴⁴ Brown "Is Off-Broadway turning into Post Broadway?"

I agree with Scot Morfee, Adam Hess and other theatre managers and producers about the fact that most of the audiences don't even know that they are seeing an Off-Broadway version of the show and more importantly, I don't believe they would care if they did know. Like so many issues in our industry, the only people that are really bothered by things like this are the people on the inside, those in the industry. Although some may believe that transferring a show back to Off-Broadway may have less artistic merits than producing a new or seemingly "important" work, this practice has significant implications for the broader artistic community. It keeps actors and stagehands employed at livable wages. It keeps the lights on in a theatre when they may not have had a show in there otherwise. It bolsters the economic impact of all entertainment in New York City. And it continues a profit stream to the original creators of a show, which in turn could enable them to create a new project of artistic significance. It's not something that should be tried by every producer for every dwindling Broadway show, but it is certainly a new model worth considering and could play a part in keeping Off-Broadway on the map to a very broad and diverse audience.

FEWER THAN 8 SHOWS PER WEEK SCHEDULE

There are other tactics that commercial producers are undertaking to make the pieces fit together for their shows in hopes of turning a profit and keeping their doors open to all. The newest trend is an attempt to forego the eight show per week agreement. Since the beginning of professional theatre in New York City, eight shows per week has been the standard and has shaped

many logistical and administrative guidelines for theatre creators. Eight shows per week is an assumption on which an Equity actor's weekly salary is based for example. It also helps to determine rehearsal allowances when a show is running, so actors are not overworked or abused. It is in a producer's best interest to play all eight performances, as a show not played is a ticket not sold. Since producers and managers are required by Equity and SDC to pay the weekly minimums, which are based on this play schedule, why would a producer want to reduce the number of shows per week?

In the recent past, some producers have realized their shows' potentials before they open and have chosen to play less than the standard eight performances a week. Some producers have also taken their shows from the standard eight shows per week down to three or four (and in some cases – one), as the interest has waned and the initial audiences have been served. Now this reduction might seem a fruitless tactic – sure to lose money – if they didn't make an adjustment on the salary end. These producers have gone to Actors' Equity Association and requested a concession from Equity in regards to the eight show per week schedule. For some producers, this means lowering the weekly minimum salary for the actors – as was done by long-time manager, theatre operator, and producer Ed Gaynes.

Ed Gaynes has been part of the Off-Broadway scene since the late '50's and has performed alongside stars like Christopher Walken and Liza Minnelli. He even opened the original Promenade theatre with the production of Maria

Irene Fornes' *Promenade* in 1969. His memory, like a trained actor's, is a steel trap and he remembers many shows he performed in Off-Broadway in the 1950's and '60's with great accuracy. And like a great manager, he remembers a lot of the budgets for these productions as well.

I worked on Off-Broadway as long ago as the '50's – and at that time, they were doing big shows with big casts. I did a musical – an old musical revival called *Johnny Johnson* by Kurt Weill, directed by Stella Adler and it was a cast of like 26 people. And the budget was like \$23,000. Then I did *Best for Four* in 1963 – and I played opposite Liza Minnelli – played roommates with Christopher Walken. Cast of 17 – that show was \$35,000.¹⁴⁵

Ed Gaynes, like Scott Morfee, manages and operates his own theatre – St. Luke's on West 46th Street near Times Square, as well as the Actors Temple one block away on West 47th Street. He is one of the now growing number of producers who utilizes the Periodic Performance Agreement for all of the productions in his space. This document, unlike a collectively bargained contract through Equity, is an agreement – not a contract – and viewed by Equity as a concession, one that Equity can grant or take away from a producer as they see fit. The agreement allows a producer to play up to four performances per week and pay the actors per performance, rather than a weekly minimum. This agreement gives the producer more control over how many shows they play and when they schedule performances, as well as greatly reduces the overhead for the performers.

A lot of emerging producers come to Ed Gaynes with an idea and some money, but not enough to do a typical Off-Broadway budget that includes eight

¹⁴⁵ Morfee Interview.

shows per week. He believes using the Periodic Performance is a way to help these emerging producers find success for their shows, as he is certain that this agreement has played a large role in many of the successes he's had. Ed believes the average Off-Broadway budgets nowadays are completely out of whack and create an environment for failure. This opinion, although it's shared by many producers, was something he felt he could change but using a different model.

It had gotten out of control doing the regular eight-show-a-week scheduling. The contracts and the rents and everything were so ridiculous that it was costing \$300,000–500,000 to do a small play and a lot more to do a large play. It was very hard to recoup that money if you could even raise it in the first place. Now, by sharing space, we've cut the budgets not just in half, but literally by 75 percent because there are all different agreements with the unions and all the costs are less and you maximize your audience.¹⁴⁶

Ed, who also serves as a general manager for many of the productions in his space, helps new producers create a very tight and lean budget with fewer performances, lower fees, and space shares. He says that he has even waived his upfront fee at times in order to give these shows the best chance to have substantial runs.¹⁴⁷ At the moment, he has six shows running in his theatre at St. Luke's alone. On Saturdays he has four matinees, an 11am, a 2pm, a 4:30pm, and an 8pm – all different shows! This enables him to create a steady income stream for the space and gives the shows a chance to run and potentially make a small profit, where he believes they wouldn't have in the traditional model.

Lowering the number of performances per week has become such a trend that in

¹⁴⁶ Buchwald, Linda. "The Show Goes On (One Night a Week)."

¹⁴⁷ Gaynes Interview.

February 2013, the Off-Broadway Alliance held a panel entitled “Producing Alternatives to the 8-Performance Week.” This panel brought together a theatre owner, manager, and a producer to discuss the pros and cons of this model and advised emerging producers on the potential gains.

Another key player in this movement is Ken Davenport. In a recent posting on his widely read blog, “The Producer’s Perspective,” Mr. Davenport spoke of his use of this tactic. “I’ve produced four Off-Broadway shows. Three recouped. One did not. Three did less than eight performances a week. One did not. Guess which three recouped?”¹⁴⁸ While Ken Davenport may be reducing recoupment to a basic formula for the sake of inciting a more interesting debate, of course it is not as simple as just slashing the number of shows (and thusly reducing weekly running costs) to create a financially successful Off-Broadway show. If that were the case, every producer would use this system and new contracts would be made for Off-Broadway. And just because a show does not have enough of an audience to sell out every show for eight performances per week – it does not mean the show is necessarily less artistically valuable than those that can sell out eight shows a week or sell bigger houses. As Scott Morfee put it, “There are very few shows that require 1100 seats based on audience demand”¹⁴⁹ – and that’s not necessarily a negative thing. Some shows need that kind of audience to fuel the story. In the same way, Off-Broadway has longed thrived on the intimacy and special experience

¹⁴⁸ Davenport “Panel Alert: Are There Alternatives to the 8 Performance Week?”

¹⁴⁹ Morfee Interview.

the smaller audience shares. If a producer can sell every seat for three or four shows a week, it not only cuts costs – but it creates a better experience for the spectator who does not feel like they are sitting in a half-empty theatre – experiencing something special without anyone to share it with.

In the future of Off-Broadway, we may see more shows producing fewer than eight shows per week, shows sharing theatre space, and new contracts being created by Equity to make this producing model more of a standard option – not just a concession. If this model provides audiences with more options and creates more jobs for aspiring talent, perhaps this direction will take Off-Broadway closer to its roots of creating work for audiences with less focus on huge profits. The producers can focus on taking the show to the larger market and not see the NYC production as the sole place to make a profit with their show.

THEATRE PRODUCER, MANAGER, AND OWNER – IN ONE

Aside from the producers who are reducing the number of performances of their shows and producers downsizing Broadway-branded material – there is also the model of producer, manager, and theatre owner in one. This is not necessarily a trend of the past 13 years alone; however, this is another group of producers that seem to be making their productions work – and not becoming part of the failed Off-Broadway show pool. Scott Morfee (Barrow Street Theatre), Daryl Roth (Daryl Roth Theatrical Management), and Ed Gaynes (operator of The St. Luke's Theatre and the Actors Temple) are three individuals using this

concept with high rates of success.

As previously discussed, a commercial producer is like the president of a company – a company without a steady office, with temporary employees, and a lack of a constant income stream – not necessarily an appealing job description. Add to that the challenge of finding a piece of work that is exciting, commercial, and physically viable; not to mention the fact that the producer also has to have a few other things in line before she can start a new project. As Scott Morfee simplifies the complex needs of a producer,

Generally speaking if you are a commercial producer, you need three things to happen at once – magical things. And that’s why it’s so difficult. You need money in place. You need the show and all the creatives in place and available – *when* the money is available. And you need a theatre that is available.¹⁵⁰

Since Scott Morfee is the holder of the long-term lease of the Barrow Street Theatre – and essentially a theatre owner, it takes the third item out of the equation. For many producers, this alone would be a great advantage – but Mr. Morfee has more. He elaborates,

Having the theatre takes one third out of the equation. Having now a consistent team of producers that kind of want to keep working together – has sort of taken the money out of the equation, cause we are committed to each other – and we’re going to all work together on the next show – or some approximation of that. So all of a sudden two thirds of my life just got so much easier. Then it only becomes about finding the magic show and the moment you think it should open.¹⁵¹

Having access to permanent space doesn’t just allow Mr. Morfee one-third less stress than a normal commercial producer; it also provides him with another

¹⁵⁰ Morfee Interview.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

potential source of income. By booking alternative programming in the space – around his own productions, he can collect rent from tenants looking for an intimate space for their shows. These shows tend to be comedy or improv-based shows that don't require a set or can work with the set that's in the theatre at the time. Mr. Morfee curates the programming and only books the artists he believes in and thinks have talent, as he gleans that anything seen in the theatre is a reflection of his work in the space. He strives to maintain a level of excellence. These rentals also tend to have very low price points which brings in new audience to the space and hopefully makes them aware of the theatre and piques their interest in the attending the other programming (i.e., Mr. Morfee's productions).

Additional programming and the income it generates help to keep the machine that is the Barrow Street Theatre up and running. It enables Mr. Morfee to keep a small staff on salary, unlike many independent commercial producers who have to hire and fire staff around the opening and closing of each new project. This system creates one less stressor – that of finding a staff – but it also creates a team environment that can benefit the theatre with efficiency and better communication – and benefits the staff, as they're ensured a reliable income.

What Scott Morfee and his team are doing at the Barrow Street Theatre is very interesting, because they are almost following a non-profit model, but with a commercial twist. Mr. Morfee has a salaried staff, a permanent space, and

alternative income from the rentals (not unlike many non-profit theatres that own their space). Although they don't have the benefits of the non-profit tax codes, they do have the perks of being able to run their shows for as long as they are profitable – which a non-profit theatre typically can't do because they have a season of four to five shows that have usually been booked and organized one year or more in advance. As the saying goes – “Non-profit theatre: the only place where we run our flops and close our hits!”

However, unlike a non-profit, they can't afford to have a dark space, because there isn't enough supplemental income and no access to grant, foundational monies, or donations. They also can't go dark like a Broadway theatre might be able to – waiting for a hit show to come along and be secured.

The problems with staying dark, as Mr. Morfee see it,

You know Broadway theatres can go dark for 6 months waiting for Billy Elliot or something – and they do all the time, but a theatre like ours – if we go dark for 6 weeks, the amount of money you're losing is significant – so you have to be building the next show while the other one is still running.¹⁵²

Several of the managers and producers interviewed for the paper named Scott Morfee as an example of the best of Off-Broadway producing. Indeed, Mr. Morfee and his group at the Barrow Street Theatre are one of the only groups producing new plays or provocative adaptations with high levels of production and a high rate of recoupment. And to me, this is a combination of two very important factors: smart budgeting and exquisite taste. Mr. Morfee is obviously concerned about the numbers and balancing the budgets, but for him first and

¹⁵² Morfee Interview.

foremost, it is about the plays he chooses. He knows you can't predict a hit, but like any great producer, he has his finger on the pulse of his audience and chooses the show methodically.

USING OFF-BROADWAY AS A LAUNCHING PAD

Most producers and managers are highly creative, and many of them have a background in the arts as either performers or directors. General manager Jill Bowman is no exception, as she was one of the earliest members of The New Group. Ms. Bowman and Theatre Mogul, her employer, are attempting to brand their newest Off-Broadway show *Silence! The Musical*. Like the shows produced by Ed Gaynes, she is currently utilizing the Periodic Performance Agreement to formulate a per performance rate – allowing even more flexibility for the production. This is part of a larger goal of the production, though – to brand it for domestic tours and international productions.

Jill Bowman has been managing *Silence! The Musical* for over a year and has guided the show through several transitions. When the show first opened, like most, it played an eight-performance week with the standard Equity Off-Broadway contract for performers. The show played a solid run at Theatre 80 for two months, before moving to PS122 for nine months, until it was time to make a move yet again to the Elektra, where it has been playing since July 2012. The Elektra is a newly designed space in midtown, near the heart of Times Square. There the show continued to play eight shows a week until the overhead became unmanageable.

We were doing well for Off-Broadway. When you compare what our income was, we were actually in a good place for Off-Broadway, but it's a big show and our expenses were just too high. And don't forget! We are branding *Silence!* for the global market. So for us, investing more money in advertising than others have the ability to do - - we had to do that, cause we were branding the show.¹⁵³

The idea of spending more money to brand the show in the beginning stages of the run is not a new concept; however, using the entire Off-Broadway run to brand the show, even at a loss, is a unique idea. Operating close to the breakeven was an intentional plot for the producers and managers of *Silence!* because they wanted to give it a future life. As Theater Mogul, the company that currently has the worldwide rights for the show, knew – or at least hoped – there is going to be a long life ahead for *Silence!* outside of New York City. This hyperopic view on *Silence!* empowered Ms. Bowman as a manager to know how best to navigate the terrain in the city. It was important to produce a quality show and obtain good reviews, and have a long-running show – something all producers want – but the profit part was not the most important piece of the puzzle, as it is for so many producers (and for good reasons). Subsidiary rights are going to play a huge part in Theater Mogul's plan for *Silence! The Musical* – in the same way it did for their last huge, long-running hit *Defending the Caveman*, which has played all over the world for many years and created a massive profit stream for Theater Mogul – a profit stream which now they can use almost as a development fund for new shows they chose to take on and

¹⁵³ Bowman Interview.

produce.¹⁵⁴ This is the kind of profit they hope to generate for *Silence!* so there will be a way to fund the next endeavor.

When *Silence!* ran its first year, it played more or less successfully, (although it has yet to recoup) and was playing eight performances per week. The show has a large cast for Off-Broadway with eleven actors and three musicians – all of whom are union. “So we ran that year, but it was time to stop operating so close to the breakeven. So we just realized – ‘let’s go down a different path.’”¹⁵⁵ Instead of closing the show and ending the life of *Silence!* in New York, Jill Bowman used some creative producing to solve the problem and keep the show running. Ms. Bowman contacted Equity and was able to switch from the standard Off-Broadway Contract to the Periodic Performance Agreement. She also went to the managers at the Elektra and proposed a space share so the theatre would not lose rental income, and thusly would be more likely to accept her proposal. Ms. Bowman was also able to reduce her weekly running costs by greatly reducing her weekly ad buys. They had spent a good chunk of money on advertising during the first year of the show to brand it as quickly as possible. Ms. Bowman realized after one full year of doing that, she could reduce her weekly ad budget and still make an impact and reach her audience.¹⁵⁶

The positives of keeping the show open are plentiful. It keeps the brand going and helps to create a stronger life force for the future life of the show. It

¹⁵⁴ Bowman Interview.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

also provides performance opportunities and experience to actors, musicians, and scenic crew who may not have them otherwise. It keeps a theatre full and provides an extra choice for entertainment for tourists and residents alike. The negatives are fewer but important to consider. One is that even though it provides experience for the performers and adds a show to their resume, it does not provide a living wage or even close to it. With her Equity representative, Ms. Bowman was able to negotiate a per performance rate of \$74 per show – and they typically do three shows a week. Ms. Bowman acknowledges that most of the performers had other jobs anyway, as she says about Off-Broadway – “It pays peanuts” – even under the standard contract. However, no one can argue with the fact that this is a low rate and not a livable salary. Another negative is that its potential gross income is now greatly reduced from what it was at eight performances per week – of course, that’s to be expected.

As Ms. Bowman mentions, it is questionable as to whether or not the minimum actor payment through Equity is a livable wage for New York City. The current wage for a performer on a standard Off-Broadway contract ranges from approximately 32 thousand dollars to fifty-four thousand dollars per year, before taxes and not including health care payments. The bottom range of the salary just barely meets the minimum living wage calculator for New York City.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, this salary is based on a full year on the Off-Broadway Agreement. Very few actors are lucky enough to be employed for a full year with a production

¹⁵⁷ “Poverty in America: Living Wage Calculator.”

As we can see, there are producers and managers breaking the mold of commercial Off-Broadway and finding new ways to present the work while trying (and sometimes succeeding) to turn a profit. Most of them are not millionaires, but they are treating their productions with the care and consideration of a million dollar show. They are also willing to try and fail, which is what a good producer should be willing to do.

CHAPTER 8: THE FUTURE OF OFF-BROADWAY AND CONCLUSION

By examining Off-Broadway's formation and evolution, we can see much more clearly how and why some periods were more prosperous than others. The creation of non-profits and their quick and substantial growth, paired with the development of Off-Off Broadway, means Off-Broadway has had to continuously define and redefine what it was and what it is. In this same vein, producers have had to adapt to the changing climate and find new models to produce their passion projects. No one argues that if you don't have a good show, you are not going to succeed. You have to have an amazing production of course – but as a producer, you want to give your show the best chance possible of getting seen to understand whether people want to see it or not. This means playing enough performances and spending enough money on advertising to get people in the space to get the word of mouth going in the early days of a show.

All of the managers and producers interviewed for this paper are innovators in one way or another. They are all finding and trying new models and attempting to create work that they are passionate about, and in a way that gives it the best chance to be seen and affect their audiences. While all of these innovators had guesses to what Off-Broadway might look like in the next ten to twenty years, none felt that had any real idea as to whether or not commercial Off-Broadway could be saved for the long run. Scott Morfee predicted more international shows and plays would become a staple in the landscape. Adam Hess said that shows will continue to get smaller in their target audience and

topic – and this will actually expand their reach because of it, in the same way that cable television has created avid followers through high-quality, niche programming. Terry Byrne still believes in the old model. And she is not wrong to believe in it. In the past two seasons, *My Name is Asher Lev* and *Old Jews Telling Jokes* have been experiencing fruitful runs at her Westside Theatre.

Those shows paired with several others like those at the Barrow Street Theatre have restored some people's faith in commercial Off-Broadway and its likelihood to persevere through this rough time.

And it's true – this is a tough time. But Off-Broadway has been there again and again and the idea of its demise has existed since its inception. We *are* at a crossroads – now more than ever. And not because of the finances and the union contracts and the theatre spaces. We are at a crossroads because of the type of work, the accessibility of new entertainment, and the decline in the importance of the American theatre.

This doesn't mean it's pointless to negotiate for better rates, build or renovate theatres when necessary, or create new business models to develop more viable budgets. But it means first and foremost, we have to create work that people *want* to see. And we have to price it accordingly – to give it value. The Golden Age of Off-Broadway did not just happen because Broadway faced tough times – although that was part of it. Off-Broadway was inventing new forms, presenting performance art and modern dance to audiences in an

approachable way, and tapping into subject matters that were pressing, challenging, and immediate. The work brought them downtown.

Perhaps even more dangerous is that if the myth that commercial Off-Broadway is dead persists, investors may stop being so interested in putting their money into anything that isn't Broadway and producers may decide the risk seems to be too big – so what's the point? Let the non-profits do the “art-y” work and let the big corporations like Disney and Marvel take over Broadway. That's not where the heart of theatre lies. Most people don't choose theatre for the money – they choose to go into theatre for an undying passion and love for the form – and always because they saw a work that changed the way they saw a piece of the world. The show could have been a \$15M mega-musical on Broadway or it was a pay-what-you-can night at the Living Theatre in Chinatown. Most likely it was something small, something they shared in an intimate house with a riveted audience. Producers know this because they have been inspired too and want to touch people with their productions.

Commercial Off-Broadway isn't dead – it's not even close. After talking to so many people who are *still* in the business even though it's harder now than ever, I truly believe producers, managers and artists will find a way to show their work on this level and make a profit. Admittedly this is harder now than ever, but Broadway was struggling 25 years ago as well and now it's hard to secure a theatre even if you believe you have the next great musical. And why is this? It's not because managers banded together to bring costs down. It's not because

ticket prices went up so high that now producers only have to sell a show at 50 percent capacity to break even. It's because the material got better and more interesting.

We can't go back to this time and recreate the scenarios that created this landscape for Off-Broadway. But we can go back to the work itself. That's how Off-Broadway has always saved itself from its own obstacles. The new generation of artists, producers, and managers has to create, find, and develop the work that speaks to them – regardless of commercial viability. Any seasoned producer knows there is always an element of unpredictability in massive successes – and that element is audience reaction. Many of the hits from the '80's and '90's couldn't have been predicted, so we can't pretend to know any better today what will become a hit. And furthermore, many of those shows would not speak to audiences now. The generation of today has seen much more and is impressed less often – but that is no reason to give up hope. There is still nothing that can replicate the event of live theatre. That is the advantage we have in this industry. No matter what new technology arrives (and we should embrace it in the theatre), it will never be able to reproduce that feeling one gets when seeing something truly amazing and utterly unrepeatable.

We have to go back to what made Off-Broadway great – the work – and trust in the fact that people will find a reason and a means to follow.

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