

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM
LIKE THE AMERICAN MUSICAL:
The Evolution of Musical Theater Producing
from *Oklahoma!* to *Rocky the Musical*

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Introduction

The contemporary American musical is in a time of crisis. More and more, not-for-profit theaters such as American Repertory Theater in Cambridge and Second Stage Theater in New York, which were founded to produce non-commercial works, are filling their season with musicals based on high-profile movies like *Finding Neverland* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. It is far more likely to see a popular musician writing music for a well-known movie turned musical - for instance Sara Bareilles for *Waitress* which will premiere at A.R.T. August 2015 - than to see a new generation of musical theater writers creating the next *Fiddler on the Roof* or *West Side Story*. Out of all the musicals that have opened on Broadway since the 2011-2012 Broadway season, 33.5% have been revivals, 13% have been jukebox musicals of some sort, 33.5% have been based on a high profile movie, and a mere 20% have been based on original or lesser known material. Of that 20%, *The Last Ship* was written by Sting, and *If/Then* starred Idina Menzel. *First Date*, *Bridges of Madison County*, *Chaplin*, *Hands on a Hardbody*, *Lysistrata Jones* and *Leap of Faith*, though novel for being original works were not successful at the box office, and only two out of the six were critically acclaimed. Of the remaining four, *Fun Home* and *Something Rotten* opened only recently, and *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* and *Once*¹ were the only two to win the Tony for best musical.

Historically, the majority of musicals produced on Broadway or otherwise have been adapted from source material. *Cabaret* is based on *I am Camera*, *South Pacific* is based on the book, *Tales from the South Pacific* and *Guys and Dolls* is based on a collection of Runyon short stories entitled *Guys and Dolls*, to name a few. However, the musical adaptations filling theaters

¹ Based on an independent movie - not a mainstream title.

today are predominantly musicalizing popular content that has already been commercially successful in another medium. Shows such as *Rocky: The Musical* and *Elf* use their titles to bring in audiences and capitalize upon the fame of the films they are based on. These pieces are not focusing on what makes the musical form unique and special across media. Instead, each *A Christmas Story: The Musical* and *Shrek the Musical* are steadily driving the musical towards irrelevance. Especially in an age where we are oversaturated with digital content, musicals are a compelling argument for live theater, but that argument disappears if musicals are telling the exact same stories accessible on Netflix.

Non-profit theaters were founded as a counter to the commercial theatre in an effort to create an environment that was more focused on art than commerce. In the fifty years since the non-profit theater movement began, theatre has fallen out of popular culture and into niche culture. As government funding has faded, audiences have aged and shrunk, and the costs of producing theater have increased relentlessly due to new technologies, better unions/work conditions, and scarcity of theaters. Now most non-profit theaters require a commercial producer to provide desperately needed funds in order to include a musical as a part of their season in an agreement known as “enhancement.” As a result, commercial producers have unprecedented control over which pieces are produced and which pieces are not. More often than not that means familiar titles with selling power are chosen over the potentially risky unknown shows and artists, who are left without production opportunities.

In this paper, I will explore the producing models, economics, and cultural shifts that have lead to the current stagnation of the musical form. I will conclude by highlighting alternate

models and possible solutions to this phenomenon with the goal of creating a richer, more diverse theatrical landscape that is firmly differentiated from other forms of media.

1. The Commercial Theatre

Broadway is the center for commercial theater in America, and has historically been considered the nexus of musical theater. For most of the twentieth century, Broadway was the goal that every musical was striving toward -- partly because before the non-profit theater movement took off in the sixties, the commercial theater was the only avenue through which professional musicals could be produced. A show on Broadway meant press and the potential for national tours and monetary success. To some extent, nearly seventy years after the “Golden Age of Musical Theatre” the Broadway-centric model still stands. The label, “Broadway Musical” carries the history of all the shows that have been there before: *Ragtime*, *Oklahoma!*, *Gypsy*, *Showboat*, *The Music Man* and so on. Shows on Broadway continue to have a high amount of visibility, due to the high concentration of press, large advertising budgets and the nationally broadcast Tony Award ceremony. Broadway theaters are typically much larger than non-profit theaters, and the shows can run indefinitely, so they reach a larger amount of people.

In addition to the traditional draws, in recent years fans of musical theater are able to look to websites like Playbill.com, Broadway.com, Theatermania, and Broadwayworld.com in order to keep abreast of every show that’s happening on Broadway through articles, videos, exclusive interviews, and Instagram accounts. Most Broadway shows create cast recordings, which is integral for developing fans across the country, and for encouraging a life for the production after New York. In general, even if a show doesn’t recoup their investment during their Broadway run, there is a higher probability that the show sent on a national tour and/or licensed to other theaters and amateur groups across the country. If a show is a success, the returns can be in the billions of dollars for investors, producers and the creative team. To put the

potential financial gain into perspective, *The Lion King*, which opened in 1998, has made more money than the entirety of the *Star Wars* franchise (Schumacher). It remains the place where writers and musicals can receive the most money and conspicuous accolades for their work.

Broadway's history and continued visibility perpetuates the perception that it is the place where the musical form is at its peak. While that was once true, due to a number of cultural and financial factors, the contemporary commercial theater's first priority has increasingly become filling the theater with ticket buyers, not creating innovative art. What is popular and what is artistic are not mutually exclusive, but lately Broadway has leaned more heavily on pieces that are conjectured to have a popular draw. In the 2015 season specifically, *Finding Neverland*, based on the movie starring Johnny Depp as J.M. Barrie, the creator of *Peter Pan* is particularly egregious. Though the show takes place in the early 1900s, all the advertising features pictures of Matthew Morrison and Kelsey Grammer in modern clothing - in an effort to sell the show off the recognizability of those two actors. The musical itself is punctuated with jokes referencing Grammer's time on the television show, *Cheers*.

In a reaction against this phenomenon, over the past few decades larger non-profit theatrical organizations in New York City have begun to buy Broadway theaters in an effort to bring more diverse work to the perceived center of theater. Lincoln Center, Roundabout, Manhattan Theater Club and most recently, Second Stage own six out of the forty Broadway houses. Their motivations are two-fold: to bring non-commercial work to Broadway audiences and to increase their revenue through the Broadway branding. Unfortunately this ownership has not brought more non-commercial new musicals to Broadway. The only new piece of note to make it through one of these non-profit theaters was *Light in the Piazza* in 2005. For the most

part, Manhattan Theater Club predominantly produces plays and Roundabout and Lincoln Center mainly produce musical revivals.

The musical once held a place in popular culture, and songs from musicals were pop-hits played on pianos in the home, and eventually on the radio. However, over time the musical has transitioned to niche culture. Before the introduction of radio, film and television, theater was the dominant form of media and entertainment. Once talking movies were introduced in 1927 by the musical film, *The Jazz Singer*, the two forms stood side by side in popularity. Many stage musicals and film musicals were created with writers and composers straddling both worlds. The 1940's brought the beginnings of the "Golden Age of Musical Theater" which is generally cited as the years between 1943 and 1959 (Kantor). Classic shows such as *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *South Pacific* and *My Fair Lady* were created within that 16 year span in the commercial sphere. Beginning in the fifties and continuing into the sixties, television began to eclipse theater and film as the dominant form of media. At the same time, rock music was introduced and the younger generation adopted it as their own in a rebellion against their parents and grandparents. As a result, show-tunes ceased to be pop-music, and the last song to be on the Billboard Hot 100 was "Send in the Clowns" from *A Little Night Music* recorded by Judy Collins in 1975. The generation for whom theater was their primary source of entertainment grew older and began to die out; audiences shrunk and by the early nineties, the musical had fallen from its place in American popular culture.

The transition from mass culture to subculture had major ramifications for how musical theater was produced. During the "Golden Age" and well into the sixties, the process for bringing a musical to Broadway was slightly different than it is today. Producers used to take

shows out of New York for an “out of town tryout,” where they would put up the show in front of audiences in multiple cities in order to work on the material, and make changes before facing Broadway audiences and critics. Producers were willing to pay for a lengthy development process, because they could expect large audiences, and the work would ultimately pay dividends if the show became a hit. As a result of this model, many shows would close out of town, and only the survivors (presumably the best of the best) would make it to Broadway. Today, the practice is less common as such for a number of economic and cultural reasons, including the increased expenses of musicals, and smaller audiences.

The expenses surrounding the production of Broadway musicals have increased dramatically over the past fifty years. In his book *The Art of Theatre Then and Now*, William Downs illustrates the evolution of costs:

Phantom of the Opera had 36 actors, more than 50 crew members, and 30 musicians. It needed 120 wigs, 260 costumes, and a massive set -- not to mention the 20,000 AAA batteries it used each year. When it opened on Broadway in 1988, the cost was \$375,000 a week. In comparison, the entire Broadway run of *The King and I* (1951-1954) cost \$360,000. Even taking inflation into account, production costs have skyrocketed from decade to decade. In 1956 *My Fair Lady* cost \$401,000 to produce; in 1975 *A Chorus Line* cost \$1,145,000; in 1986 *Phantom of the Opera* cost over \$7 million. Today a Broadway musical can cost \$5-\$15 million on average to produce. (Downs)

The original production of *The King and I* had a large cast, expensive costumes and a detailed set. Even adjusting for inflation, *The King and I* still cost \$400,000 less than *A Chorus Line*, which is a show that has a large cast, but requires very little in terms of sets and costumes.

Between when *The King and I* opened in 1951 and when *A Chorus Line* opened in 1975, various production necessities became more expensive, and new technologies were introduced. Whereas previously actors, stage-hands and musicians were sometimes underpaid or exploited in the past,

unions have become more active in fighting for equitable wages. From 1975 to the present, microphones, projections and better lighting instruments have come into vogue, adding to costs. Though star casting has always been a part of the Broadway process, more and more producers have been bringing in Hollywood names in an effort to sell tickets. Salaries for these celebrities greatly increase the weekly running costs of a musical. In 2001, Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick were making \$100,000 per week for *The Producers*, and recently Al Pacino made \$150,000 per week for the revival of *Glengarry Glen Ross* (Simonson).

One of the largest expenses and barriers facing musicals in their effort to be produced on Broadway is real estate. Currently, there are forty Broadway theaters - half the number of theaters that existed in the 1920's and 1930's. Six are owned by non-profits, one by Disney Theatricals, and nine theaters are filled with shows that have been running over three years. That leaves a little over twenty theaters available for new commercial musicals, musical revivals, and plays. Of those theaters, maybe half of those are either too big or too small to match any particular show - and whether they are open or not all depends on mostly random factors such as the timing of when other shows happen to be opening or closing. Theaters are scarce and are prime real-estate in midtown Manhattan, so theater owners can charge a large sum for rent.

Commercial producing has evolved alongside rising expenses and Broadway shows becoming more financially risky endeavors than ever. Single producers or producing teams were the norm before the late eighties and early nineties. Playbills and marquees simply read: "Cy Feuer and Ernie Martin present *The Music Man*," "David Merrick presents *Hello Dolly*," or "Hal Prince presents *A Little Night Music*." A producer's job has traditionally been to oversee every aspect of production, and raise the money for the show. Often, these producers would give the

creative team dramaturgical feedback during the development process as well. At that time, they only had to raise \$400,000 - \$1,000,000 at most and there were more potential investors, as the musical was a popular form. Investing in a Rodgers and Hammerstein piece was seen an exciting opportunity and privilege. Today, producers must raise ten to fifteen million dollars to mount a form that has fallen out of popular culture. Due to the increased risk that comes from higher expenses and more niche audiences, multiple producers come together to produce shows collectively and many high level investors are given the title “producer” as an incentive - especially if those investors find more people to invest money. Last year’s Tony winner for best musical, *Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder* had forty-four above-the-title producers and almost one hundred investors (“I Want to Be a Producer”). The huge expense of Broadway musicals has shifted the bulk of the job of producer to be one largely rife with pressure regarding raising money, working with other producers and managing investors. Due to this strain producers focus on making safer bets on works that are more known quantities. Even a familiar name cannot guarantee success, and four out of five Broadway musicals lose their typical ten to fifteen million dollar investment, or in the case of *Spiderman*, their seventy-five million dollar investment (Weiss).

Recently, film studios have started to produce Broadway musicals that are based on their existing portfolios of intellectual property. In many ways these entities are better suited to produce theater than individual producers, because they have the ability to absorb the cost and have access to ready money, so aren’t as beholden to individual investors or a coterie of producers. Inspired by *Wicked*, which was produced in part by Universal and “is on track to become the most profitable venture in the 101-year history of Universal [...] more lucrative than

its top-grossing movies like *Jurassic Park* and *E.T.*” Now, movie studios are searching for something equally lucrative in their libraries of titles for potential musical material:

Now Universal is turning *Animal House* into a musical, and *Back to the Future* and *The Sting* may be next. Twentieth Century Fox is eyeing *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Waitress*. Sony is developing *Tootsie*. Warner Brothers has *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in London and is talking to producers about a possible musical version of the Channing Tatum flick *Magic Mike*. (Like the Movie)

Studios have more capital and resources than the typical Broadway producer, which allows them to easily fund productions. “By Hollywood standards, too, stage musical budgets are small — \$5 million on the low end, \$20 million on the high, compared with \$100 million or considerably more for movies” (Like the Movie). While these productions have a positive impact on the individual lives of members of the theater community by providing jobs for actors, designers, directors, and stage hands, they are filling the already constrained market with musicalized movies, selling the show by virtue of the well-known title.

The huge financial pressures of the contemporary commercial theater have created an environment where film studios and Broadway producers are less likely to take risks on potentially innovative pieces that are harder to justify to investors. Instead, Broadway marquees are filled with titles of popular movies turned musicals. Though Broadway is and has been largely perceived to be where the height of the musical form is drawn to, that is not actually the case anymore. As far back as the 1960’s the non-profit theatre was founded to pick up the artistic slack from the commercial theatre. It is around that time that musicals and musical theatre artists began to call the non-profits home.

2. The Non-Profit Theatre and the Paradox of Development

As production costs rose for the commercial theater in the fifties, various movements -- including the off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway and little theater movement -- sprung up in order to bring theater that may not have a broad appeal to smaller audiences. Theater companies began to be founded away from New York in an effort to decentralize the theater scene from New York City. These companies united under the non-profit status when, in the 1957 the Ford Foundation made a commitment to give \$60,000,000 to support the arts. However, they would only make philanthropic gifts to non-profit organizations. Supported in part by individual donors, the Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts when it was established in 1965, non-profit theaters began to become a serious theatrical alternative to the Broadway in the 1960's (Conte 117-118).

Robert Brustein, founder of both American Repertory Theater and Yale Repertory Theater speaks to the original intention of the founders of the non-profit theater movement:

We didn't join together to do the same things to please the largest number, to bring in the greatest amount of money, and the greatest subscribers, [...] As a nonprofit theater, most of us did these things because nobody else would do them! We did Robert Wilson, we did Andrei Serban. . . . Because Broadway wasn't going to do them! And they needed a voice! They needed an outlet. They needed a stage." (Collins-Hughes)

Though Brustein is talking about avant-garde artists, his point can absolutely be applied to musical theater as well. The mid-sixties through the early nineties saw many non-profit developed musicals become successful: *Hair* (1967) and *A Chorus Line* (1975) from the Public Theater, *Falsettos* (1990) and *Sunday in the Park with George* (1983) from Playwrights Horizons, *Man of La Mancha* (1965) from Goodspeed in Connecticut, and across the pond, *Les Miserables* was produced through government subsidy at the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Non-profit theaters and other theatrical non-profit organizations are the founders of efforts to bridge the gaps left behind by the much larger theater industry of a bygone age. As theater transitioned from popular culture to subculture in the late twentieth century, André Bishop saw Playwrights Horizons taking the reigns of development and as filling the niche of the commercial producers of the golden age:

I have curiously enough come to believe that the things we do here - and at some of the other non-profit theaters - are very much what the old-time producers used to do. They did readings of plays. They took writers under their wing. They developed plays. Our language is different and our economics are different, but our process is similar. The old producers were lucky enough to function at a time when the economic costs were not so staggering, so that they had freedom. Today, we have the freedom to do what we want. God forbid that we lose it. (Freedman)

Playwrights and musical theater writers have a difficult time making a steady living even if they are considered a success - so the non-profit theater gives commissions to writers they believe in.

Non-profits give playwrights residencies, take them on retreats, and provide the space and resources to do readings and workshops with the aim of getting the work to a produceable level.

Non-profit theaters and other organizations create writing groups in order to encourage connections between artists - giving them a community, mentors and a space to write.

Stephen Sondheim, a Broadway veteran by the 1980s, noticed the singularity of the work environment when he worked at a non-profit theater for the first time. The project was *Sunday in the Park with George* at Playwright's Horizons:

These differences, both in temperament and process, affected not only the score for *Sunday in the Park with George*, but my subsequent scores as well. I found myself writing with more formal looseness than I had before [...] I worried less about punctuating the piece with applause and concentrated more on the flow of the story itself. (Sondheim 6).

The non-profit atmosphere affected the very fabric of *Sunday in the Park with George*, and changed Sondheim's writing style forever. *Sunday in the Park with George* also went on to win the Pulitzer prize for drama, and Sondheim went on to write *Into the Woods*, *Assassins*, and *Passion*. Sondheim associates the commercial theater with "punctuating the piece with applause," and the non-profit theater with "flow of the story itself." *A Chorus Line*, a piece written by and about Broadway dancers, was given similar freedom and dramaturgical support at the Public Theater. Michael Bennett, a choreographer and originator of the piece, brought taped interviews into the Public and their literary staff worked with Bennett to form those interviews and stories into a fleshed out musical. *A Chorus Line* also went on to win the Pulitzer, and eventually transferred to Broadway and held the title of longest running show on Broadway from 1984 -1997. The non-profit theater gave Sondheim and Bennet the resources to create work absent from commercial pressures, which allowed for a greater focus on the storytelling and the art.

Unfortunately, This ideal workspace was not to last. In the mid-1990's and early 2000's the expense of musical theatre production began to become untenable for non-profit theaters, just as it had for commercial producers a few decades before. These financial woes still plague non-profits today. Andre Bishop, former artistic director of Playwright's Horizons notes the differences in expense before the mid nineties and after:

Things just didn't cost very much then [...] Also, *Falsettos* opened initially in a seventy- five-seat studio theater upstairs. Actors and artists in general got paid very little. What I always say is that with these plays and musicals at these nonprofit theaters years ago, it wasn't so much the donors or the funding sources that subsidized the shows; it was the artists, because they worked for so little. (Dorbian 72)

Now unions for directors, actors, stage-managers, choreographers and musicians negotiate minimums in order to protect their members and allow them to earn a somewhat stable living. Those paychecks have increased overall expenses, and though Bishop discounts them, funding sources have decreased. When non-profits were founded, around twenty theaters had support from the Ford Foundation and the NEA. Today, there are 1,800 non-profit theaters across the country vying for funding, and significantly less subsidy. As theater has transitioned to niche culture, the donor pool has grown even smaller. Originally, non-profits depended on a subscription system which ensured both money up front, and audiences willing to see every show in their season. Over the past ten years, subscribers have been literally dying out, and the younger generation have not been taking their place, which means that theaters cannot depend on that income. To make matters more complicated, many non-profit theaters have expanded and grown into institutions. As arts education has been increasingly cut from schools, non-profits have established full departments focused on educational outreach. Larger theaters employ over fifty full-time staff members, and must pay full-time salaries that include benefits. If a theater doesn't meet their funding goal for the year, then they become more dependent on ticket sales to balance their budget and pay their employees. As funding sources and subscriberships have become scarce, it becomes more difficult to take on risk when so many people are depending on that theater for their livelihood.

Producing a musical at a non-profit requires exponentially more resources than producing a typical play. Musicals tend to involve large amounts of performers, creative teams and musicians. They need more rehearsal time in order to learn music and choreography. Salaries for so many people over so much time are a huge expense. In addition, developing and producing a

musical can be a risky process. Ars Nova's Associate Artistic Director Emily Shooltz articulates this struggle:

What is particularly hard about musicals is that there are so many moving pieces in terms of your choreography and the way that is interfacing with your orchestrations and the book and until you put that whole thing together, which really requires resources, it's hard to know what you have - and once you're looking - you know, we were looking at *Bloodsong* in previews - and knowing what we wanted to change, but to change one little thing about a musical - suddenly you're talking about re-orchestrating, re-rehearsing the band, and the actors and probably the choreography and totally rewriting, and it's hours of work to change two minutes of show. Costly work, because then you're talking about paying musicians and usually a large cast - it's hard. (Shooltz)

It is a complex process with many interdependent parts which inherently has a high potential for things to go wrong. The non-profit theater structure is designed to take shows that do not turn a profit in stride, but the scale of a musical is so large, that such a loss has the capacity to seriously damage an organization—or at least make it significantly more difficult to balance their budget at the end of the fiscal year.

Just as the commercial theater began to produce shows with the most wide appeal in the face of rising expenses, the non-profit theater has begun to be risk-averse when choosing which musicals to produce for the same reasons. Even before the 2008 recession, long time commercial producer and president emeritus of Jujamcyn Theaters, wrote about this tension in his 2000 piece “A Vital Movement Has Lost Its Way:”

It is disappointing enough that those of us in the commercial theater have long ago abdicated any purchase on sustained artistic enterprise. The idiosyncratic giants of an earlier day have given way, by and large, to syndicates of producers and corporations. Big Broadway successes are more often the product of well-crafted nostalgia brilliantly marketed than of bold and intrepid producing (*Chicago* and our own *Smokey Joe's Cafe* are recent examples). The road presenters poll their audiences' response to various titles and stars before deciding on their seasons. The stakes (read costs) have simply become too high to assume undue risks. There is still a quotient of wonderfully reckless independent producers, but those careers usually don't last long.

And now, in the nonprofit theater, too, the forces of risk control are at work. The managing directors, with their good board relationships, audience development campaigns and marketing strategies, are asserting their clout as the pressures to "succeed" increase. (Landesman)

From a strictly business perspective, musicals have a larger potential for financial failure than for financial reward. In tightening budgets and the business of non-profit theaters, musicals can be considered a liability. As with the commercial theatre, there is pressure to produce musicals that have familiar titles, either because they are a revival of an older successful musical, or because they are based on a based on a famous movie, and/or include the songs of a famous musician. The pressures that non-profit theaters were founded against have now infiltrated these institutions.

Where the non-profit theaters have begun to fall short, other organizations have risen in more efforts to supplement artists' creative process and income through fellowships, grants and awards. Specifically for musical theater there are the Jonathan Larson Grants, the Kleban Prize for Musical Theater, the Richard Rodgers award and the Dramatist Guild Fellowship. There are writers' retreats, and festivals that artists can apply to in order to get their work up. The New York Musical Theater Festival (NYMF) is particularly notable for its popularity, and the National Music Theater Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center has been providing a place to develop musicals since the 70s. The National Alliance for Musical Theater (NAMT) was founded in the 80's in direct response to the issues that constantly plague musical theater, "The two original concerns of its founders remain uppermost on the Alliance's agenda: the need for more new works and finding a way to produce musical theatre more affordably" ("History-NAMT"). Though it is questionable if NAMT's efforts have been at all effective. Paulette Haupt, the artistic director of the NMTC at the O'Neill reflects, "Even though the NAMT

theaters want to do new work, they don't often enough actually initiate something that is unknown without some support from outside. And it really makes me sad that more unknown and really talented writers aren't getting Broadway or Off-Broadway productions. That's still a very hard mountain to climb" (Haupt).

Many organizations exist solely to support the development of musical theater in various capacities: NYMF, NAMT, NAMT Festival, Goodspeed's Festival of new Musicals, The JMF Writers Colony at Goodspeed Musicals, Uncharted at Ars Nova, Playwright's New Works Lab, Barrington Stage Company Musical Theatre Lab Series, New York Stage and Film, The O'Neill Theater Center, Williamstown, Theatreworks' New Works Festival, Finger Lakes Musical Theater Festival, New Dramatists Composer-Librettist Studio, Pace New Musicals, and most recently Musical Theatre Factory (which is more of a volunteer-based organization). Some are old stalwarts, but many were founded within the past fifteen years (NYMF, Goodspeed's Festival, JMF Writer's Colony, Uncharted, Barrington's Musical Theater Lab, Theatreworks' New Works Festival, Fingerlakes, Pace and Musical Theatre Factory). These organizations were created with the goal of nurturing new musicals in the hopes that this kind of support would give artists space to do work, and eventually result in better crafted musicals, and in turn, more musicals being produced.

While the above organizations are well-intentioned, financial pressures often make it so these development steps are not a means to an end. Today, in the non-profit world, the pendulum has swung from development as support of artists, to development as a never-ending cycle that artists and projects often get trapped in. Readings and workshops are cheaper to mount than full productions and give the added benefit of developing a show in a comparatively low pressured

situation. This situation is common for plays, but is for all intents and purposes a requirement for musicals. A typical example is the plight of the show, *Venice* - a hip-hop musical retelling of *Othello* in a dystopian society. It was new, topical, and written by a fresh young writer. In 2009 *Venice* had a workshop production at Center Theater Group in Los Angeles. The next year, *Venice* was co-produced by Kansas City Rep and Center Theater Group. The show was given a full production in Kansas City in April 2010 and Los Angeles in October 2010 (Hetrick). The productions were well received, even developing a small group of fans in Los Angeles and Time magazine hailed it “the years best musical” (Zoglin). It seems as if this show could have directly transferred to the East Coast fully formed, but instead it was given another workshop at the Public Theater in 2012 and then a developmental production with the Public LAB in 2013 (Hetrick). The Public Lab “was designed as an opportunity for emerging and mid-career artists to actively develop a piece on its feet, in front of an audience. The runs are shorter, the design elements are less expensive and the production is not open for critical review” (Moore). *Venice* failed to develop any positive buzz and has since disappeared. *Venice*’s path is far from unique and only unusual in that it made it to a high profile New York non-profit at all.

Many musicals are given readings or workshops in the regions or non-profit theaters and never receive productions. Kent Nicholson, the Director of Musical Theater at Playwright’s Horizons and former Director of New Works at TheatreWorks in Palo Alto, California shares his perspective on the current state of the development process:

I think some of it is changing the focus of the development process and some of it is changing the mindset of the producers. We put writers in a bind. We put artists in a bind in this business, because we expect them to develop the work in an imperfect system, but we judge it as if we want it to be perfect. And the disconnect between that is not often acknowledged. So writers are not in those workshop situations where they’re re-writing never free to fail, because we put so much pressure on those public

presentations to be perfect and because we use them to raise money and we use time to build buzz and we use them to do everything that we shouldn't be doing. And so we're not really protecting anybody. I think that creates big problems. (Nicholson)

Artists are given development opportunities, but those opportunities are often used as the thing that theaters use to judge whether they want to move on with a project. Every part of the process has become rife with pressure. The mindset is not “this is a great idea, we are committed to producing this piece, and seeing it through every step of development.” Instead ideas are given readings and workshops in order to prove themselves worthy of moving forward to the next reading or workshop and the much sought after, but rarely received production.

Development is useful for many aspects of sustaining an artists' career, but what creators really need to hone their art is productions. “The Gates of Opportunity” was a 2006 study funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, which surveyed the “infrastructure for new works and new voices in the American Theater.” In the report, David Dower writes:

In every community, the generative artists said that what they need most to continue their artistic and professional development are production opportunities. It was surprising to me how little they distinguished between the quality of the opportunity, the pay scale, or its perceived status. In particular, playwrights and people working on their behalf expressed a strong voice that until the elements of production (designs, marketing energy, audiences, and even critics) were brought together around their project, they could not fully see what was being created and where they were in the process. Unless they were in the middle of a production process, however underresourced or high-pressured, they weren't learning the skills they need to sustain themselves in the profession. (22)

Oftentimes, an artists' first or second projects enables the third or fourth productions to be a masterpiece. Failure is an integral part of the artistic process. Writers learn from mistakes, and develop the skills to make the next piece better. Readings and workshops of shows are useful parts of the musical development process, but productions are necessary for musical theater writers to develop as artists.

There is a relatively new phenomenon of young musical theater makers who seem to have proven themselves, but have yet to achieve a sustainable career as a musical theater writer. There are many such groups, but for my purposes, I will focus on two individuals and two writing teams. First up, Ryan Scott Oliver, is spoken of in the press as “the best composer working today without a major production” (Backstage Staff). Ryan Scott Oliver is 30 years old, has written nine musicals, is a NYU Musical Theater Writing Alumni and has done many concert versions of his shows throughout New York City at venues such as Joe’s Pub and 54 Below (Oliver). Joe Iconis is 33, also an NYU Musical Theater Writing Alum, has eight shows written and one regional production under his belt (“Joe Iconis”). His songs have appeared on *Smash* and he has a cabaret presence in New York performing with his band of performers/musicians he calls “The Family.” Benj Pasek and Justin Paul are 29 and 30 respectively, and are referred to by the press as “wunderkind writers” (Jones). They have written six shows, which include two of the most high profile pieces of the group: an off-Broadway production of *Dogfight* and they were brought on as replacement songwriters for *A Christmas Story* on Broadway. Their songs were also featured on the TV show *Smash* and their show *Edges* is a particular favorite of college musical theater students across the nation (Pasek). Kait Kerrigan and Brian Lowdermilk are 33 and 32 respectively, they are alums of the BMI Lehmen Engel Musical Theatre Workshop, they have nine shows written, and successfully kickstarted their first album and tour, exceeding their original goal of \$10,000 in forty-eight hours and ultimately raising \$30,000 in one month (Kerrigan).

These writers have all benefited from the multiplicity of resources for musical theater development. Between the six of them, they have been to every major residency in the country

Everyone except Pasek & Paul have had shows at NYMF, many have had songs performed at NAMT. The fellowships and awards in particular have been integral to their early careers. These six young people have been the beneficiaries of many awards. They have all won the Jonathan Larson award, Joe Iconis and Kait Kerrigan have won the Kleban, all except Joe Iconis have been Dramatist Guild Fellows, four have won the Richard Rodgers Award - just to name a few. The greatest benefit of these awards is the potential for a small bit of financial security. Joe Iconis asserts "I've been lucky that I haven't had a 'survival job' since I graduated. I sort of had unusual circumstances, winning some very generous awards out of school that I lived off of. And I've been floating by on writing stuff of various sizes for the last couple years. But, it's scary" ("Behind the Madness"). Kerrigan says winning the Kleban was "a game-changer, but it doesn't change anything else at all" (Kerrigan). She claims that the money was incredibly helpful, so that she could keep writing full time, but the awards unfortunately do not bring any more notoriety or increase the chance of being produced. She adds that the Dramatists Guild Fellowship in particular has value in other ways. It brings writers of both plays and musicals together in a group, connects them with established artists, and is especially unique in that it pairs young writers with mentors,

The fellowship was really impactful. Lynn Ahrens and Steve Flaherty are really really good teachers and we were there when they were there. We also had a really good group [...] The fact that it goes back and forth between playwrights and composers was really amazing - and you sit in on both. So you spend half of your time talking about plays, and half of your time talking about musicals with playwrights." (Kerrigan)

These awards and fellowships have done what they were created to do - they have supported these young writers and enabled them to create, and learn. The systems that have been put in

place are working to a point and the artists have the work to show for it, but nothing has led them to consistent productions at non-profit theaters.

One organization that is doing these young writers and the theater community at large a fantastic service is TheaterworksUSA. TheaterworksUSA is an organization that tours shows aimed at children, and Ryan Scott Oliver, Joe Iconis, Pasek & Paul and Kerrigan-Lowdermilk have all written at least one show for them. Kait Kerrigan claims, “I think one of the best developmental processes I’ve actually ever been in is Theaterworks. [...] It was two years start to finish. You got hired to do a job, you then were given deadlines over the course of two years that landed in a production” (Kerrigan). Theaterworks hires young writers, pays them to do their chosen profession, and then they are able to go through the experience of a development process and putting up a show. It is exactly what these young writers need and Theaterworks is becoming a staple of musical theater writing education as much as NYU Graduate Musical Theater Writing or BMI. The other wonderful aspect of Theaterworks is that they are not only employing and giving practical experience to our next generation of musical theater writers, but they are developing future musical theater audiences as well. A recent study on arts attendance in America found, “The state-by-state statistics also yielded an interesting additional piece of information: Exposure to the arts in childhood is a very strong predictor of participation in the arts as an adult. Indeed, it was even a stronger prediction than age or income” (Psmag). TheaterworksUSA is one organization that has found a pragmatic and meaningful way to fulfill multiple needs of the musical theatre community.

Though various non-profit organizations have supported the livelihood of this group of emerging musical theatre writers, they have been unable to transcend the development sphere.

They all have material, they have been dubbed by the theater community and the press as the next generation of musical theater creators, and yet their works are rarely produced if at all. Pasek & Paul have had one Broadway show, but they were brought on as replacement writers and were not originally a part of the conception. Ryan Scott Oliver and Joe Iconis are finally having a couple shows produced outside New York just this year. Ryan Scott Oliver's *Jasper in Deadland* will be at the 5th Avenue Theater in Seattle, a last minute stroke of luck due to *Something Rotten*'s decision to go to Broadway and forego their pre-New York tryout. Joe Iconis is premiering *Be More Chill* at Two River Theater in New Jersey. However, for the most part, the current non-profit system has evolved to the point where the majority of theaters find musicals by young contemporary musical theater writers to be an undue risk to produce. The musicals that are produced in the non-profit sphere are largely the result of a commercial producer giving the non-profit money to aid in producing a specific show.

3. Enhancement

In the last twenty years, financial problems on both sides have caused the border between the non-profit and commercial theater to become more permeable. Though the practice was formerly stigmatized, today commercial producers frequently approach non-profit theaters with shows they would like the non-profit to do, the money to do it with, and the promise of royalties if the show gains traction. Just last year, *American Theatre Magazine* reported on the pervasiveness of the current situation and explained the particulars:

These days, for some nonprofits, such deals are so commonplace they're nearly rote. Pacts tend to hinge on a not-for-profit financing a production with the same amount of money it would budget for any show in its season, while the commercial producer kicks in whatever amount the project requires above and beyond that. The producer then has the right to steer the show into the commercial realm, while the nonprofit receives revenues from those market endeavors, often 1 to 2 percent until recoupment, when the percentage can go up. ("Defining the Relationship")

Enhancement money is a huge phenomenon within the realm of musical theater producing. It is such a wide-spread occurrence that the vast majority of musicals in the last ten to twenty years that reach Broadway were given a first production at a non-profit with enhancement. To name a few: *Bridges of Madison County* (Williamstown 2013, Broadway 2014), *Hamilton* (New York Stage and Film and The Public 2015, Broadway 2015), *Finding Neverland* (American Repertory Theater 2014, Broadway 2015), *Once* (ART 2011, New York Theatre Workshop 2011, Broadway 2012), *Fun Home* (The Public 2013, Broadway 2015), *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* (Hartford Stage 2012, Old Globe 2013, Broadway 2013) and even *Rent* (NYTW 1996, Broadway 1996). It is increasingly rare to see musicals produced by non-profits without enhancement money and it is even more rare for a commercial producer to pick up a show from a non-profit that did not have a commercial genesis. The only two shows that have recently transferred from a

purely non-profit beginning are *Here Lies Love* (The Public 2013, commercial transfer 2014) and *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* (Ars Nova 2012, commercial transfer 2013).

Notably, neither of them went to Broadway - they merely received commercial runs, and the former had huge names attached to it in the form of David Byrne and Fatboy Slim. These two shows were also developed by non-profits in New York City—Musicals that premiere in the regions without enhancement are largely ignored by major producers.

As previously discussed, commercial projects of the past would open out of town in order to work on the show before opening in New York. Jack Tantleff, the head of Paradigm Talent Agency's theatrical literary department asserts that "it's almost inarguable that regional [non-profit] theatres have replaced the commercial out of town tryout." (Vogel 145) Commercial producer Joey Parnes agrees with Tantleff, adding, "The obvious advantage is always economic, because in this economy, the model we all used years ago of taking a show out of town for a commercial tryout doesn't quite work anymore" ("Defining the Relationship"). Indeed, from a risk mitigation and development standpoint, bringing a show to a non-profit is far superior to the old out of town tryout, because not only is it less expensive, but non-profit theaters have built in development resources and dramaturgical support.

"But there's a lot more to be gained in working with the nonprofit in terms of the development of the work itself," Parnes explains. "Having a really astute nonprofit producer creatively developing a project over a number of years, at a theatre devoted to developing new works and good at developing new works, is a huge benefit." ("Defining the Relationship")

By bringing work to a non-profit theater, the financial risk is depressurized on two fronts. First, it costs less money to enhance a show than to fund an entire production. Second, the show has time to develop, shepherded by those who specialize in developing plays and musicals. In the best

case, this development results in a stronger piece artistically, which has the potential to save money in the long run. Commercial producer Daryl Roth also points out:

The bad thing about doing it commercially is that if it doesn't work, there is very little afterlife available and you will have blown the entire budget. The writer has no safety net within which to fall. Commercially, it will cost a lot of money to put it up. If it doesn't work and it is over, it's a harder fall - there is just no cushion." (Vogel 101)

Doing a show at a non-profit softens that fall for the reputations of those involved should it fail, or at least girds against it. Enhancement is a less expensive option and it provides access to a development process that allows the artist to learn about the piece dramaturgically.

Non-profit theaters also benefit from more than just the budget increase and the promise of royalties. If a show produced by a non-profit theater goes to Broadway, the theater gains notoriety. Michael Kaiser, president of the Kennedy Center claims that the attention is incredibly useful both financially and artistically:

More than 60 percent of our fundraising is done outside of Washington, so there's a real rationale for being in New York, in terms of its potential for expanding the donor base and benefitting from the national attention of a Broadway run. [...] Those earlier Broadway transfers gave us great credibility with the creative community. [...] It's why the *Side Show* people thought of us. If we hadn't moved *Ragtime* and *Follies*, I don't think some of the projects we're doing now would have come to us.
(Defining the Relationship)

Enhancement has allowed the Kennedy Center to gather more donors, and initiate more projects.

In addition to financial factors, Kaiser notes that a Broadway transfer can change a theater's cultural cachet within the theatrical community.

Audiences and theatre staffs alike feel significant pride when one of the shows they embrace is validated by a successful future life elsewhere. Besides, working closely with commercial producers can also provide an important opportunity for institutional learning. [Susan] Medak remembers that the extraordinary sound requirements to mount *American Idiot*, the commercially enhanced rock musical by the band Green Day, prompted the entire sound department [of Berkeley Rep] to learn new tricks. "I think that kind of thing is one of the aspects of these collaborations that have been of

the greatest value to us as an organization,” she says. In the best possible scenario, an interaction with the commercial world doesn’t sully a not-for-profit’s mission, but marks a true extension of it. (“Defining the Relationship”)

Relationships outside the non-profit sphere can be enriching for a theatrical institution. Often the only barrier between a non-profit theater and executing their mission to its fullest extent is a financial one. This money and these commercial relationships have the ability to break down a few pieces of that wall.

Artistic leaders widely share the point of view that enhancement is all for the sake of the work in question. Enhancement is good and it is necessary, because it allows musical theater to be done in an inhospitable climate. Composer Jeanine Tesori, whose work hops in and out of non-profit and for-profit lines claims that as an artist, the intermingling has little effect on her, “Every producing entity has their own way that’s right for them, and I can’t think about it too much. Everything I’ve done has given me things to put in my tackle box, artistically. For me, it’s all about getting the needs of the piece met” (“Defining the Relationship”). The artistic directors of nonprofits who take enhancement say that it does not impact the artistic integrity of their institutions:

“The truth is,” said Michael Maso, the Huntington’s managing director, “we’re all approached all the time with commercial money, and most of the things that people send to us are just plays that we don’t want to do — either plays or musicals — and so we don’t do it. We have relationships with commercial producers when either they are the way that we can afford to do something that is just too big for our budget, or when they come attached to something, and we can help develop a piece, but we really care about the piece.” (Collins-Hughes)

“There are things I do regularly that horrify Robert Brustein,” admits Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theater [...] “But my job is to figure out, in this environment, how to fulfill our mission. We just have to be very vigilant that we are not watering down what we stand for.” There’s the rub, as the challenges of sustaining subscriberships, buildings and staffs make commercial money increasingly tempting no matter what the project. (“Defining the Relationship”)

“In this changing environment of the arts in America, it is a reality for institutions to seek partnerships that enable the work,” says Diane Paulus, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass. (“Defining the Relationship”)

The largely held perspective is that enhancement is vital in order to produce musicals at a non-profit level. Specifically for those pieces (read: musicals) that cost more than the theaters usually budget for slots in their theatrical season.

Though enhancement may seem benign and as a practice is hard to credibly argue against in this economic climate, the subtle negative effects of its widespread adoption are beginning to ripple outward on the landscape of the contemporary musical. Slowly but surely enhancement has undermined the mission of non-profit theater. Robert Brustein is quoted as saying:

“The alternative theatre, the resident theatre, was originally founded to do the kind of work Broadway couldn’t do, or wouldn’t do, or couldn’t afford to do,” Brustein says. “If the nonprofit and the commercial theatres merge, one of them is going to lose direction, and I think the nonprofit theatre is doing that right now.” [...] He bristles that since it began some 50 years ago, the not-for-profit movement has been adulterated by the very commercial forces that it was created to counterbalance. (“Defining the Relationship”)

Musicals are particularly implicated in this phenomenon, because enhancement money is used to fund a disproportionate number of musicals. Though artistic directors assert they choose pieces that they would do anyway, most of these contemporary musical projects in fact have a commercial beginnings. Kent Nicholson articulates the problematic nature of this model:

I think the enhancement money in the not-for-profit world creates huge problems, because we’re not allowing writers to write what they want to write, we’re asking them to write what commercial producers - for musicals, commercial producers are essentially the artistic directors of the United States of America. And it’s a problem, because the questions that they ask upon creating a project are not the same questions that artists ask, so we start from the base of ‘how do I sell tickets’ instead of what do I want to say. And that’s a big problem. And I think if you look at the history of

musicals, you know - large numbers of the biggest successes ever don't start as commercial projects. They get discovered along the way. And so by actually ensuring that the only way a piece will get produced is to be commercial, and starting that early in the genesis of it, we're actually cutting artist's voices out of the mix and I think that's a problem." (Nicholson)

The absolute dominance of commercial producers in bringing their pieces to non-profits cuts artists' voices out of the mix and it cuts many artists themselves out of a career. Non-traditional musicals, and early career artists are excised just as with fully commercial projects, because even with enhancement they are an undue risk to a commercial producer. As Rocco Landesman stated so eloquently, "it can be reasonably argued that the forces of the marketplace through the years have been just as effective a censor as government edicts" (Landesman)

A few commercial producers and artistic directors have noticed the adverse effects of enhancement deals:

And yet Mr. Nicola [Artistic Director of New York Theater Workshop], who still makes enhancement deals, said he regretted his decision to take the money. Enhancement, he said, causes the specter of a commercial transfer to hover over the artistic process. 'It just pollutes the atmosphere, distorts it,' he said.

Carole Shorenstein Hays, one of the most active enhancing producers of the past few years — she helped fund *Caroline, or Change* at the [Public Theater](#) and *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife* at the Manhattan Theater Club — shares Mr. Nicola's concern. "I'm asking myself the question: Am I doing everyone a service?" she said. Off Broadway theaters have not been presenting enough adventurous or compelling writing, Ms. Hays said, so she is reconsidering her enhancement. "I'm kind of folding my hands, quite honestly," she said, "because I think it does start polluting everything." (Roberston)

Though Mr. Nicola and Ms. Shorenstein Hays have acknowledged these problems, they are both still making enhancement deals. The new system is incredibly pervasive, and everyone needs the money. In this climate, it is difficult to stop this practice, even when people are aware of how

unique and valuable of a space the non-profit work environment unplagued by the “specter of a commercial transfer” is.

One major result of this movement is that artistic leaders have fully internalized the commercial sales pitch and convinced themselves that they cannot do musicals without enhancement, and on the other side, commercial producers have made a non-profit production a prerequisite to become a candidate for a Broadway production. The rhetoric and a narrative surrounding enhancement frames the practice as absolutely necessary. Enhancement is written about as if theaters and producers have absolutely no choice in the matter if they wish to survive. For instance, in the Commercial Theater Institute’s *Guide to Producing Plays and Musicals*, “The economics of theatre have become such that commercial theatres need help from not-for-profits. Equally, not-for-profits need help from commercial producers.” (Vogel 70) In *American Theater Magazine*, “In the eyes of most not-for-profit leaders as well as commercial producers, the overlap is an ongoing, occasionally fraught partnership borne out of economic necessity.” (“Defining the Relationship”) “But for now, absent alternative markers of achievement and sufficient government subsidization, partnerships with the commercial world must be done to survive, most agree.” (“Defining the Relationship”) This writing is filled with words like “need” “to survive” “economic necessity.”

However, despite the internalization of the commercial logic, non-profit theaters are not required to take enhancement - it is still a choice. There are many different ways to respond to economic distress, and enhancement is merely one of those options.

“Everybody always says, ‘You have to do this,’ but you don’t have to do anything,” opines Carey Perloff, artistic director at San Francisco’s American Conservatory Theater which in recent years has largely eschewed commercial

partnerships in favor of pooling resources in not-for-profit co-productions. “We are the leaders of this field. We can do something else, if we want to.”
 (“Defining the Relationship”)

Kent Nicholson, the Director of New Musicals at Playwright’s Horizons agrees with Perloff:

I feel like we rely too heavily on it. I get frustrated at any theatre company that says that they can’t afford to produce a musical without enhancement, because my answer to that is ‘actually you can, you just have to go out and raise more money and increase your budget.’ It’s as simple as that. It’s not easy, but it’s simple. So if you need 700,000 extra dollars in order to produce a musical, then go find 700,000 extra dollars. That can come from a series of angels, that can come from a campaign specifically to do it, that can come from a grant, that can come from ticket sales that can come from anything. It does not have to come from enhancement, but we’ve cornered ourselves in this industry into saying that the only way to afford musicals is to have the commercial producer pay for it and I obviously feel like that’s problematic. (Nicholson)

Playwrights Horizons has recently stopped taking enhancement, which will mean fewer productions of musicals, but they feel it will enable them to maintain the integrity of the work.

Enhancement is not entirely a destructive force. There are commercial producers who do have a vested interest in further musical theater as an art form, and sometimes it acts a “true extension” of a theater’s mission. The practice has enabled works such renowned works as *Spring Awakening*, *Rent*, *Next to Normal*, *Hamilton* and *Fun Home*. The current problem is not so much the existence of enhancement, as the scale. It is rare that musicals are produced without it, which puts the majority of the power in the hands commercial producers. The art form would be healthier if more musicals were originated at non-profits then a commercial producer approached. As the situation stands, commercial producers have stopped looking to the non-profits for new artists and work to transfer to commercial runs. There is no need when they can easily take their own projects that they already own the options to through the non-profit theater. Enhancement needs to be reigned in and replaced with a model that empowers non-profits to nurture and produce musicals independently.

IV. Alternate Models

After all of this one could ask, is the musical theater form simply dying? Has the audience for such pieces disappeared? Despite long having transitioned from popular to niche culture, box office figures contradict that easy answer. In the Broadway realm, audience attendance is up almost twice as much as attendance in the eighties (Broadway League). Non-mainstream musical theatre is likewise going strong, as evidenced by the followings that many young musical theatre writers have developed through new digital distribution channels. Musical theatre fandom is thriving, but this group is not currently being engaged. Non-profits and commercial producers are stuck in old paradigms and have been unable to adapt. However, there are a number of success stories who have utilized new modes of fundraising and audience development.

In the past, cast recordings were the only way to distribute musical theater content. Today, the Internet and specifically YouTube has been integral in developing fans of new musical theater writers, who all have their own channels. Kerrigan-Lowdermilk's most popular video is Broadway heartthrob Aaron Tveit singing their song "Run Away with Me" and has been viewed 890,000 times. Their second most popular is Jeremy Jordan singing the same song, which has been viewed 308,000 times. They have an arsenal of videos viewed between 30,000 - 100,000 times. Ryan Scott Oliver's videos hover between 12,000-50,000 views. Pasek & Paul 15,000-280,000 views and Joe Iconis 9,000-50,000 views. Joe Iconis' Smash song, "Broadway Here I come" is rated the most popular song of the Smash Season 2 album, with Pasek & Paul's "Rewrite This Story" right behind in second place. YouTube has allowed musical theater writers to achieve a sort of fame previously only available to high-profile creators blessed by Broadway.

Kait Kerrigan says, “People recognize me on the subway! It’s super weird” (Kerrigan). Stephen Schwartz and Scott Shaiman, songwriters a generation or so removed reflect:

"I actually think it's a good time [for new writers] for many reasons. It's much, much easier to [put your material out into the world]... I think that's what you do. You have to have something you can show — an example of your work — that you can give to someone to listen to, and I think it's become easier to do that," said Schwartz. Shaiman added, "The Internet is so fantastic for exposing songwriters who haven't had a Broadway break — [or] anything close to that — [because] now their songs are literally around the world, and they're being sung by people, and that's unbelievable." (Gioia)

The fans are out there - and they exist all around the world.

YouTube has also created a demand for sheet music. Kerrigan-Lowdermilk and Pasek & Paul decided it was necessary to create newmusicaltheatre.com in 2009, which is a website that allows composers/lyricists to self-publish their own sheet music and sell it online. Kait Kerrigan says of that time, “We were making a living and it’s because of YouTube and it’s because of sheet music” (Kerrigan). There are fifty composers/composer-lyricist teams currently represented on newmusicaltheatre.com - including Kerrigan-Lowdermilk, Pasek & Paul, Joe Iconis and Ryan Scott Oliver. The up and coming generation of musical theater aficionados know these names and they know their music.

Musical theater’s rabid fan base is even more so encouraged by social media and fan websites. Lin Manuel interacts with his sixty-thousand Twitter followers on a daily basis, and there are Tumblrs devoted to everything from discussing Sondheim’s body of work to discussions of Jeremy Jordan’s muscles. In a survey of the 2014 Broadway audience, the Broadway League found, “The group of devoted fans who attended 15 or more performances comprised only 5% of the audience, but accounted for 35% of all tickets” (Broadway League). The generation who is currently entering their thirties grew up watching Disney musicals - they

understand and have nostalgia for the form. Their internet savvy also means that they share positive experiences with friends through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Fans of this age have the capacity to generate and spread exactly the type of buzz shows need to draw in an audience. These fans could be a powerful force if theaters and producers learned to effectively tap into this community.

Kerrigan-Lowdermilk have enough dedicated fans that they raised \$30,000.00 on Kickstarter to record an album and go on tour. They are labelled as musical theater writers, but their fame is largely derived from single songs - not the musicals they are from, because those musicals have not been produced. Joe Iconis notes this frustrating disconnect:

There's also a weird thing happening with YouTube that's great, and also annoying. It's now the platform for getting stuff out there and for the musical theater fans to hear new stuff. And lots of writers focus so hard on getting material up on YouTube. And YouTube's been great, but it hasn't necessarily helped me get a show onto a stage - which is what I'm really most concerned about.” (“Behind the Madness”)

Kait Kerrigan feels similarly,

And we spent so much time making videos and putting them on YouTube just so we could sell our sheet music - just as a means to an end - until maybe last year when we realized that the majority of everything that we've done is actually on YouTube and not in the theatre [...] On some level you're trying to get the tiniest space of the smallest theater in New York City and everyone's like 'ooooo I don't know if this is worthy and I don't know if this can sell tickets,' and you're like 'are you kidding? you're talking about 75 seats! We can sell 75 seats! Do you want me to call the people? It's just not that many seats! How many months do we want to do here - oh we're talking about three weeks? Okay. It's a very tiny number! (Kerrigan)

Kerrigan also believes that the disconnect has to do with age:

I think a huge percentage of it is age-based, because - I can tell you exactly what our demographic is, because all these social media outlets have demographics - our demographic is between 65-70% female ages 13-25 and then there's a small little bump of men between 40 and 50 - but mostly it's these teenage girls between 13 and 25. [...] I think it's probably basically true for all these people - but Artistic directors are not interested in that demographic at all, because it's all subscription based. And

subscribers are old and there's no interest in writing a show for someone between the ages of 13 and 25 at all. And trying to get that audience to come to the theater is not that interesting to anybody, because they don't have enough money. It's exactly who you want on the internet, it's exactly who you want for the movies - it's just not who you want in theater. (Kerrigan)

Perhaps that is the main problem with composers who have a following based on YouTube - it's geared toward a younger generation who traditionally aren't subscribing to theaters. However, *Wicked* - which is printing money - has that exact same demographic.

Many producers and artistic leaders cast theater audiences in both an adversarial and completely mysterious role, though as these artists have shown there is a large fanbase for these works. In order to successfully sell tickets and keep shows running, the marketing conversation needs to be reframed and more resources should be put toward actively finding a specific audience for a specific piece. We live in a time where niche interests are incredibly accessible, and we have the ability to target marketing more than ever. Finding that audience should be the number one priority across non-profit and commercial spheres. Again, to use *Wicked* as an example - it speaks to teen girls and the lukewarm reception from the critics had no effect on its longevity.

The past couple of years have seen several Broadway musicals fail to find an audience, and I would argue that an aspect of the failure was a result of the way the show was marketed. In the press, the producers have been part baffled and part angry at Broadway audiences:

Mr. Seller said that he had no theories for why more female theatergoers (who make up about 70 percent of Broadway audiences) and Sting fans did not embrace *The Last Ship*, about the troubled lives of shipbuilders and young people in a struggling British town. But he did say he was wrong to focus the marketing strategy and television commercials on the shipbuilders, which, Mr. Seller said he realized in hindsight, "American audiences don't really relate to." He said he wished he had focused instead on the young love story at the center of the show. ("Producers Struggle to Fathom")

In an interview he gave to *Variety* when *Holler* was on the ropes but before the closing announcement, the show's lead producer, Eric L. Gold, said, "If we don't succeed, it's going to be very difficult to do another rap or hip-hop show on Broadway," suggesting that producers would cite the show's failure as proof that Broadway audiences — who are overwhelmingly white — resisted *Holler* because they found the music unfamiliar or unappealing." (Isherwood)

Both Mr. Seller and Mr. Gold made assumptions about the "Broadway Audience" as if it is a client base that cannot be altered. It is true that tourists make up a large percentage of the Broadway audience, and though it is easy to classify all those tourists under an umbrella of "non-discriminate theater goer" - it is shortsighted. Tourists are individuals with various interests - who may not care about Sting, but might find the story of *The Last Ship* interesting. Perhaps the average Broadway ticket buyers are not Tupac fans, which would make it even more important to locate who those fans are and where advertising could reach them.

The importance of intelligent and pointed marketing cannot be understated. Recently, the musical, *Bridges of Madison County* failed to develop an audience and closed after a few months. *Bridges* was an adaptation of a book and a movie that added new contours of meaning. The show resonated with young women, but unfortunately, the marketing was not at all geared toward building and sustaining that particular audience. This fatal shortcoming is discussed in interview with the book writer Marsha Norman:

Victoria Meyers : What we found really interesting was how these young women were engaged with the show. They were really thinking about it and putting it in dialogue with their own lives and other narratives. We think that's really important. Yet it was never talked about. The PR people never engaged with that demographic—where were the PR people for that?

Marsha Norman: "Where are the PR people" is a really good question about the show. I think this show failed to find an audience primarily because the PR people sold it based on an image that people thought they'd already experienced. They thought, "I saw it with Meryl Streep and Clint Eastwood. Why would I see this show?" And, of course, we had made an entirely different show. We created a whole town—I created

the dad, the kids, the neighbors, the whole town—but we didn't have a way to tell the audience, "Come see *Our Town* with music and an affair."

VM: And that you'd totally switched the protagonist and made it into a story about a woman.

MN: Right, let's see what it is to be an immigrant in America. Let's see what the friendship is between women that lasts over a lifetime. (Norman)

This musical was more than just a musicalized version of the movie, but the marketing people did not sell it as such. The advertising featured a muscular Stephen Pasquale embracing Kelli O'Hara in a negligé. The focus of the musical was not in fact the steamy affair that the poster sold, it was about a woman who was never able to pursue her individual passions, because her life had been devoted to family. It was about women of a certain time lacking options and the affair is the representation of a completely different life where Francesca could have been an artist who travels the world, instead of a being farm wife. *Bridges* spoke to a group of young women who were so moved that they continued to engage with the subject matter at a later date. They wrote posts Tumblr about the main character's situation and choices, and they discussed with others on the internet about how it resonated with them as women. Those girls are the target audience, and they are potential advocates for the piece. If the marketing department had focused on that demographic, then maybe *Bridges of Madison County* would not have closed so prematurely.

Another way to utilize fans and fan-culture is crowdfunding. Currently a buzzword in terms of alternate funding models crowdfunding provides a way to take the means of production away from a centralized power that is deficient in some manner (i.e. producers failing to produce the shows we want produced). Crowdfunding cuts out the middleman. Unfortunately, it is a model incredibly difficult to use for theater. It is not completely unheard of. Again, Kerrigan-

Lowdermilk crowdfunded an album and a tour, but they both admit that it was ultimately an excruciating process. It would be almost impossible to fund a production of a musical - especially a commercial production - through crowdfunding simply because of the scale, the legalities and the extreme amount of work. However, the non-profit theater already does have a system in place that is very similar to crowdfunding: the subscription model.

The popular narrative around the subscription model is that it will die out with the older generation, but in reality the younger generation subscribes all the time. When they believe in a project, they give it money through Kickstarter or Indieagogo. They support artists' living through Patreon - a website that crowdfunds patronage for individuals. Subscription at its purest form is just that - a group of people giving capital upfront to support a cause they believe in and to fund a project they want to see realized. Even the Kickstarter incentives are structured like subscription incentives - "at this level you get a T-shirt, at this level you get a backstage tour." However, theaters rarely frame the conversation in those terms.

Subscription is a useful, integral tool for the non-profit model, though it has fallen out of vogue in the past decade. The concepts in *Subscribe Now!* - the ur-text for the subscription system - are concepts that still apply today. Danny Newman asserts that a non-profit theater should be "should be constantly driving toward building a 'committed' audience (my own euphemism for subscription audience)" (Newman 55). Amanda Palmer, who spearheaded one of the most effective crowdfunding campaigns in history raising \$1,192,793 from 24,883 backers to record a studio album and go on tour with her band, says basically the same thing, "Effective crowdfunding is not about relying on the kindness of strangers, it's about relying on the kindness of your crowd. There's a difference" (Palmer 244). In both crowdfunding and subscription, the

emphasis is on finding your crowd - your devoted audience. Danny Newman bemoans non-specific tactics for finding an audience:

In fact, performing arts history is strewn with the wrecks of artistically meritorious groups which foundered for lack of finding their audiences, or to put it more correctly, because they expected their audiences to find them, without the pump-priming processes which are integral to the development of committed audiences. (Newman 39)

Committed audiences are key, because they understand and are rooting for the institution to succeed. Find the people your work speaks to. Amanda Palmer observes, “Fame doesn’t buy trust. Only connection does that” (Palmer 236). Connection is a key part of theater as a form.

The goal is to build a subscriber base that connects with the work you do, and trusts you in your artistic choices - even if a show fails. For instance, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival has a thriving membership program. The festival is a destination - a small town in Southern Oregon - and presents a variety of Shakespeare, contemporary plays, classics, international works and musicals. Their productions consistently play to 80% capacity or higher (TRG Arts). Not every piece is a hit, but they market the entire experience and gain members’ confidence in their mission. Their members are there to see the art, but they are also rooting for the organization.

To subscribe to a season is to crowdfund a season. A decline in the the subscription audience is one of the major reasons cited by non-profits for the lack of financial resources required to take risk. The old model is not without worth, but it certainly needs to take on a new narrative. If theaters return to the essence of subscription, reframe it for a younger crowd and put their resources toward finding a devoted audience, then it will become easier to take artistic risks.

There are other models that have sprung up as successful alternatives to commercial entanglement. Specifically, in New York City, Ars Nova actively makes artists their priority when selecting works for their season. The musical they are most well known for is *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*. They commissioned Dave Malloy, and developed the piece from the very beginning.

What we realized was what Dave was making was twice the size of one of our normal productions both in terms of the number of humans involved, and also the way in which we were going to have to transform the space. So we looked at our season and Jeremy and Jason greenlit what was a risky move which was to put all of our production resources for that whole season into that one show. So instead of doing two productions we only did one. We had to get special concession - again - from equity to do that. The argument being that we were actually employing the same number of people that we would over a normal season, we're just doing it all at once. And we had to get permission from our board, and it was a big deal to do that - but it was the only way to do the show. [...] It was a definite enormous undertaking, but in the end we would never had made that show if we were trying to make a show that was going to be a commercial hit. That was never in our thinking. Because it's such an unlikely commercial hit! So we were just trying to make a show we believed in, and hoping that it sold enough tickets that we didn't go under. I don't think the level of success it ended up having was even on our radar until the reviews started to come out. I mean, we knew we made a show that we loved and that people were really responding to - it was clear people were loving it even from early previews, but the level of success that it had ultimately came out of left field. (Shooltz)

Most theaters have a set season, because it is the easiest way to balance their budget. It is rare that a theater would change their season and allocate all their resources to one show. This flexibility shows a dedication to the artist and a willingness to see projects through to production - traits which are even more necessary, valuable, and rare today. Associate Artistic Director Emily Shooltz claims, "it's a lot of reinventing the wheel, and trying to stay as flexible as you can within the parameters of various contracts and space limitations and financial restrictions and all that jazz" (Shooltz). It is useful to remain supple, as it allows theaters to quickly react to changing times and to be open to new works, new musicals, and new models. *Natasha, Pierre*

and the Great Comet of 1812 was more expensive than the shows that Ars Nova typically does, but they found a way to do it, and they were rewarded. *Great Comet* transferred to a commercial run, and there are talks of it going to Broadway. However, the commercial transfer was not the intention - the intention was to support an artist that they cared about, and produce a different, interesting piece of theatre.

Ars Nova's loyalty to their artists is singular and the importance of that relationship cannot be understated. All of Ars Nova's programming is generated through artists who they have commissioned or had in residence in some capacity. They keep artists within their family, integrating them into their community and follow through on their work. Joe Iconis premiered his musical, *Bloodsong of Love* at Ars Nova in 2010 and notes how unique and necessary the organization is:

It's hard to begin work on something knowing that it's gonna be an excruciating battle getting it out into the world. That's why places like Ars Nova are so important -- they encourage and support artists and create a safe place for them to develop new work. Without worrying about whether or not it will be commercial or if the subscription will rebel against it. ("Never Heard Nothing")

Joe outlines precisely the reason non-profits were originally founded. Ars Nova successfully fulfills that niche without bowing under the pressures that plague all contemporary theater today.

Ars Nova also noticed the increasing lack of a space for atypical musicals, and decided to do something about it by founding a writing group for musical theater writers called, Uncharted:

There are opportunities for people who are making traditional musicals to find support - through BMI and the O'Neil and others who do that - but people who are trying to write non-traditional musicals don't have the same access to resources and so over the first three years of the group, we have honed in on people who are writing in a nontraditional format or who don't fit in the box of traditional musical theater" (Shooltz)

They exist to support artists and their work - and there is no doubt they are mounting productions that commercial theater producers would not take a chance on.

Most theaters would have said no to *Great Comet* when they realized what an undertaking it was going to be, particularly without the aid of enhancement money or the promise of commercial royalties, but Ars Nova said yes. Ars Nova is different from many non-profit theaters in that it is comparatively young and small, and it evolved from a single patron, who funded the entire operation at the very beginning. Now administratively, Ars Nova operates more like a traditional non-profit, gathering funds through their membership program, grants and individual donors. Their audience too is unusual, with their average patron being under the age of thirty-five (York). The theater has a markedly different vibe than other non-profit theaters in New York - from their hip theater bar, which sells candy, popcorn, and local beers, to the friendly and conversational tone of their website. Ars Nova has tapped into the younger generation in a way that most theaters could learn from.

In another example of a theater challenging older ways of operating and finding ways to produce new innovative works without enhancement, Playwrights Horizons has recently introduced a couple of programs that are pointed toward solving the problems facing contemporary theater artists, and non-profits. With an operating budget of 10.5 million, Playwrights Horizons is a bigger company than Ars Nova whose operating budget is 1.6 million (York). In an uncommon move intended to support artists, Artistic Director, Tim Sanford has taken pains this year to financially compensate the playwrights in his season for preproduction activities that they are normally not compensated for, and cover 50% of health care premiums.

Playwrights Horizons is on the generous end of the compensation spectrum. A two-theater company that produced the world premieres of recent Pulitzer Prize winners

like Annie Baker's *The Flick* and Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*, Playwrights Horizons pays writers a \$12,000 advance against the royalties they earn as a percentage of box office income, executives there said. By the end of a work's performances, which usually run a couple of months, writers typically earn a total of \$15,000 to \$20,000. If a production is a hit, and more performances are added, the amount can reach \$30,000 or so. (By comparison, productions at many other nonprofit theaters yield only four-figure sums for writers.) The theater will continue to pay the royalties; the additional health care and preproduction payments represent a 25 percent increase in guaranteed compensation for Playwrights Horizons writers, the company said. The \$33,600 cost is being covered by the theater's annual operating budget, which is currently about \$10.5 million. ("Better Deal")

As Playwrights usually includes a musical in their season every year or every other year, this affects musical theater writers as well. When it is so difficult to make a living as a writer for the theater, it is admirable that Playwrights is making this change. Writers' wages are an expense that can be easily cut down in non-profit budgets. Unlike actors, directors, choreographers and musicians, writers do not have a union fighting for better pay. Tim Sanford understands that the current manner in which playwrights are treated is not sustainable for the artist, or the art form. Playwrights is taking this problem head on and actually treating playwrights as an indispensable asset.

Playwrights has also introduced a new model to encourage the growth of musicals at non-profits without involving a commercial producer. They pitched the model to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and received \$2 million in 2008 to put their plan into action (Broadway.com Staff). Essentially, it is structured in such a way that Playwrights Horizons partners with another non-profit theater outside New York. The outside theater receives grant money to do the first production of the musical - a discrete production that doesn't have Playwrights' name on it - and then the musical comes to Playwrights Horizons for a second production, all the better for having a first production. It structured similarly to enhancement in that Playwrights is enhancing another

non-profit's budget, but none of the funding sources are commercial. Kent Nicholson remarks on the progress:

It's been great. I personally believe - and I think we can probably take it even further and probably will at some point in time - that the production of musicals is so dependent now on outside money that one way to counter that is to form partnerships. And while an out of town regional partnership, which is the basis of the Mellon Grant doesn't save you a ton of money, it still can save you some, because musicals are intensive projects. So if you have somebody sharing the cost of development over those years that certainly saves you money. And you're going to have to have - generally speaking, you want a production before the first one anyway, so that first regional production becomes essential before you have the spotlight that is New York. It's just a different environment. A show that doesn't do well out of town can still do well in New York. Learning from it. Even though - in the internet age, it's a little less hidden, but even so it's still safer." (Nicholson)

They've found that it makes that largest effect at smaller companies:

So we started to look at smaller, more midsize companies that maybe don't have a history of musicals, but want to - because for them any amount to defray the costs of doing it is going to make a difference. So - New York Stage and Film does a lot of musicals, but they're small. So the amount of money we had to give them was significant. The same thing was true of Williamstown. They don't do a lot of musicals, but the amount that we had to spend on that made a significant difference - so it enabled them to and they have done musicals since too" (Nicholson)

This model is actively countering enhancement and also proving to smaller companies that they can indeed do musicals. It is slowly breaking down the myth that a theater must have enhancement money from commercial sources to produce musical theater -- in addition to partnering with commercial producers, non-profit companies can partner with each other. The Mellon Grant also allows Playwrights the freedom to give resources to musical theater artists and musical pieces that are in no way commercial, freeing up the artistic process.

Though Ars Nova and Playwrights Horizons are doing remarkable things to further the form and support artists, their models are not necessarily scaleable to Broadway theaters or large non-profit institutions. A sixty-million dollar organization like Roundabout Theater Company

depends on a certain ratio of production budgets to ticket revenue in order to pay their administrators and balance their budget. It is difficult to change an established institution, because a miscalculation could mean a decrease in income with the result of people losing their jobs. But it is through small organizations like Ars Nova and Playwrights where change begins, and where a new generation of musical theater artists are finding their works produced. They have maintained the spirit of creation that many organizations have lost - and their work is slowly changing the theatrical landscape through the musicals they have produced and the artists that they support.

Conclusion

Economic forces have brought the musical to this juncture where commercial producers hold the majority of the power over what musicals are produced in this country. Playwrights Horizon's Musicals in Partnership Initiative is working to counter enhancement on a small level, assisting smaller non-profits overcome the gross expense of musical theatre production. The model of non-profit theaters across the United States coming together to pool resources is a worthwhile one to explore. Co-productions are an excellent way to empower non-profits to originate their own musicals. However, it is first essential to change the larger narrative surrounding enhancement from being a "necessity" to being a "tool." Enhancement is an option, but it is not the only option for producing musicals at the non-profit level. This small adjustment in the theatrical conversation could open up other creative avenues of thought and models for the non-profit theatre.

Though dialing back the depiction of enhancement as a necessity is helpful on a small level, the biggest barrier to the production of new and cutting edge musicals remains the cost. It was through the generous efforts of the Ford Foundation that the non-profit theatre movement was given life. Their dedication to this cause has resulted in 1800 non-profit theaters in the United States. In this vein, contemporary musical theatre needs a patron whose goal it is to diversify the production of musicals in order to make a large-scale shift in the contemporary theatrical landscape. It would take a foundation bestowing grants of unprecedented size on non-profits to encourage the growth of musicals that specifically take advantage of the theatrical form to effectively realize this change. Up to this point, commercial producers have the money that non-profits desperately need, which has led to stages across the country being filled with

musicals that promise wide popular appeal. Currently, no such force exists to counter the power of commercial resources, but future money from another source with the means that can match those of a commercial producers and a different agenda would have the ability make a difference. It is not a perfect solution, but it is one with historical precedent. There could very well be musical theatre fans among the young billionaires in the tech industry who might be moved to take on this cause, if someone were to make it their mission.

Outside of extreme financial intervention, change may be evoked gradually through innovative artistic leadership. Smaller organizations like Ars Nova and Playwrights Horizons are slowly altering the texture of the American Theatre. These two organizations are exceptions and not the norm, but their dedication to artists still has a ripple effect. The musicals they produce exist in the culture as examples of both what musical theatre can be, and what can be created when commercial pressures are absent from the artistic process. Their artists are better for the resources they received through Ars Nova and Playwrights, and artists' experiences at these theaters enable them to continue to create. Though the larger institutions have greater public visibility, small-scale operations can make a difference through bold artistic choices.

If steps are not taken to counter the dominance of derivative musicals, then the musical form as an artistic force will eventually disappear, replaced by pale musical imitations of media already in the zeitgeist. The only way to ensure the longevity of the musical is to support early career musical theater writers. Left un-produced, these creatives will never develop the skills necessary to learn their craft to the fullest extent, or contribute to the musical theatre canon. Without productions and unable to gain traction with their theatrical careers, the next generation of musical theatre writers will most likely leave the theatre to follow our best playwrights to jobs

in film and television, where they can earn a living. Out of the six young writers mentioned in this paper, Pasek & Paul are already working in television, and Kerrigan-Lowdermilk are seriously considering making the leap to film (Kerrigan). The fan-power behind these writers is something to be harnessed, as these are people who are earnest advocates for musical theatre. However, without productions these writers will move on, their fanbase will go untapped, and their potentially great American musicals will never be realized.

A healthy theatrical environment would encourage a resurgence of innovative new musicals that do not use famous names or brands as a crutch. The strength of the musical is its multifaceted form that utilizes music, dance and dialogue in its storytelling. The appeal of a theatrical piece like the smash hit *Sleep No More* - an interactive dance-theatre piece based on *Macbeth* - is that it is a singular physical experience that cannot be captured on film. When the musical form stands on its own, it too is a unique live event that is not accessible on demand. Whether they can articulate it or not, audiences go to the theater to see something different than the content they have in their HBO-Go queue. Musicals are particularly suited to give them a new experience, if only our generation of artistic directors and producers would step up to the challenge.

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