

Five, Six, Seven, Eight: Broadway by the Numbers

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Project Overview

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This document contains chapters in draft from my second book, *Five, Six, Seven, Eight: Broadway by the Numbers*. Some of this material has been published or presented in other fora, some of it is original here. All of it is subject to later revision as I receive feedback from colleagues.

The book will consist of an introduction and ten chapters. I include here the Introduction and five chapters. (The Introduction also outlines the entire project, including the undrafted material.) The chapters that follow are:

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1. Real Estate	26
2. People	46
5. Tickets	88
6. Show Times	114
7. Repetition	147

While many of the charts and data analysis are complete, I am still gathering and refining some data—most notably, in Chapter Five, ticket price data from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s.

Comments or suggestions or opportunities to discuss this material are welcome. Please contact me at [dmiller\(at\)fas.harvard.edu](mailto:dmiller@fas.harvard.edu).

Introduction Broadway and Data

One: Weekly production activity on Broadway, 1920–2020. A boom in the 1920s; a long, slow bust from the 1930s through mid-century; some modest growth since then. Sinusoidal fluctuations on an annual basis, suggesting a rhythmic pattern, discernible only in a higher resolution.

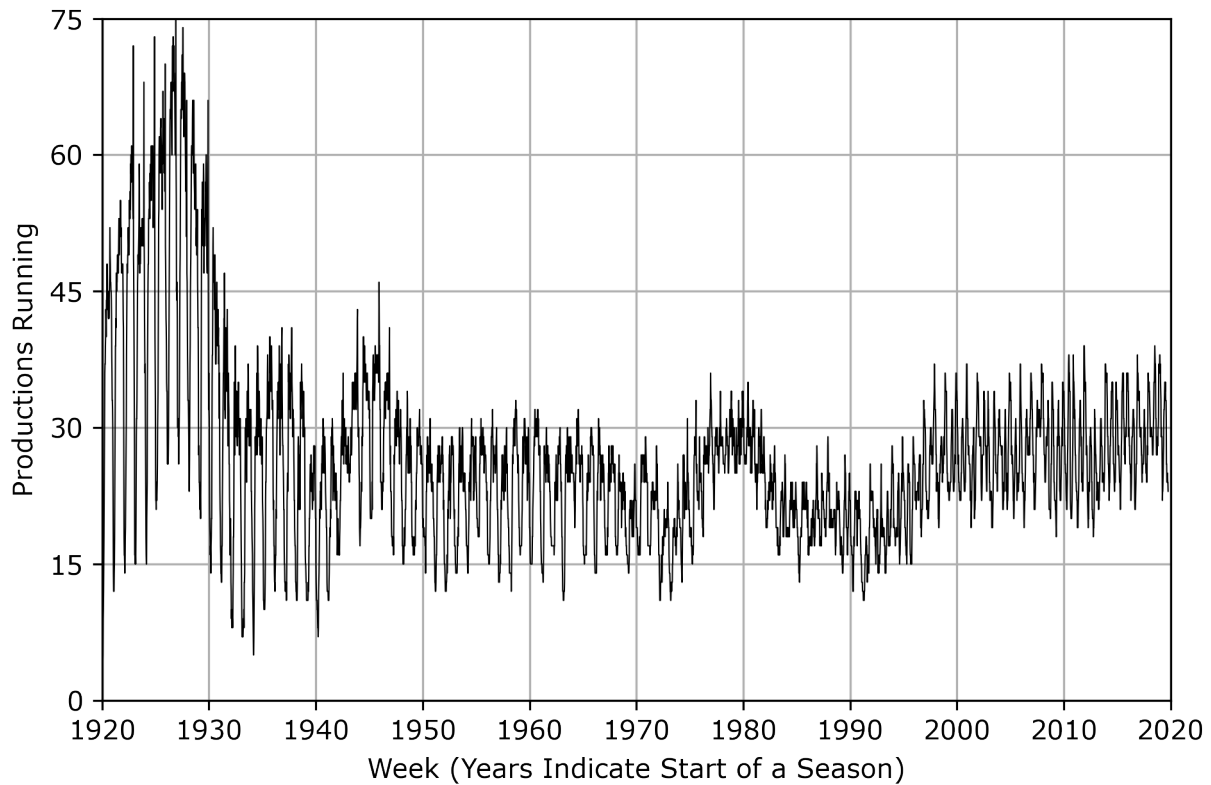


Figure 1: Productions Playing by Week

Two: Musicals as a percentage of legitimate shows (i.e., not dance or one-man specials or vaudeville) on Broadway every week, 1920–2020. Despite occasional peaks up to 70%, musicals comprise fewer than half the shows playing during most weeks through 1970. Then steady growth, to a plateau of around 75% since the mid-1990s.

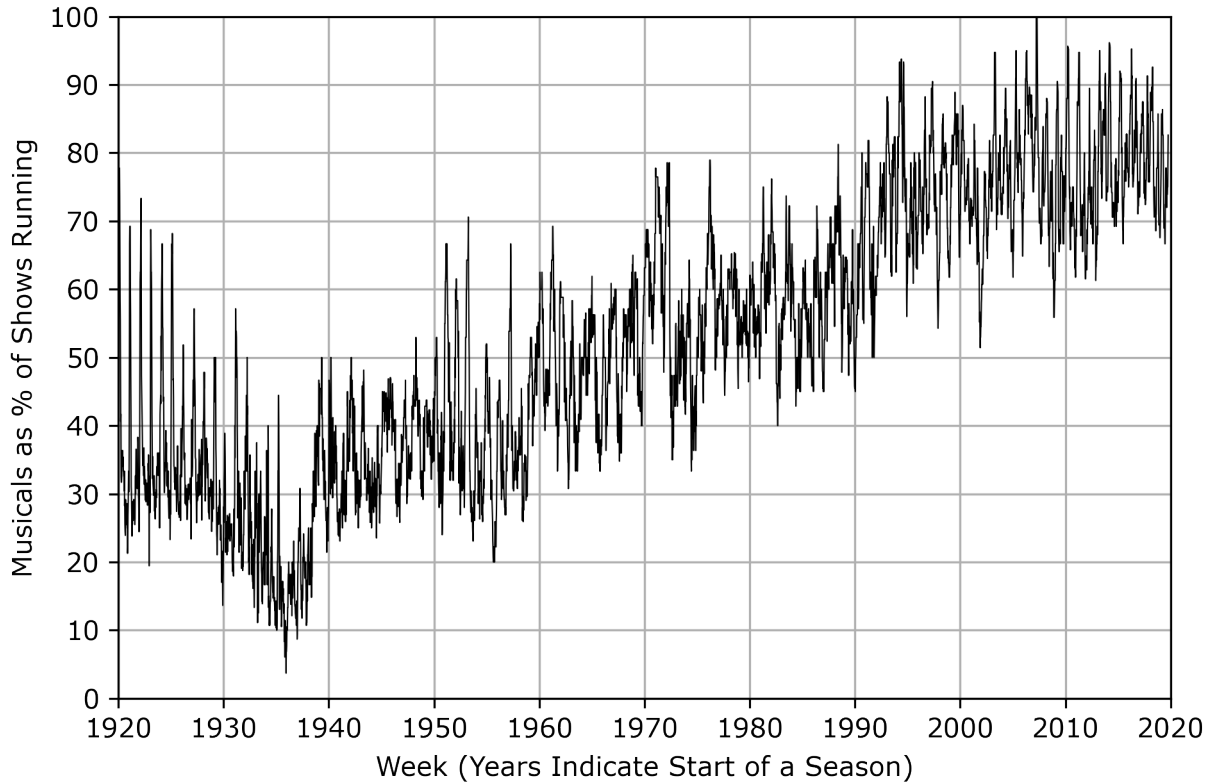


Figure 2: Musicals as Percent of Shows Running Per Week

Three: A network graph of the people and organizations credited in more than ten Broadway productions, 1920–2020. The full graph would reveal over 9 million connections, built among people and organizations who worked together on productions. Even limited to those with ten or more credits, the graph includes 5,450 nodes and 678,115 edges. The largest, most connected nodes, the people and organizations who collaborate most often and center the network, are relatively unknown compared to Broadway’s most famous names.

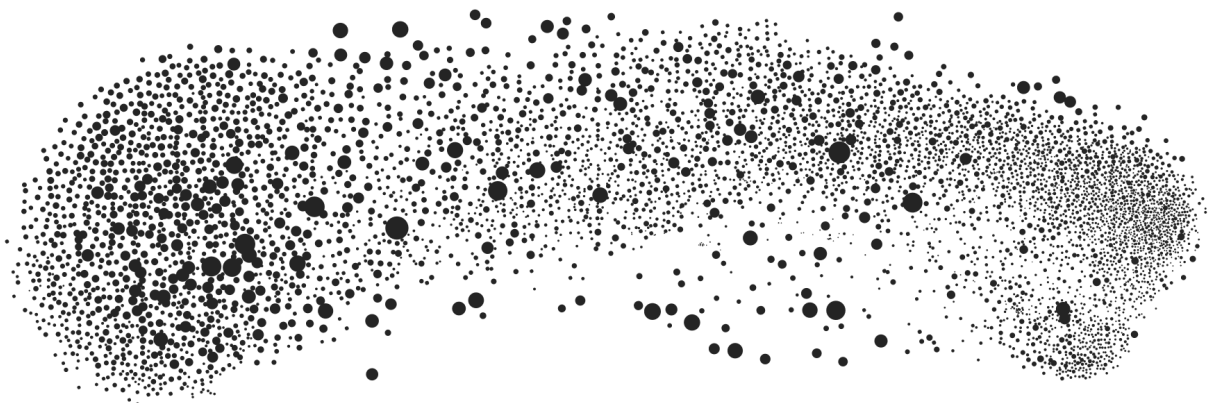


Figure 3: Network of People or Organizations with Ten or More Broadway Credits

Four: The median of the average Broadway ticket price per season (in 2020 dollars), 1949–2020. Almost the opposite of the first figure, with prices virtually flat through 1965–1975, then rising very sharply, then steadily, and then sharply again.

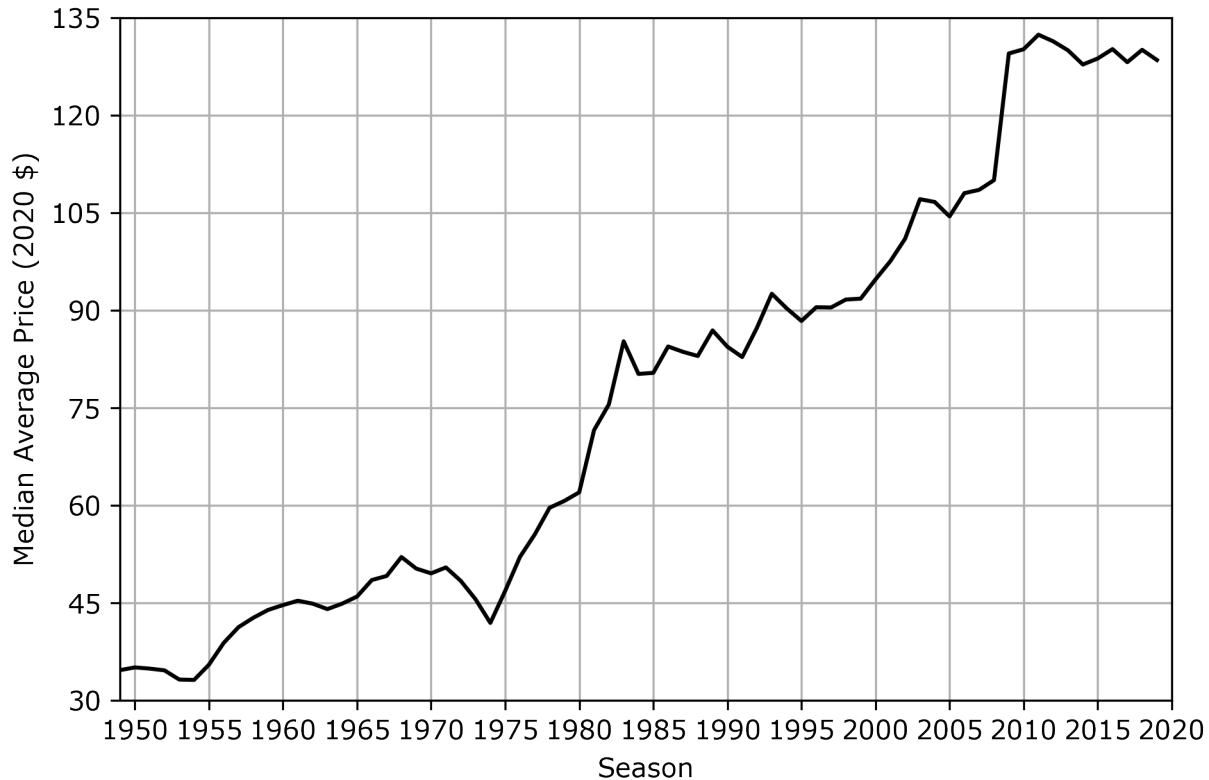


Figure 4: Median of the Average Ticket Price by Season

Four figures (or charts or graphs), visual expressions of information about Broadway that has been collected, sorted, organized, and arranged to tell a story in an image. Each provides important information about Broadway’s history: about the ebb and flow of Broadway’s production activity; about the relative prevalence of Broadway’s two main genres, plays and musicals; about the structure of the Broadway community; about how much Broadway costs. That information alone is an important product of data-driven research on Broadway. Data and data visualizations show us things we did not know, or might have only guessed or intuited through anecdotes.

But the chapters of this book use data to do far more than simply demonstrate particular historical facts. Rather, data opens up new ways of thinking about Broadway, new ways of seeing how this theatrical world operates, new ways of understanding the factors that determine how we make and watch Broadway theater. Data answers questions, but more importantly, data urges us to ask new questions. Why did production activity hit a nadir in the 1950s? What made musicals so dominant on Broadway after 1970? Who are the central figures on Broadway and what makes them so important? Why did ticket prices stay flat for so long and what finally caused them to rise? From each of these questions, a

handful more, then more from those, and so on, until we have written a new history—a data-driven history—of Broadway.

I do not wish to undersell the import of the information contained in the four figures above. Much of what this book has to teach readers comes directly from data. Broadway history, even the familiar kind so often told as the story of a few musicals and their generic innovations (*Oklahoma!*; *West Side Story*; *Hair*; *Company*; *The Phantom of the Opera*; *Mamma Mia!*; *Hamilton*), looks different when seen through the lens of data. Readers will learn from the charts and tables in the pages that follow. But the real magic of studying Broadway with data flows from the worlds such data opens up, a new way of thinking about who and what Broadway is. And with that new way of thinking comes the recognition that every show, from the longest-running to those that closed on opening night, has been a meaningful part of the history of Broadway. That complete history—never truly totalizing, but with the total picture in view at the horizon—aggregates all of Broadway’s individual histories to produce, cumulatively, a history of Broadway’s form.

Form? What form? Thinking of Broadway as a “form” may seem odd. We are used to calling “the integrated musical,” or “farce,” or “theme and variations” forms (or, often synonymously, “genres”), but not Broadway. Yet “form” usefully captures the sense in which Broadway shapes the kind of art produced for it and shapes how audiences interpret that art. Form is “an arrangement of elements” that “constrain” artistic production and consumption, a framework within which artists make their art comprehensible to an audience’s expectations.¹ Broadway’s form rarely defines exactly the shape of the people and productions forged in its mold, but no part of Broadway can avoid being shaped by it.

The challenge is to describe form not at the scale of individual productions or genres but of the whole industry. We are used to recognizing a form such as the integrated musical arise through the efforts of specific individuals (Rodgers, Hammerstein, Mamoulian, DeMille, and the rest of *Oklahoma!*’s staff and cast) and from the influence of particular artworks (*Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and some predecessors and successors). Broadway’s form comes not from any single actor, decision, or event, but instead appears in the aggregate practices of the entire industry, a set of implicit norms rarely articulated because tacitly understood. To describe properly Broadway’s form we must develop a macro perspective on the industry, see it at scale—which means using data.

Form arises in this study through the accumulation of data and the other historical facts data makes visible to us. Each figure or table or percentage or archival source acts like a piece in a collage. The pieces work together to create a shape for Broadway, a kind of form. The contours of each chart, those visual expressions of numerical relations, trace a set of historical conditions that constrain how theater has been produced and consumed on Broadway.

This book, then, springs from a simple question: *How, over the past century, has Broadway’s form changed, and in response to what forces?* The answers come from examining industry operations at scale during that period. The collective shape of those answers reveals a history of Broadway’s form.

While I offer here a history of Broadway as form, let me try an alternative metaphor from sociology. Pierre Bourdieu’s theories describe a “field of cultural production,” in which participants jockey for “position” by producing artworks that, in turn, compete in

their own field of “position-takings.”² That is, artists fight for status (positions) in the field by producing art, which functions as a “position-taking.” As David Savran puts it in Bourdieu-ian terms, we can understand theater

only by reference to the positionalities of the agents who make it in response to these impossible demands, to theater’s relationship with other cultural forms, to an audience whose tastes and expectations can never be completely known in advance, and to the variable amounts of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—at risk in any performance.³

“Positionalities,” a word signaling Savran’s debt to Bourdieu, determine the range of action available to producers. For Bourdieu and writers such as Savran who embrace his thinking, the cultural field extends along two dimensions, mapped roughly as popularity and prestige (or economic and social capital).⁴ Converting this theory into a practical method for interpreting culture is, of course, very difficult. Multiple scholars, particularly those working in the Digital Humanities (which I will define shortly) have attempted to realize Bourdieu’s theory by using large data sets.⁵ Meanwhile, popular outlets play with Bourdieu’s ideas, notably *New York* magazine’s “Approval Matrix,” which plots prestige and popularity as a Cartesian coordinate system. Within such a graph, *The Phantom of the Opera* is low prestige, high popularity; *Hamilton* is high prestige, high popularity; *Straight White Men* is high prestige, low popularity; and *Pretty Woman: The Musical* is low prestige, low popularity. We shall catch glimpses, when addressing audiences and awards, of the prestige and popularity vectors, the x and y axes of the field, at work.

Yet for all their import, artistic outcomes (money, influence, renown) tell us only so much about cultural history. They cannot teach us the terms under which participants fight for prestige and popularity. Bourdieu’s theory, in short, provides a way to think about artistic hierarchies and their relation to larger social and economic structures. But it does not tell us how and why the field takes a particular shape at any given moment, and how and why participants change their location in the field. In other words, Bourdieu’s analysis is flat and static, lacking both a third dimension, the dimension of lived experience, and a temporal dimension, the dimension of history.

Bourdieu recognizes the presence of that third dimension, the sense of the field’s contours that its participants all have innately. He notes that practitioners know a “vast amount of information” that “all contemporaries immediately invest in their reading of works: information about institutions [...] and about persons, [...] information about ideas and problems.”⁶ That information helps determine the “spaces of original possibilities which, because they were part of the self-evident givens of the situation, remain unremarked.”⁷ Each person or production secures a position on Broadway by asserting a relationship to other specific productions and to “the self-evident givens” of Broadway practice.⁸ Those self-evident givens contour Bourdieu’s metaphorical field, creating a z axis. This topography puts his flat field into relief, dotting the field with hills and valleys and a sense of flow and movement through space.

To any viewer on the ground, topography is obvious: you walk up the hill to get to the store; you walk down the hill to go to the pool. Most of us, however, need to be in the landscape to understand how land moves and how land’s patterns dictate our movement through it.⁹ Unfortunately, we cannot be in a field that no longer exists. Whether

that field is literal or metaphorical, we can only capture the lost sense of topography with topographical maps.

This book is a topographical map of the Broadway field of cultural production. It traces the field's contours, the conditions under which participants waged the battle for prestige and popularity. Like any topography, it is best seen and understood by those who stand in the landscape—by the Broadway players at every moment in this history. But their embodied knowledge of the landscape is mostly lost. We must reconstruct the topography by looking at the effects of the landscape on the people in it, and then inferring the ground's shape. Studying that topography, we can then understand how the field set the conditions under which participants fought.

The Broadway field and its topography also have a history. Like topographical changes, the changes mapped in the Broadway field usually happen slowly and over relatively long time scales. Changes in topography shift the conditions of battle: they turn high ground into low, create new obstacles, obscure once-exposed positions. Just as on a real battlefield, understanding the field's shape makes more comprehensible the strategies our combatants pursue. And they help to clarify the terms under which some achieve victory, and others suffer defeat. We must imagine the charts that follow, then, as images of the system in action, of the field in motion. A line chart is a glimpse of the boundaries of the possible; the cycle in the line, a vision of the ebb and flow of those boundaries.

Metaphors of field and form provide a theoretical framework for understanding what the pages that follow teach us. A different term, however, motivates this work: popular. Popular culture has long occupied an awkward position in literary and theater history. Popular culture's often crass commercialism and middling, frequently poorly articulated artistic standards fit uneasily in disciplines grounded in aestheticism. Even as scholars in the 1970s and 1980s turned away from purely formal concerns, embracing art's relationship to politics and society, they often did so through marginal or avant garde works, which assert their own prestige and offer the hope of a radical (rather than popular culture's often conservative) politics. The popular theater has been, until relatively recently, particularly scorned as an object of analysis. Theater's inherent ephemerality, as well as struggles to define theater as an object of study separate from literature, made scholarship on all but the most prestigious works difficult to value.

We are well within a moment now, however, when popular theater has come into its own as an object of serious and sober criticism. From the boom in studies of musical theater to a growing focus on amateur theater and theatrical spaces such as amusement parks, scholars have embraced theater that reaches large swaths of society, not just an intellectual and social elite.¹⁰ But this turn towards the popular theater (theater for the largest part of the population) wrestles still with the problem of theater's relationship to popularity. Put simply, most theater, avant garde or commercial, is highly unpopular: people don't like it; it is received poorly and swiftly rejected; it makes little impact on other theater makers. Our cultural histories overemphasize success and pay little heed to indifference and failure. Yet success is the exception; mediocrity and failure, the rules.

One path to addressing mediocrity and failure is microhistory: studies focused on forgotten, marginal figures who dominate the industry, but never achieve success.¹¹ Such microhistories can restore meaning to the artists and artworks that have fallen by the wayside. Macrohistory, by contrast, of the kind offered here, takes all individuals and pro-

ductions and treats them equally, as data points within the larger data set. Failures and the vast store of mediocrities matter in this book because they play as central a role in the Broadway system, and can give us as much information about the Broadway field's history, as exceptional successes. This is a study of popular theater, then, only in the sense that Broadway is a form of popular entertainment. In spirit, this is, instead, a historiography of the unpopular, of the forgotten, discarded people and plays that strove for success in the Broadway field, leaving in their wake only footprints that now help us map that field, let us describe its ever-changing form.

Quantitative Histories

In his massive and influential *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, historian Fernand Braudel notes humorously that "The historian is only naturally too willing to act as theatrical producer! How could he be expected to renounce the drama of the short time span, and all the best tricks of a very old trade?"¹² Braudel jestingly compares historians' tendency to focus on spectacular events to the exciting plotting of popular theater—a metaphor hinging on the idea that the desire to dramatize key events turns historians into theater artists. Writing against this trend, Braudel and the Annales school of historians produced macrohistories that lay the groundwork for this book.¹³ Rather than relate history as a drama, depicting how great men's decisions produce world-changing effects, Braudel and the Annalistes depicted the world in which such men acted, the ecological, economic, and social forms that made their decisions possible.

The Annaliste's methods—and the school encompasses many different historians and methods under one name—have found their way into the work of Anglophone critics and historians of theater, music, art, and, most widely, literature. When focused on the sort of large scale study that Braudel in particular championed, such work has been called, variously, macroanalysis, distant reading, and other names.¹⁴ Whatever the method's name, three key elements define it:

1. The object of study is not a single cultural artifact such as a painting or novel, but rather an entire set (often called a corpus) of artifacts, such as all German symphonies composed before 1900, or every poem published in *The New Yorker*.
2. The research aims to discern patterns within the corpus as a whole, such as describing the relative frequency with which writers use a semicolon, or tracing the percentage of published authors who are female. Individual works provide examples of such patterns in action, but are not themselves the main focus.
3. Computers—used in ways that range from calculating central tendencies of large data sets to advanced statistical techniques such as topic modeling and machine learning—help the researcher conduct the corpus analysis, which would be prohibitively complex or time-consuming to complete with pen and paper.

Because computers serve such a central role in this research, macroanalysis has become a key part of a movement known generally as Digital Humanities. Digital Humanities, particularly of the macroanalytic/distant reading school that seeks to describe the literary field in its full complexity, inspires this work.¹⁵ From the broadest possible view of literary forms and literary change, we catch glimpses of a truly impossible history: a complete description of literature.

While studying literature at scale can capture genuinely meaningful trends—in changing sentence lengths or syntactic complexity or genre definitions—such analyses confront a challenge of coherence. In what sense do, say, all American novels published in the 1890s form a meaningful object of analysis? Yes, they may all be novels, written and published by Americans (assuming one has done the necessary work to define these categories). But the relationship among those many individual novelists, publishing houses, booksellers, and all the individual books they write, not to mention connections to short stories, poems, magazine articles, etc. is astoundingly complex. The literary field itself cannot be isolated enough to make the results of such a study fully convincing. Literature is, in this sense, not quite a form.

Theater writ large suffers from the same analytical problem; it, too, is too diffuse to isolate in such explorations. But Broadway is in part a closed system—though I address the limitations of that hermeticism below and in Chapter Three—and therefore a more formally coherent object of study than literature and literature’s various sectors. Many, many novels have almost never been read and, therefore, bear little to no influence on literature. They fly through the literary system, leaving almost no trace. But not so Broadway plays. Every play on Broadway must be rehearsed, built, staged, and performed by the Broadway community. Even only one performance leaves an imprint on Broadway because it draws on a set of resources relatively more finite than those constraining literature. In other words, everything on Broadway matters in ways that everything in literature does not. Thus macroanalysis of Broadway offers the possibility of understanding the field’s interactions far more than any study of literature ever can.

My approach is not entirely new to theater studies, nor completely divorced from a rich history of data-driven publications about Broadway. Chronicles of theatrical seasons or a company’s work, lists of actors, encyclopedias of musical theater songs: all have a long tradition in theater historiography, as discussed in Chapter Eight.¹⁶ Burns Mantle’s *Best Plays* annual, for instance, included summaries of major shows from each season on Broadway, along with statistical summaries of the season as a whole.¹⁷ This project shares his work’s compendial sensibility, though with less concern for specifying the detail of each production, and far more attention to teasing out patterns from such information.

Scholarship in theater and performance history has embraced computer-driven techniques relatively recently, particularly through online performance databases.¹⁸ One of the most obvious uses for data-driven scholarship has been to study theater economics. The 1960s and 1970s saw a particular boom in studies of theater and money.¹⁹ Other projects have examined the industrial infrastructure that makes theater operate.²⁰ That work offers a corrective to the fascinating and illuminating anecdotal histories that have been so central to most approaches to Broadway as an industry.²¹

The conflation of Broadway and musicals has been detrimental particularly to studies of American plays and musicals, which often ignore the Broadway system’s generic catholicity. Despite this difficulty, scholarship in both areas has a rich history, particularly the recent boom in musical theater writing since the 2000s in work by theater and dance historians and musicologists alike.²² Despite the growing number of narrative histories of the musical or of Broadway, few large-scale histories of Broadway as an industry exist—and almost none attuned to the wide range of data examined here. One exception, *The Broadway Musical: Collaboration in Commerce and Art* by Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest

Harburg represents a rare synthesis of anecdote and data, but focuses only on one genre.²³ This project's novelty thus lies neither in subject nor in method, but rather telling a data-driven history of Broadway as an industry, studied through the computer-based tools of modern macroanalysis.

Data

Such a quantitative history depends on data and on that data's quality, variety, and organization. Of course, there is no such thing as perfect data. All data sets reflect not only the analyst's a priori assumptions about which data to collect, but also constraints on categorization, imperfect knowledge, and even plain errors of data entry. How good, then, are the data that make this project possible? Pretty good overall, in some cases excellent, in others, extremely limited. Such variation is an effect of the varied origin, scale, and accuracy of the data that undergird these studies.

The book draws on an assortment of data sets from a range of sources. (I discuss the history of Broadway data and its functions in detail in Chapter Eight.) The main dataset comes from the Internet Broadway Database (IBDB), an online research and promotional project of The Broadway League, the trade association for Broadway's theater owners and producers.²⁴ IBDB transcribes into digital form information from Broadway programs, supplemented by its own records. Their dataset grows increasingly reliable and thorough the closer it gets to the present day. My choice to focus from 1920 forward stems from a larger confusion about the definition of Broadway—and thus the reliability of the data—before World War I. Information from contemporary periodicals, particularly *Variety* and *Billboard* magazines and *The New York Times*, fills in gaps in IBDB's record, primarily production closing dates in earlier periods. I have also trimmed IBDB's data, eliminating productions at non-Broadway theaters, of which they include a large number. (Chapter One defines "Broadway" in detail.) Further information comes from PlaybillVault.com, a similar database produced by Broadway's largest and longest-operating theater program provider, and from BroadwayWorld.com.

All of this industry-scale data complements more precisely focused data about individual productions from the New York Public Library, the Shubert Archive, and other sources. These sources come with the usual difficulties: every archive chooses to store and make available only information of direct interest to the organization. This creates natural gaps, some of which, as in part of Chapter Two, can become useful tools themselves. But, all in all, IBDB's data make for an adequate, though certainly imperfect, catalog of Broadway performance activity since 1920.

The IBDB-sourced dataset is not "big data" in the sense managed by financial corporations, social media firms, or government surveillance operations. It is, however, large by any normal measure of analysis in theater history: 8,406 productions, of which 490 rotated in 109 repertoires, plus 59 benefit performances. Those productions account for roughly 1,042,374 performances in the 36,438 days from the start of the 1920 season to March 11, 2020, the last day of performances before the pandemic closed theaters for over a year and a half. That averages 28.6 Broadway performances every day for over a century. That's a lot of theater. Unique credited people or organizations number 106,452 with 32,663 cred-

ited as staff or crew, 68,344 credited as cast members (including understudies, swings, standbys, and replacements), and 5,445 credited as both staff and crew.

Almost 8,500 productions and over 105,000 people or organizations: while not impressive numbers on their own, they vastly surpass the scale on which most theater histories are written. This scale suffices to place unusual or outstanding productions or people into their context, to see the average at work. We can, even at this scale, understand Broadway's history as a set of group behaviors, taken up by thousands of people and dozens of productions at a time, rather than only a collection of isolated aesthetic choices operating in a given production. For all its shortcomings, a dataset of thousands of productions and over a hundred thousand people provides a basis upon which to describe Broadway's operation for over a century.

Productions and people/organizations thus comprise the major entities under consideration here. Defining those entities themselves requires a set of assumptions, as does defining the many different categories (or variables) that each contains. For example, what counts as a production? For IBDB, a production seems to be a set of capital, designs, and performance choices organized to present a particular theatrical work, which IBDB separately names a "show." The "show-ness" of these shows is not very fixed, of course. In musicals, for instance, musical numbers are often rearranged or books rewritten over time, sometimes even during a run.²⁵ Similarly, it is likely that none of the *Hamlets* presented on Broadway has used the exact same script as any other. Nevertheless, the 1943 and 2018 *Oklahoma!* productions, for example, despite vastly different interpretations, are both productions of *Oklahoma!* By contrast, return engagements count as different productions, as when *On Golden Pond* returned to Broadway in 1979, three months after its initial closing date. Relatedly, IBDB bills organizations differently when they fall under different leadership. Thus the Shubert Organization as chaired by Gerald Schoenfeld is, according to the database, different from the Shubert Organization as chaired by Philip J. Smith. One could reasonably argue for or against any of these categorizations. I mean not to criticize IBDB's categories, but merely to point out that, even in its most basic categorizations, this dataset, like all others, includes a priori decisions about what to contain and how to contain it.

This process of definition extends from these major entities down into the names given to particular individuals and roles. IBDB, for instance, follows the pattern of contemporary playbills by listing shows as either "staged by" or "directed by" an individual. Their refusal to consolidate these billings into a single "Director" category—using what is called a "controlled vocabulary"—allows us to map when directing consolidated itself as a discrete professional role on Broadway, as the latter term dominated the former. As users, however, we must recognize this flexibility in the data and know that, if looking for directing credits, we need to include both "directed by" and "staged by" in our search terms. Such decisions about controlled vocabularies must precede our reading of the data, but we need to remain aware of their operation when we use them.²⁶

Moreover, as useful as controlled vocabularies are, they also elide necessary complexity. I devote considerable time throughout this study to two major categories of Broadway production: "play" and "musical." IBDB uses these categories in a familiar shorthand manner, making rough generic distinctions between these binary options. As a historian working with data, I am supremely grateful to IBDB for marking these differences. Yet, as

a scholar of the American theater, I remain aware that this simple binary elides the complicated spectrum of theatrical works that these two names contain. Writing of classification schemes generally, Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star warn that

Classifications are powerful technologies. Embedded in working infrastructures they become relatively invisible without losing any of that power. [...] C]lassifications should be recognized as the significant site of political and ethical work that they are.²⁷

Nowhere are the politics and ethics of this naming clearer than in a dataset's attempts to classify individuals. Consider specifically the challenge of recording information about peoples' identities, identities that we now think of as fluid categories, constructed by a combination of behavior and social norms, rather than as fixed facts. In this present moment, categorizing people—by sex, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.—seems an impossibly reductive, not to mention often destructive, activity. Here we confront a genuine limitation of data-driven history: narratives permit categorical flexibility that databases deny. "The indeterminacy that databases find difficult to tolerate marks another way in which narrative differs from database," writes digital critic N. Katherine Hayles. "Narratives gesture toward the inexplicable, the unspeakable, the ineffable, whereas databases rely on enumeration, requiring explicit articulation of attributes and data values."²⁸ Just as narrative thrives on the "ineffable," so too does the performance of identity depend on elusiveness and disappearance, concepts anathema to the data-gatherer. Labeling people simply "Male" or "Female" or with any other usable (i.e., controlled) set of identities contradicts a principled critique of essentialism. Here, studies such as Brian Herrera's *Latin Numbers*, which traces a history of Latinx popular performance, or Carol Oja's *Bernstein on Broadway*, a microhistory of diverse casting practices in *On the Town*, achieve far more than can a cold enumeration. And yet only by using *some* labels can one begin to trace the real historical and contemporary disparities in how certain groups have been represented or represent themselves in performance.

IBDB is not a subtle recorder of this information. It recognizes two gender categories: male and female, recorded somewhat irregularly. There is enough information here, however, to describe generally how work on Broadway has been divided between men and women over the past century. No racial or ethnic information about its 105,000 people was systematically entered. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is a category of "All Black Cast" productions, but the identifier is used sparingly. How cast members, audiences, producers, etc., actually thought about or defined their relationship to various racial or ethnic identities remains unexplained. While I have supplemented this absence with some other sources, the systematic historical study of race and ethnicity on Broadway remains beyond reach at the moment.²⁹ One hopes that archives of theatrical unions, in particular, may help to shed light on this history, even if that light lacks the subtle shading with which one wishes to examine the story. By not making any such records, we risk excluding underrepresented groups from the digital archives, further undermining their rightful place in our histories. Yet by naming and reifying identities, we risk undermining the fluidity inherent in performances of identity. For the purposes of this analysis, I have followed IBDB's lead with respect to gender, while remaining aware of how little these binaries capture about the gendered work on Broadway, to say nothing of the relationship between Broadway and race.

As limited as IBDB's perspective may be in many respects, it presents the largest possible view of Broadway activity now available. Other data analyzed in the book cannot encompass IBDB's range, and must rely instead on a sample of relevant data. For instance, I discuss the use of understudies by examining performance reports from a single Broadway production in 1981. And my analysis of curtain times depends on performance calendars for the first week in March, transcribed at intervals of a decade. Each of these samples in some respect captures only the specificity of the data in the sample: absences in that one production; curtain times that one week. Yet they represent, for this study, not merely a set of results, but also a method. I hope future researchers can apply similar methods to larger samples, acquire more refined results, and give even better answers to these and other questions.

All of these issues with respect to data—sources, scale, controlled vocabularies—return us to the central question, namely, how reliable is the information presented here? And with that question, a few key observations bear emphasizing (or reemphasizing). First, there is nothing “given” about these data, as “data”'s linguistic origins misleadingly imply. Rather, we would do better to think with Johanna Drucker about “capta.”³⁰ What we call “data” are in fact always already gathered and interpreted in the process of turning them into “data.”³¹ That process includes selecting what counts as data, sorting data into set categories, and smoothing irregular or uncertain information into the forms permissible by the data model. Sometimes we can extrapolate from the model or from other sources to recuperate information lost in the process of data construction, sometimes we cannot. Often, we cannot even recognize what we might be missing. Thus the data in this book, for all my confidence in what they show us overall, should be taken as essentially and meaningfully incomplete.

Data errors come in a few flavors (with a specific, but non-exhaustive, example of each):

1. Incorrect transcription. With so many numbers and names in play, errors of simple data entry have undoubtedly crept in.
2. Incorrect/false sources. Actors' birth dates are notoriously falsified and should be approached with extra skepticism.
3. Missing data. Knowable facts, such as a show's closing date, may not be present in the database and irretrievable from other sources. For missing cast lists, we do not even know how many roles there were in the play, let alone the names of the performers who played them.
4. Excluded data. Information acquirable from extant sources—and sometimes even from the sources that provided the data we do have—does not appear in the data set.
5. Unassimilable data. Some data fit so poorly within the database schema that they simply do not find a place in the digital repository.

Each and every one of these errors is present in any slice of the data, in some form or another. Despite laborious efforts by IBDB to minimize such errors, supplemented by work of my own and of other researchers working on my behalf, such errors are bound to remain.³²

How, then, can we minimize their import and trust the information we do have? A few steps improve the quality of our analysis. First, I explicitly acknowledge when data

are systematically faulty and likely to give misleading information. For instance, the general amount and quality of data improves as we get closer to the present day, and thus there is likely more variation in information quality in the 1920s than the 1990s. Second, I often exclude missing data, while noting when such exclusions might skew the results. Many shows in earlier periods, for example, have no cast lists, and thus I leave them out of estimates of average cast sizes. Finally, as an analytic method, I focus on central tendencies and trends rather than outliers. Errors most likely would appear as extreme exceptions in the dataset. By attending to average shows, rather than exceptional ones, we can minimize the impact of such errors on our analyses.

This leads to the question of statistical analysis itself. Many projects in the Digital Humanities seek novel statistical means for analyzing cultural artifacts.³³ These methods, including topic modeling and principal component analysis, rely on mathematically sophisticated techniques to parse large amounts of texts. They can offer real insights and exciting possibilities. But there is much to be said for simpler statistical techniques such as counting, averaging, and calculating percentiles. This book offers little in the way of statistical innovation. Its novelty lies, instead, in its use of data to guide a history of Broadway over the past century. That work requires us to know how many productions there were, what the average cast size was, the ratio of a show's potential grosses to its potential audience size, and much more. Occasionally, I correlate two variables, such as audience capacity and stage dimensions. But the mathematical principles at work here all seek simply to describe the data's central tendencies.

This statistical naivete will alleviate, I hope, major concerns about statistical significance, that is, whether or not a change in the data represents a meaningful change in the world the data represent. Broadway, like any other system, exhibits some natural degree of variation over time. I try not to over-interpret that variation, focusing instead on general trends. Those trends may not, from a purely statistical analysis, be mathematically significant. But they are and should be significant to a theater historian because they represent the results of individuals changing their behavior. The trick of any such analysis, of course, is to distinguish the day-to-day, often meaningless reportage ("stock market rises") from the meaningful long-term trends ("fourth quarter of decline in the labor market"). Readers must judge for themselves how convincing they find each of my attempts to walk this analytic tightrope.

Finally, a word about how I present data. Occasionally, the reader will find tables giving specific numbers or listing specific individuals. More frequently, I provide figures—line graphs; scatter plots; box plots; bar charts—that illustrate underlying numerical information. These illustrations, as much as the prose descriptions that accompany them, merely represent my aggregation of the data, which themselves represent people or events from the real world. We operate, in other words, with representations of representations, a maze of interpretations. These black-and-white figures should not be read, then, as cold, hard facts, but rather as impressions. The impressions they give are, to the best of my knowledge and ability, correct. And together, the image they evoke of Broadway since 1920 captures something right about over a million performances that took place there.

But they are also merely versions of that story, versions that can and must complement less quantitative studies, which can restore to data's tendency towards absolutes the proper sense of uncertainty. I have written this book because too much Broadway history

lacks a firm foundation in data. But even the best data-driven history provides, ultimately, another way back to the older stories. I approach data as an explorer, seeking interesting and meaningful phenomena, but wary of data's explanatory (let alone predictive) power. By approaching data with the right mixture of curiosity, confidence, and skepticism, we can learn from it—without imputing to any single figure or fact the unwarranted authority of absolute truth.

Broadway by the Numbers

Broadway is a catch-all name for the (primarily) commercial theater produced in New York City. As Chapter One explains, Broadway is a somewhat nebulous space, defined by a set of theater buildings, by contracts with labor unions, and by awards eligibility as much as by the character of the work produced there. While synonymous today with the American musical, Broadway has long included many different forms of entertainment ranging from non-musical plays to vaudevilles, modern dance, operetta, magic shows, stand-up comedy, and more. What most Broadway shows share, even through the long history that extends beyond this book's scope, is a reputation for professional excellence and a strong commercial orientation. (Non-profit theaters have long played a key role on Broadway, however, and a number of chapters that follow address their function.)

Broadway's context within the American theatrical and entertainment landscape is covered in detail in Chapter Three, but the subject deserves brief mention here. Broadway's history as the hub for theatrical development and the largest theatrical market in the United States give it an outsized influence on other theater sectors, even apart from actual touring Broadway productions, which travel throughout the country and around the globe. These other sectors range from regional theaters (American Repertory Theater in Boston; Arena Stage in Washington, DC) to theaters in schools to community theaters. All of them in some way respond to and help fuel activity on Broadway—by serving as pre-Broadway workshop sites, by performing up Broadway hits, by studying and performing Broadway works in classrooms. As Stacy Wolf puts it in a study of the American musical's afterlives *Beyond Broadway*, “the lifeblood of the musical is local, in productions at high schools and community theatres, afterschool programs and summer camps and dinner theatres.”³⁴ Much of the industry that sustains these Broadway-related theaters across the US are also part of Broadway: the licensing organizations, creative staff, and even performers who move between Broadway and its related networks.

Within New York City, Broadway is one part of a large theatrical and performing arts sector. This includes: Off-Broadway (the slightly smaller, usually non-profit theaters, often producing non-musical plays for subscribers); Off-Off-Broadway (experimental, often company-based productions); the large group of educational institutions devoted to theater (from theater programs at New York University and Juilliard to acting studios, playwriting classes, and more); organizations for dance, opera, and live music. Then there are television and film, publishing, museums and galleries, and more, all of which form part of New York City's art world. Broadway has connections in some form or another to all of these, and such connections matter more or less intently both over time and from production to production. Although most of this book looks at Broadway as a relatively

isolated phenomenon, that isolation is a fiction—Broadway is part and parcel of the New York City arts scene, and, indeed, of the city itself.

Even with its influence and import in New York and across the United States, Broadway is still rather small—or, rather, it can be strangely provincial. This smallness surfaces in the repeated appearance of a few influential figures in Broadway’s history, as well as in the idiosyncrasies of the industry’s operations. A lot of what happens on Broadway happens from sheer habit, inertia combined with no incentives to change. The industry can exhibit a stubborn, ahistorical herd mentality: we do things like this because everybody knows that it has always been done this way. The chapters that follow demonstrate, to the contrary, that nothing has always been done “this way,” while also identifying some reasons why things can and do change.

The starting point for this book is one of the most notable moments of change: the 1920–21 season, the first full season under the Production Contract, which established employment rules between the League of New York Producers, a trade association for producers and theater owners, and Actors’ Equity Association, the actors’ union. As Chapter Two emphasizes, union histories are essential to Broadway history, and the treatment of Broadway productions under a special contract for actors marked a key moment in creating modern Broadway. The book’s history comes forward then almost exactly a century, to March, 2020, when the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 forced the closure of Broadway’s theaters. Not only does that date mark off a neat hundred years for this study—bringing us, indeed, to the very moment of my writing—but it also signals some hope, common throughout the theater industry, that the post-pandemic Broadway will be better (for its workers and audiences) than it had been. Some of the data in this book—about Broadway’s poor representation of female artists and lack of racial and ethnic diversity; about ticket prices—help to identify precisely Broadway’s shortcomings, and suggest what a “better Broadway” might look like in the near future.

Having minimally set the scene, geographically and temporally, it remains to tell the story of this book in brief. Relating that story through data has been simultaneously a great joy and a unique challenge. I say a joy and a challenge because the exploratory data analysis driving this book leaves open how to fit each individual analysis into all the others. The structure of this book’s narrative is thus necessarily unstable—it could easily be reconfigured to emphasize different themes, different aspects of the data, and different approaches to Broadway history. Of course, such narrative indeterminacy is always part of historiography.³⁵ But that uncertainty looms over this work because each examination of the data invites multiple interpretations that, in turn, can only be understood through other data or archival materials. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Six, Broadway’s adoption of early curtain times in the 1970s marked an attempt to resolve the problem of rising crime in Times Square. But the story of those curtain times connects not only to those crime rates, which also spurred the city’s new zoning and policing policies (discussed in part in Chapter One), but also to changes in the geography of Broadway’s audience and to new union contracts. My data and archives are thus like small puzzle pieces that admit multiple possible solutions: I draw the picture by deciding which pieces should be adjacent to each other. There is nothing random or abstract, though, about my solutions. The images produced through my use of data and other archives give particular perspectives on Broadway and reflect on what it means to tell Broadway’s story with data.

The first seven chapters focus on the material givens of Broadway and how they have changed and been negotiated over time. Chapter One begins on the ground with Broadway theaters. While these buildings are far from sufficient to make Broadway Broadway, they are necessary. The power of Broadway theaters and, particularly, theater owners has been too little understood. Broadway is in part a real estate business, driven by forces common to that world including the growth of civic infrastructure, contested zoning regulations, and the general theatrical economy. Those forces have, in turn, changed the Broadway theaters. Using data about the number of existing theaters, about their uses for both legitimate theater and other activities such as film and television, and about theater owners' finances, I argue that we can only understand Broadway by seeing it as the real estate business it always has been. Chapter Two shifts to Broadway's other essential resource, its people. The Broadway community is both far larger and more complex than the Playbill handed out at most performances suggests. Examining Broadway directories from the 1950s and 1960s and offering network analyses of cast and crew lists, I describe both the figures most central to the Broadway community and those workers who are essential but still overlooked.³⁶ I note how rising labor costs have shrunk the scale of Broadway casts, while encouraging practices such as double-casting and triple-threat performers who act, sing, and dance. Even at its largest, however, the Broadway community still fails to look like the city and country it represents, at least when we think of who performs on stage, who works backstage, and who sits in the audience. Data reveal that people on Broadway are simultaneously much more and much less than they seem. The third chapter positions Broadway within multiple contexts: theater and other arts in New York City, theater and other entertainments in the United States, and as a global cultural phenomenon. Looking at data about interactions between Broadway and mid-century film and television, at touring productions in the United States, at remountings of Broadway productions at other US theaters, and at the global brand of Broadway, I show how Broadway's identity depends on putting itself in relation to other theatrical systems and to other art forms, at home and around the world.

Two chapters about money follow. The first addresses capitalization and budgeting, the cost and production side of making Broadway. Looking at budgets, contracts, networks of investors, and rare information about investment returns, I consider Broadway as a system of capital management, with complex ideas about what labor and material are worth, and what tolerable economic risk looks like. I also investigate growing costs on Broadway and what those costs mean when viewed as wages for Broadway workers. This chapter's twin examines ticketing and grosses. Considered from the view of sales, Broadway reveals enormous variety and complexity in the price of tickets and in how they are purchased. Box offices, notably, have been less important historically in defining the prices audiences pay than have external ticket brokers. Surprisingly rigid official price structures, common until the 1970s, eventually grew more adaptable through the advent of the discount TKTS booth, internet-based ticket sales, and the adoption of dynamic pricing. All of these relatively recent innovations in Broadway's sales approach have led the extreme growth in Broadway's income. Attention to how audiences actually purchase tickets and their real costs allows us to understand better Broadway's astounding grosses since the early 2000s, and to understand its struggles to sell tickets at efficient prices through most of the twentieth century.

Chapters Six and Seven take a more abstract approach than those that preceded them, considering Broadway as a scheduled environment and then as a forum for repetition, respectively. In the former, seasons, curtain times, opening night, and other temporal structures organize Broadway activity and change drastically over the past century. Variables such as the audience's place of residence and awards calendars encourage producers to alter when shows perform. Chapter Seven considers how repetition, on stage and off, sustains Broadway's professional standards and creates a canon of must-see theater. By thinking of Broadway as a kind of repertory system, with long-running shows dominating the Broadway repertoire, we see Broadway's interplay of novelty and familiarity in action and grasp how repetition brings stability to this constantly churning industry.

The final chapters reflect in three different ways on what data means to Broadway and on what data does to Broadway historiography. Chapter Eight looks at the history of Broadway data, addressing who has gathered data about Broadway and why. Broadway data includes chronicles and encyclopedias, but takes on a new character with an initial wave of data research in the 1960s. The slow growth of organizationally-directed studies in the 1980s and 1990s, tied to the pursuit of modern economic efficiencies, marks the advent of a more data-conscious industry. I consider what the accumulation of encyclopedias, catalogues, and playbill collections, alongside grosses, annual reports, and audience surveys, means for an industry devoted to ephemeral performances. Chapter Nine offers an alternative history of Broadway's Golden Age (roughly 1945–1965), emphasizing not the era's great plays and musicals (Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Lowe, Bock and Harnick, Miller, Williams, Inge), but the systemic conditions that set it apart. These include the peak and then the demise of the Shuberts' theatrical monopoly, the extreme whiteness of Broadway stages relative to the immediately preceding and following eras, competition for space and labor from booming television and film production in New York, and a highly catholic mix of genres on Broadway's stages. Finally, Chapter Ten reflects on how narrating theater history through data allows us to think about "average" theater. By this I mean both the average of the theatrical data themselves and the average show, the middling, oft-forgotten work that forms the bulk of cultural history. While there may be no satisfactory way to define precisely the average production, knowing the general outlines of the average show—its cost, themes, scale, price, grosses, etc.—allows us to understand how individual productions deviate from the norm.

That is the story of Broadway as told in this book, but the elements I have necessarily separated into discrete chapters remain more interconnected than a single volume can convey. Any discussion of tickets is also a discussion of audience; an investigation of production capitalization is also a story about labor costs and union contracts. While every chapter tells a set of stories organized around and inspired by data, the book as a whole seeks to evoke an extremely complex world in motion, with Broadway's many constituent parts all responding to changes in each other. The upshot is a theater history thickly described by data and by the buried histories to which data point us. Only within that detailed environment does the true value and meaning of Broadway, in all its multifaceted complexity, become clear.

This is thus an unusual kind of Broadway book. A macroanalysis of Broadway flies in the face of one of the best things about most Broadway histories: they are full of wonderful stories. So much of Broadway's history comes to us as memoir or journalism—

essential, lively, and illuminating material. Such histories, however, often take too much for granted Broadway's own mythos about itself and lack an imaginative horizon beyond the observer's own experience. This does not mean such writings lack historical consciousness, but rather that nostalgia often encumbers those histories, as writers recall the theater of their youth. Without such documentation, uncovering the daily practice of theater on Broadway would be impossible. But read by themselves or even together, such narrow perspectives accrete myths. This book offers a counterweight to that tradition, with a new kind of data-driven history.

It is not, then, full of great anecdotes; it does not emphasize the best-known figures; it is not even really about the shows themselves. Rather it is about the Broadway system. At the most basic level, this book, insofar as it succeeds, lays the foundation for an artistic, social, and economic history of Broadway over the past century. As these things go, this is highly positivist history, asserting a set of knowable, known, primarily quantifiable, facts—subject to the data's limitations, as discussed above. Other kinds of Broadway histories, engaging more human (rather than industrial or corporate) perspectives, have and will be written. I hope this project helps to ground that often subtle and probing work in the strong awareness of Broadway's operations that this book emphasizes.

The theater (or other cultural) historian will find in these pages a background against which to understand American commercial theater in the twentieth and twenty-first century. For all the burgeoning scholarship on Broadway, particularly the Broadway musical, we still do not quite have a handle on what Broadway was and is. By stepping back to look at Broadway's structure and understand its contours, I offer new ways of thinking about Broadway that account for the complex array of forces that determine both what it is and how it operates. And although Broadway receives all of the attention here, I hope this study offers a model for other writing that can take a similarly macroanalytic approach to other theatrical systems. For I contend that we can better understand all cultural forms if we understand better the specific circumstances—not only social and political, but also structural—that produced them.

For those interested in the Digital Humanities (or any other term for the application of quantitative research to the study of culture), this book offers a lesson in simplicity. A growing body of experimental research has explored with increasing sophistication how to apply computing power to problems unanswerable by any other method, some of it discussed above. This is valuable work, and some of it may have a place in the study of theater history and of Broadway.³⁷ But there is much to learn still from simply counting cultural artifacts, participants, etc. Computers allow us to explore and present data in ways that illuminate new areas of cultural history, even without applying the newest statistical techniques.³⁸ While this is not quite the “minimal computing” proposed by advocates for greater equity and access in digital scholarship, it is, in its own way, a minimalist approach to the maximum data.³⁹

Finally, I hope this book will find a non-academic readership among those who simply love Broadway—and, likely, the Broadway musical. As the shelves of books about Broadway and its stars, writers, and shows make clear, Broadway has generated a ferocious and deeply knowledgeable fan base, hungry to get closer to this world they adore. In some ways, the task of saying something new to such a group is daunting. When thousands of fans can sing the lyrics to every song from *Rent* or name all the people who have

portrayed the Phantom of the Opera on tour, it is hard to imagine what else one could tell them. By telling a story that's resolutely not about such productions or people, I hope, paradoxically, to make richer such fans' experience and understanding of Broadway. *Rent* may mean something slightly different when understood as a production that paid its own rent to the Nederlander Organization. *The Phantom of the Opera's* many leading men might seem different when one recognizes the history of understudies or the challenge of keeping a production in order, night after night after night. This Broadway, the working Broadway, the detailed Broadway, the practical Broadway, is the one I hope to evoke in these pages.

To any reader, this project offers a way to think about two pressing problems, one concerning primarily cultural history and criticism, the other a fundamental challenge of modern life. For cultural historians, this project attempts a comprehensive (though necessarily incomplete) view of an artistic field. Broadway is, as I have already observed, a relatively hermetic field, particularly compared to other systems such as literature or music. Despite important competition and support from film, television, and other non-Broadway theaters, the market itself, from the perspective of producers and consumers, is remarkably well defined. Looking at Broadway in this fashion reveals how relational artistic accomplishment always is in the moment. If early cultural histories focused on understanding art's evolution over time, and late-twentieth-century scholarship showed how art reflects and produces social and political tensions, this book teaches us how to think about art in relation to other, contemporary art. In so doing, it draws out the essential sameness of so much art—those elements that make an artwork “of its time”—while, as a result, permitting us to see what in any given artwork truly merits notice.

Put more abstractly and in more political terms, this book provides a way to think about the relationship between individuals and systems. Our collective inability in modern society to think about and understand systems prevents us from recognizing their influence and from taking action to change them. Absent such understanding, we can explain adverse outcomes only by pointing wildly to conspiracies by nefarious actors, or by denying and ignoring the systemic challenge itself. This is unsustainable. Any future politics must educate stakeholders about systems and make changing systems a clear part of political work.

But understanding systems is hard. Systems are extremely complicated, they change constantly, and they refuse to explain themselves. Professionals in a field have, to varying degrees, mastery over the systems in their domain; that is what expertise is—not knowledge of every element in a system, but an understanding of how to navigate the system itself. Rarely, however, can or do masters explain everything to laymen.

We need to get better at describing and thinking about systems. This book describes and thinks about the Broadway system. Every memorable performance, every record-breaking cast album, every award-winning costume was part of this system, as were the one-night flops, the forgettable scene designs, and the unheralded careers. Those triumphs, failures, and mediocrities each play their own essential role in the Broadway system's operation, both shaping and subject to the always evolving constraints of Broadway's form. This history makes those people and productions count by counting them.

Five, six, seven, eight ...

Notes

¹Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 3.

²Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 29–31.

³David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 18.

⁴Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, p. 49. Bourdieu includes an impressionistic, confusing visualization of the fin-de-siècle “French literary field.” Genres such as boulevard theater and Decadent poetry sit along axes measuring the “degree of consecration” and “autonomy/heteronomy” of art.

⁵Mark Algee-Hewitt et al., “Canon/Archive. Large-scale Dynamics in the Literary Field” in *Canon/Archive: Studies in Quantitative Formalism*, ed. Franco Moretti (n+1 Foundation, 2017) draws the field of the British novel from 1770–1830, plotting authors by the number of reprints and translations on one axis, and by frequency of MLA Bibliography citations and length of Dictionary of National Biography entries on the other.

⁶Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, pp. 31–32.

⁷Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, p. 32.

⁸Although Bourdieu distinguishes completely between people, who occupy positions in the field, and their works, which occupy a separate field of position-takings, I prefer to imagine people and their creations as part of the same system, embracing a Latourian equality between people and things.

⁹If you have ever read about a military battle and subsequently seen the land on which that battle was fought, you will understand well this sensation.

¹⁰Some recent titles in this vein include Stacy Wolf, *Beyond Broadway: The Pleasure and Promise of Musical Theatre Across America* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Eero Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* (Routledge, 2020); Jordan Schildcrout, *In the Long Run: A Cultural History of Broadway's Hit Plays* (Routledge, 2019); the journal *Studies in Musical Theatre*, founded in 2006.

¹¹Recent studies in this vein include Amy E. Hughes, “Harry Watkins’s Sword: An Object Lesson in Nineteenth-Century US Theatre Culture,” *Theatre Survey* 59, no. 3 (September 2018): 340–62 and Brian Eugenio Herrera, “The Many Middling Failures of Miss Virginia Calhoun,” *Theatre Topics* 28, no. 1 (March 2018): 75–81.

¹²Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972), p. 30.

¹³The Annales historians include Braudel’s predecessors Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, and followers including Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Jacques Le Goff, and Roger Chartier, all working in their leading journal, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*.

¹⁴Willard McCarty, *Humanities Computing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (Verso, 2005); Matthew Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (University of Illinois Press, 2013); Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (Verso, 2013).

¹⁵Katherine Bode, *Reading by Numbers: Recalibrating the Literary Field* (Anthem Press, 2014) and *A World of Fiction: Digital Collections and the Future of Literary History* (University of Michigan Press, 2019); Andrew Piper, *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); Ted Underwood, *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change* (University of Chicago Press, 2019); Richard Jean So, *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Hoyt Long, *The Values in Numbers: Reading Japanese Literature in a Global Information Age* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

¹⁶For example: T. Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage: From the First Performance in 1732 to 1901*, 2 Vols. (Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1903); Samuel L. Leiter, *The Encyclopedia of the New York Stage, 1930–1940* (Greenwood Press, 1989); Bobbi Own, *The Broadway Design Roster: Designers and Their Credits* (Greenwood Press, 2003); Thomas S. Hirschak, *The American Musical Theatre Song Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Press, 1995).

¹⁷Burns Mantle, ed. *The Best Plays and Year Book of the Drama in America* (Dodd, Mead, 1899–1952; Applause Books, 1953–1992), under various titles.

¹⁸Some earlier projects of note include Franklin J. Hildy’s TheaterFinder, David Saltz’ Virtual Vaudeville, the London Stage Database by Ben Ross Schneider, and the César Database. The London Stage Database was recently reconstructed by Mattie Burkert; César, though now defunct, lives on in spirit through the Comédie-Française Registers Project. AusStage, a database of performance in Australia, and its off-shoot,

IbsenStage, based at the Ibsen Centre at the University of Oslo, perform functions similar to that of the Internet Broadway Database, discussed below, though scholars, rather than industry, direct the former projects. An impressive study by Julie Holledge, Jonathan Bollen, Frode Helland, and Joanne Tompkins draws on IbsenStage (*A Global Doll's House: Ibsen and Distant Visions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)). Anita Gonzalez' 19th Century Acts! uses an array of visual and textual material to illuminate the nineteenth-century stage, while Debra Caplan's study of the Vilna Theatre Troupe engages digital mapping techniques as well as network visualizations to trace the company's travel and wide-ranging influence (*Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itineracy* (University of Michigan Press, 2018)). Other scholars are exploring new uses of data to model performance, as in Miguel Escobar Varela's study of contemporary wayang performances, or performance networks, as in Kalle Westerling's research into boy-lesque and social media, or dance, as in Harmony Bench and Kate Elswit, "Katherine Dunham's Global Method and the Embodied Politics of Dance's Everyday," *Theatre Survey* 61, no. 3 (September 2020): 305–30. Debra Caplan, "Notes from the Frontier: Digital Scholarship and the Future of Theatre Studies," *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 2 (May 2015): 347–59 discusses these and other important digital studies. For an overview of theater's relationship to data, see Miguel Escobar Varela, *Theater as Data: Computational Journeys into Theater Research* (University of Michigan Press, 2021).

¹⁹William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts—The Economic Dilemma: A Study of Problems Common to Theater, Opera, Music and Dance* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1966); Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870–1967* (Cornell University Press, 1968); Thomas Gale Moore, *The Economics of the American Theater* (Duke University Press, 1968). An important predecessor was Alfred L. Bernheim and Sara Harding, *The Business of the Theatre* (Actors' Equity Association, 1932). One successor to these studies is Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a meta study of writing on theater and economics, see Margaret M. Knapp, "Narrative Strategies in Selected Studies of American Theatre Economics" in *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, eds. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁰On corporate management, see Marlis Schweitzer, *Transatlantic Broadway: The Infrastructural Politics of Global Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Michael Schwartz, *Broadway and Corporate Capitalism: The Rise of the Professional-Managerial Class, 1900–1920* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and Anthony Vickery, "The Logistics and Finances of Touring in North American, 1900–1916," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Victoria, 2001. On Broadway and real estate, see Hillary Miller, *Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York* (Northwestern University Press, 2016) and Mary C. Henderson, *The City and the Theatre: The History of New York Playhouses*, Rev. Ed. (Back Stage Books, 2004). On labor issues, see Christin Essin and Elizabeth A. Osborne, eds., *Working in the Wings: New Perspectives on Theatre History* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2015) and Essin, *Working Backstage: A Cultural History and Ethnography of Backstage Theatre Labor* (University of Michigan Press, 2021). On producers, see Laura MacDonald and William A. Everett, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Musical Theatre Producers* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). On middlemen, see Nic Leonhardt, *Theatre Across Oceans: Mediators of Transatlantic Exchange, 1890–1925* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) and Brent Salter, *Negotiating Copyright in the American Theatre: 1856–1951* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

²¹For an excellent example of anecdote-driven narrative history, see Michael Riedel, *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway* (Simon & Schuster, 2015) and *Singular Sensation: The Triumph of Broadway* (Simon & Schuster, 2021). For a less synthetic collection of personal memories of Broadway, see Jennifer Ashley Tepper, *The Untold Stories of Broadway*, 4 Vols. (Dress Circle Publishing, 2013–2012).

²²Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2005) and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2006); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Harvard University Press, 2010); Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005); Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (University of Michigan Press, 2002) and *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Elizabeth L. Wollman, *The Theatre Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical from Hair to Hedwig* (University of Michigan Press, 2009) and *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical* (Bloomsbury, 2017); Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (University of Michigan Press, 2006); Carol Oja, *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Dominic Symonds, *We'll Have Manhattan: The Early Work of Rodgers & Hart* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Broadway Rhythm: Imagining the City in Song* (University of Michigan

Press, 2017); Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (Norton, 2010); Lawrence Maslon, *Broadway to Main Street: How Show Tunes Enchanted America* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and ed., *American Musicals: The Complete Books & Lyrics of 16 Broadway Classics, 1927–1969* (Library of America, 2014). This far-from-exhaustive list does not include individual studies of authors or shows ranging from Meredith Willson to *South Pacific*.

²³Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Harburg, *The Broadway Musical: Collaboration in Commerce and Art* (New York University Press, 1993). Other industry-focused Broadway books, cited throughout the pages that follow, include Morton Eustis, *Broadway, Inc.!: The Theatre as a Business* (Dodd, Mead, 1934); Jack Gaver, *Curtain Calls* (Dodd, Mead, 1949); William Goldman, *The Season* (Limelight, 1984); Samuel L. Leiter, *Ten Seasons: New York Theatre in the Seventies* (Greenwood Press, 1986); Otis Guernsey, Jr., *Curtain Times: The New York Theater, 1965–1987* (Applause Books, 1987).

²⁴Support for IBDB came from The Broadway League, Theatre Development Fund, and the State of New York.

²⁵Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*.

²⁶Jonathan Bollen, “Data Models for Theatre Research: People, Places, and Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 68, no. 4 (December 2016): 615–32, compares several data models and how they negotiate a set of key terms for performance data.

²⁷Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (MIT Press, 2000), p. 319.

²⁸N. Katherine Hayles, “Narrative and Database: Natural Symbionts,” *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (October 2007), p. 1605.

²⁹Research in progress by Todd Decker is set to improve our knowledge of race and the Broadway musical substantially.

³⁰Johanna Drucker, “Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (2011).

³¹Lisa Gitelman, ed., *“Raw Data” is an Oxymoron* (MIT Press, 2013).

³²My thanks to those who have done, in amounts small and large, laborious data entry work for this project: Julia Stevens, Ryan Rasmussen, Grace Jurevis, Maddie Snow, Madi Fabber, Carly Yingst, Christian Schlegel, Jeffrey Careyva, Ryan Morillo, and Olivia Farrar.

³³For extended experiments, see particularly Underwood, *Distant Horizons* and Piper, *Enumerations*.

³⁴Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, pp. 4–5.

³⁵Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

³⁶Compare Howard Becker, *Art Worlds*, 25th Anniversary Ed. (University of California Press, 2008).

³⁷See, for instance, my proposal to explore repertory at the Comédie-Française through machine learning. Derek Miller, “Defining Repertory: A Response to William Weber and François Velde” in *Databases, Revenues, & Repertory: The French Stage Online, 1680–1793*, eds. Sylvaine Guyot and Jeffrey S. Ravel (MIT Press, 2020).

³⁸John W. Tukey, *Exploratory Data Analysis* (Pearson, 1977).

³⁹See writings and resources collected at <https://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/>.

Chapter One Real Estate

Broadway is an avenue that traverses the length of Manhattan and beyond into the Bronx and Westchester County. Clustered around that avenue, particularly between 41st and 55th streets, sits a group of first-class theaters that we call “Broadway houses.” Theatrical productions that play in those venues become, by virtue of their venues, “Broadway productions.” By metonymy, the industry that creates, promotes, and celebrates those shows is also “Broadway.” “Broadway” thus names—in increasing levels of abstraction—an avenue, a set of buildings near that avenue, the entertainment events that take place in those buildings, and, ultimately, the people, institutions, and infrastructure that sustain those events and those facilities.

It is tempting to look at Broadway, the Theater District, the theaters in all their grand glory, and immediately move past their brute physical reality to the histories they represent, the plays and players who have trod those boards. In our attempt to understand Broadway’s form, however, we must resist that urge and reckon instead with two powerful facts. First, Broadway theaters are essential to Broadway: no show can be “on Broadway” without performing in one of these buildings. Second, these buildings and the land on which they sit do not reciprocate this need; they have value without the theater. These buildings and their land only sometimes have anything to do with theatrical productions. At other times—and in some sense, at all times—they are also just real estate.

Counting the number of Broadway theaters over the past century affirms this principle (Figure 1).

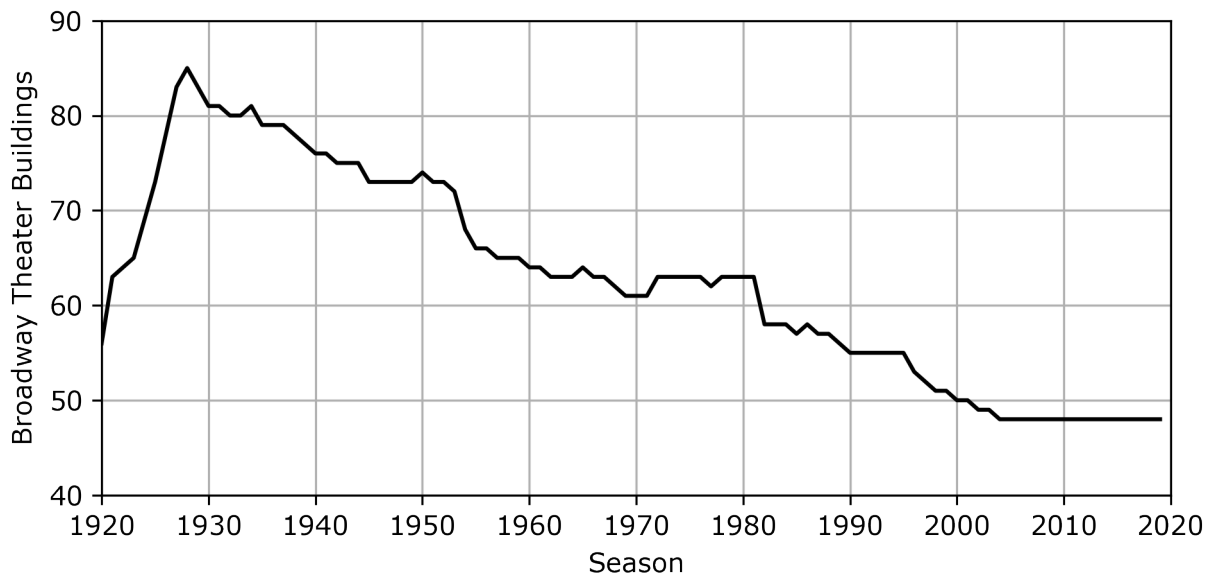


Figure 1: Extant Broadway Theater Buildings by Season

Since 1920, 105 theaters can claim to have been a Broadway house at some point in their history. (I shall say more about the definition of a Broadway theater below.) Today there are 41 working Broadway theaters, plus seven more buildings extant and, theoretically,

available for reconversion to Broadway houses. The stock of 48 existing venues is 45.7% of the total 105. But with only 41 out of 48 in use as Broadway venues, a mere 39% of the 105 theaters that operated as Broadway houses since 1920 are currently Broadway theaters.

That is a huge attrition rate and a central story behind the past century on Broadway. The roaring economy of the 1920s, including in the entertainment industry, encouraged a building boom that collapsed with the Depression. The slow collapse of Broadway's theater stock persisted, more or less, through 2004, when it turned into a small, intermittent increase in the number of theater venues. Such turnover demonstrates concretely that theatrical real estate is convertible—every theater is but one possible building on a very valuable plot of land. Indeed, not only can a theater become other property, but 61% of the theaters since 1920 have become other kinds of property. The value of individual Broadway houses, in other words, can fluctuate so greatly that it is sometimes more sensible to demolish the theater and replace it with an office tower, hotel, or shopping complex than to continue its operation as a theater.

This fact is difficult to keep in mind today, when—excepting the current pandemic shutdown—productions fight for access to the 41 current venues. For instance, in a widely publicized 2019 kerfuffle, the Shubert Organization evicted *Beetlejuice* from the Winter Garden Theatre in favor of a revival of *The Music Man*.¹ From a longer-term perspective, however, the value of a Broadway theater changes depending on demand, supply, and general industry conditions. And as those values fluctuate, the land's value as land sometimes exceeds the value of the developed plot with its theater, at least in the eyes of its owners. The history of defunct, demolished, and otherwise lost theaters reminds us that theater need never take (a) place.

By reflecting on Broadway as real estate, on how and why Broadway takes these particular places, we discover powerful, frequently neglected forces at work: civic infrastructure, zoning regulations, and the general theatrical economy.² Over the past century, infrastructure, zoning, and the theatrical economy have themselves changed drastically. Sometimes they change in response to efforts by the Broadway community. But those changes also arise due to pressure from other, non-Broadway quarters, as well as from forces well beyond any one individual's control. Those forces have, in turn, changed the Broadway theaters: how many there are, what they are used for, how they are designed or renovated. Broadway is in part a real estate business, driven by incentives and assumptions common to that world. Our Broadway history begins by accounting for that fact.

Infrastructure

One of the first things to ask about Broadway as real estate is why here? Why these buildings in this part of town, and not other buildings elsewhere? After all, as Mary C. Henderson has documented, Manhattan's theaters migrated slowly and steadily up the island, following the growing population north from the southeastern wharves, up to the Bowery, to Union Square, to Herald Square, and, ultimately, to Times Square.³ As late as 1906, theaters were still dispersed all throughout Manhattan below Central Park. Though clustered around the Broadway thoroughfare, theaters, opera houses, and music halls could be found up and down that street, as well as on the east and west sides of the island.⁴ In the building boom in the 1910s and 1920s, new theaters spread north of 42nd

Street, primarily between 7th and 8th Avenues, and below 55th Street. And, strikingly, there they have stayed. Why? Because starting at the same moment, the theaters' new location became a hub for new modes of transportation into and out of the city. Times Square is an essential node in the regional road and rail network, which makes it a superb location to attract audiences.

The first part of this infrastructure was the Times Square Subway Station, which opened in 1904. It was originally a local stop for the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT), one of two private subway systems in the New York. IRT's track ran from the southern end of the island up the east side to Grand Central Station, the essential terminal for commuter trains heading east. At Grand Central, IRT's tracks crossed west, stopping at Times Square, then turning north up the west side of Manhattan. In 1917, the IRT expanded and distinguished its east and west side tracks, converting the journey between Grand Central and Times Square into a shuttle connecting the two lines on either side of the island.

The IRT line extending south from Times Square stopped first at 34th Street, by then home to the city's newer major rail terminal, Pennsylvania Station, which opened in 1910 and provided access across the Hudson River to the west and, via the Long Island Railroad, south and east. Nearly simultaneously with IRT's expansion, the other private subway system, Brooklyn Rapid Transit (BRT) completed its own Manhattan line, which, beginning in 1918, stopped in Times Square on its way uptown and East, and, within two years, crossed the East River into Queens. By the end of the First World War, then, Times Square had become a connector not only to Manhattan's two major rail terminals, but also between the city's two separate, private subways, the IRT and the BRT. In 1932, the city-run Independent Subway System added an Eight Avenue line just west of Times Square that connected to the older station, creating a massive underground complex and further reinforcing Times Square's status as a hub of movement through Manhattan. These cumulative transit developments meant that New York City residents could travel with ease from nearly any point in the subway system to Times Square—and to its theaters.

Other infrastructural growth expanded Times Square's gravitational pull to capture those beyond the subway's reach. The Lincoln Tunnel opened in 1937, sending drivers underneath the Hudson River to New Jersey and back again at 38th and 39th Streets, just south of the Theater District. A 1939 *New York City Guide* by the Federal Writers' Project lists eight major bus terminals in Manhattan, all within eight blocks north or south of Times Square.⁵ The consolidated Port Authority Bus Terminal opened in 1952 on 42nd Street and 9th Avenue. Movement to and through New York City thus converged around Times Square from 1904 through the 1950s, making the area increasingly easy to access not only for millions of city residents, but also for commuters from Long Island, New Jersey, and Connecticut, and for the growing extra-regional tourist industry. Such accessibility was and is so important that in 1967 Broadway producers and theater owners tried to stand up their own infrastructure to make easier the notoriously slow trip from the east to the west side of Manhattan. Collaborating with the city—and drawing on an investment from Columbia Records, which recorded many Broadway cast albums—producers and theater owners created a Broadway express route. Four shuttles ran from the tony east side to the theaters and back again after shows ended. The shuttle did not come close to covering

its costs and closed in three months. But the short-lived experiment demonstrates the importance of physical access to Broadway's theaters.

Times Square's easy access for audiences was historically mirrored by the localization of the theater industry's production entities in and around the area. Businesses that supply and administer the theater industry have all, at one time or another, clustered around the theaters they support.⁶ As urban historian Timothy White has documented, for much of Broadway's Golden Age, Broadway shows were not only staged around Times Square, but also built there by artisans working in scene construction, wardrobe manufacture, and other backstage crafts.⁷ Increasing rents in the neighborhood, however, pushed those businesses to New York's outer boroughs or to New Jersey, a process that began in the 1980s. By contrast, theater's administrative apparatus remains mostly intact: in buildings throughout the Theater District one can find administrative offices for the Shubert Organization (theater owners), Actors Equity, the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, and Local One of the International Alliance of Theatrical Employees (unions), the Dramatists Guild (playwrights' association), and many more organizations that support the work happening in the theater buildings themselves.

And of course theater is far from the only attraction in Times Square. Times Square itself, of course, attracts tourists with its famous giant billboards and news tickers. Restaurants offer pre- and post-theater meals; major retail chains occupy vast storefronts. Walk today west down 42nd Street from the Times Square Station and you find two massive film multiplexes among multiple legitimate theaters, but also by Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum, Ripley's Believe It Or Not, and other quirky middlebrow tourist venues. Carnegie Hall presides near the top of the Theatre District, presenting major classical music performances by visiting ensembles. Until 1966, the Metropolitan Opera performed in a building on Broadway between Thirty-Ninth and Fortieth Streets. Sometimes, these multiple entertainment functions sit atop each other, as in One Astor Plaza, which includes Broadway's Minskoff Theatre, commercial office space, production studios for MTV, and the (currently named) Playstation Theatre, a live music venue. At street level in the same building sit multiple retail shops and a restaurant. The same lot was once the Hotel Astor, another essential category of entertainment vendor in Times Square, represented today by many modern chains. Times Square has long been a catch-all entertainment area in which the Broadway theaters play an essential role.

While theater's relationship to these other entertainment businesses is sometimes symbiotic—hotels, restaurants—it can also be competitive. The fierce, moralizing battles over the identity of Theater District reveal Broadway's continued dependence on other government policies to maintain its dominance, particularly over adult entertainment. Historically, Times Square was popular with prostitutes by the mid-1880s.⁸ When theaters emerged in the area in the 1920s, much live entertainment was reliably sexual in nature. Laurence Senelick explains that the Great Depression encouraged a transformation on Broadway from legitimate theaters showing "sophisticated nudities" in the form of various *Follies* and *Scandals* to something akin to "high-class burlesque."⁹ As Broadway grew more like its sexualized competitors, the legitimate industry supported campaigns to stifle more risqué entertainments. When Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia banned actual burlesque in 1937, he was responding to a campaign promoted by religious leaders and anti-vice groups, but spurred by "theater owners and producers envious of burlesque's takings."¹⁰

Once rid of burlesque, Theater District businesses set their sights on less obviously unsavory competitors. In the mid-1950s, the Broadway Association, a non-profit representing area businesses since 1911, successfully lobbied the City Planning Commission to forbid arcades, wax museums, shooting galleries, and other such “garish, noisy, or otherwise objectionable” businesses more appropriate for “the carnival atmosphere of seaside amusement resorts.”¹¹ As Elizabeth Wollman recounts, such efforts often backfired, as when adult bookstores filled the real estate vacuum created by the 1950s rezoning efforts.¹² By the 1970s, pornography (adult movie theaters, peep shows, and prostitution) and drugs—along with the violent crime that often accompanied the latter—defined the area. Once again, the city stepped in, leading a charge to reform Times Square that included new policing strategies, new zoning regulations, and a multi-decade plan to rebuild 42nd Street.¹³

As the 1930s battles over burlesque demonstrated, however, the line between Broadway stages and the streets outside was not as sharp as industry leaders pretended. Even setting aside increasingly overt sexuality on Broadway (and particularly Off-Broadway) stages during and after the sexual revolution, the adult entertainment businesses in Times Square differed little, conceptually, from the theaters.¹⁴ Like the theaters, these venues sold performances. Pornographic businesses catered to clientele “cognate with the matinee audiences of the theaters.”¹⁵ One senses, in Broadway’s battle against Times Square’s porn houses, fear of wily competitors alongside professed concern for public morals.

But Broadway got lucky. The same forces that threatened the live theater industry in the 1930s and 1940s devastated the adult entertainment industry in the 1980s. As Senelick reports, peepshows and x-rated cinemas collapsed not from city crackdowns but due to the rise of pornography on videocassette—as even city officials charged with cleaning up Times Square conceded.¹⁶ Video killed the peep show star.

While the legitimate theaters won in the end, the adult businesses’ success over nearly two decades reminds us that Times Square was and is as valuable for its location as for the particular brand of entertainment offered there. Legitimate theaters have no unique claim to Times Square; they have always competed with other forms of commerce and entertainment. The theaters’ apparent victory in Times Square over the most recent three decades—which, it must be noted, includes today both a wax museum and an arcade, doubtless to the disappointment of the Broadway Association—occurred only through active and expensive government, business, and non-profit policies. And the tenacity of 42nd Street’s seediness reminds us that the rise of film and adult entertainment in Times Square, just like the blossoming of arcade-style places driven out by regulation in the 1950s, represented a competing business sector’s attempt to assert its own dominance.

The Theater District’s location in Times Square owes much, then, to the development of the city’s transportation infrastructure. But it also represents the consolidation of a range of entertainment functions—from supporting businesses to cognate and competing industries—in the same neighborhood. Broadway theaters, while certainly uniquely valuable to Times Square, thus benefit as much from the neighborhood as the neighborhood does from them. And, indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s in particular, Broadway’s dominance owed as much to thumb-on-the-scale government policies that favored the legitimate theater over more explicit adult entertainment as it did to any particular virtues of Broadway. Thus Broadway’s continuing viability in and around Times Square has been

a product in part of decades of government policy, by way of transportation infrastructure and the redevelopment plans that ensured modern Broadway would be a family-friendly, less overtly sexualized environment.

Broadway Theaters

Intriguingly, some of the most successful businesses in and around Times Square are other, non-Broadway theaters. A stroll west down 42nd Street from Broadway will take you past the New Victory Theatre, formerly a legitimate house that now shows only family-oriented fare for an audience of just under 500 people. The Empire Theatre was also once a Broadway house, but today forms part of an AMC Theatres multiplex for first-run commercial films. Continue west and you pass Theatre Row, a set of small, commercial Off-Broadway venues. Even farther along are Playwrights Horizons (tenant since 1974; renovated in 2003) and the Signature Theatre (on 42nd Street since 1997; new building in 2012), both major non-profit producers of contemporary American plays. Six blocks north sits New World Stages, a set of Off-Broadway venues currently owned by the Shubert Organization and open since 2004. New World's theaters often host transfers of Broadway productions such as *Avenue Q* and *Jersey Boys*. All of these venues contribute to theatrical activity in and around Broadway, without belonging to Broadway itself.

What, then, makes a Broadway theater a Broadway theater? A theater is a Broadway house due to a confluence of factors, primarily geography, size, contracts, use, and awards. Geographically, Broadway theaters cluster around Times Square, "in the streets radiating from Times Square from Forty-first to Fifty-third east and west of Broadway."¹⁷ Broadway houses have large audience capacities, with a current minimum of 500 seats. They also operate under a specific contract with Actors' Equity Association called a Production Contract, which was first negotiated in 1919. Primarily, Broadway houses are designed for and present "legitimate" theatrical productions such as plays and musicals, rather than, say, vaudeville or dance or concert music. (Thus, Carnegie Hall, despite its size and location, is definitely not a Broadway theater.) Finally, productions in Broadway houses are eligible for the Tony Awards, overseen jointly by the American Theatre Wing (a service and educational non-profit) and the Broadway League (a theater owners and producers' trade association, formerly the League of New York Theatres and Producers).

A majority of the 41 current Broadway theaters conform to all five of these definitions. There are and always have been, however, exceptions in every one of these categories. The Vivian Beaumont Theatre, which has been part of Tony Award calculations since at least 1973 (David Rabe's *Boom Boom Room* received three nominations) is part of Lincoln Center (near 66th Street and Broadway), well north of the other Broadway houses. Productions at the Vivian Beaumont also operate under a different contract with Equity, a League of Regional Theatres contract known as LORT-A, because the Vivian Beaumont is run by the not-for-profit Lincoln Center Theater. Other non-profit venues on Broadway today include the American Airlines Theatre, Stephen Sondheim Theatre, and Studio 54 (all operated by Roundabout Theatre Company), the Hayes Theatre (run by Second Stage Theatre), and the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre (Manhattan Theatre Club). Size exceptions exist, too: the Playhouse Theatre (also known as the Jack Lawrence) sat farther west than most Broadway theaters and held slightly under 500 people during its heyday in the 1970s, but

shows there were included in Tony Awards nominations. Another marginal house is the Eden (formerly the Phoenix), which was the first home to such major Broadway hits of the 1970s as *Oh! Calcutta!* and *Grease*, but was located at Second Avenue and 12th Street, far below and east of Broadway’s boundaries.

While “Broadway house” thus seems an exceptionally valuable designation, Broadway theaters have often served other functions. Indeed, the number of facilities in use as theaters has always been less than the number of existing theater buildings (Figure 2).¹⁸

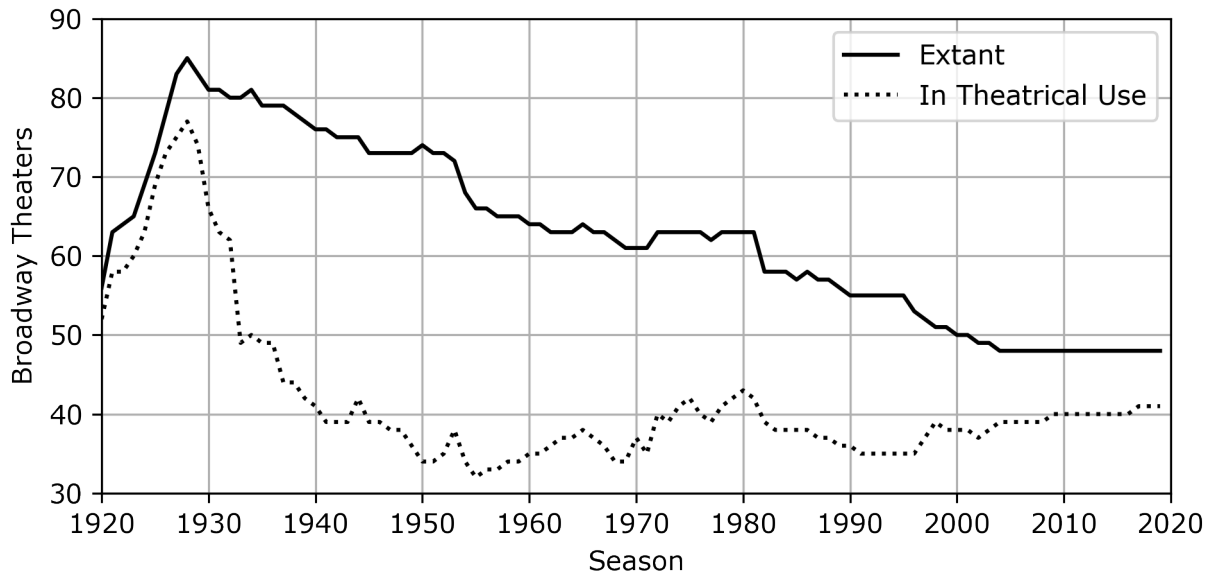


Figure 2: Broadway Theater Buildings, Extant and in Theatrical Use by Season

In some cases, buildings once used as theaters were significantly altered, so much so that reconversion is nigh impossible. But other former Broadway houses—the Ed Sullivan, the Mark Hellinger, and the vacant Times Square Theatre—remain convertible even today.

Some of those houses historically have been idle, but theater buildings have value for many other uses and have been put to those uses by owners throughout the century. By looking precisely at theater usage each season, we get a more complete view of how theater owners have managed the Broadway theater stock. Figure 3 traces Broadway theaters’ use in a given season, meaning the primary function of the building at that time, defined as follows: (a) for Broadway theater, (b) as a movie theater, (c) as a radio or television studio, (d) for other live performances such as non-Broadway theater or burlesque, and (e) vacant.¹⁹

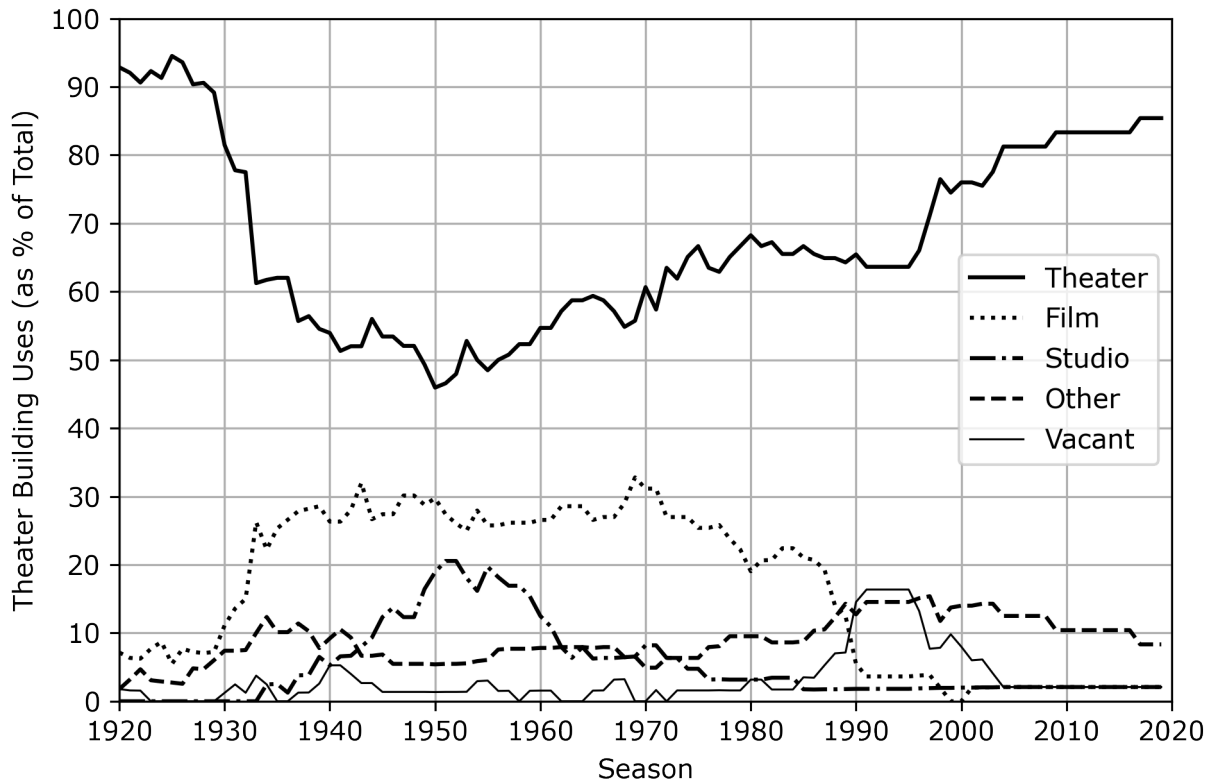


Figure 3: Uses of Broadway Theaters

Our story now comes into sharper focus. The stock market crash in 1929 and subsequent Depression closed theaters, yes, but also pushed them towards alternative uses as owners staved off (or battled back from) bankruptcy. Film was the primary beneficiary from 1930 until the early 1980s, when between 25 to 30% of existing Broadway houses served movie patrons. Other theaters became production sites for widely disseminating radio and, most importantly from 1940 to 1960, theater’s growing competitor, television. While cultural historians have acknowledged that film and television severely cut into theater’s audience throughout the early twentieth century, those industries’ direct competition with theater for physical resources such as space has been less clear.²⁰ Film and television indeed hurt theater overall by offering a similar product more accessibly and at lower prices. But film and television also competed with theater by occupying prime theatrical real estate—those scarce and valuable Broadway houses—and excluding legitimate theater from those stages. However, while the declining number of Broadway houses in use as theaters may have been bad for theater on Broadway, it was good for the Broadway real estate business.

Recognize that theater owners, as a group, adjusted their buildings’ and their lands’ use constantly throughout the century. A theater that screened movies for a decade could very well become a Broadway house again. Figure 4 tracks changes in the theater supply, which involve one of four possible processes: (a) the creation of a new building or new use of an extant building, (b) the return to use of a former theater, (c) a theater’s transfer out of legitimate use, and (d) demolition.

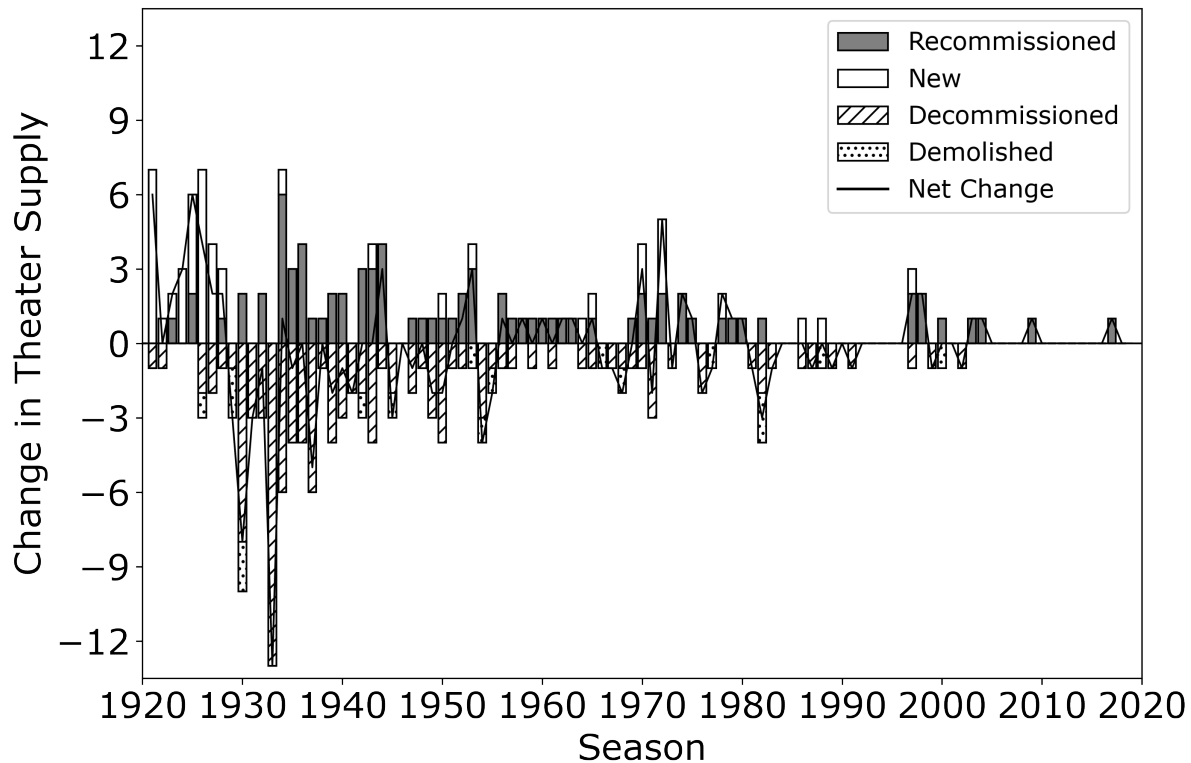


Figure 4: Changes in Theater Supply

The modern observer, looking only since the early 2000s, easily acquires the false impression that Broadway theater management has always been slow and steady, and always in the direction of increasing the number of theaters. In fact, theater management has been extremely volatile from season-to-season throughout most of the past century—during the Depression and its aftermath, of course, but even through the mid-1960s. From 1955–65, for instance, even though the number of legitimate houses grew overall through recommissionings, constant decommissionings kept the net change in theaters over that period relatively small.

The question naturally arises: why so much change? We have been considering the supply of Broadway theaters, and as any introductory economics course will emphasize, supply of theaters should respond to the demand for theaters. But does it?

The roughest measure of demand would be the number of productions in a given season. Anyone wanting to produce a Broadway show needs a Broadway theater to put it in—but there may not be one open. For instance, a planned revival of Maury Yeston and Peter Stone’s musical *Titanic* announced a postponement to 2015–16 “due to the lack of an available Broadway theatre during the 2014–15 season.”²¹ Unfortunately, it is impossible categorically to discover how many productions, like the *Titanic* revival, sought Broadway houses but could not secure one, and thus represent excess demand.

The number of productions actually produced on Broadway each season (Figure 5) provides a very rough proxy for the amount of business aimed at Broadway.

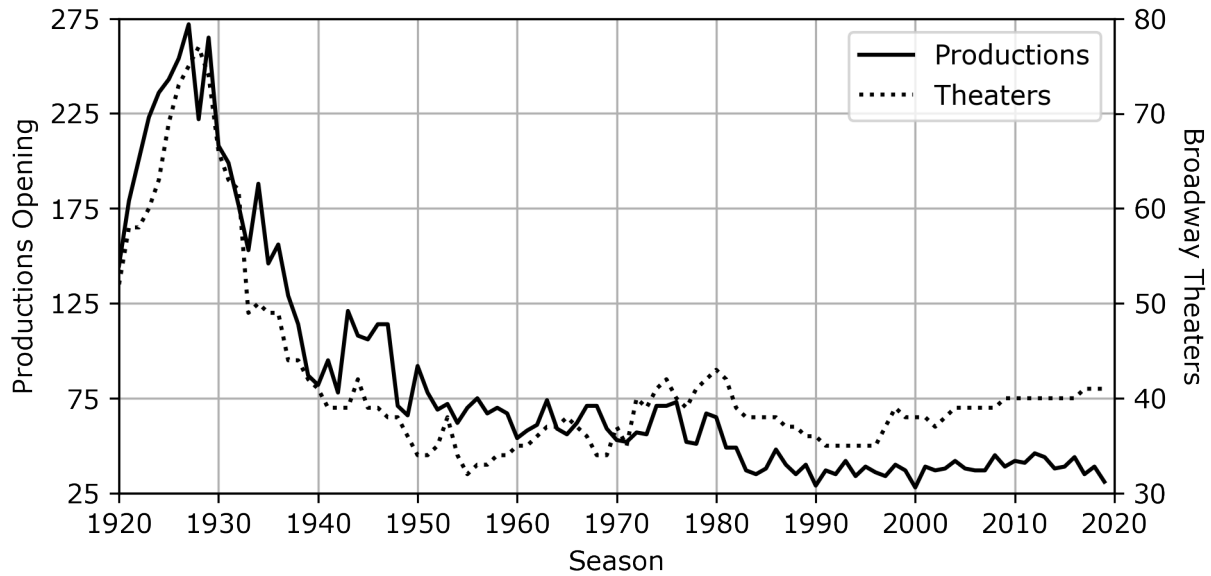


Figure 5: Number of Productions Opening and Theaters in Use

The boom and bust cycle around the Depression is very closely aligned for theaters and productions. But even as production numbers leveled out in mid-century, the theater stock generally continued to decline. That seems a clear over-correction by managers, as even contemporary observers noted. In 1956, for instance, *Variety* reported that thirty new musicals were seeking space in only eight prime theaters, all of which were already occupied or booked. “Return-to-legit of our houses currently being used for tv and films” was the only way to solve the problem.²² Thus, the volatility in theater stock identified above, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, likely does represent conscious manipulations of supply to meet perceived demand.

Zoning

The theater supply became less volatile starting in the 1970s in no small part due to new regulatory efforts by government and private partnerships, all of which encouraged different behaviors by theater owners. While Times Square was very clearly a Theatre District in name and form even by 1920, only in 1967 did the city legally create a special zoning district with unique laws to encourage the theater industry.²³ Proposing the Special Theatre District in 1967, the City Planning Commission (CPC) explained that the new zoning area was necessary due both to “an office building construction boom against which the legitimate theatre cannot compete financially” and to the “inefficient and uncomfortable” state of the small group of theaters in use at the time.²⁴

The city’s solutions, developed from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s, created tensions between legacy theater owners, who benefited financially from relatively little regulation over their property, and the rest of the Broadway community, which wanted to preserve and expand the theater supply. Three key zoning regulations were central to this struggle: (1) floor area bonuses, which allow developers to build more floor space than their lot would otherwise legally accommodate; (2) landmark preservations, which

forbid demolition or alteration; and (3) transferable development rights (TDR), which grant land owners the right to lease unbuilt floors on their lots to other lots. How the city, advocates, and theater owners fought over these policies affected directly the theater supply, how people felt about Broadway houses, and how theater owners earn money.

These battles began immediately with the 1967 zoning regulations, which paid no heed to existing buildings, but instead encouraged new theaters by granting developers a 20% floor area bonus. Existing theater owners naturally regarded new theaters as a threat to their incomes and complained vociferously.²⁵ Their fears were not unwarranted. Samuel L. Leiter observes that the eventual building of three new theaters in 1972 and 1973 converted “a shortage of theatres” into a “glut.”²⁶ Theater occupancy rates—the percentage of days each season that theaters had a show open and playing in them—show a notable, if temporary, drop-off after the new theaters were built (Figure 6).

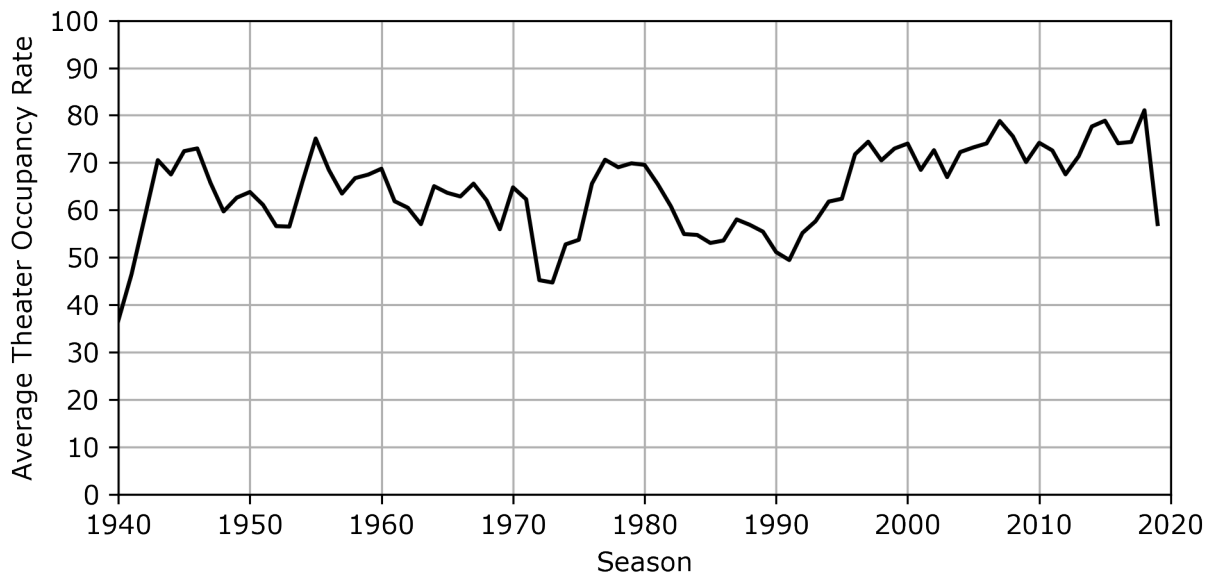


Figure 6: Theater Occupancy Rates

Those three new theaters (the Uris, Circle in the Square, and the Minskoff) resulted directly from the 1967 zoning resolution. But business on Broadway ticked up overall and soon eliminated any sense of a theater glut through the latter part of the 1970s.

When the occupancy rates decreased again in the 1980s, the theater stock retreated, too. (The abysmal occupancy rates of the 1930s make clear why the theater supply retreated in that decade.) This time, the change in theater supply was more final: the 1982 destruction of five historic theater buildings—the Bijou, Morosco, and Helen Hayes, then still operating; and the Gaiety and Astor, both already lost to other uses—to make way for a new hotel.²⁷ But if the multi-building demolition improved theater owners’ financial position by decreasing the theater supply, it also backfired by inspiring a motivated and loud movement to preserve all of Broadway’s remaining theater buildings. The same year as the demolition, a new zoning resolution prohibited the demolition of 44 theaters without both public hearings and a special permit from the CPC; it also encouraged theaters

to become landmarks.²⁸ At the time, only two theaters had yet acquired landmark status: the Lyceum and the New Amsterdam, two of Broadway's oldest extant houses. By 1988, after an intensive push by private advocacy groups and the city itself, 32 theaters were landmarked.

Landmark declarations, however, deeply displeased theater owners. By definition, further development (or demolition) of a landmarked property is legally forbidden. Therefore, as an asset, a landmarked property has no alternative value: a landmarked Broadway theater must remain a Broadway theater, and be maintained in substantially its current condition, unless the owner is willing to wage a large and prohibitively expensive fight with the city. For the previous 50 years of Broadway history, a theater owner could always convert the building into something else or, if things got really dire, tear the whole thing down and build a remunerative office tower. (Indeed, as the figures above demonstrated, this is precisely what many theater owners did do in the 1930s through 1960s.) For landmarked buildings, these options were off the table: once a theater, always a theater.

The city was not entirely unaware of the costs landmark status imposed on owners. They had developed a policy to compensate for the lost value, the transferable development right (TDR), also known as the "air right." On every plot of land in New York City, an owner may build a fixed amount of usable space, a value calculated by multiplying a lot's size by a number called the floor-area ratio (FAR), which zoning laws set based on multiple factors including location, geology, and more. On most plots, if you built a building less than your maximum allowed floor space, that unbuilt space was either a loss or, in the right circumstances, could be sold to an adjacent lot. (Conceptually, zoning regulators viewed adjacent lots as merged for the purposes of calculating the permitted floor space.) Owners of landmarked properties, however, were allowed to transfer development rights not only adjacently, but also across a street or intersection.

But this TDR concession wasn't enough for the owners of newly landmarked buildings. The Shubert, Nederlander, and Jujamcyn organizations—Broadway's three major owners—all complained bitterly that the Theater District was thoroughly developed already and, thus, theater owners would have little opportunity to take advantage of the TDR policy. They filed suit against the theater landmark declarations. Although the CPC took steps in the late 1980s to assuage the owners, and the owners eventually lost the lawsuit in 1992, they kept pushing.²⁹ Finally, in 1998, they won from the city a major concession: CPC further expanded the locations to which theaters could transfer development rights to include anywhere within the Theatre Subdistrict, particularly the relatively underdeveloped land along Eighth Avenue at the district's borders. In exchange, theater owners had to pay \$10 per square foot of transferred floor area into a new Theatre Subdistrict Fund, the capital from which would support theater preservation work and give grants to theater non-profits in the city.³⁰ Here, at last, was a policy that used zoning power to preserve theaters, keep owners happy, and ensure that some profits would return to public use.

TDRs have since become an essential part of theater owners' finances. As of 2016, nine theaters had made a total of 23 transfers to 15 separate development sites, transferring nearly 600,000 square feet of undeveloped allowable floor space from the theaters' lots. An estimated 1.4 million square feet remained untransferred at the time.³¹ The gross sales amount was \$272 million.

A Theater Owner's Portfolio

The TDR policies put significant money into theater owners' pockets. They also epitomize the fact that a theater building itself only partially realizes the value of that theater's land in midtown Manhattan. Yet even that land is but one part of a Broadway theater owner's finances. Unfortunately, details about the finances of all theater owners are impossible to come by. Most theaters are controlled by a small group of privately owned businesses. Today, the Shubert Organization, the Nederlander Organization, and Jujamcyn own 31 of the 41 current theaters on Broadway. Relatively little information about their operations is public. We cannot easily describe their assets, their liabilities, and their revenues in any given year or over time, because these private organizations hold all of that information close. What information we can glean is mostly historical and/or partial. But even that partial view gives us some insights into the complexity of a theater owner's incentives and, thus, how they manage their properties.

Let us focus on the Shuberts, both because they are the largest organization and because their archives provide the most easily available documentation. There were three Shubert brothers: Sam, Lee, and J.J. Part of an immigrant family from Russia, the brothers got into the theater business operating houses in Syracuse and other upstate cities such as Buffalo and Albany. At the turn of the century, they began a move into Manhattan. Sam died in a train accident in 1905, but Lee and J.J. continued expanding as owners, operators, managers, booking agents, and producers, both in New York and across the country. The Shuberts vertically integrated these sub-businesses for play production and distribution, running a modern-style, rational corporation that was highly efficient, as well as ruthless.³² That efficiency helped them triumph over the Theatrical Syndicate, a cartel-like affiliation of owners and producers including Klaw & Erlanger and Charles Frohman, which wielded a near-monopoly over theaters when the Shuberts began branching out.

Vertical integration did not, however, mean simplicity: the structure of the Shuberts' operations before the Depression was extremely complex. They were originally privately capitalized, with ownership distributed among multiple corporations with names like Shubert Theatrical Company and Shubert Consolidated Enterprises, Inc.³³ In 1924, they went public, merging their 24 wholly-owned subsidiaries and 19 affiliated companies into the single Shubert Theatre Corporation (STC). But that public offering disguised a key aspect of their finances: "almost *all* their real estate was held out of the company," as Shubert biographer Jerry Stagg explains. "Theaters that Lee and Jake [J.J.] *owned* were leased to the company."³⁴ Thus some of the money STC spent to finance their theater operations went back to the brothers themselves as lessors of real property.

This structure did not survive the Depression, which sent STC into receivership in 1931. But the brothers scored a coup: on April 7, 1933, Lee Shubert, acting as agent for a new legal entity named Select Theatres Corporation, purchased all of Shubert Theatre Corporation's holdings. The sale price was \$400,000 (\$6.8 million in 2018 dollars) for assets the receivers had valued at almost \$23 million (\$389 million) in October of 1931.³⁵ With full control again, the brothers re-established the matryushka doll corporate structure that existed before 1924. Select Theatres became the holding company for subsidiary corporations such as Magoro, Inc. (which owned the MAjestic, GOLDen, and ROyale theaters). Select Theaters then sublet the venues to Select Operating Corporation (also a Shubert

business, of course). Select Operating then rented houses to producers. The Shubert business was leases and subleases, companies within companies; Shuberts all the way down. And at the bottom, on the land, the owners were still often the brothers themselves.

While a successful anti-trust lawsuit in the 1950s forced the Shuberts to curtail some of their vertical integration and cede some theaters they controlled, the business carried on in this nested fashion until the 1970s. Lee and J.J. died in 1953 and 1963, respectively, leading to a protracted power struggle. Out of this morass, new leadership emerged in the form of two in-house lawyers, Gerald Schoenfeld and Bernard Jacobs. They transformed the Shubert business into yet another new, also unusual corporate form: a for-profit business, the Shubert Organization, wholly owned by a non-profit private charity, the Shubert Foundation. That's right: the Shubert Organization, one of the most powerful and wealthiest entities in Broadway, is technically a wing of a private charity.³⁶

As any Broadway producer or ticket-buyer could tell you, their operations don't seem particularly charitable, however. In 2015, for instance, the Shubert Foundation gave \$25.6 million to non-profit performing arts organizations, primarily theaters, around the United States. They are, almost certainly, the largest annual donor to the American theater. And yet it seems they could do more.

The Shubert Organization's incomes from theater rentals are significant and extend well beyond a simple rental fee, as scattered available records make clear. For instance, a contract for Neil Simon's *The Star-Spangled Girl* at the Shubert-owned Plymouth Theatre in 1966 indicated that the production paid for air conditioning at \$80 per performance, 73% of the New York City gross receipts tax, \$25 per week for supervising tickets, and \$175 for the use of a Shubert box office in Macy's.³⁷ Those numbers are on top of the rent, which starts with a minimum—for *The Star-Spangled Girl*, the Shuberts were guaranteed \$3100 a week (roughly \$25,000 in 2020 dollars). Theaters also take a percentage of the gross once that percentage tops the minimum: in this case, 18% of the gross up to \$20,000 and 25% of the gross over that amount. (Those percentages vary depending on the production and the deal they cut with the theater. For Simon's *The Odd Couple*, which had played the same theater the previous year, the Shuberts took 30% of the first \$20,000 and 25% of the rest. Simon got a better deal for his next play because his bargaining power had increased after to *The Odd Couple*'s smashing success.) Even without the fees named above, we can calculate the weekly Shubert income from renting the Plymouth to *The Star-Spangled Girl* (Figure 7).

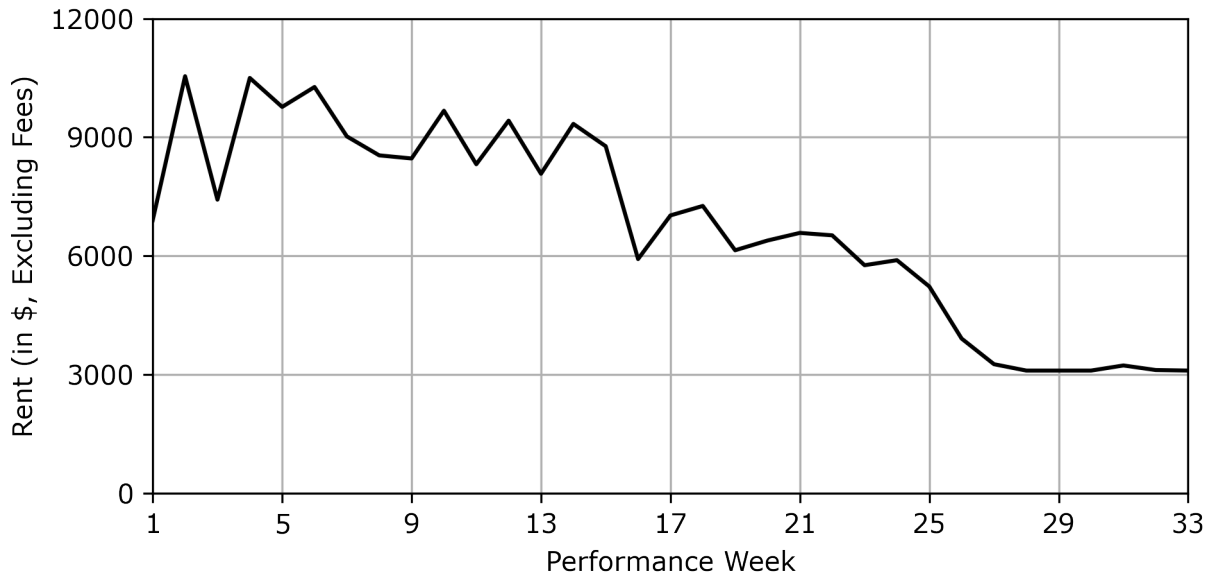


Figure 7: Estimated Shubert Income from *The Star-Spangled Girl*

But fee structures have shifted since the 1960s. A 2017 guide to the Broadway business, for instance, describes weekly expenses differently, estimating them for non-musical venues at \$90,000 each week, broken down as follows:³⁸

Table 1: Broadway Theater Expenses for a Non-Musical House

Category	Cost
Rent Guarantee	\$15,000
Operating Charge	\$15,000
Stagehands	\$15,000
Other Staff	\$27,000
House Expenses	\$18,000
Total	\$90,000

Additionally, a theater today takes 6% of grosses over a set minimum gross. Without access to all of the Shuberts' actual contracts, we cannot break down their rental incomes in better detail. But we can estimate their income, in 2020 dollars, as a percentage of the gross for all shows in Shubert houses (Figure 8).

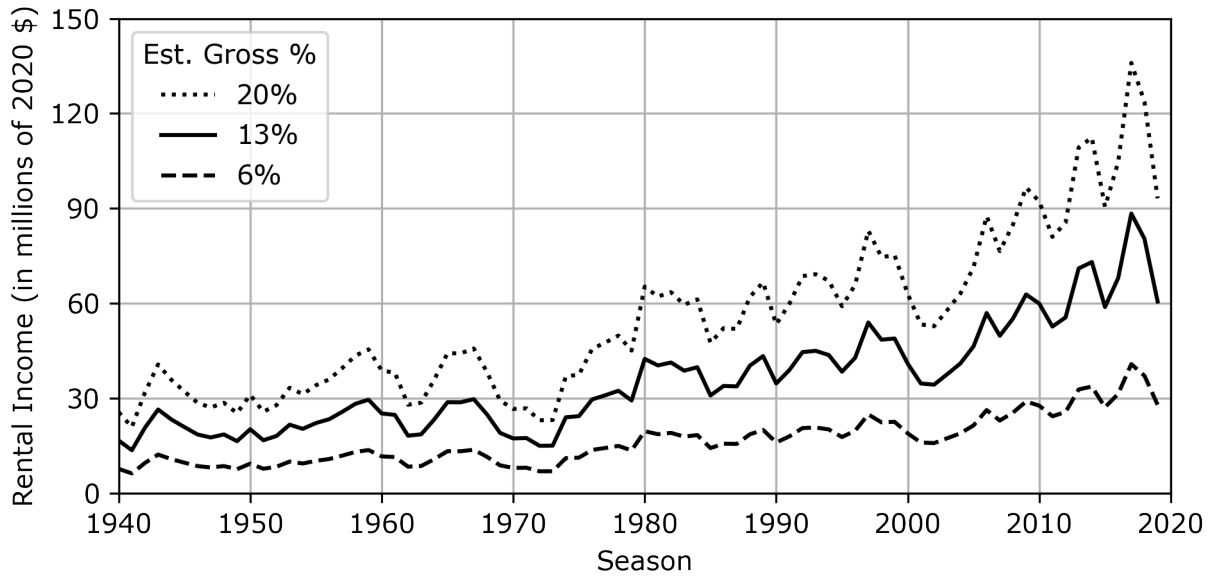


Figure 8: Estimated Shubert Grosses from Theater Rentals

Grossing between \$10 and \$40 million in seasonal income through the 1980s, and rising since then, the Shuberts’ theater rental business is clearly very lucrative.

Little of that rental income shows up on the Foundation’s tax returns, however, which reveal assets far in excess of their giving. The Foundation’s 2015 tax returns reported total assets of \$778 million, of which their \$25.6 million in gifts represented but 3.3%.³⁹ Predominantly that money sits in stocks and bonds (corporate and government), to the tune of \$529 million. The Shubert Organization itself—which manages and rents the theaters, invests in productions, and owns the ticketing agency Telecharge, among other operations—is purportedly worth only \$49.3 million—strangely, the same valuation since 1987—and pays an annual dividend to the Foundation of \$10 million. As other observers have noted, this valuation and the annual dividend are ludicrously low relative to what must be the Organization’s annual profits.⁴⁰ Even their key assets, the theaters, are worth significantly more than \$49.3 million, according to city tax assessors.⁴¹

Table 2: Market Value of Shubert-owned Theatres in New York, 2018

Current Name	Market Value (\$ Millions)
Golden Theatre	3.8
Lyceum Theatre	4.5
Music Box Theatre	4.7
Cort Theatre	4.8
Jacobs Theatre	5
Barrymore Theatre	5
Schoenfeld Theatre	5.1
Ambassador Theatre	5.4
Broadhurst Theatre	5.6
Imperial Theatre	7.7

Current Name	Market Value (\$ Millions)
Majestic Theatre	8.8
Broadway Theatre	9.5
Longacre Theatre	10
Booth Theatre	12.1
Shubert Theatre	12.1
Belasco Theatre	17.2
Winter Garden Theatre	29.9
Total	151.2

The Shubert Foundation and the Shubert Organization, despite their public filings, remain inscrutable. Additionally, the land under the theaters, now made virtually inaccessible by the theaters’ landmark status, may be worth even more. In one sign of the true market potential of this land, in 2015, the Shubert Foundation realized a massive income from the sale of land at 1700 Broadway at 53rd Street—a site with no theaters, but well within the theater district—for \$280 million. On paper, the Shubert Organization itself, along with the Organization’s annual dividend to the Foundation, comprise a mere 7.6% of the Foundation’s assets. The Shubert Organization and Foundation thus have financial assets that rival their income from theater rentals, making the Shubert approach to theater management extremely difficult to understanding in relation to their entire portfolio.

How, then, should we think about the Shuberts’ theater ownership and their reactions to government policies such as zoning regulations, when they have so much money entangled in other financial entities? And what does it mean that the Shubert Organization purportedly exists only for charitable purposes? Understanding the decision-making in Broadway real estate is not only formidably complex, but frankly impossible. Their responses to endogenous and exogenous forces may be based on a business strategy that stretches far beyond Broadway. We may not understand how the Shuberts manage their theaters in part because managing their theaters—and particularly managing them in the interests of the theater industry—is only part of their business.

This problem touches all of Broadway’s owners in different ways. The Nederlanders (six theaters owned, plus three more operated) and Jujamcyn (five theaters), the next largest owners, are similarly opaque private entities—though neither, to my knowledge, operates as the subsidiary of a private foundation. Ambassador Theatre Group (two houses) and Disney also run theaters commercially on Broadway, though both rent their houses from other landlords, as does the independent owner of Circle in the Square. And then there are the many non-profit theater operators: Roundabout Theatre Company (three theaters), Second Stage, Manhattan Theatre Club, and Lincoln Center. Those non-profits do not compete to host productions; they produce their own work. As confounding as the Shuberts’ size and business structure is, that size can obscure the truly varied landscape of Broadway theater ownership.

Each theater operator has a particular financial relationship to the theater. That relationship is embedded within other financial structures, which, by increasing or decreasing the larger capital pool, can restrict or enhance the theater’s operation. In other words, every theater on Broadway is as complicated a financial entity as the Shuberts’ theaters, in

one way or another. And while we can look at historical trends in theater operations, we can never satisfactorily recuperate the strategies that the many players adopted to navigate an ever-changing industry.

The goal of this chapter has been to understand Broadway in part as a real estate business. I established first the historical fact that the number of theaters on Broadway grew rapidly in the 1910s and 1920s, before starting a collapse in the Depression that has continued more or less to the present day. I then identified how Times Square's vast transportation infrastructure, established roughly during the theater building boom, helped to encourage theaters to remain around that area, and not to continue drifting uptown, as they had done historically.

I then looked more closely at the changing supply of theaters, noting the extensive use of theaters for other purposes, particularly to support competing industries of film and television at mid-century. Theater owners seem to have been responsive to these multiple incentives, bringing theaters into and out of use as Broadway houses throughout the period. New zoning regulations created both three new theaters and more stability in the theater supply starting in the late 1960s. In particular, creative use of development bonuses, landmarking, and transferable development rights, kept theater owners happy and invested in a more stable Broadway theater stock. Finally we explored the difficulty of understanding the basic financial incentives theater owners face, because theaters may be only a small piece of a larger financial portfolio.

I have said almost nothing, except in passing, about any actual Broadway productions. Yet the changes traced in the graphs above and the incentives teased out of the zoning fights and corporate history, directly determined how much Broadway theater there could be at all. The real estate business on Broadway is like the printing business for the book industry: necessary, even if not sufficient. Broadway is far, far more than its real estate, those theaters in which the magic happens. But it is nothing without them either.

Notes

¹Michael Paulson, “Despite Turnaround, ‘Beetlejuice’ Being Forced Out of Theater,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2019.

²Hillary Miller, *Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York* (Northwestern University Press, 2016); Michael McKinnie, *Theatre in Market Economies* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Mary C. Henderson, *The City and the Theatre: The History of New York Playhouses*, Rev. Ed. (Back Stage Books, 2004).

³Henderson, *The City and the Theatre*.

⁴Merchants Association of New York, “The Merchants’ Association Hotel and Theater Map,” 1906, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2001620439>.

⁵Federal Writers’ Project, *New York City Guide* (Random House, 1939), p. 16.

⁶Brooks McNamara, “The Entertainment District at the End of the 1930s,” in *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1991).

⁷Timothy R. White, *Blue-Collar Broadway: The Craft and Industry of American Theater* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁸Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “Policing of Sexuality,” in *Inventing Times Square*.

⁹Laurence Senelick, “Private Parts in Public Places,” in *Inventing Times Square*, p. 335.

¹⁰Senelick, “Private Parts in Public Places,” p. 336

¹¹City Planning Commission, Minutes of Meeting, December 23, 1953, p. 1117.

¹²Elizabeth Wollman, *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical* (Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 137.

¹³Senelick, “Private Parts in Public Places”; Lynn B. Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette: Remaking the City Icon* (MIT Press, 2003).

¹⁴Elizabeth Wollman, *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁵Senelick, “Private Parts in Public Places,” p. 351.

¹⁶Senelick, “Private Parts in Public Places,” p. 347.

¹⁷Henderson, *The City and the Theatre*, p. 197.

¹⁸For the purposes of this graph, a theater counts if it is (a) among those on the list of 105 venues, (b) hosts (or has previously) hosted at least one Broadway production, and (c) would theoretically be convertible back into a theater with a reasonable amount of construction, i.e., has not been demolished. However, for the eight marginal theaters, I included them among the total only if they were a Broadway venue that season; I do not treat them as potential Broadway houses when not designated as such.

¹⁹Usage information comes from Henderson, *The City and the Theatre* and Nicholas van Hoogstraten, *Lost Broadway Theatres* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), supplemented by information in *The New York Times* and *Variety*. Again, these numbers are generous: some use in a season, even in a building primarily converted to film or burlesque, counts here as a theater season.

²⁰See, for example, Alfred L. Bernheim and Sara Harding, *The Business of the Theatre* (Actors’ Equity Association, 1932), Chapter 18, and Jack N. Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1860–1967* (Cornell University Press, 1968), Chapter 4.

²¹Adam Hetrick, “Broadway Revival of *Titanic* Postponed,” Playbill.com, May 21, 2014, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/broadway-revival-of-titanic-postponed-218591>. That revival was subsequently abandoned.

²²“B’way Facing Worst Booking Tieup,” *Variety*, June 27, 1956.

²³There had been earlier, small attempts at controlling the area’s development: a regulation permitting particularly large and electrified signs had been passed in 1940, as had some anti-“honky tonk” amendments. City Planning Commission Minutes, October 2, 1940, p. 600–1.

²⁴City Planning Commission Minutes, November 1, 1967, p. 762.

²⁵Charles G. Bennett, “Shuberts Oppose 2 New Theaters,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 1968.

²⁶Samuel L. Leiter, *Ten Seasons: New York Theatre in the Seventies* (Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 181.

²⁷See Michael Riedel, *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), Chapter 19, for a standard version of the fight over these demolitions.

²⁸Midtown Zoning Resolution (1982), s. 81-745(a)(2).

²⁹Most notably, in 1988 CPC eliminated the 1967 FAR bonus for new theaters and added an extra FAR of 1 for retaining an existing theater. City Planning Commission Reports, N 870760 ZRM (September 2, 1987).

³⁰See City Planning Commission Reports, N 980271 ZRM (June 3, 1998) and C 980272 ZMM (June 3, 1998). In 2016, the CPC moved to increase theaters' contributions, arguing that the goal of taxing these transfers at 20% of the sale price was not being met. The Mayor's office pushed back and the transfer tax remains where it was originally set. "Curtain Falls on de Blasio's Theater District Air Rights Plan," *The Real Deal*, February 28, 2017, <https://therealdeal.com/2017/02/28/curtain-falls-on-de-blasios-theater-district-air-rights-plan>.

³¹City Planning Commission Report, N 160254(A) ZRM (November 16, 2016), pp. 4–5.

³²Peter A. Davis, "The Syndicate/Shubert War," in *Inventing Times Square*; Michael Schwartz, *Broadway and Corporate Capitalism: The Rise of the Professional–Managerial Class, 1900–1920* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³³For histories of the Shuberts, see Anthony Vickery, "The Logistics and Finances of Touring in North America, 1900–1916," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Victoria, 2001, Chapter 3; Jerry Stagg, *The Brothers Shubert* (University of California Press, 1968); Foster Hirsch, *The Boys from Syracuse: The Shuberts' Theatrical Empire* (Cooper Square Press, 2000).

³⁴Stagg, *The Brothers Shubert*, p. 221.

³⁵Receivers' Report No. 1, Southern District of New York, reprinted in Revenue Revision Hearings before the Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives, Seventy-second Congress, First Session, p. 513.

³⁶They also benefit from a major IRS exemption, granted in a 1979 private letter ruling. Since 1969, tax law forbade private foundations from owning more than 20% of a for-profit business. But Schoenfeld and Jacobs successfully convinced the IRS that the theater business was so unprofitable that they should be allowed to retain ownership and not to count the Organization among the Foundation's assets. The IRS agreed, determining that the Foundation's ownership of the Organization was a "program-related investment," and thus not calculated as part of the Foundation's assets, and that the Organization was a "functionally related business" and, therefore, not subject to the business holding limitations.

³⁷Plymouth Theatre, Real Estate Series, Shubert Archive.

³⁸Peter Boygo, *Broadway General Manager*. New York: Allworth Press, 2017, pp. 55–6.

³⁹Shubert Foundation, Return of Private Foundation, 990-PF (2015), available from ProPublica's Non-profit Explorer, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits>.

⁴⁰See, for instance, Dean Adams, "Puttin' the Profit in Nonprofit Broadway Theatre Companies," *Theatre Symposium* 22 (2014), p. 53.

⁴¹New York City, Department of Finance.

Chapter Two People

In his gossipy and opinionated memoir, Arthur Laurents recalls working with ego-maniacal director and choreographer Jerome Robbins on *Gypsy* (1959). During rehearsals, Robbins insisted that the producers put a box around his name in the program. Laurents was furious; a contractual stipulation had guaranteed equal billing for the lead creative team, “same size, same color, same whatever but the same.”¹ But the producers relented to Robbins’ demand, ceding to Laurents a larger share of the profits as compensation for the contractual breach. Laurents got his revenge by memorializing Robbins’ pettiness as an “inside joke” in the show itself. As the memoir explains:

When Rose and Louise find they have been booked into a burlesque house, Louise says: “One good thing: I’ll bet we got top billing.” To which Herbie answers: “Well—actually, they kind of had us lost in the middle. I thought last was better. . . . And I’m making them put a box around it.”²

Robbins’ ego and Laurents’ gleeful payback touch on a deep truth about Broadway: credit matters. Yet even as the big names fight for the prime spot on the marquee, poster, or program, many people who play essential roles receive little or no recognition.

The same big names get a box around them in our histories of Broadway, too. Actors, playwrights, directors, choreographers all take up space on the page of Broadway history, wrongly crowding out the designers, press agents, photographers, union leaders, and more. Broadway is not as individualistic as Robbins’ infamous vanity would suggest. It is instead a tremendously collaborative community, dependent on work from a huge array of people and organizations. For all its breadth, however, Broadway does not look like the United States or even like New York City when it comes to the demographics of its artists and audience. The Broadway community is both much more than the popular imagination might think, and much less than it could be.

This chapter offers multiple ways to think about who really populates Broadway, mostly on stage, but also off. Beginning with Laurents’ program joke, I look first at Broadway programs to explore what makes Broadway far larger than usually realized. The program allows us to think about the history of getting credit, but also about the many people who still work at the edges of, or just beyond, the program. Then we will consider Broadway as a network of collaborators, recognizing those people who define Broadway through the breadth and strength of their connections. Production staff in particular serve as the (usually invisible) centers of the Broadway network. Next, exploring cast sizes and the importance of Broadway’s union history, we will consider how Broadway has valued (or not) its labor. And finally, we will zoom out to consider Broadway’s people in relation to the city and nation from which they draw their pool of talent and the bulk of their audience. Some of the stereotypes about Broadway’s demographics, particularly about its whiteness, are well-earned, but other expectations about who stars on and watches Broadway prove to have more complex histories.

In many ways, this chapter celebrates the wide range of people who make Broadway run. But it also points out the structures of power that promote some individuals and marginalize others. Broadway loves hyping its stars: star actors, star composers and writers, star directors. Yet Broadway works only with the labor of everyone else. Decentering

the stars, and recentering Broadway around the groups that make Broadway Broadway, is one happy outcome of looking past the boxes in the program to read every name on every page.

The Whole Broadway Community

Laurents' story turned on a box, a visual way to highlight a name among the raft of people cited in a program. But where superstars like Robbins could fight to stand out even among the bold-faced names, other Broadway workers went decades without proper recognition in yellow-fronted Playbills.³ Many of these historically ignored roles have long been essential, and their importance precedes their appearance in programs. Others arose only at particular stages of Broadway's technological or industrial development. As Robbins and Laurents well understood, program listings matter—they not only acknowledge labor performed by a particular individual, but credit the status of a profession itself. Taking seriously their combative understanding of the importance of program listings, we can see how the members of the Broadway community have changed over the years, and how some people essential to Broadway's operations still linger at its margins.

Consider the understudy. Understudies are members of a theatrical company who perform named parts when another company member is absent. (Understudies are closely related to swings and standbys. Swings are not part of the regular company, but “swing into” all ensemble/chorus roles. Standbys are actors who do not perform regularly, but “stand by” to perform a leading role, usually replacing a top-billed star. Some shows, such as the premieres of *Evita* (1979) or *Hamilton* (2015) used an alternate for the title role for the Wednesday and Saturday matinees. In such cases, the alternate is the standby, with, essentially, a permanent assignment.) Understudies proper have a long but difficult to trace history in the theater.⁴ The expectation that some members of a company could step into roles played by others in the event of indisposition long precedes the use of the word “understudy.” That word rises in frequency starting in the 1880s, appearing regularly after 1900.⁵ A 1921 observer, relating anecdotes about the understudy's utility, notes that “There has long been a conspiracy of silence about understudies,” likely because the understudy often portends the absence of a star and the accompanying ire of the audience.⁶ The first Actors' Equity contract in 1919 required managers to note if an actor were assigned to understudy a role. But only in 1924 did Equity contracts begin to require formal notice to the audience when understudies took the stage.⁷

Understudies are so obscure that they receive almost no mention in theater programs until World War II (Figure 1).

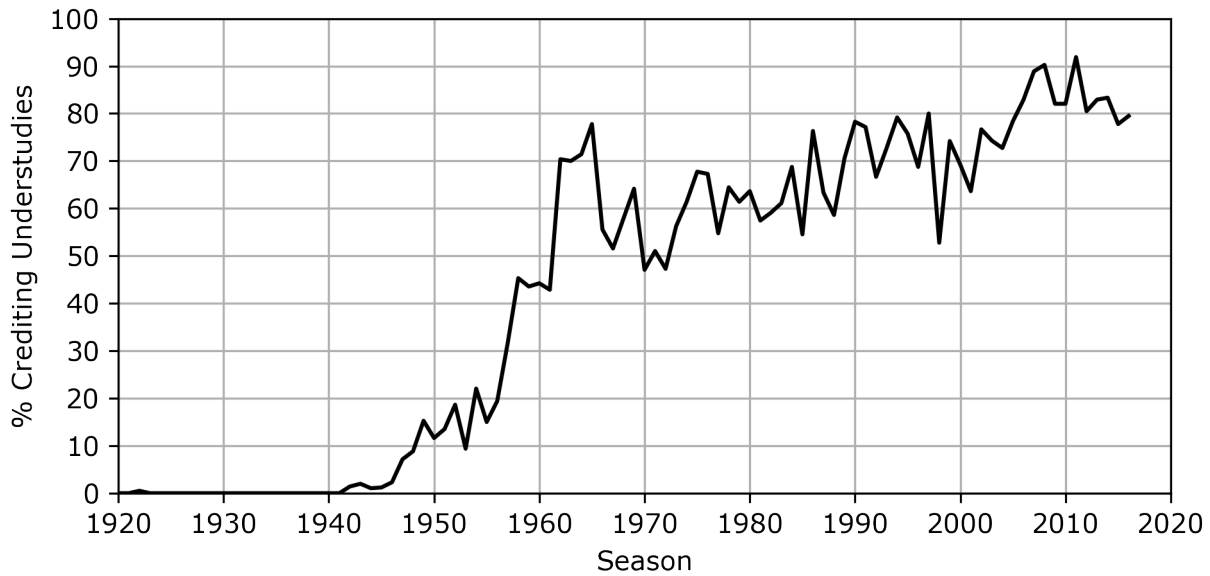


Figure 1: Percent of New Productions Crediting Understudies by Season

During that period, the Broadway press briefly took serious notice of this difficult role. *Billboard*, for instance began summarizing important understudy appearances in its weekly Showlog feature, and even devoted an entire article to explaining some of the most notable recent accomplishments by understudies.⁸ As *Billboard*'s attention suggests, understudies are crucial to a production's operation. In one show from the 1980s (discussed in Chapter Seven), understudies appeared in almost 40% of the production's 579 performances.⁹ But credit in programs when understudies did not take the stage remained limited until the mid-1960s. Understudies do appear by name in the overwhelming majority of programs today.

Both the regular use of understudies and proper credit in programs owes much to changing union rules. J. Austin Eyer and Lyndy Franklin Smith note that the rise of swings coincided with expanded vacation and illness rights for actors, which made swings more essential to keeping a show open. The 1974 the Equity contract was the first to require that musicals with a chorus include swings.¹⁰ The understudy thus epitomizes one particularly important type of worker on Broadway: the hidden laborers, long present and essential, who have only slowly emerged—not into the spotlight, but into a far, dimly lit upstage corner.

The understudy, who sometimes appears onstage but usually does not, somewhat comprehensibly appears at the margins of a program. These days, posted notice in the lobby and a small paper insert in programs indicates the labor of understudies, swings, or standbys in an evening's performance. But what of all the people who labor off- or backstage, never seen by an audience? Their work appears without their person; recognition happens only in the program. Being named in a program depends primarily on the status of a profession within the industry. What we think of now as the major creative staff roles—director, set designer, lighting designer, sound designer—today sit on the front page of a contemporary program alongside the names of many others. But while someone

has always designed Broadway sets and lit the stage, that person did not receive featured credit regularly and prominently until their profession gained sufficient stature throughout the industry. Eight major production staff roles—producer, director, stage manager, set designer, costume designer, lighting designer, sound designer, and casting director—reveal the slow rise to prominence of these positions (Figure 2).¹¹

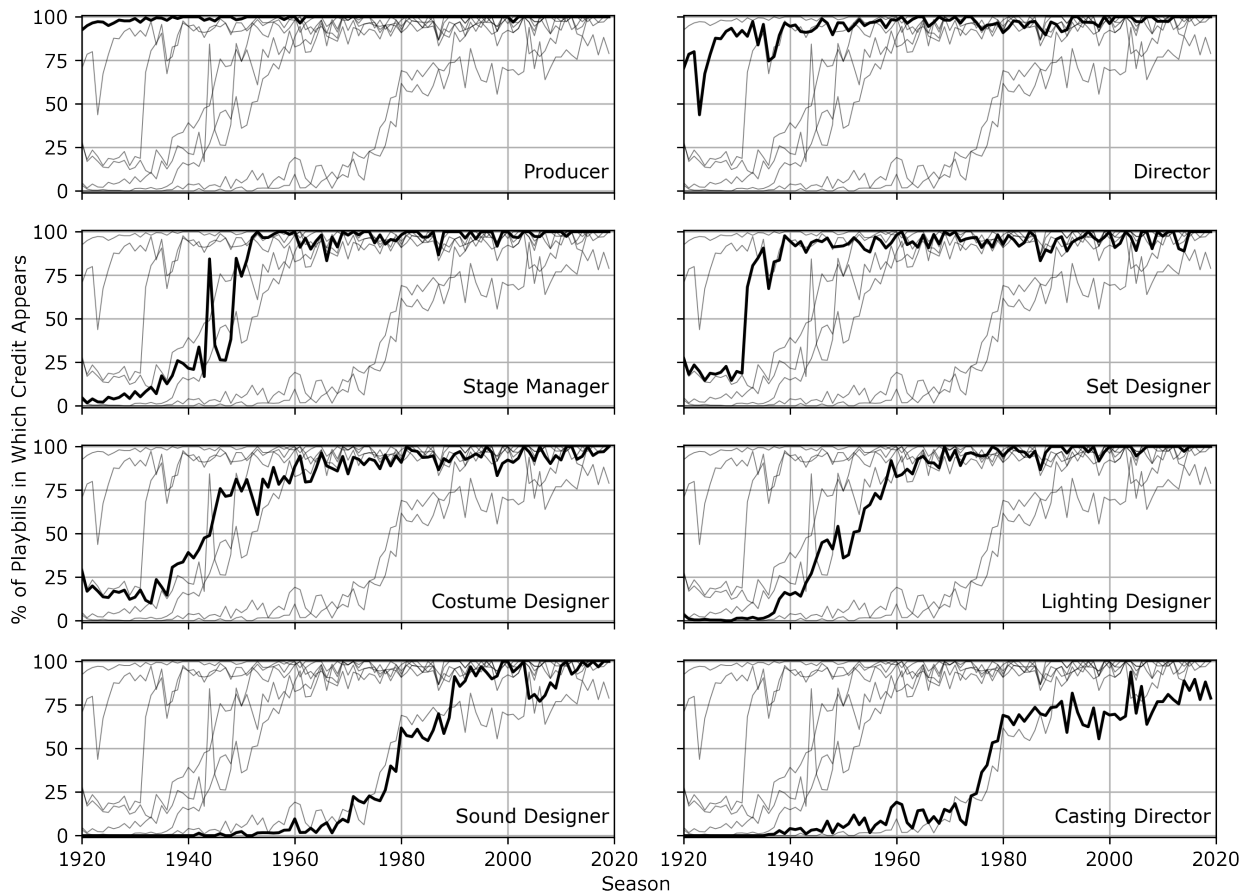


Figure 2: Percent of New Productions Crediting Creative Staff by Season

Producers were credited in almost 100% of shows from the beginning. (Capital always acknowledges itself.) Directors start to appear consistently around 1920, joined soon by set designers. Costume and lighting designers, along with stage managers, only attained rough parity with those professions in the early 1960s. Casting directors emerge tentatively during the late 1950s but, like sound designers, matured professionally in the 1970s, the latter alongside the development and spread of microphone technologies. None of these roles was non-existent before they appeared prominently in programs. Microphones, for instance, planted onstage or in the scenery were in use for decades before the complex, wearable mics of the modern production became commonplace.¹²) But recognizing these roles—with program listings often coming hand-in-hand with awards eligibility and, later, royalties from a production’s weekly gross—took time.

And there remain still many, many occasionally credited roles. Comparing the program listings for the same show across multiple productions demonstrates the rising stature

of the many professions still living at the margins even of the modern industry. The original program for *Oklahoma!* (1943) names 87 people or organizations who contributed to the production. These names include all of the cast, of course, as well as the director, choreographer, and designers for sets and costumes. Companies that built the physical goods also receive named credit in a short paragraph, along with several backstage staff for the producing organization, The Theatre Guild. A 1979 revival lists slightly more contributors: 105 names, including not only a lighting designer and casting director, but also a press representative, wardrobe and hair supervisors, a production photographer, and the firms that provided legal and accounting services. By 2002, the program's lists had more than doubled, with a whopping 227 named people or organizations. Alongside the cast, crew, and creative team, the 2002 program recognizes: leadership at the Nederlander Organization (theater owners), the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization (play licensor), and Cameron Mackintosh, Inc. (producer); 21 musicians; 14 dressers; a tutor; a dialect coach; customs brokers; travel agents; payroll services; a merchandiser; a bank; and no fewer than 41 people listed as assistants, associates, or interns. Even major theatrical unions (Equity, IATSE, SSSDC, ATPAM) all now receive explicit mention in the credits. One can certainly find in such lists specialized roles that would have no historical analogue, such as the light board programmer, whose skills did not exist prior to the establishment of computerized lighting systems.¹³ And surely some roles used to be performed not by specialists but by company managers or other organizational experts. But looking at growing program listings in detail makes clear that each production always gathers a larger community of individuals than one can possibly fathom from a seat in the audience.

One role in the modern program, though always prominent, names an increasingly large number of individuals or organizations: producer (Figure 3).

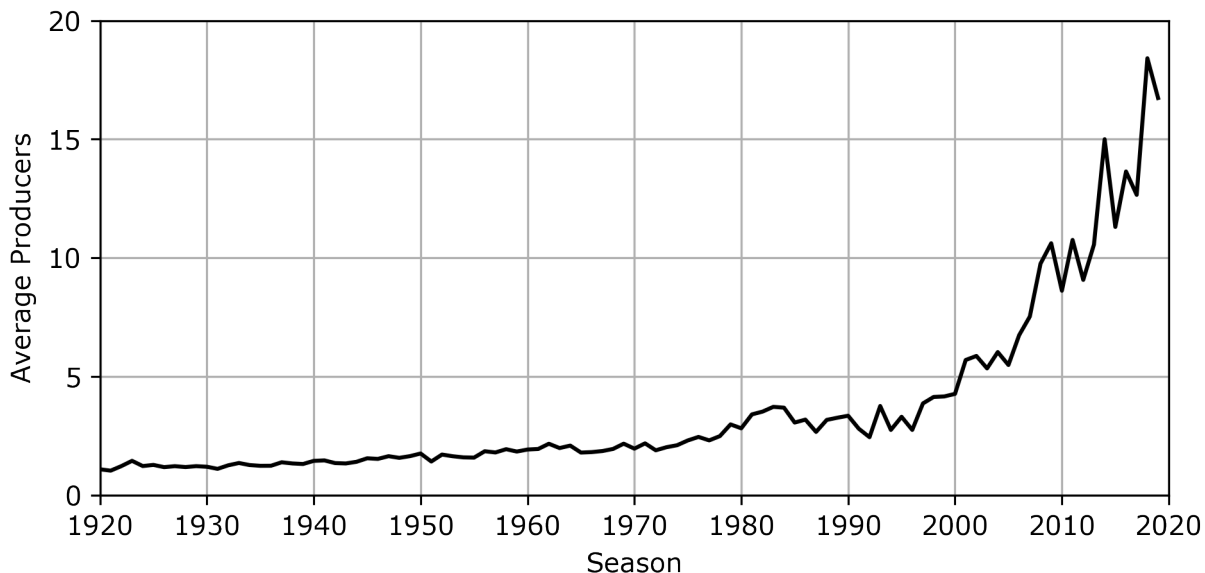


Figure 3: Average Producers Per New Production by Season

Historically, it was common to see one, and eventually two people credited as producer for a production. By the 1980s, three or four names were not unusual. But since 2000,

the number of producers per production has skyrocketed, with a recent average around 15 names. The record-holder is *The Inheritance* (2019), which credited no fewer than 48 people as producers. Does this mean that the work of individual producers is now widely distributed across a larger field of people? No. Most productions still have one or two people working as Lead Producers, who raise the bulk of the capital. That money comes from Co-Producers, who represent most of the new names in programs and either invested a particularly large amount or themselves served as a conduit for other investors.¹⁴ The growth of producer credits indicates not changes in labor, but rather that, for investors as for performers and staff, credit serves as its own form of currency.

The rise of the named investors—the production financiers who do no actual labor, but contribute capital and earn returns if a show profits—is somewhat surprising because investor names used to be quite secretive. Investors are one of the many people essential to Broadway and to theater’s operation in New York City who, historically, never made it into the program at all. Thankfully, from the 1940s to the 1970s, entrepreneur Leo Shull produced reference books with investors (and more recognizable Broadway names) in a *Who’s Where* guide and in his collections of *Angels*.¹⁵ A look at Shull’s table of contents gives some sense of the truly massive scope of Broadway’s community.

Many of Shull’s categories do not appear in a program because they provide services for other people in the industry, rather than for an individual production. For instance, agents: publicity agents and casting agents (sometimes overlapping), a subset of whom are officially approved by Actors Equity for use by their members (“franchised,” in Equity’s language), a category Equity established in the late 1930s.¹⁶ Shull’s 1956 guide lists 400 publicity and 325 casting agents, 85 of whom are franchised by Equity. Ten answering services specialized in managing theatrical business. And 98 schools and instructors advertised their ability to transform raw talent into stardom.

Shull’s guides also recognize audience services as a huge piece of the theater business. Critics, who purportedly represent the views of their readers, appear in multiple lists. Shull names members of the Drama Desk and Critics Circle association, as well as the press lists for first- and second-night performances, and the names of leading staff at major news publications, domestic and foreign, including the “Negro press,” as it was still known at the time. He also includes a list of trade publications (many published by Shull himself), which comes to a whopping 64 in the 1956 edition. Ticket brokers (about whom, see Chapter Five) likewise form a key part of Broadway unaffiliated with any individual production or even theater.

And then there are the affiliated businesses, some which receive brief mention in programs. Shull names fabric suppliers (18), costume shops (63), scenery builders (21), lawyers (49), make-up suppliers (16), rehearsal halls (20), and transfer companies (18) to move material from one shop to the theater, or from theaters to the road. Many of those businesses also appear in the catch-all list of Equipment and Supplies, which includes 172 individuals and firms. Robert Abels offered guns, swords and daggers, and armor for sale or rent; Encore Studio promised “6 Floors of Furniture & Props”; Masque Sound & Recording provided sound equipment and effects. A sumptuous looking, half-page advertisement from The Imitation Food Display Co. in Brooklyn demonstrates the highly effective realism of that organization’s wares. As Timothy R. White has documented, these shops used to be central to the urban landscape of the Theater District, but have slowly

been pushed farther away from Broadway. All of these businesses thrive or fail based on the production activity on Broadway—and many of them are not even dependent on a given show’s success. “Measured in wages or components produced, a flop and a hit generated roughly the same amount of craft and construction work,” writes White. “Before the reviews hit, much of [a] show’s [capital has] already been spent on wages and tangible products.”¹⁷ White reminds us that viewing productions only as financial endeavors for investors or aesthetic ventures for artists ignores how every production’s capital supports a wide array of artisans and other professionals on its journey to Broadway, regardless of whether a production succeeds financially or artistically. White’s work, which also draws on Shull’s guides, puts the industry and its wide community of members on full display.

Finally, Shull’s bird’s-eye view properly recognizes Broadway as part of a larger live entertainment industry in New York that includes modeling, radio, television, and film, as well as live musical and dance performance. Night clubs, modeling agencies, motion picture companies, photographers, fashion publicists, disc jockeys, and television and film producers take up their own space in Shull’s guide. While in Chapter One, film and television appear as rivals for theater, literally crowding theatrical productions out of Broadway houses in the 1950s, film and television offer more opportunities for work to actors and other Broadway talent. White notes that “many experts in Broadway stagecraft,” from performers to craftspeople to directors, “found additional work at mid-century” in radio, film, and television.¹⁸ Broadway is part of the “show business” in New York City, as Shull’s guides rightly note. And show business itself is made up of thousands of small businesses, each pursuing their own specialized trade. All of them are part of the Broadway community, too.

Connected

White’s research on the history of Broadway stagecraft in New York City also notes how entangled many of these businesses were and are with each other. For instance, a number of Broadway-affiliated businesses and individual artists acted as investors in their own and others’ shows.¹⁹ But the connections on Broadway go far beyond the financial. Broadway is a community because all of these groups are interdependent and because they interact with each other repeatedly over the duration of their involvement with Broadway. In other words, Broadway is a network.

Modern social media platforms have widely familiarized basic concepts of networks: every individual is connected to others strongly or weakly, depending on how well they know them and how often they interact. Some individuals have more connections than others; some individuals are connected to high numbers of people who are, themselves, well-connected, and are thus the most important conduits in a system. We can model Broadway’s network this way by imagining that all collaborators on a production have worked together—although this may not literally be correct—and connecting everyone from production to production. When we do this, we find that the most important individuals in the Broadway network, the people with the most connections and who are most central to the network’s structure, are not the names in boxes in the program.

Well, that’s not entirely true. Some of the top names in our network are very, very recognizable: the Shubert and Nederlander firms, which own so many Broadway houses, oc-

cupy predictably high positions in measures of the most centrally connected contributors. But you are less likely to recognize the most central person, photographer Joan Marcus. Or the names of the press agents and agencies (Lee Solters, Boneau/Bryan-Brown, Serino Coyne, SPOTco) and advertisers (Ingram Ash, The Blaine Thompson Company) that also dominate these metrics. And you likely work on Broadway if you know names such as Paul Huntley (hair and wigs), Angela Avallone (makeup), John Miller (music coordinator), or Deborah Hecht (vocal coach). These people are at the center of the Broadway network, and it is worth thinking about why we find their names at the center of Broadway, rather than that of Jerome Robbins.²⁰

The simplest factor that places individuals at the center of Broadway’s network is the number of productions on which they worked. This explains why the Shuberts (over 1600) and Nederlanders (over 550) are so important to the network—a huge percentage of productions simply must use their venues, and thus credit their participation. Work frequency is not evenly distributed across professions on Broadway, and most Broadway workers have been part of very few productions (Figure 4).

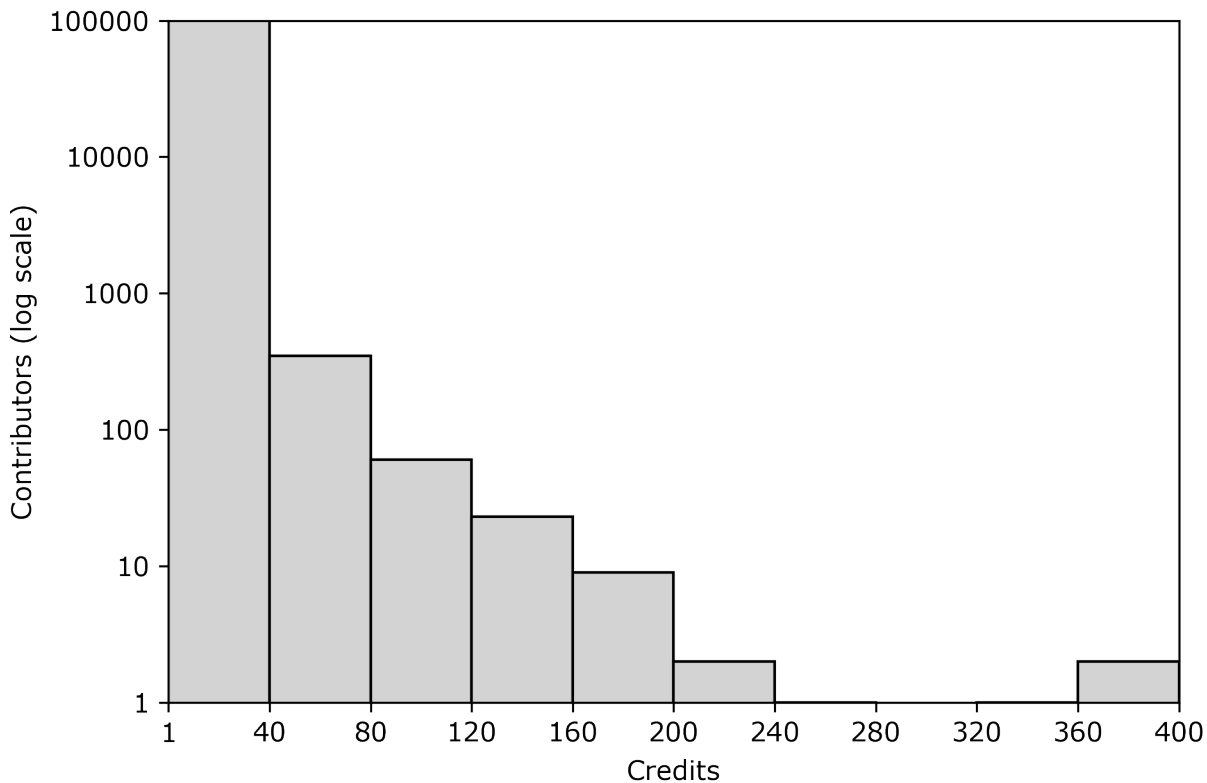


Figure 4: Histogram of Number of Production Credits

Even if we exclude the Shuberts and Nederlanders as extreme outliers, only around 450 people have more than 40 credits from plays and musicals. The vast majority of Broadway’s credited people and organizations, around 100,000, appear in fewer than 40 programs. Looking at a slightly more granular breakdown of these statistics reveals a sizable

majority of people (nearly 54,000) with one credit, and a similar amount (43,000) with between two and ten (Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of Number of Credits

Credits	Number of People
1	53,955
2	18,296
3–4	14,551
5–9	11,143
10–19	4,678
20–49	1,682
50–100	221
>100	59

The 59 individuals with over 100 credits are an extremely unusual group. Being central to the Broadway network is partly a function of appearances within the network, and because those appearances are few for most people, the most central figures are going to be few and far between, too.

Our network measures not productions, but connectedness to other Broadway community members through productions; productions build the network. Productions are, obviously, an extremely imperfect measure of the community. A network built through them ignores contacts outside of Broadway production work including collaborations in other venues and media, as well as educational connections, personal friendships, etc.²¹ Furthermore, as noted above, simply being listed on a program together does not mean two people have interacted: a given ensemble member likely has no contact with the company accountant, for example. Yet even with these serious flaws, we can see that some individuals and organizations not only participate in a large number of productions, but work on productions that, themselves, connect other connected individuals. And, again, that distribution of people is highly uneven, as histograms both of all connections—called the “degree” of a member of the network—and of those contributors with fewer than 1,200 connections—essentially, a breakdown of the leftmost bar in the top graph—show (Figures 5 and 6).

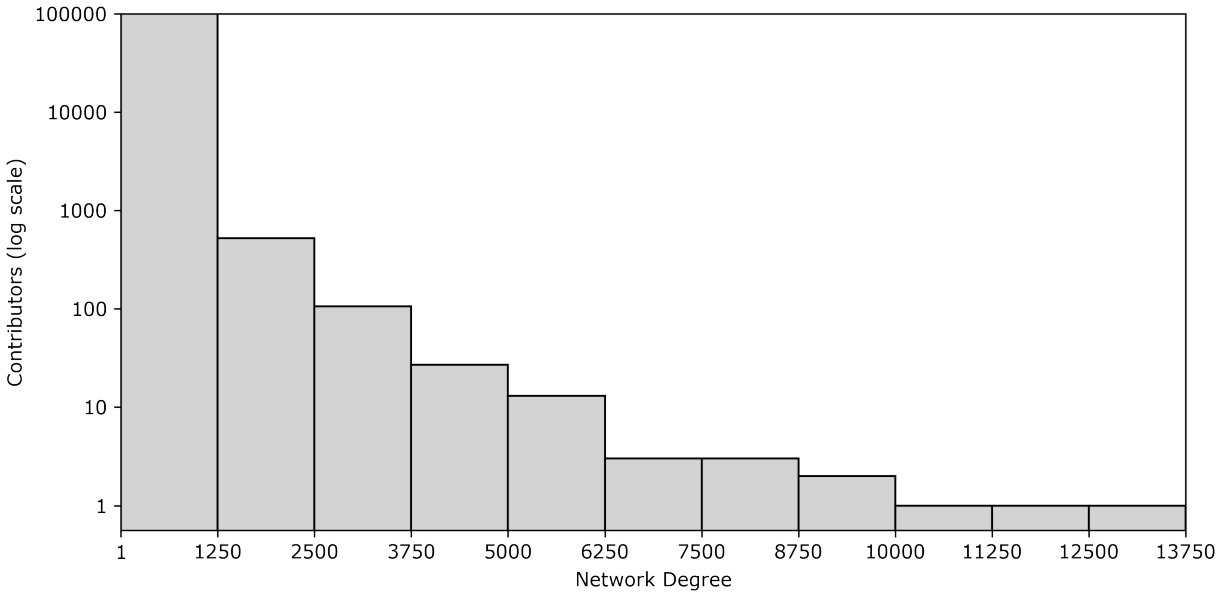


Figure 5: Histogram of Network Degrees

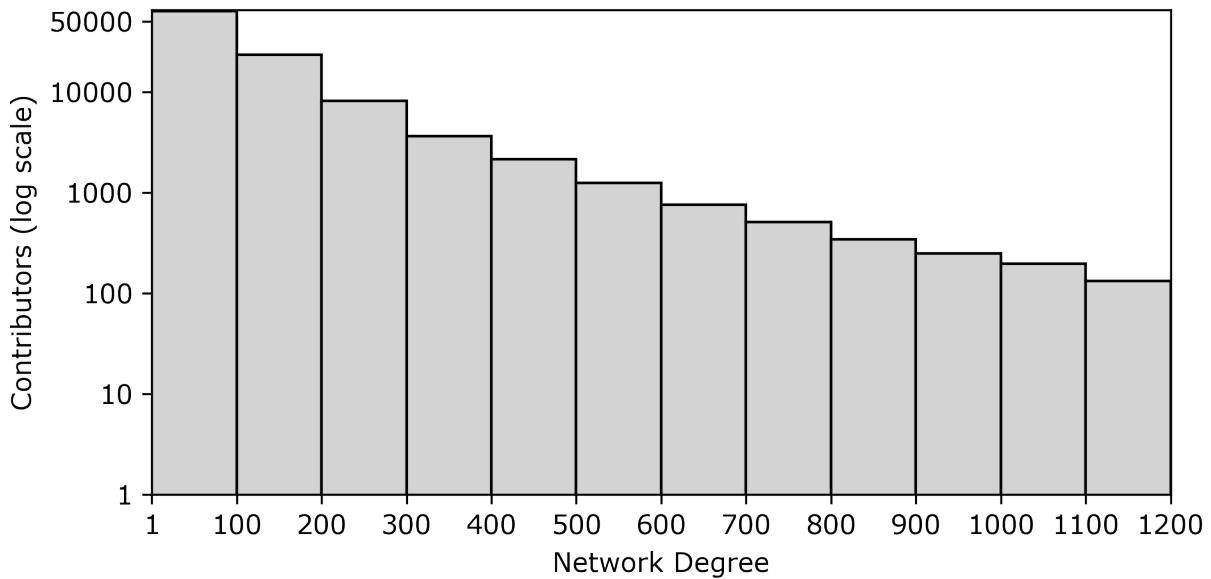


Figure 6: Histogram of Network Degrees (< 1200 Connections)

In short, people and organizations on Broadway are, for the most part, very thinly connected.

A small subset of individuals, however, are very highly connected. Most of the most highly connected people are production staff members, not cast members. Again, this is a simple function of the number of productions in which one has participated, which in turn reflects how many productions you can actually be part of in a season or career. Maybe an actor can appear in three productions in a year—although that assumes at least one show

closes quickly and that the performer leaves the other production after six months or less. But there are upper limits on the time an actor can be in more than one Broadway show, particularly because that work continues during the show's run. By contrast, many production staff members, ranging from press agents to photographers, put in time-limited work on a production and therefore can (and must) join many productions each season. At the center of Broadway's network are thus the staff, not the actors.

One difficulty in thinking about Broadway's network is that the community changes over time. Members start careers relatively unconnected, then build connections through years of work. When people retire, their centrality within the network fades—although here is where non-production connections such as mentorships or educational lineages would help to construct a more rigorous sociology of Broadway's community. If we break the Broadway network down into decades, we see better the dominant figures at each moment in Broadway's history (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: Highest-Degree Community Members by Decade

1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s
Shuberts	Hans Spialek	Shubert Org.	Shubert Org.	Harvey B. Sabinson
Watson Barratt	Jo Mielziner	Howard Bay	Jo Mielziner	Lee Solters
Alfred Goodman	Donald Oenslager	Jo Mielziner	Oliver Smith	Shubert Org.
Charles LeMaire	Shuberts	Don Walker	Lawrence Weiner	Ingram Ash
J. C. Huffman	Irene Sharaff	Ted Royal	Don Walker	Oliver Smith

Table 3: Highest-Degree Community Members by Decade (continued)

1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Blaine Thompson Co.	Serino Coyne	Serino Coyne	Joan Marcus	Joan Marcus
Shubert Org.	Shubert Org.	Boneau/Bryan-Brown	SPOITCo	Shubert Org.
Martha Swope	Martha Swope	John Miller	Serino Coyne	SPOITCo
Merle Debuskey	Nederlanders	Jujamcyn Theatres	Boneau/Bryan-Brown	Telsey Co.
Ash/LeDonne	Ash/LeDonne	Paul Huntley	Shubert Org.	Boneau/Bryan-Brown

Always a theater owner or two sits on the list. But we see too in the early decades the names of designers (Oenslager; Bay) and orchestrators (Spialek; Walker). Then, by the middle of the century, a transition to advertising and press agents, as well as photographers. These are the Broadway workers who are most central to the network, who make Broadway Broadway. (We should not, however, put too much weight on change over time. Much of that transition from designers to press employees is a function of the change in program credits. Because program sizes grew, modern community members have more connections from each production than did their historical peers.)

The centrality of designers and press agents is particularly intriguing. While one can grasp why designers as such would be key figures in the Broadway network, it is less clear why individual designers should be so central. It turns out, though, that Broadway has most-favored designers, whose work dominates labor in each category (Figures 7–10).

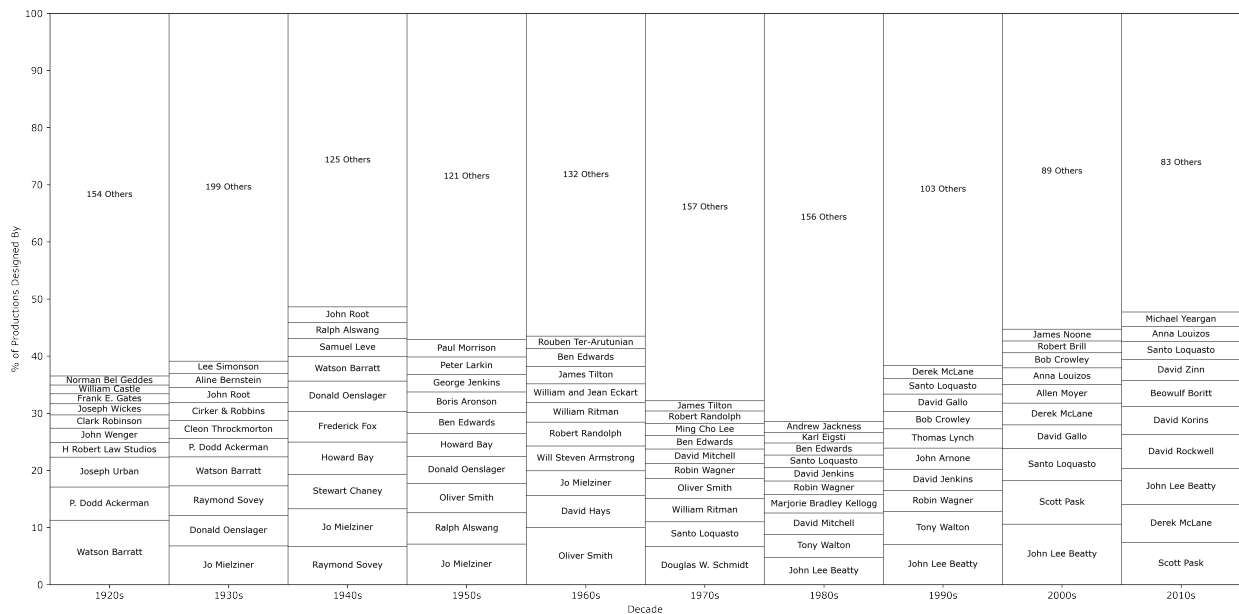


Figure 7: Percent of Productions by Set Designers by Decade

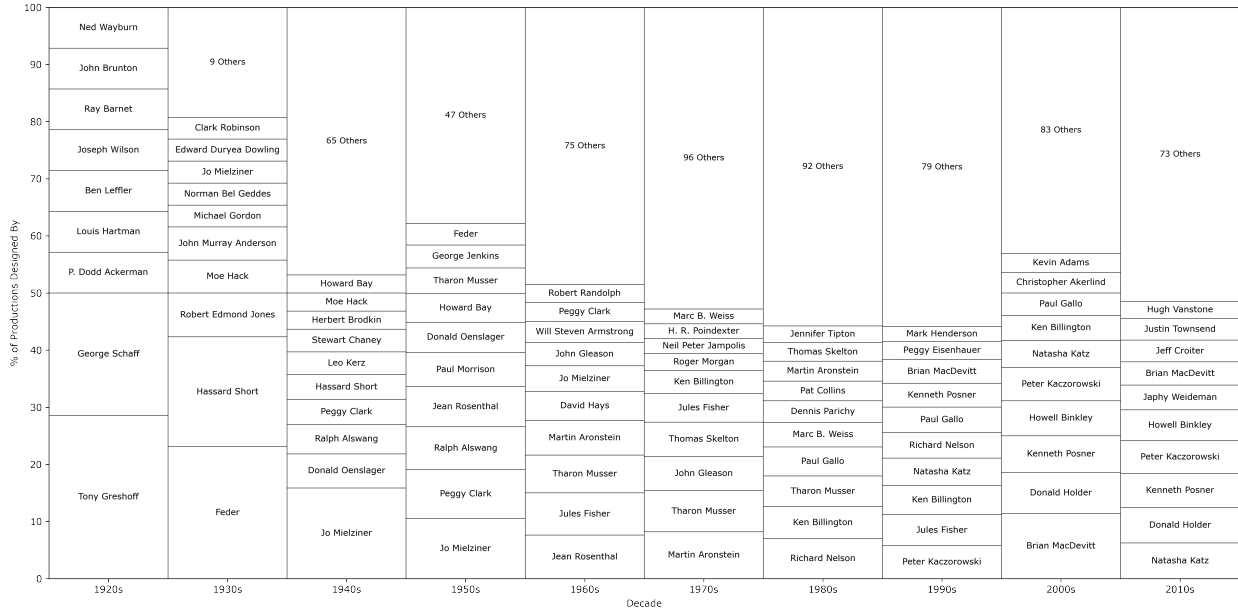


Figure 8: Percent of Productions by Lighting Designers by Decade

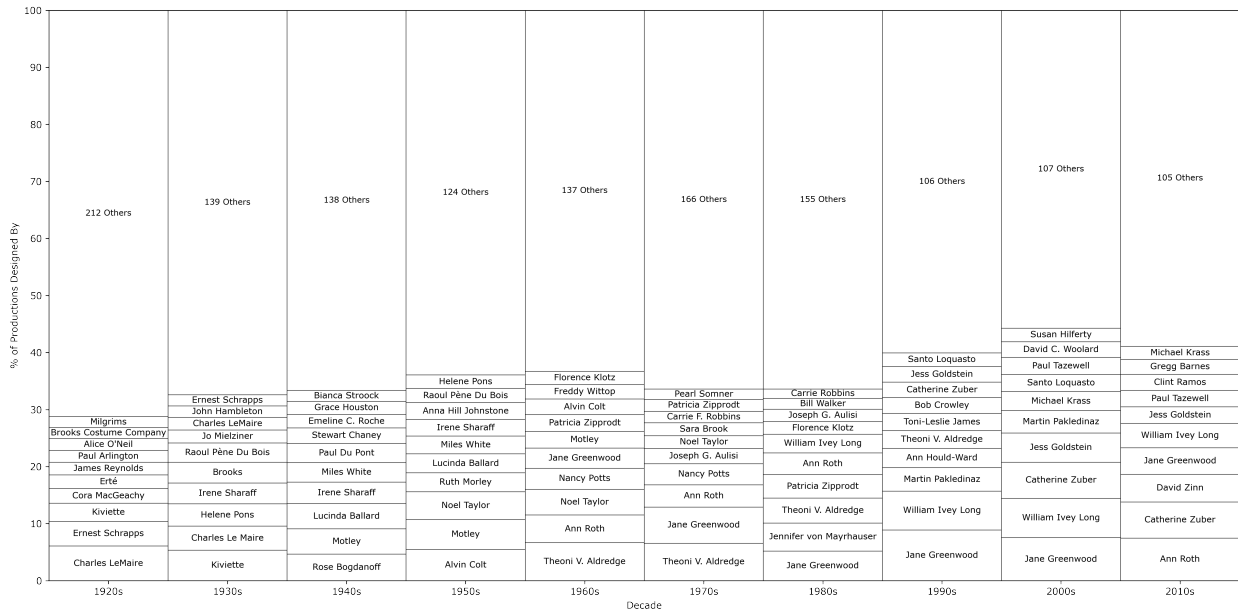


Figure 9: Percent of Productions by Costume Designers by Decade

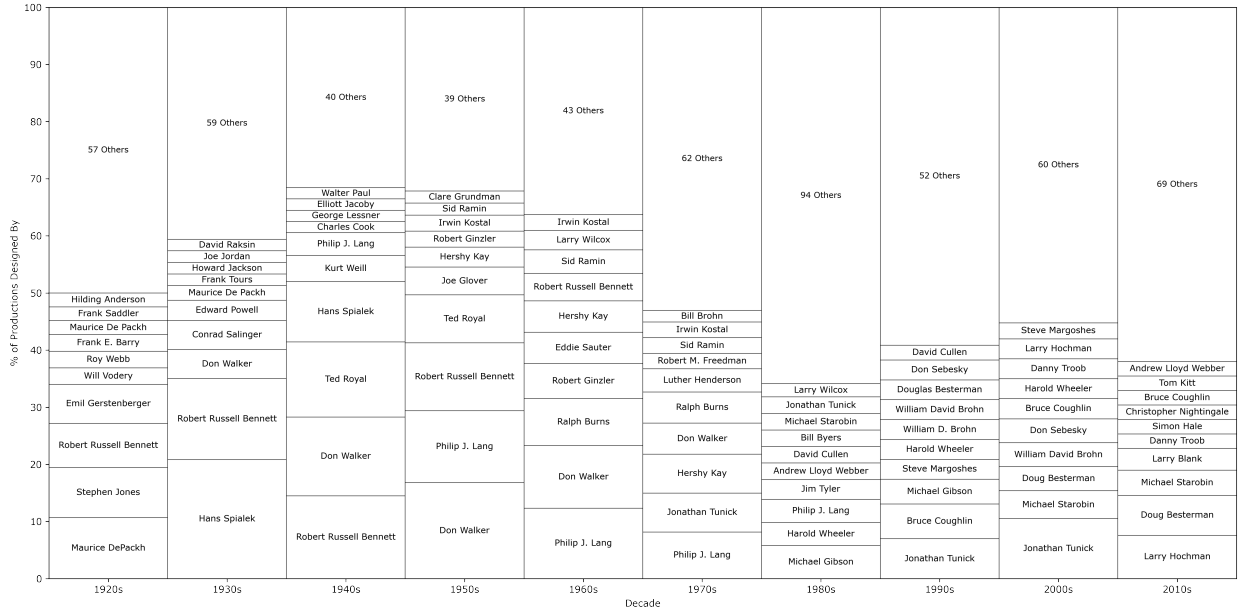


Figure 10: Percent of Productions by Orchestrators by Decade

The ten most frequently employed designers for each of the major design positions (sets, lights, costumes, orchestrations) account for 30–50% of productions every decade, and more in the case of orchestrators.²² There is, of course, some variability over time and across the decades. But the dominance of leading figures is undoubted. Indeed, they are even more dominant when we look at their contributions by percentage of performances each decade (Figures 11–14).

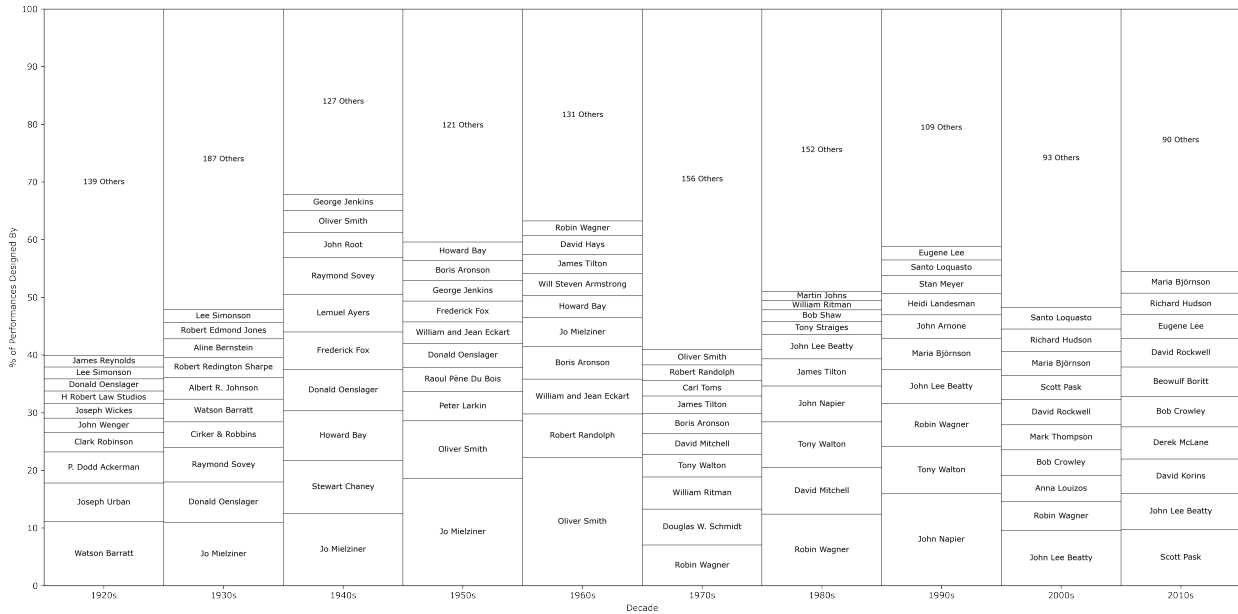


Figure 11: Percent of Performances by Set Designers by Decade

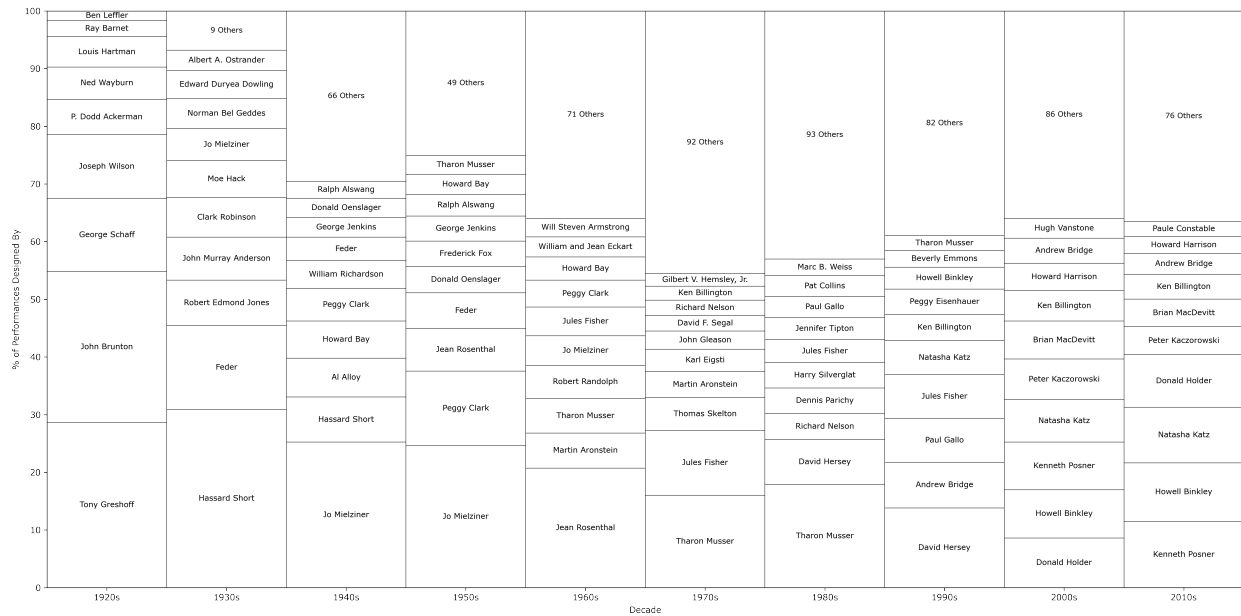


Figure 12: Percent of Performances by Lighting Designers by Decade

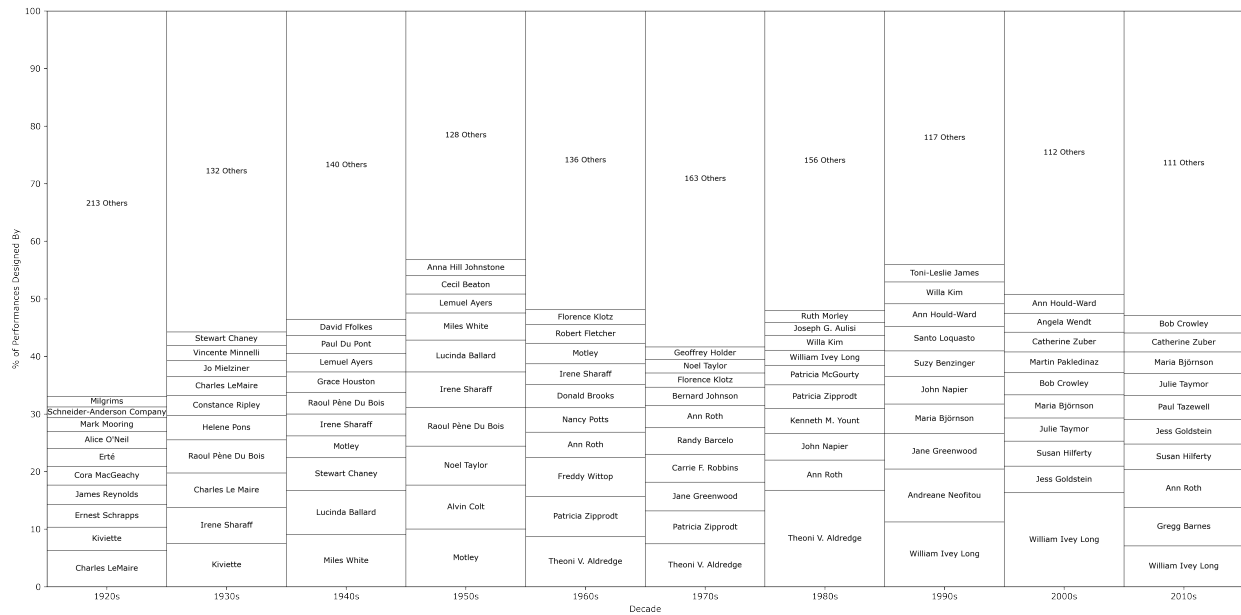


Figure 13: Percent of Performances by Costume Designers by Decade

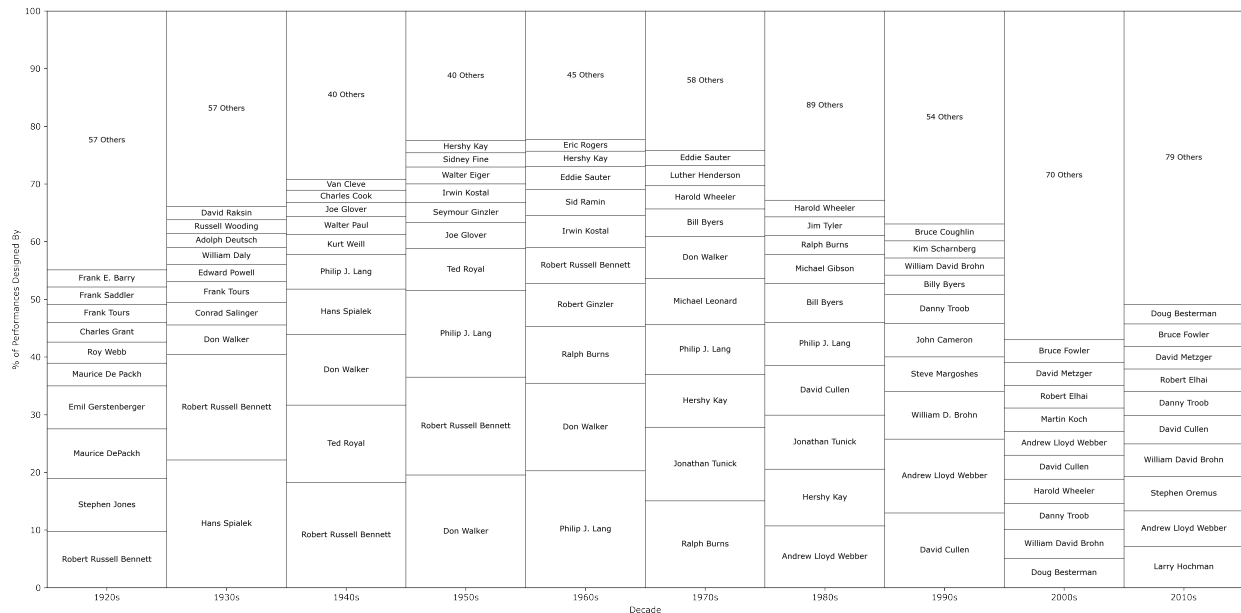


Figure 14: Percent of Performances by Orchestrators by Decade

Figures such as set designer Oliver Smith in the 1960s, lighting designer Tharon Musser in the 1980s, and costume designer William Ivey Long in the 2000s built the look of almost 20% of all performances in those periods, respectively. This tells us something supremely important about what Broadway means in any given era: because only a few designers dominate the production space at any given moment, and because their dominance far exceeds that of other creative artists in the community, how Broadway looks is one of the key elements of what Broadway means to audiences. More than a Broadway acting style or a Broadway staging or a Broadway politics there is a Broadway look—really, a small set of looks, crafted by these dominant designers.

Before leaving this point, let us consider a key moment in the career of one of those dominant designers, for a glimpse at what it means that Broadway productions have a “look” simply by being crafted by a small community of individuals. Jo Mielziner, a scenic and lighting designer, was one of the most central figures on Broadway in the 1940s and 1950s. Mielziner worked extensively in both plays and musicals during his long, illustrious career (Figure 15).

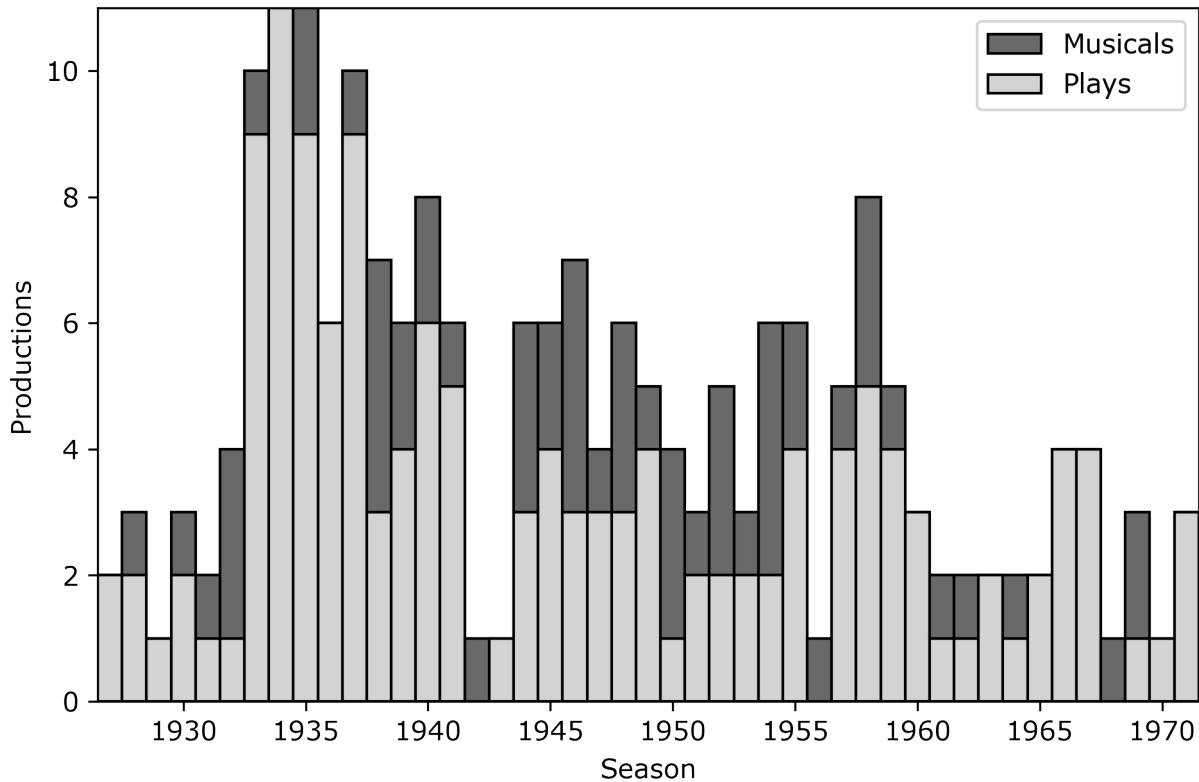


Figure 15: Jo Mielziner, Productions Per Season by Genre

Mielziner’s design aesthetic fed back and forth among the productions on which he worked. In perhaps the most spectacular example of this, he practically simultaneously designed *Death of a Salesman* and *South Pacific* from late 1948 to April of 1949. In his memoir *Designing for the Theatre*, Mielziner explains the process of designing both shows, emphasizing particularly Arthur Miller’s play.²³ His key insight into the design of *Salesman* was to use Willy Loman’s house as the main set and to put all other scenes on the forestage, using elegant lighting projections to create the sense of new spaces. This approach gave the play a necessary fluidity, as Miller’s scenes in the present and the past could run into each other with ease.

A few pages later in the memoir, Mielziner describes watching the first run-through of *South Pacific*. He records director Joshua Logan’s frustration that the actors had not grasped how the production “would overlap one scene into another without a single black-out or a dead pause.”²⁴ The design Mielziner hints at here was a remarkable achievement, which scholar Stacy Wolf describes as an emulation of “filmic crossfades.”²⁵ Wolf rightly recognizes that *South Pacific* fully realizes a crossover style that many earlier musicals employed, in which a lowered curtain disguises a major scene change while other action continues on the forestage. But *Death of a Salesman* employs precisely the same formula: using the forestage for some action and the main playing space for the rest, relying on that up-and-down-stage movement to keep the energy flowing through multiple changes of location.

Mielziner realized both of these iconic designs almost simultaneously. Thus, if scholars and audiences regard *South Pacific* as the epitome of a certain musical approach to design and scenic movement, we should recognize *Salesman* as its twin in the non-musical theater. Or vice versa: *Death of a Salesman's* design borrows wholesale from the predominant scenic approach in the musical theater. Mielziner's contributions directly connect the two shows and demonstrate that artistic sensibilities belong not to a single production but to Broadway as a whole, even leaping across genres. The Broadway community, particularly its most central members, bind disparate production themes and styles into a singular artistic experience to which we give the name "Broadway."

Costs

All of these people working together in intricately networked, closely collaborative communities, cost money. Mielziner, like most designers, ran a small business including a few permanent staff such as his assistant, John Harvey, and apprentices, including future design star Ming Cho Lee. Designers take on so much work in part because they can, but also because they need constant employment to sustain their businesses. Not all Broadway employees are so lucky. Most salaries on Broadway are far from exorbitant and many artists, particularly actors, go through alternating periods of work and unemployment (or, at best, employment teaching their art or working in other industries). Yet from the cost side of the equation, labor looms large: people are the most valuable and the most expensive part of Broadway, and it is hard to bring those costs down.

This problem is structural, as explained in an influential study of the economics of the performing arts from the 1960s that introduced the theory of Baumol's cost disease.²⁶ William Baumol and William Bowen, drawing on extensive evidence across live performance sectors, observed that even as the economy overall increases its productivity, live performances have limited ways to improve their efficiency. If two mechanics used to fix a tire in forty minutes, today one mechanic with better tools does it in ten. That's an increase in productivity that keeps prices at the car shop relatively low, even though the mechanic makes more money due to inflation. But a string quartet by Haydn still takes four musicians about thirty minutes to play. Thus the cost of live performance increases over time relative to the rest of the economy because of the limited possibilities to keep performance's productivity in line with productivity increases elsewhere. What, then, is Broadway to do?

Cast sizes on Broadway have responded to this productivity trap as economists predicted they would. Baumol and co-author Hilda Baumol described in a later analysis that shrinking cast sizes is an obvious strategy to make Broadway performances cheaper.²⁷ Whether done consciously or no, Broadway has, indeed, shrunk its cast sizes for plays and musicals (Figure 16).

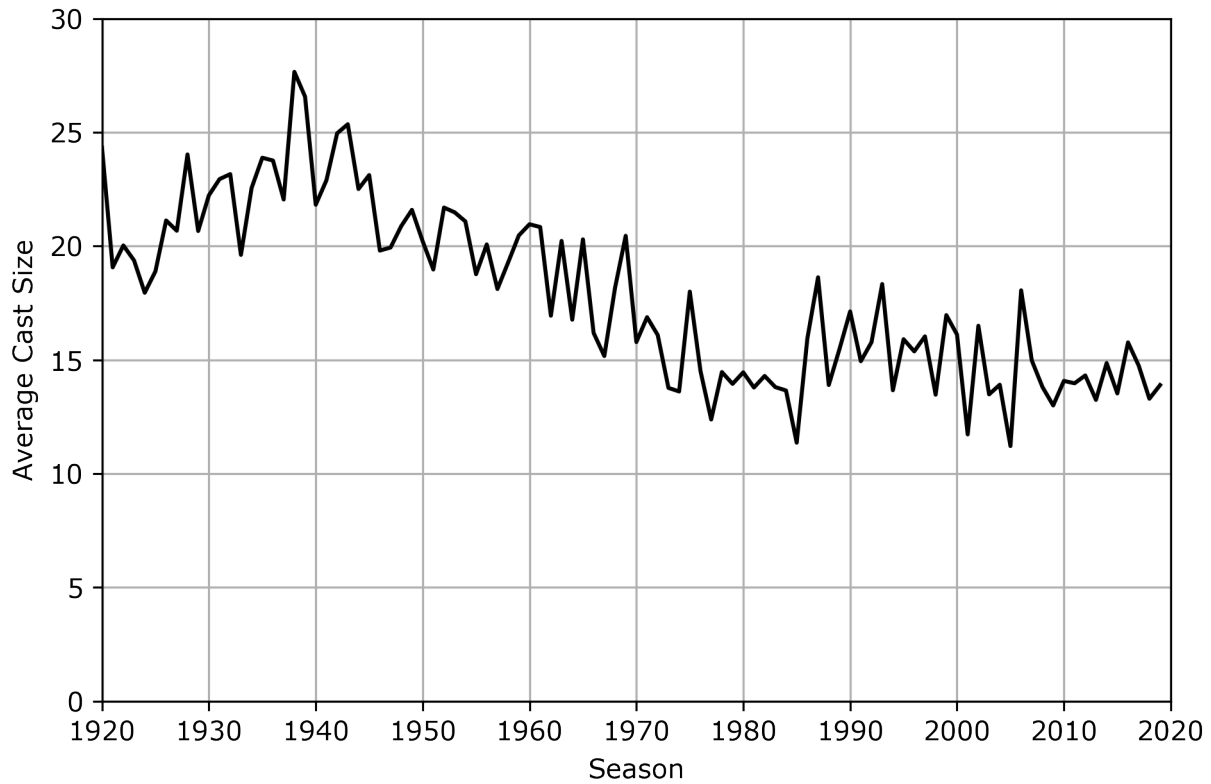


Figure 16: Average Cast Size of New Productions by Season

From average casts of 25 performers on the eve of World War II, productions shrank casts nearly continuously through the 1980s to an average of just above 11, with some small growth since then to around 14 performers per show. There are still big shows on Broadway, of course, but even those big shows are smaller than they were historically (Figure 17).

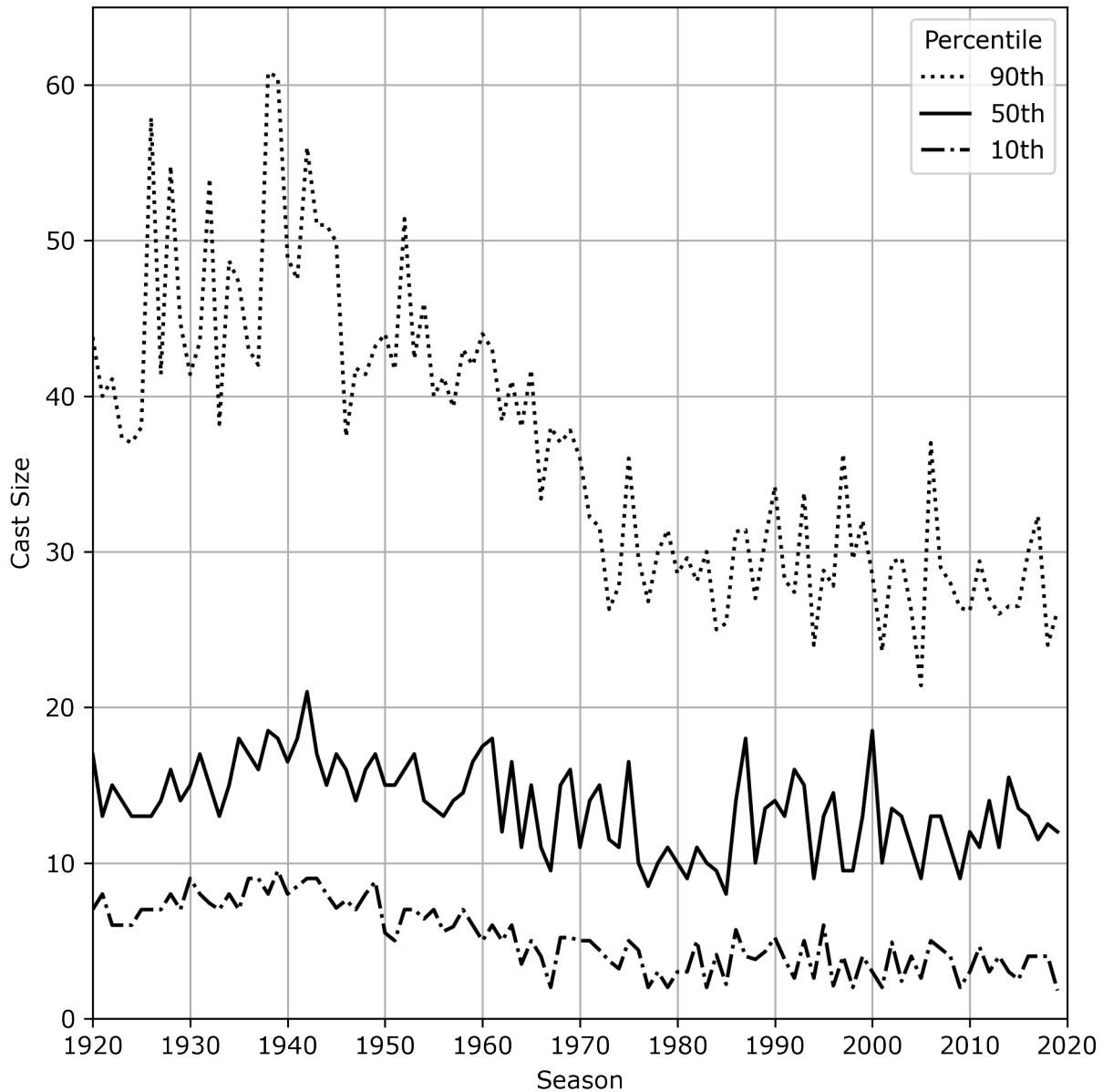


Figure 17: Cast Size of New Productions at Three Percentiles by Season

The truly massive productions of the early century are gone. Indeed, big productions, those in the 90th percentile of cast sizes, fell off precipitously 1950–1970, from peaks well over 50 to a trend under 30 performers per show. And smaller productions (10th percentile) fell off from around eight or nine to a measly three or four cast members by the mid-1990s.

Musicals, with their ensemble of singers and dancers, are often much larger than plays, of course. Naturally, cast sizes shrunk more dramatically for the former than for the latter. But both genres lost performers (Figure 18).

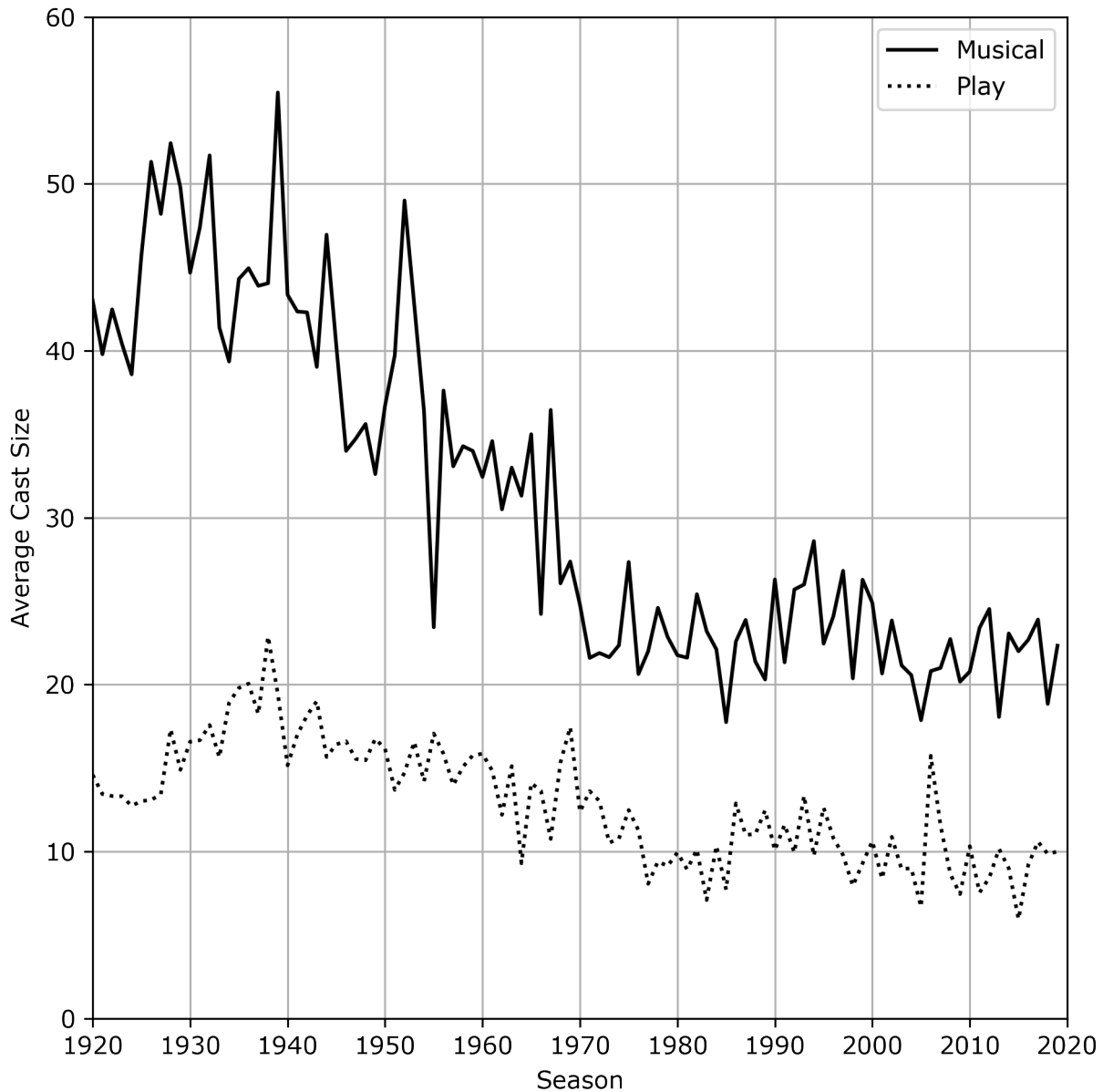


Figure 18: Average Cast Size of New Productions by Season (Plays and Musicals)

Musical cast sizes consistently dwarf those of plays by a ratio of two or three to one. Yet cast size contraction means that contemporary musicals are, on average, about as populous as your average play from the 1930s. For instance, the musical *Hadestown* (2019) has a cast of thirteen; Philip Barry’s comedy *The Philadelphia Story* (1939), fifteen.

These trends have real effects, of course, on the writing and design of contemporary shows. Plays such as *Proof* (2000) or *Doubt* (2005) with four actors each are normal new productions on Broadway these days. Revivals, meanwhile, often benefit from a reverse effect: the shows seem big because their casts are comparatively larger. *Death of a Salesman* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (both 1947) are frequently revived. Their 13- and 12-person casts, respectively, loom a lot larger on the contemporary stage than they did when they

premiered and their cast sizes were average or even small. Musical revivals can benefit from this large-scale effect, too. The 2002 production of *Oklahoma!* had a whopping 40 cast members, including understudies and swings. By contrast, some recent revivals use a stripped-down aesthetic in part as a justification for smaller-scale casts. The 2019 *Oklahoma!* revival, for instance, had a cast of 18 performers including understudies.

These cuts happen backstage, too, though often a technological imperative is at work—in other words, real productivity gains have been possible on Broadway. The advent of electric light boards and, more recently, radio-guided followspots limited work opportunities for electricians.²⁸ Broadway musicals also use fewer musicians now than they once did, prompting regular reflections on the thinning sound of the Broadway orchestra.²⁹ These smaller orchestras often require new orchestrations, which can increase production costs initially (payments to the orchestrator and music printers), but save operating costs throughout the run. The 2019 *Oklahoma!* again exemplifies this trend: seven musicians in new arrangements for guitars, banjo, and other string instruments, plus one keyboard and drums. That contrasts with all previous productions, which used or adapted slightly Robert Russell Bennett's arrangements for a full pit orchestra (23 players in 2002).

One example of a particularly savvy approach to the smaller number of performers on stage and in the orchestra comes from director John Doyle. Doyle's revivals of shows such as *Sweeney Todd* (2005) and *Company* (2006) cast performers who play instruments, eliminating the separate orchestra entirely. At first glance, three women singing "You Could Drive a Person Crazy" while also playing saxophones seems a simple opportunity for delight. But the joy in these Doyle-staged numbers embraces and manages increasingly stringent economic imperatives, incorporating diminished labor size as part of the production's aesthetic.

While Doyle's productions utilize Broadway's shrinking labor as part of the production's dramaturgy, other shows dramatize labor on Broadway directly. Most notably, *A Chorus Line* (1975) enacts the literal winnowing process of an audition while effectively staging for the audience the shrinking Broadway show. From 24 dancers in the first number—an unusually large number by 1975—the story ends with the selection of eight dancers. That's a 67% decrease in cast size, which matches the musical's overall trajectory from heights of a mean of 65 performers to a post-1970s mean of 22 performers. In other words, *A Chorus Line* enacts the shrinking Broadway cast size; its rejected dancers, victims of the cost disease.

A Chorus Line also stages the increasing pressure on performers to master multiple skills. The show's director/choreographer Zach asks these expert dancers to demonstrate and speak about their prowess as actors (of which Diana sings in "Nothing") and singers (about which Al and Kristine duet in "Sing!"). Performers who act, sing, and dance at the highest levels are known as "triple-threats" and represent yet another form of efficiency in Broadway production. Musicals from the 1940s used to name separate singing and dancing choruses in their programs: it was assumed that performers had one talent or the other, but not both. For example, *Oklahoma!*'s famous dream ballet originally cast dancers to step into the roles of Laurey and Curly rather than rely on the leads to perform Agnes de Mille's choreography. By the 2002 revival, despite its large cast size and sumptuous orchestrations, "Dream Laurey" and "Dream Curly" were gone; the stars did their own dancing. The triple threat and its expansion through the whole ensemble is a productive

innovation that eliminates separate singing and dancing choruses, replacing them with a single, more efficient performer.

In addition to shrinking casts and consolidating performer talents, productions can also cast actors to perform multiple roles. Of course, such techniques have long histories in the theater and authors often use such double- and triple-casting meaningfully. Scholars conjecture that *King Lear's* Fool and Cordelia were played by the same performer, for instance. But financial convenience and artistic expression often work hand-in-hand—or try to do so (Figure 19).

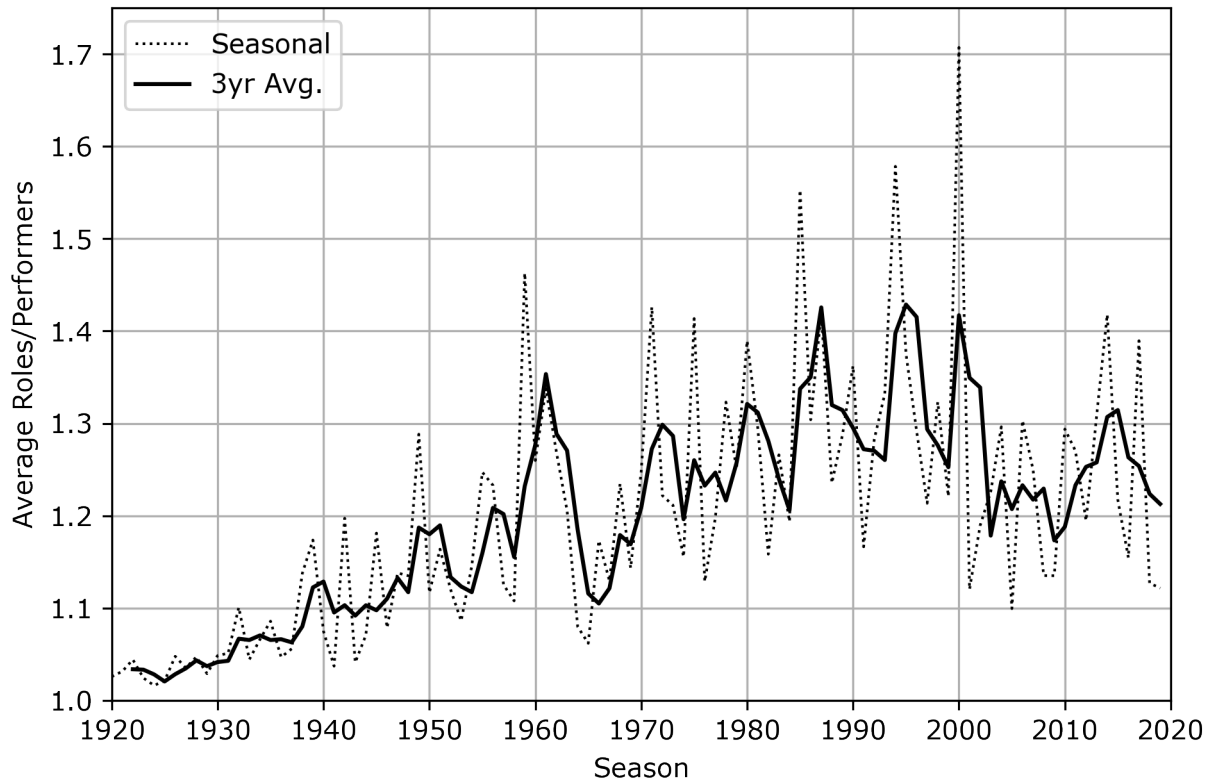


Figure 19: Average Ratio of Roles to Performers in New Productions

The ratio of named roles to the number of performers in a production is higher now than it was through the 1950s, with some re-adjustment in the mid-1960s. (Figure 19 includes both the seasonal data, which is very noisy, and the average of the past three seasons, to clarify the trend.) Doubling seems to have peaked around 2000, however, and settled into a new normal of around 1.25 roles per cast member.

The entanglement of economic imperatives and aesthetics is sometimes hard to judge. If the relationship were straightforward, then anytime Broadway cuts back generally, cast sizes would seem an obvious area to shrink, too. But that is not the case uniformly, at least not when comparing the number of new productions each season and the average cast size.

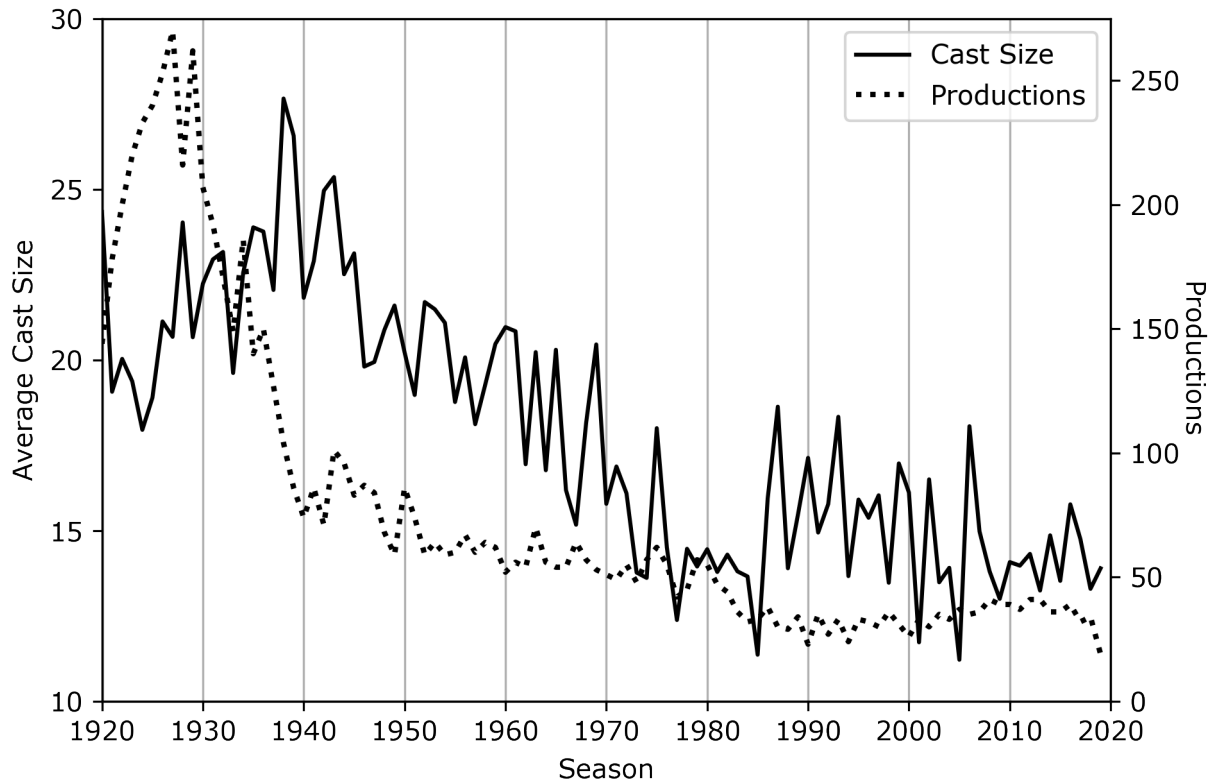


Figure 20: Average Cast Size of New Productions and New Productions by Season

Average cast sizes peaked around 1938, a decade later than the peak in the number of productions in 1927. If trimming the cast size is the fastest route to cost savings, why did Broadway shows become less efficient (that is, have larger casts) during the 1930s, even as producers developed fewer productions? Was the spectacle of more bodies on stage worth the money to compete, even in a less propitious environment? Had aesthetic sensibilities outrun economic imperatives? Because the data represent not a single decision, but the aggregate decisions of many stake-holders (particularly producers and directors), there is no one answer to these questions. Yet despite this distributed decision making, it is clear that there are far fewer opportunities for actors on Broadway today—on a seasonal and per-show basis—than there were, and that actors must now do more—in range of skills and number of roles performed—than in the past.

There is one more confounding factor in the continued rise of cast sizes during Broadway’s contraction in the 1930s. In 1933, the National Recovery Act set the first minimum weekly salaries for actors: \$30 for the chorus; \$25 for actors with under two years of experience; \$40 for experienced actors.³⁰ Actors’ Equity, the actors’ union, which negotiated its first Broadway contract in 1919, spent the next five years arguing over the merits of this minimum system, which persisted even after the NRA was ruled unconstitutional.³¹ What role did these new minimums play in cast sizes during the 1930s? And, in the longer run, how did the federal government’s introduction of minimums affect the union’s thinking about minimum salaries and how best to support the unequal experience and drawing-power among its members?

This question about Equity is one of hundreds that need answering to truly understand how Broadway works. And Equity is only one union. Broadway is heavily unionized, as a list of the industry’s current bargaining units makes clear (Table 4).³²

Table 4: Broadway Unions and Guilds

Organization	Details
Actors’ Equity Association	Actors and Stage Managers
American Federation of Musicians	Musicians, Orchestrators, and Copyists, Local 802
American Guild of Musical Artists	Musicians
International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees	Umbrella Union
Association of Theatrical Press Agents and Managers	IATSE Local 18032
Mail Telephone Order Clerks	IATSE Local B-751
Make-Up Artists and Hair Stylists	IATSE Local 798
Theatrical Stage Employees	IATSE Local 1
Theatrical Wardrobe Union	Includes Child Guardians, IATSE Local 764
Treasurers & Ticket Sellers Union	IATSE Local 751
United Scenic Artists	Designers, IATSE Local 829
Ushers, Ticket Takers & Stagedoor Persons	IATSE Local 306
International Union of Operating Engineers	IATSE Local 30
Service Employees International Union	Porters and Cleaners, Local 32BJ
Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers	

Broadway continues to add more union contracts to its standard production deals. In 2012, for instance, the Broadway League ratified a contract with the newly unionized Child Actor Guardians, who joined the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Local 764. A 2017 push for unionization for casting directors fell short, but labor history suggests they are likely to try again. Casting directors are one of the only major theater workers without a collective bargaining agreement. (The other group, playwrights, work through an Approved Production Contract between the Broadway League and the Dramatists Guild, signed originally as the Minimum Basic Agreement in 1926.³³ The Dramatists Guild is not, however, a union.) Inter-union tensions are also a part of Broadway’s story, though the 2003 formation of a Coalition of Broadway Unions and Guilds (COBUG) aimed to increase dialogue among unions and improve their negotiations with the Broadway League.

Unfortunately, despite the labor movement’s importance, the history of Broadway’s unions, their organization, and the part their contracts play in Broadway’s operations has been almost entirely absent from American theater history, including Broadway history.³⁴

(The history of Sunday performances in Chapter Six exemplifies how union contracts pervade every aspect of the Broadway experience.) Their most visible influence usually arrives in the form of strikes: work stoppages that shut down Broadway. The longest strikes halted Broadway for 19 days in 2007 (stagehands), 25 days in 1975 (musicians), and 30 days in 1919, when Actors' Equity signed its first agreement with Broadway producers. While effecting significant change in Broadway both during their duration (as performances grind to a halt) and afterwards (as new contracts go into force), strikes mark exceptions. The agreements reached among these groups are the most important factor in determining labor conditions ranging from wages to minimum staffing to health and safety.

In addition to the labor unions and the Dramatists Guild, trade associations such as the Broadway League are also key players. The Broadway League, formerly known as the League of New York Theatres and Producers and then the League of American Theatres and Producers, represents the management side of Broadway. Non-profits such as the American Theatre Wing (co-sponsor of the Tony Awards) and the Theatre Development Fund (which runs TKTS discount ticket booth) have had massive impacts on Broadway's organization, as the discussions in Chapter Six about awards and Chapter Five about discount tickets makes clear. Today's performances even include explicit acknowledgment of these organizations twice each year, for six weeks, when Broadway productions end with a curtain speech by a cast member to solicit donations for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. That group, formed of a 1992 merger between actors' and producers' fundraising efforts, raises money for AIDS research and care. Shows auction off signed merchandise—at one production I saw, Kevin Kline proffered a signed prosthetic nose he had worn that evening as *Cyrano*—and station cast members at the exits with red buckets for cash gifts.³⁵ These fundraising efforts blur the boundaries between the onstage drama and the behind-the-scenes organizations that make Broadway operate, while also calling attention the fragile lives of so many Broadway workers, present and past, whose lives have been affected by HIV/AIDS.

All of these institutions are far from static and, most importantly, the relationships among them constantly shift, both overtly and internally. IATSE, for instance, has slowly brought more of the behind-the-scenes unions into its alliance. Many unions were born out of struggles with competing organizations.³⁶ And some groups, such as the Shubert Organization's United Booking Office or the Conference of Personal Managers, have disappeared or diminished in their import to Broadway. Each of these groups shares a commitment to representing the interests of its members: financial, artistic and professional, health and safety, etc. The history of people on Broadway is in part a history of what people are contractually permitted and bound to do. That full history must include the story of these unions and trade associations, which set those rules.

Representation

Unions are supposed to represent their professions equally, but, if Broadway's stages are any evidence, they have not always succeeded at that task. In recent years, new coalitions have formed on Broadway, both within existing organizations and outside them, that aim to resolve a persistent problem: Broadway's continued under-representation of black,

indigenous, and other non-white performers, along with non-male and differently abled artists and other workers.³⁷ Advocacy by such groups has done key work in aggregating contemporary data about Broadway's failures in these areas—failures that the unions and the Broadway League have tracked only intermittently, if at all. Because data about Broadway's demographics (both onstage and in the audience) is so sparse, it is impossible to tell a consistent, longitudinal story about who Broadway includes and welcomes, and to put that in relationship to the demographics of New York and of the United States. But we should do what we can to see Broadway as it has been and as it is. Only by understanding who Broadway has served can we begin to address the changes needed to make Broadway the community it should be.

Given the long associations between theater and non-majoritarian sex and gender expressions and alternatives to heterosexuality, it would be desirable to tell a data-driven story about homosexuality, transexuality, transvestism, and other related forms of difference on Broadway. Julian Eltinge, for instance, gained such fame as a female impersonator in the early twentieth century that a theater was named in his honor. Unfortunately, the best we can do with current data is focus on the standard binary of male and female. But there exist other important stories about representing sex, gender, and sexuality on stage and off, stories that need a data-driven study to complement existing qualitative analyses.³⁸

Women have been the majority of the US population since the 1950s, and the majority of the New York population since 1900. And yet there has been a woeful dearth of women on creative teams on Broadway (Figure 21).³⁹

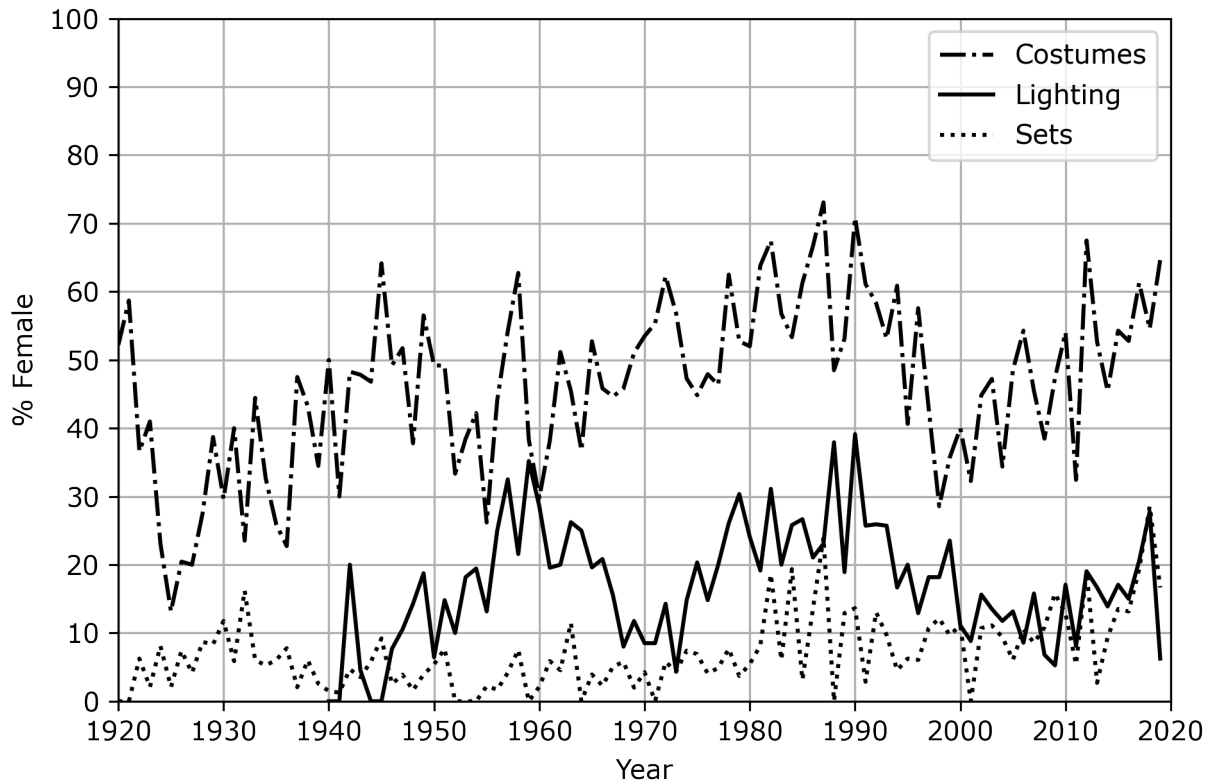


Figure 21: Percent of Female Designers of New Productions by Season

Set and lighting designers, for instance, have been almost exclusively male. Set design is the least female-friendly role among the three longest-standing physical design roles. Only in the most recent years have more than 25% of designers identified as female. Female lighting designers have fared better than set designers, with sustained periods matching set design’s peak. (Lighting designers were credited consistently enough to make a meaningful data set only since 1940.) The late 1950s through the mid-1960s, and then again from 1980 to the early 1990s were relatively good periods, with a persistent presence of female lighting designers at or over 25%. Outside of those eras, however, lighting design has been as inequitable as set design, including in the 2000s, though numbers seem on a slight upswing recently. And outstanding designers such as Tharon Musser, whose work accounted for nearly 20% of all performances in the 1970s and 1980s, almost single-handedly account for female representation in this profession. Costume design represents the one lead design role with significant, sustained female leadership. Numbers over 50% have been common since the 1940s, with occasional troughs such as in 1999, and peaks as high as 75%.

Directing has been as inequitable as set design (Figure 22).

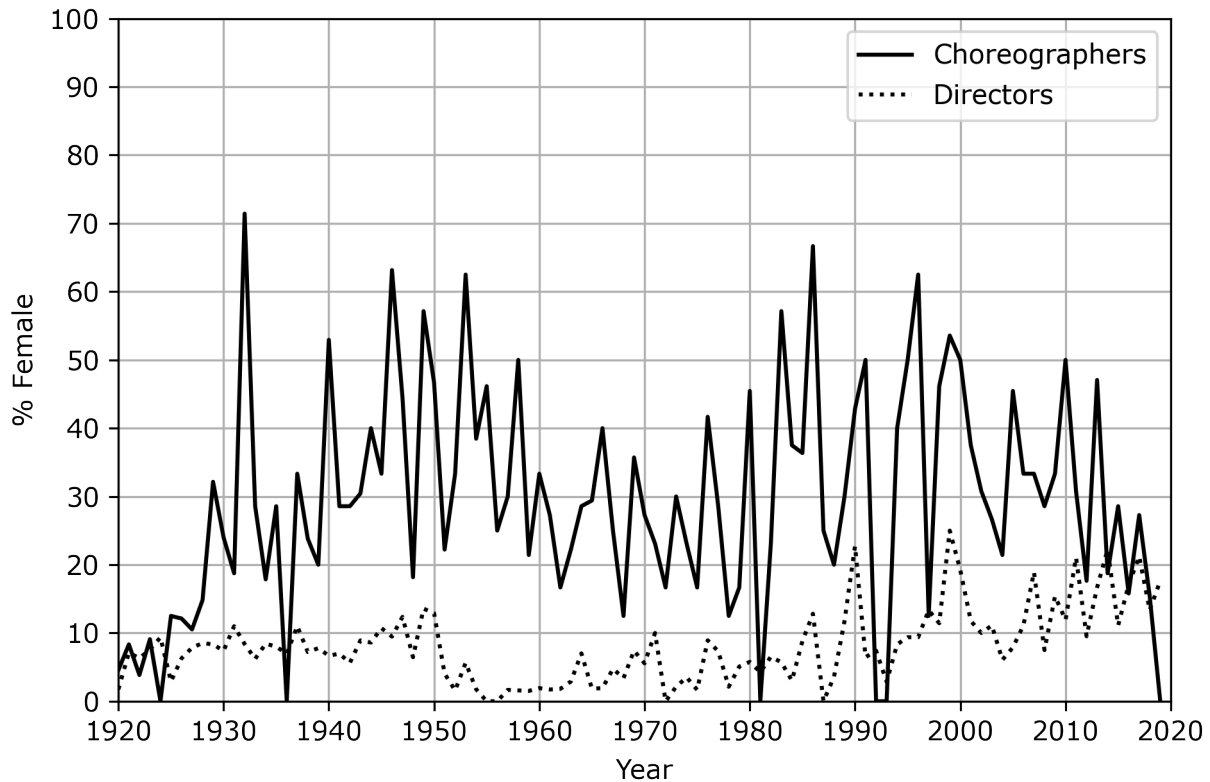


Figure 22: Percent of Female Directors and Choreographers of New Productions by Season

Even the general upward trend starting in the 1990s has yet to sustain itself at one out of every four plays or musicals for directors. Female choreographers have fared far better. Again, though, there have been extended periods of comparative exclusion: the heyday of the director/choreographer and dance musicals in the 1970s was an unusually male-dominated period for credited choreographers. The directors and choreographers’ union, SDC, conducted a 2019 study reporting that 39% of their members are female—but those roles on Broadway are filled by women only 25% of the time.⁴⁰ Broadway thus clearly underrepresents female professional directors and choreographers, even relative to their professional participation.

Female writers of original plays were an important part of Broadway before mid-century, but reached troughs in the 1970s and still go some seasons without any appearances (Figure 23).

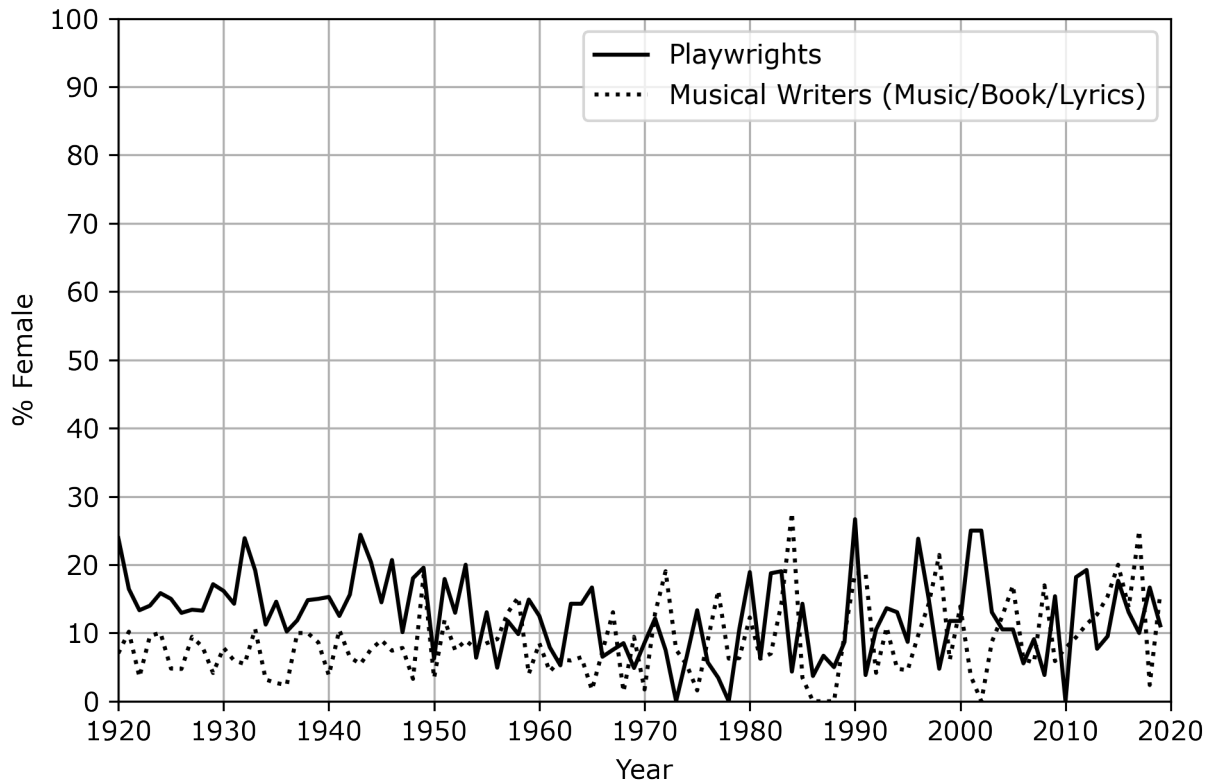


Figure 23: Percent of Female Writers (Playwrights or Composers/Lyricists/Librettists) of New Productions by Season

Among the three writing roles for a musical (composer, lyricists, librettist, sometimes filled by one person, sometimes by many more), women have done notably poorer than their playwright peers.

Unsurprisingly, fewer women in creative leadership correlates with fewer women on stage, too (Figure 24).

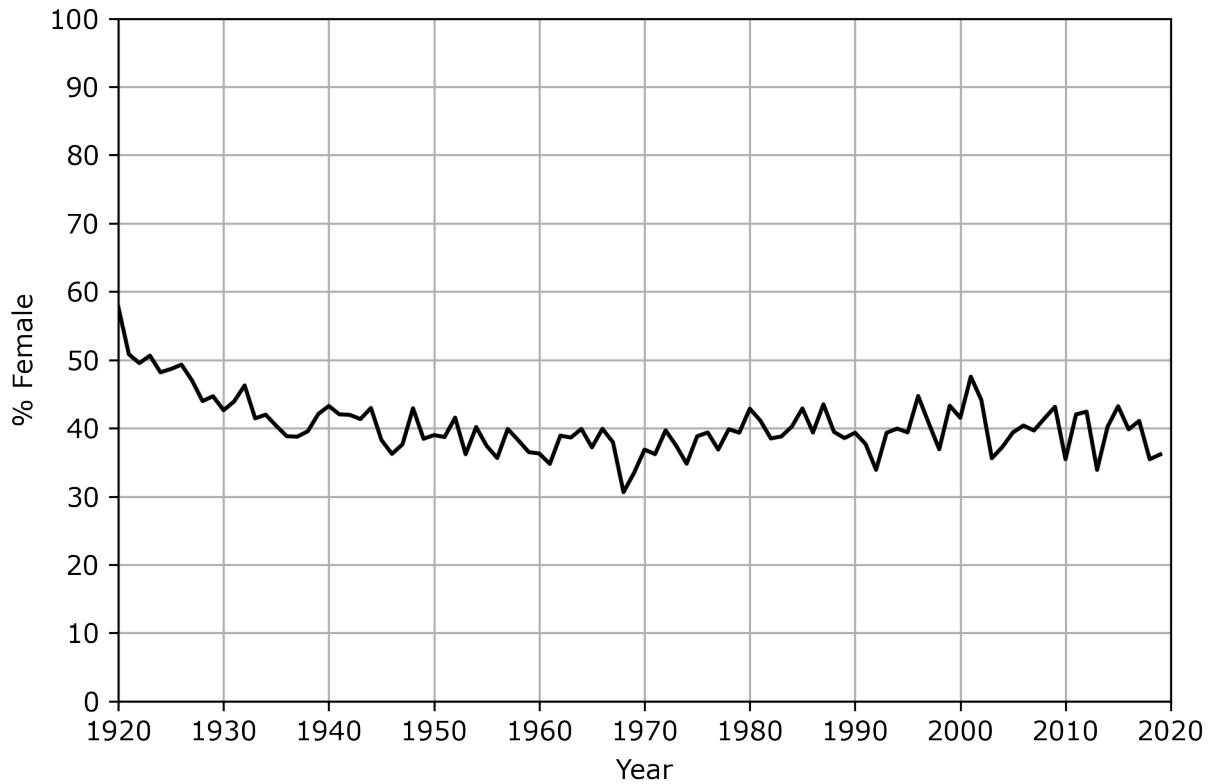


Figure 24: Percent of Female Performers in New Productions by Season

Only coming out of the 1910s did women comprise a majority of Broadway performers in all new play or musical productions each season. In plays, women have mostly hovered between 30 and 40% of performers (Figure 25).

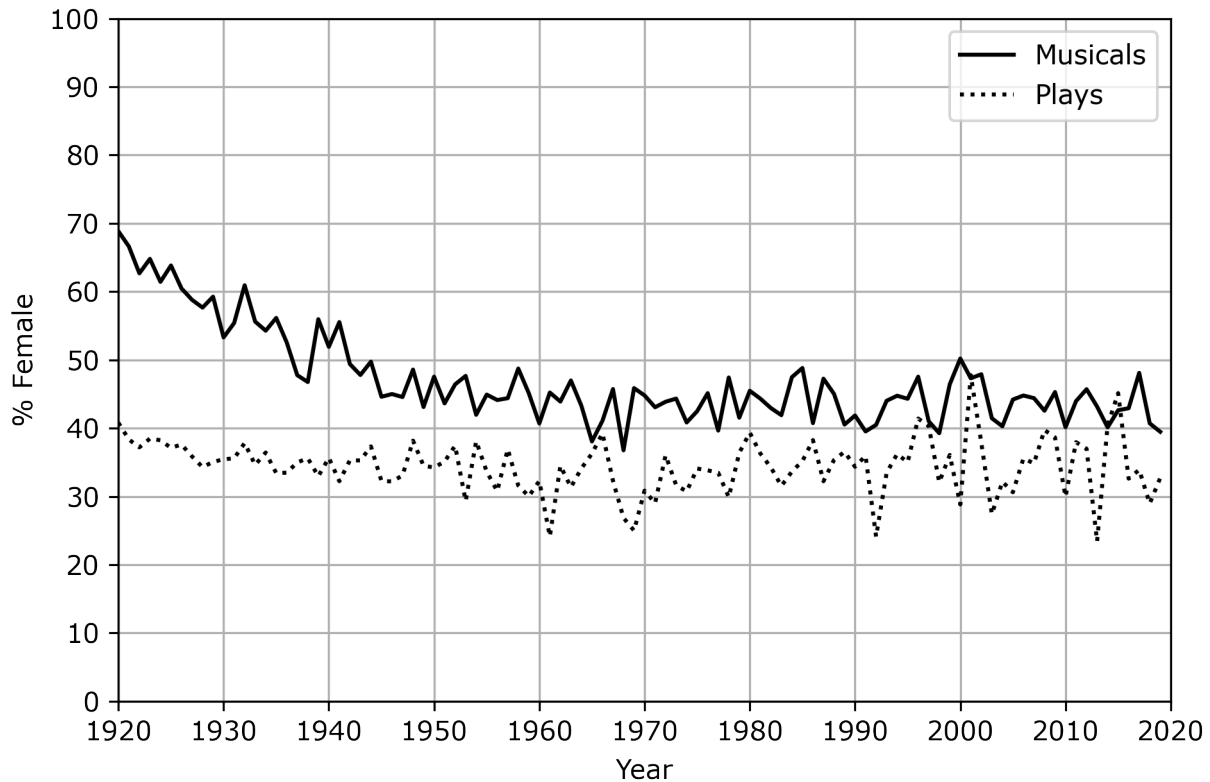


Figure 25: Percent of Female Performers in New Productions by Season (Plays and Musicals)

Representation is somewhat more equal in musicals, with women in the lead through the start of World War II. Many of those roles, however, were in the chorus. And Broadway’s association with chorus girls faded with the rise of the integrated musical and the demise of shows such as Ziegfeld’s Follies. When early critics buzzed that *Oklahoma!* would fail because it featured “no legs,” they were wrong about the show, but right about the diminishing opportunities for women on stage. Sadly, the chorus still remains the most (comparatively) equal place on stage for female performers, according to studies of contracts since 2013 by Actors’ Equity (Table 5).⁴¹

Table 5: Percent of Females Signed to Production Contracts (includes Broadway and National Tours)

Contract	2013–15	2016–19
Principal (Musical)	42.5	41.5
Principal (Play)	35.0	36.0
Chorus	44.2	46.5

Shrinking Broadway cast sizes lost opportunities for women in the chorus, while doing nothing to expand opportunities for lead or featured parts.

There are other connections between the gender breakdown of musical casts and the musical’s formal evolution. As Stacy Wolf has noted, in the 1960s a convention emerged of “scenes or songs with a single woman on stage that focus on her moving body.”⁴² During that same period, the percentage of female performers in Broadway musicals reached its nadir. Women in 1960s musicals seem to stand alone because there were literally fewer women onstage.

This gender inequality back- and onstage echoes, of course, the general inequality in American culture. However, such inequality is particularly striking given the perception of Broadway as a female-focused entertainment sector. In recent decades, this perception is correct: Broadway audiences have been predominantly and increasingly female since the 1990s. But that marks a shift from the mid-century, when surveys reported gender parity and even, in one case, male-heavy audiences (Table 6).

Table 6: Audience Gender Breakdown

Season (or Years)	% Female
1955–56	51.6
1960–61	47.9
1963–65	42.4
1981–82	51.6
1990–91	61.8
2000–01	62.6
2010–11	65.7
2018–19	68.3

Even if we regard the 1963–65 survey’s result of 57.6% male audiences as an unusual data point, the relative gender balance of the audience from the mid-1950s to the 1980s marks an important difference from the modern Broadway audience.⁴³ It is possible that younger audiences skew more female—think of shows such as *Wicked* or *Mean Girls*—and larger youth cohorts lead to a more female audience overall.⁴⁴ Or, relatedly, the abundance of family shows may leave women, who still do the bulk of child care, bringing their children to the theater. But even in 1980, when audiences were relatively evenly split by gender, women were noted as “exert[ing] added influence on attendance,” showing more enthusiasm and knowledge about Broadway than male respondents.⁴⁵ So it seems likely that this enthusiasm has slowly translated into greater participation numbers. Regardless of the reason, the slow growth in female representation on and backstage has occurred under the watchful eyes of an increasingly female audience, ever more likely to notice the presence (or absence) of major contributions from women. Perhaps the pressure from that changing audience has helped to increase women’s opportunities on Broadway.

As with gender, Broadway’s racial and ethnic makeup does not reflect that of the United States or the local community. Broadway’s audiences are overwhelmingly white. No audience studies asked about race and ethnicity until 1980, when the Broadway League reported an audience that was 85% white, 10% black, and 5% other.⁴⁶ The Broadway League’s annual survey since 1998 has recorded similar information on audience race (Table 7).

Table 7: Audience Share by Race/Ethnicity, 1998–2019

Racial/Ethnic Category	Minimum	Average	Maximum
White	73.7	77.9	82.5
Black	1.5	3.7	6.7
Asian	3	5.1	8.6
Hispanic	3.6	6	8.6
Mixed/Other	4.1	7.4	11.4

Those numbers are an improvement from the 1980 survey, but not by much. Audience members identifying as white, Asian, and mixed/other are over-represented, in their averages, relative to the US population, while Black and Hispanic audience members are underrepresented. That representation is statistically even more imbalanced compared to the New York City population, which remains a significant proportion of the audience. For instance, New York City is 24% Black, but the city-based Broadway audience is a mere 7% Black. The League’s 2018–19 report notes laconically that these statistics demonstrate “the continual need for diversity outreach.”

That outreach has historically focused on shows with black (or other non-white) casts, which have a long history on Broadway. Little information exists publicly about whether such shows increase the black audience share. The 1980 Broadway League survey, however, reported that 60% of the black theatergoers they surveyed attended black-cast shows, as opposed to 15% of the total audience. *Slave Play* (2019) tried to maximize this effect, hosting special “black-out” performances, with only black audiences.⁴⁷ That show’s writer, Jeremy O. Harris, helped to compile a modern list of black-created work on Broadway (not necessarily with all-black casts, including Harris’ own play). Harris’ catalogue suggests that, if black-created shows have made a serious difference to black attendance, then the mid-century was likely particularly poor for recruiting black audiences because of the relative dearth of such productions (Figure 26).

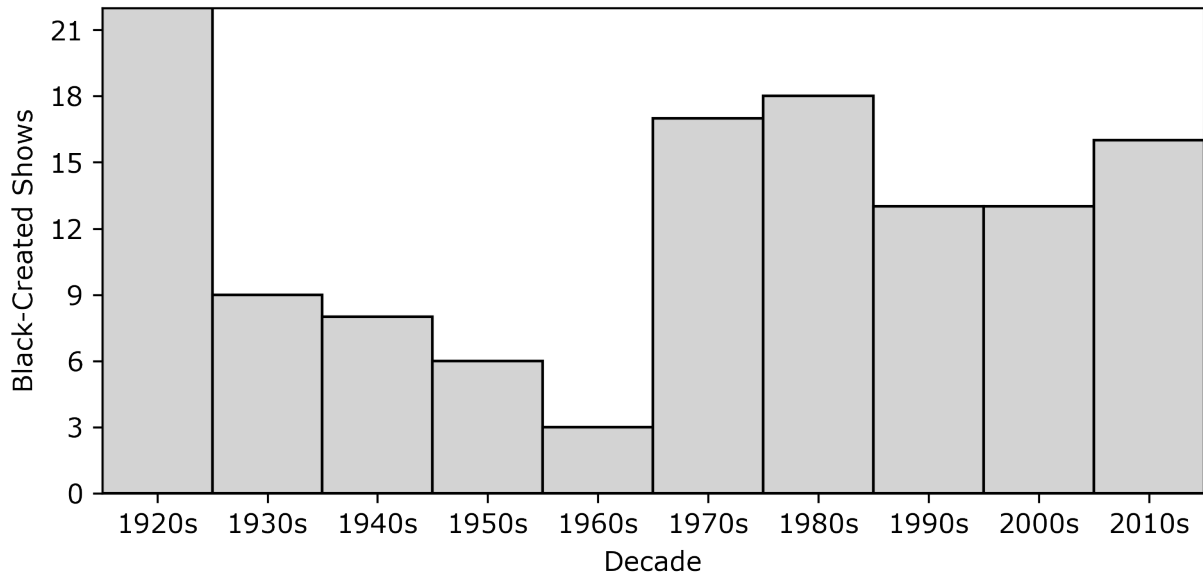


Figure 26: Number of Black-Created Shows by Decade

Black, and other non-white performers, also appear in shows written by white artists, of course. Allen Woll’s study of black musicals notes a particular flourishing of such white-authored work in the 1950s.⁴⁸ That period did not translate, overall, into more opportunities for Black performers. Equity and the Black press reported data from the 1940s through the 1960s (with a gap from 1947–1954) showing that the number of black performers on Broadway fell in that period (Figure 27).⁴⁹

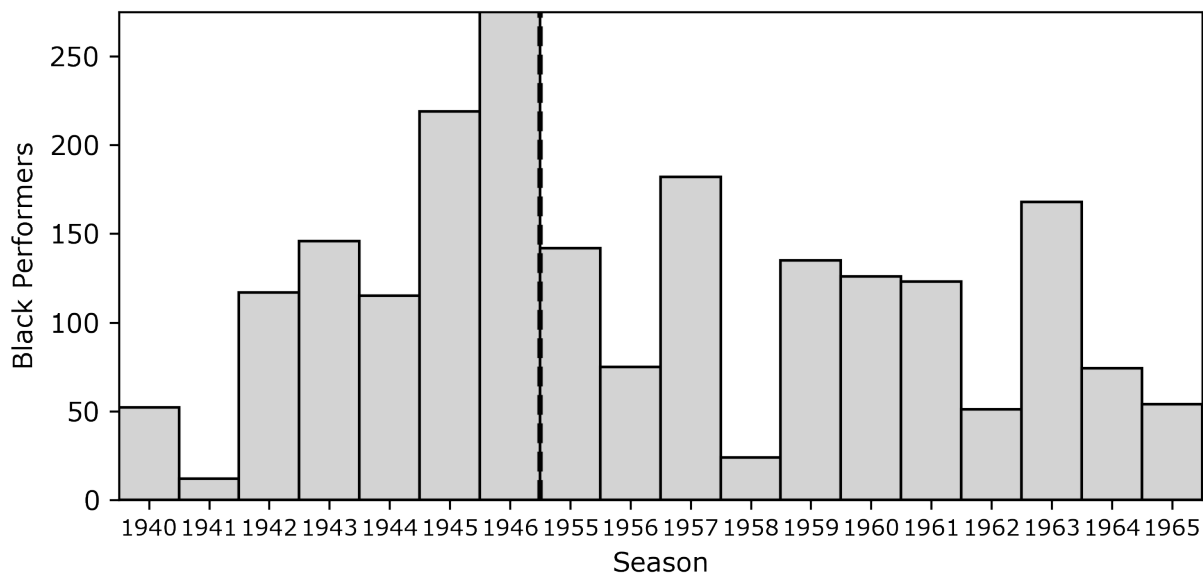


Figure 27: Number of Black Performers by Season

Why was this happening? It seems a puzzle, particularly because, during the 1940s, the number of productions with Black actors had increased and productions included Black performers at somewhat comparable rates 1955–65 (Figure 28).

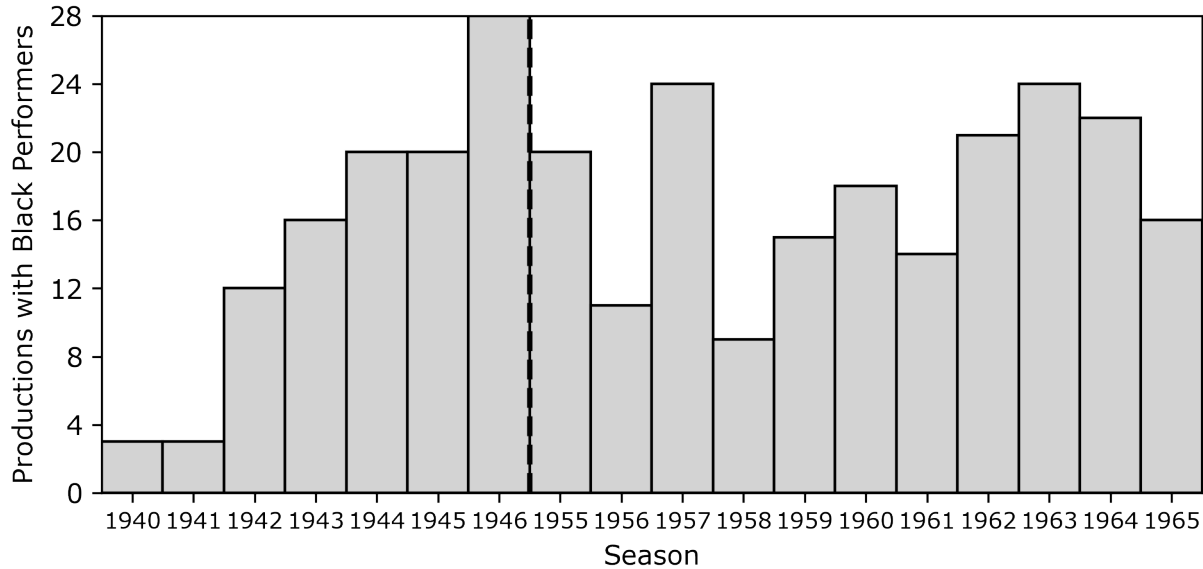


Figure 28: Number of Productions with Black Performers by Season

This means that the shrinking number of Black-created shows in the 1950s and 1960s, as shown in Figure 26, was tied directly to the overall diminishing Black presence on stage. Black-created shows had more Black performers than did white-created shows. Even as more productions included some Black actors in the 1950s and 1960s, those productions could not make up for the absence of Black-dominated stages of Black-created shows. Thus the average number of Black performers per show (for productions with a minimum of one Black performer) often fell extremely low in the 1950s and 1960s (Figure 29).

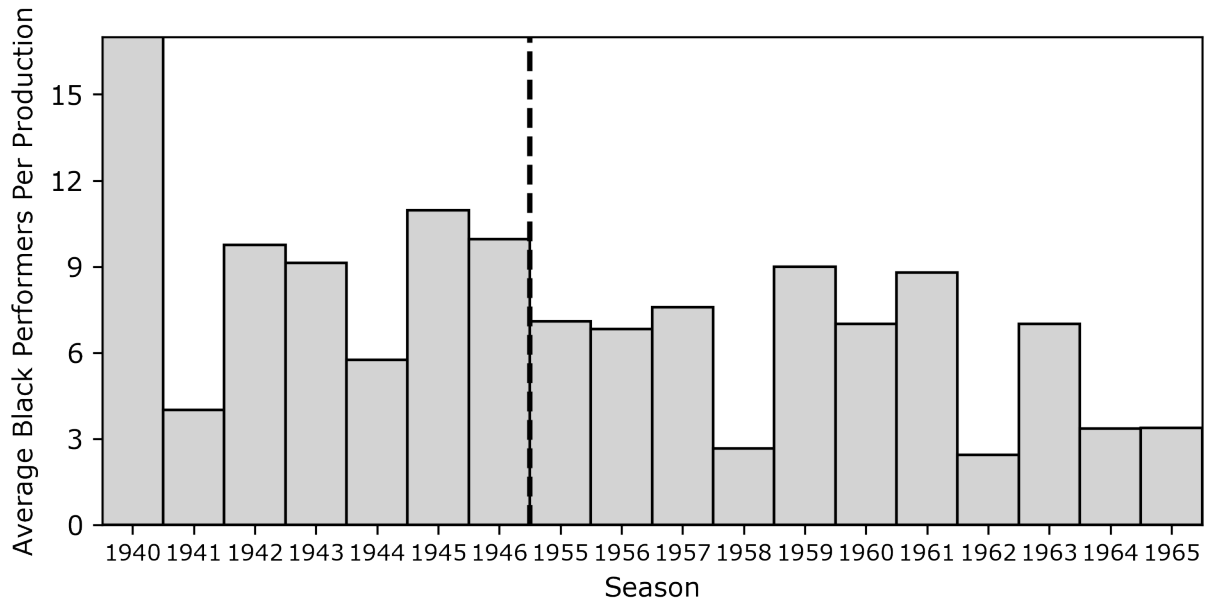


Figure 29: Average Black Performers Per Production by Season (Minimum One Black Performer)

Modern studies by a coalition advocating for greater non-white representation on stage, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition, reveal improvement since in the 1960s in overall non-white representation on stage.⁵⁰

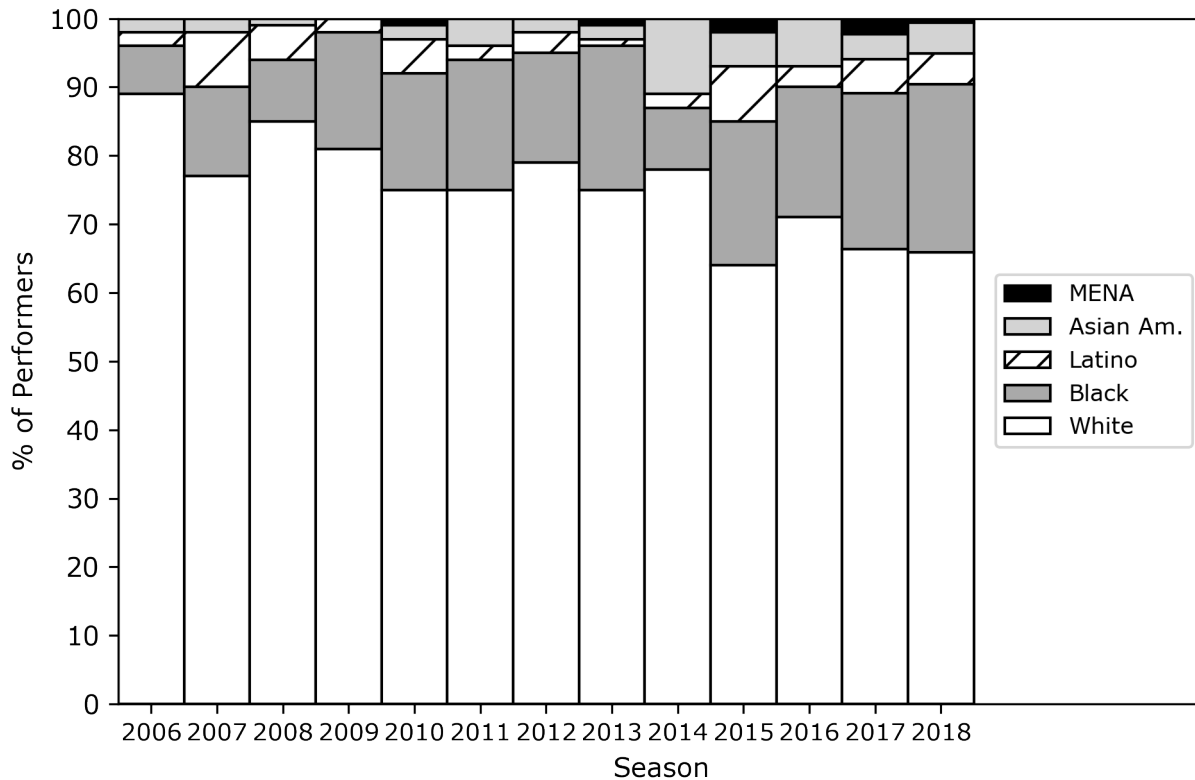


Figure 30: Racial and Ethnic Breakdown of Performers by Season

Productions focused closely on minority racial and ethnic experiences such as *Hamilton* (2016) or *Allegiance* (2015) continue to boost significantly the number of non-white performers on Broadway. Those numbers consistently lag those of the population of New York City and the United States. (They do, however, look more balanced than non-white representation in the audience, as discussed above.)

Backstage statistics on race are available mostly from more recent surveys and emphasize an even more shocking dearth of non-white contributors in all professions. For example, in the 2018–19 season, 89% of writers, 93.8% of directors, and 92.6% of designers on Broadway were white. Advocates for change have broken down this and related data in greater detail, but the story in brief is simple: Broadway was and is an extremely white place onstage and offstage, relative to the US population and to the New York City population in particular. That has occasionally been less true, as in the 1920s, 1970s, and 2010s, but the Broadway community simply does not look, and never has looked like New York and the US, racially and ethnically.

Broadway’s community is thus both far less than it should be, as a sample of the American populace, and far more than it seems on its stages and in its major histories. Like any professional world, though, Broadway looks different to its insiders than it does to the outsiders reading a program. The Broadway community itself knows from experience who is central to their network, recognizes the names of key (but often unknown) players, and understands the scope of collaboration required to make Broadway run. Yes,

Broadway can be extremely hierarchical. People and organizations with outsized economic power (the Shuberts) or artistic power (Robbins) can hog the limelight and give an impression that they are, as the Shubert Organization Chairman Gerald Schoenfeld titled his autobiography, *Mr. Broadway*.

But Laurents' contract, emphasizing equality among *Gypsy*'s lead creative team, is also part of the Broadway ethos. Union solidarity and the ideal of a theater company better express the truly collaborative, communal spirit that imbues the best Broadway shows. Everyone is necessary on Broadway, and no one is sufficient. As Rose sings in *Gypsy*:

Wherever we go,
Whatever we do,
We're gonna go through it together.⁵¹

Notes

¹Arthur Laurents, *Original Story By* (Applause Books, 2000), p. 387.

²Laurentis, *Original Story By*, p. 388.

³On Playbill's history, see Vicki L. Hoskins, "Playbill Takes the Stage: The Rise of America's Foremost Theatrical Program," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2020.

⁴The only scholarly discussion of the understudy's history is a brief three paragraphs in an interview-based handbook, J. Austin Eyer and Lyndy Franklin Smith, *Broadway Swings: Covering the Ensemble in Musical Theatre* (Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 1–2.

⁵Google Books N-Gram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>.

⁶Bernard Sobel, "Actors Who Are Hidden," *Theatre Magazine*, September, 1921, p. 170.

⁷"New Equity-M.P.A. Contract," *Variety*, May 28, 1924.

⁸"Understudy Heaven on B'way," *The Billboard*, March 11, 1944. For the Showlog, see, for instance, the issue of February 12, 1944, mentioning Martha Falconer's appearance for an ailing Uta Hagen in *Othello* starring Paul Robeson.

⁹Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Shubert Organization Materials, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, *T-Mss 2002-029, Box 3, Folders 1–3, and McCann & Nugent Productions, *T-Mss 1985-009, Box 5, Folder 4.

¹⁰Eyer and Smith, *Broadway Swings*, p. 2.

¹¹I use a controlled vocabulary for these roles. So whether the program lists "scene designer," "scenic design by," or "set designer," they all amount to the same category here. Data includes only roles featured in the first few pages of a production's program, so some roles may have received named credit, but were not listed with prominently.

¹²Mark N. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (Northeastern University Press, 2004), p. 188–210.

¹³Christin Essin, "Unseen Labor and Backstage Choreographies: A Materialist Production History of *A Chorus Line*," *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (May 2015), pp. 210–12.

¹⁴Ruthie Fierberg, "Theatre Jobs: What Does It Take to Be a Broadway Producer?," *Playbill*, October 15, 2017, <http://www.playbill.com/article/theatre-jobs-what-does-it-take-to-be-a-broadway-producer>.

¹⁵Leo Shull, *Who's Where* (Show Business, 1956). I discuss *Angels* in Chapter Four.

¹⁶"Equity Rules That Agencies Must Be Licensed," *The Billboard*, September 29, 1928.

¹⁷Timothy R. White, *Blue-Collar Broadway: The Craft and Industry of American Theater* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), pp. 108–9.

¹⁸White, *Blue-Collar Broadway*, p. 77.

¹⁹White, *Blue-Collar Broadway*, p. 105.

²⁰A brief comment on some major sociological research that uses Broadway musicals to put forth a mathematical model of "small-world collaboration" (Brian Uzzi and Jarrett Spiro, "Collaboartion and Creativity: The Small World Problem," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 2 (2005): 447–504.). While my methodology here is far more simplistic than that employed by those authors, their modeling, which focuses only on the core creative staff of directors, lyricists, librettists, composers, producers, and choreographers, excludes many of the figures most central to Broadway's actual network. Including more press employees and, particularly, designers in their study might have a meaningful effect on their results.

²¹Compare Debra Caplan's network of the Vilna Troupe as discussed in *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theatre, and the Art of Itineracy* (University of Michigan Press, 2018).

²²These graphs copy a format developed in John H. Mueller, *The American Symphony Orchestra: A Social History of Musical Taste* (Indiana University Press, 1951).

²³Jo Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre: A Memoir and a Portfolio* (Atheneum, 1965).

²⁴Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre*, p. 51.

²⁵Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 134.

²⁶William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts—The Economic Dilemma: A Study of Problems Common to Theater, Opera, Music and Dance* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1966).

²⁷William J. Baumol and Hilda Baumol, "The Future of the Theater and the Cost Disease of the Arts," in *Bach and the Box: The Impact of Television on the Live Arts*, ed. Mary Ann Hendon, James F. Richardson, and William S. Hendon (Akron, OH: Association for Cultural Economics, 1985), pp. 7–31.

²⁸Essin "Unseen Labor and Backstage Choreographies," pp. 205–12.

²⁹Robert Meffe, "How Many Musicians Does It Take? A History and Analysis of the Shrinking Broadway Pit Orchestra," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 5, no. 1 [2011]: 99–115.

³⁰"Legit Committee Meets," *The Billboard*, September 2, 1933.

³¹"Equity Against Minimums," *Variety*, November 25, 1936.

³²For a fuller description of these Unions, see Mitch Weiss and Peri Gaffney, *The Business of Broadway: An Insider's Guide to Working, Producing, and Investing in the World's Greatest Theatre Community* (Skyhorse Publishing Company, 2015), Chapter 4.

³³On the Guild, see Thomas J. Walsh, *Playwrights and Power: The Making of the Dramatists Guild* (Smith and Kraus, 2016) and Brent Salter, *Negotiating Copyright in the American Theatre: 1856–1951* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

³⁴Alfred P. Harding, *The Revolt of the Actors* (W. Morrow & Company, 1929); Sean P. Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!: Actor's Unionism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (University of Illinois Press, 2013); Christin Essin, *Working Backstage: A Cultural History and Ethnography of Technical Theater Labor* (University of Michigan Press, 2021); David Bisaha, "Defending the Standard Contract: Unmeasured Work, Class, and Design Professionalism in United Scenic Artists Local 829," *Theatre Survey* 61, no. 2 (May 2020): 231–51; Rachel Shane, "Negotiating the Creative Sector: Understanding the Role and Impact of an Artistic Union in a Cultural Industry," Ph.D. Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2006.

³⁵For a reading of othr work by Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, see Virginia Anderson, "Choreographing a Cause: Broadway Bares as Philanthroproduction and Embodied Index to Changing Attitudes toward HIV/AIDS" in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*, ed. Nadine George-Graves (Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁶See, for instance, ATPAM's head-spinning history, <https://www.atpam.com/history>.

³⁷Some of these groups include the Asian-American Performers Action Coalition, The Count, We See You White American Theater, and Counting Together.

³⁸For examples of non-quantitative studies of Broadway and homosexuality, see D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Harvard University Press, 1998) and Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (University of Michigan Press, 2002).

³⁹Wendy Vierow, "Women on Broadway: 1980–1995," Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1997.

⁴⁰Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, "On the Edge: The Lives and Livelihoods of Stage Directors and Choreographers," 2020, p. 47.

⁴¹Actors' Equity Association, "Diversity Report: 2016–2019 in Review," 2020.

⁴²Wolf, *Changed for Good*, p. 55.

⁴³There may be a purely methodological explanation for this shift. The 1963–65 survey surveyed only audiences for plays and musicals. It is unclear if the other pre-1990 studies included specials. The more recent surveys seem to be the most inclusive with respect to genre. Possibly, this difference explains the 1963–65 study's outlying result.

⁴⁴The Broadway League provides only summary data and no cross-tabs with which to correlate variables.

⁴⁵The League of New York Theatres and Producers, "A Study of the New York Audience for the Broadway Theatre," 1980, p. 54.

⁴⁶Baumol and Bowen do, however, note the subject's absence from their surveys.

⁴⁷Diep Tran, "How 'Slave Play' Got 800 Black People to the Theatre," *American Theatre*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/09/23/how-slave-play-got-800-black-people-to-the-theatre/>.

⁴⁸Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 193.

⁴⁹John Lovell, Jr., "Roundup: The Negro in the American Theatre (1940–1947)," *The Crisis*, July, 1947, pp. 212–17; Frederick O'Neal, "Integration Report," *Equity* (December 1960), p. 21.

⁵⁰AAPAC's reports shift their category names over time. I use the most recent categories here.

⁵¹Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim, *Gypsy: A Musical Fable* (Theatre Communications Group, 1994), p. 66.

Chapter Five Tickets

Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (2001) is the story of two Broadway producers who scheme to stage a sure flop. They plan to capitalize the production for more than it costs to mount, then pocket the difference and escape to a glamorous retirement. Everything goes awry when the show-within-a-show succeeds; musical-comedy hijinks ensue. Like Brooks' fictional producers, *The Producers'* producers had a huge hit on their hands. And then they decided to do something entirely legal and above-board that infuriated some Broadway observers as much as if they had run the fictional scheme depicted on stage: they raised the top ticket prices. By a lot.

"Shame!" cried Isabelle Stevenson, chair of the American Theatre Wing. "Shame on not caring about helping make theater more available."¹ Stevenson, speaking barely a month after the September 11 attacks, felt *The Producers'* new \$480 seats—almost five times the previous top price—violated Broadway's obligations to the theater community.² Yes, you can charge money for your shows, but you can't charge too much for them.

Of course, tickets for *The Producers* could be had for \$480 (or more) before the production raised their face prices. Audiences have long paid significantly above the face price for any in-demand Broadway ticket. But until *The Producers* came along, most of that money did not accrue to a production team; it went instead to outside brokers. By introducing "premium" seats, *The Producers* brought the face price of theater tickets closer into line with the actual price of theater tickets. The listed ticket prices thus became more responsive to economic laws of supply and demand.

The Producers' price increase sparked a transformation in Broadway ticketing. Since 2001, productions have almost uniformly joined *The Producers*, using premium pricing, alongside more detailed price discrimination, to maximize income by manipulating ticket prices. It might seem shocking that Broadway has not always let its ticket prices respond to the marketplace. But ethical, logistical, and legal constraints kept productions' stated prices shockingly flat (accounting for inflation) through most of the twentieth century. This chapter looks at ticket prices, and at the grosses shows earn from them, by focusing on how tickets are sold, and how methods of sale and the laws regulating them have determined much of Broadway's pricing.

Why does the method of sale matter? Because it affects the buyer's decision-making, the price of the ticket, and who earns the income from the sale. This all becomes clear in a fable about ticket-buying by Morton Eustis in his 1934 volume *B'way, Inc.!* Eustis imagines a fictitious "Mr. Brown, from out-of-town," attempting to acquire seats for himself and "his girl" to the "city's reigning musical show."³ For the best seats in the house, the price should be no more than \$6.60 for both tickets. Mr. Brown finds himself turned away at the box office, accosted on the street with an offer for two lousy orchestra seats for \$14 each, rejected outright at "a reputable looking agency," and pitched two mediocre balcony seats for \$7 apiece. His concierge finds two good orchestra seats for \$20, but Brown's girlfriend accepts even better seats from her father's "man." The excellent seats cost a shocked Mr. Brown \$33.50.

There are a few notable aspects to this story. First, Brown is interested only in seats to the one show, and never seriously considers or attempts to find seats for anything else.

Some audiences, indeed, want tickets to only one production, but many might be enticed into tickets for another show. Direct comparison shopping among productions has long been difficult, however, and, when possible, only through limited venues throughout most of Broadway's history. Second, the prices Brown heard varied wildly, from the reasonable face price to a final price over five times what the seats cost at the box office. Distinctions between ticket face prices and actual costs challenge attempts to tell a proper history of Broadway prices but also puzzle audiences who find themselves seated next to neighbors who paid significantly less (or more) for the same experience. The mark-ups, along with taxes and fees, that increase what audiences pay are also part of the history of ticket prices. Third, few of the vendors Brown dealt with had any direct connection to the production: everyone except the box office treasurer to whom he spoke first was a middleman, taking a huge chunk of the difference between the purchase price and the face price. As we shall see, these three aspects of Mr. Brown's adventure all play key roles in how Broadway has priced its tickets. And the situation for all three has changed. Since Eustis wrote his fable, ticket brokerage inside and outside of the box office has evolved—legally, technologically, organizationally—to permit new approaches to pricing that solve some of Mr. Brown's problems. What has not changed is the relationship between ticket prices (and the grosses such prices produce) and the logistics of buying and selling tickets, which this chapter emphasizes.

With these issues in mind, let us take Eustis' fable as an inspiration for this study. There are three main places where you can purchase tickets: the box office, ticket agencies, and theater-run authorized retailers.⁴ Most have existed in one form or another throughout the century. Each has different prices, different incentives, and different relationships to the production itself. Step, then, into Mr. Brown's shoes, and try to buy a ticket.

The Box Office

Box office pricing has been defined by two trends: greater price discrimination and overall price stickiness. These two factors, as well as the general character of the box office, explain why prices on Broadway are so complex. Broadway box offices are located in theater lobbies. During business hours, and until shortly after curtain time on performance days, a theater's treasurer and assistants sell and distribute tickets at the windows. The treasurer and assistants almost always work for the theater owner, not the show's producer. At the end of each week, the treasurer totals the box office income, delivers to the owners the amount owed for rent, expenses, and the theater's contractual percentage of the gross, and then pays the remainder to the producer to distribute per the company's budget.⁵ It is important to recognize that theater owners run the box office because this means they run the box office in the interests of the theater and not of the production. Sometimes those interests coincide; sometimes, not.

Since the 1920s, observers have recognized a few salient facts about box office treasurers.⁶ First, treasurers do not sell you tickets to other shows. They sell tickets to the production in their theater only. That means a purchaser cannot comparison shop at a box office, but only by walking from box office to box office. Second, historically, treasurers have had little incentive to sell any tickets at the box office window. If a show in the theater is a flop or a middling production, why sell a ticket, increase the production's

income, and possibly extend the production’s lifespan? Better to keep tickets unsold and hurry the dud out of your theater so you can bring in a hit instead. (Producers need to make a minimum amount of money to cover weekly production costs; grosses under that amount lead sensible businesspeople to close a show. Furthermore, a standard contractual “stop clause” allows theater owners to evict a production that falls below a certain gross amount for two straight weeks.) If the show in the theater is a hit, the treasurer might make money (illegally since 1928, with further legal tightening in 1965) by selling the most valuable seats to an agency, which pays the treasurer either a flat or per-ticket fee known as “ice”—essentially, a bribe.⁷ Why sell a \$140 orchestra seat to a stranger walking up to the window, when the same seat can go to an agency for \$200, with the treasurer pocketing difference? William Goldman summarized in 1968, not without some admiration, that “box-office personnel [...] are thieves.”⁸ A more recent observer noted that, “regrettably,” an experienced treasurer may be well-versed in “box office embezzlement techniques.”⁹ Historically, then, box offices have not been transparent sites for acquiring tickets, but opaque and vaguely unsavory locations that serve the interests of the treasurer and the theater owner, not the producer or audience.

If, however, you did manage to buy a ticket at a box office—either in person, or by mail—what kind of prices would you pay? Box offices, in theory, simply charge the face price for the ticket, which the theater owner, perhaps in consultation with the producer, has set. That face price, however, is never a single value. Even in Shakespeare’s time, theaters priced tickets differently based first and foremost on an audience member’s location in the auditorium. Typically, a modern theater’s orchestra seats cost the most, with prices in the balcony decreasing steadily by the seat’s distance from and view of the stage; this is called “scaling the house.”¹⁰ Most shows also differentiate pricing based on the performance calendar: Friday and Saturday nights may cost more than weeknights, or matinees may be discounted. This simple form of variable pricing recognizes that not every seat for every performance is equally desirable.

In practice, such scales are usually straightforward, like a menu. For instance, Neil Simon’s *The Odd Couple* (1965) was priced as in Table 1.¹¹

Table 1: Price Schedule for *The Odd Couple* at the Booth Theatre, 1965

Location	Evenings	Matinees
Orchestra	7.50	5.40
Balcony A	6.90	4.80
Balcony B	5.75	4.30
Balcony C	4.80	3.60
Balcony D	3.60	2.50
Boxes	7.50	5.40

Two price schedules, one for evenings and one for matinees, with six seating areas. As this tariff illustrates, the box office price is always a plural set of box office prices. Today’s Broadway productions still scale prices by seating area, but scales are actually simpler than they used to be.¹² As discussed below, new forms of price discrimination take advantage

of greater differences in pricing based on the performance date and time, and emphasize less seat locations.

These advertised prices are actually lower than what audiences pay. Why? Because they exclude taxes and fees—such as “theater restoration” fees, introduced on Broadway in 1997—that have been standard in various periods, but are hard to track in detail.¹³ From March, 1949 until January, 1966, *Variety* explicitly stated that their weekly financial reports included admissions or amusement taxes. But the data suggest that those taxes had been implicitly included for years prior, perhaps since *Variety*’s reporting began. Surveys by the Broadway League in 2002 and 2018 reported increases between the average face prices sold and the reported price paid for tickets of 22% and 17.5%, respectively. Those increases include service charges, restoration fees, brokers’ fees, and more. Box office prices, while theoretically knowable and stable, thus always vary by date and location and do not fully account for the actual amounts paid by customers because they exclude taxes and fees.

Although we cannot thus state confidently what audiences have historically paid for tickets, we do know what they purport to cost. Specifically, with available data, we can trace the highest priced ticket you could buy directly from the box office, also known as the “top,” for plays and musicals, which often have significantly different prices (Figure 1).¹⁴

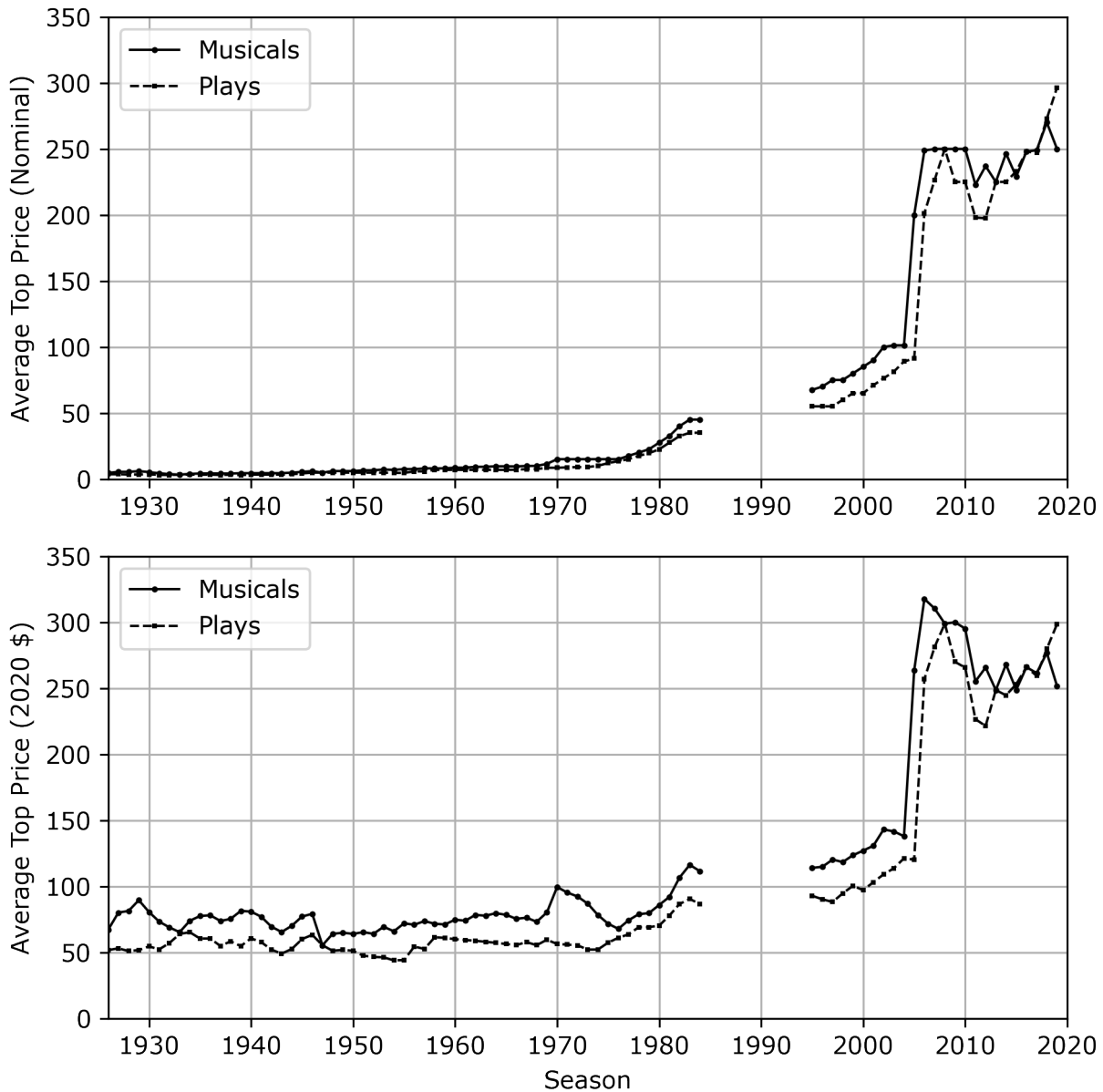


Figure 1: Average Top Ticket Price by Season

Two key points appear in these charts. First, prices were extremely stable, in real dollars, until the 1980s. Nominal price increases in the 1970s, which inspired complaints of “heart-stopping price increments,” were merely an artifact of that decade’s high inflation.¹⁵ As a 1972 study noted succinctly, when adjusted for inflation, “theater ticket prices have not been rising over the years.”¹⁶ Second, while prices did begin a real rise in the 1980s, premium pricing in the 2000s was the real breakthrough event. (*Hair* [1967] had experimented briefly with \$50 premiums for a dozen seats, which they attempted to sell by subscription to large corporations, but the experiment did not last.¹⁷) Premium tickets refer to a small subset of (usually) prime orchestra seats—*The Producers* started with 50—sold at a price well above the rest of the tariff. Premium prices purported to bring black market prices

into the open—and onto the balance sheets of the production itself. Note that the premium price merely extends the logic of price differentiation evident even in *The Odd Couple's* price schedule: not all seats in the theater are equal; the better seats should cost more. But the price difference between Balcony D and Balcony A is a lot less than the difference between a regular orchestra seat and a premium seat. Premiums also have the downside of significantly inflating audience expectations about all ticket prices, particularly when they made headlines, as *The Producers* did in 2001 and as *Hamilton* did in 2016. When audiences read of \$450 or \$850 Broadway tickets, perceptions about costs increase, even if prices overall do not change much. Even so, the highest prices have, on average, grown massively—in both nominal and real dollars—with particularly noticeable leaps in price first during the 1980s, and then, more extremely, from 2001.

We can also calculate the average price, meaning not what audiences actually paid—as noted above, fees and taxes often lift that number significantly—but simply the weekly gross capacity divided by the number of seats in the theater over eight performances. In this case, because of the large difference in gross capacity, we will focus on the median average price in each season (Figure 2).¹⁸

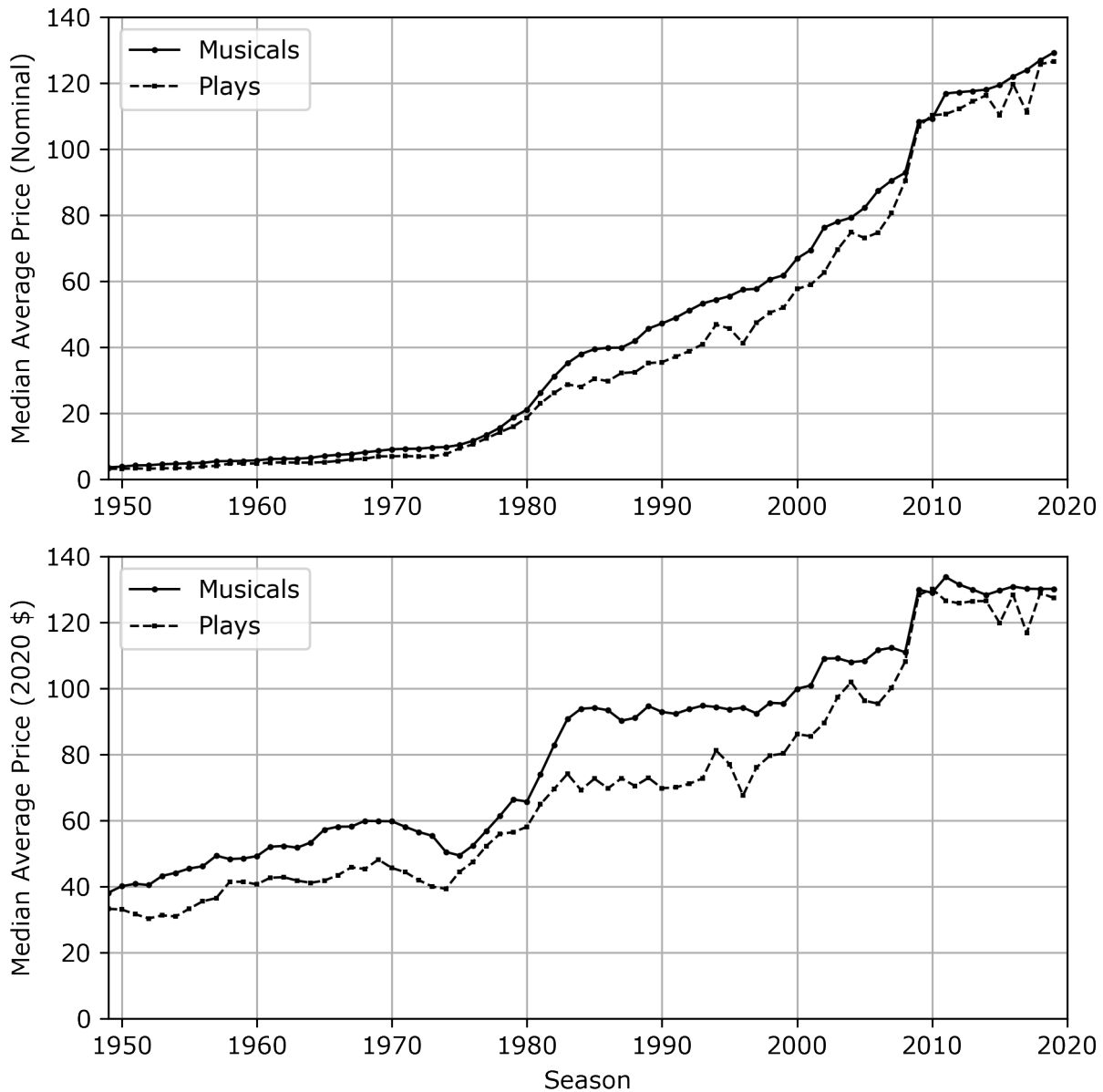


Figure 2: Median Average Ticket Price by Season

While the average prices are necessarily lower than the top prices, the data generally align in their growth. However, average musical prices got significantly more expensive than play prices in the 1980s—a trend less pronounced with respect to top prices.

While over time and across Broadway, prices have grown significantly since the 1980s, pricing for individual shows has been, historically, far more stable. I am talking about what economists refer to as price stickiness: how fast and how much a specific product's prices change. Until recently, an individual production's face prices changed minimally during the course of a run. Why is this? One can understand, perhaps, a production's resistance to lowering prices because it sends a negative signal to audiences. (This is distinct from selling explicitly discounted tickets in some form, which most shows do at various points

in their run.) But it is harder to understand why so many shows, even after they became hits or win awards, barely budged their tariff. Even as late as 1993, an economist called “the absence of intertemporal price variation” on Broadway “a puzzle.”¹⁹

How sticky are Broadway prices? *Mister Roberts* opened in February, 1948 with star Henry Fonda. Top price was \$4.80. The war dramedy won unanimous raves and sold out so completely that producers added two rows of seats to increase their weekly gross capacity.²⁰ A year later they were still selling out at the top price of ... \$4.80, where it stayed for the remainder of the production’s run. Musicals occasionally raised prices after opening, but usually only once, when the second block of tickets went on sale. (Tickets are sold in “blocks” of time: from opening night to six months into a run, for instance, then from six months after opening to the end of a year.) *My Fair Lady* (1956) opened at a \$7.50 top and jumped to \$8.05 after six months. Yet by the show’s continually sold-out one-year anniversary, audiences were paying at the box office that same \$8.05, the top price for the rest of the six-and-a-half-year run. Even those small, one-time boosts were not the norm until the mid-1960s, when *Variety* observed that “ticket price increases for Broadway musicals after their openings is [sic] becoming routine.”²¹

This price stickiness seems to stem in part from the puritanical attitude exemplified by Isabelle Stevenson’s cries of “Shame.” When discussing price increases, articles in *Variety* often immediately blamed rising costs, regarding higher prices as warranted only due to increased wages or other operating expenses.²² Ticket hikes could be justified as attempts to “meet the inflationary spiral” but not to maximize income. This rhetoric occasionally contrasted Broadway’s pricing modesty with growing tariffs Off-Broadway: a 1969 article praised Broadway for keeping lower-priced tickets available while Off-Broadway prices soared out of “avarice.”²³ Major industry players such as theater owner Bernard Jacobs, designer Jules Fisher, and lyricist Sheldon Harnick even justified rising real prices in the 1980s as an essential response to higher costs. In Harnick’s view, Broadway was trapped in a bad feedback loop: “Because a show costs so much, the ticket prices have to be high, and when the ticket prices are high, I think an audience justly begins to expect something eye-popping, something so startling and so stunning that they feel they’ve had their money’s worth.”²⁴ Thus prices were high because costs were rising and costs were rising because high prices raised expectations for production spectacle, which costs more money, etc. Nowhere does Harnick suggest that prices should rise because supply is low and demand high. Harnick’s claims, which have some merit in the 1980s, exemplify the “prices should be tied directly to costs” mantra on Broadway.

Surprisingly, even premium prices have been remarkably sticky. The average premium ticket price hovered around \$250 nominally from 2008 to 2016 (Figure 3).

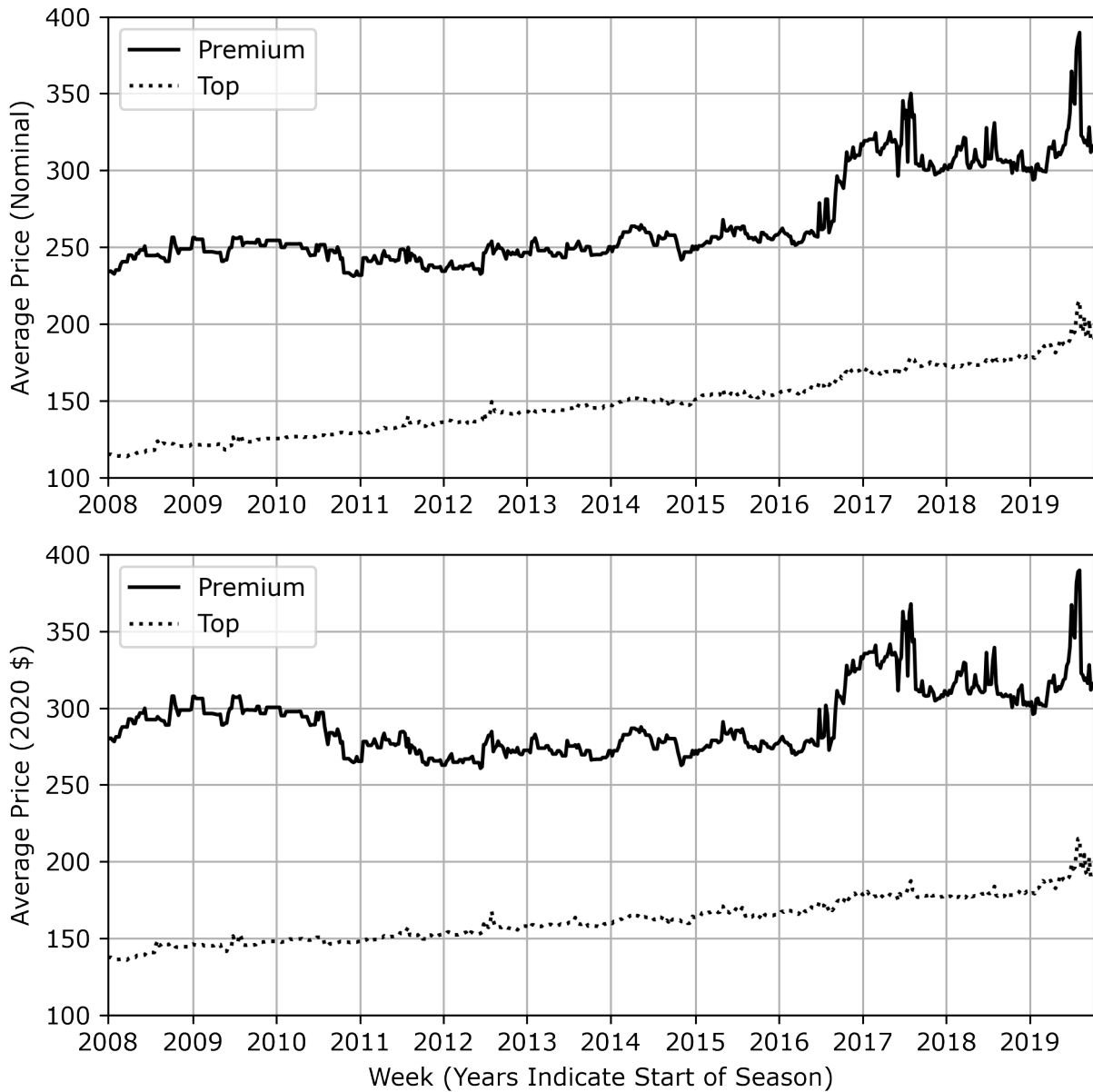


Figure 3: Average Top and Premium Price by Season

This means that, in real dollars, premium prices got slightly cheaper in that period, even as normal top prices (i.e., the most expensive non-premium seats) grew steadily in nominal and real dollars. Only the wild market for *Hamilton* spurred premiums across the industry higher again. And *Hamilton*'s producers were eager to silence accusations of greed, pairing its two-hundred premium seats at an eye-popping \$849—75% higher than their pre-opening premium—with 46 seats sold for \$10 in a daily lottery.²⁵

We cannot blame all of Broadway's historical reluctance to raise prices on industry anxiety, however. There is also an important legal story. From 1918 until 1965, a federal law intended to prevent ticket scalping levied a 50% tax on any amount paid for a ticket in excess of the "established price." The Internal Revenue Service defined established price

to mean the amount advertised for a given location at a given performance.²⁶ For instance, imagine that a show sells Friday night orchestra seats for \$4. When the show receives universal accolades, the producer, being a competent businessperson, raises prices: orchestra seats for Fridays are now \$8. But they owe \$2 in tax (50% of the difference between \$8 and \$4) to the federal government. This tax structure limited any attempts to raise prices when hit shows received their initial rush of interest, as well as the ability to lower prices if shows fell on hard times. Producers could still raise prices, but only when selling a new block of tickets: once established, the prices were the prices. Thus the tax law put a damper on price variation and set expectations for price stability across Broadway.

Repeal of the law in 1965 raised brief hopes that prices would finally be more flexible and respond to supply and demand. John Wharton, an attorney hired by the League of New York Theatres and the Shuberts to lead a kind of think tank for Broadway, published reports and gave interviews full of hope for a more honest, straightforward, and remunerative pricing policy.²⁷ The intrepid producer Hal Prince, who co-chaired the committee that Wharton ran, took a rare gambit at flexible pricing with his first show after the tax's repeal. For his musical *It's a Bird ... It's a Plane ... It's Superman* (1966), Prince offered "premium orchestra seats at \$12 and \$10," with a lower-than-usual price scale in the rest of the house.²⁸ And he used the 1965 tax law's repeal to sell tickets at different prices depending on when audiences bought them: if you bought tickets before opening night for any performance after the opening, you could do so at a significant discount—essentially, a pre-show sale. One month into the show's run, Prince was enthusiastic about these policies, which had boosted the show's advance sales despite a difficult preview period. Moreover, the policy had attracted an audience of "people who normally could not afford a Broadway musical."²⁹ But by July, *Superman* was closing and, as *Variety* predicted, "as goes 'Superman,' so goes flexible pricing."³⁰

Between Prince's failure and Broadway's general reluctance to try new things, prices continued to move only in fits and starts. By 2014, Broadway finally had adopted truly flexible pricing in the guise of computer-assisted "dynamic pricing," a practice learned from the airline industry. We shall return to dynamic pricing and its effects in a moment. But first, how did consumers and the rest of the industry manage fluctuations of supply and demand before the modern era?

Beyond the Box Office

There has long existed a secondary ticketing market, not directly affiliated with theaters, where brokers attempt to bring supply and demand—and thus prices—into closer alignment. Ticket agencies come in all shapes and sizes, from storefront businesses such as Tyson and Sullivan, McBride, and Leblang's, to questionable phone or online businesses run in neighboring New Jersey or Connecticut. In their most organized and legal form, agencies were central to Broadway's operation from the late nineteenth century up to the 1970s. In 1956 and 1961, a *Who's Where* guide to Broadway listed 32 and 31 ticket agencies, respectively, occupying storefronts throughout the theater district.³¹ Some agencies such as Tyson and Sullivan had outposts in local hotels. Their 1942 flyer named 26 hotels where one could take advantage of "a better theatre ticket service."³²

These firms had arrangements with treasurers across Broadway to purchase blocks of seats in advance of a show's opening. Those seats were to be purchased at face prices—though here is where ice might come into play, so as to secure the brokerage a better group of seats. The agency was permitted to sell those tickets to customers above the face price at an amount fixed by law: \$0.50 initially, then no limit between 1926 and 1940, \$0.75 by the war, \$1.50 in the 1960s, and eventually \$5 or 10% of the face price, before those caps were finally dropped in 2007. Some agencies tried adding other fees, such as delivery charges, but their legality was constantly questioned. Brokers were allowed to sell unsold blocks of seats back to the box office by an hour or so before curtain time—but only a fixed percentage of unsold seats. On an unpopular show, agencies simply had to take a bath on most of their pre-purchase. Furthermore, agencies wanting to get good seats from the treasurers needed to purchase reasonably sized blocks of tickets even for shows in which they saw little possibility for success, just to stay on a treasurer's good side. Occasionally, fights broke out between producers or theater owners and ticket agencies, as in 1949, when the Shuberts halved ticket allotments to Tyson and Sullivan.³³ The Shuberts were eager gain more control over their ticket stock and to exert leverage over the agencies, which, despite being good for the industry, operated to maximize their firm's success, not that of a production or venue. Ticket agencies seem to have been (and continue to be) challenging businesses, beset by complicated regulations, taking on large risks in their inventory, and hemmed in by the reputations of their least legally fastidious competitors.

Agencies nevertheless remained essential to the theater business' operation for years. This is evident in the estimates of the sheer scale of tickets that passed through agencies' hands. In 1918, *Variety* posited 1.2 million tickets went through agents each year.³⁴ Tyson's alone declared to courts in 1927 that it sold an average of 300,000 tickets annually over the previous five years.³⁵ A dozen years later, from September to April, accredited agencies sold over 800,000 tickets.³⁶ A 1958 *Variety* article pegged agencies as handling 50% of Broadway's annual gross.³⁷ William Goldman estimated in 1968 that 70% of orchestra seats for hits and 70% of all weekend seats are sold by agencies.³⁸ And a 1972 report noted that agencies handle between 35 and 40 percent of all Broadway tickets.³⁹ By the late 1990s, though, agencies had been supplanted by alternate venues, accounting for less than 6% of sales in 1998, and around 2% by 2018.⁴⁰

Why were agencies so important? Above all, agencies convert ticket selling into a "retail" operation. To a broker, Broadway really is a unified industry; the goal is simply to sell a ticket. To facilitate such sales, brokers would distribute free weekly flyers, not unlike newspaper listings, with venue, show, and curtain time information. At least one organization, Joe Leblang's Public Service Ticket Office, offered discount cards for an annual fee. Holders could purchase tickets for any show at a flat discount rate of 50% throughout the season.⁴¹ As theatrical lawyer John Wharton summarized, the agent's office is "the only place where salesman *want to sell* tickets to *some play*, not just one."⁴² Brokers lift Broadway as a whole not because they hoard tickets for sell-out shows and deliver them at marked up prices (which they do), but because they redirect buyers from one scarce (or perhaps too expensive product) to another, comparable product.

And yet the overcharges and illicit payments to treasurers cast a pall over ticket brokerage that was hard to shake off. All of that extra money went not to productions but to these middlemen. No comprehensive evidence exists about the historical markup for

the most valuable tickets. Thomas Gale Moore found markups between 200 and 250% in his 1962 Broadway audience survey.⁴³ Goldman reports hearing of eight tickets for a Saturday evening performance of Neil Simon's hit *Plaza Suite* (1968), face price of \$8, that sold for \$70 each: a 775% markup.⁴⁴ That's comparable to some markups reported on the black market on today's top prices. And although premium prices come closer to prices on the secondary market, there is still a markup: in 2019, some *Hamilton* resale tickets were posted for \$2,500, almost 200% of the show's premium pricing.⁴⁵ Someone, somewhere can find a way to make money from hard-to-get tickets. As Eustis observes, in a refrain common to all discussions of Broadway ticket sales practices, "There always was, and it is safe to say there always will be, ticket speculation in some form or other."⁴⁶

These illegal prices and other unsavory practices earned brokers constant scrutiny.⁴⁷ At intervals throughout the past century, government (most often the Attorney General of New York) has intervened to crack down on particularly nefarious speculators, and to pass laws attempting to limit resale income and otherwise control the market. In 1927, New York state held hearings and passed strict laws. In the late 1930s, under threat of more legislation, the League and Equity banded together to force agencies to abide by a self-enforced code. More investigations followed in the 1940s, then in the 1960s, both led by New York's Attorney General Louis Lefkowitz. Each investigation inspired by much handwringing and statements of shock worthy of Claude Rains in *Casablanca*. Each resulted in somber new declarations about cleaning up the business and new constraints—licensing regulations, bonds, fingerprinting of employees, record-keeping requirements—all of which worked for a few months or years until the market found a way again.⁴⁸

Not all out-of-box office brokerage was tainted by illegality, however. From the 1894 to the early 1940s, some brokers, led notably by Joe Leblang, specialized in "cut-rate" tickets. Leblang purchased tickets from the box office or other brokers at highly discounted prices, selling them at slightly less good discounts to customers and pocketing the difference. He helped keep numerous shows afloat by selling seats below face prices, often in direct coordination with a production. By selling cut-rates from Leblang's offices rather than at the box office, productions were able to maintain the illusion that they had not dropped prices—even though, in selling to Leblang, they had.⁴⁹

A similar in-house cut-rate market existed in the form of "twofers" (two-for-one). These were special tickets, distributed as coupons made by the Arcus-Simplex Ticket Company, redeemable at the box office before curtain time. Twofers were often given to organizations such as "unions, fraternal organizations, factories and churches," as well as small businesses.⁵⁰ While coupon-holding patrons—who ended up paying slightly over half price, given tax rules—might discourage regular-price audiences, industry norms seem to have accepted twofers as a reasonable way to boost income for lagging shows.

The other type of brokerage is the theater party. These businesses, typically run by women, sold group tickets for charitable organizations as part of a fundraiser. A 1970 *Variety* article claimed the practice originated in Yiddish theaters on the Lower East Side.⁵¹ In pre-war form on Broadway, they were a type of cut-rate business; the Shuberts even ran a party bureau in-house. During the war, the business model shifted to a process like this: The charity buys a block of tickets at the face price before the show opens, thus pushing up a show's advance sales. The charity then sells the tickets at a higher rate as a fundraiser, keeping the difference as donations. The theatre-party lady takes a percentage of the gross

from that sale from the producer. By 1948, an Association of Theatre Benefit Agencies was founded with 14 members, led by Ivy Larric. *Who's Where* guides to Broadway from 1956, 1961, and 1974 list 18, 32, and 33 businesses, respectively, offering theater party services.⁵² Theater parties claimed particular utility in building up a show's advance sales (tickets sold prior to opening)—you wouldn't want to sell blocks of valuable tickets at the box-office price once you had a hit on your hands.⁵³ Yet some productions railed against the practice for limiting the seating available to regular audiences and, according to word on the street, producing notably dreary audiences.⁵⁴

Theater parties and twofers blossomed particularly from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s. At times, theater parties were involved in nearly twenty percent of a season's playing weeks—i.e., the sum of all weeks of performances by all productions—and almost fifty percent of playing weeks included twofers (Figure 4).

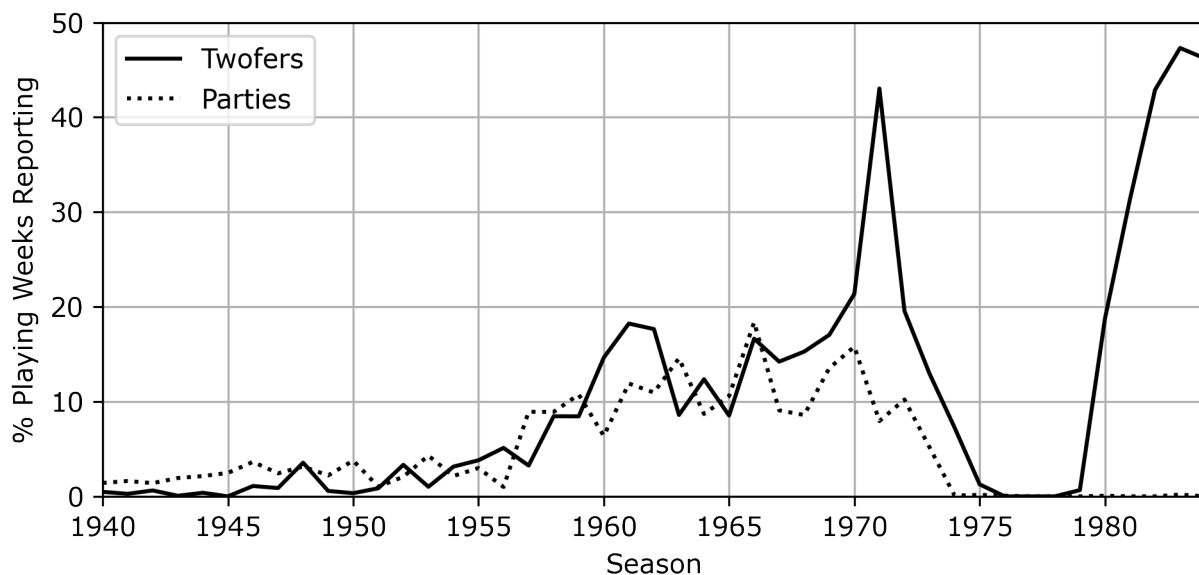


Figure 4: Percent of Playing Weeks Reporting Theater Parties or Twofers by Season

It is unclear whether these practices truly collapsed in the late 1970s or whether *Variety's* reporting on the practices simply ceased for a time. Twofers at least appear to have grown in popularity again in the 1980s and—although data are unclear on this point—continued into the 1990s.⁵⁵ Group sales of any kind have since waned as a percentage of overall sales, from a high of 13.4% in 2000 to only 2.5% in 2018.⁵⁶

The multiple ticket-selling businesses outside the box office proper were thus essential because they served as retail agents in an industry without its own retail venues. This inevitably created tensions between agencies and producers over who actually should control the ticket supply. By giving tickets to agents (or theater parties or as cut-rates), producers off-loaded some risk and often increased their audience size. Yet such bulk distributions diminished the number of tickets sold at face price, lost some income in transaction fees, and producers lost control of their audience. Today, although in-person brokerages continue to exist, their comparative advantage consists usually of package deals (dinner

and a show). Online resale vendors such as StubHub create a secondary market for ticket exchanges.⁵⁷ Speculators still exist. They must acquire tickets through bribes or “diggers,” who buy blocks of valuable seats legally the moment they go on sale, or through clever computer programs. Those seats are then offered at massive premiums if the show is a hit. The legitimate agencies—constantly dogged by legal interrogation—mostly fell by the wayside with the advent of more formal, producer-controlled resale channels and with changes in ticketing technology in the 1960s and 1970s.

Ticketing Revolutions and their Aftermaths

Theaters and producers regained control of ticketing and provided a better retail experience for customers through a number of innovations. The first was a centralized discount location. The TKTS booth, as it is known today, has been run by the Theatre Development Fund, a non-profit, since 1973.⁵⁸ Producers choose to allocate seats to the booth at discounts (originally only 50%, but now more variable). Anything unsold is returned to the theater. The modern booth has become a visual fixture in Times Square, particularly since a 2008 renovation, and sells around 10–15% of Broadway tickets each season. Producers have a love–hate relationship with TKTS: it can keep a show afloat, but also means direct competition with your rivals.⁵⁹ The booth’s boon to Broadway seems clear: in their first eight years of operation, they sold 8.3 million tickets for \$51.8 million net to theaters.⁶⁰ And early studies of purchasers confirmed that most were shopping last-minute and would not have paid full price.⁶¹ The discount booth was working.

While TKTS represents the institutionalization of cut-rate tickets, there were other attempts to centralize ticket selling by the theater owners and producers themselves. The Shubert Organization, for instance, opened outlets at Macy’s department stores, where customers could buy a seat to any show in a Shubert venue and receive a coupon redeemable at the box office later.⁶² This made retail shopping possible at the Shubert’s own hands. (Only in 1998 did the Broadway League establish a retail store for all full-priced tickets, the Broadway Ticket Center.⁶³) By 1971, computerized ticketing had advanced enough that the Shuberts engaged Ticketron—then the leading computerized ticket seller—to run its Macy’s locations. Until 1983, computer ticket vendors were like brokers, allocated a batch of seats to sell.⁶⁴ As technology improved, the Shuberts and Nederlanders set up their own fully computerized ticketing operations, which could interact with Ticketron (which the Shuberts eventually acquired and subsumed into their phone order system, Telecharge) or TicketMaster.

Internet purchasing has enabled a truly new era in ticket sales and pricing. Box offices have run long-distance sales in some form or another for a long time, most notably mail purchases. Mail-in ticket requests, though, depend on the ticket price stability common through the 2000s. Only with stable prices could an audience member calculate the cost of their seats by indicating a price point and dates one wished to attend. Mailed-in cash from the customer was sufficient to cover costs because costs were predictable. The rise of telephone purchases and the use of credit cards opened up an initial opportunity for more price fluidity. And customers liked it: in a 1980 survey, over 70% of audience members noticed the rise of credit card and phone transactions, and around 40% told interviewers that it helped them go to Broadway more often.⁶⁵ The same respondents indicated that

19% of purchases were made by phone and 37% by credit card at the box office.⁶⁶ But the internet took all of this flexibility to a new level.

Online, customers can view the full inventory of a company's seats for all shows and compare prices and dates. Reciprocally, ticket sellers themselves use the audience's shopping patterns to adjust prices. This practice, called dynamic pricing, adapts prices to match supply and demand as it ebbs and flows based on historical and predicted purchasing behavior. The strategy evolved from the modern business science of yield management—attempts to minimize empty seats—originally pioneered by the airline industry.⁶⁷ With dynamic pricing, shows adjust how much they charge not only by performance slot and seating area, but by time of year, day of the week, and even the general availability of seats for a particular performance.

New boom times resulted. In 2014, the *Times* reported on a surprisingly successful year for *The Lion King*, then completing its sixteenth season. While the show didn't have the highest prices on Broadway, they had generated the most income by constantly recalibrating prices with the help of an algorithm that accounted for historical "demand and ticket purchasing patterns."⁶⁸ Other shows had or would take up dynamic pricing—the Shubert Ticketing Blog touted the system's virtues in 2015—at least for some seats, though few as comprehensively as Disney.⁶⁹ The belated acceptance of week-by-week and show-by-show price flexibility marked the end of a century of ambivalence, anxiety, and legal controls that prevented Broadway from adapting ticket prices at the box office to meet supply and demand.

With the internet as a transformative technology and dynamic pricing offering Broadway a new method for setting prices, along with the TKTS booth as a retail storefront for discounts, Broadway overcame decades of reticence about allowing market forces to work more freely. While the upside of this market freedom is evident in eye-popping premium prices, the major beneficiaries have actually been the less popular shows. This becomes evident when looking at grosses, and how they have been distributed among shows.

Growing prices have led to tremendous growth, both nominal and real, in Broadway grosses overall (Figure 5).

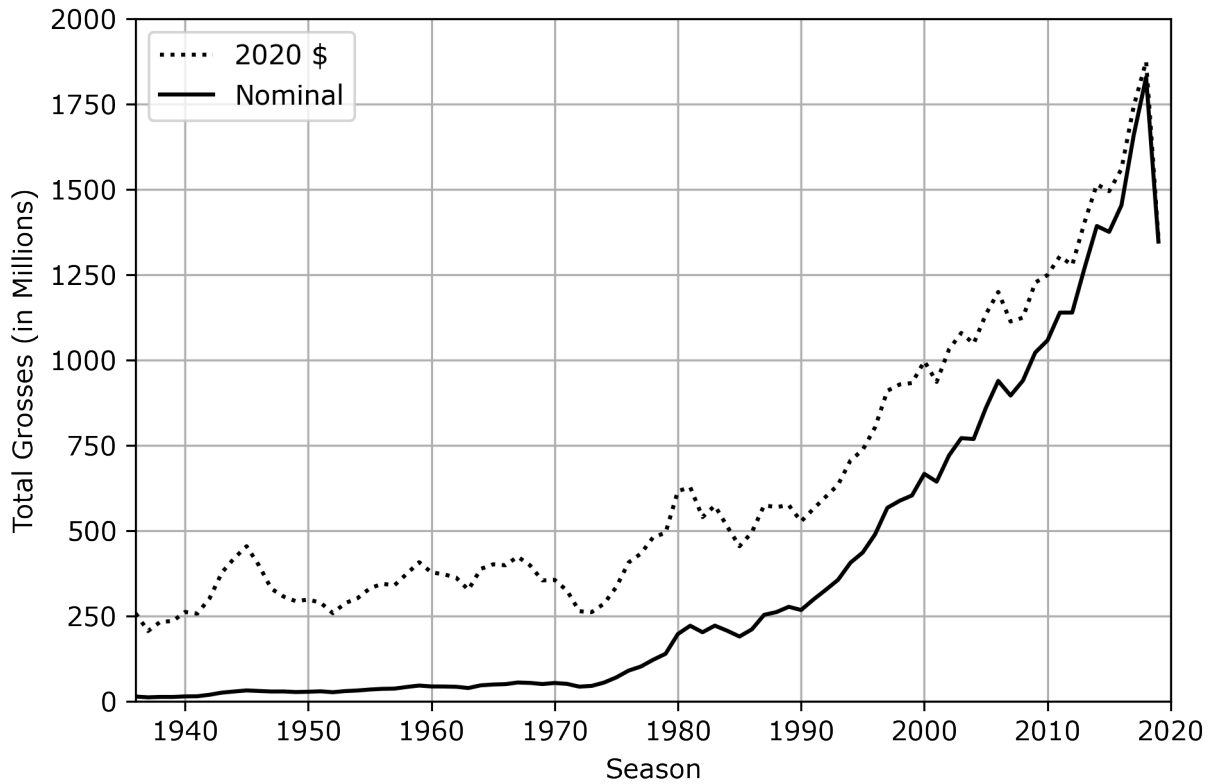


Figure 5: Total Grosses by Season

In the last full season (2018–19), Broadway grossed over \$1.8 billion. (The pandemic-shortened 2019–20 season’s lagging grosses register the economic effect of losing around a quarter of the season.) That’s a 700% increase (in real dollars) over the annual reported gross since 1936. Accounting for fluctuations in the number of playing weeks—that is, weeks available to earn income—highlights greater season-to-season variation, but does not change the trend (Figure 6).

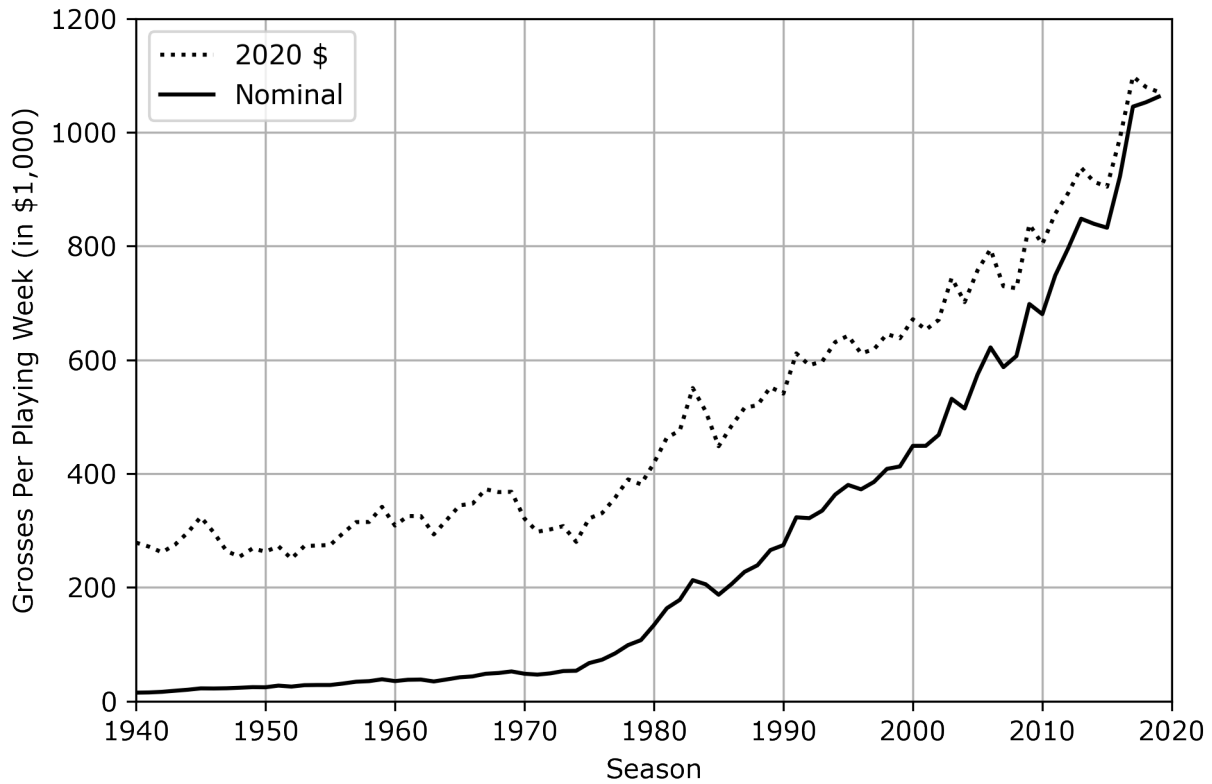


Figure 6: Total Grosses Per Playing Week by Season

Using a common measure of inequality, the Gini coefficient—used to track, say, the distribution of wealth in a national population—reveals that grosses have become more equally distributed than they were historically, at least among plays and musicals as distinct groups (Figure 7).

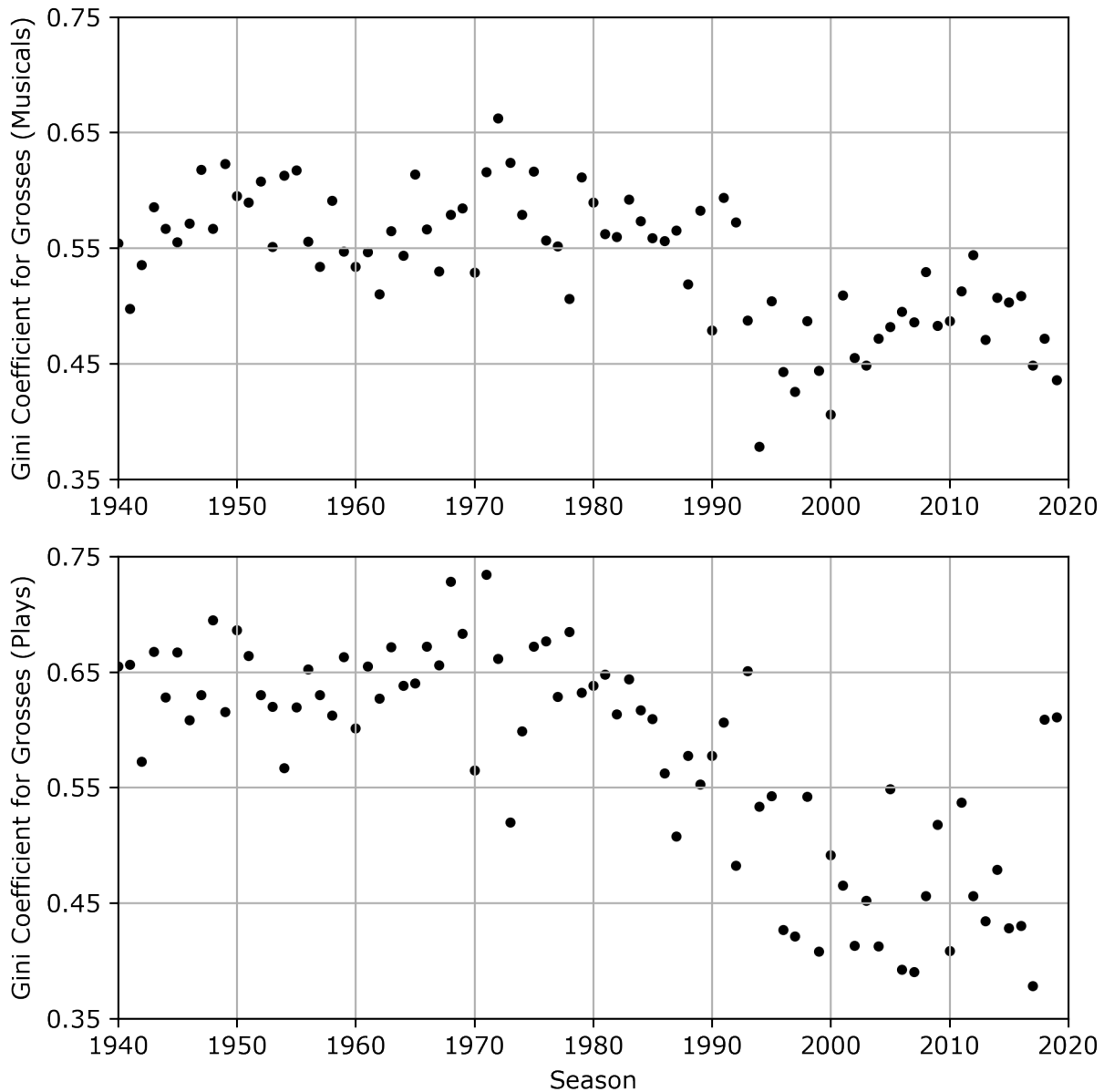


Figure 7: Inequality of Grosses by Season (Gini Coefficient)

Seasonally, the Gini coefficient for grosses among shows in the same genre used to be .55–.65 for musicals and .55–.7 for plays. Now, musicals and plays range from .35–.55. All of this means simply that there is less inequality in earnings across productions, when divided by genre. Less successful productions are less unsuccessful, compared to the most successful shows, than they used to be.

Premium pricing seems to be doing the heavy lifting here: while average prices have risen, the ratio of the top or premium price to the average price has increased significantly, too (Figure 8).

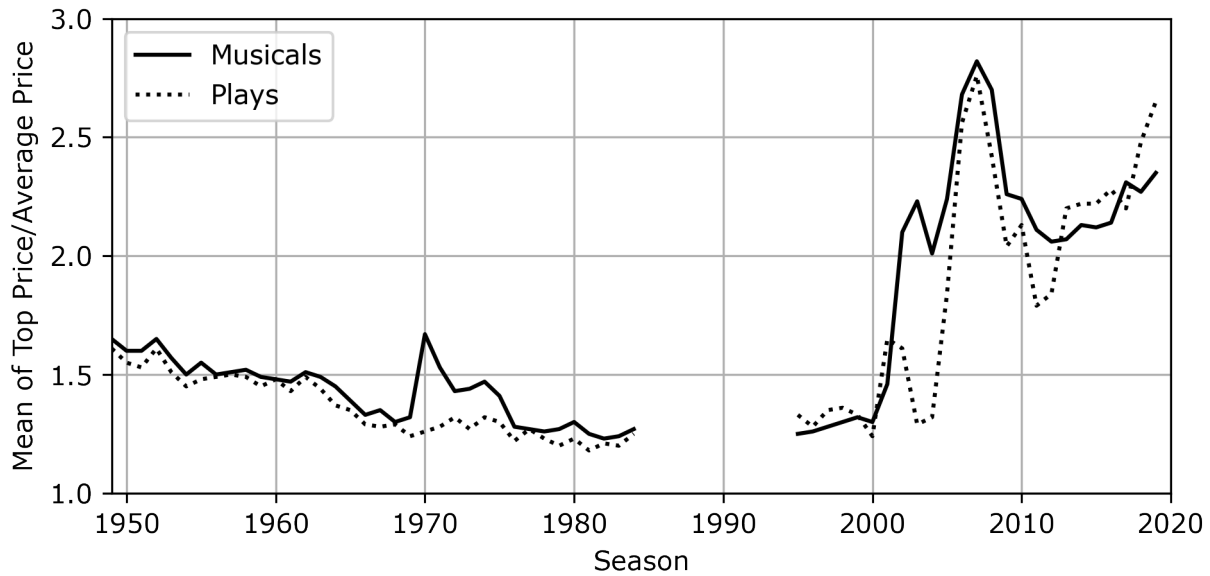


Figure 8: Average Ratio of Top to Average Price by Season

With the advent of premiums as a new top, the highest prices grew in the 2000s to well over double the average price, when historically the ratio was closer to 1.5 or even 1.25. The result has been a clear lift-all-boats effect, with poorer shows earning more even as the best-selling shows hit unfathomable new highs.

One question lingers in all of this celebration of Broadway’s increased—and more widely distributed—wealth: how do audiences afford it? The short answer is: Broadway audiences are wealthy. Estimates of incomes for Broadway audiences are necessarily rough, particularly due to data-collection differences over time.⁷⁰ Even with these caveats, median audience incomes for selected years since 1959 to the nearest hundred dollars show clearly that Broadway audiences are consistently wealthy relative to US household income (Table 2).⁷¹

Table 2: Median Audience Household Incomes for Selected Years

Season	Income (Nominal \$)	Income (2018 \$)	% of US Income
1959	\$9,650	\$83,300	179%
1964	\$16,700	\$135,300	253%
1990	\$71,000	\$136,400	237%
2000	\$88,400	\$128,800	211%
2005	\$113,500	\$145,900	245%
2010	\$124,900	\$143,800	253%
2015	\$124,600	\$132,000	234%
2018	\$133,700	\$133,700	212%

The 1964 median income of \$135,300, adjusted for inflation, is roughly the same as that reported since 1990, fluctuating only by 7% up and down over the reported period.

When factoring in data uncertainty and year-to-year variability, the Broadway audience's median income has remained remarkably consistent over time, with 1959 as the sole, comparatively low exception. Given the relative paucity of information from that period, and what seems to be a large jump in median income by 1964, I hesitate to assert that Broadway audience income increased significantly from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s—though that is possible. More confidently, we can say that, since the mid-1960s, the median Broadway audience member's household has been more than twice as well-off financially as the median US household.

Yet even that data does not capture the extremity of audience wealth. In 2000, the League recorded an average household audience income—as distinguished from the median income—of \$93,000 (\$138,700 in 2018 dollars).⁷² For the 2018–19 season, the average household audience income nearly doubled to \$261,200. On the one hand, incomes of that size make possible the spiking ticket prices seen since the 1990s. Without such incomes, some corners of Broadway could never have grown so expensive. On the other hand, such eye-popping numbers simply reflect changes in US wealth distribution during the past two decades. As wealth in the United States and particularly in New York City has concentrated in a small class of the hyper-wealthy, it was inevitable that the Broadway audience's average income would increase significantly. Broadway audiences on the whole are, and have long been, much richer than the US population. But the huge leaps in the audience's average income likely reflect general social and economic trends more than a real shift among audiences towards the proverbial one percent.

And yet, for all the audience's wealth and high ticket prices, Broadway shows can still be seen for surprisingly little money. While producers have reaped the benefits of contemporary ticketing systems, so, too have consumers. It is far easier to shop for a production online than to manage an uncertain world of box offices and brokers, both tainted by hints of illegality. Yes, prices are higher than they were historically—but ticketing methods and Broadway's general reluctance to let prices respond to supply and demand conspired to keep them artificially low, even through bad periods for the industry. And the growth in prices, while extreme at the top, has actually decreased income inequalities among productions.

This lower inequality is the result of better management of ticket stock and pricing, meaning that more high-priced tickets can also keep lower prices low. As a consequence, seats at less popular shows can still be had for remarkably low prices. Let me be clear: the top prices are extremely high for the most desirable shows. But better price management, rather than across-the-board price increases has improved the situation for the less successful shows. The cheapest top price today is only 20–30% of the most expensive top prices.

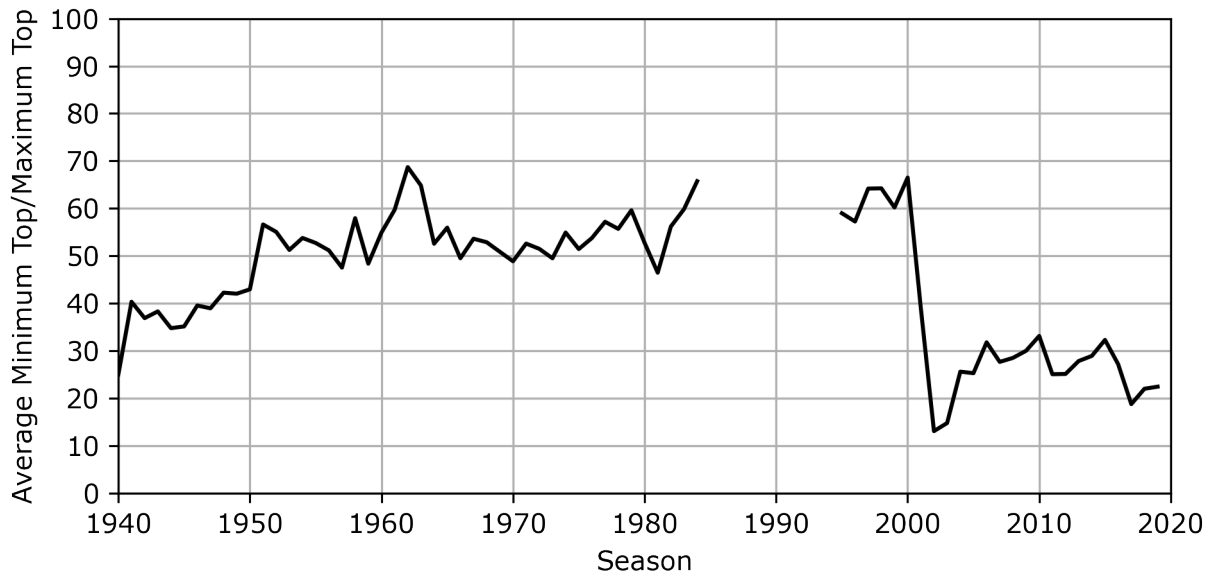


Figure 9: Average Minimum Top as Percent of Maximum Top by Season

For much of Broadway history, even the cheapest shows had top prices that hewed more closely to the prices for the most expensive productions. Some of the perceived inflation of the 1970s and 1980s may have been due to rising top prices for the least desirable shows, as the the cheapest tops moved from 50% of the highest tops in the late 1960s to 60% and more in the 1980s. In other words, the least desirable shows have not raised their tops or premiums to keep pace with the most successful productions.

At the top of the demand curve, for an audience member with deep pockets, Broadway will ask shocking amounts: well over \$800 for a musical and around \$500 for a play (Figure 10).

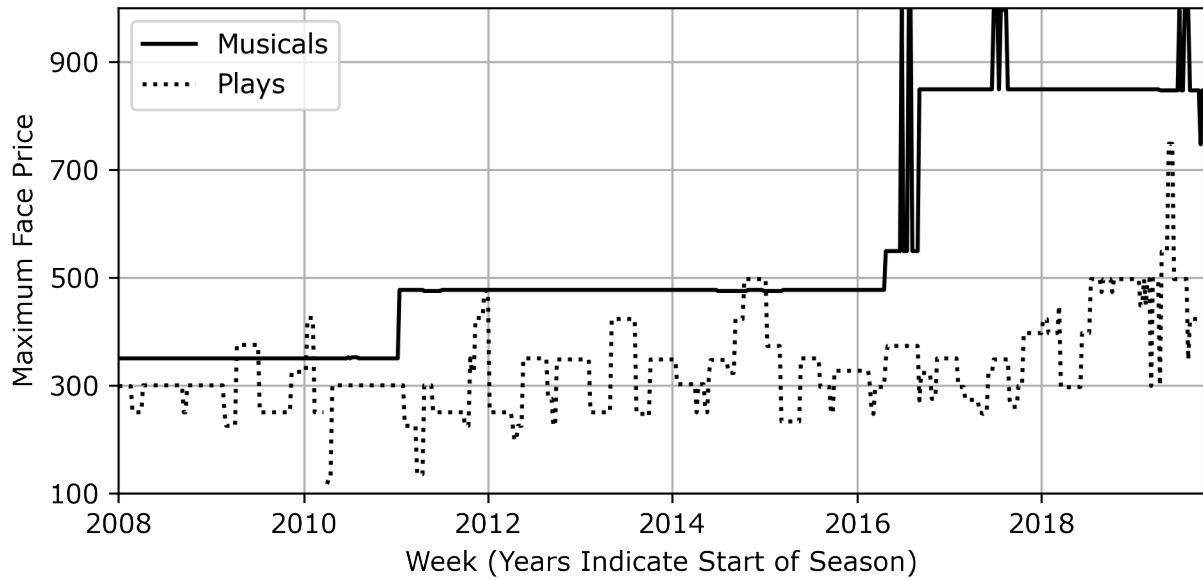


Figure 10: Maximum Face Prices by Week

Maximum musical tops or premiums, as noted earlier, have doubled in the past decade. Premium play pricing has not kept pace, but remains very, very high.

At the bottom of the demand curve, the lowest advertised ticket prices remain surprisingly low. Broadway is still cheap for some seats at some shows (Figure 11).⁷³

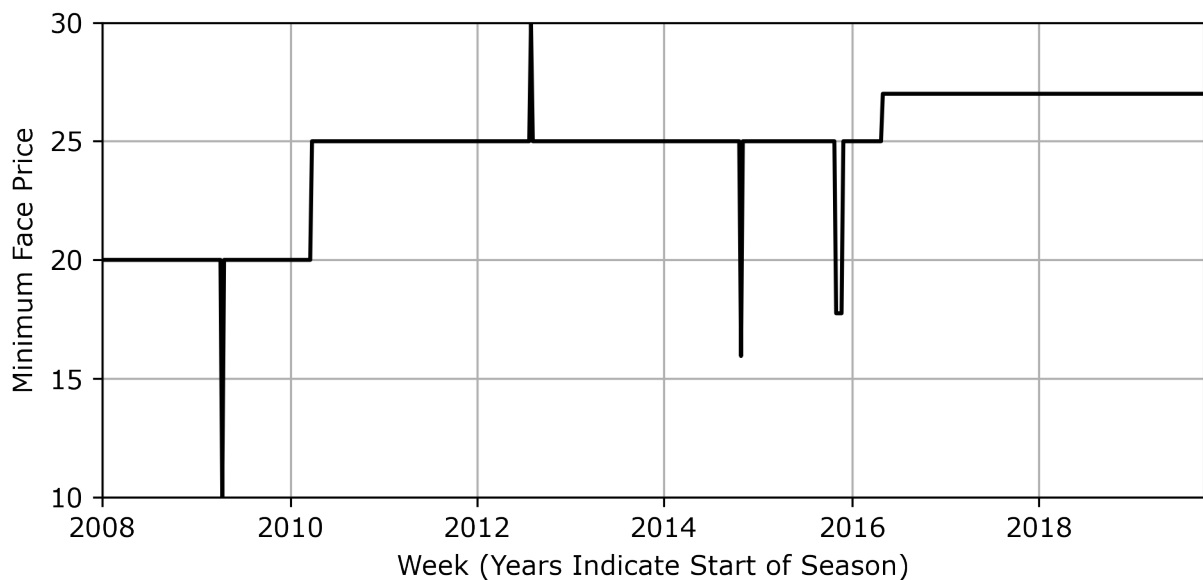


Figure 11: Minimum Face Prices by Week (Musicals)

Indeed, every week since the start of the 2008 season, Broadway has offered at face value tickets to a musical for less than \$30. Thus for roughly comparable products, Broadway offers prices from \$30 to nearly 30 times that much. Eight-hundred dollars for one seat

may seem shamefully high. But some seats on Broadway are still available for remarkably little—at least, if you don’t mind what show you see and from where you see it (Table 3).

Table 3: Comparing High and Low Ticket Prices (2020 \$)

Year	Musical	Play
1926 (Avg. Top)	\$67.23	\$51.80
2020 (Avg. Bottom)	\$74.14	\$53.98

In 1926, top face prices, on average, were \$67.23 for a musical and \$51.80 for a play, in 2020 dollars. That is the average price across all shows for the best possible seats in the house. Ninety-four years later, the cheapest face price, averaged across all shows, was \$74.14 and \$53.98. Those are bad seats at those prices in 2020; you sit much prettier at that rate in 1926. But you can see the average Broadway show today at prices only 10% and 4% higher than almost a century ago.

Thus, for all the changes in rules around ticketing and the massive shift in prices that has resulted, Broadway is simultaneously wealthier and, in some ways, just as accessible as it used to be. The upshot of most changes has been increasing transparency in some pricing, and the reduction of some of the more unsavory aspects of the ticket market. Mr. Brown need no longer spend a day wandering haplessly around Times Square, fielding outrageous offers, and find himself shockingly gouged with no obvious better solution. Broadway ticketing is far from perfect, and prices are, for the most popular shows, shockingly high. The anger and shame that attends such high costs has not entirely dissipated: news of *Hamilton’s* \$849 premiums spurred *The New York Times* to publish a summary of some reader responses, including “Greed. Greed. Greed. Period.” and criticism of the price as “unrealistic,” “obscene,” and “the beginning of the end of Broadway.”⁷⁴ Yet as other readers acknowledged, *Hamilton’s* premium, like prices overall, are better aligned with demand and accrue more directly to productions themselves than throughout most of Broadway history. Broadway moves money more efficiently from the audience to the producer because it has changed, in tandem, the way tickets are priced and sold.

Notes

¹Robin Pogrebin and Jesse McKinley, "Mixed Notices for the \$480 Ticket," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2001.

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³Morton Eustis, *Broadway, Inc.!: The Theatre as a Business* (Dodd, Mead, 1934), pp. 113–116.

⁴This schema appears in William J. Baumol et al., *Study of the New York Theater*, Vol. 2 (New York City Cultural Council, 1972), pp. 41–4.

⁵For a detailed breakdown of modern box office operations, see Mitch Weiss and Peri Gaffney, *The Business of Broadway: An Insider's Guide to Working, Producing, and Investing in the World's Greatest Theatre Community* (Allworth Press, 2015), Chapter 13.

⁶See, particularly, Eustis, *Broadway, Inc.!*; John F. Wharton, "A Fresh Look at Theatre Tickets," (Legitimate Theatre Industry Exploratory Commission, ca. 1965); and William Goldman, *The Season* (Limelight, 1984).

⁷Whether some cut of that money goes back to theater owners has been a point of contention in the semi-regular probes attempting to crack down on the practice. See *Variety*, verbatim testimony of ticket hearings, July 20 to August 10, 1927.

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⁹David M. Conte and Stephen Langley, *Theatre Management: Producing and Managing the Performing Arts* (Entertainment Pro, 2007), p. 274.

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¹⁶Baumol, *Study of the New York Theater*, p. 29.

¹⁷"'Hair' Drops \$50 Top Ticket Plan," *Variety*, August 28, 1968.

¹⁸The shorter time series for these figures is due to lack of available information in earlier periods.

¹⁹Phillip J. Leslie, "Essays in Applied Microeconomic Analysis," Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1999, p. 64.

²⁰"B'way's Top Week of Late Winter," *Variety*, March 3, 1948.

²¹"'Dolly' and 'Girl' Hike Prices to Nightly \$9.90 Top," *Variety*, June 2, 1965.

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²⁵Michael Paulson, "'Hamilton' Raises Ticket Prices: The Best Seats Will Now Cost \$849," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2016.

²⁶Treasury Department, United States Internal Revenue, REegulations 43 (Rev.), Part 1, Relating to the Tax on Admissions Under the Revenue Act of 1918 (Government Printing Office, 1919).

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- ³⁴Kerry Segrave, *Ticket Scalping: An American History, 1850–2005* (McFarland, 2007), p. 107.
- ³⁵Tyson v. Banton, Bill of Complaint, August 7, 1925, District Court, Southern District of New York.
- ³⁶"Statistics of Theater Ticket Code Operation," *Billboard*, August 5, 1939.
- ³⁷Hobe Morrison, "'Party' Sales Harass N.Y. Brokers," *Variety*, January 8, 1958.
- ³⁸Goldman, *The Season*, p. 342.
- ³⁹Baumol, *Study of the New York Theater*, p. 42.
- ⁴⁰Karen Hauser, *Who Goes to Broadway? The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2002–2003* (The League of American Theatres and Producers, 2003), pp. 34–5; Karen Hauser, *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2018–19* (The Broadway League, 2019), pp. 34–5.
- ⁴¹Public Service Ticket Office, Theatre Ticket Discount Card, 1918 and 1927, Author's Collection.
- ⁴²Wharton, "A Fresh Look," p. 12.
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- ⁴⁴Goldman, *The Season*, p. 342.
- ⁴⁵Charles Passy, "A 'Hamilton' Ticket for \$849? Experts Call That a Bargain," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2019.
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- ⁴⁸For a recent assessment of how such regulations fall short, see United States Government Accountability Office, "Event Ticket Sales: Market Characteristics and Consumer Protection Issues," GAO-18-347, April, 2018.
- ⁴⁹Jerry D. Eisenhour, *Joe Leblang's Cut-Rate Ticket Empire and the Broadway Theatre, 1894–1931* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2003).
- ⁵⁰Gaver, *Curtain Call*, p. 290.
- ⁵¹Harry Golden, "Yiddish Theatre 'Benefit' Spawned Today's Broadway Legit Party Biz," *Variety*, January 7, 1970.
- ⁵²Shull, *Who's Where*.
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- ⁵⁴Gaver, *Curtain Call*, pp. 271–82.
- ⁵⁵My data sources shift from *Variety* to the Broadway League in the 1985–6 season; the Broadway League did not report on twofers or parties.
- ⁵⁶Hauser, *Who Goes to Broadway?* (2003), pp. 34–5; Hauser, *Demographics of the Broadway Audience* (2019), pp. 34–5.
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- ⁵⁸On the early years of TKTS, see Vicki Ann Sherman, "An Analysis of Reduced Price Ticket Centers," M.A. Thesis, American University, 1983.
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- ⁶⁴Dean Budnick and Josh Baron, *Ticket Masters: The Rise of the Concert Industry and How the Public Got Scalped* (Plume, 2012), p. 81.
- ⁶⁵The League of New York Theatres and Producers, "A Study of the New York Audience for the Broadway Theatre", 1980, p. 28.
- ⁶⁶League, "Study of the New York Audience," p. 73.
- ⁶⁷Donahue and Patterson, *Stage Money*, p. 81.
- ⁶⁸Patrick Healy, "Ticket Pricing Puts 'Lion King' Atop Broadway's Circle of Life," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2014.

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⁷⁰Data challenges presented by income include both different reported income ranges (e.g., \$5,000–\$16,500 vs. \$25,000–50,000) and inflation. All of the studies conducted between 1959 and 1964 (by *Playbill*, by William J. Baumol and William Bowen, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* (The MIT Press, 1968), who also cite the *Playbill* studies, and by Moore, *The Economics of the American Theatre*) report median household incomes ranging from \$9,650 to \$16,700 (roughly \$83,300 to \$135,300 in 2018 dollars), a significant spread. Broadway League surveys from 1990 onward all report the percentage of the audience in certain income ranges. One can interpolate a midpoint by finding the range within which you hit 50% of the audience and, assuming that range is evenly distributed, calculate the break point.

⁷¹Median US household incomes are reported by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

⁷²Hauser, *Who Goes to Broadway?*, p. 6.

⁷³The press, in booster mode, occasionally reminds audiences of this fact. See, for instance, James B. Stewart, “Broadway Tickets, for the Price of an Economics Lesson,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2017.

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Chapter Six Show Times

As I write this in 2020, the theaters on Broadway are closed. They have been closed since March due to the coronavirus known as COVID-19, which swept the globe in the worst pandemic since the 1918 influenza. That pandemic closed theaters across the United States, including in large theatrical hubs such as Chicago, Boston, Buffalo, Washington, Providence.¹ Broadway, however, did not close in 1918. The city instead ruled that theaters must stagger their curtain times: in groups of between seven and twelve venues, performances were to begin at fifteen-minute intervals from 8:15 to 9pm.² The health authorities' logic was clear: limit crowding as much as possible by distributing audiences in a semi-orderly fashion throughout the Theater District.

Start times on Broadway were, in fact, already staggered prior to this ruling, but not at all evenly; curtains rang up at tight intervals. Table 1 gives the distribution of start times the week prior to the pandemic rule announcement, as an example.

Table 1: Frequency of Curtain Times, September, 1918

Curtain Time	Number of Productions
8:00	2
8:10	1
8:15	5
8:20	16
8:25	1
8:30	11

These curtain times likely strike the modern reader as odd, if not downright perverse. What possible function could the most popular curtain time of 8:20pm serve? And why did seven shows start at times such as 8:10, 8:15, and 8:25?

Curtain times are a set of industry norms that evolve out of the complex interaction of multiple forces, including, in 1918, public health. They are also only one form of scheduling on Broadway, where temporal patterns—weekly performance schedules, running times, previews and opening nights, and the distribution of productions across a season—all have changed dramatically over the past century.

This chapter considers the many forms of time on Broadway and how and why those times have shifted. Moving from curtain times to seasons, from the micro to the macro, reveals a startlingly complex set of influences on Broadway's scheduling. Some primary drivers behind temporal change are the needs of a changing audience, theater criticism and awards, and production costs and labor rules. The weekly performance calendar, curtain times, and running times demonstrate Broadway's attempts to sell its product at the most propitious times of the week and day, as well as to negotiate with the most important labor unions. Preview periods and opening night developed in response both to the evolving influence of criticism and to increasingly high-cost and complex production designs. And the rhythms of production on Broadway generally, the industry's seasonality, has appeared in three distinctly different phases over the past century. The most recent

seasonal patterns represent in particular the triumph of the awards calendar, particularly the Tony Awards.

Exploring show times in all of these forms will reveal Broadway adapting so as to assuage these multiple forces. But Broadway struggled, too, simply with the weight of its accrued habits. As a 1972 study noted in its recommendation for more scheduling variety, “Many of the theater’s current performance schedules [...] are the product of tradition rather than careful deliberation.”³ Broadway’s use of time thus changes in fits and starts. The highly inertial industry morphs only reluctantly and eventually into radically different temporal practices.

The data undergirding this chapter come from a sample of advertised performance schedules, taken from one week of performances at five-year intervals since 1921, with 2020 added at the end.⁴ In 1921, 1931, 1941, etc., the shows tracked are those playing the first full week in March. In 1926, 1936, 1946, etc., the selection was taken from the second full week in November. Both are generally busy weeks in Broadway. Busy has meant very different things, however, over the past century. Figure 1 gives the percentage of shows from the first week in March, 1921 and March, 2020, that performed on a given day’s matinee or evening performances.

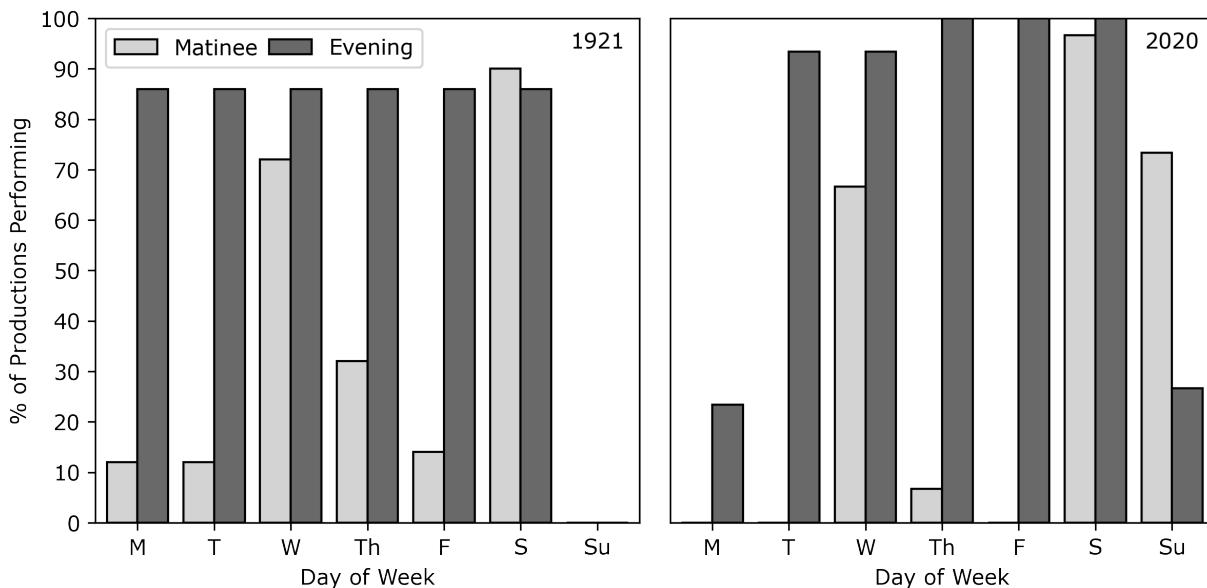


Figure 1: Percent of Shows Performing by Day of Week, 1921 and 2020

The schedules differ from each other in many ways. Most starkly, in 1921 no shows performed on Sunday; by 2021, 75% performed a Sunday matinee. From this one fact, this chapter unfolds how and why show times on Broadway have changed over the past century, and what those changes reveal about how Broadway works.

Performance Days and Times

Our exploration of time on Broadway begins at the most local level: the time of the show, the duration of the show, and the days of the week on which shows perform. On

the one hand, these times must have a certain regularity about them: obviously no Broadway show is going to perform at 4am on a Tuesday. But beyond such general parameters, Broadway performance schedules could vary drastically from show to show. The history of performance calendars teaches us that such variation is a relatively recent phenomenon; historically, performances followed a small set of norms. The primary forces acting on the performance calendar are audience composition (particularly audience geography and age) and union contracts, though changes in the Theater District itself have also played a role. Yet one of the most obvious changes in the performance calendar, the advent of Sunday performances, came about too because of changes in state and local law—in negotiation with God’s law.

As any good Christian soul knows, life upon the stage is wicked. Therefore theatrical performances are, historically, prohibited on the sabbath. New York State, like many other places across the United States, long forbade Sunday theatrical performances by law. Non-theatrical events such as baseball games and movie screenings were allowed, but no “legitimate” theater. By the late 1920s, other localities had relaxed their rules, permitting Sunday performances—not New York. Broadway continued to observe this prohibition almost absolutely: no shows reported Sunday performances in 1921, 1926, or 1931, and only one (a Yiddish Art Theatre production) in 1936.

Opposition to Sunday curtains came from two sides: religious groups (for obvious reasons) and unions. For unions, dark Sundays guaranteed genuine rest from the relentless six-day Broadway performance calendar. Sunday performances, unions feared, may have merely added more work with less time for rest and recuperation.

When the Depression hit, however, some unions were willing to experiment with Sunday performances if they could improve their devastated incomes. Stagehands’ and musicians’ unions moved in favor of sabbath curtains in 1932 and 1934, respectively.⁵ Actors Equity, however, remained firmly opposed to any change in current policy, despite some stirrings of openness in 1929.⁶ Even the state got ahead of the actors’ union. In 1935, New York granted cities the right to allow Sunday theater performances, but also guaranteed twenty-four consecutive hours of rest each week for theatrical employees. Equity now had the high card: the new law secured the protections the union had feared a Sunday performance-day would eliminate. (Stagehands disliked the guaranteed rest day—they needed more work for their members, and could easily shift out employees so that no one individual worked seven days.⁷) But the actors’ union hesitated simply to allow the new schedule—Sunday, after all, was still an unusual day for members to work. Moreover, the stagehands’ and musicians’ unions were guaranteed overtime pay rates on Sundays. Why should not actors ask the same? Equity proposed a trial year of Sunday shows at double pay, but producers insisted the costs would never work.⁸

Arguments continued through the 1930s until, finally, in November, 1940, stagehands and musicians agreed to waive their Sunday overtime rates and Equity accepted Sundays at regular pay. After more than a decade of on-again/off-again negotiation, Broadway was ready for regular Sunday performances. But the seeds of discontent among the unions resprouted over the following decades. Old habits died hard and Sunday performances took time to become a feature of the Broadway schedule.

Let us take a step back and imagine a world with minimal performance scheduling norms. Modern theaters generally raise their curtains at two performance times: the mati-

nee in the early afternoon, and the evening performance. In theory, a production could stage a matinee and an evening performance on any given day of the week. But in practice shows observe a set of norms, such as the Wednesday matinee. Figure 2 provides performance calendars from 1921 through 1961, again expressed as the percentage of productions with performances scheduled for a given matinee or evening show, as in the Figure 1, above.

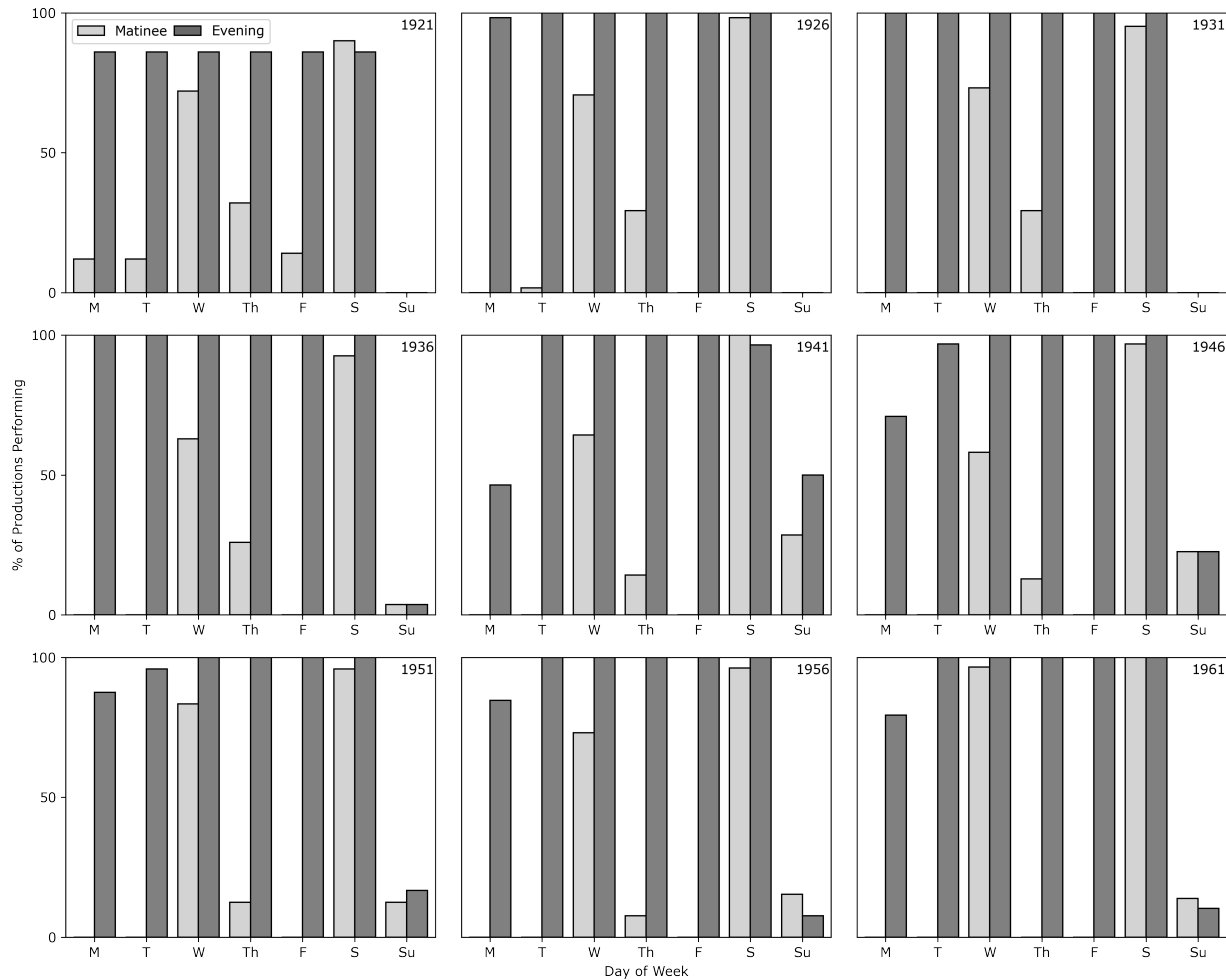


Figure 2: Percent of Shows Performing by Day of Week, 1921–1961 (Sampled)

In the 1920s and 1930s, almost all shows performed evenings, Monday through Saturday, inclusive. Matinees were chaotic in 1921, but had settled by 1926 into a predictable Wednesday or Thursday plus Saturday rhythm. Broadway had a very predictable performance schedule.

By March of 1941, Sunday performances were legal and union-approved. The 1941 performance calendar finds producers experimenting with the new performance day for either matinee or evening performances, and Monday evening and Thursday matinees dropping off as compensation. That same month, the League of New York Theatres—the theater owners’ and producers’ organization, known today as the Broadway League—published an analysis of the new Sunday performances in the *New York Times*. They claimed

Sunday shows successfully developed new audiences (“the businessman whose only free night is Sunday”) and distributed competition among shows that now had a choice between a Monday or a Sunday performance.⁹

And yet, despite the league’s boosterism, Sunday performances did not last. Each subsequent five-year interval shows fewer Sunday performances. By 1951, productions returned to the old, uniform Monday–Saturday schedule, with Wednesday and Saturday matinees and ever-rarer Thursday exceptions through the decade. Only four of the twenty-three shows in 1951 performed at all on Sunday (though three offered both a Sunday matinee and evening show).

The cause? Again, the unions. Speaking to *Playbill*, industry veteran Steven Suskind recalled that “Sunday labor costs were higher, especially stagehands, music and box office.”¹⁰ Sometime in the 1950s—available records are unclear on precisely when the crucial contracts were signed—unions won again the right to overtime pay for work on Sundays, making that day significantly more expensive. Thus, the relatively short-lived experiment with Sundays.

Despite higher costs, producers pushed ahead with Sundays again; Sunday performances had resurfaced by 1966, and increased further by 1971. Union costs came down later that decade in revised contracts with the musicians’ and stagehands’ unions.¹¹ Then, once Sunday costs had decreased, the two Sunday performance slots grew in popularity significantly and are today all but standard (Figure 3).

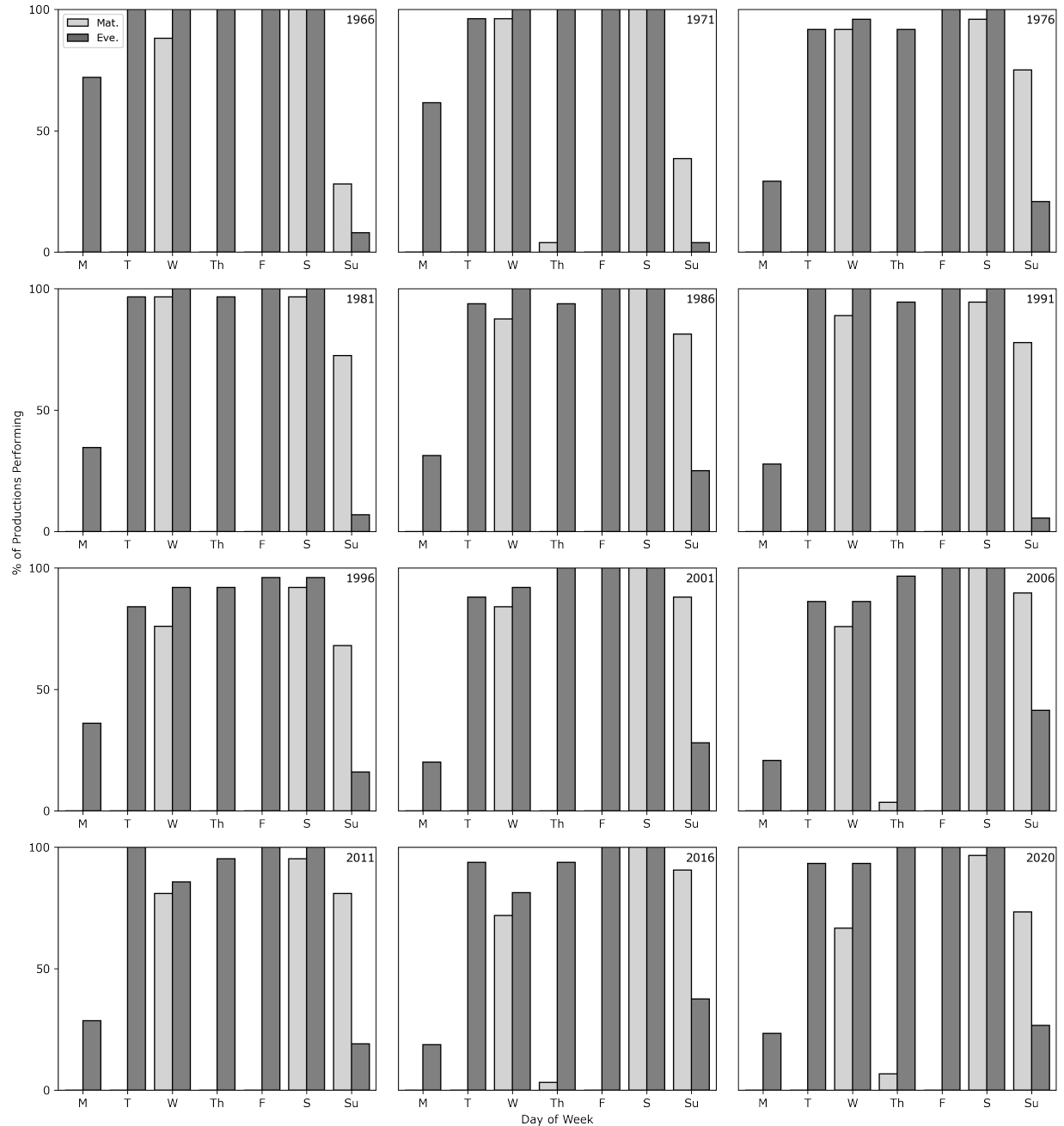


Figure 3: Percent of Shows Performing by Day of Week, 1965–2020 (Sampled)

Sunday performances went from illegal to permitted but unprofitable, and then slowly became a regular feature of the Broadway calendar. The Sunday performance thus emerged initially out of more than a decade of vocal debate among religious groups, producers, and unions. It was quickly abandoned as unprofitable due to changing union rules. Only when new contracts brought costs down in the mid-1970s did Sunday performances claim a regular place in the Broadway calendar.

Why, despite the persistently higher union costs for Sundays in the late 1960s and early 1970s, did producers return to Sunday performances? Because Sunday curtains

were only one part of conscious experimentation with Broadway performance calendars throughout that decade. Most notably, in 1971 the League of New York Theaters' members acted in concert to move all shows to a 7:30pm curtain time. Just as a show's calendar, the days of the week and the general performance slot (evening or matinee), are theoretically flexible, so too are curtain times, the time on which the curtain rises and the performance begins. Yet in practice, just like the performance calendar, curtain times were historically very, very regular.

The innovation of the 7:30 curtain came with a clear rationale: Times Square and the Theater District had become unsafe and patrons wanted to be on their way home before the streets grew more dangerous late at night.¹² The 7:30 curtain time was part of Broadway's attempt to respond. Restaurants, however, feared the 7:30 curtain, concerned that "In order to have dinner before the theatre, patrons would have to eat between 5 and 6 PM."¹³ Slowing restaurant business soon confirmed their fears.¹⁴ By September of 1971, the New York Restaurant League was sitting down with theater owners and producers, pushing surveys that purported to demonstrate the public's dislike for a 7:30 start: "The prevailing sentiment among restaurant owners is strongly opposed to the advanced performance time," *Variety* reported, because it had "hurt the dinner business."¹⁵ Producers and theater owners, with some encouragement from recalcitrant producer David Merrick, heard the complaints, and within a year rumblings made clear that an 8pm curtain was all but certain.¹⁶ Yet, once again, calendar changes waited on union approval: stagehands agreed in 1973 to approve any curtain time on the half-hour between 7 and 9pm, as long as the show ended by 11:30.¹⁷ With this contractual flexibility, Broadway adopted a more flexible schedule, with 8pm as a new normal, but also with permission for producers to experiment with new ways to manage their audience in a changing Times Square.¹⁸

The League's regulation of curtain times in the 1970s were, however, a deviation from the norm. In the early part of the century, general wisdom held that musicals opened at 8:30 and plays at 8:40, though producers did not always observe this rule. Curtains went up instead whenever managers wished and start times remained confusingly staggered until the 1960s (Figure 4).

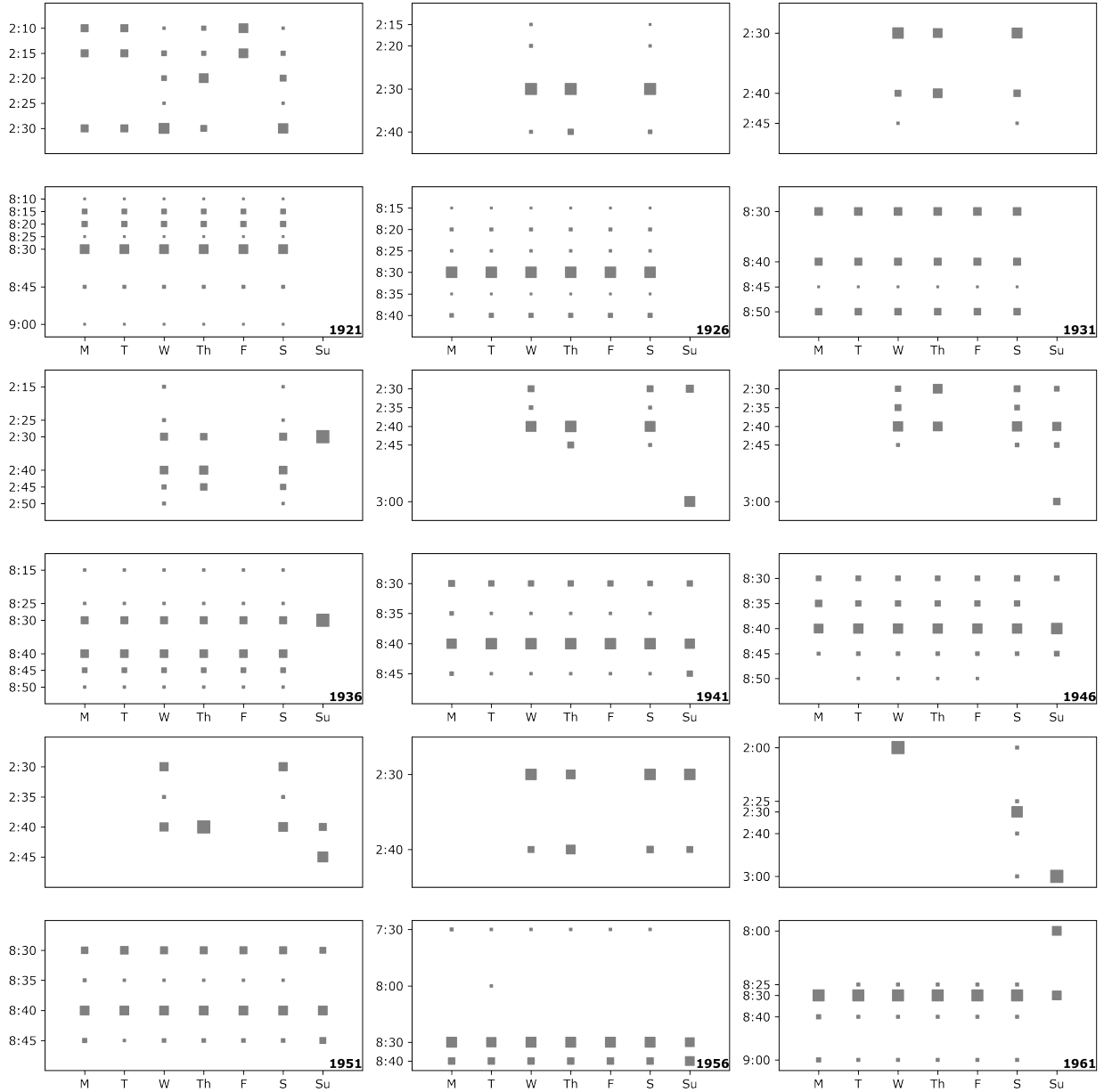


Figure 4: Curtain Times, 1921–1961

While most shows chose either 8:30 or 8:40, audiences could find multiple performances starting five or ten minutes earlier or later. (In Figure 4, the size of each box indicates the percentage of shows playing that week that run at that curtain time. The graphs are stacked such that each sample includes the matinee times [top] and evening times [bottom].) This process seems crazy to a modern audience member, all but ensuring confusion about when the curtain goes up. It seems more sensible, though, when we recognize that there existed a substantial volume of last-minute ticket purchases: if you couldn't get a ticket for the show you wanted at 8:30, you could see a different show at 8:40. The staggered start times make possible this walk-around, last-minute business.

No data exists to describe the relative volume of advanced-purchased and last-minute tickets in these decades. But in an era when every ticket was a physical item that the box office had to distribute to the customer, dealing in tickets was complex. As discussed in Chapter Five, ticket brokerages have long played a key role in mediating between individual box offices and audiences. A 1969 dissertation reported that “New York City’s sixty ticket agencies sell 70 per cent of all theatre tickets in New York City during a theatrical season. They sell not only most of the tickets, they sell, as well, the choicest seats.”¹⁹ For popular shows, only less desirable seats, if any, were available at a box office or through a mail request. Brokerages served productions by making tickets more widely available (physically) and served audiences by consolidating their options in one location. Yet whether relying on brokers or a box office, if a certain volume of business is last-minute and on foot, producers benefit by manipulating their curtain times to be slightly before or after their competitors’ times.

Oddly, despite the wide disparities in curtain times during this 30-year period, curtain time information could be hard to come by. Until 1945, curtain times did not regularly appear on tickets. (One must admire Noël Coward, who titled his 1936 collection of one-acts *Tonight at 8:30*, which was indeed the production’s curtain time. A modern revival might have to retitle the show.) A *Billboard*-lead campaign, according to that periodical, seems to have forced productions and brokers to take up the habit of explicitly noting curtain times.²⁰ Before then, you could ask your broker or the box office, or, as *Billboard* explained, you could grab a newspaper and search the advertisements.²¹ Yet a startling number of shows from before the 1940s advertise curtain times only in a cryptic shorthand, if at all—and many did not include curtain times in every day’s advertisement.

Hard as it is to imagine something as customer-unfriendly as not listing a curtain time on the ticket, curtain times grew both more standard and less clear in the next two decades. While curtain times themselves settled into clear patterns in the 1960s and 1970s, shows became less explicit about advertising curtain times (though by now they printed those times on tickets themselves). In March, 1961, 12 of 29 productions advertised no curtain times; 14 of 27 in 1966 and 11 of 26 in 1971 did not explicitly note a curtain time for two or more performance days. Broadway clearly expected its consumers to be “in the know” about curtain times. Indeed, such knowledge was the mark of a theater sophisticate. When George Murchison boasts to the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) that “in New York standard curtain time is eight forty,” he demonstrates familiarity and comfort with the city’s leisure routines.²² Broadway catered to those savvy enough to cultivate such knowledge. This reliance on implicit information also explains why the League worked so hard to advertise its new 7:30 curtain in 1971—most playgoers just assumed they knew when curtains rose.²³

Curtain times of course also relate to running times—that is, when the show starts has at least something to do with how late a show ends. In 1971, one hope producers and restaurateurs had for the earlier curtain was that audiences might catch a meal not before but *after* the show. A two-hour show that starts at 7:30 may be over by 9.45 (with intermission and a slightly delayed start), making for a late but not intolerable mealtime for most patrons. But the meal hour depends on how long Broadway shows actually are. In 1946, Eugene O’Neill’s mammoth *The Iceman Cometh* raised its curtain at 5:30 and included an hour-long dinner intermission to break up a playing time of around four hours.²⁴ (A

front-page Brooks Atkinson review in the *Times* bore the headline “Four-Hour O’Neill.”²⁵) But O’Neill was never the norm.

Broadway running times since 2003 average (both median and mean) around two and a quarter hours (Figure 5).

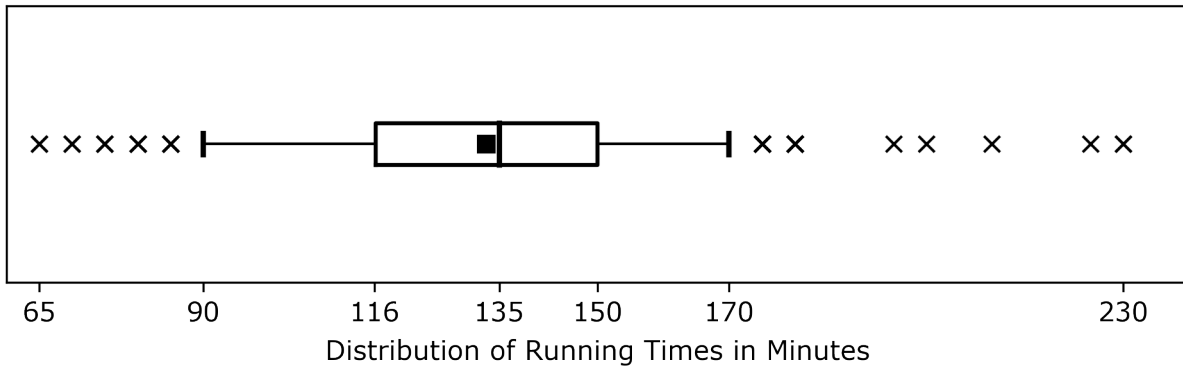


Figure 5: Distribution of Running Times, 2003–2018

Ninety percent of productions were between ninety minutes and two hours and fifty minutes. A ninety-minute show is certainly very different from a nearly three-hour show, pointing to some of the real variety in the types of work Broadway presents. But even today’s longer Broadway shows usually send audiences home a little after 11pm, with an 8pm curtain.

It is striking, then, that run lengths seem to have shrunk over time. No data exists to demonstrate this point definitively. But if we assume that modern revivals of older plays take roughly the same time to perform as their originals, then we can plot post-2003 production running times by the date a show premiered on Broadway (Figure 6).²⁶

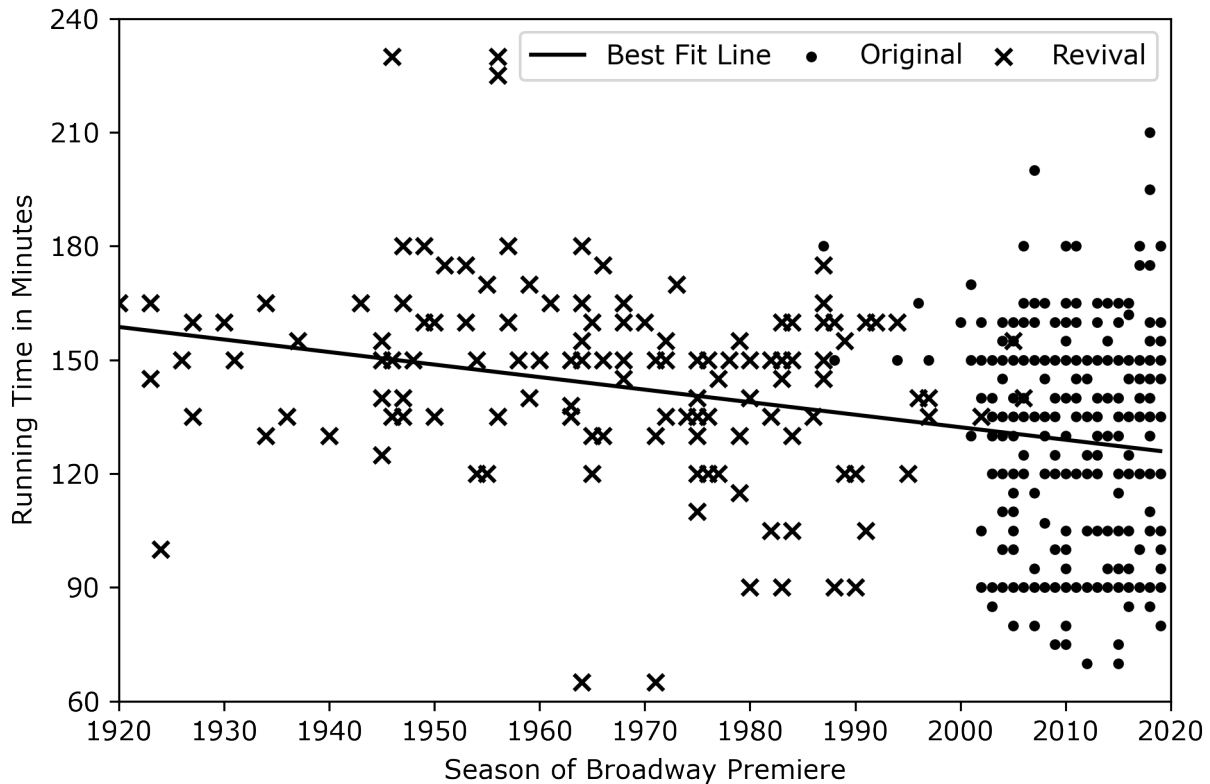


Figure 6: Running Times by Year of Original Production

Broadway shows appear to have gotten shorter over the past century. Unfortunately, most revivals (the x markers) are of shows that opened since 1945, so we know less about shows before the war. The rate of shrinkage (the slope of the trend line) suggests that, for every season since 1920, Broadway shows have gotten shorter by about twenty seconds. Over a century, that comes to a loss of half an hour—though these are all very rough estimates from a small sample and there is very large variation in any given year. At the least, based on available evidence, productions today let audiences head home earlier than in the past. Giving the data the maximum credence, in the 1920s and 1930s shows might be expected to run thirty minutes longer than today. Thus with curtains rising at 8:30 or 8:40 at least through 1971, Times Square was at its busiest near midnight.

This almost-midnight end time helps explain some of the persistent concern for commuters in the 1970s curtain time debates. Producers worried about ensuring audiences they could catch their last train home. This reminds us that Times Square is an entertainment destination, to which most entertainees travel from somewhere else, enjoy their entertainment, and then leave. And, crucially, where theater patrons come from affects when they would like to attend the theater.

To understand the history of the performance calendar, we must know more than about the residences of theater audiences. *Playbill*-sponsored surveys in 1928 and 1935 showed that 75 and 86% of Broadway’s audience, respectively, came from New York City or “towns within commuting distance.”²⁷ By the 1960s, audiences were only slightly less local, with one study showing 65% of the audience still coming from the New York

metropolitan area: 39% from the city, 13% from New Jersey, 8% from Westchester and Connecticut, and 5% from Long Island.²⁸ Broadway wanted a wider audience base. Even in the 1950s the League tested out a 7pm curtain for Monday evenings, which lasted less than a year, with hopes of luring “suburbanites” who would have a larger choice of trains home from which to choose.²⁹)

With such local dominance, productions could thus arrange their performance schedules to accommodate a local’s habits. The three-hours-plus between the 5pm close of business and an 8:30 curtain had become excessive, and people needed to return to their suburban homes.³⁰ As League of New York Theatres president Richard Barr told *Variety*, the 7:30 curtain would “reduce the time span between the end of the business day and the start of performances, and it will allow our audiences to get home an hour earlier.”³¹ The 1970s move to earlier curtain times—both the original 7:30 gambit and the compromise 8—occured to accommodate the audience’s need to arrive at and leave the theater district more safely and more efficiently for their modern lifestyle.

Yet Broadway audiences have continued to change—and so have performance schedules. The most recent Broadway League reports show a complete transformation in audience geography from the 1960s and 1970s. Today, only 35% of the total annual audience hails from the New York metropolitan area—about half of the local audience percentage from the 1930s, and a number that has held roughly steady since 2007–08 (Figure 7).

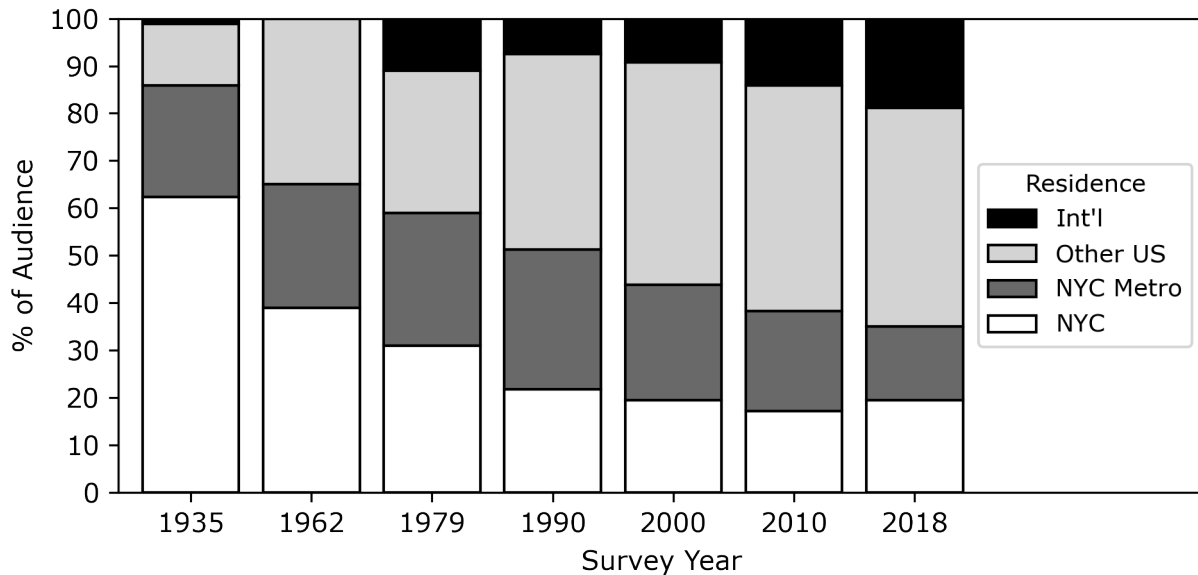


Figure 7: Audience Geography

Both the domestic (beyond the New York region) and the international tourist markets have grown significantly, with the former nearing 50% most seasons and the latter at almost 20%.

This change in audience geography matters to our understanding of performance schedules because out-of-town audiences attend the theater most frequently at specific performance times. For instance, foreign tourists made up 28% of the Broadway audience

for weekday evening shows, nearly twice as high a percentage of the audience as they comprise on weekend evenings, and nearly three times as high as for matinees. By contrast, weekday evenings are the least frequent time for metro New York and US tourist audiences.³² This makes sense: international tourists are likely to visit New York for an extended trip, which includes weekdays. For US-based and suburban visitors, a weekend stay in the city, or even a day trip, is more viable. Purchasers living in the Northeast corridor (Washington; Philadelphia; New Haven; Providence; Boston) in 2011, for instance, were particularly likely to see a Wednesday or Saturday matinee.³³ These geographic changes have in turn pressured the performance calendar—both the weekly performance schedule and curtain times—to continue adapting, too.

Such pressure, however, took years to have any real effect, despite strong evidence that theaters might increase their business with a more flexible schedule. A 1972 *Study of the New York Theater* noted a massive disparity in audience sizes between weekdays and weekends, and encouraged “a series of experiments” that would replace unpopular Tuesday or Monday evenings with more desirable times—including even a Friday matinee.³⁴ As usual, inertia won out, and the performance calendar remained relatively rigid for decades.

But by the early 2000s, further advances in ticketing, particularly the wide availability of internet-based sales, encouraged new flexibility. Customers at a distance could now not only talk with a salesperson attempting to explain all the ticketing variables (show, date, time, seat location, price), but could also see that information for themselves on their personal computer screens. As online sales across all categories expanded, Broadway relied more heavily on the computerized systems and internet-based sales, which had developed initially in the 1970s and 1990s, respectively. Digital sales also give sellers access to more information about their audiences. Telecharge, owned and operated by the Shubert Organization and vendor for the majority of Broadway houses, was able to survey its purchasers about minute details of their experience buying tickets. Among the points they observed: New York City locals particularly preferred the new 7pm curtain times, which seems to have encouraged their use on weekdays throughout the industry, particularly for shows that draw locally (Figure 8).³⁵

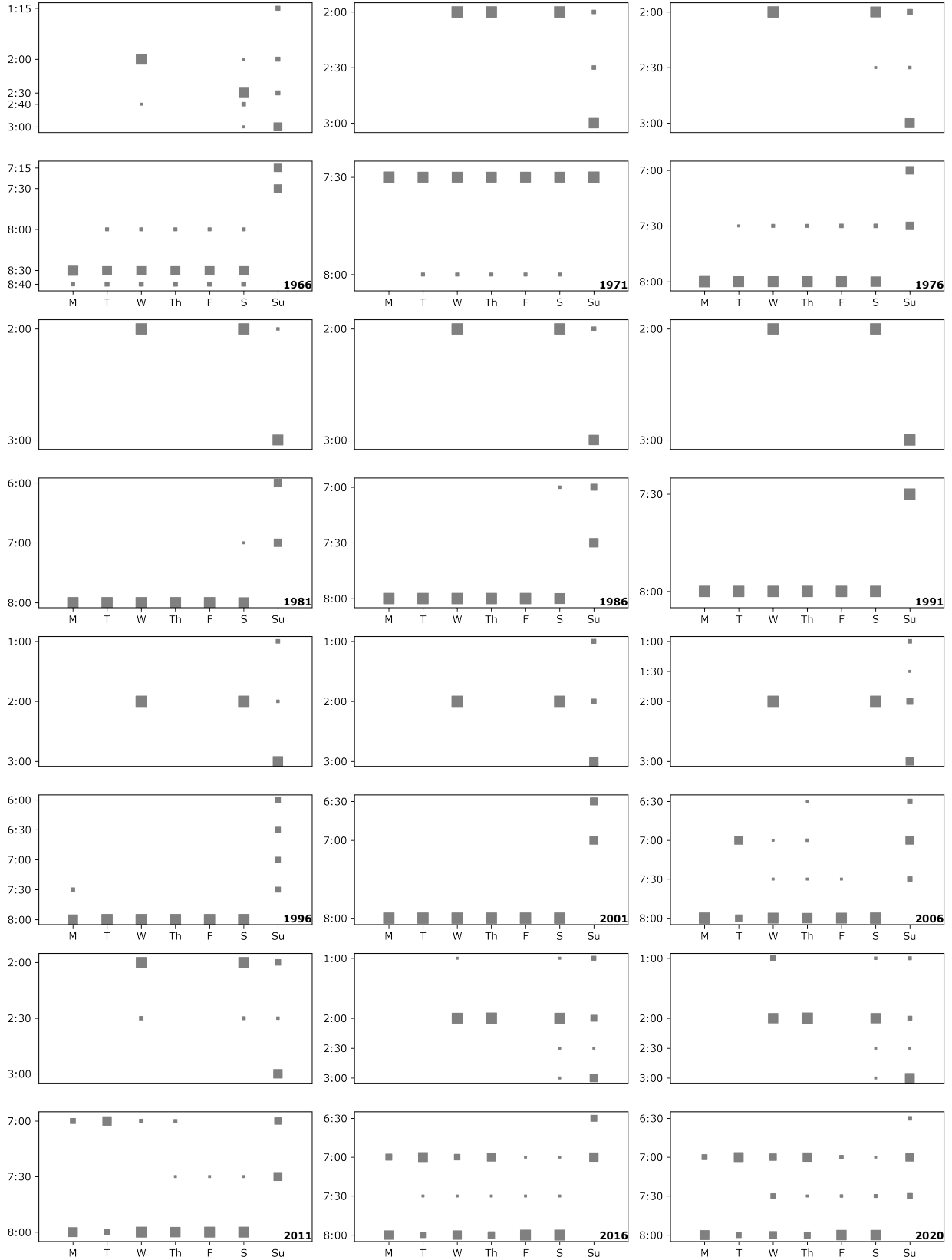


Figure 8: Curtain Times, 1966–1920

The 8pm curtain on non-Sundays, all but an iron law from 1981 to 2001, lead to a slow emergence of 7pm curtains, with increasing popularity. In 2015, between a quarter and a third of buyers reported that they would choose a show with an earlier curtain over one that started later, solely because of the curtain time.³⁶

Today's varied curtain times, while different from those of the 1920s and 1930s, thus owe their existence in part to the ability to make more explicit information available to the customer—and to get more feedback from that customer. This plays out on a show-by-show basis. For example, some long-lived shows offer unusual performance schedules. The record-smashing revival of *Chicago* abandoned Wednesday performances entirely in 2011 and 2020. If Wednesday matinees attract mostly regional audiences, and Wednesday evenings are notoriously soft, why would a long-running show bother to compete in those slots?³⁷ Better to use Wednesday as the mandated union day off, and use other, more desirable performance slots. *The Phantom of the Opera* has taken a different tack, sometimes playing Thursday matinees and skipping Tuesday night. Such flexibility reflects attempts by management to adapt these super-long-running shows to the needs of their mostly-tourist audience as best they can. They can depend on the audience's figuring out their performance calendar and curtain time because of the ready availability of such information online at relatively low cost. And they can make changes in part based on feedback from online buying habits and other audience studies.

Even as Broadway has finally adapted to the needs of an increasingly geographically diverse audience, the new scheduling flexibility has also helped market shows to different age groups. Thus the relatively new category of Broadway show that performs at 1pm and 6:30pm on Sundays. In 2016, four shows played that schedule (*Aladdin*, *Matilda*, *School of Rock*, and *The Lion King*); in 2001 and 2011, three (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, and *Seussical*). That double-Sunday schedule not only includes unusually early showtimes, but also entails dropping an additional performance from the rest of the week: Monday or Thursday night, or a Wednesday matinee. Some family-oriented holiday shows have gone even further to find their audience. In 2006, *Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas* held Thursday matinees at 11am, played four shows on Saturday (11, 2, 5, and 8) and three on Sunday (11, 2, and 5). All of those shows engage the under-18 audience—an audience that Broadway has consciously cultivated over the past twenty years.

In their 2002–03 report, the League cites happily its efforts that have successfully increased the size of the youth audience: “audience development programs, family marketing initiatives, industry events geared towards young people such as Kids' Night on Broadway®, and an increase in the number of kid-friendly shows” since 1992.³⁸ Whether the chicken (young audiences) or the egg (youth-oriented programs) came first, one thing is clear: those audiences have grown, as historical data confirm. A 1963–1965 audience study showed the “under 20” cohort comprised 4.9% of the audience.³⁹ Seventeen years later, *Playbill's* 1982 survey reported a roughly comparable 2.8% of the audience as under 18.⁴⁰ That number soon took off, growing by almost 75% by 1990, and by more than a third again to 9.5% in 1997. Since then, the under-18 audience has peaked at 15.3% (2017–18), while never dropping below 8.6% (2013–14) in recent years.⁴¹ “Kid-friendly” Broadway was thus a real phenomenon that began in the mid-1990s and a true transformation both in what Broadway made and for whom. No wonder, then, that curtain time innovation has followed, aimed at better serving this newly large audience sector.

The young Broadway audience has grown, but the average Broadway age hasn't changed significantly.⁴² Why? Because the older Broadway audience has also expanded. Based on estimates to smooth over differently reported historical age data, we find an older (60-plus) audience in larger numbers (Figure 9).⁴³

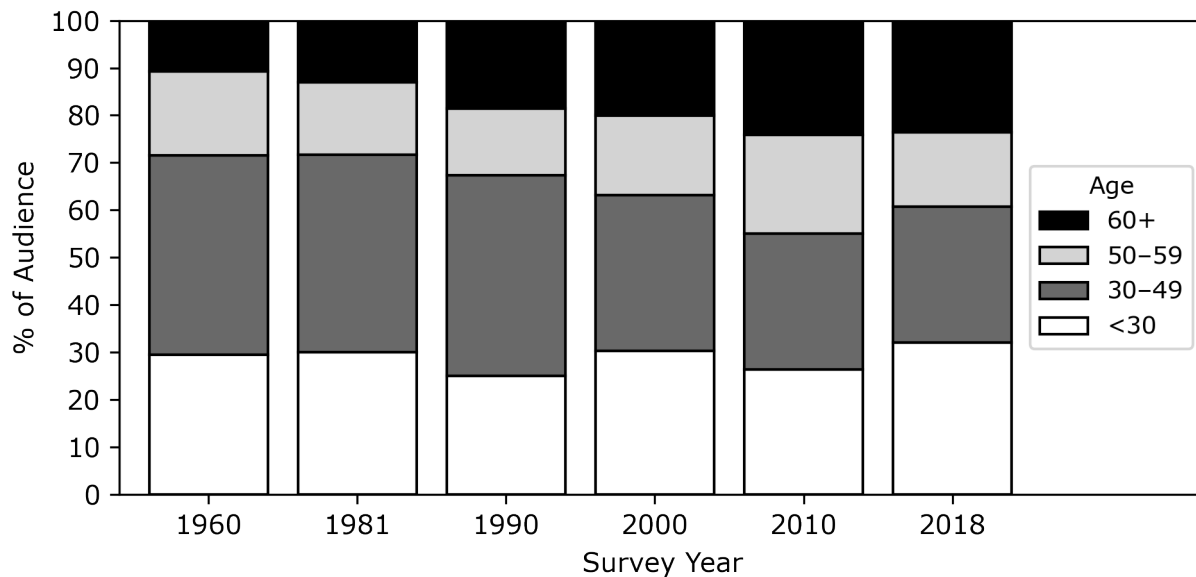


Figure 9: Audience Age

The aging audience may have something to do with the recent turn to 7pm curtains during the week. Older, perhaps retired, adults may not be as eager to spend late nights on the town. While the Baby Boomers may have happily jaunted off to Broadway at 8pm in the mid-1970s, the earlier curtain time suits this phase of their theater-going lives just fine.

The Broadway League does not spend much time celebrating the increasingly large older segments of its market, perhaps because no industry wishes to advertise its audience as closer to the end of its purchasing life than to the beginning. But the ageing audience, too, seems to have shifted programming on Broadway. Just as younger audiences encourage more youth-oriented productions, older audiences have flocked to productions with a high level of nostalgia. Thus, today, we find youth-oriented musicals such as *Frozen* and *Wicked*, but also Baby Boomer-focused shows, particularly jukebox musicals featuring artists of the 1960s and 1970s (*Jersey Boys*, *Beautiful*, *Mamma Mia!*) and revivals of musicals from the 1940s–1960s.

The older side of the age spectrum supports yet one more kind of show: adult-themed fare, which also operates outside the normal production calendar. In 1921, spectacular variety performances such as the *Passing Show of 1921* and *Ziegfeld's 9 O'Clock Frolic* featured 11pm performances (though the latter also had an early show at 9pm). Both also sold dinner to patrons. In 1961, the comedy sketch act *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May* began at the outlier time of 9pm. The adult revue *Oh! Calcutta!* raised the curtain at 7:30 and 10 on Friday, and then 10 and midnight (!) on Saturday, emphasizing its nightlife bona fides. And in 2001, *The Rocky Horror Show* played Saturdays at 5 and 9:45pm, thus

effectively running a “late” show without actually starting too late in the evening. We might generalize, then, to say that standard plays and musicals thus operate on one set of schedule expectations, while other types of productions have long behaved more variably to signal the audience about their unusual content.

Curtain times, running times, and the weekly performance calendar have thus undergone significant changes over the past century. Union rules, the Times Square environment, and the audience’s geography and age all played significant roles in forcing adjustments to Broadway’s scheduling. Some of those changes came about through conscious industry efforts to effect a change: the Sunday performance; the 7:30 curtain in the 1970s. Other changes, though, arose from the natural but slow pressures of the market, most notably the highly variable modern performance calendar, which arose only once ticketing itself became a more flexible process, with more feedback from audiences to producers. A different kind of audience feedback is key to another temporality on Broadway: the preview period. To that, and to the opening night to which previews lead, we turn now.

From Previews to Opening Night

Opening night on Broadway is its own special kind of magic: the first official audiences; the reviews appearing in newspapers and other venues; the Broadway royalty in the audience, shouting praise for their peers’ accomplishments. The eventness of opening night is a product of careful time management, arranged to draw all of Broadway’s attention to this one production for one fleeting evening. Both opening night itself and the modern preview periods that lead up to it have, like everything else about time on Broadway, changed over the past century. The major forces driving that change are financial and critical. Opening night and previews serve as opportunities to efficiently prepare a production for Broadway’s audiences and to promote the show through (one hopes, positive) criticism.

Historically, the Broadway opening came after tryouts away from New York. Productions on Broadway have almost never opened cold and untested. In Boston or New Haven or Philadelphia or elsewhere, productions would run for a few weeks, giving performers time to settle into their roles, and production staff time to make changes in response to audience reactions. Some of these tryouts are famous in themselves, either for rescuing a disastrous show or for marking the beginning of a slow-motion catastrophe. The choral section of *Oklahoma!*’s title song, for instance, was composed by arranger Robert Russell Bennett on the train to Boston, learned in the lobby of the Colonial Theatre on a Sunday, and inserted into tryouts the next day. The newly stirring penultimate number “was a show-stopper.”⁴⁴ Likewise, many of *Fiddler on the Roof*’s most memorable scenes—including the famous “Bottle Dance” at the wedding—came together on the road in Detroit and Washington, D.C. According to historian Alisa Solomon, revisions during the road tryouts were “grueling” but made the show “more fully itself.”⁴⁵

While giving productions time to come into their own, road tryouts were also logistically daunting and costly. Moving the entire cast and all the scenery and costumes, many of which would be adjusted on the fly, was a tremendous exercise in itself. Actress Colleen Dewhurst notes the relative ease of previewing in New York, where she could work from home, and thus not having her every waking moment consumed by the play as it would

be on the road.⁴⁶ And with each new theater requiring slightly different stagings or even altered scenery and lighting to accommodate the different spaces and sight lines, previewing in New York saved time and money. Jo Mielziner’s projections for *Death of a Salesman*, for instance, were so intricately precise that the production needed separate lenses for the Philadelphia tryout and the New York premiere.⁴⁷ Thus, unsurprisingly, *The New York Times* reported that productions could save 20% in expenses by previewing rather than moving from theater to theater.⁴⁸ As production designs grew increasingly complex and costly, and required more time to mount in a Broadway house, out-of-town tryouts became less viable. The first true Broadway preview period was in 1952 for *Wish You Were Here*, a production that included a swimming pool set that was prohibitively expensive to build both out-of-town and in New York.⁴⁹ And thus the *in situ* preview was born.

What happens during previews? The same work that used to occur in out-of-town tryouts. Actors and crew practice and tweak their performances in front of an audience. Writers, directors, and designers alter their work based on their own feelings and the audience response. All of this change happens in rehearsals, which take place in the daytime and on off-days during preview weeks. The schedule crunch often means that a full eight-show week is not possible during previews. Audiences used to have access to discounted tickets during previews, but that is less common today.⁵⁰ Industry opinion was initially mixed about the Broadway preview. Despite the financial savings and the improved quality of life for cast and crew, previews had their downsides. Some thought audiences in New York more bloodthirsty than open, eager crowds in New Haven or Philadelphia. And local gossip could be faster and more vicious about a faltering show.⁵¹ Yet the economic imperatives seem to have won the day. In the tryout era, shows might have had one or two “preview” performances aimed at friends of the production. But these were not long, formal preview periods, which really blossomed in the 1960s (Figure 10).⁵²

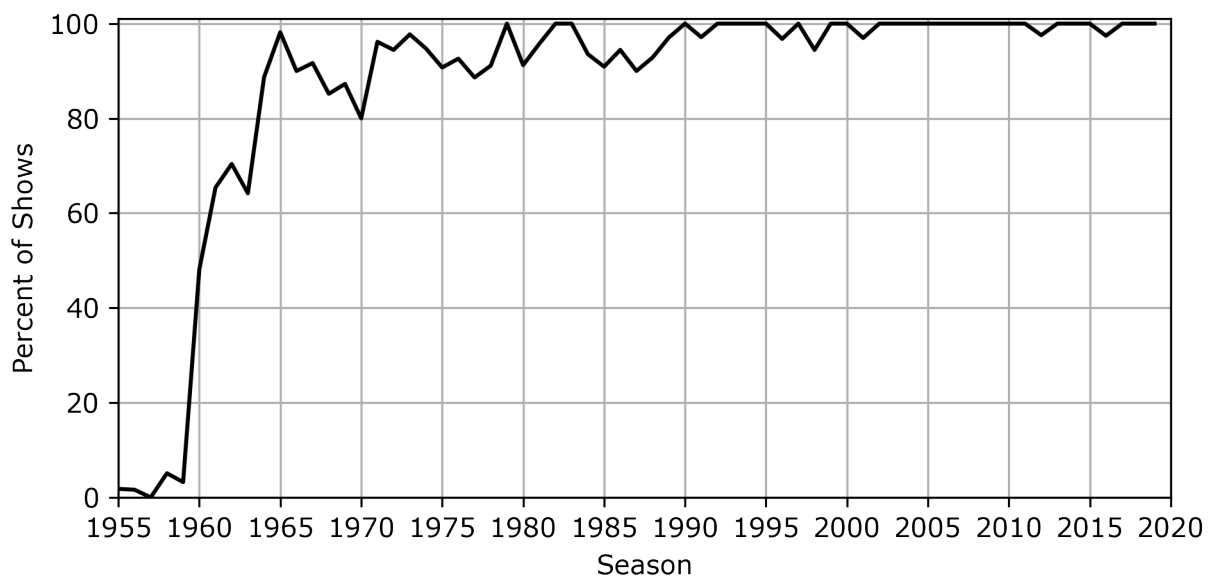


Figure 10: Percent of Plays and Musicals with Previews by Season

From almost nothing prior to 1960, previews exploded in seven years. By 1965, nearly 100% of plays and musicals had some previews, with minor fluctuations all but disappearing by the 1990s.

One other thing happens in the final week of modern Broadway previews: critics attend. These days, a company “freezes” the production in the week or so before opening and critics attend during that final preview period. This leaves them more time to write their reviews. Yet in the preview’s early days, producers resisted critics’ attendance, as their shows were still very much works in progress.⁵³ By the late 1970s, however, critics felt entitled to attend previews. Battles between critics and producers about previews and access then ebbed and flowed for over a decade. The New York Drama Critics’ Circle complained in 1979, for instance, that producers should not get to choose which critics they admitted during previews.⁵⁴ On the other side, in 1986 the League pushed for a single press opening for new shows.⁵⁵ Available records suggest that by the 1990s both critics and producers had accepted that written reviews would be composed based on preview performances seen a few days prior to the official opening. (As part of this detente, critics lost their opening night ticket privileges.)

To protect against failure due to trouble in previews, some shows have run extremely long preview periods without critical assessments. Such was the case in 1983, when two critics reviewed *Merlin* after eight weeks of previews, but a fortnight ahead of its opening.⁵⁶ Most notably, the spectacular musical *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* ran 182 preview performances while resisting critical appraisal. Eventually, some critics simply bought tickets and published reviews without the producers’ foreknowledge (and much to their anger). While *Spider-Man* was a very unusual outlier, the median length of the preview period has quadrupled from the preview’s early days.

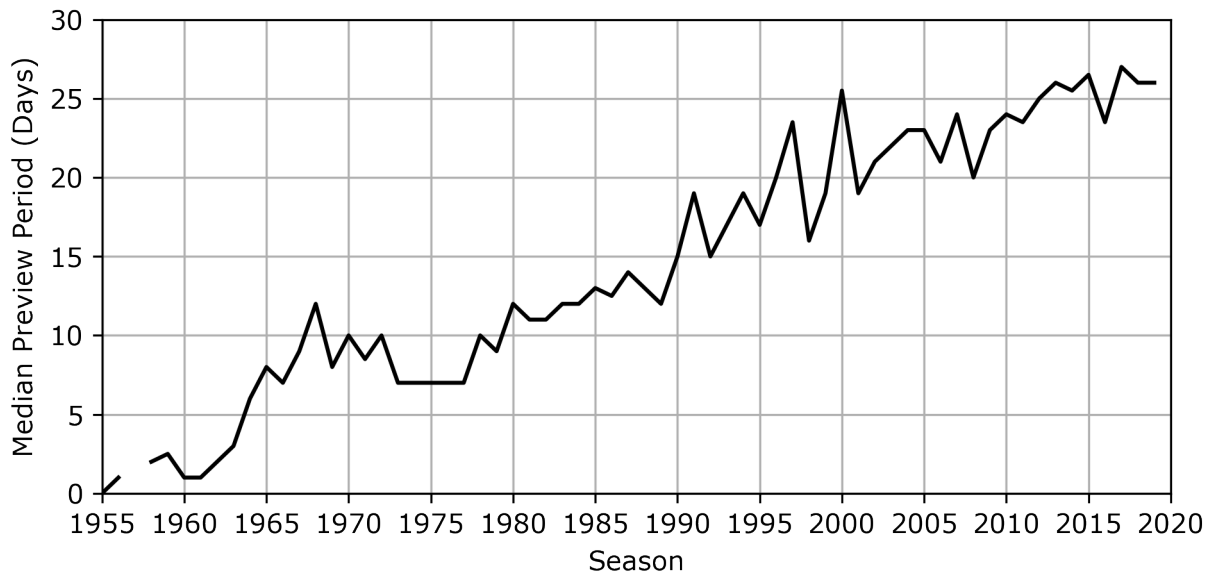


Figure 11: Median Preview Period Length by Season

From single- and occasionally two-week periods at the outset, previews have grown to include almost four weeks of performances before opening night. This excludes any time to load in the scenery, focus the lights, and rehearse without a paying audience.

Critics, who by mutual agreement with producers only publish reviews after opening night, were not the only group puzzled by such extended preview periods. The long preview lead-in time seemed, to some observers in the preview's early days, to diminish the meaning and significance of opening night.⁵⁷ And yet opening night remains a key marker for productions, the moment when all eyes on Broadway turn to this new show. How best to capture that attention? In part, by opening at the right time. Opening nights confront two temporal questions: What time of year should the show open? And when in the week should the show open? (Usually, opening night curtain times are on the earlier side, to allow for some red carpet press, a proper after-party, and, in the days of opening night reviews, to give the critics another hour or so to file their copy.) The next section discusses when in the year shows open. But a striking story can be found even in the days of the week on which openings occur.

In theory a show could open any night of the week—or even at a matinee, which has not, to my knowledge, ever happened. If openings were distributed evenly among the seven days of the week, we would expect roughly fifteen percent of openings to happen on each week day ($\frac{1}{7} \approx 0.143$). In practice, however, openings take place only among a much smaller set of possible performance slots. And over the past century, the most popular night for opening on Broadway has been Monday (Figure 12).

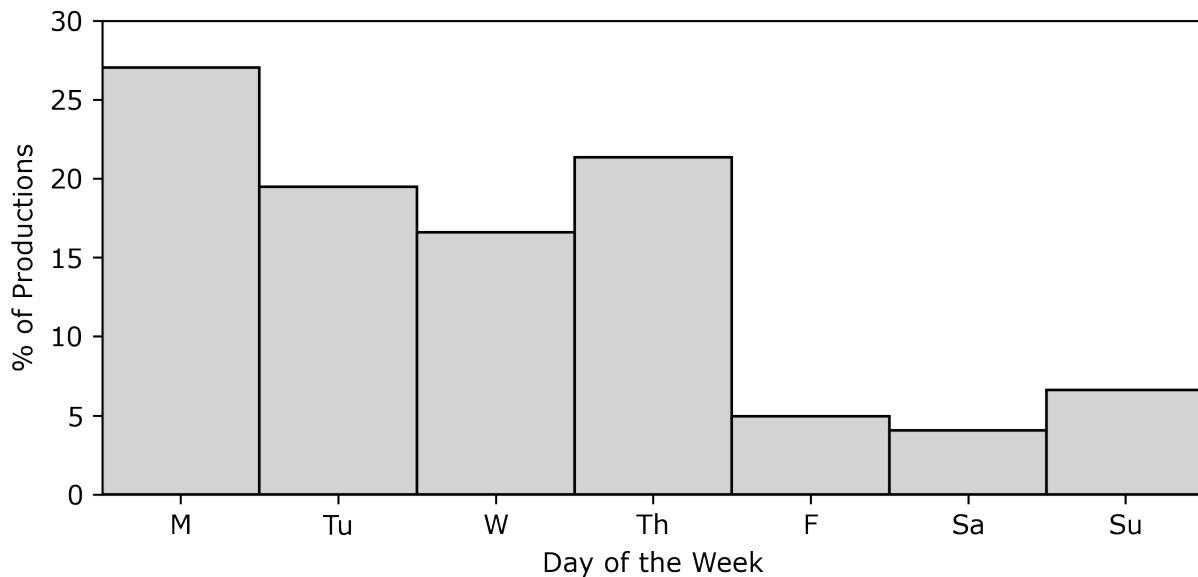


Figure 12: Frequency of Opening Nights

Why Monday? Because with Sundays as traditional dark days, as discussed above, Mondays were the first performance day of the week. And as many shows in the early part of the century had relatively simple scenery and were transferring in from out of town, opening on the first possible performance day was efficient and economical. Moving into

a theater on Sunday (or, if lucky, a few days prior), a show that did not open Monday would be renting space without earning any income. The later a show opens in the week, the smaller the revenues and the lower the ticket-selling momentum before Sunday (dark again), a hiatus which could make or break a marginal production. And, of course, should a show fail with the critics and audience, a Monday opening gave producers time to notify the landlord promptly that the lease would soon end.

Yet Mondays were only the dominant opening night through 1935. As productions grew more complex, requiring more time to load into a theater and properly rehearse, opening nights were in flux throughout the mid-century (Figure 13).

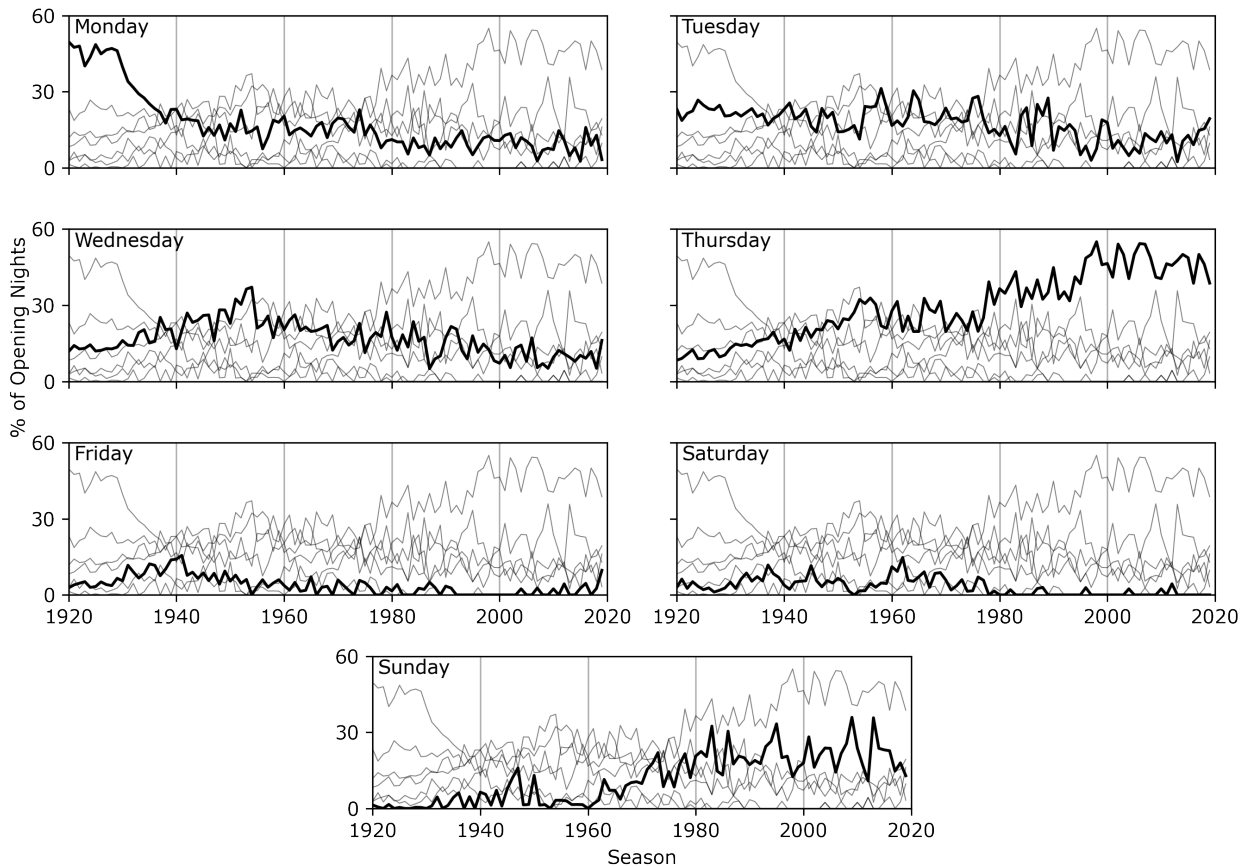


Figure 13: Opening Nights by Season

By 1975, a new consensus was forming that solidified in the 1990s: opening nights would be Thursday or Sunday. We cannot say for certain what caused the rise of Thursday as the new normal opening. I am tempted to point, though, at the critics. Around the same period, the *New York Times'* Weekend section premiered, which may have encouraged shows to have reviews appear there on Friday and, thus, to open on Thursday. (Review-publishing schedules are, at least in the opinion of newspapers themselves, highly significant. When David Mamet's *China Doll* rescheduled its opening for Friday night in 2015, the *Times* noted that "Because the play is now opening on a Friday night—unusual on Broadway—many news organizations are likely to publish reviews online late Friday,

and, for daily newspapers, in print on Saturday, when audiences are relatively low.”⁵⁸) The final leap in Thursday’s dominance coincides too with the renewal of Times Square as a Broadway-first entertainment district, after the dissolute and crime-ridden 1970s and 1980s. Might Thursday openings indicate a new phase in industry-consciousness among producers, seeking more clearly to brand and coordinate their marketing efforts? Whatever the precise causes—and, as with all history, those causes are multiple and complexly intertwined—the change in opening night marks another instance of collective change across the industry, but, unlike the 7:30 curtain, one not marked by a conscious effort. Rather, we see a herd mentality: what other shows do becomes what one ought to do and, eventually, the way it has always been done.

Intriguingly, the modern Thursday opening night is very much an idiosyncratic Broadway practice. Off-Broadway and regional theaters follow different opening night patterns of their own (Figure 14).

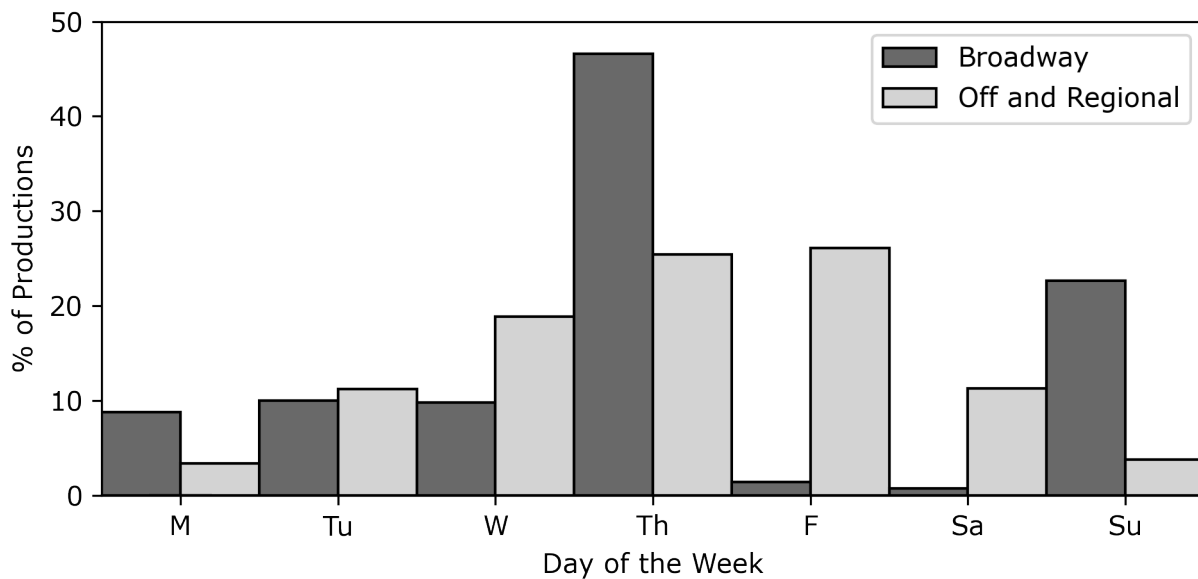


Figure 14: Frequency of Opening Nights, 2008–2018 (Broadway vs. Off-Broadway and Regional Theaters)

The comparison underlines how closely Broadway’s practices are tied to its own peculiarities as an industry, and are not necessarily reflected across the wider theatrical field. Broadway retains deep ties to the rest of the American theater, but some things about Broadway, like the Thursday opening, are still *sui generis*.

Seasons

One unanswered question about opening night remains: When in the year should a show open? While we can imagine a world in which openings are distributed evenly across the 52 weeks of a year, in fact openings (and thus the rhythms of production and consumption on Broadway generally) follow patterns—as does the production schedule generally.

Broadway today merely seems to supply endless performances, exemplified by apparently deathless long-running shows. (*Cats*, Andrew Lloyd Weber's erstwhile standby at the Winter Garden in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, advertised itself with the simultaneously hopeful and mildly threatening tagline "Now and Forever.") Such apparent interminability, however, belies the importance of cyclical time on Broadway: the theatrical season, the slow and steady rhythms of which bring order to Broadway's operations.

Seasonality has long been important to Western theater. From the annual Dionysian festivals in which the great Greek tragedies premiered through the medieval cycle plays, performed during Christian festivals, theater frequently followed religious calendars. Performances were thus intermittent, in brief bursts throughout the year. In Shakespeare's time, theatrical seasons followed meteorological ones. James Wright's *Historia Histrionica* notes that "The *Black-friers*, and *Globe* on the *Bankside*, [served as] a Winter and Summer House" for Shakespeare's troupe.⁵⁹ The movement from one venue to the other entailed a natural division of the theatrical year. British theaters during the Restoration inaugurated the seasonal rhythms that continue to control Broadway (and many other theaters) today: relatively dormant summer months, an uptick in production around September, with performances tapering off in May. Some organizations, such as the Metropolitan Opera, which shares a campus with Broadway's Vivian Beaumont Theatre, observe this seasonality strictly, limiting performances to this September–May period. Other groups, such as the summer theater festivals at Williamstown, Massachusetts or at Stratford, Ontario, operate the inverse of the Broadway season. Modern Broadway concentrates premieres during the Restoration's season, while continuing operations throughout the entire year.

Defining the Broadway season more precisely than that is, well, challenging. The season has multiple discrete boundaries that do not line up precisely. In his book *The Season*, William Goldman explains the season's contours in the late 1960s: "I'd like to explain just what 'the Broadway season' is, since that's what this book is about, one Broadway season," Goldman writes. "I'd like to explain, but I can't quite, because I'm not really sure." He then names some parameters defining the season, including actors' contracts, which "expire on the last day in June," "theatrical records," and the frustrating habit of excluding works that, by either of those measures, should indicate the commencement of a new season. Throwing up his hands, Goldman simply observes that "the bulk of openings takes place in a six-month period," with three-quarters of shows in the 1960s opening between October 1st and late March.⁶⁰ In other words, just like during the Restoration, the summer is a more or less fallow period in terms of new play development: "There are always houses [for musicals] available in the summertime," notes Goldman, five empty in the season about which he wrote.⁶¹ *Variety* magazine's annual reports on Broadway inaugurate new seasons on the first Sunday in June. This accords roughly with the Broadway League's current practice, which ends the season near the last weekend in May.

Yet, following Goldman, the season as defined by premieres is actually slightly different today than a June–May season. Looking at the history of premiere dates reveals a force at work distorting Broadway's seasonal rhythms: the Tony Awards.

The Antoinette Perry (or Tony) Awards, Broadway's equivalent of the Oscars, are given each season to recognize the best work on Broadway. Launched in 1947 with non-competitive categories, they were administered initially by the American Theatre Wing—a non-profit with roots in World War II relief efforts—and, since 1967, in collaboration with

the Broadway League. That same year marked the first national television broadcast of the awards ceremony. The Tony Award committee annually establishes a cut-off date for each year's awards, a date usually near the end of April, and over a month before the actual awards ceremony. That cut-off date has become a major force in the Broadway calendar and reshaped Broadway's premiere season. Recently, more and more Broadway premieres happen close to Tony nomination time so that shows can make an immediate impression on voters.

Such sensitivity to the Tony Awards arose only in the late 1970s. Prior to that time, many shows would open in the limbo between the Tony Award eligibility cutoff and the end of the League's official season on May 31st. But by 1980, production during that no-man's-land period after the Tony eligibility became virtually non-existent, as shown in the Figure 15, which plots each June–May season's productions as days before (positive) or after (negative) Tony eligibility.

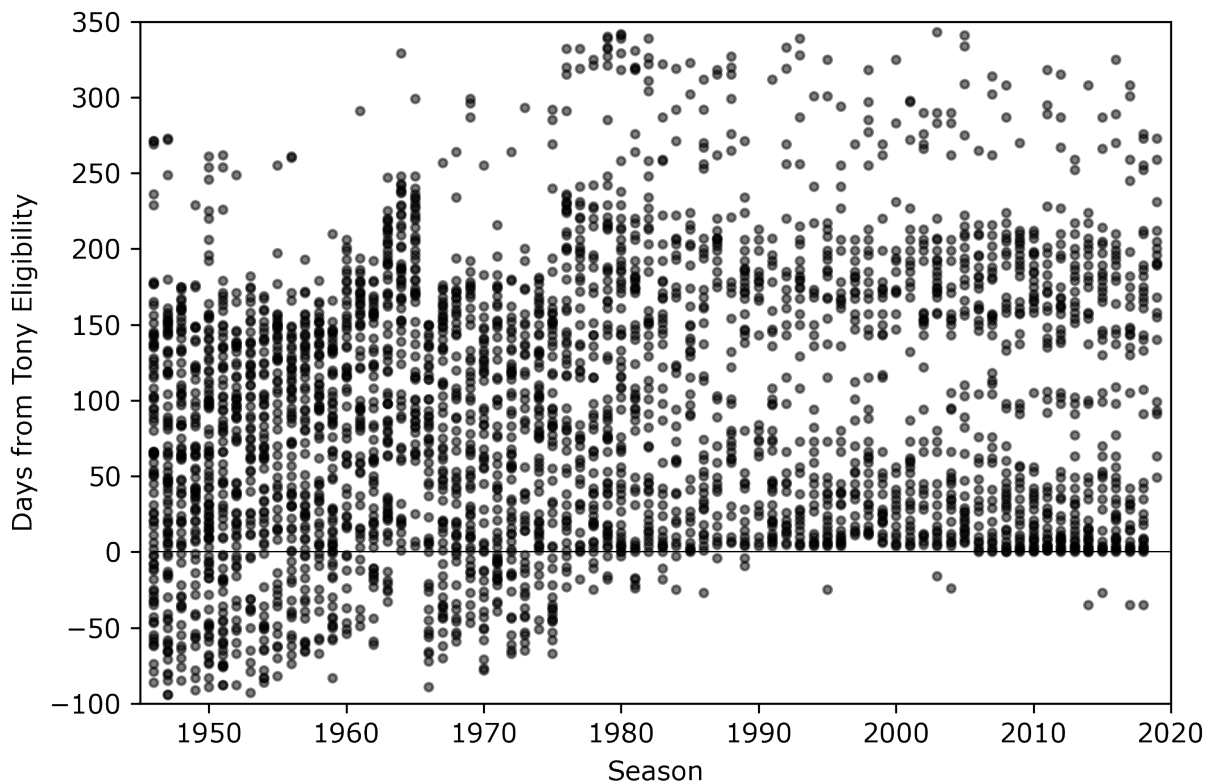


Figure 15: Opening Nights Relative to Tony Eligibility by Season

That shift came about in part because producers ceased to open shows in the dead period, but also because the Tonys themselves moved the eligibility date and awards ceremony later in the season.

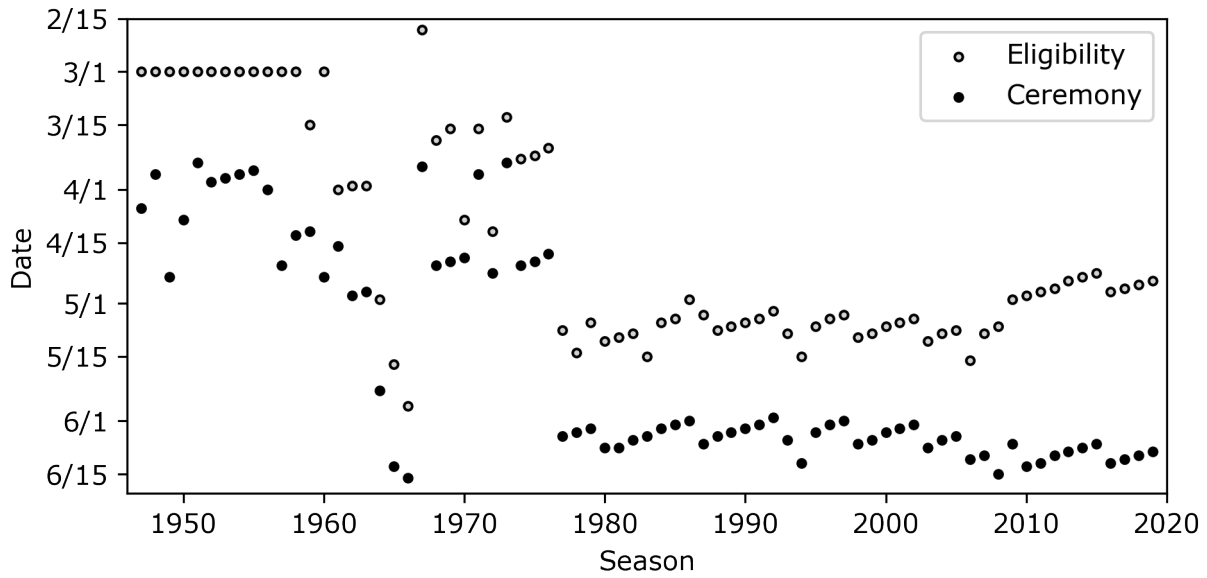


Figure 16: Tony Eligibility and Ceremony Dates by Season

The awards season now matches more approximately the June–May season discussed previously.

Why does this matter to Broadway productions? Many marginally successful shows earn a big boost from Tony nominations and then from any awards. By opening closer to the awards eligibility and ceremony dates, a production minimizes risk by minimizing the time until it can earn this awards bump. Furthermore, the thinking goes, shows that are fresh in voters' minds are more likely to be nominated or to win prizes. As a result, we might expect to see production openings clustering around awards season. And, indeed, that seems to be happening.

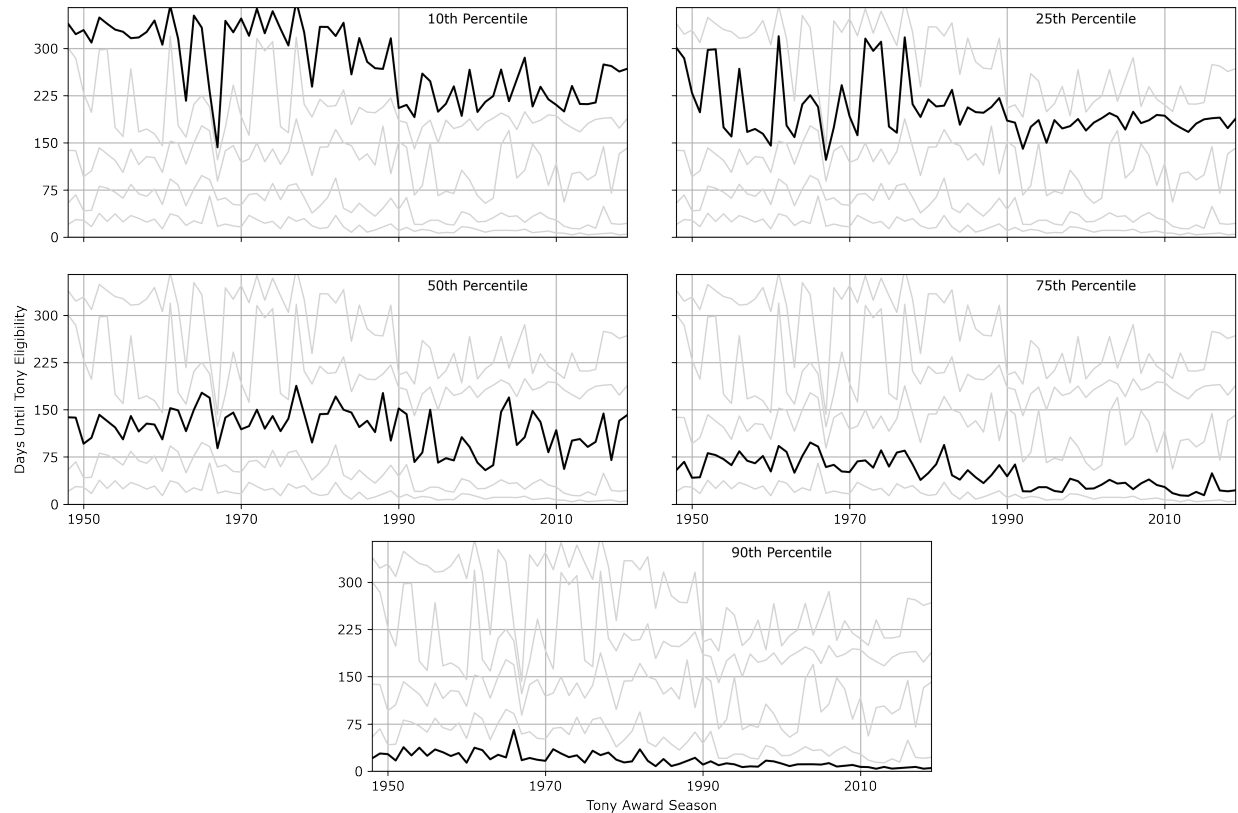


Figure 17: Percentile of Shows Opened Relative to Tony Eligibility by Tony Season

If we treat the period between Tony Award eligibilities as a season (rather than the June–May definition by the Broadway League), we can see when in each year the bulk of shows have their premiere, relative to the Tony eligibility date. By 1990, we see the clear gap in premieres that appears between one year’s Tony cut-off and the next: almost 100 days passes between one Tony eligibility date and the opening nights of 10% of the next season of productions. Since about 1992, a full quarter of the plays and musicals each season have opened in a narrow twenty- to forty-day window before Tony eligibility. And the last 10% of productions have crept closer and closer to the eligibility cutoff, as the final few shows of each season open in a rush the last week before the eligibility deadline. This seasonal crunch, the piling up of premieres on the cusp of awards, made the timing of the 2020 pandemic particularly hard on Broadway: theaters closed on March 12, almost a month and a half before the April 23 Tony eligibility cut-off, with sixteen openings yet to occur.⁶²

Broadway’s awards-oriented calendar has drawn premieres towards the Tonys and also restructured the rhythm of the entire season—that is, the number of productions performing each week, rather than just the timing of premieres. Seasonality has always been strong on Broadway, as evident from a simple time-series of the number of productions playing each week over the past century.

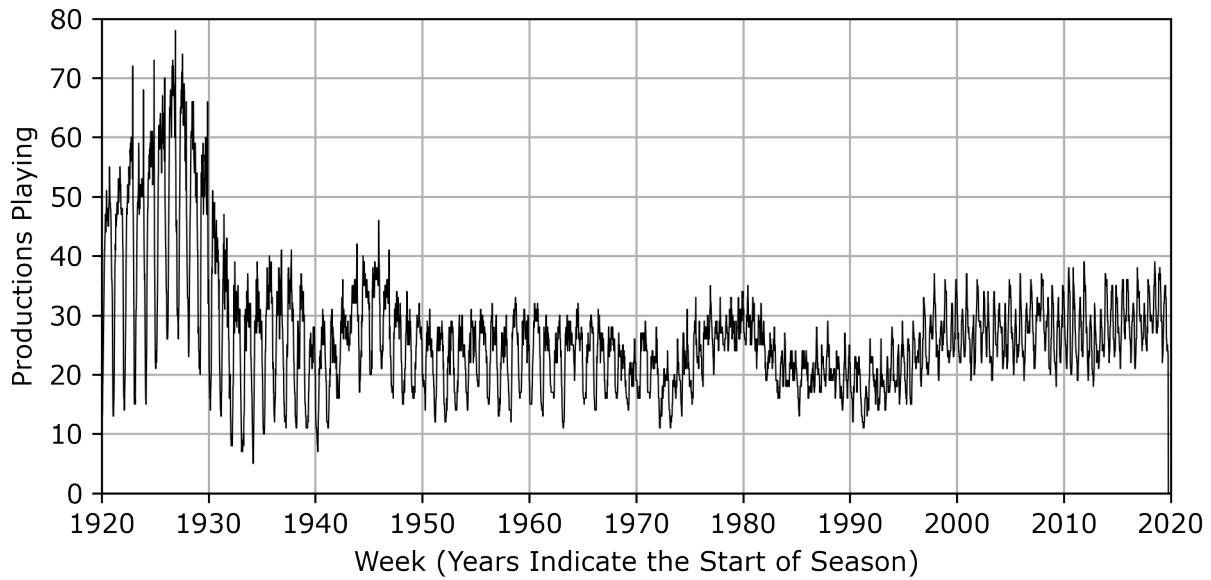


Figure 18: Productions Playing by Week

The strong sinusoidal movements are the seasons, with peaks indicating lots of theatrical activity, and troughs tracking moments of relative quiet, each ebbing and flowing in a semi-regular rhythm. Seasonality is omnipresent.

The shape of the curves is not, however, the same. We can see how the season has changed by segmenting Figure 18 and zooming in, to better note the shape of the seasonal curves (Figure 19).

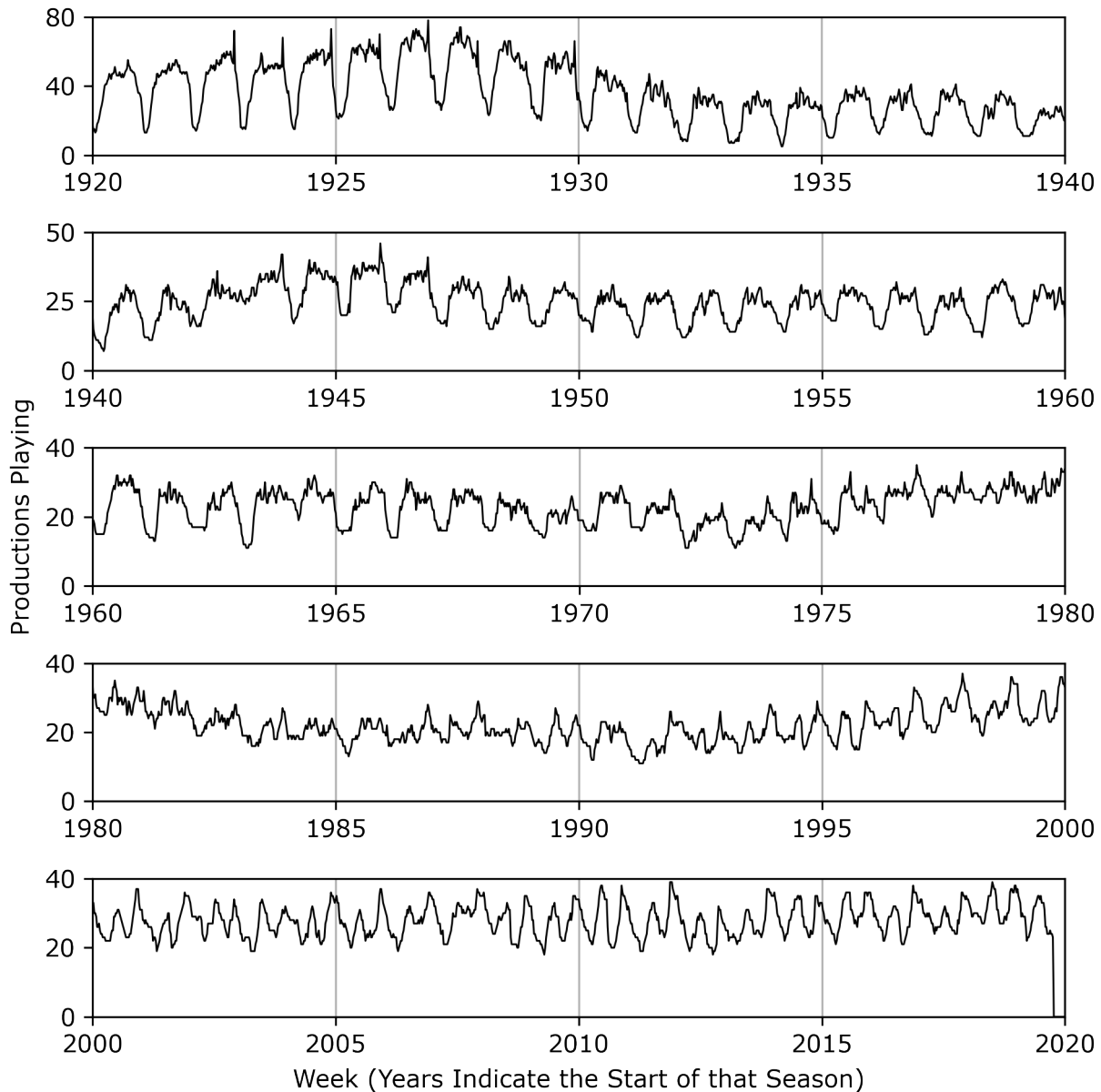


Figure 19: Productions Playing by Week, Higher Resolution

From 1920 to around 1968, seasons had clear slow (valleys) and active (plateaus) periods. While exceptional seasons of abnormally strong successes or higher-than-normal volatility occurred occasionally, the pattern is readily discernible for over fifty years. But Broadway’s strong seasonal pulse faded from 1969 to around 1999. Although peaks and troughs persisted, the rhythm of the season became irregular and unpredictable, no longer marking a strong pattern of behavior. Once seasons became more stable around 2000, they showed no clear alignment with the seasonal calendar as it had previously existed. Gone are the long plateaus, replaced by two booms in activity and attendant busts.

When are the peaks and valleys and why? In the earliest periods, performance activity slowed only in the summers. Historically, this was a result of the lack of good cooling

systems in theaters. In 1935, *Variety* reported that the first three theaters were due to install modern air conditioning, and by 1938, 14 theaters had systems in place. (Previously, most theaters had “blowers connected with stored ice” that they cut off due to noise once shows started.⁶³) Air conditioning’s expansion made summer performances more viable. This improvement in theaters’ literal climate helped dampen the degree of variability within each season (Figure 20).

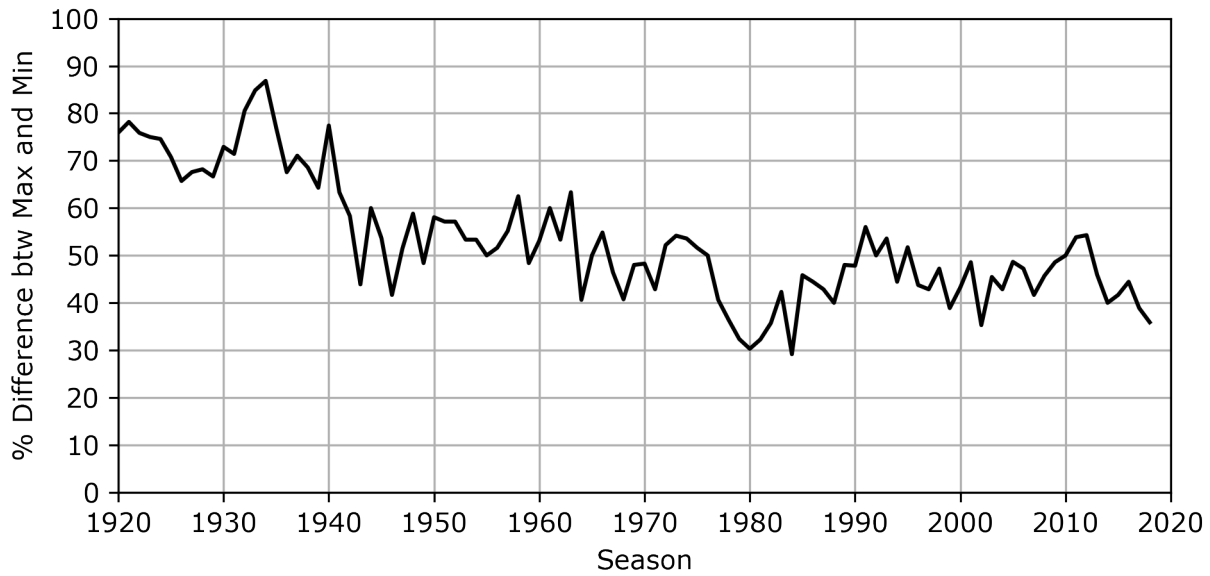


Figure 20: Percent Difference in Number of Productions Playing Weekly by Season

The percent difference between the maximum and minimum number of productions playing in any given week was much higher prior to World War II (over 80% at times), than the 50% difference that has been the general norm since air conditioning became standard. Climate control, in other words, made seasonality flatter, less pronounced overall.

The winter holidays mark another interesting period. On the one hand, Broadway often features special holiday or family-friendly performances, ranging from panto-like theatrical productions to magic shows. Yet non-holiday-themed productions are also historically wary of opening during December and January, and have grown even more so, as is clear from the general decline in January and February performance activity. Instead, awards-oriented premieres have pushed the entire production calendar forward into March and April. Broadway is quiet (at least from an audience perspective) in January and February, as theaters load in new productions and previews begin. Public performances boom, as discussed above, around the Tony eligibility deadline. As a result, the Broadway season has transformed from a simple binary (summer: quiet; not-summer: busy) to a bimodal structure, with two peaks of activity, one in the fall and one, even larger, in the spring.

Awards have thus altered not only the rhythm of openings on Broadway, but also the pattern of theatrical activity overall. The turn towards the Tonys, however, occurred only after a long middle period of uncertain seasonal rhythms (1969–99), itself preceded

by a simple “on/off” season, with a quiet summer and busy rest of the year. The new bimodal season represents the triumph of publicity and the competition for attention over Broadway’s more ancient, weather- and audience-driven, production habits.

I want to return, by way of concluding this exploration of time on Broadway, to the labor disputes that hampered the advent of Sunday performances. While the modern season reveals low performance activity in January and February, labor on Broadway reaches its peak during those months, as productions preparing to open in March and April rehearse, load in to theaters, run technical rehearsals, and otherwise ready themselves for the premiere. Behind these stories of time lies a bustle of human activity and behavior permeating the Theater District. Those human behaviors can appear directly in Broadway’s temporal patterns, as when shows offer unusually early curtain times for young audiences. Or they can disappear behind other influences such as awards. Behind these schedules lies a story about the movement of bodies—casts and crews, ticket sellers, audiences—through the shared space that is Broadway.

That specific eye contact you can make with a stranger sitting across from you on the train home, seeing their bright-yellow *Playbill* clutched in hand, another curled tight in your own fist. “How was that show?” you wonder. “I almost got tickets to that one.” That moment on the street, thirty-five minutes before show time, when you pass the star heading into the stage door in time for the half-hour call. Broadway’s explicit and implicit schedules orchestrate those movements, direct those encounters. Seasons, performance calendars, and curtain times may not take shape with those ends in view, but they nonetheless occasion Broadway’s particular sociality.

When you walk through the Theater District just before the curtain rises, you are part of a collective audience for the theater of Broadway—whether your destination that day is a seat in an actual theater or no. The flashing signs, street performers, hot-dog vendors, arcades, memorabilia, tourists, all contribute to that sense of Broadway as an exciting, special place to be. When *42nd Street*’s Julian Marsh lures Peggy Sawyer with the “Lullaby of Broadway,” he sings not of fame and art but of noise and movement and people and restaurants:

The rumble of the subway train,
The rattle of the taxis,
The daffodils who entertain,
At Angelo’s and Maxie’s.⁶⁴

The 2020 pandemic stilled Broadway by closing the theaters. But even when audiences return to their seats, Broadway won’t really be back until Marsh’s “hidee hi and boopa doo” return to Times Square, too.

Notes

¹For the 1918 pandemic's effects on the theaters, see "Entire Country Near Closed; Few Hopeful Reports Received," *Variety*, October 4, 1918 and subsequent weeks through late November.

²"Drastic Steps Taken to Fight Influence Here," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1918.

³William J. Baumol et al., *Study of the New York Theater*, Vol. 2 (New York City Cultural Council, 1972), p. 60.

⁴Listings were given in *The New York Times* as advertisements. Some shows could not be accounted for and have been excluded.

⁵"N.Y. Local for Sunday Shows," *Billboard*, July 30, 1932; "Musicians Demand Shows on Sundays," *The New York Times*, January 6, 1934.

⁶"Equity May Favor Shows for Sunday," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1929.

⁷"Stagehands, T.M.A.T. at Odds with Equity on Sundays; Claim Actors' Org is Stymieing Sabbath Shows," *Variety*, April 12, 1939.

⁸"Equity Votes Year of Sunday Shows," *The New York Times*, August 7, 1935.

⁹James F. Reilly, "Interim Report on Sundays," *The New York Times*, March 9, 1941.

¹⁰Robert Simonson, "When Did Broadway Shows Start Offering Sunday Performances?," *Playbill*, April 4, 2011.

¹¹"Theatre League Next Has Negotiations with Musicians, Dramatists (Others)," *Variety*, June 15, 1960.

¹²Louis Calta, "Broadway Curtains to Go Up at 7:30," *The New York Times*, September 21, 1970; Otis Guernsey, *Curtain Times: The New York Theater, 1965-1987* (Applause Books, 1987), p. 201; Samuel L. Leiter, *Ten Seasons: New York Theatre in the Seventies* (University of Michigan Press, 1986), p. 160.

¹³Charlotte Harmon, "7:30 Curtain Fight," *Backstage*, October 23, 1970.

¹⁴"N.Y. Restaurants Like 8 p.m. Curtain; More Shutterings," *Variety*, June 23, 1971.

¹⁵"8 P.M. B'way Legit Curtain Compromise Likely; Restaurants Map Co-Op Tie-In," *Variety*, September 8, 1971.

¹⁶"League Hedges on 8 P.M. Curtain; Say Promotional Ante Not Put Up," *Variety*, September 11, 1972.

¹⁷John Madden, "Staggered B'way Curtain Times Likely Under Stagehand-Prod. Pact," *Variety*, August 15, 1973.

¹⁸Leiter, *Ten Seasons*, p. 159-60.

¹⁹John G. Watts, "Economics of the Broadway Legitimate Theatre, 1948-1958," Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1969, p. 36.

²⁰"Brokers Urged to Add Time to Tic Orders," *The Billboard*, August 25, 1945.

²¹*Billboard's* campaign was spurred by a 17-day newspaper and mail-deliverer strike, which revealed how intensely audiences relied on advertisements to explain the curtain time. When the printers' union struck in 1962, the League banded together to distribute their own weekly flyer with curtain times and prices. "B'way's Press Blackout Blues," *Variety*, December 19, 1962.

²²Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (Vintage Books, 1994), p. 82.

²³"7:30 Curtain Called a Success by League," *Backstage*, January 22, 1971.

²⁴Sam Zolotow, "'Iceman Cometh' to Start at 5:30," *The New York Times*, September 6, 1946.

²⁵"Brooks Atkinson, 'Four-Hour O'Neill,'" *The New York Times*, October 10, 1946.

²⁶The assumptions here are important, but likely not disqualifying. Spot-checking some revival lengths against film versions of some shows demonstrates relative consistency over time. More meaningfully, revivals cannot serve as a reliable sample for historical running times because they represent not a random sample but rather a highly selective group of the most successful (in this case meaning "revivable") shows. It is entirely possible that Broadway shows are more likely to get revivals if they are longer than their contemporaries, and thus seen as "heftier" or more important.

²⁷"Only 25% of Theatregoers are Out-of-Town Visitors," *The Billboard*, January 14, 1928; Daniel Starch, *A Survey of 'The Playbill'* (New York Theatre Program Corporation, 1935).

²⁸Thomas Gale Moore, *The Economics of the American Theater* (Duke University Press, 1968), p. 71.

²⁹"'Pacific' to Go Up at 6 Bells on Mondays," *The Billboard*, January 19, 1952.

³⁰"Aim 7:30 Curtain for B'way Legit to Aid Suburbia," *Variety*, June 4, 1969. Although one woman told a Broadway audience survey in 1968 that she and her husband couldn't attend the theater on a work night

because “We’d have to leave too early for him to get home and dress without it being a hectic mess.” William Goldman Archive, Columbia University, Box 27, Folder 2002.

³¹Frank Segers, “Showmen Consensus Favors 7:30 Rise; Off-B’way Cautious: Cafes Worried,” *Variety*, September 23, 1970.

³²Karen Hauser, *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2018–19* (The Broadway League, 2019), p. 15.

³³Brian Mahoney, “Research: The Daytrippers,” *Shubert Ticketing Blog*, June 1, 2011, <http://www.shubert-ticketnotes.com/shubert-ticketing-blog/research-the-daytrippers>.

³⁴Baumol, *Study of the New York Theater*, pp. 61–2 and 25–27. See also William Goldman, *The Season* (Lime-light, 1984), pp. 406–8, cited, too, by the study’s authors.

³⁵Brian Mahoney, “Research: Update on 7pm Weeknight Curtains,” *Shubert Ticketing Blog*, June 1, 2012, <http://www.shubertticketnotes.com/shubert-ticketing-blog/research-update-on-7pm-weeknight-curtains>.

³⁶Brian Mahoney, “How important is curtain time to customers?,” *Shubert Ticketing Blog*, March 26, 2015, <http://www.shubertticketnotes.com/shubert-ticketing-blog/-how-important-is-curtain-time-to-customers>.

³⁷Brian Mahoney, “What is the problem with Wednesday nights?” and “What Can We Do About Wednesday (Evenings)?,” *Shubert Ticketing Blog*, November 20, 2014 and April 2, 2015, <http://www.shubertticketnotes.com/shubert-ticketing-blog/-what-is-the-problem-with-wednesday-nights> and <http://www.shubertticketnotes.com/shubert-ticketing-blog/-what-can-we-do-about-wednesday-evenings>.

³⁸Karen Hauser, *Who Goes to Broadway? The Demographics of the Audience, 2002–3* (The League of American Theatres and Producers, Inc., 2003), p. 23.

³⁹William J. Baumol and William Bowen, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* (The MIT Press, 1968).

⁴⁰Note that *Playbill* reported “under 18” while the 1963–65 survey reported “under 20.” This may account for any seeming difference. Milton Alexander, *Who’s Who in the Audience* (*Playbill*, 1982), p. 12.

⁴¹Hauser, *Demographics, 2018–19*, p. 18.

⁴²Hauser, *Demographics, 2018–19*, p. 18.

⁴³These estimates assume that the Broadway League’s middle age cohorts (18–24, 25–34, 35–49, and 50–64) are evenly distributed within their ranges, and then subdivide their data into cohorts that match *Playbill*’s historical categories (under 30, 30–49, 50–59, and 60 and over) to effect a longitudinal analysis.

⁴⁴Tim Carter, *Oklahoma! The Making of an American Musical*, Rev. Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 162.

⁴⁵Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (Metropolitan Books, 2013), p. 186.

⁴⁶Milton Esterow, “Broadway Plays Shunning Tryout,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 1964.

⁴⁷Jo Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre: A Memoir and a Portfolio* (Bramhall, 1965), pp. 35–6

⁴⁸Louis Calta, “Broadway Previews Paying Off for Producer and Theatergoer,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 1963 and Esterow, “Broadway Plays Shunning Tryout.”

⁴⁹John Corry, “Broadway Opening? Matter of Economics,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1979.

⁵⁰Louis Calta, “Producer Offers Half-Price Seats,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1961 and Corry, “Broadway Opening? Matter of Economics.”

⁵¹Corry, “Broadway Opening? Matter of Economics.”

⁵²Corry, “Broadway Opening? Matter of Economics.”

⁵³“League Opposes Preview Reviews,” *Variety*, February 2, 1966.

⁵⁴“Critics to Protest Preferential Admissions to B’way Previews; Suggest Pre-Opening Coverage,” *Variety*, October 24, 1979.

⁵⁵“League Wants One Press Preem, And No More Critics at Previews,” *Variety*, March 26, 1986.

⁵⁶“N.Y. Times, News and AP Review ‘Merlin’ Previews; Post Abstains,” *Variety*, February 2, 1983.

⁵⁷John Chapman, “Whatever Became of That Joyous B’Way Event, the Opening Night?,” *Variety*, January 7, 1970.

⁵⁸Michael Paulson, “Delayed Opening for Mamet’s ‘China Doll,’” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2015.

⁵⁹James Wright, *Historia histrionica: An Historical Account of the English Stage* (London: William Haws, 1699), p. 5.

⁶⁰Goldman, *The Season*, pp. 23–24.

⁶¹Goldman, *The Season*, p. 403.

⁶²Michael Paulson, “Broadway, Symbol of New York Resilience, Shuts Down Amid Virus Threat,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2020.

⁶³“Legits Go Modern,” *Variety*, May 1, 1935.

⁶⁴Al Dublin and Harry Warren, “Lullaby of Broadway,” performed in *42nd Street* (1980).

Chapter Seven Repetition

A few years ago, I had occasion to hear musical theater star Betty Buckley share some anecdotes about her illustrious career. One story she told was about her work in *Pippin* (1972), in which she played Catherine. Buckley recalled the evening she decided to leave the show. Having entered to deliver Catherine's first monologue, Buckley felt like she had walked through a veil, with no idea where she was or what she was supposed to do. Staring helplessly down into the orchestra pit, completely lost, Buckley caught the music director's eyes. He prompted her with the first words of the speech, and Buckley snapped out of it, rushing through the monologue. As she came offstage, she turned to the stage manager and gave her two weeks' notice.

That night came around two years and eight months into Buckley's work on the show. That's over 1,000 performances, eight times a week, for 140 weeks. Every time should be essentially the same: the same angle of the head for Bob Fosse's exacting choreography, the same pitches hit in harmony, the same emotional beats. Even for the most masterful performers such repetition is extremely demanding. And when you can no longer keep your attention on the tasks at hand, it is time, as Buckley knew, to leave.

Previous chapters have emphasized change as a theme of Broadway's history. From the number of theaters to curtain times to the key players in the industry, Broadway is constantly reshaping itself. Novelty is also an important part of Broadway's brand, often featuring in what Broadway advertises to audiences: "See the new musical attraction!" "A performance unlike any other!" "Now, for the first time on a Broadway stage . . ." The promise of the new provides energy to Broadway. It is also inherent in the attraction of live performance, where the prospect of something truly untoward—a spectacular failure that makes this performance, tonight, truly different and unrepeatable—is often regarded as the key element differentiating theater from its rivals film and television.

And yet: for all of novelty's importance, Broadway depends on consistency, reliability, and repetition. Such repetition embraces more than a single performer's relentless pursuit of excellence. It appears in the internal consistency of each individual production, as casts and crews keep a show running in a condition as close to that in which they opened as possible. It appears in the frequent attendees, the true Broadway buffs who make up the core audience for the industry and a large share of the overall Broadway audience for new productions. And it appears in the long-running productions and revivals that are central to Broadway's identity. Looking at repetition on stage, in the audience, and across Broadway as a whole exposes how, despite the importance of change on Broadway, repetition creates an essential sense of stability within the constantly churning industry.

Production Stability

On April 10, 1980, Paul Osborn's *Morning's at Seven*, a small-town comedy of family and old age, was revived at the Lyceum Theatre. The production garnered wide-spread praise for its veteran cast, which included Nancy Marchand, Teresa Wright, Maureen O'Sullivan, and Gary Merrill, under the direction of Vivian Matalon. It played 581 total performances: 16 previews, an Actor's Fund benefit, and 564 regular performances. In

at least some important ways, the final performance was very unlike the first preview. For one thing, most of the original cast members left the show at some point, and thus almost all the performers were new. Even those actors who stayed with the production (Maurice Copeland as Thor and Maureen O'Sullivan as Esty) would have adapted their work in that final performance to suit their new colleagues' contributions. And yet. The set was the same, the costumes (with appropriate adjustments for the new cast members' bodies) were the same, the lighting was the same, the staging was the same, the script was the same. An audience at the 581st performance could hope to have a theatrical experience very similar to that had by an audience at the first performance. This is part of the promise of Broadway: the production stays the same.

Keeping the production the same requires tremendous effort from cast and crew alike. For eight performances a week, for almost a year and a half, nine performers hit their marks, spoke their lines, held their props, entered and exited, while backstage workers raised and lowered the curtain, hit light and sound cues, and coordinated wardrobe changes. It is, in fact, somewhat remarkable that Broadway casts and crews repeat an essentially identical performance with such stability over such a long run. Indeed, the difference between less successful theater of this kind and Broadway lies in no small part in the precision with which Broadway casts and crews repeat themselves.

Such repetition requires multiple kinds of upkeep, both of the material production and of the performances themselves. Reports by the stage manager after each performance of *Morning's at Seven*, of which 579 survive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, catalogue this labor, which consumed enormous time and effort.¹ Few of the kinds of problems faced on any given day would have distorted the production dramatically. But taken cumulatively, these problems could eat away at the production until the company's laborious efforts to build a successful show gave way to sloppy, error-ridden work. (This is, of course, the comic structure of Michael Frayn's great backstage farce *Noises Off* [1983].)

What kinds of problems? Consider the deteriorating material production. The *Morning's at Seven* set by William Ritman included grass that, due to daily trampling by the actors, required frequent regluing. Wooden stairs broke; lighting equipment fell out of alignment; wigs grew disheveled. Prior to one performance, five electricians, three carpenters, and one property man spent eight hours with lighting designer Richard Nelson making minor adjustments to the lights and refreshing the colored gels. At the next performance, the stage manager noted glowingly that "The show looked *beautiful*. I'd forgotten how rich and full the lighting used to be."² They repeated the same process six months later.³

Actors required similar upkeep (though no glue was involved). Director Matalon kept a remote perspective on the show, but returned at intervals to watch the performance and give notes to the cast. Such notes often threw the company off its focus at the subsequent show, leading to a temporarily less reliable performance. "The first performance following a director's note session is a poor one," stage manager Marnel Sumner observed. "One in which the actors play the notes instead of the character and/or the play. One could almost feel a hesitation before each line that contained a note and then the actor proceeded to louse it up."⁴ This reveals an important distinction between the company's success in any given performance and the production's general stability. Keeping the production

stable and repeatable over the long run warranted sacrifice and an occasional stiff and uncertain performance.

The most disruptive effects on the production came from cast changes: either brief absences necessitating an understudy's appearance, or permanent departures, requiring a new actor to slide into a role. Over the production's run a total of twenty-one actors occupied the nine roles and five understudy slots. (Understudies mostly covered multiple characters.) Those twenty-one actors combined to form *thirty-eight* unique cast configurations on stage during the run. The original cast appeared together in only a third of the 579 documented performances—meaning two-thirds of the performances could not fully repeat the production as originally designed because the performers were not the same. More startlingly, fully a quarter of all performances featured cast configurations that played together fewer than 16 times. In other words, one out of every four performances took place with a set of actors that played those specific parts for under two weeks of performances total. When you consider the precision required to make a delicate, high-sensibility comedy successful, the production's success despite constant cast changes is nothing short of remarkable.

Such sustained success, however, is hard work. When Kate Reid replaced Nancy Marchand as Ida her initial performances were notably uneven. Reid struggled with her lines and seemed, from the stage manager's perspective, not to understand how her part fit into the rest of the show. Yet Reid worked with the Assistant Stage Manager, took notes from Sumner, and grew into the role. Understudies pose different challenges. No matter how able understudies may be, stepping into a role one has never performed with an audience or one's fellow cast members is a tremendous challenge—and the source of more than a few Broadway legends, including Shirley MacLaine's breakout performance substituting for Carol Haney in *The Pajama Game* (1954). Almost two in every five performances of *Morning's at Seven*—or, in an eight-performance week, three performances per week—included an understudy. As stage manager Sumner put it in one note, “the first performance for any understudy [...] tests the mettle of not just the understudy in question [...] but also the stage managers, the other members of the cast, the wardrobe and hair departments—everyone involved in getting the show on.”⁵ Even crew replacements could pose similar challenges. “A new man on house curtain and it was *slow!*” Sumner complained in a technical note.⁶ When the flyman changed again later in the run, the same problem arose, leading Sumner to arrange a “curtain rehearsal” a half-hour before that night's performance.⁷ Cast and crew changes thus pose a particular challenge the production's ability to repeat itself and require extra labor—whether regular understudy rehearsals or irregular curtain or line rehearsals—to maintain the production's integrity.

Even amidst such efforts to keep the cast and physical production up to snuff, errors creep in, both onstage and off. The stage managers' reports catalogue a stream of mistakes and disturbances, though of varying significance, scattered throughout the production's run (Figure 1).

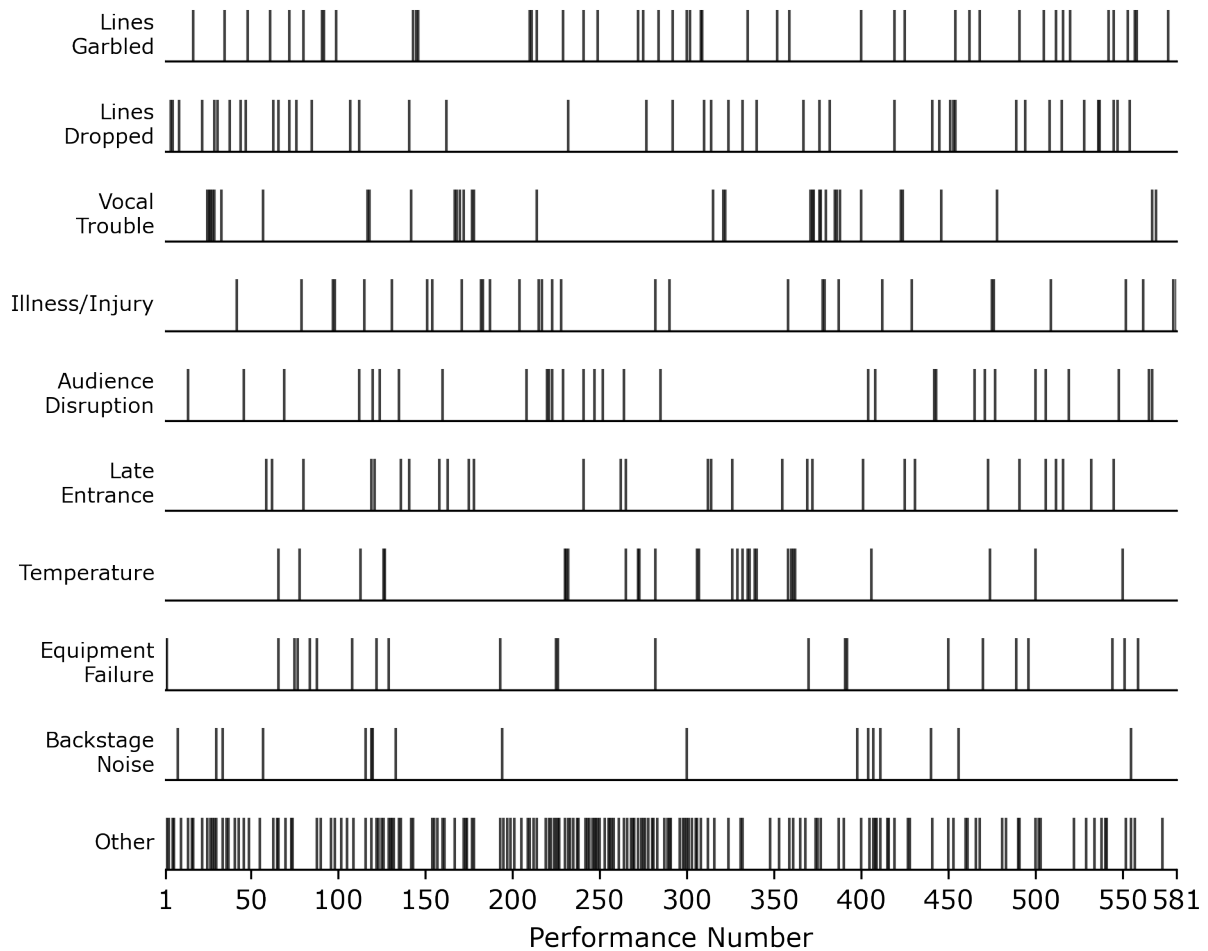


Figure 1: Errors and Disruptions in *Morning's at Seven*

By far the most frequent problems related to lines—lines garbled (as when cast members replaced one character's name for another) or dropped entirely, as well as vocal trouble that came from the strain of eight shows a week or lingered after the frequent illnesses that plagued the relatively elderly cast. Late entrances were also a common performer error. Other problems came from exogenous disruptive forces (Figure 2).

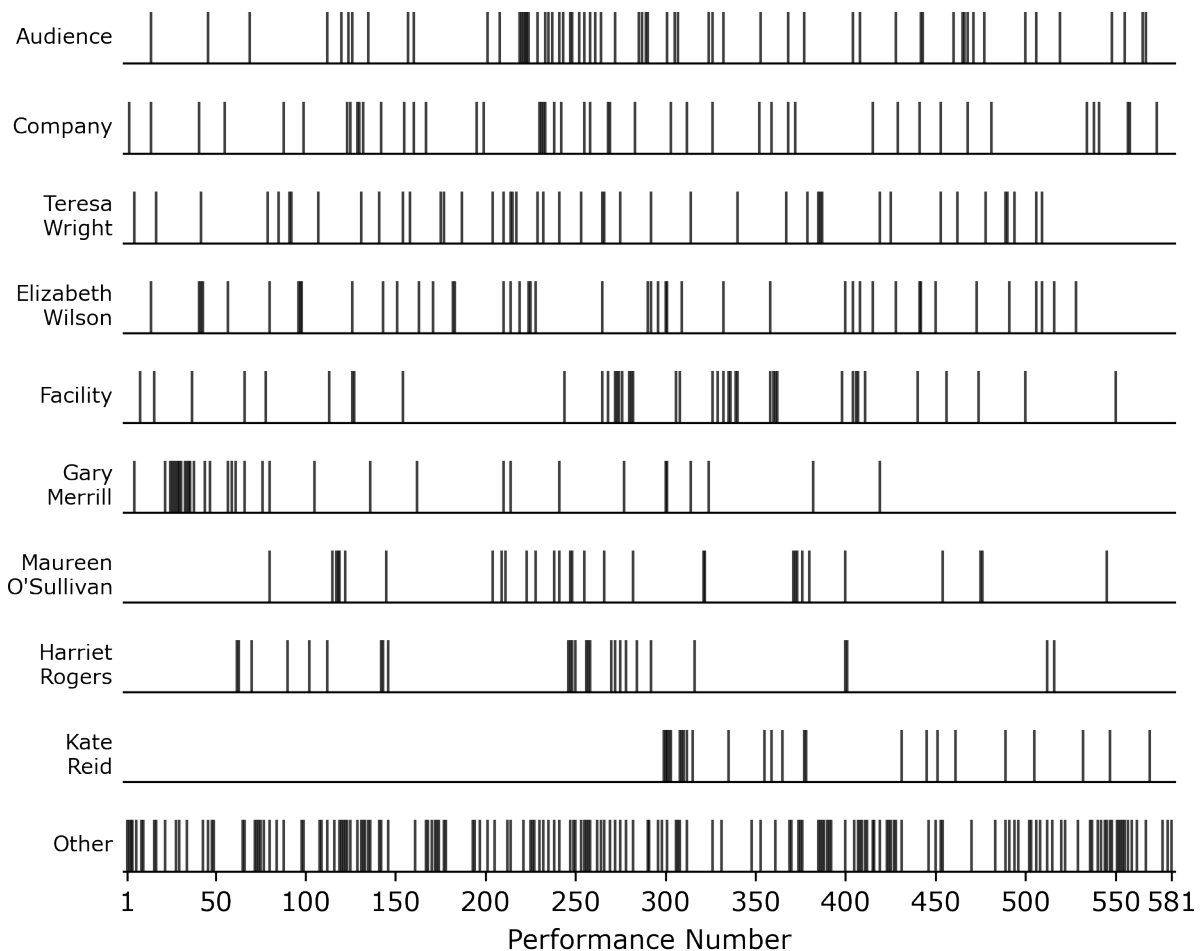


Figure 2: Sources of Errors and Disruptions in *Morning's at Seven*

Audiences, for instance, caused the most problems—68 distinct incidents noted in the reports. Such disruptions ranged from noisy drunks to a patron who vomited in the mezzanine during the first intermission. Even when the audience behaved, the theater building itself often did not. Backstage temperature became a near constant source of complaint in the winter, often solved by turning on a heating system that caused loud clanging in the pipes. Stage manager Sumner thought temperature very important to the company's performance and to the show's reception. As he noted sarcastically after one show, "It's the first time this week that the auditorium was comfortable. We also gave our best show and got our best reaction. I wonder if these facts are related."⁸

The specific history of *Morning's at Seven's* trials and tribulations likely differs in important ways from that of other shows. Some productions may have had fewer errors; others, more. Audiences may have behaved more or less predictably at various points in Broadway history and for certain types of productions. (Think of all the shows today for young audiences generally untutored in Broadway's spectatorial norms.) But every show, in one way or another, wrestles with the same fundamental problem: putting on the performance audiences expect eight times a week. And while some of the magic of live theater on Broadway derives from the potential for error—a dropped line that creates

an unexpectedly comic moment; a scenic disaster that brings performers and audience into unusual communion—Broadway’s brand derives in part from the reliability of its product. Some of this drive for pure repetition may make Broadway more like film and television, and less unpredictably live, while also putting more and more pressure on performers to repeat a very strict production script.⁹ Yet this is also Broadway’s competitive difference from most regional theater and, certainly, most local revivals of Broadway shows. Broadway productions are, by virtue of their high-caliber cast and crew as well as their budgets and work rules, more reliably repetitive than work produced elsewhere. And this repetition guarantees that seeing a show, with all its attendant costs in dollars, time, and effort, will not be worthless due to any failure of performance quality. Broadway’s startlingly good repetition within each production is one of the keys to its success.

Frequent Attendees

Among the most amusing disruptive forces in *Morning’s at Sevens* production reports is the presence of a celebrity in the audience. “Having superstars out front creates a more subdued reception,” observed one note after a performance that had won the starry cast “no entrance applause.” The purported cause? “Paul Newman was very noticeably in attendance.”¹⁰

Newman, of course, had a long theatrical career in addition to his film stardom, and it was probably not unusual to find him in a Broadway audience. Indeed, though more famous than most such attendees, Newman represents an important category of frequent Broadway audience member: the theater professional. Whether actors, producers, designers, teachers, or agents, and whether or not they have ever been formally associated with a Broadway show, theater professionals undoubtedly make up a large portion of the regular audience. Broadway depends heavily on the patronage of such frequent attendees. The industry repeats itself not only onstage, but in the auditorium, too.

Repetition in the audience takes two significant forms. First, for some shows, their audiences are comprised of people who see many, many shows in a season. Second, the frequent attendees are more likely to attend particular kinds of shows, particularly plays and new productions, than other audiences. In other words, in addition to the audience’s geographic dispersal discussed in Chapter Six, the Broadway audience is differentiated by level of engagement.

Implicit here is a double way of thinking about the Broadway audience: (1) a collection of unique individual audience members who come to see a show at least once (the set of all audience in a given season), and (2) a pool of people who collectively buy a much larger number of tickets. In 2018–19, for instance, the Broadway League estimated a unique audience of 3,486,367 individuals who saw their productions. But Broadway filled 14,768,255 seats for performances that same season. A huge proportion of tickets sold every year are thus sold to repeat purchasers, and many of those attend Broadway extremely frequently. These facts are also true historically and have further implications for how we think about the audience for shorter- versus longer-running shows.

The history of Broadway audience data, as discussed in Chapter Eight, is sketchy at best. But from the available information, it is clear that the size of the frequent-attendee

audience has shrunk because the average number of performances attended has fallen significantly from its heights (Table 1).¹¹

Table 1: Average Attendance Frequency

Survey Year	Average # of Productions Attended
1935	12.9
1965	6.6
1982	6.1
2002	5
2019	4.4

Some of this shrinkage is certainly a function of Broadway’s smaller scale, some a product of higher prices, and some a result of a wider range of leisure opportunities, including television. Yet the outcome is a startlingly different relationship between Broadway and its audience over time. In 1935, an astounding 30% of patrons attended 15 or more performances that season, accounting for 66% of all tickets sold. (Some patrons went to Broadway so often that the survey’s top category for attendance frequency was “Over 50.”) One-off attendance, by contrast, was extremely rare (only 5.3% of patrons) and a mere 24.6% of audience members attended four shows or fewer. Seventy years later, three times as much of the total audience (77.2%) attended four shows or fewer and a whopping 38.6% attended only one show. Only 4.7% of the total modern audience attended 15 or more shows. Thus the extremely high-frequency attendees are a smaller, less devoted lot than historically. Nonetheless, today’s frequent attendees still matter because they buy a disproportionate number of tickets (28%) relative to their size as part of the total audience: a very significant proportion of the seats sold.

Unfortunately, no clear data exist to parse out attendance frequency by the actual shows (or types of shows) attended. The Broadway League has reported the intuitive fact that audiences closer to New York attend more frequently than those farther away. And they have observed that audiences for plays see more performances than the audiences for musicals: 6.8 shows per season versus 3.9, respectively.¹² This points to some conjectural math worth exploring, estimates that help to expose how bifurcated the modern Broadway audience really is.

Imagine two productions in 2019: one, a mega-hit such as *The Phantom of the Opera*; the other, a new play by an unknown (outside of the theater community) American playwright, such as Lucas Hnath and his *A Doll’s House, Part 2*. *Phantom* has been running for over 30 years. By that 30-year anniversary, 18 million people had seen the show at the Majestic Theatre alone. Certainly, on any given night, some audience members are New York locals, some even people who attend the theater frequently: a grandparent taking grandchildren to their first show; a special occasion for people who rarely attend the theater; a class trip. But the bulk of the audience will be tourists from elsewhere in the United States and from out of the country. By contrast, Hnath’s play will get mostly theater aficionados, locals who have seen his work at Playwrights Horizons or simply want to see his star, Laurie Metcalf, who has become a Broadway darling. Furthermore, for a very new production, some sizable number of the audience likely work in the theater industry. They

may be friends of people involved in the production, arts students in New York, or simply checking out the competition. (Of course, if Hnath’s play sells poorly, producers may run an intense advertising campaign and push to get tourists into the seats, but that can be a hard sell. Apart from being a play, and therefore less invitingly spectacular, Hnath’s show expects an audience to have some knowledge of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, to which his play is purportedly a sequel. This is not your optimal ticket for a foreign tourist interested in “Broadway,” but not necessarily in theater.) The two productions should thus have very, very different audiences.

Broadway League data correlating audience geography and a production’s age bear this out. (Unfortunately, such information is not broken down into generic subcategories, but plays generally never run as long as musicals.)

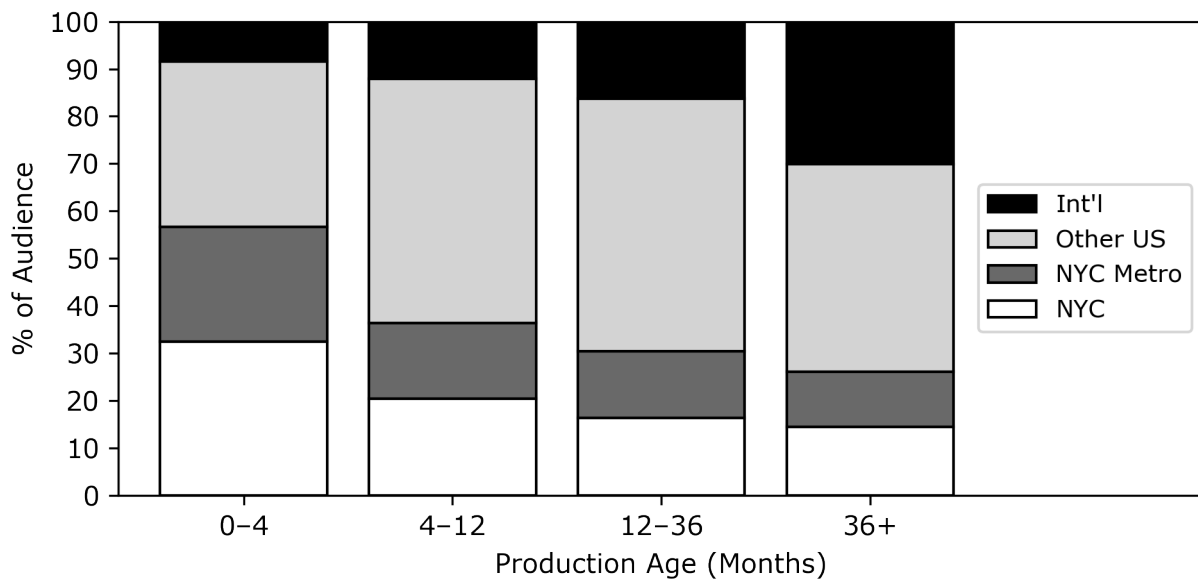


Figure 3: Audience Geography and Production Age

At less than four months, productions get almost 60% local audiences. The non-local US audience expands drastically from month 4 to 3 years; ceding some ground eventually to the international audience.

Can we imagine a similar chart broken down not by geography, but by attendance frequency? In 2018–19, Broadway’s ticket sales broke down by attendance frequency as in Table 2.

Table 2: Seats Sold by Frequency of Broadway Attendance

Performances Attended in Past Year	Number of Tickets
1–4	5.4 million
5–14	5.2 million
15+	4.1 million

And by age of production, the number of seats sold looked like Table 3.

Table 3: Seats Sold by Production Age

Production Age	Number of Seats Sold
0–4 mos.	4.1 million
4 mos.–1 yr.	2.9 million
1–3 yrs.	2.8 million
3yrs.+	4.9 million

It is remarkable that the number of tickets sold to the most frequent attendees (fifteen-plus performances per year) equals the number of seats sold to productions younger than four months, and that the older productions account therefore for the remainder of the audience. Obviously, we would not expect a perfect correlation: some international tourists will wander into Hnath’s audience for their only Broadway experience; a certain number of theatrically inclined Oregonians or Missourians might pop into Hnath’s play for an annual, three-show jaunt. And of course even the most seasoned theater-goer eventually takes a friend back to *Phantom*. But by and large, we might expect a chart mapping Broadway attendance frequency onto production age to look something like Figure 4, if audiences distribute themselves among performances something like Figure 5.

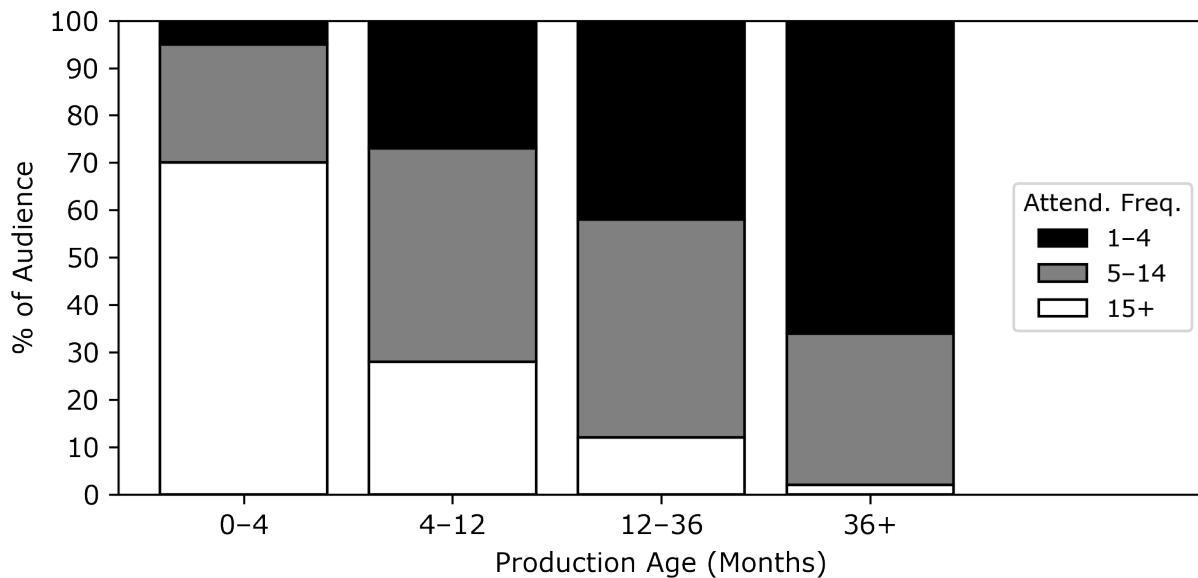


Figure 4: Audience Attendance Frequency and Production Age (Conjectured)

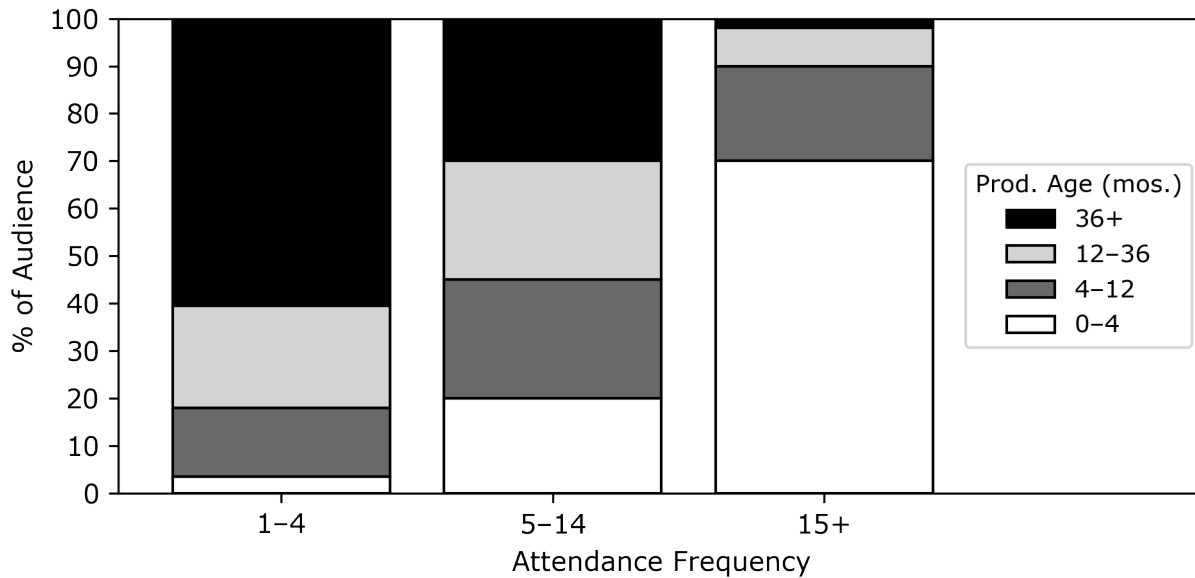


Figure 5: Production Age and Audience Attendance Frequency (Conjectured)

The upshot of these distributions (although they are entirely conjectural) is that Broadway’s most reliable audience, the truly devoted Broadway fans, would account for the vast majority of the audience for new productions. And, vice versa, the old productions likely seat only the most marginal, novice playgoers.

There is, however, an exception to this rule, audience members who serve yet another repetitive role on Broadway: fanatics. *Rent* (1996), for instance, garnered an ecstatic community of followers called “Rentheads,” cultivated in part through the sale of \$20 day-of-show tickets for which the faithful often camped out in front of the box office. Less than a year into the show’s Broadway run, reporter Michael Riedel spoke with fans who had seen the show twelve, sixteen, and a whopping 57 times.¹³ A 2008 article noted similar fandoms for shows such as *Spring Awakening*, *Xanadu*, and [title of show].¹⁴ And while 675-plus attendances at *Jersey Boys* might be an extreme outlier, such “superfandom” by “repeat attenders” seems to be common for most long-running shows.¹⁵

Reports on extreme attendance are mostly modern, though they echo nineteenth-century articles about Bowery b’hoys and matinée girls, as Caroline Heim as observed.¹⁶ It is likely—though not clear from the available record—that similar fandoms have existed in some form another throughout Broadway history. And yet it seems, too, that the modern long-running musical is a particular kind of vehicle for superfandom—offering in its excessive repetition of performances year after year, an opportunity for over-the-top adoration to be performed through repeat attendance. This mutual repetition—the way the repeated performances feed the repeat attenders—encourages us to turn our gaze from the audience to repetition at the level of the industry.

Broadway as Repertory

Just as the long-running show seems to have encouraged new forms of fandom and repeat attendance, so too has it changed the shape of the industry as a whole. In particular,

long-running shows take up space—theaters, talent, audience attention and money—in a finite marketplace. The upshot is that Broadway is less varied in a given season and its products are older than was historically the case. In other words, Broadway has become more repetitive. We can understand this best by examining the variety of Broadway’s offerings.

Imagine Broadway, for the moment, as a kind of repertory company, a troupe offering a set of performances to the audience each season. In a literal repertory company such as France’s national theater, the Comédie-Française, the repertory in a given season is the complete set of works presented during that time. Measuring a company’s repertory offers a good way to think about the variety of its offerings. Repertory variety comes in three flavors: the number of unique works staged; the number of performances per work (if you stage ten works, but nine of them get one performance and the other gets 91, that’s not much variety in practice); and the percentage of works that hold over from one season to the next. As we can see from the Comédie-Française’s programming in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century, the number of unique plays staged each season increased massively around 1750 (Figure 6).¹⁷

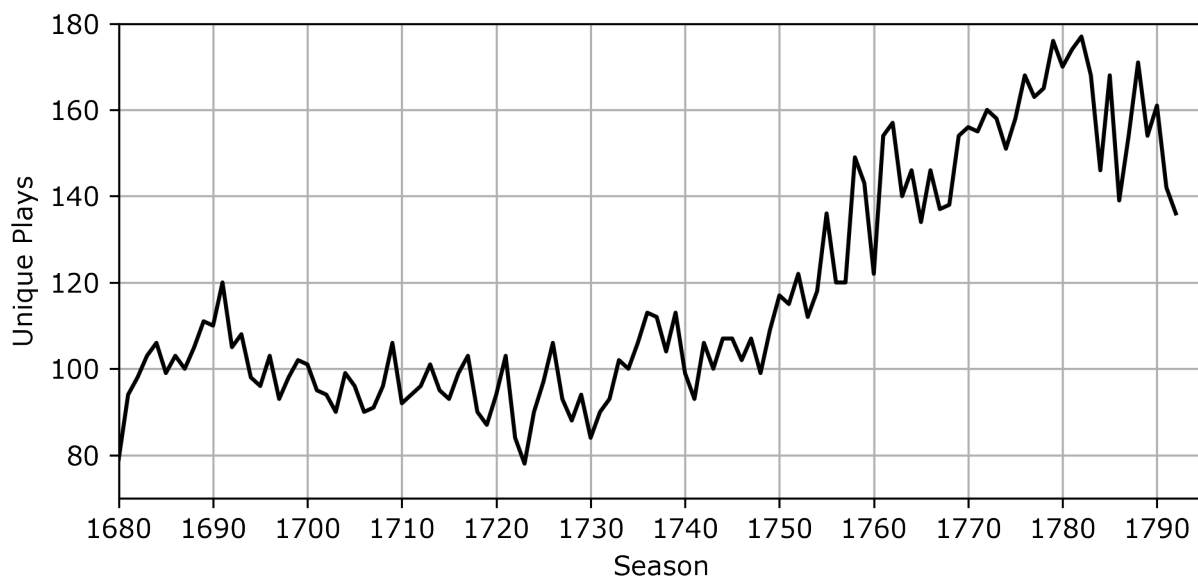


Figure 6: Unique Plays Per Season (Comédie-Française)

Such growth required a serious transformation in the company’s work, as the number of productions mounted or remounted each year grew quickly and significantly. Most plays at the Comédie-Française were staged more than once each season (Figure 7).

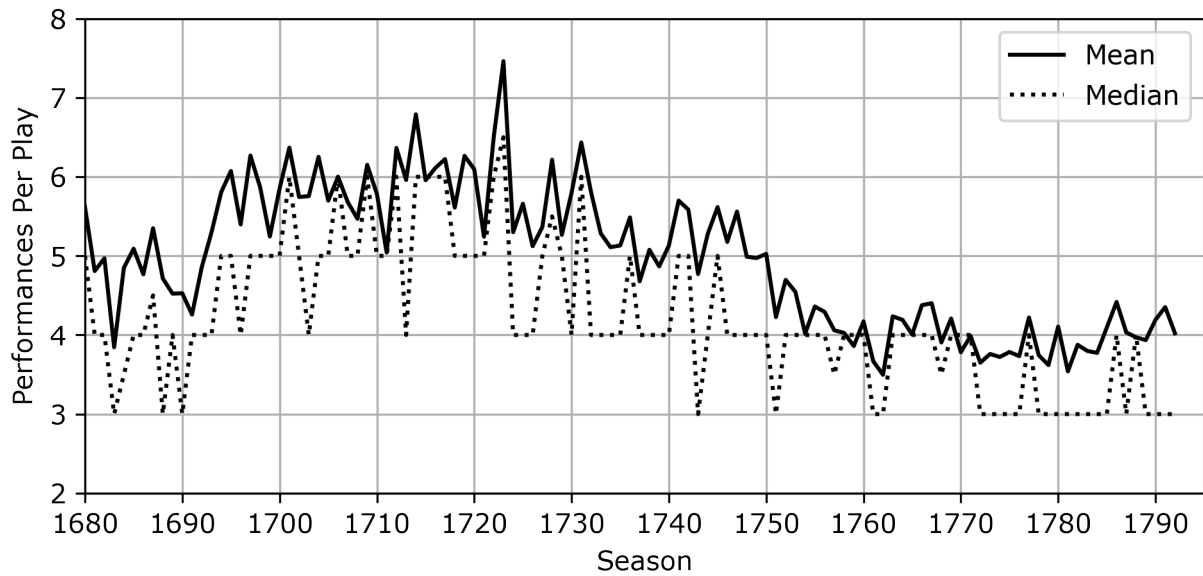


Figure 7: Performances Per Play (Comédie-Française)

The average number of performances per play shows an increase before they expanded the size of the annual repertory. The company’s overall performance capacity thus grew first, followed by their production capacity. Finally, the percentage of plays each season also performed in the previous season show a moderately regular stability in the repertory (Figure 8).

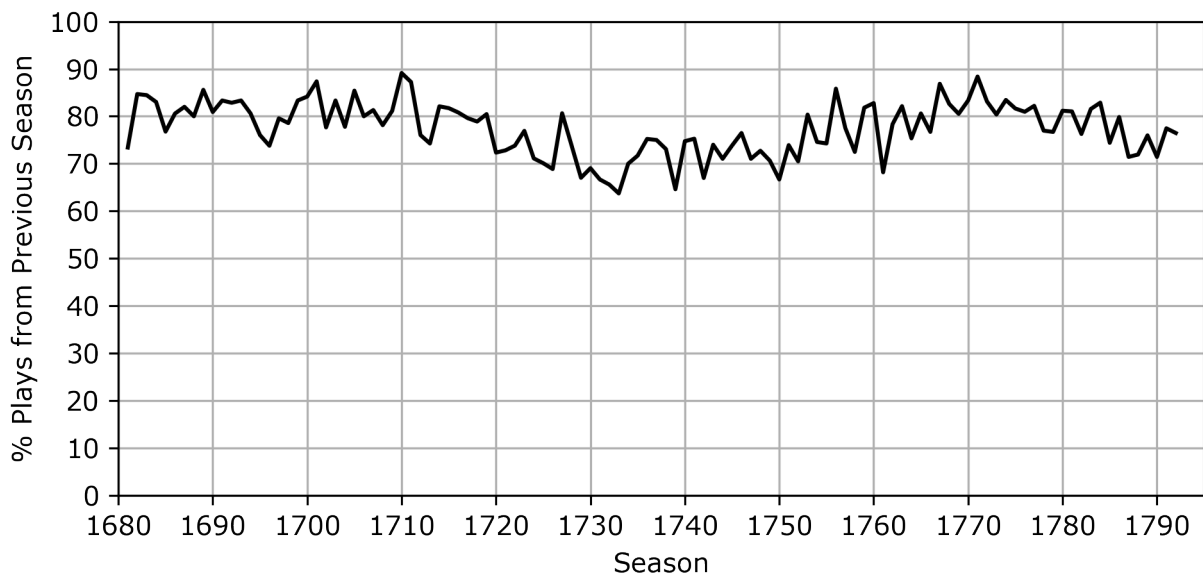


Figure 8: Percent of Plays Performed in the Previous Season (Comédie-Française)

Generally, between 70% and 80% of plays each season at had been performed the previous year, a high rate of retention. However, a dip in the 1730s shows the troupe increasing

the novelty of its offerings for an extended period. Together, these three figures show changes in the Comédie-Française's programming, how their repertory adapted to embrace first larger numbers of performances, then a wider variety of productions, all of which occurred only after an initial period of greater novelty in production choices each season.

Now Broadway is not, of course, a company like the Comédie-Française. But its set of offerings at any given moment and over time look something like a repertory: a collection of performances from among which audiences choose. Thinking about Broadway as offering a kind of repertory allows us to understand better the interplay of novelty and repetition at the level of the whole industry. Just as actual repertory companies must balance new work with old, so too does Broadway present its audiences with a mixture of familiar chestnuts and surprising innovations.

As addressed briefly in the Introduction, Broadway production boomed in the 1920s, collapsed into a stable range around the 1950s, then fell further in the 1980s before recovering slightly by late 2000s. Figure 9 shows the number of unique productions of all kinds that played each season since 1920.

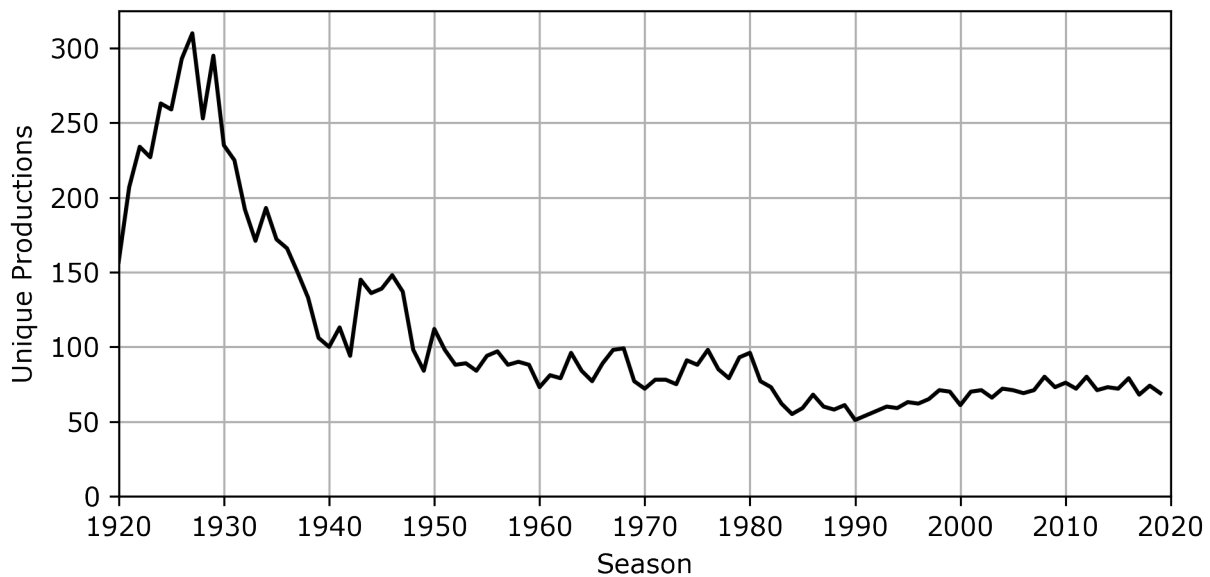


Figure 9: Unique Productions Per Season (Broadway)

In terms of the scale of its cultural output, measured as the number of productions each season, Broadway has shrunk drastically since its peak, though improved from its nadir. This shrinking production scale also increasingly depends on a smaller number of long-running shows. Performances per production each season generally inverts the repertory size trend (Figure 10).

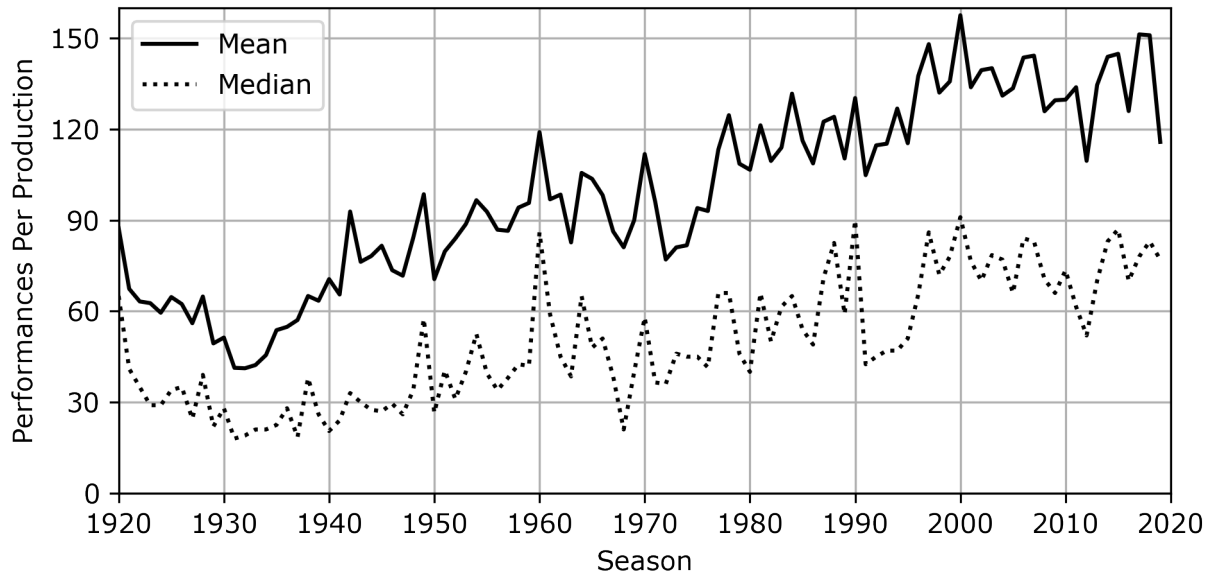


Figure 10: Performances Per Production (Broadway)

Broadway is thus not only smaller than it was, but also less varied in its offerings. Finally, yearly production stability, the percentage of productions each season that were also playing in the previous season, demonstrates most dramatically that Broadway is a more repetitive industry than it was (Figure 11).

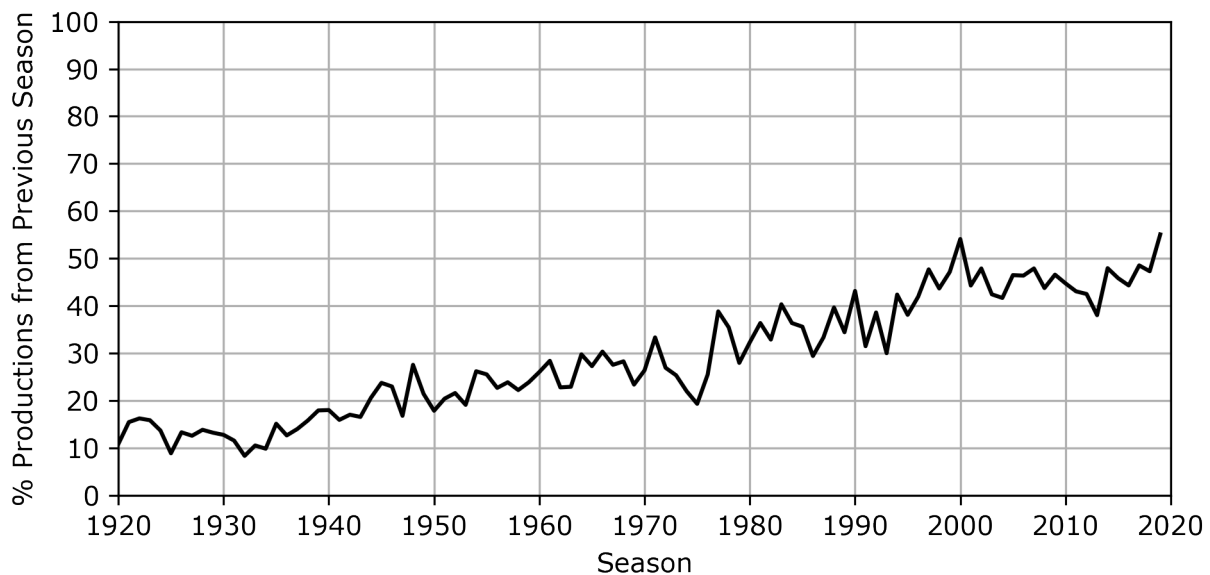


Figure 11: Percent of Productions Running in the Previous Season (Broadway)

In early decades, only 10 to 20% of shows could be expected to roll over from one season to the next. But that number climbed until 2000, where it has leveled off at around 45%

of productions. Furthermore, hold-over productions are also much older than they have been: productions last not one season, but many (Figure 12).

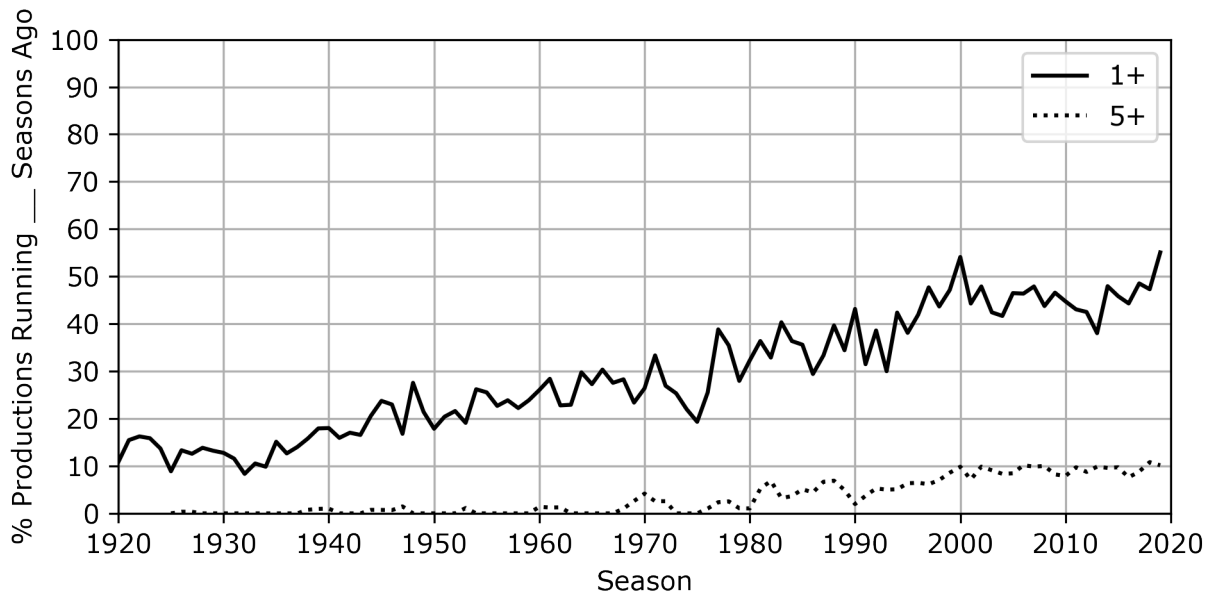


Figure 12: Percent of Productions Running in the Previous Season by Age

Until 1975, Broadway rarely had productions running five seasons or more, though the late 1960s hinted at the coming change. Today, about 10% of productions are that old—a percentage comparable to the scale of productions only one year old in the 1920s. Work on Broadway is thus not only more repetitive, but repetitive over longer time spans, not just annually predictable, but predictable over five, ten, fifteen, even, in the case of *The Phantom of the Opera*, thirty seasons.

As dominant as hold-over productions have become in number, their dominance increases when we measure them as a percent of total *performances* each season, rather than of productions (Figure 13).

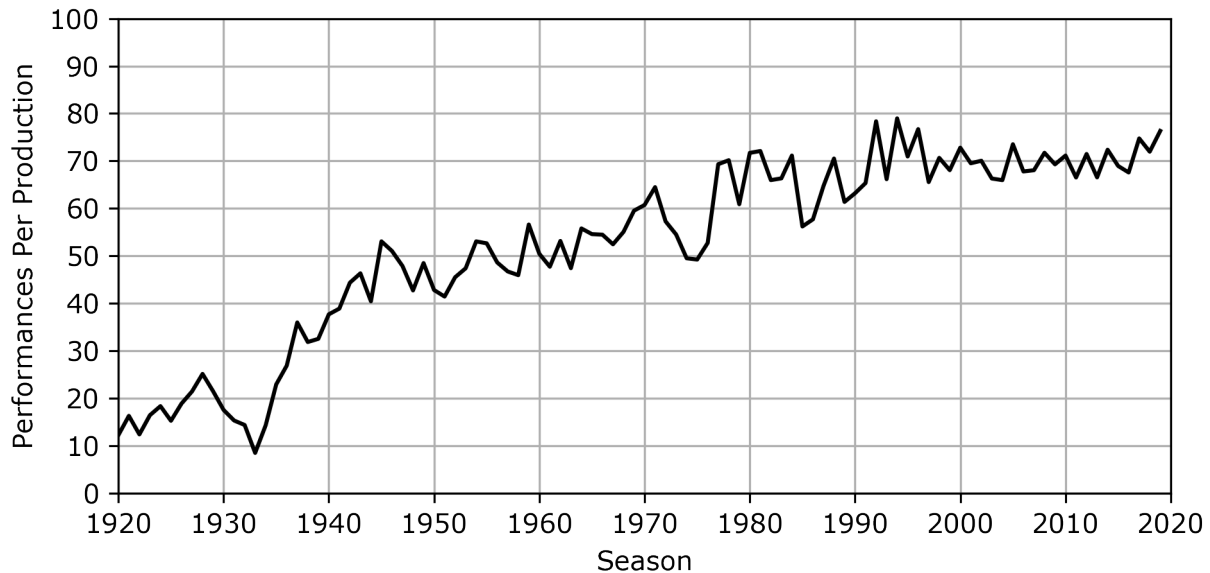


Figure 13: Percent of Performances by Productions Running in the Previous Season

As early as 1960, over half of performances each season were of productions that had opened in a previous season. Recently, 70% and sometimes 80% of performances were performed in the previous season—numbers like those of the Comédie-Française. And, again recognizing Broadway’s increasing ancience, more than one in five performances on Broadway in recent seasons are of shows at least five seasons old. One factor here is Broadway’s contraction: the massive closure of theaters during the Great Depression left fewer opportunities for new productions as a percentage of productions performed. Older productions dominate a field with fewer opportunities for new work. However, the nadir for the number of Broadway theaters came in the 1950s (as discussed in Chapter One); today’s 41 theaters is a relative peak, but has done little to diminish the stranglehold of long-running works.

Yet there is one flaw in thinking about the competition between long-running and new shows, and it returns us to the issues of audience addressed above. Recall that, as productions age they capture a significantly larger tourist and foreign audience, rather than local frequent attendees. New Yorkers dominate the audience for short-lived productions; the longer running shows have a larger non-US and larger foreign audience. In other words, Broadway’s long-running repertory seeks a very different audience member than its newest shows. Broadway’s repertory is thus able to sustain a double-game: an increasingly large long-running sector that defines “Broadway” for out-of-towners, and a historically small field of novelties each year that, while vying to become the new megahits, cater to the in-crowd.

Older shows have thus come to dominate the “repertory” on Broadway. Such long-running productions create a sense of repertory through their repetition. While long runs do not give way to other productions, providing that rotation that characterizes a true repertory, their constant presence generates an essential background stability against which Broadway’s novelties appear as novelties. They create the industry’s collective voice

and, through their constant presence, provide continuity of the kind that Molière’s comedies performed for the Comédie-Française. On the flip-side, the long-running shows limit Broadway’s variety, narrow the range of what Broadway presents each season, relative to the more unstable but more novelty-laden past.

Revivals

While some productions repeat year after year on Broadway, only some are productions of shows that have appeared on Broadway before. Of the 7,674 productions of plays and musicals since 1920, 1,546 were revivals, or about 20%. Revivals were relatively rare until the Second World War, barely surpassing 20% of all new plays and musicals in a season.

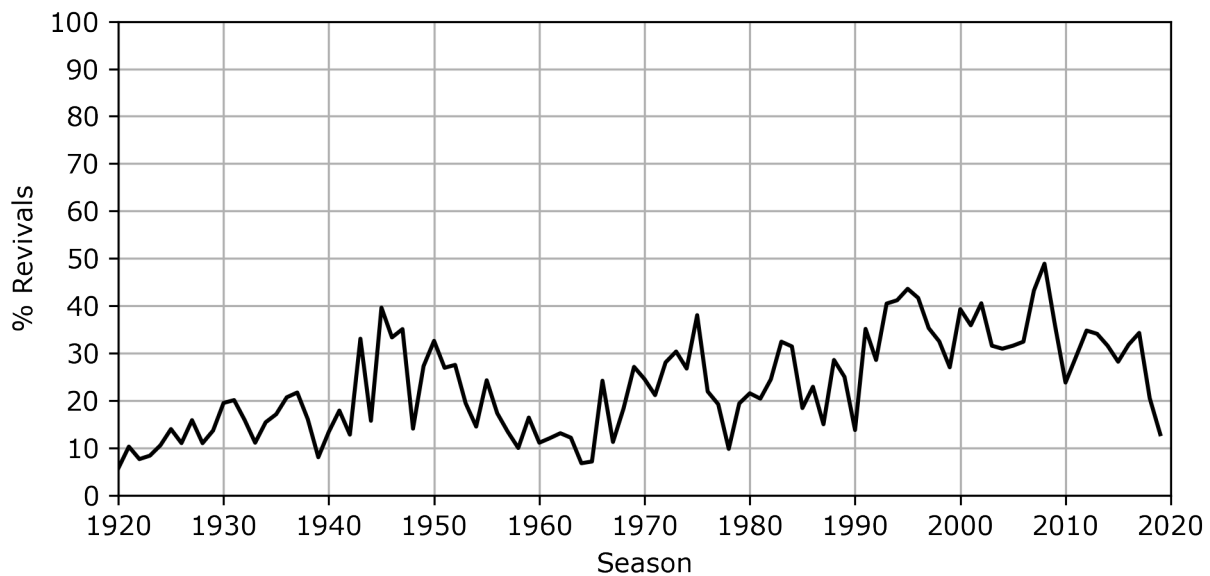


Figure 14: Revivals as Percent of New Productions by Season

They boomed during and after the war—one can imagine the desire for the familiar—but then fell off to a near historic low in 1964 and 1965.¹⁸ Although revivals were slightly more frequent from the mid-1960s (25–30%) than they had been before the war, the real boom occurred after 1990: peaks of 50% (in 1994 and 2008) and an average saturation of 42% held sway through 2010. The 1990s and early 2000s thus represented a historically repetitive period on Broadway, while the late 1950s and early 1960s were aberrantly novel relative to preceding and subsequent eras.

While over 600 shows have been revived since 1920, most of those only get one revival. A mere 132 shows have been produced more than three times. The most-revived are classics of Western drama: Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, Greek tragedies, along with Gilbert and Sullivan productions by the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company, which tapered off at mid-century. A small set of American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Eugene O’Neill have multiple plays with five or more productions, joined by an elite set of musicals, mostly from the Golden Age (*Show Boat* [1927] with seven; *Porgy*

and Bess (1935), *Oklahoma!* [1943], *Carousel* [1945], *Guys and Dolls* [1950], *West Side Story* [1957], each with six). This list of revivals accords with our sense of the Western and American dramatic canon. It is also logical that more recent shows are rarely on this list because they have had less time to establish themselves and become revivable. (*Spring Awakening* [2006], revived less than a decade after it originally closed, was an exception to this rule. In that case, the production concept, pairing deaf and hard-of-hearing actors with hearing performers, sustained much of the energy to make a revival possible on such a short time scale.) Revivability also feeds on itself: revivals are familiar to more audiences than un-revived shows, and each success makes possible the next revival. Yet revivals also test a show’s ability to respond to new interpretations and adapt to contemporary audiences.¹⁹

Importantly, revivals on Broadway have also been getting much older—the shows they revive last appeared longer and longer in the past (Figure 15).

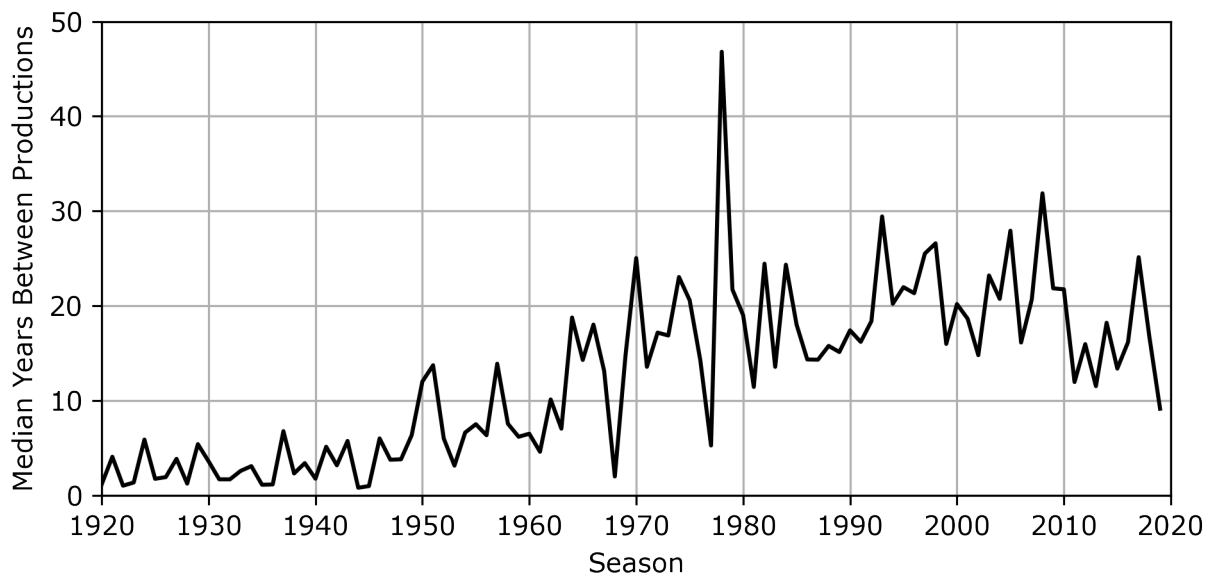


Figure 15: Median Years Between Productions of Revivals

The median number of years between productions of a show has increased significantly, representing a change in the meaning of a Broadway revival. Through World War II, Broadway revivals were at the median two to five years old, meaning they were mostly remountings of recently closed shows or touring productions returning to New York. Today, revived shows have a median age of 20 years since they were last performed on Broadway. In other words, revivals used to look more like an extended run, with a two-year hiatus between performances, rather than the modern bringing back to life.

While revivals and long-running shows give us a sense of Broadway’s variety, or lack thereof, they also hint at the fuzzy ground between a repertory constructed through mere repetition and a canon built from renown. To move from repertory to canon requires some amount of reproduction, occasionally in print or through recordings, but also on stage. Thus it bears considering what role Broadway has played in producing its own canon.

Revivals, after all, represent the industry’s collective sense of work that its audiences still hold in high esteem. The most frequently revived shows project an aura of greatness not because of their commercial momentum, necessarily, but because producers, directors, actors, designers, and audiences all recognize something vital about returning to these materials once more. In other words, revivals point to something like theatrical canonicity.

As it happens, commercial success, while never forbidden to a revival, is far from guaranteed, and often not even essential to the planning of many Broadway revivals. Broadway, though a commercial space, hosts many non-profit groups. And those non-profits often have been a driving force behind major revivals. For instance, the number of new play and musical revivals since the 1968 season, broken down by producer, shows the incredible importance of work by two major nonprofits (Figure 16).

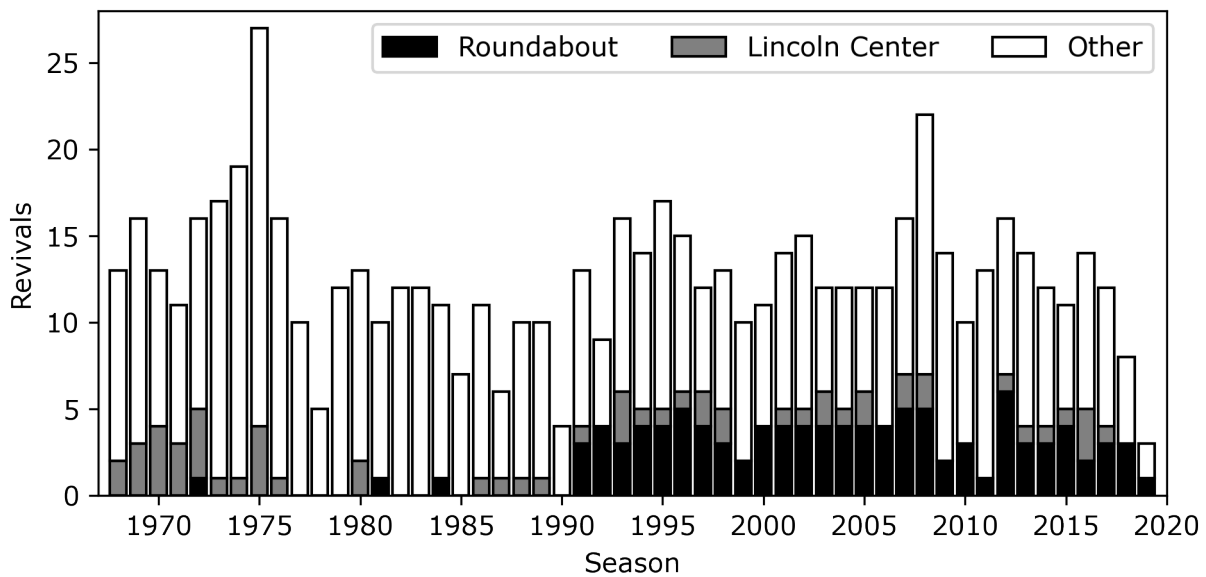


Figure 16: Non-Profit Productions of Revivals by Season

Lincoln Center Theater and Roundabout Theatre Company in particular, two of Broadway’s largest nonprofit producers, produced a full quarter of revivals since 1968, and a third of all revivals since 1990, when, in many individual seasons, they account for about half. Lists of revivals by these companies include simply popular plays, but also a lot of the work we now consider canonical. (See Tables 5 and 6 at the end of this chapter for a complete list of revivals by the two companies.) Broadway’s performances of the theatrical canon depend, since the 1970s, on its nonprofit sector.

While Roundabout and Lincoln Center sustain the canon on Broadway, another, forgotten nonprofit was key to creating the modern canon of American musicals. The New York City Center of Music and Drama was founded in a former Shriners Temple on 55th Street in 1943. Over two decades of operation at City Center, the organization hosted numerous troupes and performances, founded the now-defunct New York City Opera Company, the New York City Ballet, and, most importantly for Broadway, the New York City Light Opera Company. Today, City Center famously produces the Encores! series, which

revives less successful or relatively forgotten musicals for a weekend of semi-staged performances.²⁰ Encores! had an outlier success with John Kander and Fred Ebb’s *Chicago* (1996), now the longest running revival ever on Broadway, and has transferred a few other productions to Broadway. But most of their producing serves as a kind of museum for successful composers’ lesser-known works. Encores! has produced revivals since 1994. Its origins lay in the Light Opera Company of the 1950s and 1960s, under the leadership of Jean Dalrymple as publicist and, eventually, producer.²¹

There are three reasons why the City Center Light Opera Company’s work has proved so important for Broadway history. First, they performed, some of the most revered musicals of the so-called Golden Age, which was still in full swing at the time (Table 4).

Table 4: City Center Light Opera Company Musical Revivals, 1943–1968

Show	Seasons
Porgy and Bess	1943; 1960; 1963
The New Moon	1943
The Merry Widow	1944; 1956
The Desert Song	1945
Carmen Jones	1945; 1955
Bloomer Girl	1946
Show Boat	1948; 1953; 1960
The Medium & The Telephone	1948
Carousel	1948; 1953; 1957; 1966
Brigadoon	1949; 1956; 1961; 1962; 1964; 1967
Come of Age	1951
Oklahoma!	1953; 1957; 1962; 1965
Die Fledermaus	1953
Guys and Dolls	1954; 1964; 1965
South Pacific	1954; 1956; 1960; 1964
Finian’s Rainbow	1954; 1959; 1966
The King and I	1955; 1959; 1962; 1967
Kiss Me, Kate	1955; 1964
The Pajama Game	1956
Annie Get Your Gun	1957
Wonderful Town	1957; 1962; 1966
Auntie Mame	1958
Say Darling	1958
The Most Happy Fella	1958; 1965
Lute Song	1958
Pal Joey	1960; 1962
Can-Can	1961
Fiorello!	1961
West Side Story	1963
My Fair Lady	1963; 1967
The Music Man	1964

Show	Seasons
How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying	1965
Where's Charley?	1965
The Sound of Music	1966
Carnival	1968

This is, by and large, a highly canonical list: a few shows that have little contemporary cachet (*Brigadoon*, most notably, a City Center favorite), but many that have been among Broadway's most revived, and certainly the most revered.

Second, City Center situated its musicals within a highbrow milieu. City Center was at best marginally a Broadway venue, "psychologically outside the Broadway district," as Brooks Atkinson put it, despite its Actors' Equity Production contracts, the same as the union uses for Broadway.²² Primarily, City Center produced highbrow art—it was Lincoln Center before Lincoln Center. (Indeed, Dalrymple recounts the machinations under which the Light Opera Company almost became part of Lincoln Center's operations, only to be supplanted by a Richard Rodgers-helmed, and poorly managed, musical revival program there.) The City Opera Company staged canonical works and championed new American operas by composers such as Carlisle Floyd and William Grant Still. And the City Ballet premiered works by George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, as well as by major visiting choreographers, for decades. Thus City Center fit its middlebrow musical theater productions into its other, generally highbrow, programming.

Third and finally, City Center's revivals were very conservative remountings, rather than any kind of reimagining or revision of the works in question. This conservatism owed much to City Center's necessarily efficient production strategy, which involved seeking out talent who knew the original production. Even the Light Opera Company itself, when officially established in 1954, was run by none other than William Hammerstein, eldest son of Oscar Hammerstein II. Many productions used versions of the original sets or costumes. Stars even occasionally reappeared, as when Vivian Blaine played Miss Adelaide in the 1966 production of *Guys and Dolls*.

City Center, though not officially part of Broadway, thus conducted many Golden Age musicals to the musical theater canon by producing them as part of a Broadway-adjacent musical repertory. Their revivals hewed closely to the original productions. And, by dint of being at City Center, they drew on that institution's highbrow aura, cultivated by its other commitments to the opera and ballet.

Crucially, City Center's revivals bridged the creative energy from the 1940s and 1950s through the next decades. Many of City Center's musical revivals received productions in multiple seasons during their heyday (Figure 17).

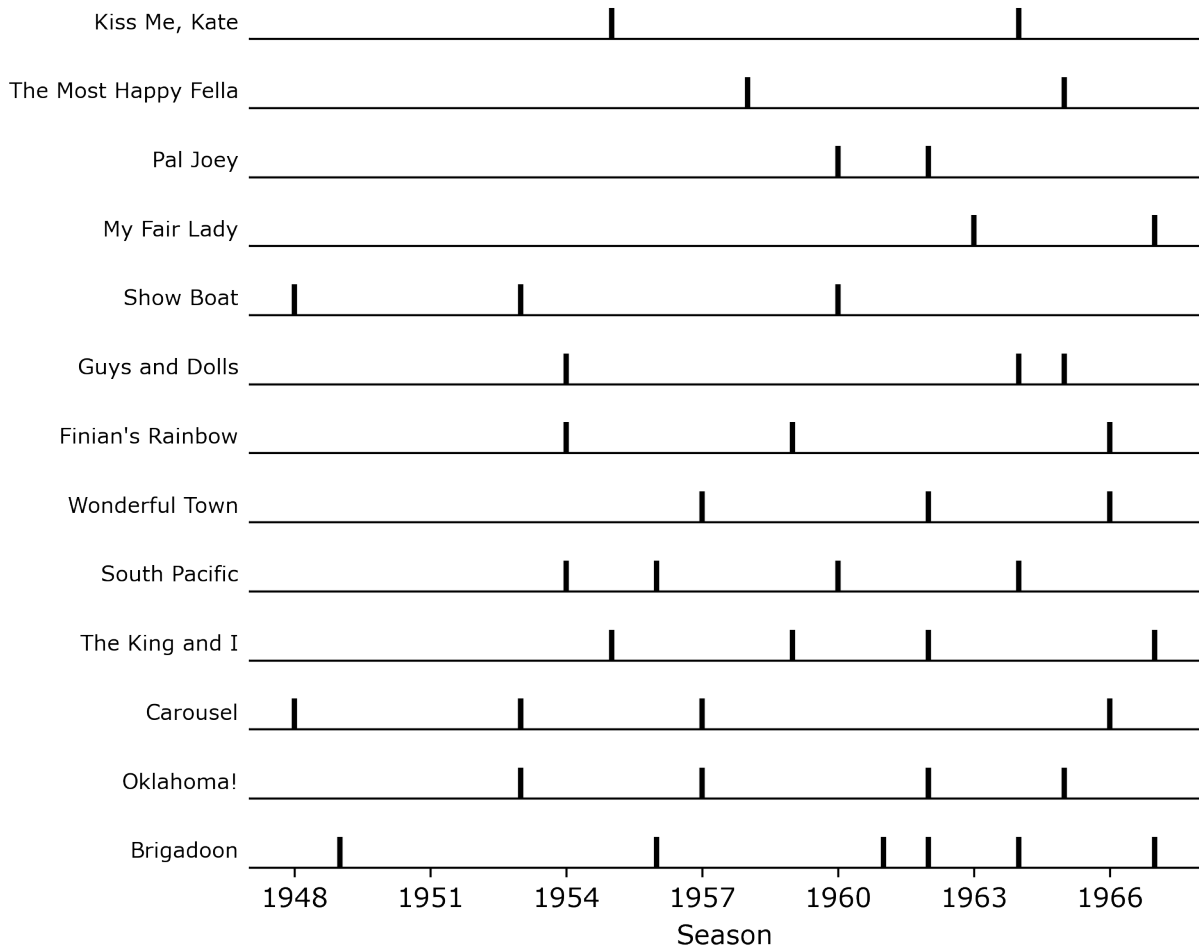


Figure 17: City Center Revivals

Compare a graph of the seasons with productions of the most-revived musicals on Broadway (Figure 18).

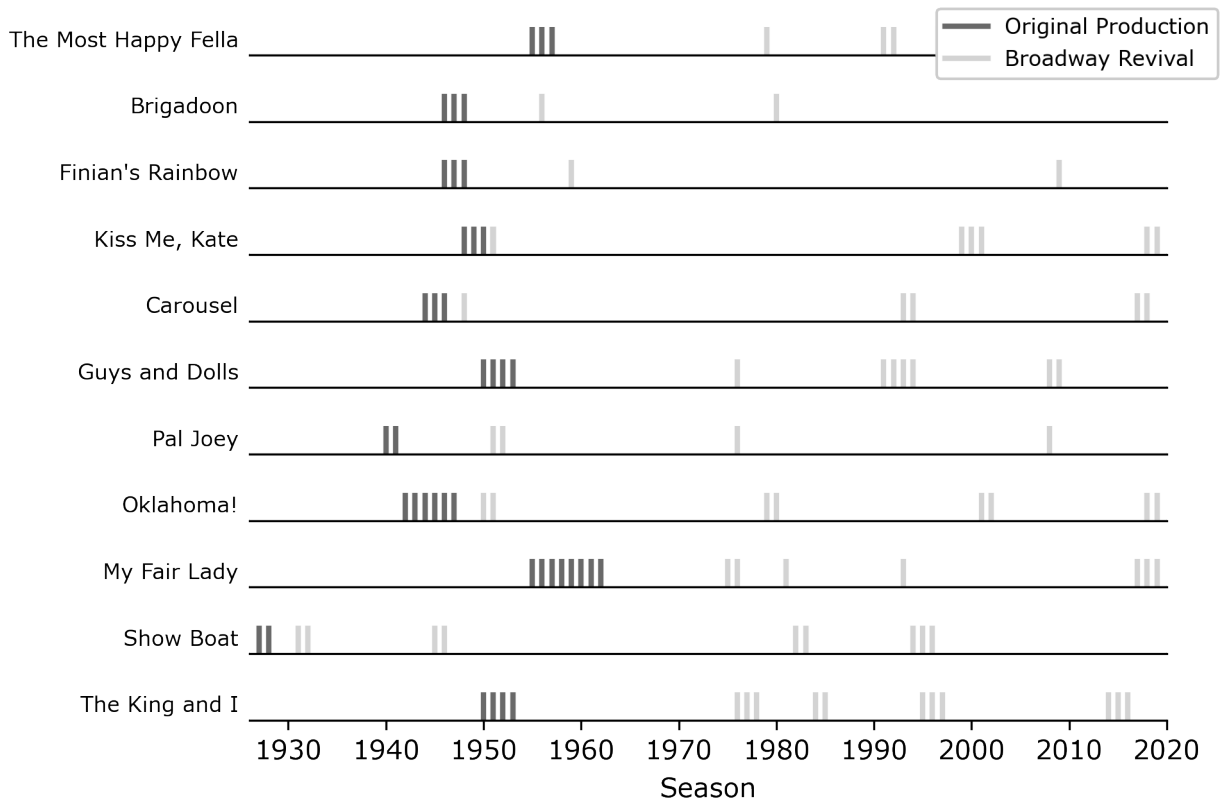


Figure 18: Most Frequently Revived Musicals

A major gap appears in the 1950s through the late-1970s (somewhat obscured by *My Fair Lady's* original run), as these Golden Age, soon-to-be-canonical hits disappeared from Broadway stages. They were not, however really gone, but rather sustained by City Center and eventually picked up again by Broadway proper, whether commercial or other non-commercial producers (Figure 19).

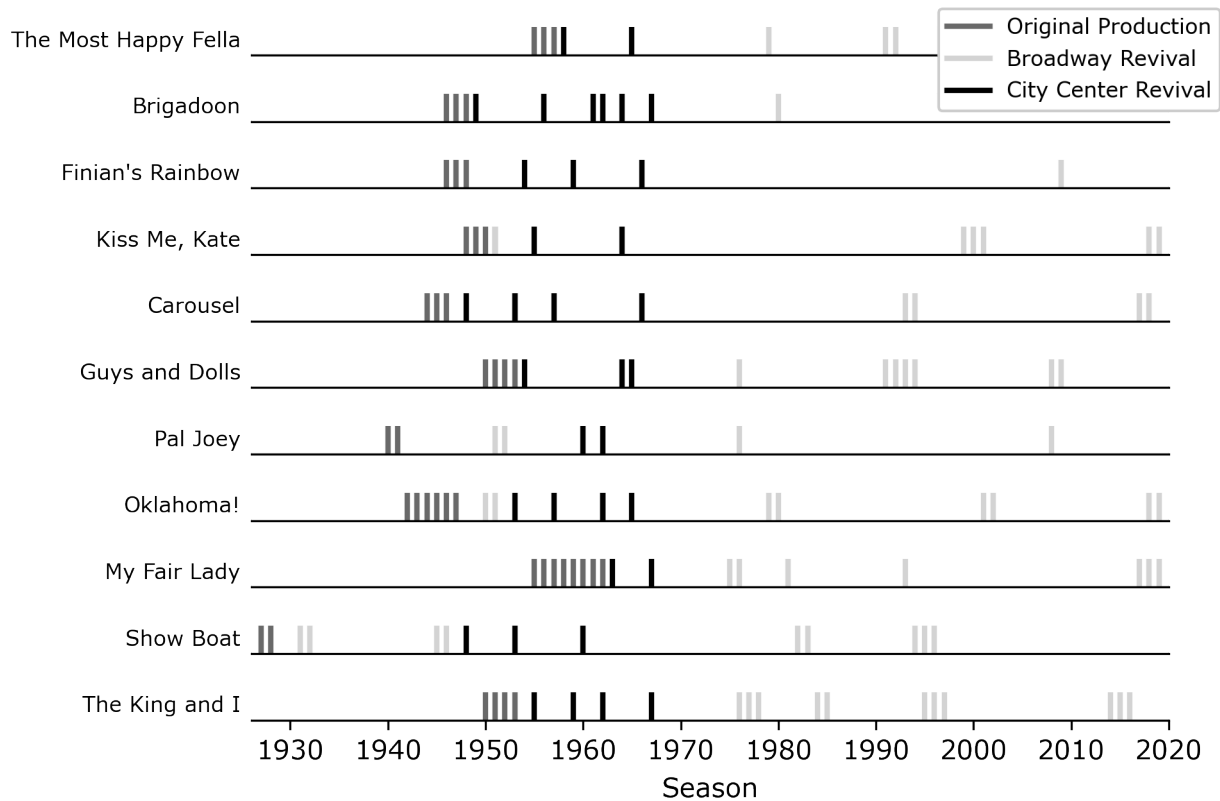


Figure 19: Most Frequently Revived Musicals and City Center Revivals

Despite brief runs, usually of two weeks, the City Center musicals cemented recent musical theater successes in the minds of performers and audiences alike. By the mid-1970s, official Broadway revivals began to reappear, and the City Center repertory became the much-revived Broadway canon.

From canonical productions to revivals to frequent audience members to sustaining a production during a long run, Broadway's identity depends as much on repetition as it does on novelty. We have encountered other forms of repetition in other parts of this book. The regularity of curtain times in the 1950s and 1960s provided temporal stability across the industry. The importance of a small set of designers and press agents, whose work defines and markets Broadway's visual style, also give Broadway continuity by the way those individuals repeat their roles. Even the longevity of the Shubert Organization and their old (though renovated) theater buildings, help provide links between past and present that keep Broadway a fixed idea against a constant pressure for the new.

Of course a lot about Broadway is new. And every production, every performer, every performance differs from all of the others in meaningful ways. But the similarities matter too, binding together a disparate set of people and productions into a unified whole. That thread of similarity, sustained by repetition, does more to define Broadway than the novelties themselves. Data makes studying stability and similarity particularly effective. And we need these histories, too. The absence of change or difference, usually not a good story for narrative history alone, must be part of our historiography. While most histories

of Broadway necessarily emphasize difference and change—the premiere of this musical style; the debut by that choreographer—if Broadway were only a set of unique, one-off occurrences it could have no clear identity. Broadway does mean something specific, however, and much of that meaning comes through its repetitiveness—its precision performances, its fanatical audiences, its revivals and long-running hits. For cultural history, that kind of stability is just as important as generic innovation, if often harder to pin down. Sometimes the flat line, the null result, and the familiar need our attention, too.

Table 5: Revivals at Lincoln Center

A Delicate Balance	A Doll's House
A Streetcar Named Desire (2)	A View From the Bridge
Abe Lincoln in Illinois	Ah, Wilderness!
An Enemy of the People	Antigone
Anything Goes	Awake and Sing!
Beggar on Horseback	Camino Real
Carousel	Cymbeline
Dinner at Eight	Falsettos
Golden Boy	Hamlet
Henry IV	In the Summer House
Ivanov	Joe Turner's Come and Gone
King Lear (2)	Macbeth (2)
Man of La Mancha	Mary Stuart
Morning's at Seven	Mrs. Warren's Profession
My Fair Lady	Our Town
Ring Round the Moon	Seascape
Six Degrees of Separation	South Pacific
Speed-the-Plow	The Cherry Orchard
The Crucible	The Front Page
The Glass Menagerie	The Good Woman of Setzuan
The Heiress	The King and I
The Little Foxes	The Merchant of Venice
The Miser	The Most Happy Fella
The Philadelphia Story	The Playboy of the Western World
The Plough and the Stars	The Rivals
The Tenth Man	The Time of Your Life
Threepenny Opera	Trelawny of the "Wells"
Twelfth Night (2)	

Table 6: Revivals at Roundabout Theater Company

"MASTER HAROLD" ... and the boys	110 in the Shade
1776	A Day in the Death of Joe Egg
A Man for All Seasons	A Month in the Country
A Streetcar Named Desire	A Taste of Honey
A Thousand Clowns	A Touch of the Poet
A View From the Bridge	After The Fall
All My Sons	Anna Christie
Anything Goes	Betrayal
Big River	Bye Bye Birdie
Cabaret (2)	Candida
Children of a Lesser God	Company
Cyrano de Bergerac	Death of a Salesman

Table 6: Revivals at Roundabout Theater Company

Design For Living	Follies
Glengarry Glen Ross	Hamlet
Harvey	Heartbreak House
Hedda Gabler (2)	Joe Egg
Kiss Me, Kate	Les Liaisons Dangereuses
Little Me	London Assurance
Long Day's Journey Into Night	Machinal
Major Barbara	Man and Boy
Mrs. Warren's Profession	Nine
No Man's Land	Noises Off
Old Acquaintance	Old Times
On the Twentieth Century	Pacific Overtures
Pal Joey	Philadelphia, Here I Come!
Picnic (2)	Prelude to a Kiss
Present Laughter	Pygmalion
She Loves Me (2)	Summer and Smoke
Sunday in the Park with George	Tartuffe
The Apple Tree	The Big Knife
The Boys from Syracuse	The Caretaker
The Cherry Orchard	The Constant Wife
The Crucible	The Deep Blue Sea
The Father	The Glass Menagerie
The Homecoming	The Importance of Being Earnest
The Lion in Winter	The Man Who Came to Dinner
The Man Who Had All the Luck A Fable	The Mystery of Edwin Drood
The Night of the Iguana	The Pajama Game
The Philanthropist	The Play's the Thing (2)
The Price (2)	The Rainmaker
The Real Thing	The Rehearsal
The Ritz	The Rose Tattoo
The Show Off	The Three Sisters
The Threepenny Opera	The Trip to Bountiful
The Visit	The Winslow Boy
The Women	Time and the Conways
Travesties	True West
Twentieth Century	Uncle Vanya
Waiting for Godot	You Can't Take It With You

Notes

¹Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Shubert Organization Materials, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, *T-Mss 2002-029, Box 3, Folders 1–3, and McCann & Nugent Productions, *T-Mss 1985-009, Box 5, Folder 4.

²Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Performance of January 13, 1981.

³Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Performance of July 27, 1981.

⁴Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Performance of May 21, 1981.

⁵Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Performance of August 23, 1980.

⁶Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Performance of May 23, 1980.

⁷Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Performance of March 19, 1981.

⁸Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Performance of February 7, 1981.

⁹Jonathan Burston, "Recombinant Broadway," *Continuum* 23, no. 2: 159–69; Michael McKinnie, *Theatre in Market Economies* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), Chapter 1; Martin Young, "Stage Managing Wasted Time: The Temporality of the Theatrical Workplace," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 35–56.

¹⁰Stage Manager's Reports, *Morning's at Seven*, Performance of August 13, 1980.

¹¹Daniel Starch, *A Survey of 'The Playbill'* (New York Theatre Program Corporation, 1935); William J. Baumol and William Bowen, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* (The MIT Press, 1968), citing their own study and *Playbill's*; Milton Alexander, *Who's Who in the Audience* (Playbill, 1982); Karen Hauser, *Who Goes to Broadway? The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2002–2003* (The League of American Theatres and Producers, 2003); Karen Hauser, *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2018–19* (The Broadway League, 2019). Unfortunately, the 1935 survey asked this question only of theater-goers from New York and vicinity, reporting 14.6 productions on average. The same survey measured such theater-goers as 85.9% of the audience. Giving a lowball estimate that out-of-towners attend a quarter of the number of shows seasonally that locals do (historically, the ratio is closer to 1:2), the 1935 average for all audiences is the given 12.9 shows per season.

¹²Hauser, *Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2018–19*, p. 31.

¹³Michael Riedel, "Every Day a 'Rent' Party," *New York Daily News*, March 3, 1997.

¹⁴Miriam Kreinin Souccar, "Broadway's Superfans," *Crain's New York Business*, October 20, 2008, pp. 31–32.

¹⁵Michael Gioia, "Over 676 Performances Later, This Superfan Still Can't Take Her Eyes Off *Jersey Boys*," *Playbill*, November 8, 2015, <https://www.playbill.com/article/over-675-performances-later-this-superfan-still-cant-take-her-eyes-off-jersey-boys-com-370736>.

¹⁶Caroline Heim, "Broadway Theatre Fans: Communities of Narrators and Translators," *Popular Entertainment Studies* 7, nos. 1–2 (2016): 39–54.

¹⁷Data from the Comédie-Française Registers Project, <https://cfregisters.org/>.

¹⁸There are two systematic studies of early- and mid-century Broadway revivals: Abigail C. Boardman, "A Study of the Revivals of Plays in New York City (Broadway) Theatre from 1925–1940," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1944; Marie J. Robinson, "Revivals on the New York Stage, 1930–1950, with a Statistical Survey of Their Performances from 1750–1950," Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1960.

¹⁹Bryan M. Vandevender, "'Kiss today goodbye, and point me toward tomorrow': Reviving the Time-Bound Musical, 1968–1975," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Missouri—Columbia, 2014.

²⁰Garrett Eisler, "Encores! and the Downsizing of the Classic American Musical," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 5, no. 2 (2011): 133–48; Bryan M. Vandevender, "Reclaiming, Restoring, and Reviving the American Musical: City Center Encores" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Musical Theatre Producers*, eds. Laura MacDonald and William A. Everett (Palgrave, 2017).

²¹Jean Dalrymple, *From the Last Row* (James T. White, 1975).

²²Quoted in Dalrymple, *From the Last Row*, pp. 107–8.