

# Broadway theatre – a history



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Broadway Theater Broadway is the longest street in New York, starting in downtown Manhattan, and running through town, crossing the Broadway Bridge, and continues to Bronx (Greiner, visit- new-york-city. com) Then why when people hear this street name, do they think of theater? That's because this street, commonly referred to as the " Great White Way", has 36 theaters. These 36 theaters, along with 4 other, make up what is called the Theatre District. Broadway history dates back to the late 1600's, when a coffee house called ' The King's Arms' opened in 1696 on Broadway.

Some scholars think this may have held Manhattan's earliest theatrical performances (Kenrick, J, musicals101. com). However, it isn't until December 6, 1732, when the first professional performance of a specific play is recorded in New York City. The play was " The Recruiting Officer", and was performed by a group of actors from London, in an empty building near Maiden Lane and Pearl Street. Performances continued in this unnamed place through the end of the decade. For it wasn't until 1750, when New York had around ten thousand citizens, that it received its first formal theater (Kenrick, J, musicals101. om). However, the theater was still not on Broadway, but slightly east on Nassau Street, which gave it the name " Theatre on Nassau Street. " This theater was a wooden, two story structure that could only hold about 280 people. Walter Murray and Thomas Kean presented Shakespeare's " Richard III" on March 5, 1750. They also presented the first documented musical in New York, which was John Gay's " The Beggars Opera", on December 3, 1750. Historians don't know much about the Theater on Nassau Street, which results in mostly guesswork. In her book " Theater In American", Mary C.

Henderson said, " May have been either a warehouse or a brewery (or both). . . probably fitted up with a stage at one end, benches in front of it, and a raised gallery at the rear for common folk. Murray and Kean made a significant addition to their New York playhouse - they added boxes along the side walls, not only to increase the seating (a sign that they attained a moderate success) but also to provide a special place for the elite of the city. " (Henderson, 237). Unfortunately, the theater was later sold and turned into storage space, and then was eventually torn down in 1754 to make way for a church (Kenrick, musicals101. om). In 1798 the city's first world-class theater was built (Kenrick, musicals101. com). The " Park Theatre" could hold 2, 000 people, had a spacious bench-filled pit, four tiers of private boxes, and a top gallery. Lewis A Erenber talks about the Park theatre in his book " Steppin' Out" saying, " All kinds of performances were housed under one roof, so that audiences in the 1830s might see drama, circus, opera and dance on the same bill. New York's Park Theater, despite a reputation as an elite house, had a relatively large room that permitted the masses to govern the stage. Each class had its own part of the theatre, but all attended - mechanics in the pit, upper classes and women in the boxes, and prostitutes, lower class men, and blacks in the balcony. The rowdy audiences often yelled, stamped, drank and smoked during the performance. " (Erenberg, 15). Admission for the theater was 50 cents for the pit, 25 cents for the gallery, and a full dollar for the boxes (Kenrick, musicals101. com). The behavior of the rowdy audience was often drowned out by the action on stage, though showers of nuts and fruits from the balcony were common.

Prostitutes often conducted business in the balcony, which led to much belief by the church that theatres were “ foyers of hell”. One of the next theaters to open, was the ‘ Bowery Theatre’ in 1826 (Kenrick, musicals101. com). It aimed at the upper class at first, but when new management took over, decided to cater to the working class, by more action packed plays. According the Broadway League, it “ Presented varied popular fare through the years, including spectacle, variety, melodrama, Italian vaudeville (c. 1915), and Chinese theatre (1920s).

Burned down (and rebuilt) five times: 1828, 1836, 1838, 1845, and 1923- until a June 5, 1929 fire closed the theatre for good. ” (Broadway League, ibdb. com) On the other side of the spectrum, for the upper class, The ‘ Astor Place Opera House’ was built in 1847, by wealthy New Yorkers, with the sole purpose of bringing Italian opera to the city (Broadway League, ibdb. com). These two theaters are commonly remembered for the Astor Place Riot, when in the spring of 1849, they were both performing the production of Macbeth.

American ‘ Edwin Forrest’ was directing the play along the middle and lower classes at the Bowery, while British ‘ William Macready’ appealed to the upper class at the Astor Place Opera House. As one source states, “ A volatile combination of press ballyhoo and widespread anti- British sentiment incited a claque of Forrest’s fans to disrupt a few of Macready’s performances. ” (Kenrick, musicals101. com). On the night of May 10, 1849 while the mainly upper class audience was enjoying their performance of Macbeth at the Astor Place Opera House, a mob of twenty thousand lower and working class men broke into a full-scale riot.

When the violence got out of control, the police fired their guns directly into the crowd, killing at least twenty-two, while wounding more than 150 (Kenrick, musicals101. com). Robert W. Snyder says in the Encyclopedia of New York City that, “ After the Astor Place Riot of 1849 entertainment in New York City was divided along class lines: opera was chiefly for the upper middle and upper classes, minstrel shows and melodramas for the middle class, variety shows in concert saloons for men of the working class and the slumming middle class. (Jackson, 1226).

While there will always be fighting between the classes, it never again was centered around a theatrical event. As New York City grew in population, more ways of entertainment were on the rise. Laura Keene became one of the first nationally recognized actress managers of the American Stage (Kenrick, Musicals101. com). She produced and starred in many comedies and musicals at 622 Broadway. She set Broadway's first “ long-run” record with a 50 performance hit called ‘ The Elves’ in 1857, and continued to astound everyone with her musical ‘ Seven Sisters’ in 1860, which had 253 performances.

With the Civil War going on during this time (1861-1865), this vastly expanded and upgraded railroads, which made it much more easier and affordable for the theatrical productions to tour. It was during one of these tours, when Laura Keene's troupe came to Ford's Theater in Washington, DC for the Spring of 1865, that President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated while attending the performance of “ Our American Cousin” on April 14. Even though Keene had no control over Lincoln's assassination, her name became so linked to the tragedy, that it soon forced her into retirement.

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Charles Hoyt's "A Trip to Chinatown (1891) became Broadway's long-run champion, with 657 performances (Kenrick, Musicals101. com). A "Trip to Coontown" was performed in 1898, and was the first musical comedy entirely produced and performed by African Americans in a Broadway theatre. In 1894, "The Passing Show" was the first Broadway revue. However, it received little attention, and revues would not really catch in popularity until Floren Ziegfeld introduced his Follies in 1907. (Zenrick, musicals101. om) Hundreds of musical comedies were staged on Broadway in the 1890s and early 1900s, but New York Runs continued to be relatively short, in comparison to London runs. In 1910, smaller off-Broadway theatre groups really took up. They would setup shop in smaller downtown venues, with the purpose of promoting experiments works, with people who may not make it to the city to see them. Some of the first groups were "The Washington Square Players (later renamed the Theatre Guild), The Provincetown Players, and The Neighborhood Playhouse" (Zenrick, Musicals101. om). Most of the first off-Broadway performances were "Socially challenging dramas (Zenrick, musicals101. com)", for it wasn't until later when musicals became a part of the off-Broadway scene. Since gaslight was not strong enough to be used with colored filters, theatre district advertising was dull through the 1890's. The first animated electric billboard appeared in Times Square in 1903, with Victor Herbert's musical "The Red Mill", installing a sign with carbon lights that imitated the revolving arms of a windmill.

This sign used electric light, which was far brighter, and made advertising much easier. Soon, every Broadway show had some sort of electric sign, but

since colored bulbs burned out too quickly, at first white lights were standard. This is where Broadway gets its name "The Great White Way", because the largest of these electric billboards, often called spectaculars, were actually stopping traffic with the night glow that they gave off. (Zenrick, musicals101.com) In 1927, neon lighting was introduced, which helped elongate shapes and bright colors.

Broadway's business peaked in the 1927-1928 season, as more than 70 legitimate theatres housed over 250 shows, but then later dropped tremendously in the 1930's in the depression, some Broadway productions even had to file for bankruptcy, such as Lee Shubert's productions (Zenrick, musicals101.com). Though eventually, World War II boosted the American economy, and many great musicals appeared in the 1940's, such as "Oklahoma". Off-Broadway also increased, in small downtown theatres in Greenwich Village, and the Lower East Side that had been home to experimental theatre since the 1920's.

Such shows such as "The Fantasticks" opened in 1960, "Godspell" (1971), "Little Shop of Horrors" (1982) "Nunsense" (1985) were born off-Broadway, and were very successful (Zenrick, musicals101.com) During this time, marked the beginning of the "Theatre Wing's Tony Award". This award is theatre's most prestigious and coveted prize, designed to celebrate excellence in theatre (Tony Awards, tonyawards.com) The 1980's Broadway was taken over by imported "Mega-Musicals" (Cats, Les Misérables), and the 1990's saw the rise of big corporations such as Disney (Beauty and the Beast, Lion King).

These hits brought more people to Times Square, showing that the district had fresh commercial potential. Big, new, hotels were built, and a series of corporations (MTV, ABC, etc) were now present in the neighborhood. (Zenrick, musicals101. com). For the book, " New York, An Illustrated History" states, " By the late 1990s, a new Times Square had emerged - cleaner, better lit, and more wholesome than it had been in half a century, and busier and more profitable than it had been in decades. Each night as the sun went down, the district was transformed into a glowing, shimmering diaphanous dish of light. (Burns, Sanders, & Ades, 554). Unfortunately, As theatrical productions got more technologically advanced, and theatrical production costs continued to rise, so did the price of tickets. Orchestra seats that once went for \$8 in 1965, were \$45 in 1985, and up to \$100 in 2001, which is a much higher rise than the overall price of living (Zenrick, musicals101. com) Modern day Broadway shows that can very expensive. The production of the play " Wicked", which is currently in its seventh year on Broadway, has grossed nearly \$1. billion dollars, and has been seen by nearly 23 million people worldwide (Wicked Facts, newsobserver. com). " The Phantom of the Opera" is another Broadway play that has seen phenomenal success in its run. The show has received 7 Tony Awards, and been see by more then 10 million people. It has been on Broadway for over 17 years, making it the most successful production in the history of Broadway. In conclusion, New York's theatre district is once again a prime tourist attraction, and the theatrical productions remain a huge factor in the city's financial well-being.



According to the League of Theatre Owners and Producers, Broadway shows currently sell one and a half billion dollars worth of tickets annually (Zenrick, musicals101. com). Broadway Theater is a staple in live entertainment, and something that is amazing to be able to see. Works Cited Kenrick, John. " Theatre in New York: A Brief History. " Musicals101. com - The Cyber Encyclopedia of Musicals. N. p. , n. d. Web. 14 June 2010. . Henderson, Mary C.. Theater in America: 200 Years of Plays, Players, and Productions. First Edition ed.

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