

BROADWAY BEYOND THE PROSCENIUM
Why Immersive Theatre Is The Wave Of The Future, And What It Will Take To Get There

Jonathan Hogue

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Theatre Program of the
School of the Arts

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
February 19, 2024

Acknowledgements

Steven Chaikelson, Tory Bailey, and Charlie Flateman for their meaningful mentorship and guidance in the creation of this thesis.

The brilliant artists responsible for creating the revolutionary immersive productions that have fundamentally changed the way I conceptualize theatrical storytelling.

The incredible industry members who generously offered their time and insight to support my research through interviews:

Renee Blinkwolt, Producing Executive Director - Ars Nova

Chris Boneau, Press Representative - Boneau/Bryan-Brown

David Byrne, Musician and Songwriter

Dalton Dale, Producer/Founder - Immersive Arts Center

Michelle Farabaugh, Press Representative - Boneau/Bryan-Brown

Charlie Flateman, Executive Vice President - The Shubert Organization

Andy Jones, General Manager - Baseline Theatrical

Hal Luftig, Broadway Producer

Aaron Lustbader, General Manager - Foresight Theatrical

Katherine McNamee, House Manager - The Broadway Theatre

Chris Morey, General Manager - 101 Productions

Matt Ross, Press Representative - Matt Ross PR

Joe Smith, West End Producer

Alex Timbers, Broadway Director

Danielle Vargas, House Manager - The Broadway Theatre

Hannah Wilson, Associate Production Manager - Juniper Street Productions

Alex Wolfe, Associate General Manager - Foresight Theatrical

All of my incredible **professors and mentors** from the Columbia University Theatre Management & Producing MFA program for the last two years of invaluable training.

My wonderful and brilliant **TM&P Class of 2024** for all their support, encouragement, and comic relief.

God, for all this, and everything else.

INTRODUCTION

As any artist in the American Theatre knows, there is no more prominent stage to aspire to than the Broadway stage. Across the last century of the Great Bright Way's rise to prominence as the billion-dollar grossing industry it is now, Broadway's 41 theatres have each hosted decades of legendary productions and performances for millions of audience members from around the world. The influence that Broadway bears on theatre globally cannot be disputed, as the massive impact of million-dollar marketing campaigns, prestigious awards, and large ticket inventory extends the brand of Broadway shows to more audiences than any smaller regional theater could ever hope to reach. Many Broadway shows become established in a publicly recognized canon of works (especially those that run in New York for years on end) and later expand outside New York with touring and international productions before eventually spreading into community and regional theatres through licensing. "Broadway is the most visible place in the American Theatre," said press representative Matt Ross. "Whether or not it is creatively the apex, it is the greatest place to which we can elevate something in the American Theatre."¹

Yet, while Broadway's impact on the American (and Global) Theatre is significant, it is also readily apparent that the greatest experimentation within the artform – whether in form, tone, style, or presentation – happens on much smaller stages where the financial risks are much lower. Broadway has continued to be known for presenting high-production vehicles costing millions of dollars, whereas off-Broadway and regional houses are able to challenge traditional commercial expectations with reduced costs due to their smaller scale and diminished union jurisdiction. Broadway has had some success with commercially risky plays and musicals that have transferred from hit off-Broadway runs (i.e., original musicals that might not have high

¹ Ross, Matt. Interview.

spectacle or recognizable IP, like *Hadestown*, *Fun Home*, and *The Band's Visit*). Still, even the most non-traditional content on Broadway has offered a very traditional audience experience: the proscenium presentation, in which audiences sit in physical seats (whether at the orchestra, mezzanine, or balcony level) all facing the same direction towards a stage with an overarching proscenium suggesting a “fourth-wall divide” between audience and production.² For nearly a century, Broadway has carried on this tradition of presentation, and audiences have become accustomed to the social rules that are inherent in this form of viewing experience. That is, until the recent rise of immersive productions on Broadway.

The introduction of *Natasha Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* (written by Dave Malloy, hereafter referred to as “*Great Comet*”) and *Here Lies Love* (written by David Byrne and Fat Boy Slim) brought Broadway beyond the proscenium, inviting audiences into the world of the story not just when the curtain rises, but from the moment they step through the front door. *Great Comet* welcomed audiences into a grand scale Russian supper club - a reimagined Imperial Theatre adorned with red curtains, ornate chandeliers, and twisting runways winding all the way around the orchestra level into the mezzanine and even into the lobby. *Here Lies Love* removed the entire orchestra level in favor of building a disco floor for up to 300 patrons to dance alongside the infamous Filipino First Lady Imelda Marcos. In the coming months, a new revival of Kander & Ebb’s *Cabaret* will transfer to Broadway from a smash-hit run on the West End, which will completely reimagine the August Wilson Theatre as the seedy Kit Kat Club, complete with a side alley entrance, multiple 1940’s Berlin-era bars and lounges, and performers dancing through ornate halls with audiences sitting at cocktail tables around a newly constructed in-the-round stage. All of these productions have demonstrated ambition to rethink the traditional

² The only exception to this is Circle in the Square, the one Broadway theatre of the total 41 theatres that is exclusively built for in-the-round and thrust productions.

presentation of a Broadway show, with hopes of reinvigorating the audience experience and challenging the notion of what types of theatrical production Broadway can and should represent.

Are immersive productions the new face of innovation on Broadway? Many seem to think so. TheaterMania's Zachary Stewart's number one prediction for Broadway in 2023 was that more producers and theatre landlords would agree to all bolder interior changes to Broadway theatres for immersive productions.³ Musical theatre legend Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber shared in a 2023 interview that he believes there is a huge future in immersive theatre, predicting that audiences will want to respond to new transformative ideas as opposed to conventional theatrical experiences.⁴ This new trend does not exist in a vacuum, as immersive experiences have exploded into a multibillion-dollar industry outside of the Broadway industry, especially post-COVID lockdown where people look to unique social experiences with an eagerness to connect with something new and innovative. But can shows of this immersive nature succeed within the increasingly complex economics and restrictive union regulations of the Broadway industry, or do their high capitalization costs and unique marketing challenges make them doomed from the start? It should be noted that both *Great Comet* and *Here Lies Love*, while highly regarded critically in their Broadway runs, were unable to achieve a sustainable level of weekly ticket income and closed well before recouping their full capitalization costs; yet, there is much to learn from their commercial failure that indicates the possibility of future success for productions of this kind. In this thesis, I will make the case that immersive productions are vital to Broadway's future growth as a commercial industry and artistic bastion, and such productions have the potential to become economically viable on Broadway with further precedent supported by audience development and industry-wide cooperation.

³ "4 Predictions for the Theater in 2023." *TheaterMania.com*

⁴ "Andrew Lloyd Webber: 'The Lifeblood of Musical Theatre Is Getting Rather Squeezed Out.'" *WhatsOnStage.Com*

The term “immersive theatre” can encompass any theatrical experience that is participatory, environmental, and/or interactive. For the sake of clarity, my definition of “immersive production” in this thesis will primarily reference *Great Comet, Here Lies Love*, and the 2024 revival of *Cabaret* (hereafter referred to as “*Cabaret*” unless otherwise defined as the 1966, 1987, 1998, or 2014 Broadway productions) as three Broadway productions that include all three of the following elements:

1. A new configuration of a Broadway house’s traditional proscenium seating arrangement.
2. An element of audience participation in the world of the production, whether during the performance or before/after.
3. A scenic design that extends beyond traditional performance spaces.

In Chapter One, I will observe the commercial boom of immersive experiences outside of the theatre industry as an indication of an energized audience ripe for crossover into similar experiences on Broadway. I will dive further into the history of immersive production on Broadway in Chapter Two as a means of emphasizing an inherent audience interest in experimental staging and participatory elements over the last few decades. In Chapter Three, I will expand on the valuable opportunities that Broadway’s immersive productions offer producers, creatives, and audiences with the purpose of demonstrating why such production is not only invigorating for this industry, but vital for the future of this artform. Chapter Four will expand on the unique and complex challenges that Broadway’s immersive productions face during various stages of production, with observations on how specific producers have attempted to respond to them. Finally, in Chapter Five, I will propose ways in which the Broadway industry can better accommodate immersive productions to support their success in the future.

As there is very little precedent for immersive production on Broadway, much experimentation on this front is happening in real time; thus, much of my research is based on interviews conducted with a wide range of individuals connected to immersive productions past, present, and future. While much of what is shared by these industry professionals is based on real experiences, their opinions and future predictions are naturally conjecture, and are thus subject to change as further developments occur. Finally, while I argue that immersive productions can and should have a place on Broadway, an individual immersive production's commercial viability—or any apparent lack thereof—should not be judged solely based on its unique immersive elements without consideration of the other larger factors that affect any new Broadway shows (such as seasonality, market competition, audience development, etc.). Therefore, the commercial failure of both *Great Comet* and *Here Lies Love* on Broadway should not be seen as an indictment of immersive production any more than the early closures of *Once Upon A One More Time* or *Jagged Little Pill* should indicate a failure of jukebox musicals on Broadway (which is largely not the case for this genre!).